

“Phenomenology of Spirit” and the Hegelian Triad

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Abstract. The Phenomenology of Spirit summarizes Hegel's previous philosophical research and announces the outline of the future philosophy. Phenomenology of Spirit is the science of mental reality, which reduces the whole diversity of life and history to the relation of "consciousness" to "object" and inverts this relation to explain the mental movement and history of human beings. The Phenomenology of Spirit is not only an original work among all Hegel's works, but it is also one of the original works of the whole Western philosophy. This paper shows that Hegel, however, insists on the consistency of the development of thought and focuses on the study of appearances and the pure process of knowing.

Keywords: Hegel; Triad; Dialectical Stages; Negation; Phenomenology of Spirit; History; Kant; Theories of Knowledge.

1. Introduction

It is always useful to begin a philosophical analysis of Hegel's work from its terminologies. Appearance can be defined as how a thing directly manifests itself and Hegel concerns the examination of the distinction between two translatable “appearances”, *Schein* and *Erscheinung*—*Schein* is more like the mere 'facade' of the essence, whereas *Erscheinung* is its full disclosure in which nothing is hidden. The same distinction constructs a different pair of quiddity and haecceity, whereon People formulate their thoughts based on different cultural identities and knowledge structures that affect the faculty of expression, giving rise to distinctive descriptions of the world. This paper shows that Hegel yet sticks to the consistency of the development of thoughts and focuses on the study of appearance and the pure process of knowing. For Hegel, Phenomenology turns out to be a record or interpretation of “the coming to be of knowledge,” (Hegel et al., 2018), and “Phenomenology of spirit” means the study of the spirit of spirits that manifests itself.

2. Kant and Hegel in Theories of Knowledge

The word “phenomenology”, at the first glance, implies a fundamental epistemological difference between Hegel and Kant. Kant “demanded a criticism of the faculty of cognition as a preliminary to its exercise.” (Hegel, 1995) That is, we must understand what it is to know so that we can engage in the real experience of knowing. He makes the case that we must critically examine our fundamental categories before beginning the journey of philosophy. Kant, therefore, separates the application of his study of judgment and the table of categories that resulted from it from the actual knowing process.

In contrast, Hegel thinks that the knowledge system is contingent upon both the faculty of cognition and the investigation and reexamination of old theories. He criticized Kant's use of the categories as the foundation for the objectivity of knowledge and his analysis of them as prerequisites for the possibility of knowledge instead of when functioning in the knowing process. For Hegel, Kant's examination of knowledge sounds paradoxical, like “wanting to know before one knows” and “wanting to learn to swim before venturing into the water”. (Hegel et al., 2015) According to Hegel, only an act by nature bears an inquiry of knowledge, so we must examine knowledge when it is practiced by the agent.

Thus, the word “phenomenology” hints at the reason, a latent intention to reveal the study of how consciousness or mind manifests.

3. Thesis, Antithesis, and Synthesis

To shed light on the phenomenon and transform it into the spirit, one should reinvestigate the three dialectical stages of self-development: thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. A thesis is a proposition of phenomena, giving rise to its reaction, while an antithesis negates or contradicts the thesis. Synthesis is a means of resolving the tension between thesis and antithesis. However, when we categorize a certain phenomenon and examine its function through the description, our language will unavoidably lead to the extension of the phenomenon itself, which causes losses in its meaning. Once people illustrate the functioning process of a thing, they explain neither the concept of their understanding nor in the reality, because it is always a past stage that is neither able to reflect the present nor the future. In addition, the description in language can be understood if and only if it is settled under a specific context, which, most of the time, cannot be precisely expressed. Thus, due to the past-stage feature of language and its incompleteness in expression, the idea changes and negates itself, an antithesis to be more precise. For example, art is born as an antithesis since when artists paint or photograph their feelings and space, they have already instilled their subjective understanding and trade-offs into their works. After resolving contradictions and synthesizing to a higher level of insight, one will then return to itself and be more aware of its being.

The dialectical stages of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis were initially ascribed to Kant and popularized by Fichte's elaboration. Hegel did apply triad theories of thinking but the terms he usually used were: abstract, negative, and concrete. The difference between Hegel's writing model and Fichte and Kant's is that for Hegel, negation occurs internally of the initial status. And thereby Hegel emphasizes the flaw and incompleteness of the initial status and the lack of a negative trial, which claims the relationship between the three stages in sequence.

Hence the methodology of dialect utilizes the functions of faculty and synthesizing events, being a systematic method to deconstruct the empirical reality. For example, when dealing with the phenomenon of suicide, we face problems like whether it is an accidental event or the explanation behind people's natural fear of dead bodies. Based on Kant's argument, we can only conclude that suicide is fundamentally unethical, since it opposes rational humans' fundamental need for self-preservation and degrades humanity and individual sovereignty. This does not contribute to further understanding of suicide like its universality and significance in society. However, the dialectical process makes it possible to explain and categorize the regularity in changes while at the same time reaching out to externalization and alienation of the thesis. In this way, we may find contradictions between external reality and knowledge structures, objectivity and subjectivity, posit negations, and better comprehend the phenomenal world, from abstract to concrete.

4. Hegel's Understanding, Dialect, and Speculation

The three stages of dialectical thinking juxtapose with are three levels that dialectical thinking operates on, which are Understanding, Dialect, and Speculation.

First, Understanding captures the features of an object and invests it under a specific category. For example, we shall identify a "table" or a "chair" appealing to different categories, instead of mere sensory perceptions. However, at this level, the objects are treated distinctively in insulations, only apprehending "existing objects in their specific differences." (Hegel et al., 2015) For Hegel, Understanding informs empirical sciences and mathematics, for they need precision in the sustained investigation, like categories of magnitude or algebra. Every thought need "a clear differentiation of orders and callings," (Hegel et al., 2015) which emphasizes the significance of Understanding in Philosophy.

The limitation of Understanding is self-evident: according to Hegel, distinct identities cannot form relations between objects. Thus, the thinking process has to move to the "Dialect" level to supersede the finite characteristics and "pass into opposites." "Dialect" stage in dialectical thinking is different from Hegelian dialectical mentioned above, but rather "the indwelling tendency outwards by which the one-sidedness and limitation of the predicates of understanding is seen in its true light, and shown

to be the negation of them.” (Hegel et al., 2015) Hegel gives an example of “life” and death” which are separate from each other and identical with themselves. When rising to Dialect, the relation between two objects is built: they internally relate to and presuppose the other. They have mutually defined identities, being separate facets or perspectives of the same reality. Hegel considers Kant as the precursor of Dialect because of the “antinomies,” which says that if we just depend on reason but not our arguments on sense experience, we can examine two opposing positions with equal justification.

Dialect seems to be an antithesis of Understanding, as Hegel claims that “when the Dialectical principle is employed by the understanding ... Dialectic becomes a synonym with skepticism; in which the result that ensues from its action is presented as a mere negation”. (Hegel et al., 2015) In this way, Dialectic becomes a term for “negative reason.” It shows the externalization of objects where every phenomenon has identities that lie beyond its immediacy.

The negation in the stages of Dialect leads to further negation at a higher level with a broader perspective which is Speculation. Our definition of “life” shall encompass both its similarities to and differences from “death”. We preserve both its truth in Understanding and the negation in Dialect to an apprehension of “the unity of terms ... in their opposition.” (Hegel et al., 2015)

5. Triad in Philosophical History of the World

The philosophy of world history has its generality, different from “original history” recording the development of people firsthand, and “reflected history” representing way historical materials are examined with workers adding their spirit besides the original spirit of content. Rather, it is “a history of the account of the history and an assessment of the same.” For Hegel, the “sole conception that it [philosophy] brings with it is the simple conception of reason - the conception that reason governs the world, and that therefore world history is a rational process.” (Hegel et al., 2011) As he states, “What is real is rational, what is rational is real.” (Hegel et al., 2003)

A similar approach to thinking of the process of world history is to look at a plant’s growth. When the flower bursts forth, the bud vanishes, and finally, the fruit takes the place of the blossom. The life of a plant has its fluidity and each phase appears periodically. Different stages are not separated phases but the externalization of one another. In other words, rather than the former being negated by the latter, because of the fluidity, different life stages make up an organic unity in which they overcome negations, coexist, and are prepositions of another. Each stage, with its substance, endowed with diversity by alienation, finally achieves transcendence.

When applying the triad of development to the process of world history, we do not view historical events as an individual phenomenon but as a process. Hegel’s history of the world is the progression of thoughts. With alienation, ideas create their antithesis. Considering historical events as a whole process, these concepts can be sublated to a larger all-encompassing viewpoint where the original concept and its antithesis may coexist.

With the theory of the triad, Hegel offers us another perspective to view the French Revolution. He recognized the outcome as the construction of a new tyrannical government but not national emancipation. He saw its genesis and problem as an inevitable progression rather than a historical accident. The emancipating process is carried out by individuals rather than by the state itself, but liberty as a political ideal can only be provided by the state. Freedom and reason do not need a certain social or political structure to exist but are compatible with the current situation. For Hegel, the world itself demonstrates a continual advancement toward the absolute truth. Advancement does not occur in a straight line but rather results from the interaction of endless conflicts. The movement's root and driving force is continual negativity.

To conclude, using Hegel’s dialectical thinking to examine world history, we practice the fluidity of historical events and then, from a macroscopical aspect, understand unity from negations.

6. Triad in the History of Philosophy

Ultimately, the theory of triad also helps examine the history of philosophy. Thoughts have two phenomenal aspects which are their ordinary representations that they are “what is objective ... universal in and for itself” (Hegel, 1995) and the historical mode that they develop under certain circumstances but freely based on their inner necessities--all philosophy cannot emerge besides their exact time of existence. Still, like the example of the lifetime of a plant, once the highest idea of its era is formed, as the world spirit moves on and the activity of thinking develops itself, the content is negated and the idea either moves to the next stage, being more concrete or forms a counterpart of the previous one and the two conjoin to present the unity. For Hegel, viewing the history of philosophy as a whole process, we will find that it is the progression of philosophical thoughts moving to the absolute truth; the negation of contradicting philosophies shows the limitation of determinations that motivates the self-progression of thoughts. Philosophical thoughts not only deal with modernity but also present the epistemic development to the knowledge world, and thereby shape human history accordingly.

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