

Epistemological position of G.W.F. Hegel

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In this paper I shall discuss Epistemological position of G.W.F Hegel (1770-1831). In his epistemology Hegel discusses four sources of knowledge. They are sense-certainty, perception, understanding and reason. Sense-certainty is the source of our knowledge of the ordinary consciousness of things. Hegelian notion of sense-certainty can be compared with Kantian view that human knowledge begins with and terminates in sensibility. The second source of knowledge according to Hegel is perception. By ‘perception’ Hegel refers to that form of consciousness, in which, world is regarded as the collection of things with properties. Understanding is the capacity of reflective interpretation. Understanding conceives a world of finite entities, governed by the principle of identity and opposition. The understanding introduces the conception of force and its expressions. The force is manifested in its expressions. Hegel in order to overcome the Kantian distinction between thing-in-itself and the appearance or between the reality and the appearance draws the analogy of force and its expressions. Just as the force experiences through its expressions, similarly the thing-in-itself has revealed through its appearances. Hegel strongly criticizes Kantian unknown and unknowable of thing-in-itself. He points out that there is nothing like the mysterious unknown and unknowable thing-in-itself behind the veil of appearances. There is no dualism between thing-in-itself and the appearance. In the process of unifying the opposites between the finite and its expressions, reason plays an important role. Here Hegel’s position is related with Bradley. According to Bradley, all appearances must belong to reality.

The theory of knowledge as discussed by Hegel is found in his book *Phenomenology of Spirit*. According to J.N. Findlay the *Phenomenology of Spirit*,

... is a work seen by Hegel as a necessary forepiece to his philosophical system ... its task is to run through, in a scientifically purged order, the stages in the mind’s necessary progress from immediate sense-consciousness to the position of a scientific philosophy, showing thereby that this position is the only one that the mind can take, when it comes to the end of the intellectual and spiritual adventures described in the book.¹

Here it is important to say that Hegel is very much influenced by Kantian philosophy. He regards Kantian philosophy to be the basis and the point of departure of modern German philosophy. Hegel in his book *Science of Logic* says,

... it is to be remembered I frequently take the Kantian philosophy in to consideration in this work (superfluous though this may seem to some), because, however its detailed determinations and the individual parts of its development may be regarded in this work and elsewhere, it still remains the basis and beginning of modern German philosophy; whatever faults we may find with it, this must be set down undiminished to its credit.²

In his book Hegel discusses four sources of knowledge these are sense-certainty, perception, understanding and reason. They are discussed as follows:

Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit starts with our ordinary consciousness of things, and takes us from there to the true perspective of spirit. It is called phenomenology because it deals with the way things appear for consciousness, or with forms of consciousness. In Hegel's philosophy appearance should not be contrasted with reality, what is most real, because in his philosophy he regards the absolute as self-appearance. Here Hegel's view is different from Kant. Kant distinguishes between phenomenon and noumenon. But Hegel rejects Kant's idealism on the ground that it assumes the existence of 'things-in-themselves' as the ground and cause of the 'appearance' but those 'thing-in-themselves' transcend human cognitive capability.

Hegel starts with a form of consciousness, known as sense-certainty. Sense-certainty according to Hegel is a form of consciousness in which we are immediately aware of things in our sensory world. Consciousness here does not refer to anything mental, rather it tries to give us the knowledge of something. Hegel thinks that sense-certainty is the immediate knowledge of the object and it is the first source of knowledge. Hegel in his Phenomenology of Spirit says,

The knowledge or knowing which is at the start or is immediately our object cannot be anything else but immediate knowledge itself, a knowledge of the immediate or of what simply is. Our approach to the object must also be immediate or receptive; we must alter nothing in the object as it presents itself.³

According to him sense-certainty is not only the immediate knowledge but it appears to be the truest and the richest kind of knowledge and both these for the same reason, that is, it has not as yet omitted anything from the object before it in its perfect entirety. He writes:

Because of its concrete content, sense-certainty immediately appears as the richest kind of knowledge, indeed a knowledge of infinite wealth for which no bounds can be found, either when we reach out into space and time in which it is dispersed, or when we take a bit of this wealth, and by division enter into it. Moreover, sense-certainty appears to be the truest knowledge; for it has not as

yet omitted anything from the object, but has the object before it in its perfect entirety.⁴

Here we perceive a certain amount of resemblance of Hegel's sense-certainty with British empiricists like Locke, Berkeley and Hume of seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Because according to Locke, Berkeley and Hume knowledge depends upon our sense perception.

According to Locke, sensation and reflection are the two sources of knowledge. Through sensation the mind is furnished with sensible qualities. According to Locke, a sensation arises through the affection of the body by external material things. Sensation tells us about the external world, likewise reflection tells us about the internal world.

According to Berkeley, knowledge depends upon sense-perception. According to him the existence of a thing consists in its being perceived or to be is to be perceived (*esse est percipi*).

Hume says that all our knowledge is ultimately formed on experience. Knowledge according to him is constituted of impression and idea. Impression is lively perception like hear, or see, or feel, or love, or hate, or desire, or will etc. and idea is less lively perception. Hume says,

By the term impression, I mean all our more lively perceptions, when we hear, or see, or feel, or love, or hate, or desire, or will. And..ideas... are the less lively perceptions, of which we are conscious, when we reflect on any of those sensations⁵

while discussing 'Idea' Hume says,

All our ideas or more feeble perceptions are copies of our impressions or more lively ones⁶

It is to be noticed here that Kant also adopts the view of the empiricists that all human knowledge begins with experience or sensibility, that sensibility alone provides the content for the concepts of understanding. He thinks that through sensibility, objects are given to us. Through understanding, they are thought. Kant writes,

Without sensibility no object would be given to us, without understanding no object would be thought. Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind.⁷

According to Hegel, sense-certainty is immediate or receptive, free from conceptual comprehension. Hegel remarks that because of its immediate or receptive nature, free from conceptualization, sense certainty is regarded as the richest knowledge. It is also considered to be the truest knowledge because it omits nothing from the object. Hegel says,

Moreover, sense-certainty appears to be the truest knowledge; for it has not as yet omitted anything from the object, but has the object before it in its perfect entirety.⁸

From sense-certainty, Hegel proceeds to the second source of knowledge, that is, perception to replace the ineffability of the bare particular of sense-certainty. This section is actually indirectly an analysis and a criticism of the doctrine which reduces or confines knowledge to perception. Because Hegel does not believe Berkeley's view that is "esse est percipi" or to be is to be perceived, who denies that matter can exist in its own right and maintains that what we think of as matter is nothing but the content of some mind. This is why Baillie in the Introduction to his translation of *The Phenomenology of Mind* has written that,

... 'esse est percipi' must give way to the principle 'esse est intelligi'.⁹

According to Hegel sense-certainty does not express the truth. On the other hand perception takes thing as universal. Perception as the form of consciousness, is the determinate negation of sense-certainty. Hegel says,

Immediate certainty does not take over the truth, for its truth is the universal, whereas certainty wants to apprehend the This. Perception, on the other hand, takes what is present to it as a universal.¹⁰

Hegel further observes that,

For us, or in itself, the universal as principle is the essence of perception....¹¹

Therefore it is apparent that the perception deals with universal.

He thinks that the sense knowledge is also dependant upon perception, because perception is the only source of instances. So the wealth of sense knowledge does not belong to immediate certainty. He says,

The wealth of sense-knowledge belongs to perception, not to immediate certainty, for which it was only the source of instances; for only perception contains negation, that is, difference or manifoldness, within its own essence.¹²

Hegel has given a summary of the constitution of the Thing. He describes thing as containing three moments: the Also, the One, and the Properties. He says,

It is (a) an indifferent, passive universality, the Also of the many properties or rather ‘matters’; (b) negation, equally simply; or the One, which excludes opposite properties; and (c) the many properties themselves, the relation of the first two moments, or negation as it relates to the indifferent element, and therein expands into a host of differences.¹³

But he thinks that the primary constitution of the Thing lies neither in any one of these moments separately, nor in their cohesion, rather in the movement of these moments one into the other, and in their relation to one another through this movement or dialectic.

Regarding consciousness he thinks that the consciousness may deceive us or it can apprehend the object incorrectly because consciousness is alterable and unessential. But the percipient is aware of the possibility of deception. The percipient apprehends the object as self-identical. But if any dissimilarity arises here in perception then it is not the untruth of the object because object is self-identical. So here the untruth is in perceiving the object. Hegel writes,

Since the object is the True and universal, the self-identical, while consciousness is alterable and unessential, it can happen that consciousness apprehends the object incorrectly and deceives itself. The percipient is aware of the possibility of deception; for in the universality which is the principle, otherness itself is immediately present for him, though present as what is null and superseded. His criterion of truth is therefore self-identity, and his behavior consists in apprehending the object as self-identical. Since at the same time diversity is explicitly there for him, it is a connection of the diverse moments of his apprehension to one another; but if dissimilarity makes itself felt in the course of this comparison, then this is not an untruth of the object – for this is the self-identical – but an untruth in perceiving it.¹⁴

According to Hegel sometimes in perception we perceive various properties which seem to be properties of the Thing. But for him Thing is One. It is due to our way of perception that we some time think something as white, tart, cubical and so on. This diversity of the Things are not of Thing but these are of ourselves. Actually the Thing is One and we are the universal medium in which such moments are kept apart and exist each on its own. Hegel says,

Now, there also occur in the perception various properties which seem to be properties of the Thing; but the Thing is a One, and we are conscious that this diversity by which it would cease to be a One falls in us. So in point of fact,

the Thing is white only to our eyes, also tart to our tongue, also cubical to our touch, and so on.15

The thing excludes all others from it is not due to it that it is One rather we can say that One makes it like all the others. Because of its determinateness thing excludes others. According to Hegel Things are in and of themselves determinate. Thing has a number of properties, by these properties it distinguishes itself from the other. Hegel writes,

But it is not as a One that it excludes others from itself, for to be a One is the universal relating of self to self, and the fact that it is a One rather makes it like all the others; it is through its determinateness that the thing excludes others. Things are therefore in and for themselves determinate; they have properties by which they distinguish themselves from others.16

According to Hegel consciousness perceives the Thing as being both for itself and for another (the one and the also). The proximity of these two moments, their inhering within the same Thing is what gives rise to the contradiction. Consciousness attempts to resolve this contradiction by distributing the oneness and difference between different things. Hegel in his writing directly declared that

... it is for itself, so far as it is for another, and it is for another, so far as it is for itself. 17

From the above discussion it derives that perception is that form of ‘consciousness’, in which the world is regarded as the collection of things with properties. But how is that we take the properties as the properties of any particular thing? For the answer of this problem, Hegel refers to the third form of consciousness that is ‘understanding’.

We have seen that in perception the universal is limited or conditioned. It is conditioned by the sensuous field. But in the understanding consciousness has arrived at a new truth, this is the unconditioned universal. Here the universal is not conditioned by any sensuous object. And this is what consciousness is going to try and grasp in its attempts to know its object.

According to Hegel understanding means the capacity of reflective interpretation. It is a capacity which unrelentingly separates identity from difference and allows neither to contaminate the other.

Understanding then, conceives a world of finite entities governed by the principle of identity and opposition. Everything is identical with itself and with nothing else: it is by virtue of its self-identity, opposed to all other things. It

can be connected and combined with them in many ways but it never loses its own identity and never becomes something other than itself.¹⁸

According to Hegel understanding limits itself to the finite and always its thinking is finite thinking, Hegel calls it ‘finite reason’. Hegel maintains that finite thing always carries its own negation. The defining characteristic of finite thing is ‘finite things are negative’. Finite thing always exist in a state that tends of their own motion to go over in to their opposite. They exist in this state to change into what they are not. This is why Hegel says,

... the object is in one and the same respect the opposite of itself: it is for itself, so far as it is for another, and it is for another, so far as it is for itself.¹⁹

At the level of understanding, the dichotomy between the appearance and the thing-in-itself or reality lies. The separation between ‘appearance and reality’ is completely unacceptable in Hegel’s philosophy. Hegel tries to overcome this gap between ‘appearance’ and ‘reality’ which lies at the roots of Kantian philosophy. Hegel has interpreted this ‘appearance’ and ‘reality’ in another way in his famous book *Phenomenology of Spirit*. To overcome this distinction Hegel takes the analogy of a ‘force’ and its expression. Just as a force is manifested in its effect, so reality is revealed in appearance. Hegel explains Force and its expression in the following words:

... the ‘matters’ posited as independent directly pass over into their unity, and their unity directly unfolds its diversity, and this once again reduces itself to unity. But this movement is what is called Force. One of its moments, the dispersal of the independent ‘matters’ in their [immediate] being, is the expression of Force; but Force, taken as that in which they have disappeared, is Force proper, Force which has been driven back into itself from its expression. First, however, the Force which is driven back into itself must express itself; and, secondly, it is still Force remaining within itself in the expression, just as much as it is expression in this self-containedness.²⁰

It means that a force has its own identity apart from all its expression. According to Hegel though ‘Force’ expresses itself in its effects yet it is united with its expressions. According to him, the relation between reality and appearance must be understood in the same way.

According to Hegel, things do not remain in their finite state of existence. There is a unity between finite and its negativity. We get this unity at the stage of reason. Sense certainty as well as the understanding presents the disparity between finite and its negativity. They present isolated or separate entities which are opposed to

one another. But in the state of reason there is a unity between the finite and its negativity, or the reality and its appearance:

The process of unifying opposites touches every part of reality and comes to an end only when reason has organized the whole so that every part exists only in relation to the whole and every individual entity has meaning and significance only in its relation to the totality.²¹

The process of unifying the opposites touches every part of reality and it ends only when the reason has organized the whole, where the particulars can participate in the whole. Hegel argues that every individual entity has meaning and significance only in its relation to the totality. The final reality, where all the antagonisms are resolved, Hegel terms it as ‘the Absolute’. This rationally systematized whole, where all the antagonisms are resolved and sublated are known as the ‘reality’.

Hegel has identified rational with the real. According to him, the unity of the contradictory moments is made by reason and reality is that unity. As he points out, “What is rational is actual and what is actual is rational. On this conviction the plain man like the philosopher takes his stand, and from it philosophy starts its study of the universe of mind as well as the universe of nature.” Thus, Hegel overcomes the Kantian dichotomy between the reality and the appearance.

The relation between reality and appearance is also discussed in the Science of Logic. Hegel says that,

...essence appears ...Appearance is that which the thing is in itself or its truth... the being that appears and essential being, simply stand in relation to one another. Existence is essential relation; what appears manifests what is essential, and this is in its Appearance...²²

In Kant’s philosophy Kant has discussed that reality is something which is unknown and unknowable. But Hegel rejects this position of Kant. He rejects it by formulating that all reality is at least subject to cognition. No part of it is unknowable. In his philosophy Hegel directs a powerful polemic against the epistemological gap between man and nature expressed in Kantian distinction between phenomenon and Noumenon (thing in itself). In this regard Charles Taylor in his book *Hegel and Modern Society* says:

... how can there be anything beyond knowledge, that is, beyond mind or Geist, for Geist turns out ultimately to be identical with the whole or reality? More specifically, the opposition is overcome in the fact that our knowledge of the world turns ultimately into Geist’s self-knowledge for we come to discover that the world which is supposedly beyond thought is really posited by thought,

that it is a manifestation of rational necessity. And at the same time the thought which was supposedly over against the world, that is, our thinking as finite subjects, turns out to be that of the cosmos itself, or the cosmic subject, God whose vehicles we are. In the higher vision of speculative philosophy, the world loses its otherness to thought, and subjectivity goes beyond finitude, and hence the two meet. We overcome the dualism between subject and world, between knowing man and the nature, in seeing the world as the necessary expression of thought, of rational necessity, while we see ourselves as the necessary vehicles of this thought as the point where it becomes conscious. And become conscious it must, for the rationally necessary order to things includes the necessity that this rationally order appear to itself. 23

Thus with the help of reason, Hegel tries to overcome the gap between reality and the appearance or between the phenomena and the thing-in-itself.

1 Findlay, J. N., “Foreword” to G.W.F. Hegel’s Phenomenology of spirit, (1979), Trans. By A.V. Millar, U.S.A: Clarendon Press, P. v.

2 Hegel, G.W.F, Science of Logic , Volume I, Translated by W.H. Johnston and L.G. Struthers, London, George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1966, P.73.

3 Hegel, G.W.F., Phenomenology of Spirit, Trans. by A.V. Miller, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1998, P. 58.

4 Ibid.

5Hume, David, Enquiry, P.11. (Quoted from: Bhattacharya, Samarendra, Paschatya Darsaner Itihas, Book Syndicate Pvt. Limited, Calcuta, 2010, P. 154)

6 Ibid.

7 Kant ,immanuel,Critique of Pure Reason, Trans by, N.K . Smith, London, The Macmillan Press, 1973,P. 93.

8 Hegel, G.W.F., Phenomenology of Spirit, Trans by A.V. Miller, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1998, P. 58

9 Hegel, G.W.F, The Phenomenology of Mind, Trans by J.B. Baillie, The University of Adelaide, 1807, p. 67

10 Hegel, G.W.F, Phenomenology of Spirit, Trans by A.V. Miller, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1998, P. 67.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid., p.69

14 Ibid., p.70

15 Ibid., p.72

16 Ibid., p.73

17 Hegel, G.W.F, Phenomenology of Spirit, Trans by A.V. Miller, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1998, P. 76.

18 Marcuse, Herbert, Reason and Revolution, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977, p.44.

19 Hegel, G.W.F. Phenomenology of Spirit, Trans by A.V. Miller, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1998, P. 76.

20 Ibid., p.81

21 Marcuse, Herbert, Reason and Revolution, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977, P. 47

22 Hegel, G.W.F, Science of Logic, Trans by A.V Millar, London, George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1969, PP. 479-80.

23 Taylor, Charles, Hegel and Modern Society, London, Cambridge University Press, 1979, P. 47.

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