

G. W. F. HEGEL THE SCIENCE OF LOGIC (1812-1816)

The greatest of the German Idealists, whose heyday was in the early nineteenth century, was Hegel. He is most remembered today for two magna opera: The Phenomenology of Spirit (1807) and The Philosophy of History (1830-1831) which have both had an extraordinary influence on contemporary thought, not least in the sphere of social and political philosophy. Though an idealist, Hegel's influence is particularly felt in several schools of contemporary Continental philosophy, of which Marxism is one of the most important.

The key concept which Hegel bequeaths to Continental thought, not least Marxism and Phenomenology, is the notion of the dialectic. This is a term first coined by Plato to denote a process of argumentation by which the absolute truth of things is arrived at. Plato used the dialectical method of arguing (what logicians call the 'method of the contrary case') in order to elicit from the person to whom it is applied information which s/he is unaware s/he possesses. For example, in a famous exchange in The Republic, a *thesis* (or truth-claim or proposition) about justice is proposed by someone named Cephalus who equates justice with telling the truth. This is followed by finding a contrary case to the thesis--the *antithesis*--in which the opposing assertion is made (that justice has nothing to do with telling the truth). When thesis and antithesis are weighed against each other, the outcome is not a contradiction but a reconciliation of these two seemingly contradictory propositions: what Hegel would term a *synthesis* in which the truthful aspects of each opposing claim are retained and the false aspects dismissed. This synthesis in turn functions as a new thesis at a higher level which is in turn weighed against another antithesis, and so on. This process is carried out until the highest truth is arrived at.

Hegel uses the term in this sense here to denote the conscious process by which we arrive at the truth but, as we shall see, given that the universe is in his view the manifestation of God or Spirit, which he thinks of as something akin to a universal consciousness, human consciousness writ large, as it were, it also denotes the process inherent in all life. The dialectic is the pattern of being and becoming constitutive of all life. Hegel is a very difficult thinker to understand but it is possible to isolate the most important claims he makes.

Here, Hegel's focus is on the "true method of philosophical science" (243) which is the "inner self-movement of the content of logic" (243). In The Phenomenology of Mind, he offers an "example of this method in application to a more concrete object, namely to consciousness" (243). Here, however, he is dealing with the workings of conscious thought, nothing less than the process by which our mental concepts (which are necessarily about things in the external world) are formed: "we are dealing with forms of consciousness each of which in realising itself at the same time abolishes and transcends itself, has for its result its own negation – and so passes into a higher form" (243). The "fresh concept" (243) produced thereby is "richer than the negation or opposite" (243) of its predecessor for it "contains it, but also something more and is the unity of itself and its opposite" (243). It is in this "dialectic . . . , that is, in the grasping of opposites in their unity or of the positive in the negative, that speculative thought consists" (243).

Hegel then illustrates how the dialectic normally functions. If you take any object or event, for any claim concerning, for example, its "finitude in space or time" (243) or its "presence in this place" (243), it is also possible to show that the opposite is true of the object in question (for example, "infinity in space and time" [243], "non-presence in this place" [243], etc.). As a result, the conclusion is often drawn that the initial assertion made is null and void. However, to conclude thus is to be ignorant of the true dialectical

nature of thought: "all the oppositions that are assumed as fixed, as for example, finite and infinite, individual and universal, are not in contradiction" (243). Rather, "they are in and for themselves a transition; the synthesis and the subject in which they appear is the product of their concept's own activity of conceptual reflection" (243). If a "consideration that ignores the concept stops short at their external reflection, isolates them and leaves them as fixed presuppositions, it is the concept, on the contrary, that keeps them steadily in view, moves them as their spirit or mind and brings out their dialectic" (243). In other words, appearances can be deceiving and one might assume that the world is full of contradictions but closer inspection reveals the inherently dialectical nature of things by which seeming contradictions (a thesis and its antithesis) are cancelled out and subsumed in a higher unity (the synthesis by which the initial negation is itself negation).

From this perspective, any object which is initially "considered in and for itself, shows itself to be the other of itself" (244). What at first seems "immediate now appears as mediated, related to an other" (244). From this point of view, what was initially thought to be "universal appears as particular" (244), its opposite. The "second term that has thereby come into being is the negative of the first" (244). The "immediate, from this negative side, has been extinguished in the other, but the other is essentially not the empty negative, the nothing, that is taken to be usual result of dialectic; rather, is it the other of the first, the negative of the immediate" (244) and "contains in general the determination of the first within itself. Consequently, the first is essentially preserved and retained even in the other" (244), the thesis in its antithesis which is only the "first negative" (244), however. This insight into the presence of the "positive in its negative" (244) is the "most important feature in rational cognition" (244).

Since the "first is contained in the second, and the latter is the truth of the former, this unity can be expressed as a proposition in which the immediate is put as subject, and the mediated as its predicate; for example, the finite is infinite, the one is many, the individual is universal" (244). This may seem contradictory but is merely the paradoxical truth of things which is the insight of deeper speculative thought. There is a relationship between the first and the second terms, the positive and the negative, the immediate and the mediate: the latter "is the negative, but the negative of the positive, and includes the positive within itself. It is therefore the other, but not the other of something to which it is indifferent – in that case it would not be an other, nor a relation nor a relationship – rather it is other of its own self, the other of an other; therefore it includes its own other within it and is consequently a contradiction, the posited dialectic of itself" (244).

What logic attempts to show in the case of the first term is the "difference that it implicitly contains" (244), its implied opposite, and in the case of the second term, the inherent "unity that is contained in it" (244). To fail to see this relationship between the thesis and antithesis is the "fault of a thinking that does not bring its thoughts together" (244), what Hegel calls "formal thinking" (244) which "makes identity its law and allows the contradictory content before it to sink into the sphere of ordinary conception, into space and time, in which the contradictories are held asunder in juxtaposition and temporal succession and so come before consciousness without reciprocal contact" (244-245). When confronted by contradiction, formal thinking "at once looks away from it" (245). In short, formal thinking "lays down for its principle that contradiction is unthinkable; but as a matter of fact, the thinking of contradiction is the essential moment of the concept" (245).

This "negativity" (245) is the "turning point of the movement of the concept" (245). It is the "simple point of the negative relation to self, the innermost source of all activity, of all animate and spiritual self-movement, the dialectical spirit that everything true possess and through which alone it is true" (245). On this "alone rests the abolishing and

transcendence of the opposition between concept and reality, and the unity that is truth" (245). The "second negative, the negative of the negative, . . . this abolishing and transcending of the contradiction" is not an "act of external reflection, but rather the innermost, most objective moment of life and spirit, through which a subject, a person, a free being, exists" (245):

Just as the first premiss is the moment of universality and communication, so the second is determined by individuality, which in its relation to its other is primarily exclusive, for itself, and different. The negative appears as the mediating element, since it includes within it itself and the immediate whose negation it is. So far as these two determinations are taken in some relationship or other as externally related, the negative is only the formal mediating element; but as absolute negativity the negative moment of absolute mediation is the unity which is subjectivity and mind. . . . In this turning point of the method, the course of cognition at the same time returns into itself. As self-transcending and self-preserving contradiction this negativity is the restoration of the first immediacy, of simple universality; for the other of the other, the negative of the negative, is immediately the positive, the identical, the universal. If one insists on counting, this second immediate is, in the course of the method as a whole, the third term to the first immediate and the mediated. (245)

This third is the "immediate, but resulting from the simultaneous abolition and preservation of difference, the positive resulting from the abolition and preservation of the negative, the concept that has realised itself by means of its otherness and by the abolition and preservation of this reality has become united with itself, and has restored its absolute reality, its simple relation to itself. This result is therefore the truth" (245). As "that with which we began is the universal, so the result is the individual, the concrete, the subject; what the former is in itself, the latter is now equally for itself, the universal is posited in the subject" (245-246). If the first is the "universal that is in itself" (246) and the second the "negative that is for itself" (246), the third is the "both in and for itself" (246). The third is the "conclusion in which the concept through its negativity is mediated with itself and thereby posited for itself as the universal and identity of its moments" (246).