

HEGEL'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO MODERN INDIVIDUALISM AND TOTALITARIANISM

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Abstract

The need for reconciliation of individualism and communitarianism in search for an ideal state has been the main preoccupation of social and political philosophers. Unlike other philosophers like Hobbes and Locke that view the individual and the state as being incompatible and therefore seek to achieve some sort of compromise between the two principles, Hegel believes that the individual and the state are mutually independent. For him, individual freedom understood as rational freedom is achieved through the rational institutions of the state. Thus, the state's institutions must harmonise truly the collective interest with the objective good of individuals. The will of the state, the universal will is the good; it is the realisation of freedom and so is unquestionable. This paper discusses how Hegel reconciles individual freedom with the authority of the state. Besides, it argues that the absolutism of the Hegel's state tends to restrict individual right and freedom which, in Hegel's view, must be actualised in the state. Finally, this paper contends that Hegel's reduction of freedom to rationality tends to encourage indiscriminate utilisation of human reason to create things that can erode human dignity and values. It suggests that the recognition of the place of God in human thought and life would make life meaningful and valuable.

Introduction

Individualism is a political, social or moral outlook which emphasises individual interests, independence and freedom as opposed to statism, communitarianism or collectivism that stresses the interests and goals of the state, group or community. Totalitarianism is a political system in which the state wields absolute power and completely controls all aspects of people's life.

The period of the Renaissance witnessed great advancement in science on the basis of observation, hypothesis and mathematic deduction. The Renaissance scientists like Galileo Galilei, Nicholas Copernicus, Sir Isaac Newton and Johannes Kepler discovered the natural laws of nature merely with the application of human reason. The scientific advancement made in this period had a profound effect on the minds of the Enlightenment philosophers who began to develop a stout belief in the capacity of human intellect, stressing rationalism and de-emphasising theocentric thinking.

For instance, Francis Bacon laid emphasis on the observation of empirical data as a basis for induction and for discovering causes of nature. It was the certainty and exactitude of mathematics and its successful application to scientific problems that made Descartes think that the essential characteristic of the mathematical method would reveal the right method for use in philosophy. He introduced the intellectual attitude known as 'Cartesian doubt' which claims that reason must be applied to determine the truth or falsity of a given phenomenon. Descartes' emphasis on rationalism became the staple of the 18th century philosophies.

The renewal of intellectual spirit and courage brought about a paradigm shift in human thoughts and relations. This paradigm shift is portrayed in the natural law of progress which claims that "human reason can discover scientific truths about the world and human nature and in turn this body of knowledge can be put into practice to improve human societies and living conditions."¹ Consequently, modern philosophers such as Jean Jacques Rousseau, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke applied reason to human nature and society in order to secure the natural rights of property, freedom and equality.

The rapid spread of the message of freedom and independence throughout Europe paved the way for the modern individualism which received wide currency with the secularisation and bureaucratisation of social and political institutions of European societies as well as the advent of capitalism. The Enlightenment and Kant's idea of rational autonomy or freedom plays a significant role in Hegel's political philosophy in which he seeks to reconcile the state with individual freedom.

Starting Points for Hegel's Conception of Individualism

Hegel derives his idea of the universal, the community, as an ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) of a nation from Plato and Aristotle, and Greek experience in general. A Greek citizen regards himself as a political animal by nature and immerses himself in the politics and ethos of his city. As a member of the ethical community, his actions are guided "not by his self-interest or some private conception of happiness and virtue, but by the traditional ideals of his city,"² which he willingly accepted.

Accordingly, respect for and submission to the established social morality or ethical life of the city is the true Greek ethical ideal. Hegel acknowledges that fulfilling one's ethical duties is the concern of Plato's Republic. However, Plato's greatest undoing is to subdue elements of individual interests on the grounds that they undercut the existence of the Greek city-state. He does this by placing restrictions on property, marriage and career. His indifference to subjective freedom, in Hegel's view, makes Greek ethical life defective.

Hegel also examines Rousseau's concept of individual in the modern state. Rousseau maintains the primacy of the individual over the state. He believes that established institutions and laws of the state are valid due to their voluntary acceptance by individuals. The conscience and will of the individuals are the basis of the civil state. Rousseau's political thought is therefore antithetical to Plato's and Greek political principle that gives priority to the community over the individual. Hegel explicitly states this antithesis in the lectures on the History of Philosophy thus:

The lack of subjectivity is really the defect of the Greek ethical idea... Plato has not recognised knowledge, wishes and resolutions of the individual, nor his self reliance, and has not succeeded in combining them with his idea; but justice demands its rights for this just as much as it requires the higher elucidation of the same, and its harmony with the universal. The opposite of Plato's principle is the principle of the conscious free will of individuals which in later times was more especially by

Rousseau raised to prominence: The necessity of the arbitrary choice of the individual, as individual, the outward expression of the individual.³

Hegel agrees with Rousseau that liberty is the essential characteristic of the individual, for “to renounce one’s liberty is to renounce one’s manhood.”⁴ However, Hegel feels that Rousseau takes individualism to extreme by rejecting all established order as the objective and rational principle that guides individual will. For Rousseau, the only thing which is binding on individual will is what the individual freely gives his consent to. The implication of this is at “the will of each individual, unrestricted and unguided by anything except his own deeply felt conception of virtue or the common good”⁵ is the foundation of any political association or law. In this case, one’s will becomes the supreme arbiter of morality.

Hegel contends that the fact that there could be no freedom without the consent of individual will does not imply that such consent constitutes freedom. Although, the consent of one’s will is required to have freedom, it will become arbitrary and capricious without being guided by an objective, rational principle. Hegel asserts that Rousseau’s ideas of individual will and freedom and the reduction of the union of individuals in the state to a social contract are responsible for the French Revolution. Hegel’s concern is to find a unity of the individual and the state which transcends the limitations of a social contract. He “upholds individual rights as the basis of a distinctively modern form of liberty”⁶ without regarding freedom as independence.

Hegel incorporates most of the individual rights and freedom ordinarily associated with liberalism – a political doctrine that is primarily concerned with securing the life, liberty and property of the individual. However, Hegel’s rationale for incorporating these liberal elements is essentially not the same with that of traditional liberalism. He rejects the social contract upon which liberalism is theoretically founded and which makes the sovereign individual lies at the base of liberal doctrine.

He argues that the problem with classical liberalism is that it attributes individualistic end – the securing of the life, liberty and property of the individual – to the state. Besides liberalism claims

that individuals' consensus is the foundation of the state so that established customs, laws and institutions have no validity unless individual voluntarily accept them. Hegel explains that classical liberalism mistakes civil society for the state whereas, in his view, both are quite different. In his own words:

If the state is confused with civil society, and if its specific end is laid down as the security and protection of property and personal freedom, then the interest of the individuals as such becomes the ultimate end of their association, and it follows that membership of the state is something optional. But the state's relation to the individual is quite different from this. Since the state is mind objectified, it is only as one of its members that the individual himself has objectivity, genuine individuality and an ethical life. Unification pure and simple is the true content and aim of the individual, and the individual's destiny is the living a universal life.⁷

Therefore, for Hegel the state is not based on a contract and it is not a mere means to the satisfaction of the individualistic end. Rather, it is "the objective embodiment of that universality which represents the destiny and deepest essence of human beings."⁸ Given that the State represents the rational essence of individuals, it is by necessity that the individual belongs to the State. As Hegel puts it: "It is the rational destiny [*Bestimmung*] of human beings to live within the State, an even if no State is yet present, reason requires that one be established."⁹ He agrees with classical liberalism that the state exists to advance human freedom but his idea of freedom is different from the classical liberal one. The freedom which the liberal state seeks to promote is merely the freedom of the arbitrary will, which for Hegel, is antithetical to the universal form of the will. He contends that the union of individuals within the state amounts to "a contract, which accordingly based on their arbitrary will and opinions,"¹⁰ when the universal will is interpreted as merely the common element arising out of the will of all individuals. He interprets the universal will

rather in terms of the rational will, which for him, wills the freedom and thus itself. In the light of this, he asserts:

In opposition to the principle of the individual will, we should remember the fundamental concept according to which the objective will is rational in itself, i.e in its concept, whether or not it is recognized by individuals [*Einzelnen*] and willed by them at their discretion – and that its opposite, knowledge and volition, the subjectivity of freedom (which is the *sole* content of the principle of the individual will) embodies only *one* (consequently one-sided) moment of the *Idea of the rational* will, which is rational solely because it has being both *in itself and for itself*.¹¹

Hegel insists that genuine free will must be the rational will that wills the universal. The rational will wills the universal, the freedom by willing the law and the state. He believes that the law and the state do not limit individual freedom unless “we understand freedom wrongly as arbitrary caprice and the satisfaction of our particularity.”¹² Thus, freedom, conceived as rational freedom, is achieved in the law and the state.

By subordinating the subjective character of the individual will to the objectivity of the rational will, Hegel takes his departure from the traditional liberal conception of freedom. However, it does not imply that Hegel outrightly ignores the subjective aspect of freedom, for he maintains that “subjectivity of freedom constitutes one moment of the idea of the rational will.”¹³ In this way, Hegel finds a middle ground between the modern liberalism and contemporary communitarianism, thereby “partaking of the virtues of each without suffering from the corresponding defects.”¹⁴

Ethical Life (*Sittlichkeit*) as the Bedrock of Individual Freedom and Rights

Hegel does not conceive will as a separate faculty distinct from reason. For him, will and thought are two modes of reason. Individual will is really free only because the individual thinks and

knows himself. Free will is therefore viewed as thinking intelligence. Thus, individual freedom is bound up with self-consciousness. An act of will implies that the individual accepts only courses of action he freely chooses to follow.

However, when the content of one's will comprises one's impulses, desires and appetites, the will ceases to act in accordance with its rational nature and becomes arbitrary and indeterminate. Hegel holds that the arbitrary wills of individuals are inherent in the Hobbes' state of nature where violence is the order of the day. Such impulse-driven and egocentric individuals, who act arbitrarily and capriciously, are not free in Hegel's thinking.

Hegel maintains that individuals realise freedom only in ethical life. For him, when man wills what is rational, he acts not as a particular individual but in accordance with the concept of ethics. True freedom is therefore ethical freedom and can only be actualised in an ethical community. He views ethical life as a 'substance' and individuals as its 'accidents'. Ethical life moulds man's nature; it is the soil in which individuals' rights and morals grow. Hegel explains that the right and the moral cannot exist independently, they must have the ethical as their support and foundation, "for the right lacks the moment of subjectivity, while morality in turn possesses that moment alone, and consequently both the right and the moral lack actuality by themselves."¹⁵

Ethical life encompasses the ethical norms or principles of actions which provide the substance of human choices and decisions. It finds expressions in duty which, for Hegel, does not restrict individual freedom, provided that freedom is not seen as indeterminate subjectivity or in the abstract. In duty the individual is liberated from reliance on natural impulses and is made to achieve his substantive freedom. Hegel's concept of freedom can therefore, be viewed as the conscientious recognition and fulfilment of one's ethical duties, for it is in duty that the individual attains his freedom.

Concrete freedom – the self-determination and self-consciousness of a rational and ethical agent –reaches its fullest development in a politically organised community whose *raison d'etre* is the realisation of common good or public interest. In Hegel's perspective, common good constitutes the objective will of the community and is identical with the totality of rational laws and

institutions of the state. For him, “such will must express or manifest itself in the actual thinking and willing of individual citizens, consciously identifying their subjective will with the “objective will” and its needs.”¹⁶

Accordingly the preservation of the unity-in-difference of the universal and subjective will results in rational self-determination of the individual and the self-consciousness of the state. Individual freedom, conceived as rational self-determination, involves “the subordination of the natural instincts, impulses and desires to conscious reflection and to goals and purposes that are consciously chosen and that require commitment to rational principles in order to properly guide action.”¹⁷ Concrete freedom consists in the knowing and willing the universal and pursuing it actively as one’s ultimate goal. The universal hence cannot achieve completion without individual interests and cooperation of individuals knowing and willing it.

On the other hand, individuals “do not live as private persons for their own ends alone, but in the very act of willing these they will the universal in the light of the universal, and their activity is consciously aimed at none but the universal end.”¹⁸ Thus, for Hegel, “the unity of the subjective with the objective and absolute good is the ethical life, and in it we find the reconciliation which accords with the concept.”¹⁹ On the whole, freedom is conceived in an ethical, social and political context. Individual freedom is fully actualised in the structure of the state as an objective, rational system of wills. A well-constituted ethical life is the only guarantee of individual freedom and rights.

The Place of Individualism in Hegel’s Political System

Hegel’s idea of individualism is developed at the three moments of ethical life, namely, the family, civil society and the state.

Family

This is the first moment in the union of moral subjectivity and objectivity. The Absolute first objectifies itself in the family. Initially, the members of the family are united primarily by the bond of love or feeling so that the individual is not conscious of oneself as being independent, but only sees himself as a member of the family

to which he is bound. What it means is that one's sense of individuality is within this undifferentiated unity of the family. Thus, "the family is what one might call a feeling – totality."²⁰ The will of each member of the family is expressed in the common property of the family.

In course of time, the submersion of particularity or individuality in a common life becomes intolerable for individuals and so each individual family member strives to assert himself as particular (individual person), possessing his unique plan in life. In the wake of emergence of particularity out of the universality of family life, the undifferentiated unity of the family is broken up, thereby leading to the formation of civil society.

Civil Society

This represents the second moment of ethical life. Having escaped from family life and strived for independence, the self-interest and personal choice come to the fore in civil society as its dominant characteristic. There is civil society when individuals, who seek to satisfy their own needs at the family level, are "united in a form of economic organization for the better furtherance of their ends."²¹ In other words, civil society is an assemblage of individuals for the actualisation of their goals.

Hegel gives supreme recognition to subjective freedom and particularity in civil society. In *Philosophy of Right*, he states that in an attempt to satisfy individual unlimited economic needs in civil society, we find particularity "indulging itself in all directions as it satisfies its needs, contingent arbitrariness, and subjective caprice."²² Therefore, the concern of individuals is the pursuit of their private or self interests in civil society without any conscious sense of unity of membership.

Here, there is a dialectic relation between the family and civil society. The family is the thesis, which civil society is the antithesis. Civil society is characterised by individualism and therefore stands as an antithesis to the unity of the family. Both the family and civil society are united on a higher plane in the concept of the state. The emergence of the state does not lead to the annulment or cancellation of the family and civil society since the three concepts are not mutually exclusive; they co-exist. Both the

family and civil society are therefore preserved in the state. What it implies is that the universality of the family life and the particularity of the individuals are carried over into the state in which they are made rational.

The State

This is the final moment in the development of social ethics. Hegel's state is not human construction established freely by a social contract, rather "it is the absolute which objectifies itself in the State through the instrumentality of human beings and their activities."²³ According to Copleston, "the State is the actuality of the rational will when this has been raised to the plane of universal self-consciousness. It is thus the highest expression of objective spirit."²⁴ The state is the highest level in the process of objectification of the Absolute Spirit.

Civil society is a means to an end, while the state is an end in itself. The State utilises civil society for the accomplishment of its ends. It "represents the rational ideal in the development and the truly spiritual element in civilization."²⁵ The family (thesis) and civil society (antithesis) are synthesised in the state. Therefore, the state "develops as the synthesis in which the thesis and the antithesis (the unity of the family and the diversity of society) are resolved, and preserved."²⁶ For Hegel, the principle of private liberty or individual freedom and personal choices are preserved in the state. Therefore, the selfhood of each member of the society is not annulled but fulfilled in the state.

In a bid to reconcile the state with individual freedom, Hegel insists that freedom is rationality, for "the I (the Will) comes to freedom through the process of thought."²⁷ The state possesses such a rationality which is basically a universal norm as opposed to individuality that has no standard other than whim and caprice. It follows therefore that the individual achieves rationality (universality) only in the context of the personal relations with the state. Freedom is thus "positive and active only in so far it is objectively universal."²⁸

What Hegel is driving at is that the individual pursues his freedom in furthering the interest of the body politic. Man is free when his conduct conforms to reason which is embodied in the laws

of the state. By acting reasonably, “the individual promotes his own (Reason’s) interest, for he is freed from personal whim, and thereby achieves his true stature as a man, i.e., as a free or reasonable being.”²⁹ Hegel holds that the idea of human individuality is worthless without the political community and “so practically, the state and the individual are the same in essence.”³⁰

According to Hegel, just as an organism is produced through various activities of its members, constituting an independent whole, so the state produces itself continually through the reciprocal determination of its parts and wholes. The laws of the state “are conscious expressions of the individuals that (directly or indirectly) create them. On the other hand, the laws infuse and determine all of the interactions occurring between the individual and the society.”³¹ Hegel situates the objective freedom in the state within this reciprocal determination of the individual and community. Freedom therefore provides an organic mediation between the universal and the particular in the political community. Ware explains that freedom in Hegel’s thinking involves “the continuous recognition and transcendence of limitations through the joint development of the individual and the community.”³² On the one hand, it requires that the individual should be particularised in relation to the substantive universality of the political order. On the other hand, it demands that the laws of the political community should be particularised in relation to the rational universality of subjective thought.

In this way, both the substantive and subjective forms of universality are conceived of as being dependent on each other and actualised reciprocally through each other. Through the complementary activities of limitation and transcendence, the individual and the state contribute to each other’s transformation and attain reconciliation. The individual member of the state expresses this subjective freedom through his contribution to the determination and realisation of a substantive universality. He promotes his particular interest when he pursues self-consciously the universal development of the state. Therefore, for Hegel, subjective freedom is realised through the individual’s contribution to the advancement of substantive universality.

The incorporation of subjective freedom in the Hegel's state ensures internal harmony and stability of the state. This is because if "the individual does not find the satisfaction of his particularity in the state, the state will be weak; its universality will remain abstract, without actuality."³³ Hence, there is need for the rational law to be merged with the law of particular freedom. The state becomes actual, strong and stable when the individual's particular end is identified with the universal. Hegel affirms that the modern state is strong and stable because it allows for the satisfaction of subjective freedom and presents itself as "the sole precondition of the attainment of particular ends and welfare."³⁴

Hegel's ascertain that the recognition of particular interests in the state makes it stable and strong seems to contradict his stance that the state is not merely a means to the protection of the individual's life, liberty and property. Nevertheless, the point Hegel is making is that the subjective ends of individuals must be fulfilled in the state as an instrument for the satisfaction of their ends. As he puts it:

The state is actual only when its members have a feeling of their self-hood and it is stable only when public and private ends are identical. It has often been said that the end of the state is the happiness of the citizens. That imperfectly true. If all is not well with them, if their subjective aims are not satisfied, if they do not find that the state as such is the means to their satisfaction, then the footing of the state itself is insecure."³⁵

However, what Hegel rejects is the liberal view that the ultimate end of the state is to advance particular interests or subjective freedom of individuals. His major concern is not about "the ultimate end of the state but what is necessary to make that end – the universal, rational freedom – actual and concrete."³⁶ He stresses the need for the private interest of individuals and the universal goal of the state to be united for the realisation of each other's ends. For him, "everything depends on the unity of the universal and the particular within the state."³⁷

Hegel does not want the substantiality of the state appear as something alien to the individual but as something in which the particularity of the individual is fulfilled so that the individual feels that his particular interest is preserved and contained in the interest and end of the state. He therefore insists that the personal wills of individuals should be given some sort of recognition in the process of universal legislation. In *Philosophy of Right*, he states that “the role [*Bestimmung*] of the Estates is to bring the universal interest [*Angelegenheit*] into existence [*Existenz*] not only *in itself* but also *for itself*, i.e., to bring into existence the moment of subjective *formal freedom*.”³⁸

In other words, the state enters into subjective consciousness of the people and the people participate in it through their corporations or estates. Hegel is cautious about this legitimate demand on subjectivity to avert the possibility of this demand degenerating into a radical demand that legislation should emanate directly from the subjective wills of the individual as exemplified in democratic individualism. This accounts for his insistence that individuals must be represented through their corporations. Thus, “particularity and subjectivity are given due without being allowed to overwhelm the universality and rationality of the state.”³⁹

The need of the state is attained in the particular activity of the individual. “The end motivating the activity of the individual member must be the interest of the whole, while the end motivating the action of the whole must be the individual.”⁴⁰ This means that the individual promotes the ends of the whole in pursuing his particular end. Hegel expresses thus that the actuality of the state “consists in the fact that the interest of the whole realizes itself through the particular ends.”⁴¹ In this way, Hegel reconciles the subjectivity of the individual and the substantiality of the political community without sacrificing the freedom of the individual or the authority of the state.

The Place of Totalitarianism in Hegel’s Political System

Totalitarianism is a political system in which the state wields absolute power and completely controls all aspects of people’s life. Although Hegel’s idea of individualism does not necessarily lead to totalitarianism or authoritarianism, the absolute power he grants to

the state tends to engender totalitarian rule. Hegel maintains that conscience (*Gewissen*) that identifies itself with the universal will is the mark of freedom. He insists that the rights of individuals must be compatible with the supreme rights of the universal will. In other words, the particular will must conform to the universal will.

In a bid to ensure that the individuals' interests are identified with those of the state, he presents the state as an absolute entity to which every individual must be submissive unconditionally. For him, the will of the state is the universal will, the will of the Absolute, and so cannot be challenged or questioned by any individual. He recognises unlimited interference in the individuals' rights and freedom. The implication of this is that the constitutional monarch, which Hegel advocates as the head of the state, wields absolute power so that the government is free to exercise control over the lives of its subjects by whatever means possible. In this way, Hegel makes his ideal state totalitarian in nature.

Concluding Reflections

Hegel's idea of individualism is conceived within the framework of the state that embodies the rational will. Individual freedom consists in the unity of particular interests of individuals and universal interests. The state is the realisation of rational freedom. The individual actualises rational freedom through his reciprocal relationship with the state. He attains freedom when he absolutely conform his will to that of the state through the process of internalisation. On the other hand, the individual is not free when he acts arbitrarily and irrationally such that his will is antithetical to the universal will. Therefore, "freedom is identical with rationality; to be free is to be rational, and to be rational is to be free."⁴²

The end or purpose of the Hegel's state is not the subjective freedom inherent in the liberal state but the rational freedom, the universal will which is in line with the universality of the human essence. "The rationality of the state is located in the realization of the universal substantial will in the self-consciousness of particular individuals elevated to consciousness of universality."⁴³ Through participation in the life of the state, the members are raised to the higher level of universal self-consciousness above their sheer particularity. Thus, the state is the embodiment of individuals'

rational essence. “The ‘enormous strength’ of the modern state lies in the fact that the state’s ‘substantive unity’ rests on the principles of ‘subjectivity’ and personal particularity”⁴⁴ so that through the institutions of the modern state, individual right and subjective freedom can receive real content, for the state is the “actuality of concrete freedom.”⁴⁵

Hegel demonstrates how the ideas of the individual and the state can be interpreted without being incompatible. The tension between the two concepts is surpassed by their mutual dependence. To act freely is not to make an unrestricted choice but to align one’s subjective choice with a substantial order so that one’s identity is bound up with the state. In this organic conception of the state the tension between the individual and the state is resolved and their claims become fully satisfied. For classical liberals such as Hobbes and Locke, the solution to the tension between the individual and the state is sought in some sort of compromise between the two principles. Steinberger refers to this liberal approach as ‘accommodationism’. On the contrary, Hegel adopts a perfectionist approach to the problem of the individual and the state. He tries to resolve the problem by subjecting the individual and the state to conceptual analysis and reinterpreted them in such a way that they are no longer seen as antagonistic to each other but as mutually dependent.

On the whole, Hegel draws our attention to the fact that individual rights such as property rights and civil liberties are all bound up with the social and political context of the state. “Our freedom and dignity demands the recognition of others in order to be realized.”⁴⁶ The State secures individual freedom through political and legal institutions of the state. For instance, through the rule of law, orders and rights are secured and freedom realised. Hence, the institutions of the state are instruments that advance individual freedom and happiness, and, in so doing, the state commands citizens’ respect, trust and loyalty. The good of the individual cannot be set aside from the common good or welfare of the state.

Hegel insists that human rights and freedom should be preserved and promoted in the state. For him, “a more rational constitution means a more liberal constitution, at least in the sense that it must explicitly allow for the free development of individual

personality and respect the rights of individuals.”⁴⁷ However, by making his ideal state totalitarian in nature, Hegel tends to restrict private freedom and encourage abuse of human rights. A constitutional monarch, who wields absolute power, can become despotic. In the light of this, Lord Acton remarks that “power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”⁴⁸ The absolutism of the state can engender ruthless disregard for basic human rights. The power of the state need not be absolute in order to contain the irrational aspect of human desires. As John Locke indicates, it is possible to have both law and order in the state without making it absolute.

Hegel views the state as the highest level in the process of objectification or expression of the Absolute Spirit/Mind. For him, the Absolute is the totality of reality which is rationality, for what is real is rational and what is rational is real. The state is the actuality of the Absolute will, the rational will. Individual freedom is therefore identical with rationality. The individual realises his freedom when his interests and will coincide with the rational will, the will of the Absolute. In this way, Hegel reduces the whole of reality to rationality and regards the Absolute as an end in and for itself.

Thus, Hegel's absolute idealism accentuates the power of human reason to comprehend the essence of things, without any recourse to God who confers intelligibility on the world. When ethical and spiritual dimensions of human beings are ignored in our efforts towards advancing the frontiers of human knowledge and power, human values and dignity are lost. In this case, human person becomes depersonalised and is treated as a mere object or tool.

It is against this background that Soren Kierkegaard strongly condemns the loss of human values in Western civilisation which accords no importance to the absolute value and dignity of the human person. Human being are being dehumanised, instrumentalised and turned into machines in Western civilisation. The problem is that Western civilisation with its scientific and technological advances, built on materialistic worldview and so it pursues material achievement at the expense of the spiritual and moral development of the human person.

Hegel's emphasis on the power of human reason alone to invent and comprehend things without recognising the place of God in human thought and history engenders erosion of moral values and human dignity. God is the suprasensory ground and goal of reality. The very idea of God imposes a moral obligation on human beings to respect and promote human values and dignity. The fact that God confers intelligibility on the world and creates values makes human life meaningful and purposeful.

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