

HEGELIANISM : POSTMODERNISTS' CHARGES REFUTED

In the last three decades or so, postmodernists have emerged as controversial writers in philosophy. There is a strong reaction aimed not at a single philosopher but at the entire modern European movement in philosophy. Its advocates dubbed this reaction "Postmodernism" which means essentially the reaction against Descartes, Sartre and the German thinkers between them. From the current vantage point of view, I have chosen some of the main figures in this rebellion - Richard Rorty, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. German Idealism occupies an important but ambiguous role in postmodernism. They have occasioned considerable confusion and misunderstanding, among enthusiasts and detractors alike, as well as some sound criticism.

The objective of this paper is to examine critically and to refute the charges levelled by postmodernists against Hegelianism. It is proposed to be achieved in the following manner; Part I : An exposition of the basic features of modernism and Hegelianism and its criticism by Rorty and Lyotard; Part II : A critical examination of Foucault - Derrida charges on Hegelianism. In my attempt to defend Hegelianism, I would like to present some clarifications, annotations and summations which may be useful for the limited end of a preliminary acquaintance with the Hegelianism on the one hand and postmodernism on the other.

I

G. E. More, in the *Principia Ethica*, says, 'What I think, namely that something is true, is always quite distinct from the fact that I think it That 'to be true' means to be thought in a certain way is, therefore, certainly false. Yet this assertion plays the most essential part in Kant's 'Copernican Revolution' of philosophy, and renders

worthless the whole mass of modern literature, to which that revolution has given rise, and which is called Epistemology. ¹

This is, however, not the occasion to explain salient features of Kant's Copernican Revolution nor the related ideas of the necessary conditions of knowledge and of the transcendental. What I am primarily concerned with in quoting the above passage from Moore is that when a particular philosophical system, say, postmodernism, is criticising Kant, there is a definite method involved in it. Things viewed from one method may not be the same if they are viewed from a different method. Between modernism and postmodernism, there is a methodological gap. But the basic preoccupations of postmodernism are the basic presuppositions of modernism. It is therefore necessary to raise those presuppositions of modernism and discuss how the same issues are reinterpreted through a different method and the consequences are entirely different.

It is often thought that postmodern philosophy arises, at least in part, from a reaction against Descartes, Sartre and the German thinkers between them.² To a great extent this is correct. The philosophies of Rorty, Lyotard, Foucault and Derrida, and others, in the last three decades or so of this century which were enormously influential in the subsequent postmodern philosophy, were developed in conscious reaction to idealist views that owed much to Hegel. This fact, however, does not settle the question of the influence of Hegel, either on Foucault and Derrida or on postmodern philosophy more generally, all that it does is to give us a way of posing the question. And the question is a complex one. Besides the general difficulties involved in tracing the influence of a view as complex as Hegel's, there is also a particular problem arising from the relation between Descartes, Kant and Hegel. The philosophical views against which Rorty, Lyotard, Foucault and Derrida were reacting and which they grouped under the rubric "Modernism", were Cartesian, Kantian and Hegelian. Richard Rorty says, "In order to interpret this problem of the three spheres as a problem only for an increasingly 'isolated order of priests', one has to see the 'principle of the modern' as something other than that famous 'subjectivity' which post-Kantian historians of philosophy, anxious to link Kant with

Descartes, took as their guiding thread. One can instead attribute Descartes' role as "founder of modern philosophy" to its development of what I earlier called an 'overzealous philosophy of science' - the sort of philosophy of science which saw Galilean mechanics, analytic geometry, mathematical optics, and the like, as having more spiritual significance than they in fact have. By taking the ability to do such science as a mark of something deep and essential to human nature, as the place where we have got closest to our true selves, Descartes presented just those themes in ancient thought which Bacon had tried to obliterate. The preservation of the Platonic idea that our most distinctively human faculty was our ability to manipulate 'clear and distinct ideas' was Descartes' most important and most unfortunate contribution to what we now think of as 'modern philosophy'.³

Besides identifying subjectivity as the central theme of modernity, Lyotard proceeds towards the rejection of Kantian transcendental pretence and Hegelian philosophizing of it. There is a complete rejection of rationality in knowledge. 'A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher : the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgement, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work.'⁴ The contrast between Kant and Hegel cannot be pressed too far : Kantian transcendental deduction could be taken as the direct line to Hegelian themes, although, modified or transposed to a great extent, and Kant himself can be interpreted as being, to a greater or lesser extent, a precursor of Hegelian ideas. Let us elaborate these points. In the *Science of Logic*, Hegel has this to say. 'It is to be remembered that I frequently take the Kantian philosophy into consideration it still remains the basis and beginning of modern German philosophy'⁵ It may be pointed out that Hegel's criticism of Kant does not amount to the denial of the latter. Instead, Hegel's attempt has always been to incorporate Kant's doctrines into his own. Hegel explains this process with reference to the *Philosophy of History*. 'The relation of the earlier to the later systems of philosophy is much like the relation of the corresponding stages of the logical Idea : in other words, the earlier are preserved in the later'⁶

In the context of Kant's epistemological situation, Hegel goes on to note three points that worry him : (a) Kant's theory of sensation is undialectical; (b) Kant's goal to know our categories before we have any knowledge is wrong; (c) Kant's attempt to deny knowledge of transcendental consciousness cannot be accepted. However, I cannot go into the details of all these objections except the (b), i.e. Kant's transcendental ambitions in philosophy and Hegelian philosophizing of them. This is extremely important to assess the postmodernists charges on the transcendental pretence.

At the centre of Kant's epistemology, there lies the Transcendental Deduction of Categories and Hegel, in his early work, commends Kant that, 'it was the argument of Kant's Transcendental Deduction that first came close to and made possible the speculative identity theory he ultimately created.'⁷ Hegel appreciates Kant's refusal to go along the lines of Hume. There lies much in the things which is not given in sensations. It requires the use of 'understanding' and 'reason.' These views, rooted in Kant's philosophy, represent one of the most important aspects of Hegel's own epistemology. Kant, according to Hegel, is right to set out to prove that human mind possesses universal and necessary 'forms' and 'categories' that are used to organize the manifold of sensible intuitions. Human cognition presents universality and necessity only by virtue of the *a priori* activity of the mind which perceives all things and events in the form of space and time and comprehends them under the categories of unity, reality, substantiality, causality etc. The constitution of knowledge by the categories is regarded by Kant as the transcendental activity of human mind, because, '.... it is, after all, we ourselves who are responsible for the formation of general concepts. Conceptions are something which the mind produces actively and it is precisely in this respect that they differ from perceptions. In so far, therefore, as we exercise our power of entertaining general ideas, we must be said to have gone beyond the state of mere acceptance of the given. Or to put it in another way our ability to render the given intelligible to ourselves, and to describe it, under the guidance of general works, is an expression of genuine intellectual activity.'⁸ Hegel accepted Kantian transcendental claims in philosophy. However, in Kant the categories are in the manner as done in the formal logic and Hegel adds dialectic into the

logic. 'Thinking and its categories,' Hegel tells us, 'are at once both object and the activity which examines it. They must criticise themselves. Thinking is a self critical, self-developing dialectic ...'⁹

The other charge that postmodernists have levelled on Kant and Hegel is to outdo the concept of unity or totality or rationality in knowledge and even our ability to know the world as it really is and to supplant it with fragmentation, discontinuity, pluralism and irrationalism. As a matter of fact, Hegel writes about the Absolute Truth, 'The true is the whole. But the whole is nothing other than the essence consummating itself through its development'¹⁰ Things do not remain in their finite state of existence. There lies a unity between finite and its negativity. To restore this unity is the objective of 'reason'. Whereas 'sense-certainty' and 'understanding' present isolated entities, 'reason' appreciates the 'unity of opposites'. 'Reason' does not produce the unity by a process of connecting and combining the opposites, but transforms them so that they cease to exist as opposites, although their content is preserved in a higher and more real form. '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.'¹¹ In the process of unifying the opposites, 'reason' negates the finite and its negation, and binds them together on mutual dependence, so that they are revealed as moments of a more inclusive whole. The rationally systematized whole is what Hegel calls reality. Hegelian contention that 'the true is the whole' is allegedly criticised by Lyotard as a 'terror' and the 'nostalgia of the whole and the one' in philosophy. Lyotard's answer to Hegel's concept of reason as the unifying agency is, 'Let us wage a war on totality....'¹²

Taking a clue from Hegel's own terms that the speculative philosophy if applied on physical sciences will lead to a 'Road of doubt road of despair skepticism'¹³ Lyotard gives a final blow to Hegelianism. '.... the speculative apparatus maintains an ambiguous relation to knowledge. It shows that knowledge is only worthy of that name to the extent that it reduplicates itself ('lifts itself up', *bebt sich auf*, is sublated) by citing its own statements in a second - level

discourse (autonomy) that functions to legitimate them. This is as much as to say that, in its - immediacy, denotative discourse bearing on a certain referent (a living organism, a chemical property, a physical phenomenon, etc.) does not really know what it thinks it knows. Positive science is not a form of knowledge. And speculation feeds on its suppression. The Hegelian speculative narrative thus harbors a certain skepticism toward positive learning as Hegel himself admits. '14

We might summarize the basic charges levelled by postmodernists on the presuppositions of modernism, the Cartesian-Kantian - Hegelian tradition, in this manner : it indeed rejects almost all the presuppositions of modern philosophy, "the celebration of self and subjectivity, the new appreciation of history, most of all the already flagging philosophical confidence in our ability to know the world as it really is. It was, in a phrase, the wholesale rejection of the transcendental pretence. '15 Foucault and Derrida, despite their mutual differences, attack not only on the pretensions but also on the premises and presuppositions of modernism : its confidence in our knowledge, its assurance that all people everywhere are alike, and above all, its doctrine of freedom and human subjectivity.

II

What exactly is Foucault's project in philosophy as an alternative to Hegelianism or modernism as such ? In an interview of 1983, he summed up his work in this way, 'Three domains of genealogy are possible. First, a historical ontology of ourselves in relation to truth through which we constitute ourselves as subjects of knowledge; second, a historical ontology of ourselves in relation to a field of power through which we constitute ourselves as subjects acting on others; third, a historical ontology in relation to ethics through which we constitute ourselves as moral agents. '16

Hence genealogy has three axes. It will, however, not be possible to go into the details of these axes. I shall, therefore dwell upon the general implications which these axes have in Foucault.

Foucault is a holist in his insistence that an element can be identified only by its place in a system and has no identity outside it.

In this formulation what is rejected is the role of the self which identifies and unifies the system. And it is tantamount to the rejection of human freedom of any kind and to any extent. Foucault's method known as 'archaeology' has two features, '... first, it does not concern itself with the possible permutations of a system but only with its actual, historical instances; and secondly, there is no attempt to eliminate meanings from discussion.'¹⁷ Indeed, language ('discourse') is much of Foucault's doctrines and it can describe actual situations and the changing transformations of meaning. Generally, in the transcendental idealism of Kant as well as in Hegel's absolute idealism, there has always been an attempt to present an all embracing concept with the help of which knowledge can be derived and freedom can be realized. To satisfy these requirements, Kant creates two spheres - a sphere of knowledge in which understanding with all its categories holds away and a sphere of morality in which reason imposes maxims of categorical imperatives. In both the spheres, Kant's basic thrust has been to present the world of knowledge and the world of morality in a unified and orderly manner. And for this unification what is presupposed is the existence of the self. Hegel too has the same philosophical preoccupation. But he overcomes the dualism between knowledge and morality created by Kant. Hegel's project is therefore wider and more comprehensive than that of Kant. Foucault has been extremely skeptical about such possibilities from his earliest works and, as his work has proceeded, this doubt has become something very strong. The tradition of German idealism with its doctrine of self as the locus of knowledge and morality is expansive with the pregnant sense of humanity within itself; Foucault is indignant at the very thought of humanity's invasion of self, and has no faith in human freedom and reason.

Derrida's work is often highly critical of Foucault. However, I cannot go into the details of the differences between Foucault and Derrida. What I am primarily concerned with is the way Derrida too like Foucault launches offensive against the basic doctrines of German idealism and modernism as such. Derrida summarizes as 'the myth of the presence', 'whether this takes the form of the immanent presence of God, or of the world as a determinate entity, or of the self as an inner certainty. This 'theo-ontological tradition' refuses to consider the possibility that there are no such certainties

and even the language we used to talk about philosophy is riddled with distinctions and words that make this myth avoidable.¹⁸

To develop Derrida's basic contention behind this position we have to clarify his basic philosophical position. In an interview in Paris in 1981, Derrida has said, 'My philosophical formation owes much to the thought of Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger.'¹⁹ Derrida hails originally from the phenomenological movement of Husserl, Heidegger and Levinas; and it is within and around this particular framework, more than anything else, that his thinking has evolved. His method is known as 'deconstruction'. Richard Kearney, in a Prefatory Note on Derrida, says, 'Derrida was working out his central notion of the irreducible structure of *difference* as it operates in human consciousness, temporality, history and above all in the fundamental and overriding activity of writing (L'e' criture). By means of this concept of *difference* - a neologism meaning both to 'defer' and to 'differ' - Derrida proposed to show how the major metaphysical definitions of Being as sometime less self-identity or presence (e.g., Logos), which dominated Western philosophy from Plato to the present day, could ultimately be "deconstructed." Such a deconstruction would show that in each instance difference *precedes* presence rather than the contrary'²⁰

Derrida's work of rigorous 'deconstruction' attempts to pose a radical challenge to such logocentric notions as the Eternal Idea of Plato, the Self-Thinking - Thought of Aristotle, the *Cogito* of Descartes, the transcendental consciousness of Kant and the *Geist* of Hegel.

In rejecting the presuppositions of modern philosophy, Derrida fails to offer a serious and constructive counter-hypothesis to supplant the doctrines which lie at the roots of the German idealism. Derrida's method of deconstruction means, like in guerrilla warfare, to attack quickly and run back, to puncture and parody, and to defuse through refusing to take a thesis seriously. Derrida has an intense distrust of metaphysics. For Derrida, the job of philosophy is not to defend or account for this system, but to deconstruct it.

To bring the paper to a close, one may point out that the postmodernist's reaction on the basic premises of Hegelianism in particular and modernism in general is a story which is yet to be settled, for the story is far from over. However, the rejection of self implies the rejection of man's creative activity, his capability to transcend the given limitations and hence the realizations of freedom. The concepts evolved by Kant and Hegel, with respect to their specific philosophical system, play the most important role. These concepts are not mere possessions of a definite language and are not confined to the discription of a definite situation alone. Rather, these are universal concepts which help us in understanding the objective reality as such. A particular situation does not possess an authority of its own. Every situation has a reference to the whole process of reality through which it undergoes. All this is possible if we have universal concepts to appreciate reality in its totality. An attempt to reject totality by Rorty, Lyotard, Foucault or Derrida will not solve that problem.

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FOOT NOTE S

1. Moore, G. E., *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1903), pp. 132-33.
2. Solomon, R. C., *Continental Philosophy Since 1750* (New York, Oxford University Press), p. 194.
3. Rorty, Richard, "Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity" in *Habermas and Modernity*, (ed) Richard J. Bernstein, (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1985), p. 170.
4. Lyotard, Jean-Francois, *The Post Modern Condition : A Report on Knowledge*, trans. from Fench Geoff Benniengton and Brian Massumi, vol. 10, of *Theory and History of Literature*, (ed) by Wlad Godzich and Jochen Schulte Sasse, (Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 81.

5. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. Johnston & Struthers, vol. I, (London, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1966), p. 73.
6. Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, quotation from David Macgregor, *The Communist Ideal in Hegel and Marx*, (London, George Allen & Unwin, 1984), pp. 134-5.
7. Hegel, *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's Systems of Philosophy*, trans - H. Harris and W. Cerf Albany, (New York, Sunnyside Press, 1977), p. 80.
8. Cassirer, H. W., *Kant's First Critique : An Appraisal of the Permanent Significance of Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, (London, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1961), p. 55.
9. Harris, Errol E., *An Introduction of the Logic of Hegel*, (New York, University Press of America, 1983), p. 64.
10. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. - A. V. Miller, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1973), p. 11.
11. Marcuse, Herbert, *Reason and Revolution*, (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), p. 47.
12. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, etc., pp. 81-82.
13. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, etc., Preface.
14. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, etc., p. 38.
15. Solomon, *Continental Philosophy since 1750*, etc. p. 194.
16. Gane, Mike, " Introduction : Michel Foucault", in *Towards a Critique of Foucault*, (ed) by Mike Gane, (London and New York, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), p. 4. All three axes were present, albeit in a somewhat confused fashion in *Madness and Civilization*, The Truth axis was studied in *Birth of the Clinic*, and *The Order of Things*, The power axis was studied in *Discipline and Punish*. and ethical axis in *The History of Sexuality*.
17. Solomon, *Continental Philosophy Since 1750*, etc., p 198.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 200.
19. Kearney, Richard, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers The Phenomenological Heritage*, (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 109.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 105-106.