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## **The Notion of an Absolute Spirit in G.W.F. Hegel: A Critical Appraisal**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper critically examines the notion of an Absolute Spirit which features prominently in the idealistic metaphysics of Hegel. It x-rays the interrelated concepts of Absolute Spirit and Absolute Mind and how they feature in his philosophy of history. It adopts qualitative research method and utilizes the method of textual analysis based on primary and secondary texts. Its epistemological value consists of conceptual and logical clarification of salient themes and topical issues in Hegelian Philosophy. In conclusion, the major thesis of this paper is that Hegel's understanding of an Absolute Spirit reflects a new approach to appreciating existential reality and of course, man's social condition. It recommends an incorporation of Hegel's idea of Absolute Spirit into contemporary discourse on speculative metaphysics.

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### **Introduction**

The intellectual burden of this paper is to investigate the complexities in the determination of an Absolute Spirit in Hegelian thought-pattern. It is an inquiry that is domesticated within the domain of philosophy of History, Historiography, Metaphysics, Philosophy of Religion, Christian Doctrines and Theology, Dogmatic and Sacred Theology, etc.

#### **Hegel on the Absolute Spirit**

The notion of an Absolute Spirit is central to Hegel's metaphysical idealism. The Absolute Spirit is the terminal point which Hegel's Absolute Idealism culminates in or tends towards. It is variously referred to as Absolute Mind, Universal Mind, Universal Spirit, etc. it simply means the basis of ultimate reality. In other words, it is the self-directing principle that governs or animates reality. It is not an overstatement to stress that the Absolute Spirit is indeed the cornerstone of Hegelian metaphysics.

In his *Phenomenology of Mind*, Hegel (1967:457) writes that:

REASON is spirit, when its certainty of being all reality has been raised to the level of truth, and reason is consciously aware of itself as its own world, and of the world as itself. The development of spirit was indicated in the immediately preceding movement of mind, where the object of consciousness, the category pure and simple, rose to be the notion of reason. When reason "observes", this pure unity of ego and existence, the unity of subjectivity and objectivity, of for-itself-ness and in-itself-ness-this unity is immanent, has the character of implicitness or of being; and consciousness of reason finds itself.

Hegel's understanding of the Absolute Spirit, as noted above, is that it gives credibility to self-consciousness, thereby, providing human reason with some kind of self-awareness. It is for this singular reason that the Absolute Spirit is said to be the determining and self-regulating principle of reason in Hegelian metaphysics. He further opines that:

... if "the truth is the whole", and only so is truth self-complete and self-explaining, and if reality is essentially spiritual-then experience only finds its complete meaning realized in the principle of Absolute Spirit. Hence the final stage of the phenomenology of experience is the appearance therein of Absolute Spirit.... Absolute Spirit, in its own distinctive existence, could only appear at the end of the

process of experience, for the whole of that process is required to reveal and to constitute the substance of which the Absolute consists (Hegel *Mind* 1967:683).

Implicit in the above excerpt is the fact that Hegel's conceptualization of the totality of reality as being ultimately spiritual is expressive of his Absolute Idealism. He has a strong conviction that reality beyond its surface appearance. It follows that reality can be interpreted to mean a spiritual or supersensible phenomenon which lies beyond the boundaries of the physical structure of the external world of sensation.

It can be understood to mean something that belongs to the domain or realm of the unknowable world of psycho-physical realm.

Another meaning implied in Hegel's supposition that experience finds complete realization or manifestation in the principle of Absolute Spirit is that it serves the purpose of essence to existent things. Put differently, the relationship between essence and existence which constitutes a fundamental problem in metaphysics is emphasized here. Whereas the Absolute Spirit is the essence that gives individuation to material things; self-consciousness which is the operational act of human reason becomes the existence which essence (quiddity) has given vital force or credibility.

In a bid to properly situate the Absolute Spirit in its right perspective, Hegel (1967:683) succinctly states that:

... the Absolute operates in its undivided totality to form a definite goal or type of experience, ... the Absolute here "conscious of itself". No doubt, all the previous stages "consciousness", "self-consciousness," "reason", "spirit", and determining the boundaries of each stage: hence each stage had an Absolute of its own, the character of which was derived in each case from the peculiarity of the stage in question. Now, however, we have the Absolute by itself, in its single self-completeness, as the sole formative factor of a certain type of experience (*Phenomenology of Mind*)

In this regard, the Absolute Spirit becomes a self-regulating principle that gives direction the development of self-consciousness which occurs in stages.

It is the ultimate basis of objective reality. He apply posits that:

The category therefore gets for consciousness the character which it possesses in its universal truth-it is self-contained essential reality (*an und fürsichbeyendes wesen*). This character, still abstract, which constitutes the nature of absolute fact, of "fact itself", is the beginning of "spiritual reality" (*das geistige wesen*); and its mode of consciousness is here a formal knowledge of that reality, a knowledge which is occupied with the varied and manifold content thereof. This consciousness is still, in point of, a particular individual distinct from the general substance, and either prescribe arbitrary laws or thinks it possesses within its own knowledge as such the laws as they absolutely are (*an und für sich*), and takes itself to the power that passes judgment on them (Hegel *Mind* 1967:457:458).

In this way, spiritual reality becomes the operational mode of consciousness which determines our knowledge or awareness of an objective reality – the organizing principle of Hegel's Absolute Idealism. Similarly, the Absolute Spirit equally serves as the arbitrary or universal law that makes knowledge of the external world to be possible.

There is no doubt that *Being* and the *Absolute* lie at the centre-stage of Hegel's metaphysical soul of his central or general understanding of Absolute Idealism. It is against this background that Okoh (1998:81-82) remarks that, "For Hegel, the realm of the spirit is the manifestation of the Absolute Spirit who holds everything into existence. The Absolute Spirit holds history and determines both the noumena and phenomena". In what follows, the Absolute Spirit is a non-material or non-physical reality that inhere in the abode of spiritual realities. It is the determinant that gives meaning and purpose to world history. To be sure, the Absolute resides in the province or realm of the noumena. Hence, not easily accessible to the senses. The fundamental question as to whether there is another world to which can be attributed objective reality beckons here. In the Hegelian perspective, it is the Absolute Spirit that controls or determines the human spirit or human mind.

Furthermore, his idea of dialectics features prominently in his analysis and understanding of Being and the Absolute. Little wonder that Ajodo (2014:67) explicitly states that:

The main issue is the extraordinary claim that Hegel's Absolute idealism is actually, when properly understood, dialectical materialism and not the historical materialism of left-Hegelianism... the main point is to make Hegel's natural philosophy to have essential position in the history of dialectical

materialism... the *being qua being* must reflect the nature of both the subjective and objective being. The threshold of the argument is that the Absolute Spirit exists for the knowledge of man. Therefore, it means that man's knowledge about the noumena which is the being of the absolute is totally independent of our senses.

The powerful force and influence of German idealism echo in the above expression. The supremacy or superiority of the mind over and above the senses finds expression in the Absolute idealism of Hegel which is representative of German idealism – an offshoot of the Enlightenment and Romanticism that pervaded the Western culture during this historical epoch, a time when Hegel theorized and postulated his brand or version of metaphysical idealism known as Absolute Idealism which is anchored and hinged on the understanding of an Absolute Spirit.

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### **Hegel on Absolute Idealism**

There is no iota of doubt that idealism is the cornerstone of Hegelian metaphysics. The entire gamut of Hegel's metaphysical edifice revolves around the notion of idealism. Hegel gives idealism a modern undertone and its absolute nature. For him:

...all parts of the universe are included in one all-embracing order, and he attributed this unity to the ideas and purpose of the Absolute Mind. As a result, Hegel sees thought or mind as the essence of the universe, and nature as the whole of mind objectified (Hegel *Mind* 1967:611).

Idealism gives primacy to idea over and above matter in its conception and explanation of reality. Thus, matter does not exist on its own outside the mind. This pre-supposes that material objects are ideas in the mind of the individual who perceives them (Elechi 2014:157). The import of the foregoing is that perception or knowledge of the external world is mind-dependent. Lawhead (2002:575) writes that, "idealism is the theory which holds that reality is ultimately mental or of the nature of a mind". The logical implication is that the complex network of reality is reducible to mind-its mental structure and functionality. It also implies that there exist some kind of permanent or immutable ideas to which reality should approximate.

Attempting to properly situate idealism in the right perspective, Udoidem (2016:114) notes that:

It (idealism) is the theory which asserts that reality consists of ideas, thought, mind or selves rather than matter. Plato is often regarded in the history of philosophy as the founding father of idealism. There are many types of idealism. The two most important forms are Berkeley's subjective idealism and Hegel's absolute idealism (Emphasis Mine).

The major assumption of idealism is that reality consists of ideas in the human mind. This underscores the fact that idea is supreme, over and above matter in the cosmic realm. It is also evident and crystal clear from the above background that idealism is traceable to Plato in the Ancient Period in the history of philosophy. No wonder he is fondly regarded as the historic exponent of the theory. Little wonder that idealism has pervaded the metaphysical scene from the platonic era to the present and beyond. It has been a powerful force in the domain of both descriptive and speculative metaphysics. Its intellectual effect or impact is felt in, or assumed a definitive form and dimension in, German Philosophy of the Enlightenment. Hence, the current known as German Idealism – a school to which Hegel belongs has been an emerging trend and evolving dynamics in the philosophical landscape of both the modern and contemporary periods in the historical trajectory of Western Philosophy. Thus, more than ever before, German intellectual tradition is largely characterized, in the main, by the essential tenets or fundamental canons of metaphysical idealism.

Furthermore, Nwosu (2010:48) has this to say about the nature and character of idealism:

This philosophical trend holds that ultimate reality or the essential nature of reality can be known through the mind. The theory sees reality or the universe in terms of ideas and maintains that all phenomena are products of the mind. This theory argues that the human mind is capable of reaching or understanding transcendental realities. It lays emphasis on the primacy of ideas, concepts and the metaphysical over the senses, the physical or empirical data.

Implicit in the above point of view is the fact that the mind is central to the cognitive process of knowing. It follows that the mind, which is a mental

substance, is an avenue for acquiring knowledge of, or understanding, the external world. Thus, whatever object of knowledge-material or immaterial that can be known is ultimately conditioned by the structure of the human mind. For the idealists, the complex network of reality is reduceable to ideas in the mind. It is against this background that idea or mind is rated over and above sense experience. Idealism places high premium on the superiority of the mind, and accords precedence to it over matter. Edeh (2016:87) notes that:

Idealism is the system of philosophy which gives primacy to idea or spirit in its conception of reality. It holds that reality, including the physical world, is ultimately spiritual or immaterial, and denies that matter is an independent substance existing on its own. It maintains that matter is ultimately reducible to ideas or spiritual substance.

As has been stated earlier, idealism presupposes that the cosmos or cosmic universe is spiritual and has an immaterial attribute. The implication of the foregoing is that matter does not have independent existence on its own in its own right. In effect, matter or material substance can be reduced to ideas in the mind which have spiritual underpinning. Maduabuchi (2014:75) defines idealism thus:

...idealism refers to any view that stresses the central role of the ideal or the spiritual in man's interpretation of experience. It holds that the world or reality exists essentially as spirit or consciousness, that abstractions and laws are more fundamental in reality than sensory things, or, at least, that whatever exists is known to man in dimensions that are chiefly mental-thought and as ideas.

The import of the above excerpt is that idealism stresses the centrality of the mind in both cognition and volition. By this connection, sensory perception is made subordinate and subservient to mental abstraction. Idealism emphasizes the dependency of sensible objects on inward workings of the human mind. Perception of the external world is dependent on, conditioned and shaped by, the mental operations of the mind as a mental faculty.

Furthermore, Ajodo (2014:72-73) straightforwardly writes that:

As a worldview and metaphysical doctrine, idealism builds upon the view or belief that the basic reality is made up of, or closely to, minds, ideas, thoughts or selves. The world has a meaning apart from its surface appearance. The word, the universe or reality could be understood and interpreted by a study of the laws of thought and of consciousness and not exclusively by the methods of the empirical sciences such as chemistry and physics.

The distinction or dichotomy between appearance and reality, which is a central and perennial problem in metaphysics, is writ large in the above picture. The supposition of idealism that the world has meaning beyond its surface appearance, which is superficial, is also emphatically highlighted here. Thus, metaphysical idealism jettisons the methods of the empirical or experimental sciences such as experimentation, formulation and testing of hypotheses, observation, generalization, etc. Metaphysical idealism stands opposed to the major assumptions or presuppositions of the physical sciences. The former prides itself in mental abstraction while the latter relies on experimentation and drawing of conclusion based on observable phenomena in the external world. Whereas idealism employs rationalism, physical sciences utilize empiricism. No wonder Onyenani (2017:54-55) states that:

Idealism is the doctrine that whatever exists, or at any rate whatever can be known to exist, must be in some sense mental. This is to say that physical objects have no existence independent of thought. The whole universe is made up of minds and the immaterial objects of minds and nothing more... Idealism as a school of thought holds that mind is prior to matter. While the materialists defend the position that matter is real and mind is an accompanying phenomenon, idealism on the other hand contends that the mind is real and matter is in sense a by-product...Idealism implies a denial that the world is basically a great machine to be interpreted as matter, mechanism, energy alone.

For the idealists, the notion that the universe or reality can be understood or manipulated through sensory perception is untenable. It is germane to note that idealism claims that reality has the characteristics of mind or thought; that reality is rational, logical, or spiritual (Dimkpa 2015:81). Idealism, in the main, undermines and underrates the power of the senses in acquiring or obtaining knowledge of the natural world. It relegates sensory knowledge and

empirical evidence to the background. For the idealists:

The knowledge arising from the senses or experiences ... is uncertain and incomplete. True knowledge comes from reason through the power of the human mind because reason grasps the pure form or ideas beyond the material aspect of things... direct and immediate knowledge can only be in the form of ideas or mental pictures. ... the ultimate reality or existence is spiritual, mental, thoughtful-instead of material or physical or sensory (Agbefe 2010:73-74).

The epistemological implication of the above background is that nothing can be known of the external world independent of the mind. It implies that genuine knowledge of the natural world can not be attained without recourse to the mental operations or cognitive activities of the human mind. For Hegel, "... all truth is achieved or attained through reason" (Asuquo 2008:31). Hegel gives idealism a redefined interpretation. For him, "... all parts of the universe are included in one all-embracing order, and is attributed to the unity of ideas and purpose of the Absolute Mind" (Hegel *Mind* 1967). Thus, thought or mind is the essence of the universe, and nature is an organic structure or composition of mind objectified. Hegel (2018:113) further avers that, "... the universe is an unfolding process of thought. Nature is the absolute reason expressing itself in outward form. The laws of thought are also the laws of reality" (*Spirit*). The entire gamut of the cosmic universe can be interpreted or translated into ideas or thoughts which are predicated on the cognitive status of the mind guided by the power of reason. In what follows, over knowledge of both physical and non-material phenomena are coloured and determined by the inward working of the human mind.

All the same, Okezie (2008:84-85) while throwing his weight behind Hegel as an uncompromising and unrepentant idealist posits that:

Hegelian idealism consists of the Logic, the Philosophy of Nature, and the Philosophy of Spirit. Hegel contends that the dynamic nature of reality manifest in history and nature as dialectic movement of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. Contradiction and its resolution in the realm of thought are paralleled by a similar movement in nature and human affairs. Here, too, there are antithetical tendencies, each bent upon destroying its opposite, and producing a kind of crisis by its inordinate one-sidedness. The clash of these tendencies exposes the logical ridiculousness of each factor taken in isolation and thus releases corrective forces which restore the balance. In this way, the whole process leads to more coherent and comprehensive states of equilibrium.

It is worthy of note to stress that Hegelian idealism, which is commonly and technically referred to as Absolute Idealism, revolves around the notions of Absolute Mind, Absolute Spirit, Universal Mind, God, etc. Attempting to paint a lucid and vivid picture of metaphysical idealism which underlie Hegel's thought pattern, Nwaeze (2016:110-111) writes that:

The world of ideas is the real world with eternal qualities. It is the pure state of being. The idealist sees the world of the senses or experience as a shadow of the world of reality. The sensory world is transient, changeable and imperfect. The real world for the idealist is absolute, permanent with perfect values. The idealist conceives the human mind, which is an invisible reality, as immortal and incorruptible unlike its physical nature which is mortal, extended and corruptible.

The intellectual influence of Plato on Hegel is manifestly evident in the above explanation. Plato's distinction between the world of ideas (forms) and the world of sensible objects (matter) serves as ideological influence on Hegel in the development of his Absolute Idealism. It is also important to note that Absolute Idealism is the Hegelian variant of idealism. It is objective and finds expression in the self-consciousness and self-projection or self-development of the Absolute Spirit.

This school of philosophy made its presence felt mostly during the latter half of the 19th century. However, the tradition could be traced back to the ancient period of Western philosophy. It is on record that Plato had idealist lining in his thought and works. We must first ask: what is idealism? To the layman, for Titus et al, idealist is one who accepts and lives by lofty moral, aesthetic and religious standard or one who is able to visualize and advocates some plan or program that does not yet exist. Every social reformer is an idealist in the second sense because he is supporting something that has not yet come into existence: Those who work for permanent peace or for the elimination of poverty may be called idealists in this sense (Mordi 2009:93).

This is popular and positive conception of an idealist. However, there is also the popular and negative conception of an idealist. Titus went further to tell us that a person stands for goals that other people generally believe to be quite unattainable or who ignores the facts and practical conditions of a situation is quite likely to be called a *mere idealist* (Nnadi & Udabah 2004:44).

On the philosophical sense of idealism, Nwaeze (2016:72), notes that the word idealism comes from the word idea rather than ideal. So for him, the term idealism straightens the meaning than the term idealism. Idealism, philosophically says that reality consists ideas, thoughts or minds or selves rather than of material objects and forces.

Bertrand Russell throwing light on what idealism is all about said that it is the doctrine that whatever exists, or at any rate whatever can be known to exist, must be in some sense mental (Russell 1976:102). This is to say that physical objects have no existence independent of thought. The whole universe is made up of minds and the immaterial objects of minds and nothing more.

Speaking on idealism, Nwocha (2016:36) says that *idealism* (idealism, with the *I* inserted for the sake of euphony) may strike beginning students as exceedingly odd; but it is quite possible that the universe is very odd, and the arguments for idealism are strong (Maduabuchi 2014:36). Supporting this, Russell says that those who are unaccustomed to philosophical speculation may be inclined to dismiss such a doctrine as obviously absurd. There is no doubt that common sense regards tables and chairs and the sun and moon and material objects generally as something radically different from minds, and the contents of minds and as having an existence which might continue if minds ceased. We think of matter as having existed long before there were any minds, and it is hard to think of it as a mere product of mental activity. Russell asserts that whether true or false, idealism is not to be dismissed as obviously absurd (Russel 1976:107).

Idealism as school of thought holds that mind is prior to matter. While the materialists defend the position that matter is real and mind is an accompanying phenomenon, idealism on the other hand contends that the mind is real and matter is in a sense a by-product. Idealism implies a denial that the world is basically a great machine to be interpreted as matter, mechanism, energy alone (Idowu 2011:51).

As a worldview and a metaphysics, idealism builds upon the view or belief that the basic reality is made up or is closely related to mind, ideas, thoughts or selves. The world has a meaning apart from its surface appearance. The world, the universe or reality could be understood and interpreted by a study of the laws of thought and of consciousness and not exclusively by the methods of the empirical sciences such as physics and chemistry.

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## Conclusion

In this paper, we have explored the notion of an Absolute Spirit as a key concept in Hegelian philosophy. An attempt has been made to depict a vivid picture of his central idea of Absolute Spirit which is also referred to as Absolute Mind, Universal Mind, Objective Mind, amongst others. It posits, in conclusion, that Hegel's concept of an Absolute Spirit is a mystical and metaphysical approach to mirroring reality in the external world.

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