

HEGEL, THE PLATO OF THE MODERN WORLD

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We often have heard and read that Hegel was (or at least wished to be) the Aristotle of the modern world. A careful study of the Hegelian system reveals this to be quite true. Just as Aristotle attempted to synthesize and go beyond all philosophical thought that had preceded him, so Hegel attempts to cast all of western as well as oriental thought up to his own time into a single system. Just as Aristotle attempted to comprehend and organize (as well as further the development of) the various branches of science extant in his day, so Hegel in his *Philosophy of Nature* and *Philosophy of Mind* attempts to organize and philosophically critique the natural and humanistic sciences of his own time. But, . . .

This Aristotelianized view of Hegel, while accurate as far as it goes, does not give us an adequate picture of his aims or his achievement; neither does it render us an adequate picture of Hegelianism. For we must always remember that Hegel was the resuscitator of dialectical logic and that he was an idealist, indeed an Absolute Idealist, and that in light of these facets of his thought he might just as well be called the Plato as the Aristotle of the modern world.

What then are we to say? Was Hegel the Aristotle or was he the Plato of the modern world? This question is unanswerable as stated, for it sets up a false dichotomy. It implies that Hegelianism must be taken as either modernized Aristotelianism or modernized Platonism, but not both. The fact is, however, that Hegel attempted to synthesize Platonism and Aristotelianism. Thus the answer to our question can only be that Hegelianism is both Aristotelianism and Platonism and neither exclusively Aristotelianism nor Platonism. The manner in which Hegel has synthesized these two opposing philosophies is best illustrated by examining his doctrine regarding the relationship of particulars to universals.

Plato, as we know, separated the realm of universals from that of particulars. The realm of particulars was the realm of becoming and impermanence and relative reality, while the realm of universals was the realm of the changeless, eternal and absolute reality. Aristotle saw this rigid separation of the world of universal forms from the world of particulars as untenable. We are all familiar with his severe criticism (presented in the *Metaphysics*) of his great predecessor's ontological views. Aristotle sought to unify the world of universals with the world of particulars and so developed the view that the universal is immanent in the particular as its essence or inherent nature, or, put another way, that form and matter are always united.

Reduced to a brief formula, Platonism asserts that the universal transcends the particular while Aristotelianism asserts that the universal is immanent in the particular. Here then we have that famous antithesis, immanence versus transcendence, which constitutes the heart of the divergence of Aristotelian ontology from Platonic ontology. We have before us what appears to be an exclusively disjunctive proposition: either universals are immanent in particulars or they transcend particulars; either one or the other must be true, but not both.

If Hegel were the Aristotle and only the Aristotle of the modern world we would expect him to opt for the doctrine of immanence. Yet to the degree that he is an idealist and so also a Platonist we would expect him to favor the doctrine of transcendence. The fact is that he favors both of these apparently antithetical views and sees both as true, but not the whole truth. Only their synthesis into a more comprehensive and concrete view, a view which preserves them both and yet goes beyond both, can be held as truly expressing the relationship of universals to particulars. For Hegel then the task was to develop a view of the relationship of the universal to the particular such that he could affirm both that the universal was immanent in the particular and transcendent of the particular. Only thus could he achieve a synthesis of the Platonic and Aristotelian positions. The expression which Hegel employs to refer to the simultaneously immanent and transcendent universal is "concrete universal."¹

In order to elucidate this notion of the concrete universal let us examine a specific example, the universal term "man." The term "man" is used to refer to particular men as in the sentences, "There is a man walking down the street" and "This man is intelligent." It is also used in a generic sense as in "Man is a rational animal," and other such sentences in which "man" stands for mankind or the human race as a whole.

Aristotle would have viewed "man" in the generic sense (mankind) as an example of what he called secondary substance. The particular man for Aristotle was primary substance.² This view which makes the particular substance primary and the universal secondary gives to the universal the status of a "term" predicable of a number of similar particular primary substances. It is easy to see how this view could lead to nominalism in its various forms.

Plato's view was directly the reverse of Aristotle's. For Plato the universal was the true primary substance: particular men take, or rather receive, whatever reality they possess solely through their participation in this higher order reality, this truly substantial being, the universal or genus man. For Plato the universal is first and gives birth to the particulars. For Aristotle the particulars are first and the universal comes into being only in the mind of the perceiving subject which is capable of abstracting the common form from the matter of the particulars.³

Now Hegel fully agrees with Aristotle that if there were no particular men there would be no human race, no "man" in the universal sense. Thus for Hegel the universal must exist as particularized: mankind exists as men. Man-ness, as it were, this universal form only exists as immanent in the collection of all particular men. Each and every particular man is different and distinct from every other particular man: it is this in which his particularity consists. And yet every man has something in common with every other man: all men are men. This is tautologically true yet not trivial for it has an ontological significance, namely, that all men are of the same type or kind. Each man, despite his difference from every other man, despite his particularity, is in this one determination the same as every other man. It is because we can apply the term "man" to these many different particular beings that "man" is a universal term.

Now if Hegel went no further than the above analysis indicates he would be an Aristotelian through and through holding a doctrine of the immanence of universals in particulars. He goes further however and points out that while it is true that mankind exists as particularized into the aggregate of all men and that each and every man contains the form of manhood immanent within him as his essence or real nature, it is also true, as Plato observes, that the particular man dies; the particular man is finite, non-eternal, transient. Mankind, on the other hand, does not die or cease to be when a particular man dies or ceases to be. Thus "man" in the universal sense as mankind *transcends*, that is to say, *goes or reaches beyond* any given particular man. Mankind exists before any given particular man and gives him birth: mankind exists after any given particular man and disposes of his dead shell, the body. Looking deeper we see that ultimately mankind survives the death of all particular men, for all particular men will die while mankind lives on ever regenerating itself anew and preserving itself by bringing into existence other particular men to replace those that have died.

Thus we see that Hegel fully agrees with Plato that mankind, this universal entity, transcends its particulars and is a higher order reality. The Whole, mankind, is more than the sum of its parts, even though the existence of the parts is essential to the existence of the whole.

The doctrine of the concrete universal is one of Hegel's great achievements. We can see from the foregoing exposition that such a universal can be grasped through dialectical thought alone since it requires that apparently contrary positions (immanence-transcendence) be grasped in their unity. This dialectical element itself is, as stated earlier, a markedly Platonic dimension of Hegel's thought. This along with his exaltation of the universal above the particular (in the limited sense specified above) shows him to be quite in accord with the spirit of Platonism.

In conclusion then we must not be satisfied with the view which characterizes Hegel as the Aristotle of the modern world. There are aspects of his thought which certainly do possess an Aristotelian flavor; yet, other aspects of his thought which are quite as central allow us to refer to him with equal right as the Plato of the modern world.

NOTES

¹See Hegel's discussion of the relationship of universalist to particularity in *Hegel's Science of Logic* by G.W.G. Hegel, trans. A. V. Miller, Humanities, 1969, pp. 600-618. It would complicate this brief paper too much to introduce Hegel's views on individuality (Einzelheit).

²Aristotle "Categories" in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. R. McKeon. Random, 1941, pp. 9-14.

³Aristotle "De Anima" Bk. II, Ch. 5 in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. R. McKeon. Random, 1941, p. 556.