

Enver ORMAN\*

## On Hegel's Concept of the Absolute

### Abstract

The concept of absolute is one of the key concepts in order to understand Hegel's philosophical system. In the context of Hegelian dialectics the absolute is absolute only if manifests itself in the form of relative and contingent beings. This article discusses Hegel's conception of the absolute in connection with his *Phenomenology of Spirit* and *Science of Logic*.

### Key Words

Absolute, Relative, Being, Essence, Concept, Spirit.

## Hegel'in Mutlak Kavramı Üzerine

### Özet

Hegel'in felsefi sistematiğini anlamamız açısından önem taşıyan kavramlardan birisi de mutlak kavramıdır. Hegelci diyalektiğin bakış açısıyla mutlak, kendisini yalnızca görelî ve rastlantısal olanda dışavurduğu sürece mutlaktır. Bu yazıda Hegel'in Mutlak anlayışı *Tinin Görüngübilimi* ve *Mantık Bilimi* adlı yapıtları bağlamında ele alınmaktadır.

### Anahtar Sözcükler

Mutlak, Görelî, Varlık, Öz, Kavram, Tin.

### The initial determinations of the absolute

The word 'absolute' means basically "not dependent on, conditional on, relative to or restricted by anything else; self contained, perfect, complete." (Inwood, 1992:Absolute) It refers to God as the main concept of religions. God is the unconditional being that is transcendent to all conditional and created beings. On the other hand, every real being is dependent, conditional and relative. Here the 'real' means what is ontologically material and natural, epistemologically empirical and phenomenal. In the natural world there is nothing self-contained, perfect and complete.

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\* Doç. Dr. İstanbul Üniversitesi, Edebiyat Fakültesi, Felsefe Bölümü.

The natural world is a world of conditional and relative beings. It is a phenomenal world. In the context of German Idealism, if there is an absolute reality at all, it must be immaterial and spiritual. For Kant the absolute is the unconditional and the ultimate reality which cannot be known theoretically. The absolute is *Ding-an-sich* or noumenal reality beyond phenomenal reality which is known by our theoretical activity. Kant says "...I shall use the word 'absolute', opposing it to what is valid only comparatively, that it is, in some particular respect. For while the latter is restricted by conditions, the former is valid without restrictions." (Kant, 1965:A326) In this respect any reality which is not restricted by any conditions and which is not comparative to any other determinations is transcendent for human mind and unknown for us. According to Fichte absolute is the pure or the transcendental ego. The pure ego is the starting point of all things and "the self-evident presupposition of all knowledge." (Thilly, 1952:455) If we do not presuppose the pure or the transcendental ego, there will be no object or a phenomenal world at all. Fichte's pure ego is the absolute ground for all natural things and the absolute condition of all conditional beings. So the pure ego is the absolute ego which divides itself into the subject and the object. For Fichte the absolute ego is *Ich-an-sich* or in a different sense Kantian *Ding-an-sich* beyond phenomenal reality. The postulation of the absolute ego is the fundamental principle for Fichte's subjective idealism. In the system of Schelling's objective idealism, the absolute is a neutral identity without any difference and determination. For Schelling the absolute is the absolute indifference to all relative and conditional differences. The absolute is the infinite indifference which is epistemologically transcendent to all rational and analytical thought of finite determinations. For this reason, this neutral identity or infinite indifference can be grasped not by rational thought but by intellectual intuition. In the 'Preface' to his *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel describes Schelling's concept of absolute as "...the night in which all cows are black..." (Hegel, 1964:79) For Hegel the absolute is not a neutral and abstract identity excluding all differences and determinations, but a concrete identity, an identity-in-difference. The absolute is not grasped by intellectual intuition but by conceptual thinking and rational philosophical system. According to Hegel the absolute cannot be absolute if it does not manifest itself in the form of relative and conditional world. (Inwood, 1992: Absolute) The absolute is absolute only in its phenomenological manifestation.

### Phenomenological journey of absolute

Hegel's conception of the absolute is mainly connected with his *Phenomenology of Spirit* and also his *Science of Logic*. In *Phenomenology* the absolute is the spirit which shows its truth in the course of history. This absolute spirit is a kind of subject not limited to anything else; it is both subject and object. As aforementioned, for Hegel the absolute cannot be absolute if it does not manifest itself in the form of not-absolute. This truth is a necessary result of the Hegelian dialectics. In the context of the Hegelian dialectics the absolute is both the other and not the other of what is relative. What is relative, conditional and finite is different from absolute, unconditional and infinite, but it is also a part and moment of the absolute. Hegel's absolute is the Hegelian spirit which is also the Hegelian truth. According to Hegel, if there is a truth for philosophy, it must be absolute. Any relative and empirical truth is not a philosophical one.

Hegel says: “according to my view, which must justify itself by the presentation of the system, everything depends on this, that we comprehend and express the true not as substance but just as much as subject.” (Hegel, 1966:III) So the truth or the absolute in the Hegelian sense is a self-differentiation process of an absolute subject or spirit. The Hegelian spirit is the rational consciousness that searches for its absolute truth and certainty. The spirit is the infinite totality which includes and conceives all relative reality in an absolute and rational system. For Hegel spirit as being absolute truth, refers to absolute, not-absolute and the knowledge of them. What is not-absolute and relative is a necessary part of what is absolute. Without this necessary connection between the absolute and the relative, the absolute cannot be *actual* and *comprehended*. So in the context of the Hegelian dialectics the absolute can be thought *in relation with* what is relative and henceforth relative in an epistemological sense. The Hegelian absolute can be grasped by human mind and knowledge in the course of a phenomenological journey.

Consciousness is the first form of spirit in his search of absolute truth. When we define the *Phenomenology of Spirit* as the coming-to-itself of absolute knowledge, consciousness, as the first form of this absolute knowledge, has for its knowledge an object which thereby given to it. (Heidegger, 1988:34) Firstly, the human consciousness has sense-certainty about individual objects in the phenomenal world. But although sensation is from a historical and phenomenological perspective the absolute starting point for spirit, the content of this sensation is not clear, certain and absolute. The sense-certainty is the poorest and immediate manifestation of knowledge. (Hegel, 1964:149) “The knowledge, which is at the start or immediately our object, can be nothing else than just that which is immediate knowledge, knowledge of immediate, of what *is*.” (Hegel, 1964:149) To know something means that there is something which exists for consciousness. At first it seems that the existence of this something is directly and immediately given to our consciousness. But, according to Hegel when we try to know and signify this immediate being, we should use some universal concepts which cannot be given to us from sensation. “The aim of this section is then to bring out how sense-certainty’s aconceptual view of knowledge appears natural to it because it conceives of individuality in this way, as something an object has apart from universality and particularity; by showing how this conception is problematic...” (Stern, 2002:45) For Hegel what is unthinkable and unspeakable and comes from sense-certainty alone, is “what is untrue, irrational, something barely and simply ‘meant’.” (Hegel, 1964:160) But when we try to think and speak about the objects of sense-certainty, we grasp the true, rational and universal nature of them.

“If nothing is said of a thing except that it is an actual thing, an external object, this only makes it the most universal of all possible things, and thereby we express its likeness, its identity, with everything, rather than its difference from everything else. When I say ‘an individual thing’, I at once state it to be really quite a universal, for everything is an individual thing: and in the same way ‘this thing’ is everything and anything we like. More precisely, as this bit of paper, each and every paper is a ‘this bit of paper’, and I have thus said all the while what is universal” (Hegel, 1964:160).

Secondly, human consciousness has the power of perception about individual things. We have seen that what sense-certainty gives us is a kind of knowledge of acquaintance. What confronting a conscious being in sense-certainty cannot be said and thought without going beyond this immediate awareness. "Consciousness accepting its conceptual role in the face of given, then becomes 'sense-perception'..." (Findlay, 1968:328) Perception transforms the given sense-data into a number of individual things with different properties and aspects. In the context of Hegel's absolute idealism, an individual thing cannot be there and cannot be thought without its universal and particular determinations. Individual and particular determinations *are relative to* their universal determinations. All finite and individual determinations have only a relative and finite existence. "The proposition that the finite is ideal [*ideell*] constitutes idealism. The idealism of philosophy consists in nothing else than in recognizing that the finite has no veritable being." (Hegel, 1976:154) So the individual as a finite existence has no veritable being without what is ideal and universal.

So consciousness has, thirdly, the power of understanding which recognizes that what lies behind the content of perception is the human mind itself and its abstract and universal categories. Spirit takes the form of self-consciousness after consciousness. The objects of self-consciousness are mirror-images of itself, other individual minds, members of a human society. The third main section of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is called 'reason'. Spirit in the form of reason, "more and more daringly and successfully unmasks the foreignness of things and comes to see in them nothing but the conditions of its own rational subjectivity." (Findlay, 1968:328) Here the absolute means spirit which implies to the concrete and dialectical identity of subject and object and of thoughts and things. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* exposes the various forms of the spirit on the way to the absolute knowledge and hence absolute spirit. "The wealth of appearances of spirit, which at first sight seems chaotic, is presented in its necessity; imperfect appearances dissolve and pass into higher ones that are their proximate truth." (Inwood, 1992:218) The Hegelian spirit can reach his final and absolute truth by means of philosophy which is the rational and systematic thought of the whole reality. In this Hegelian context, philosophy but especially Hegel's own philosophy has the true form of absolute knowledge, because it sublates all relative, contingent and imaginative forms of rational thinking. For Hegel philosophy in its true and absolute form is pure rational thinking which means that every material and spiritual entity as the parts of a rational and universal system cannot be absolute but contingent and relative.

### **The logical context of the absolute**

If absolute basically means not dependent, conditional and relative to anything else, it can also be called as substance, essence, infinite, God, universe, wholeness etc. The absolute can also be conceived as being, essence and concept which are the names of three main parts of Hegel's *Science of Logic*. In the *Science of Logic* every latter part is the truth of a former one. So the truth of being is essence and the truth of essence is concept.

In Hegel's logical system the first name of the absolute is being. Being is the immediate meaning of the absolute. From an ontological point of view every

determination in universe is a kind of being. Being in its universal and absolute meaning is not a finite and determinate being which can be restricted by anything else or another determinate being. The categories of being, nothing, becoming, determinate being, something and other, quality, quantity, being-in-itself and being-for-itself, etc. are discussed in the 'Doctrine of Being' which is the first main part of *Science of Logic*. All the categories of the 'Doctrine of Being' have immediateness. Here immediateness means being not mediated by the categories such as inner and outer, past and present. But it is important to notice that in his *Science of Logic* Hegel uses all categories in pure rational form. This means that when we think about the categories 'inner' and 'outer', 'past' and 'present' in the context of the Hegelian logic, we should not forget that for example 'space' and 'time', being the categories of Hegel's *Philosophy of Nature*, do not appropriate to his *Science of Logic*. The *Science of Logic* as the first main part of Hegel's great philosophical system cannot borrow and use the categories of his *Philosophy of Nature* which is the second main part of his system.

Why is it so? For there is always a process of sublation (*Aufhebung*) in Hegel's dialectical thought. Sublation or *Aufhebung* "has three main senses:

- (1) 'to raise, to hold, to lift up',
- (2) 'to annul, abolish, destroy, cancel, suspend',
- (3) 'to keep, save, preserve'." (Inwood, 1992:Sublation; Hegel, 1990:100)

Sublation implies that in Hegel's philosophical system every foregoing part or concept, as the basis of the latter one, gives its determination to this latter one not in an immediate form but in a mediated form. In Hegel's system sublation and mediation are parallel concepts. In that case to understand and illuminate the categories of Hegel's *Science of Logic* it is invalid to use the categories of his *Philosophy of Nature* which comes after *Science of Logic*, but on the other hand we can validly use and must use the categories of *Science of Logic* for a clear understanding of his *Philosophy of Nature*. This process of sublation or *Aufhebung* is valid for every part of the Hegelian system and for the parts of *Science of Logic*. Moreover, the Hegelian absolute has a process of sublation for human mind. In the 'Doctrine of Being', that is the first main part of Hegel's *Science of Logic*, pure being (*reines Sein*) is mediated with determinate being (*Dasein*) and both of them are sublated by being-for-itself (*Fürsichsein*). (Hegel, 1990:158-159) Pure being is indeterminate being and in this indeterminacy it is absolute and infinite. Pure being has no determinate content; it is identical to nothing. But when we think speculatively this indeterminateness, it will be clear that this indeterminateness is the determination of pure being. It means that in the realm of speculative philosophy or of pure thinking indetermination is also a determination, because it has its meaning or determination in contradiction to determination. Pure being as indeterminate being has its meaning in contradiction to and in relation to determinate being. Therefore, pure being does not have any meaning and determination independent of determinate being and it is not absolute.

Determinate being is finite being and as a limitation it is also not absolute. "The limitation of the finite is not something external to it; on the contrary, its own determination is also its limitation." (Hegel, 1976:133) Being-for-itself shows that the sides of this contradiction (and every other contradiction) cannot *be there* and cannot *be*

*thought* separately. Their difference is immediately their identity. This identity of indeterminate and determinate being means that they are absolutely different but in this very difference they have concrete and true identity. A determinate being is qualitatively and quantitatively determinate being and it can be reduced to its determinations. So in its very determination it is a finite being and when it loses its determinations it also loses itself or its very being. But being-for-itself as the synthesis of determinate being and pure being cannot also be seen basically as the sum of its determinations and cannot be reduced to its determinations. Now it is the true definition of the absolute. For Hegel there remains always a 'thing-in-itself' for a 'being-for-itself' which *has* its determinations. Determinate beings have a determinate and finite character that enables us to understand why they collapse into each other and they become different and they change. Here determinateness means what is not absolute and refers to relative things. It indicates irresoluteness, unresistance to the process of becoming. According to Hegel, determinate beings are finite beings and so they are in a process of becoming, because they are being-for-another (*Sein-für-Anderes*) or, in other words, they have their origin not in themselves.

Indeterminacy of being-for-itself means its indifference to becoming. It is the absolute indifference to what is contingent and relative. Pure being is abstract being without any determinacy. Being-for-itself has qualitative and quantitative determination, but it is indeterminate and unfixed to its determination. And because of its indeterminacy to determination, it is indifferent to the process of becoming. This side of indeterminateness makes being-for-itself infinite being which is called now essence.

“Being is the immediate. Since knowing has for its goal knowledge of the true, knowledge of what being is *in and for itself*, it does not stop at immediate and its determinations, but penetrates it on the supposition that at the back of this being there is something else, something other than being itself...” (Hegel, 1976:383).

For Hegel at the background of immediate being there is essence. At the beginning of the 'Doctrine of Essence' in his *Science of Logic* Hegel says, “The truth of being is *essence*.” (Hegel, 1976:383) Immediate being and its determinations are the world of becoming and appearances in the Platonic manner. Every finite and material thing with its qualitative and quantitative determinations belongs to the world of appearances. They are relative but not absolute beings in respect to their essence.

“Being is accordingly determined as essence, as a being in which everything determinate and finite is negated. It is thus the *indeterminate*, simple unity from which what is determinate has been eliminated in an *external manner*; the determinate element itself was external to this unity and, after this elimination, still remains confronting it; for it has not been sublated in itself but only relatively, only in relation to this unity” (Hegel, 1976:383).

At the first moment determination is eliminated from the indeterminate essence in a pictorial or external manner; the realms of appearances and of essential beings are separate realms. The diversity of appearances is external to the unity and the identity of essence. Diversity and unity or difference and identity are imagined as separate realities

which constitute a dualistic view of the world. But for Hegel a true philosophy should overcome every kind of dualism in order to reach a logically necessary, interconnected, unified and cohesive philosophical system. There should be not only an external and material but also an internal and immaterial connection between the different appearances of the universe or the cosmos. According to Hegel's absolute idealism, the internal and immaterial connection among the appearances of the universe can be only ideal, rational and spiritual. But until the 'Doctrine of Concept' (or Idea) which constitutes the third main part of Hegel's *Science of Logic*, this ideal and pure rational connection cannot be seen in its exact presentation and form.

In the 'Doctrine of Being' we have said that pure being without any determination is indeterminate and identical to nothing and as such it was an empty thought or idea. Because of its emptiness and nothingness, pure and indeterminate being, although it was the first name of absolute and infinite being, is inappropriate as to conceive it as a real and true inner connection all over the determinate beings and appearances. Pure being is pure abstract being and in this manner is not a concrete concept which will be adequate for a clear understanding of beings there. According to Hegel, from a Kantian perspective "*existence* or being (these being taken here as synonymous) is not a property or a real predicate, that is to say, is not a concept of thing." (Hegel, 1976:86) From a Hegelian perspective, the category of being in its immediate and indeterminate form which is only a pure and empty thought, cannot be seen as a determinate and concrete predicate.

The category of essence is more determinate and concrete than the category of being. So essence as the new name of the absolute is not only abstract indeterminacy and indifference to what is relatively there, but also the ground of all relative and accidental things, that is, the world of appearances. The absolute is absolute only when it is the essence of what is relative. It is in and for itself only when it sublates and makes sensible what is relative. The absolute is not only different to what is relative but it also is the ground of relative things. What is relative is the manifestation of the absolute. "The absolute as such manifestation, the absolute which is nothing else and has no content save that of being self-manifestation, is the *absolute form*." (Hegel, 1976:541) But if the absolute without its manifestation is not absolute, it is *relative to* its manifestation, that is, it is relative to what is relative. An absolute, which is the other of the relative is, is itself relative and not absolute. So from the perspective of the Hegelian dialectics, the absolute is not transcendent to what is relative, but it is the immanent and transparent essence of relative and finite things. "Absolute substance, which is absolute form distinguishes itself from itself, therefore no longer repels itself as necessity from itself, nor, as contingency, does it fall asunder into indifferent, self-external substance; on the contrary, it differentiates itself...into the totality..." (Hegel, 1976:571; Kroner, 1924:466) For Hegel the absolute is not abstract negation but the sublation of all differences and contradictions. It is the Absolute Idea or the Concept which sublates all determinations in its rational and systematical totality.

What is not transcendent but immanent to its manifestation in pure rational form is the Concept itself. Now, according to Hegel, the Concept is the new name of the absolute which indicates to the unity of essence and its manifestation (or appearances). The Concept as the content of last main part of the *Science of Logic* is being *in and for*

*itself*. (Hegel, 1976:578) In other words, the Notion or the Concept is the absolute substance which “has returned to itself and so become absolute, only *out of* and *in* its *positedness*...Hence this reciprocity is the appearance that again sublates itself...” (Hegel, 1976:580) For Hegel what sublates itself and what becomes itself in its appearances or manifestations is the *Concept*, the *subject*.

“This infinite reflection-into itself, namely, that being is in and for itself only in so far as it is posited, it is *consummation of substance*. But this consummation is no longer substance itself but something higher, the Concept, the subject. The transition of the relation of substantiality takes place through its own immanent necessity and is nothing more than the manifestation of itself, that the Concept is its truth, and that freedom is the truth of necessity” (Hegel, 1976:580).

We have said that Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* can be understood as a self-differentiation process of the absolute subject or spirit. Now at the end of his *Science of Logic* we see that the absolute subject or spirit has another name, that is, the Concept. They are the different names of the Hegelian absolute which implies to the immanent necessity of contingent things. The knowledge of this immanent necessity is the freedom of Hegel's absolute subject or the absolute Spirit which shows its truth in the course of history.

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