



# Western Philosophy II

COURSE CODE: M23PH05DC



SREENARAYANAGURU  
OPEN UNIVERSITY

Discipline Core Course  
Postgraduate Programme in Philosophy

**SELF LEARNING MATERIAL**

**SREENARAYANAGURU OPEN UNIVERSITY**

The State University for Education, Training and Research in Blended Format, Kerala

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**Western Philosophy II**  
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Semester - II

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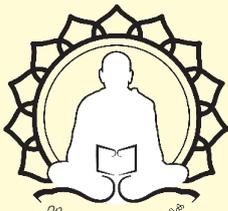


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# MESSAGE FROM VICE CHANCELLOR

Dear learner,

I extend my heartfelt greetings and profound enthusiasm as I warmly welcome you to Sreenarayanaguru Open University. Established in September 2020 as a state-led endeavour to promote higher education through open and distance learning modes, our institution was shaped by the guiding principle that access and quality are the cornerstones of equity. We have firmly resolved to uphold the highest standards of education, setting the benchmark and charting the course.

The courses offered by the Sreenarayanaguru Open University aim to strike a quality balance, ensuring students are equipped for both personal growth and professional excellence. The University embraces the widely acclaimed “blended format,” a practical framework that harmoniously integrates Self-Learning Materials, Classroom Counseling, and Virtual modes, fostering a dynamic and enriching experience for both learners and instructors.

The university aims to offer you an engaging and thought-provoking educational journey. The postgraduate programme in Philosophy is designed to be a continuation of the undergraduate programme in Philosophy. It maintains a close connection with the content and teaching methods of the undergraduate programme. It advances the more nuanced aspects of philosophical theories and practices. The university has recognised that empirical methods have limitations when explaining philosophical concepts. As a result, they have made a deliberate effort to use illustrative methods throughout their content delivery. The Self-Learning Material has been meticulously crafted, incorporating relevant examples to facilitate better comprehension.

Rest assured, the university’s student support services will be at your disposal throughout your academic journey, readily available to address any concerns or grievances you may encounter. We encourage you to reach out to us freely regarding any matter about your academic programme. It is our sincere wish that you achieve the utmost success.



Warm regards.  
Dr. Jagathy Raj V. P.

21-08-2024

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**BLOCK 1**  
**Kant**

# UNIT 1

## INTRODUCTION TO CRITICAL PHILOSOPHY

### Learning Outcomes

In this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ▶ discuss the crisis faced by human reason in the eighteenth century
- ▶ analyse the limitations of the dogmatic philosophies
- ▶ appreciate the need for a critical philosophy
- ▶ understand the method of critique proposed by Immanuel Kant

### Background

The modern period in the history of Western thought celebrates the autonomy of human reason against the traditional authorities. The eighteenth century, that belongs to the age of Enlightenment, witnesses the advancements in natural science based on the contributions of Newton. The new mechanical conception of the world hardly gives any room for free will and thereby shakes the grounds of morality and values. Moreover, some basic assumptions of the natural science become vulnerable to sceptical challenges too. The two then prevalent currents in Philosophy – rationalism and empiricism – fail in their attempts to provide a metaphysical framework that could incorporate the scientific world view as well as make room for human freedom. The question arises as to whether there is anything that Philosophy can offer in the pursuit of knowledge. Immanuel Kant, a German philosopher, re-asserts the worth of philosophizing by proposing a ‘critical philosophy’ that can solve the crisis faced by human reason. He believes that an examination, of the nature, scope and limits of the human faculty of knowing, is the need of the hour. Through his famous works called ‘the three critiques’ – Critique of Pure Reason, Critique of Practical Reason, and Critique of Judgement, Kant attempts a critique of human reason itself, and gives a new philosophical account for the validity of scientific principles and the notions of free will, God etc. This unit introduces the ‘critical philosophy’ of Immanuel Kant which not only revives the status of Philosophy in his period, but also has a huge impact on the later philosophies in the Western tradition.

## Keywords

Age of Enlightenment, Dogmatism, Scepticism, Critique

## Discussion

► The intellectual milieu in each period affects the mode of philosophizing

► The age of Enlightenment celebrates the autonomy of reason

► Advancement in science brings with it certain challenges

### 1.1.1 Introduction

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) is an 18<sup>th</sup> century German philosopher who is considered as one of the epoch-making philosophers in the Western tradition. He is known for his 'critical philosophy' which calls for a critique of the human reason to discover its scope and limits. The contribution of a philosopher to the discipline of Philosophy is more often dependent on the intellectual milieu that surrounds him / her.

Kant belongs to an era which is generally known as the 'age of Enlightenment'. In Kant's words, enlightenment is the emergence of man from his self-imposed immaturity. He defines immaturity as the inability of a man to use his reason without guidance from another. The enlightenment era, having its primary origin in the scientific revolution of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, witnesses the enthronement of human reason over and above all other traditional authorities. The period asserts the belief that reason by itself is capable of making mankind understand the world around and thus cultivate a better life. There is no need for any religious or political authority to dictate the dos and don'ts to the man of reason. The intellectual and scientific progress of the age is so tremendous that one of the leading figures of the period from France, named D'Alembert, calls the eighteenth century as 'the century of philosophy par excellence.'

However, the progressive spirit of enlightenment soon faces a set of challenges. The basic assumptions of science, such as the law of causation, the notion of substance *etc.* which underlie its findings about the world, are questioned by sceptical standpoints. The new mechanical picture of the world that is governed by unchanging mathematical laws paves way for determinism (the theory that all events, including moral choices, are determined completely by previously existing causes, rules, laws *etc.*) and gives no room for human freedom. This



in turn casts doubt on the possibility and validity of moral values and ethics.

► Philosophy fails to provide a comprehensive metaphysical framework

The legitimacy of metaphysics, that is expected to give a comprehensive framework to validate the new findings of science as well as advocate the existence of free will, comes under scrutiny as the two then prevalent approaches in philosophy – rationalism and empiricism – could not fulfil the task. Rationalism rejects the role of experience in attaining certain knowledge and finally results in a plurality of conflicting conclusions. Empiricism over-emphasises sense-experience, gets caught up in the subjective realm and finally results in scepticism.

► Kant proposes the critical philosophy

It is at this juncture that Kant proposes a critical philosophy to meet the need of the hour. He claims that only a self-examination of the human reason can free it from the perplexities it faces in its pursuit of comprehending the reality. Can pure reason unaided by experience know anything with certainty? If yes, what all can be known and what all cannot be? The following discussion provides an introduction to the critical project undertaken by Kant by briefing the factors that necessitated such a shift in the style of philosophizing.

### 1.1.2 Critical Philosophy: Why?

► Kant's critical philosophy is a response to the crisis in the age of Enlightenment

The critical philosophy of Kant is a response to the crisis in the age of enlightenment due to the free play of reason. The advancements in natural science, based heavily on the Newtonian principles, depict a mechanical and thus deterministic world where human freedom does not enjoy any special status. Morality and values have no place in such a world. At the same time sceptical challenges arise that doubt the assumptions on which the new theories on the physical world are built. Kant feels the need of a comprehensive frame of reference that could place the scientific theories on a strong indubitable base, and make room for free will and values as well. Philosophy, through epistemological and metaphysical inquiries, is expected to shed some light here, which however it could not. Both the rationalist and empiricist philosophies fail miserably. This results in questioning the status of philosophizing as a fruitful activity – Is there any domain left for Philosophy to function? The critical philosophy introduced by Kant thus also revives the status of Philosophy.

### 1.1.2.1 Science and Human Freedom

- ▶ Kant has admiration for the physical world as well as the deeper dimensions of humanity

According to Kant, the mind has increasing admiration and awe for two things – ‘the starry heavens above’ and ‘the moral law within.’ The former stands for the physical world which causes wonder and curiosity in the human intellect. The latter represents the free will and the inner sense of moral duty experienced by all humans alike, which in a way are peculiar to the human species as compared to the other elements of nature.

- ▶ No place for free will and morality in the mechanical world conceived by science

The spectacular achievements of science in the age of Enlightenment enforces widespread confidence and optimism in the autonomy of reason to control nature and improve human life. This raises questions against the need of traditional religious or political authorities in guiding mankind. The 18<sup>th</sup> century science based on the universal laws of motion discovered and expressed in mathematical formulae by Newton encourages the conception of the physical world as a very complex machine. The physical world is comprised of parts that are material and set in motion fully accounted for by deterministic causal laws. In this drift of scientific thought Kant feels an attempt to include all reality, including human nature, in the mechanical model where every event can be explained in terms of cause and effect. This scientific approach also would reject any element that does not fit into its method which limits knowledge to sense experience and inductive generalisations derived from therein. Kant realises that science thus gives no room for notions such as free will, soul, God *etc.* and moral values would lose their worth.

- ▶ Kant could not adhere to the advocacy for faith and other mystic vision

The tension between science and human freedom causes the emergence of some counter-enlightenment thinkers who advocate that the deepest dimensions of the human nature cannot be dealt with using the scientific method. They cannot be conceived by intellect, but only felt by heart. These thinkers believe that discursive understanding cannot comprehend reality in its true sense and only faith or sort of mystical vision can do the same. However, Kant could not find these claims as solving the crisis.

### 1.1.2.2 Attack on the Foundations of Science

David Hume, an empiricist from Britain, has already put forward a striking philosophical argument that shakes the grounds of science. Hume claims that all our knowledge come



- Sceptical attacks on notions like causality cast doubt on the foundations of science

from experience. Whatever is not given in experience cannot be accepted as knowledge about the actual world. We cannot have any knowledge of causality or necessary connections between events, because we do not directly experience such a connection. According to Hume, what we think as a causal connection is simply our habit of associating two events which we experience one after the other. Moreover, as it is impossible to conclude any valid and necessary cause-effect relationship, we cannot infer or predict any future event from our experience of the present. Hence, Hume denies inductive inference. Similarly, Hume attacks the notion of substance which his predecessor Berkeley has done to an extent. As we do not have any direct impression of 'substance' as such, there is no way we could assert with certainty the existence of substance. However, the notion of substance is important in the conceptions of science and it is precisely upon the notion of causality and inductive inference that scientific method proceeds. The logical outcome of Hume's philosophy is that there cannot be any scientific knowledge. So, another difficulty that Kant finds with respect to the development of science is how to explain or justify scientific knowledge.

### 1.1.2.3 The Failure of Philosophy

- Philosophy could neither validate the grounds of scientific method nor advocate for the realm of moral law

Philosophy, since the modern period, has been gradually distanced from explaining the physical world directly as natural science developed a separate branch of knowledge with its own method. However, Philosophy could still attempt to provide a framework stating the basic principles of knowledge as such, which then would validate the scientific method and thereby its findings. And, it would have been better if Philosophy also could come up with a vindication for the realm of human freedom and morality. Kant gets impressed by the constant advancement of scientific knowledge and the success it earns in understanding the world. But he realises that the adequacy of the philosophy of his day is getting questioned.

The two major philosophical systems of the modern period – Continental rationalism and British Empiricism – could not succinctly justify the Newtonian physics, which make it worse for the systems. Continental rationalism has been constructed upon the model of mathematics. Such a mode of philosophizing deals with the relation of ideas to each other and therefore does not connect with things as they really are.

- ▶ The dogmatic approach of Rationalism and empiricism

- ▶ The status of Philosophy gets questioned

- ▶ Philosophy becomes critical when the methods and assumptions are questioned

The metaphysical speculations of rationalism beyond experience are considered dogmatic. It is believed uncritically that reason has the capacity to know everything about reality on its own. This dogmatic character of rationalist metaphysics effected the disparity in the conclusions arrived at by different thinkers like Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz. The empirical philosophy that originated in Britain, was also dogmatic in its emphasis on the role of experience in knowledge formation. In their view, the content for all factual knowledge comes only through experience. Getting limited to the subjective realm is an inevitable end thereof. The tradition thus witnesses the subjective idealism of Berkeley and finally reaches the scepticism of Hume. The notions like substance, causality *etc.* are doubted and the method of inductive generalisation gets rejected. Empiricism and science thus move in different directions.

The failure of rationalist and empiricist philosophies in justifying and coping with the popular and advancing scientific conception paves way for doubting the productiveness of Philosophy as such. Is it worth philosophizing? Is there anything that Philosophy can offer, as its own peculiar contribution, to the bundle of knowledge?

### 1.1.3 Critical Philosophy: Philosophy as Critique

Generally, the term ‘criticism’ is applied to denote the process of raising manifold objections against a particular view. It enables us to discover the unconscious presuppositions behind a judgement. However, it has no universal criterion or well-defined methodology and thus often leads to the desperate efforts to disprove whatever we do not wish to accept. In this sense, there are many instances in Philosophy, where the advocates of one position criticise another. But Philosophy is termed ‘critical’ when it takes up the task of assessing its methods and questioning its assumptions. Immanuel Kant, proposes such a critical philosophy’ as the need of his age.

#### 1.1.3.1 Kant’s Call for Critique of Reason

In the preface for the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant says that metaphysics, which was once considered as the queen of sciences, is having a despicable status in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The reason behind this is the inadequacy of the existing metaphysical approaches that cannot withstand the trends of the age of Enlightenment. Metaphysical systems, at first, proceeded dogmatically without a previous critique



► The despicable status of metaphysics

of the scope and limits of reason. They flourished despotically for some time, soon degenerated due to internal conflicts. The sceptical challenges that arose in regular intervals could not prevent dogmatism. The unaided use of reason in an unrestricted manner continued to construct theories like building castles in air. There have been attempts, in between, like that of John Locke to emphasis on the study of the process of knowledge generation to take a view of the nature of our own understanding and its powers. Locke felt the necessity of such a study before setting out with inquiries. However, in Kant's opinion, the psychological inquiry Locke resorted to could not succeed much. The dogmatic approach appeared time and again in revived forms and gradually caused the separation of science as an independent branch, leaving metaphysics to the position of contempt. Kant sees that there is after all an increasing tendency of keeping an indifferent attitude explicitly to avoid all concern with metaphysics. But the peculiarity of the metaphysical questions that we cannot completely ignore in our endeavours, forces these indifferentists to have implicit metaphysical assertions of their own. Clearly, indifferentism is not the final solution.

► The age of criticism demands the self-examination of reason

For Kant, philosophy is now in need of a method that will put it on a sure path. He calls his age as the age of criticism where everything needs to be submitted before reason. Religion and law are not exempted from the same, or else they would not earn the respect that reason has for those branches of knowledge which withstand its free and public examination. He opines that criticism of any discipline is good so far as it leads to ensure that the system is well grounded, a status that Mathematics and natural science possess. Thus, the only path left to revive the status of metaphysics, Kant says, is that of letting reason take the most difficult task of self-knowledge. Through such a critique, reason can dismiss all its groundless pretensions and secure its rightful claims, according to its own eternal laws. This is what is known as the critical philosophy of Kant.

► The critique aims to analyse what reason, unaided by experience, can and cannot do

Kant makes it clear that he is not aiming at a critique of books and systems, but a critique of the faculty of knowledge in general. He calls for an analysis of the powers of the human reason before employing the same into various inquiries – "... a critique of the faculty of reason in general, in respect of all the cognitions after which reason might strive independently of all experience, and hence the decision about the possibility

or impossibility of a metaphysics in general, and the determination of its sources, as well as its extent and boundaries, all, however, from principles.” (Critique of Pure Reason 101)

► Before undertaking metaphysical enquiries, one should think whether metaphysics is possible at all.

According to Kant, the fundamental question that a philosopher of his age should ponder upon is the question whether philosophy itself is a genuine subject. Kant says, “my purpose is to convince those who find it worth their while to occupy themselves with metaphysics: that it is absolutely necessary to suspend their work for the present, to regard everything that has happened hitherto as not having happened, and before all else first to raise the question: ‘whether such a thing as metaphysics is possible at all’.” (Kant’s Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics 1). Earlier metaphysicians disputed the nature of soul, God and other subjects which lie beyond the realm of direct experience. Kant asks the critical question whether reason is capable of engaging enquiries regarding such subjects that are not given in experience. It would be foolish on the part of a metaphysician if he spends time to construct theories and systems on matters that do not come under the domain of immediate experience, before ensuring whether one can apprehend such notions through pure reason alone. If metaphysics deals with knowledge that is developed by reason alone, i.e., prior to experience, *ora priori*, the critical question is whether such *a priori* knowledge is possible, and if yes, how.

► Critique of reason reveals how much it flourishes in the domains of science and morality

By undertaking a critique of reason, Kant expects to discover the boundaries of reason in the domains of science and morality. He says: “Through criticism alone can we sever the very root of materialism, fatalism, atheism, of freethinking unbelief, of enthusiasm and superstition, which can become generally injurious, and finally also of idealism and scepticism, which are more dangerous to the schools and can hardly be transmitted to the public.” (Critique of Pure Reason 119) Kant carries out the critical project through his three great Critiques. In the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), he attempts a critique of the faculty of reason aiming to discover its scope and limits regarding theoretical knowledge. *The Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) includes Kant’s effort to reveal how practical reason dictates the principles for morality. Kant gives a critique of aesthetic judgement in his Critique of Judgement (1790).



### 1.1.3.2 Dogmatism, Criticism, and the Kantian critique

► Dogmatism proceeds without assessing the powers of the faculty of knowledge

The method of critique is best understood when contrasted with the dogmatic procedure of human reason where there is hardly any antecedent criticism of its own capacity of knowing. It is the system which is produced in the direct effort to understand and interpret the world. It is characterised by the effort of a mind which finds no limits to its own competence. The faculty of knowing never doubts the efficiency of the methods and principles it uses. It is too busy with its enthusiasm to form conclusions about the object it deals with so that it does not get time to attend to itself.

► Dogmatism evokes conflicts and contradictions

The dogmatic or uncritical use of the reason gets challenged at some point sooner or later in its journey. It gets checked and frustrated by the nature of things because the simple principles which it uses to account for the explanation of the world are imperfect and one-sided. When reason applies a limited principle to everything, it eventually contradicts facts and even itself. One-sidedness here calls for a one-sidedness there. One dogmatic system is challenged by another dogmatic system. The conflict of opposite dogmas effects the rise of scepticism which denies both the dogmas and rests in the conviction that no truth can be reached. Absolute scepticism also becomes dogmatic in its rejection of all systems. Consider the great conflicts in the history of Western thought such as – 1) whether the world we experience has existence independent of any mind (realism) or is dependent on some mind (idealism), 2) whether the world is made up of single substance (monism), two independent substances (dualism), or many substances (pluralism), 3) whether reason is the important source of knowledge (rationalism) or nothing can be known that is not given in experience (empiricism) – and others. These have happened because of the limitations of dogmatism: “Such controversies arise out of the attempt to settle by a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ questions which cannot be thus simply answered. Hence each answer involves an absurdity and is open to an irresistible attack from the other side, and that disputant will be victorious who can secure the attack and force his opponents to act on the defensive. Meanwhile the sceptic draws the conclusion that truth is unattainable, or, to put it in Kantian language, that the question involves an insoluble ‘antinomy’ of reason. The true interpretation of the facts is, however, different.” (Caird 7)

► Criticism seeks to understand the source and presuppositions of a controversy

A controversy ends only if we break through the narrow conditions under which it has been carried on. This is what criticism seeks to do. It aims to bring the controversy to an end by detecting its source and presuppositions. Every controversy does have some ground common to the parties which escapes their recognition. Criticism takes up the regressive approach that goes back over the ground traversed by the dogmatists to the point where their wanderings begin. It goes back to the point, logically prior to the controversy, at which the opposing systems diverge. It penetrates to the principle which underlies the controversy, to discover the more comprehensive conception which puts each of the opposing systems in its place as an element of the truth.

► Kantian critique is the examination of the very faculty of knowing

Criticism, in its general sense, involves an effort to get beyond the sphere in which a controversy is carried on. It attempts to throw new light upon the controversy from a point of view which is above that of either of the disputants. The critical philosophy, proposed by Kant, however, is an attempt to reach principles, which are prior not only to a particular controversy, but to all controversy. For Kant, it is the criticism of the very faculty of knowledge to determine the most general conditions of the knowable. The faculty of knowledge is presupposed in the knowledge of everything, and the criticism of that faculty, if carried out successfully, could lead to the establishment of principles which are universal. Such principles can be used then to determine the value and place of all secondary principles in a scheme of knowledge. Locke has dealt with the psychological foundations of knowledge. Kant aims to reveal the logical conditions presupposed in all knowledge.

► Through critique, Kant introduces a new method in the discipline of Philosophy

Kant's method of critique that attempts to examine what is presupposed in all knowledge is quite different from his predecessors like Bacon, Descartes, Spinoza *etc.*, who tried to devise 'the best method' before setting out to philosophize. It can be said that those methodologists applied to Philosophy the methods already achieved by other sciences. Bacon resorted to inductive logic and the other two developed their methods based on Mathematics. However, Kant invents a unique method of philosophizing. Since Kant, the Western tradition has witnessed the emergence of new methods of philosophical inquiry, for example, the dialectical method of Hegel, the phenomenological method of Husserl *etc.*



## 1.1.4 The Critical Tradition after Kant

► Kant's philosophy encourages others to celebrate the autonomy of reason

The idea of “critique” is central to Kant’s philosophy, and the titles of three of his greatest works make it clear. Kant thus thinks that a critique of the powers of reason itself, to determine what can be known *a priori* (independently of experience), what can be known *a posteriori* (on the basis of experience), and what cannot be known at all, is crucial to Philosophy. The flame of criticism that Kant has ignited in the 18<sup>th</sup> century continues, though in a different manner, in the later period of the Western thought. Kant’s call for the resurrection of reason from being the slave of various forms of authority, to become the judge of the strictest tribunal where everything is examined thoroughly, influences many philosophers to employ the critical method in dealing with various disciplines.

► Kantian method of critique encourages the varied application of the critical method

German poet and literary critic Friedrich Schlegel, applies the method of critique to literature and develops his version of a romantic criticism. According to him ‘criticism is not to judge works by a general ideal, but to search out the individual ideal of each work.’ Humboldt the geographer and naturalist, advocates a critique of nature, which is to combine knowledge and enjoyment in such a way that people will have a more serious engagement with and appreciation for nature. Kantian critique serves also as a starting point for Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s dialectical conception of critique. For him, transcendental critique is one of the moments in the dialectical system. Karl Marx’s orientation towards the material conditions of existence gives rise to a multidimensional and intersectional conception of critique. It is evident particularly in the critique of capitalism seen in his writings on political economy. Nietzsche calls for the revaluation of values by attempting a critique of the fundamental claims of morality hitherto accepted uncritically. Phenomenologists adopt a critical stance towards the lived experience to discover the immanent meanings. The Frankfurt School combines Philosophy and Social science to have a radical critique of the social reality which eventually takes up different strands.

## Summarized Overview

Immanuel Kant is a German philosopher who revolutionised Philosophy with his critical approach. He flourished in the eighteenth century where the age of Enlightenment reached its heights of celebrating the autonomy of reason. His critical philosophy promises to solve the crisis of his time. The advancement made by science grounded on Newtonian laws paves way for certain challenges that human reason needs to meet in order to progress in its endeavour to have the best understanding of the world and thus improve the standards of living. However, the new mechanical conception of world where everything is determined by causal laws threatens the notions of free will and thereby the grounds of morality. Sceptical thoughts that reject causality and inductive logic questioned the foundations of the scientific method as well. A comprehensive metaphysical framework that can incorporate the scientific findings and the inner dimensions of human nature is the need of the hour. But existing philosophical currents of rationalism and empiricism could not account for the same. This in turn doubts the status of Philosophy as a discipline that has something peculiar of its own to contribute to the bundle of knowledge.

Kant realises this despicable condition of the discipline which used to be considered as the queen of sciences. It is a result of the uncritical use of reason by the dogmatists. Metaphysicians hitherto proceeded dogmatically, i.e., they set out to inquire using reason before reflecting upon its capacities. Kant feels the need for a critique of the faculty of knowledge before setting out to inquire using the same on metaphysical matters which are beyond experience. What is the nature, scope, and limits of reason? Can pure reason know anything on its own without the aid of direct experience? If yes, what is the scope and boundary of such metaphysical knowledge? Kant calls for such a self-examination of human reason to discover its lawful claims in the domains of science, morality etc. The critical philosophy is expected to revive the status of Philosophy and solve the crisis of the Enlightenment. Kant employs his method of critique in three of his main works – Critique of Pure Reason, Critique of Practical Reason, and Critique of Judgement. The legacy of this critical project is seen in the various trends of criticism that emerged in the later period.

## Self-Assessment

1. Explain the challenges faced by Philosophy in the age of Enlightenment.
2. What does Immanuel Kant mean by ‘a critique of reason’?
3. Discuss how critique overcomes the faults of dogmatism.



## Assignments

1. Reflect upon the dogmatic attitude that underlies the metaphysical controversies in Western thought since ancient times.
2. Discover how dogmatic character pervades the various beliefs you have in your life.
3. Find out more instances of critical philosophy in the post-Kantian era.

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## Suggested Reading

1. Kant, I. (1998). *Critique of Pure Reason*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 99-105.
2. Caird, E. (1968). *The Critical Philosophy of Immanuel Kant*. Kraus Reprint Co.

## Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

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## UNIT 2

# KANT'S EPISTEMOLOGY

### Learning Outcomes

In this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ▶ realise how Kant revolutionises Philosophy
- ▶ comprehend Kant's problem and his transcendental method
- ▶ appreciate Kant's theories of sense-perception and understanding
- ▶ understand how Kant distinguishes between phenomena and noumena

### Background

The despicable nature of Philosophy in the eighteenth century forces Immanuel Kant, the German philosopher, to search for a new method of philosophizing. He realises the need to have a critical investigation of the capacities of the human faculty of knowing, before using the same to inquire about and understand reality. He believes that this is the only way to discover the rightful claims of reason in the domains of science and morality. His critical project comes out through three of his main works – *Critique of Pure Reason*, *Critique of Practical Reason*, and *Critique of Judgement*. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant asserts that our faculty of knowing is not merely a passive receptor of the content of knowledge, but it has some active role in knowledge formation. His transcendental philosophy aims to reveal the foundational principles in our mind that make the kinds of knowledge like Mathematics and Physics possible, and to know the same with respect to the domain of metaphysics that deals with God, free will, immortality etc. This unit helps the learner to understand Kant's way of philosophizing that contributes to Philosophy a well-defined epistemological system.

### Keywords

Transcendental method, Copernican revolution, Synthetica priori, Transcendental idealism, Empirical realism, Categories, Phenomena, Noumena

## Discussion

### 1.2.1 Kant's Problem and Method

As mentioned in the previous unit, Kant's pressing problem is to discover how the human faculty of knowing knows something. A critique of the capacities of the human reason is expected to reveal the boundaries of knowledge that mankind can have in different domains.

#### 1.2.1.1 Kant's Copernican Revolution

The failure of the existing metaphysical traditions – rationalism and empiricism – to analyse and explain how human reason attains knowledge, compels Kant to overcome the limitations of these systems. Though Kant has followed rationalism in the beginning, he has been awakened from his 'dogmatic slumbers' by the striking arguments of David Hume. Hume has attacked the then prevalent notion of causality by advocating it as mere habit of human mind to impose a 'necessary connection' to those events it repeatedly conceives as happening one after the other. Hume rejects all such notions that the reason forms without any grounds of experience. Kant realises that the reason can have legitimate claims only within the boundaries of experience. The free play of reason unrestricted by experience is compared to the flight of a dove without any resistance from air. The dove feels resistance from air while flying. It might think that if there is no resistance from air it could fly more easily. However, when there is no such resistance it would not be able to fly. Similarly, rationalists think that reason can have a free play if it is completely free from experience, but the fact is that the reason soon loses grip and goes on constructing castles in air. On the other hand, though enlightened by Hume, Kant is not ready to accept the radical form of empiricism which denies the possibility of any knowledge that does not have its origination in experience. Such an extreme form of empiricism has led Hume to scepticism, as the result of which he doubted the foundations of science as well. Kant is assured about the certainty of scientific knowledge. The Newtonian science has showed that human reason is capable of experiencing knowledge with certainty. So, if empiricism leads to a sceptical conclusion, it nonetheless shows the failure of empiricism.

► The failure of existing philosophical traditions

Kant feels that both rationalism and empiricism are dogmatic in their procedure. They "are right in what they affirm, but wrong in what they deny. Empiricism affirms that knowledge



- ▶ Dogmatic character of rationalism and empiricism

is constituted by experience, and, rationalism affirms that knowledge is constituted by innate *a priori* ideas. Empiricism is right in as much as it points out that propositions of facts can be derived from experience. But rationalism is also right in as much as it points out that knowledge is constituted of *a priori* elements also. Again, empiricism is wrong in as much as it denies the presence of *a priori* elements involved in knowledge. In the same way, rationalism wrongly denies that sense-experience also constitutes knowledge.” (Masih 334)

- ▶ Kant calls for a revolutionary shift in the philosophical approach

In his attempt to overcome the limitations of the dogmatic systems, Kant makes a remarkable suggestion. Hitherto all theories have assumed that our knowledge should conform to objects. They all assume that the objects actually exist independent of our apprehension of them. When we inquire, we try to make our beliefs about them to correspond to what they actually are. Kant wants to proceed with a whole new assumption that the objects exist only according to the structure of the rational mind that apprehends them. This way of thought can fix the problems like causality, if we can show that causality is not something that exists between the objects in the world independent of our apprehension, but is a law that our mind imposes on the objects while apprehending them. Thus, in our experience, the objects will necessarily behave according to causal laws. This revolution in our approach is compared to the revolution effected by Copernicus. The Ptolemaic view had conceived ourselves, i.e., the spectators on earth, at rest, and the heavenly bodies as revolving around us. Copernicus thought the possibility of the other way around. What if we, the spectators, are revolving and the heavenly bodies are at rest? As it is known that the Copernican revolution happened to be effective in the progress of science, Kant believes that, in Philosophy too, a revolution about our assumption of the way we apprehend objects, can bring advancements. Kant, thus claims that our faculty of knowing is not a passive receptor in knowledge formation, but has an active role in constructing the varied experience. Kant calls for an approach where reason, while inquiring about nature, realises itself as the judge, i.e., the source and adjudicator of the principles, and not as a pupil who expects nature to teach him.

### 1.2.1.2 Synthetica *a priori* Judgements

All our knowledge is expressed in the form of judgements. So, the first task Kant does is to study the nature of different

► Analysis of knowledge through analysis of judgements

► Judgements are classified into *a priori* or *a posteriori* and analytic or synthetic

kinds of judgements. Even though David Hume has already classified judgements into two kinds, i.e., relations of ideas and matters of fact, Kant takes up a further elaborate analysis.

According to Kant, how the truth value of a certain judgement is determined gives a classification of judgements into *a priori* and *a posteriori*. A judgement is *a priori* if it is formed without resorting to experience, i.e., prior to experience. 'Seven plus five equals twelve' is an example. A judgement is *a posteriori* if it is formed only with reference to experience, i.e., posterior to experience. 'The tree on the hill is tall', is an example. Judgements are also classified into 'analytic' and 'synthetic' based on how the predicate of the judgement is related to its subject. In an analytic judgement, the predicate is already contained in the concept of the subject or in other words the judgement gives a mere elucidation of what is there in the concept of the subject. The denial of such a judgement yields contradiction. For example, 'All bodies are extended' is analytic because the predicate 'extension' is already contained in the conception of a body. For Kant analytic judgements are 'judgements of clarification.' In a synthetic judgement, the predicate is not already contained in the conception of the subject and it gives some new kind of information about the subject. 'All bodies are heavy' is synthetic because heaviness is not conceived in the conception of a body, rather it adds to the information we already have about the body. For Kant synthetic judgements are 'judgements of amplification.' All analytic judgements are *a priori* without doubt. If the judgement just elucidates what is there in the conception of a subject, the determination of its truth value does not need any reference to experience. The necessity and universality of such judgements are known *a priori* only. There would not be an analytic *a posteriori* judgement for the same reason. Most of the synthetic judgements are *a posteriori*. If the predicate of the judgement gives additional information which is not already defined in the conception of the subject, in most cases its truth value needs to be verified through experience.

Kant sees that analytic *a priori* judgements do not extend our knowledge as they only elucidate what is already there. But they are characterised by necessity and universality. These correspond to what Hume calls relation of ideas. Also, synthetic *a posteriori* judgements extend our knowledge but do not provide necessary or universal content. 'The tree on the hill is tall' does not guarantee that the tree must be tall in all



Only *synthetica priori* judgements contribute to universal and necessary knowledge

conditions or that all trees are tall. Hume brings these judgements under matters of fact. For Kant, only a *synthetica priori* judgement adds to our knowledge and is characterised by necessity and universality. He thinks that earlier philosophers have missed this possibility as they focused only on *analytica priori* and *synthetic a posteriori* judgements.

► Propositions in Mathematics and Physics are *synthetica priori*

Kant believes that Mathematics and Physics contribute to our knowledge bundle and analyses the nature or judgements in these disciplines. An arithmetic proposition, for example ‘seven plus five equals twelve’ may indeed seem as *analytica priori* in the first glance. But Kant claims that the subject ‘seven plus five’ only contains the conception of the addition of two numbers or the unification of two numbers into one. It nowhere gives any information about what the single number is. The concept of twelve, the predicate, is not included in the concept of the subject. Similarly, the proposition from geometry, ‘the straight line between two points is the shortest’ is not analytic since the subject talks only about the quality (straightness) of the line, and nothing about its quantity (shortness). In the same manner, all mathematical propositions can be shown as synthetic judgements. However, these propositions are nevertheless *a priori* as they are necessary and their denial leads to contradiction. Kant also shows the *synthetica priori* nature of propositions from Physics. “Take the proposition: ‘Everything that happens has its cause.’ In the concept of something that happens, I think, to be sure, of an existence that was preceded by a time, etc., and from that analytic judgements can be drawn. But the concept of a cause lies entirely outside that concept, and indicates something different than the concept of what happens in general, and is therefore not contained in the latter representation at all” (Critique of Pure Reason 142-43). However, the judgement is characterised by necessity and universality making it *a priori*.

The need to examine how *synthetica priori* judgements are possible

Kant thus become convinced of the possibility of *synthetica priori* judgements in Mathematics and Physics. He only needs to examine how such judgements are possible in those domains. Kant feels that the domain of metaphysics that deals with God, immortality etc., does not hitherto possess the status of Mathematics and Physics. It is only thought to be possible as a discipline just because of the natural disposition of human reason to enquire about such topics. So, in order to ensure that metaphysical theories amount to valid knowledge, or to check the boundaries of metaphysical knowledge, Kant

feels the need to examine the possibility of *synthetica priori* judgements in metaphysics also.

### 1.2.1.3 Transcendental Method

The problem for Kant develops from ‘how knowledge is possible’ to ‘how *synthetica priori* judgements are possible.’ The aim is to discover the *a priori* elements of knowledge, i.e., the universal and necessary elements in all knowledge. Unless these *a priori* elements are operative, no cognition arises. It is our pure reason that forms the basis for the *a priori* nature of judgements. This makes it clear that an inquiry on ‘how *synthetica priori* judgements are possible’ forces us to delve into our own faculty of reason. Kant’s Copernican revolution suggests that the human faculty of knowing plays an active role by contributing some elements in the knowledge formation. These elements are nothing but the *a priori* conditions that make the *synthetica priori* form of knowledge possible. The method of the critique of pure reason to discover the presupposed conditions of knowledge is called ‘transcendental method’ because it goes beyond the objects of knowledge explicitly known. It deals with or enquires into the pre-requisites of knowledge more than the objects of knowledge. It studies the conditions that make knowledge possible. Kant calls, “all cognition transcendental that is occupied not so much with objects but rather with our mode of cognition of objects insofar as this is to be possible *a priori* . A system of such concepts would be called transcendental philosophy.” (Critique of Pure Reason 149).

► Kant’s transcendental method deals with the pre-conditions of all knowledge

We will see that what Kant expresses through his work is ‘transcendental idealism.’ In the common-sense view, we all feel the objectivity of the world around us. We tend to conclude that the world we experience exists independent of our mind, and its characteristics are discovered by us using our mind. But in the deeper analysis with the transcendental philosophy of Kant, we can realise that the world we experience is constructed by our own mind based on its inherent principles. That is the reality we know is transcendently ideal. It is a ‘common prejudice’ that we all possess. In other words, as the minds of all humans subjectively construct the world for themselves using the same universal principles, we feel that an objective world exists independent of us. What is transcendently ideal, is empirically (in experience) real.

► Kant advocates for transcendental idealism and empirical realism



## 1.2.2 The Critique of Pure Reason

► Critique of pure reason attempts to uncover the *a priori* forms of the faculties of sense-perception and understanding

The critical investigation into the working of pure reason with respect to the theoretical sciences is given in Kant's famous work – *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant envisages the experience of a human that leads to knowledge as having two stages / components. First, there is the reception of content, i.e., percepts, through the senses. The next stage is thinking / understanding of these precepts through the application of certain concepts. Based on this, Kant partitions our inner faculty of knowing into two parts. There is the faculty of sensibility that deals with sense-perception, and the faculty of understanding that deals with understanding. Knowledge would be impossible without the cooperation of perception and understanding. For Kant, percepts and concepts constitute the elements of all our knowledge. "Percepts without concepts are blind and concepts without percepts are empty". Having mere perceptions that constitute content but not having the concepts or the tools to think about or understand them, seems like being blind. Similarly, having the tools to think or understand but not having the content, gives an empty picture.

We have seen in the previous section that Kant's transcendental philosophy aims to discover the *a priori* elements employed by our mind in the formation of knowledge. Thus, it can be said that through the Critique of Pure Reason, Kant aims to reveal the *a priori* elements that our mind employs both in sense-perception and understanding.

The text Critique of Pure Reason thus comprises of the following sections:

- |                          |  |
|--------------------------|--|
| Transcendental Aesthetic | – It deals with the <i>a priori</i> forms of sense-perception. |
| Transcendental Logic     | – It deals with the <i>a priori</i> forms of understanding.    |

It comprises of two parts.

- |                          |  |
|--------------------------|--|
| Transcendental Analytic  | – Discovery and proof for the <i>a priori</i> forms of understanding                     |
| Transcendental Dialectic | – Showing the illegitimate use of the <i>a priori</i> concepts and the illusions thereof |

### 1.2.2.1 Theory of Sense Perception

- ▶ Space and time are thea priori forms of sense-perception

The critique of the faculty of sensibility uncovers thea *pri-ori* elements in sense-perception. What are the pre-conditions of sense-perception? Every sense experience consists of sensations – colour, sound, hardness / smoothness etc. But mere sensations themselves do not account for perception that leads to knowledge. Each sensation needs to be referred to space and time. It must have a definite place in space and point in time in relation to other sensations. Every sensation must be apprehended in a definite spatial order. It should also be sensed before or after or at the same time as other sensations. So, perception can be analysed into matter and form. Sensations constitute the matter or content, and space and time constitute the form of experience.

- ▶ Space and time are transcendently ideal and empirically real

There are empirical and pure percepts. An empirical percept is derived from some sense-experience. The round table or the blackboard are empirical percepts. A pure percept is not based on any sense-experience of this or that object, but is the base of any perception whatsoever. These pure percepts are *priori*, i.e., not derived from any sense experience, but which are presupposed by any sense experience. Space and time are thea *priori* pure percepts on which all other empirical percepts are based. So, for Kant, space and time are thea *priori* elements that the faculty of knowledge employs in the process of sense-perception. They are not realities that exist by themselves. They are the ways in which human faculty of knowing structures the varied sort of sense-perceptions it has. In other words, the active role of the mind in the perception stage of knowledge formation is evident here. Space and time are considered as empirically real and transcendently ideal. They seem like really existing in our experience, but in the deeper analysis it is known that they are subjective elements only, or they are the in-built forms each human mind possesses. It can be realised that only because our sensations are projected into space and ordered in time that we all experience an objective world. Space and time are subjective elements of all human minds. When we all share the same subjective dream, the dream effects like objective reality. On the other hand, without these universal forms of sense-perception – space and time – mere sensations discrete in nature, would have bound us in our subjective realms. Kant shows that the propositions from Mathematics are synthetic propositions which have

space and time as *priori* elements, i.e., they are structured in the space-time framework which is the peculiar contribution of the human faculty. Thus, the possibility of synthetica *priori* judgements in Mathematics is explained.

### 1.2.2.2 Theory of Understanding

The critique of the faculty of understanding uncovers the *priori* elements in understanding. Percepts ordered in the spatio-temporal setting cannot by themselves yield knowledge. Disconnected, unrelated perceptions cannot make us know anything. Understanding component is needed for the knowledge formation. The perceived objects should be thought of, or understood conceptually. We should make the manifold percepts intelligible by bringing them under concepts. Concepts without percepts are like empty baskets, and percepts left alone without getting subsumed under concepts remind of a state where something is there to see but the seer is blind.

► Percepts need to be thought of or understood in order to constitute knowledge

### Pure Categories of Understanding

Kant reveals that the faculty of understanding has several *in-built* concepts using which it thinks about the different percepts given to it. These are known as pure concepts or categories of understanding. They are not like the empirical concepts derived from experience, rather they are the *priori* forms that the human faculty of knowing possesses. To think is to judge. The different ways of thinking correspond to the different kinds of judgements. Logic has already analysed our process of judgement and has discovered 12 kinds of them. The list of judgement helps to outline the categories or concepts. The twelve judgements along with their structures and the corresponding categories of understanding are given in Table 1.2.1. Kant claims that what he has given is an exhaustive list of the pure concepts. He is very confident that no other such category exists. Of course, there are other subsidiary concepts but all of them are derived from these twelve basic concepts.

► Pure concepts as the *priori* forms of the faculty of understanding

These categories are the *priori* forms of understanding. The manifold percepts are brought under these categories and made a connected whole so that we can have judgements. ‘The stone is heavy’ is a judgement we make by subsuming

► The categories make scientific knowledge possible

the percepts of stone, heaviness etc. under one of our pure forms of understanding, namely substance-accident, a type of relation. We understand two events as causally related as our mind applies its in-built form of understanding to the percepts of two events under suitable conditions. Thus 'the sun heats the stone' is made through the application of the category of cause-effect relation to the percepts of sun, stone, heat etc. Whereas Hume claimed that causality is mere fiction of the mind derived from the experience of constant conjunction, Kant makes it a universal law given by the mind to itself in experiencing the world. The objects of the world appear before the mind, as connected through various laws, because the mind thinks of them on the basis of these laws. This is how the scientific principles gain objective validity. The natural laws that we discover are not the laws that exist in the nature independent of being apprehended, about which our mind give descriptions or explanations. The laws are prescribed by the mind to nature. Nature conforms to the laws of the mind.

<b>Judgements and the corresponding Pure Categories of Understanding</b>			
Judgement		Example of Judgement	Corresponding Category
Quantity	Universal All S is P	All metals are elements	Totality
	Particular Some S is P	Some plants are cryptogams	Plurality
	Singular This S is P	Napoleon was Emperor of France	Unity
Quality	Affirmative S is P	Heat is a form of motion	Reality
	Negative S is not P	Mind is not extended	Negation
	Infinite S is non-P	Mind is unextended	Limitation
Relation	Categorical S is P	The body is heavy	Inherence & Subsistence Or Substance & Accident
	Hypothetical If S, then P	If the air is warm, the thermometer rises	Causality & Dependence Or Cause & Effect
	Disjunctive S is either P or Q	The substance is either solid or fluid	Community Or Reciprocity



Apodictic	Problematic S may be P	This may be a poison	Possibility & Impossibility
	Assertoric S is P	This is a poison	Existence & Non-existence
	Apodictic S must be P	Every effect must have a cause	Necessity & Contingency

Table 1.2.1

### Transcendental Deduction of Categories and the Unity of Self-consciousness

► In the absence of the categories, intelligible experience is impossible

Now what is the justification for these twelve categories of understanding? How can we be sure of their objective validity? Kant attempts a transcendental deduction of the categories. Here deduction means justification. The justification is transcendental as it is not to prove something about any particular instance of understanding, but to prove that these categories are the pre-conditions for any understanding to happen. It is not an empirical justification where we might justify something based on its workability or fruitfulness in experience. Kant proves the validity of the categories by showing that without them intelligible experience is not possible. Knowledge is the product of the application of the categories to objects perceived by the senses spatially and temporally. Categories serve to make experience possible. In comprehending every simple event in the world, we see the mind's application of one or more of the categories. There would be no knowledge of the connected world of experience, without those original a priori concepts of thinking. This is the only justification.

► Unity of apperception is presupposed for a unified experience

In fact, Kant points also to a transcendental unity of apperception which is necessary to have a unified experience of the percepts brought under the categories. The proofs for the unity of consciousness and the pure forms of understanding are accomplished together. However, knowledge is still not possible if without a unifying consciousness or self-consciousness which operates with these categories. Kant calls it the synthetic unity of apperception: "Understanding is judgment, the act of bringing together in one self-consciousness (unity of apperception) the many perceived objects. Without a rational mind that perceives in certain ways (space and time) and judges or thinks in certain ways (the categories), that is so constituted that it must perceive and judge as it does, there

could be no universal and necessary knowledge of objects of experience.”. (Thilly 424) The unity of self-consciousness is presupposed by the categories as the categories are presupposed by experience.

► The transcendental method progresses from percepts, through categories, to the unity of consciousness

The manifold percepts are synthesised in a unified manner by the categories. But the consciousness that perceives and the consciousness that thinks through the concepts should be one. Or else, it would be like one person perceiving, another person thinking, and the knower will be somebody else. So, the unity of consciousness is necessary for the formation of knowledge. This unity is not an empirical unity. It is a logical presupposition. The application of categories to the percepts implies a unified consciousness behind the stages. Also, the categories are the medium that synthesises the perceptions into a unity. It is said that Kant’s search for the transcendental elements of experience or knowledge formation culminates here.

### 1.2.2.3 Things as They Appear and Things-in-themselves

► Things appear to us according to our *a priori* forms

**T**he *a priori* forms of sensibility, space and time, structure our perception. The *a priori* forms of understanding make thinking about these percepts possible. Thinking is expressed in judgements that constitute our knowledge. This is how our faculty of knowing works. However, Kant points out that these conditions presupposed in our knowledge formation also define the boundaries of our knowledge. The knowledge we have is about how objects are experienced by us. The structure of the experience is given by our own faculty. This means that we know the objects only as they appear to us and the possibility of the objects existing in their own nature beyond our apprehension is not to be ignored. Kant goes on to distinguish between ‘things as they appear to us’ and ‘things-in-themselves.’ The latter is beyond our reach. Our mind makes it structured in the form of the former.

► Our mind structures our experience

Consider ourselves as wearing spectacles with which we are born. We experience the world through the spectacles. The characteristics of the world that we conceive are dependent on the characteristics of the spectacles with which we conceive the world. We can logically assume that the world as it is, exists beyond our apprehension of it, the original characteristics of which we would have known if we could somehow remove



the spectacles. But we are bound to wear those spectacles forever. Hence what we know is the world that appear to us and not the world as it is.

► Our knowledge is limited to phenomena, noumena lies beyond our reach

Kant terms the world as it appears to us as the ‘phenomena’ and the world as it is as the ‘noumena.’ Our knowledge is limited to the phenomena. The spatio-temporal order and the twelve ways of thought have their scope only in the phenomena. The noumena “... is a limiting concept; it says to the knowing mind: here is your limit, you can go no further, here is where your jurisdiction ceases. You can know only phenomena; the non-phenomenal, the noumenal, the intelligible is beyond you. I know things not as they are in themselves, but only as they appear to me.” (Thilly 428).

#### 1.2.2.4 Transcendental Illusions

► Reason falls into illusions while attempting to know the noumenal world

Knowledge is formed when spatio-temporally structured precepts are thought of by the in-built concepts. Recall that precepts without concepts are blind and concepts without precepts are empty. The faculty of understanding can work on only what is sense-experienced. But the human reason has the tendency to go beyond the phenomena, and it attempts to form judgements about the noumenal world, of which no perception is possible. It mistakes mere thoughts of its own as having perceptual content and falls into ambiguities, false inferences, contradictions etc. The categories like cause-effect, substance-accident etc. have their application limited to the phenomena. However, reason tries to apply the same on the noumenal world and digs its own downfall. This is what happens in the metaphysical enquiries regarding soul, God etc. Reason, while striving to form conclusions about the noumena using its faculties that have their legitimate use only in the phenomena, experiences illusions which Kant calls as transcendental illusions. These happen when reason transcends its boundary of knowledge and are different from ordinary sensory illusions. The Transcendental Dialectic section of the text uncovers the kinds of such transcendental illusions. They are natural and inevitable. We may try to avoid them, but we may not be able to get rid of them completely.

##### A. Illusions Regarding Soul

Through rational psychology, reason attempts to form conclusions about the soul, of which no perception is possible and to which the categories cannot be legitimately employed. It

then becomes guilty of fallacies called paralogisms. The reason gets into false conclusions when it tries to prove that the soul is a substance; is simple; is unchanging; and, is immortal.

### **B. Illusions Regarding World**

Through rational cosmology, reason attempts to form conclusions about the universe or world as a whole, of which no perception is possible, and to which the categories cannot be legitimately employed. It then gets caught up in antinomies where both thesis and anti-thesis can be proved.

Four such antinomies are:

It can be proved –

1. that the world has a beginning in time, and that it has no beginning in time, or is eternal; that it is limited in space, and that it is unlimited in space;
2. that bodies are infinitely divisible, and that they are not infinitely divisible, that they are made of simple parts, or atoms, which cannot be further divided;
3. that there is freedom in the world, and that everything in the world takes place according to the laws of nature;
4. that there exists an absolutely necessary Being, either as part of the world or as the cause of it; and that there is no such Being, either within the world or outside it as the cause of it.

### **C. Illusions regarding God**

Through rational theology, reason attempts to form conclusions about God as the first cause, or a perfect being that necessarily exists etc. There is no perceptual ground for the conclusions and the categories of causality are illegitimately applied to the noumenal God. Kant shows the inadequacies of the physico-theological, the cosmological and the ontological proofs for the existence of God, put forward by earlier metaphysicians.

### **D. The Regulative Use of the Three Ideas of Reason**

Even though, human reason gets into false conclusions on soul, world and God, Kant asserts that these three Ideas are important. They have a regulative use, i.e., they direct the faculty of understanding in its inquiry. The human reason always strives to systematise and get a unified picture of everything that it knows. Without the Idea of a permanent soul, a world,

► Reason gets caught up in paralogisms and antinomies



► The Ideas of soul, world, and God helps human reason to have a unified picture

and a necessary being God, it finds difficulties in having a comprehensive framework. Through the Ideas reason aims to systematise our knowledge in conformity with a single principle. Kant also shows in his other critiques that these Ideas are assumed as a priori notions to make morality possible. The reason dictates the foundational principles of morality on its own.

## Summarized Overview

Immanuel Kant has revolutionised Philosophy. His achievements in meeting the challenges faced by human reason in the eighteenth century are tremendous. The grit that he has showed to be a Copernicus of his age in the field of Philosophy ought to be appreciated. Kant could overcome the problems developed in the realist and idealist views of the world through his picture of the same as transcendently ideal and empirically real. He could synthesise into his transcendental method, the complementary elements in the diverging currents of empiricism and rationalism.

It can be said that Kant has done utmost justice to the age of Enlightenment. He awakes from dogmatism and has not succumbed to scepticism or mysticism. He has shown determination to accept only those sciences that are warranted by the human reason for which he does a critical investigation of the capacities of human faculty of knowledge. He could work out the possibility of certain knowledge in the domains of Mathematics and Physics. He believes that human reason has natural disposition to metaphysical enquiries but he could outline the boundaries of metaphysics as a science. The demand for recognition of the human will has been settled to an extent by Kant through his justification of free will and morality.

Kant has largely influenced the later Western philosophers. His works provide room for numerous interpretations partly because of the difficulty in his language and partly because of the seriousness of the content. The entire branch of German Idealism is indebted to the varied interpretations of Kant's noumena. It is said that the subsequent divergence in the Western thought into the Analytic and Continental traditions has its beginning in the philosophy of Kant.

## Self-Assessment

1. How did Kant revolutionise the way of philosophising? Explain.
2. Why is Kant's method called transcendental?
3. Discuss the nature of *synthetica priori* judgements.
4. Space and time are *a priori* forms of sensibility. Appreciate.
5. Explain Kant's theory of understanding.
6. Elaborate upon the transcendental illusions of reason.

## Assignments

1. Reflect upon the possibility that our minds shape the world for us and we are having a common dream.
2. Discover the applications of the pure concepts in the judgements we make in everyday life.
3. Do we need the three Ideas of soul, world, God to satisfy our reason's quest for a systematic and unified picture? Examine.

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## Suggested Reading

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## Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

SGOU

# BLOCK 2

## Hegel



SREENARAYANAGURU  
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# UNIT 1

## INTRODUCTION TO GERMAN IDEALISM

### Learning Outcomes

Through this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ▶ understand how Kantian philosophy paves way for new philosophic currents
- ▶ expose the idealistic philosophy that flourished in Germany
- ▶ appreciate the intellectual contributions of Fichte and Schelling
- ▶ get introduced to the philosophy of Hegel

### Background

The philosophical current that developed in France, of which Descartes is the forerunner, is known as Continental Rationalism. The way of philosophizing marked by the works of Locke, Hume etc. in Britain is known as British Empiricism. Similarly, the philosophic tradition that developed in Germany after Kant, earns the label German Idealism. Immanuel Kant's attempt to revive philosophy by discovering the boundaries of human knowledge attracts different responses in the later part of the eighteenth century as well as in the beginning of the nineteenth century. Many philosophers point out inconsistencies in Kant's notion of the 'things-in-themselves' or noumena. They also think that the three Critiques of Kant fail to provide a unified picture of reality. An idealistic explanation of reality is derived as the solution by a few German successors of Kant. Fichte and Schelling depict reality as a unified system based on a dynamic first principle. They are followed by Hegel who agrees with his predecessors on some grounds but strives to overcome the limitations in their philosophies. This unit introduces the philosophy of German Idealism.

## Keywords

Idealism, Fichte, Ego, Schelling, Nature, Hegel

## Discussion

► Contemporary Western Philosophy has its roots in the Kantian Philosophy

► No noumenal world or the 'things-in-themselves' cause sensations

### 2.1.1 Problems Raised by Kant's Philosophy

Kant's critical philosophy is considered as a marvellous chapter in the history of Western philosophy. But it does not mean that there are no challenges to Kant's findings. Contemporary Western philosophy is heavily indebted to Kant in so far as the development of the former in different directions has its roots in the Kantian notions. Various systems emerge by taking Kant's views as their starting point either affirmatively or negatively. The endorsement of a strong idealist metaphysics in the philosophies of some German thinkers is also due to the problems they could locate in the philosophy of Kant. In this section, we will have a brief account of a few of those problems to have a smooth transition to the study of Kant's successors.

One of the main difficulties within the Kantian philosophy, as noticed by the later thinkers, is the notion of things-in-themselves. Kant limits human knowledge exclusively to the sense-experienced phenomena and restricts the use of pure concepts like causality to things as they appear to us. However, he later advocates a causal relationship between the noumena and the phenomena. He states that the objects of our knowledge are not created by our mind, but are coloured by the characteristics of our mind in the process of knowledge formation. When we get the knowledge of a red apple, Kant insists that it is because of the characteristics of our mind that we know 'something' as an apple that is red in colour. But there exists 'something' in some form prior to being captured by our mind, which causes sensations in our mind and then appears as a red apple as per the nature of the mind. We cannot know that 'something' because our faculty is limited to the realm of experience. Still, we can think of such things that exist by themselves. So according to Kant, the noumenal world or the 'things-in-themselves' is that what causes sensations



► The status of things-in-themselves creates difficulty

which are then spatio-temporally perceived by the human faculty of sensibility. The difficulty lies in the application of the concept of causality to the things-in-themselves when Kant himself has restricted the use of such concepts to the world of phenomena only. As Kant *prima facie* assumes that the *a priori* forms of human faculty of knowledge has its employment only in the realm of experience, any attempt from his side to employ the same *a priori* forms to describe or explain the noumenal realm that lies beyond experience amounts to contradiction.

► Lack of harmony among the various strands of Kantian philosophy

Another pressing problem that rises from the philosophy of Kant is the absence of coherence and integration. The system lacks unity in numerous aspects. Many thinkers remark that the Kantian system comprises several dualities which he hardly succeeds in overcoming. Scientific and moral realms, theoretical reason and practical reason, determinism and free will, transcendental and empirical consciousness, the faculties of sensibility and understanding etc. are a few of such dualities. There is difficulty in determining the relationship between the three Critiques – Critique of pure Reason, Critique of Practical Reason, and Critique of Judgement. Kant himself says that he must deny knowledge to make room for faith so that the practical challenges of human reason can be overcome. He gives prominence to practical reason in the second Critique and postulates the notions of free will, God etc. for the justification of morality. It is to be noted that, for Kant, these notions are ‘not-known’ by the faculty of theoretical reason. They are not constitutive ideas but regulative only which help human reason to have a unified system of knowledge that it strives for. It appears as if Kant has created divisions in the human experience – the scientific world where pure or theoretical reason has its play and the moral realm where the practical reason flourishes. By giving independent status to both, Kant tries to solve the crisis of the Enlightenment era where science and morality could not go together. It is believed that the third Critique is an attempt to bridge the gap between the first two. The Critique of Judgement deals with aesthetic and teleological judgements. Kant, by advocating the purposiveness in nature, expects to meet the objections raised by the first two Critiques. However, many later thinkers are not satisfied. They could not reconcile the deterministic world of the first Critique and the flourish of human freedom in the second Critique. They could not find the relationship between the transcendental unity of apperception, the ‘transcendental I’ from the first Critique and

the ‘moral I’ or the ‘free I’ of the second Critique. They feel that the relation of both ‘I’s to the embodied individuality of humans, i.e., the ‘empirical I’, is also not explained.

These problems in the philosophy of Kant evoke different responses. Reinhold highly appreciates the features of Kant’s transcendental philosophy but believes that it lacks coherence and systematic rigour. He demands that the transcendental philosophy should have at its base, a single principle that is self-evident and could become the foundation from where everything else can be deductively arrived at. Reinhold terms his philosophy ‘Elementary Philosophy.’ He adopts ‘pure consciousness’ as the absolute first principle and attempts to derive all Kantian faculties and categories therefrom. This approach by Reinhold later prompts philosophers like Fichte to outline a philosophical system that has a first principle upon which the whole system in its entirety can be grounded. Jacobi declares that the critical philosophy is incapable of grasping the ultimate realities like God and freedom which are placed in the realm of things-in-themselves. Even though Kant claims the necessity of postulating such notions for practical purposes, he also explicitly says that pure reason cannot have a ‘knowledge’ of the same. Jacobi believes that this approach would rather undermine morality and religion than supporting them. He criticises the limits of intellect and endorses the primacy of faith or revelation in grasping the truest picture of reality. Several other thinkers, who accept the Kant’s restriction of knowledge to phenomena and reject the advocacy of faith, call for the sceptical attitude. Many thinkers wish to completely abandon the impossible and inconceivable realm of things-in-themselves.

► One of the results of the varied responses to the problems of Kant’s philosophy is the rise of idealistic metaphysics in Germany.

► Speculative metaphysics gets a rebirth in the form of idealism

## 2.1.2 Philosophy of German Idealism

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries witness, in Germany, the development of speculative metaphysics with all its rigour. After being questioned of its worth during the era of Enlightenment, and being critically limited in its scope by Kant, the queen of sciences attains a rebirth. A few philosophers come to the frontline who have huge admiration for the transcendental idealism of Kant but also believe that an attempt to solve the weak chains therein, inevitably leads to the metaphysical framework of idealism proper. However, each one of them has his own version of the same.



► The German version of idealism differs from its earlier versions

Idealism is generally defined as the philosophical position that claims that reality is ultimately mental in nature. It asserts that the whole material world with its diversity can be realised as the manifestation of idea or thought or consciousness. According to the subjective idealism of Berkeley, there exist only finite minds and an infinite mind called God. Everything else that appear as an external world are mere ideas in those minds, *i.e.*, they exist only as perceived by the minds. The objective idealism of Plato expounds a world of pure ideas or forms, of which the sensory world is a mere copy. However, those ideas exist in their own realm and not in any subjective mind or in the infinite mind of God. Kant's philosophy is termed transcendental idealism. The objects in our experience are structured by *thea priori* forms of our mind even though not created by it. The German successors of Kant agree to the remark made by Reinhold that only if we could identify a first principle and derive everything else from the same, can a coherent philosophical system be built. The version of idealism developed by German thinkers is termed absolute idealism in the sense that the whole reality including finite minds and material world are the manifestations of an absolute first principle which is rational in character. This form of idealism does not deny the existence of an external world, rather it claims for an objective world that is a real manifestation of the absolute principle.

► The German idealists attempt to overcome the challenges in Kant's transcendental idealism

Kant assumes the existence of a noumenal world, or the realm of things-in-themselves, but adds that the same is unknowable. The German idealists claim that whatever exists is knowable. They opine that Kant has made significant progress in Philosophy and they are carrying on the project by correcting the mistakes. They accept the Kantian claim that mind imposes its categories on the objects of experience. But they refrain from positing a world which lies beyond the human experience and thus cannot be grasped by the mind. There cannot be any realm about which we can think 'that it is' but cannot know 'what it is'. They propose that the whole reality should be conceived as the product of mind and thus capable of being known by itself. However, the mind that they account for is not any individual mind, but one absolute mind. Moreover, the pure categories of understanding which, Kant says, are *thea priori* forms common to each mind, become categories of being or categories in the manifestation of the absolute mind.

This section points out some basic tenets of the German idealism and gives a brief outline of the philosophies of its chief representatives – Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel.

### 2.1.2.1 Main Tenets of German Idealism

The thinkers who form the group of German idealists agree at some points which can be thus considered as the basic tenets of the idealistic metaphysics that flourished in Germany.

► A rational system based on a first principle

Reality is depicted as a rational system. There is a first principle that is rational in character and the universe with all its diversity is presented as the manifestation of the same. The process of the manifold development of the first principle or Absolute is explained logically and the various stages of the process are projected via logical deductions. The Absolute is not static but dynamic. It is not determined by anything else but self-determined.

► Purposiveness in nature and the human life

The manifestation of the Absolute into the diverse universe is not accidental. It purports to the self-realisation of the Absolute. The universe thus accounts for a teleological explanation. The mechanical picture of the universe given by science is rejected. There is a purpose behind every moment in this universe. It follows that our lives are also aimed at the fulfilment of the universal purpose.

► Ethical and socio-political dimensions

A purposeful life calls for moral dedication. How do we deal with our own person and other fellow beings? What is our role in a society? Are we all just isolated egos or do we have a common ideal? There is a conception of an organic whole. Each part of the whole is related to other parts as well as to the whole. Ethics and values gain importance in such a conception. The universal purpose is reflected in the socio-political dimensions as well. The problems of the sovereignty of the State and the status and duties of the citizens ought to be discussed.

History is depicted as the expression of the Absolute

The evolution of mankind is equated with the self-realisation of the Absolute. What each person or group of persons does here in the world, forms moments in the universal process. The history of mankind is expressed as the unfolding of the Absolute.

### 2.1.2.2. Johann Gottlieb Fichte

- ▶ Fichte seeks a first principle in which all knowledge is based

Fichte (1762 – 1814) is one among the immediate successors of Kant. Some of his main works are *Foundations of the Entire Science of Knowledge*, and *Foundations of Natural Right*. He impresses Kant with his talent during the latter's lifetime. Fichte believes that every science becomes a science, when it possesses a coherent body of propositions that are held together by a first principle. It should provide for an organic whole in which each proposition occupies a definite place and is in a definite relation to the whole. There is the concept of space as the central idea in geometry. In natural sciences there is causation. Now, the different sciences call for an all-embracing science, a science of sciences, that Fichte names *Wissenschaftslehre*. However, such a science of sciences, what Fichte believes to be the real Philosophy, must itself proceed from a self-evident first principle that validates its own judgements as well as that of other sciences.

- ▶ Fichte advocates his first principle as the free and self-determining Absolute Ego

Fichte studies seriously the notion of the transcendental unity of apperception given by Kant. For Kant it is that self-consciousness what unifies all sequences of knowledge formation like sense-perception, applying the categories etc. This unity of apperception is transcendental. It is presupposed in all experience. Fichte thus picks up such a 'consciousness' or 'ego' as the first principle on which everything can be grounded. Moreover, Kant advocates the primacy of practical reason through his Critiques. The inner sense of being which is free and dictates moral maxims for itself is considered as the real nature of man. It touches the dimensions that theoretical reason fails to understand using the categories it possesses. The notions of free will, God etc. are necessitated only by the moral person. By exercising freedom, it goes beyond the mechanical deterministic world which is the realm of theoretical reason. So, it is not a surprise that Fichte defines his first principle or ego as essentially free and self-determining. However, an individual ego cannot be the source of everything that includes other egos and a world experienced by all such egos. So, Fichte describes his first principle as the Absolute Ego which is free and expresses itself through self-determining activity. It is self-evident. It posits itself. It is not a substance that exists before acting. It exists through activity. The Absolute Ego is not a fact, but an act.

► The Absolute Ego manifests itself as individual egos. It also posits non-Ego or nature

Fichte grounds his idealism on ethical dimensions

► Fichte's philosophy has implications for socio-political and historical aspects of life

► Fichte explains reality through his idealism rooted in a moral dimension.

When Fichte talks about the Absolute Ego that it is free, he means that it strives to realise its free nature. Now to be conscious of its freedom, it needs some opposition. Only by facing struggles and striving to overcome the obstacles can it realise it is free. So, the Absolute Ego limits itself in the form of individual egos, and also posits a non-Ego, i.e., an unconscious world that seems external to each of the individual egos. The individual egos try to understand the peculiarities of the world external to them which is nothing but scientific knowledge. Knowledge leads them to the realisation that the sensual or intelligible world structured in a causal order, is an instrument that aids them in exercising their freedom. When the individual egos realise their freedom, it is the Absolute Ego that is realising itself through them.

The philosophy of Fichte becomes what is known as ethical idealism. Our lives are meant to be acknowledged as the part of the Absolute Ego's striving to realise its freedom. So, it is given as a moral duty that our acts must conform to the universal purpose. We do that through our efforts to overcome the challenges imposed by the mechanical world and thereby realise our freedom. Rather than becoming the blind tools of the universal project, we all ought to be willing participants in it: "Acceptance of the law of duty and of the freedom which it implies will give our life worth and meaning; it will enable us to understand the world as the instrument of a universal purpose – the realization of freedom – and thereby to transform ourselves from blind tools of this purpose into its willing helpers" (Thilly 456).

The role of an individual in the society, the role of a civilization as part of the whole humanity – all of these are explained by Fichte in terms of his ethical idealism. The role of an individual is to become a conscious link in the universal chain of moral purposiveness. Each one of us should regard ourselves as part of the community and work for its common good so that the part of the ultimate purpose is realised. Fichte also develops a philosophy of historical development by stating that the gradual realisation of the Absolute of its freedom can be traced out in the events of the development of human reason.

Fichte's philosophy develops in different stages. What we have acquainted with here is only an outline of the way in which his overall project develops. It is to be noted that Fichte attempts to do away with the Kantian notion of an unknow-



able noumena. He cares to reject sceptical attitudes as well. He proposes a rational explanation of reality through his idealism rooted in a moral dimension.

### 2.1.2.3 Friedrich Wilhelm Schelling

Schelling (1775 – 1854) is another influential German thinker who finds himself as an ardent exponent of the idealistic position. But he could not endorse Fichte's conception of nature as non-Ego, the opposite of Ego, which serves the individuals merely as an instrument in the realisation of the universal moral will. Schelling expands the Absolute Ego of Fichte to include not only conscious moments, but also what we call as the unconscious matter. All the animate and inanimate beings are manifestations of the same Absolute. Mind and Nature are not opposed as Ego and non-Ego. They are exemplifications of a single dynamic principle that divides itself into subject and object and then reunites them. Schelling interprets nature as an organic whole. He proposes a philosophy of nature where he advocates that the universe or the nature reveals itself in different grades – from the unconscious elements to the conscious individuals. The highest manifestation of nature is the man who conceives nature as manifesting through himself: "All the products of nature are held together by one creative spirit; every part of nature subserves the whole. Man is the highest product of nature. In man, nature attains the realization of the goal of self-consciousness" (Thilly 468). Schelling's picture of nature as a lively, dynamic, creative and purposive principle as opposed to the hitherto depiction of the same, attracts the appreciation of the advocates of romanticism.

► Schelling proposes a philosophy of nature

Whereas Fichte has an ethical dimension in his idealistic framework, Schelling resorts to an aesthetic explanation. It can be said that the influence of a great poetic era and the artistic atmosphere of his time leads him to endorse the aesthetic dimension in the human experience of reality. The Absolute expresses creativity when it unfolds. Everything is an artistic product of the Absolute. So, rather than philosophical knowledge, artistic experience can reveal reality to us: "In the products of art, subject and object, the ideal and the real, form and matter, mind and nature, freedom and necessity, fuse and interpenetrate: in art the harmony sought by philosophy is achieved before our very eyes in a sensuous medium; it is a unity to be seen, touched, and heard. Nature herself is a great

► Schelling appreciates artistic experience as revealing the activity of the Absolute

poem, and her secret is revealed by art. The creative artist, in realizing his ideal, creates even as nature creates, and so knows how nature works; hence artistic creation serves as model for the intuition of the world: it is the true organ of philosophy” (Thilly 472). In art, we see the highest stage in the development of self-consciousness. An artist through his creativity imitates the creative action of nature and thus become conscious of the Absolute. The Absolute becomes conscious of its own creative force in the artistic creation.

#### 2.1.2.4 George Wilhelm Hegel

In Hegel (1770 – 1831), we witness the culmination of the German idealism. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, *Science of Logic*, *Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences and Philosophy of Right* are some of his major works. Hegel builds on the foundations laid by his predecessors. Hegel appreciated that Fichte and Schelling have travelled in the correct direction by choosing an idealistic framework to rectify the Kantian mistakes. They have acknowledged the foundation of the universe in an absolute first principle. But Hegel also feels that both the thinkers have not been able to provide sufficient justification for the first principle. It seems like a pistol shot, says Hegel. Fichte has spoken about an ‘intellect intuition’ that grasps the Absolute Ego which cannot be known by the discursive faculty of understanding. Hegel is not satisfied with this. What we need is a proper explanation of the first principle along with the logical elaboration of the process in which it evolves itself into the manifold universe. Hegel has worked with Schelling as the editor of a journal. Later, he feels differences in his views when compared to that of Schelling’s. Hegel claims that Schelling portrays his Absolute as the identity which dissolves all differences. Unification of the opposing Ego and non-Ego, or subject and object, in the single abstract Absolute, marks a reductive strategy. The particular features of each part are no more valued in the whole, instead are dissolved or concealed. Hegel rejects such an Absolute as ‘the night in which all cows are black’ and chooses to develop his own project where the Absolute must preserve all the differences within.

► Hegel makes an effort to overcome the limitations in the philosophies of Fichte and Schelling

Through his dialectical method that proceeds by synthesising contradicting theses, Hegel explains how an abstract Absolute becomes concrete in its effort to overcome contradictions and finally attains self-realisation. He provides a comprehensive philosophical framework grounded on logic in which all the



► German idealism culminates in the absolute idealism of Hegel

sciences, along with morality, art, religion and philosophy itself, occupy relevant positions. He delivers a philosophy of history based on the unfolding of the Absolute. The Absolute realises itself through the philosopher who discovers the purpose of the universe. According to Hegel, the whole project of philosophical enquiry in the Western thought since ancient times attains fulfilment in his version of absolute idealism. His contribution to the socio-political philosophy also acquires high reputation.

Hegel occupies one of the prominent positions as the fore-runner of the contemporaneous Western thought. We will discuss the philosophy of Hegel in detail in the upcoming units.

## Summarized Overview

German idealism is the name for the philosophical tradition that emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Germany. The main grounds for its rise are the problems posed by the critical philosophy of Immanuel Kant. The successors of Kant discover inconsistency in the system of Kant. They face difficulties with the notion of things-in-themselves and the disharmony caused by the kinds of bifurcations Kant retains in his transcendental idealism. The solution is sought in a metaphysical framework of absolute idealism. Reality is depicted as a rational system based on a dynamic first principle. The whole universe is the manifestation of that first principle. The mechanical conception of the world is replaced by a teleological one.

Fichte and Schelling are considered as the initiators of the idealistic current in Germany. Fichte explains reality as the unfolding of a self-determining rational principle – the Absolute Ego which thus strives to realise itself. He works out an idealism based on ethical dimension. He calls for a conscious life where every individual is aware that his life is a part of the universal project. The world is an instrument for each one of us to exercise our duty. Schelling revises the instrumental conception of nature and proposes a philosophy of nature. Nature is the self-active principle which strives to realise itself through each of its manifestations and achieves its goal through the man who understands himself as part of the overall project. Schelling gives special status to artistic experience which in a way imitates the creative project of the Nature.

It can be said that the culmination of the German idealistic endeavour is in the absolute idealism of Hegel. Through his dialectical method he advocates a conception of the Absolute that manifests itself as this universe to achieve the goal of self-realisation. He could integrate all the branches of human life as occupying relevant positions in the overall comprehensive framework.

## Self-Assessment

1. Discuss the common objections against Kant's critical philosophy.
2. What are the basic tenets of German idealism?
3. Comment upon the ethical idealism of Fichte.
4. How does Schelling develop a philosophy of nature?

## Assignments

1. Reflect upon the incoherence in the Kantian philosophy.
2. Compare the earlier versions of Western idealism with the German idealism.
3. Critically appraise the status of our lives as contributing to the realisation of a universal purpose.

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## Suggested Reading

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## Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

SGOU

## UNIT 2

# HEGEL'S DIALECTICS

### Learning Outcomes

Through this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ▶ grasp the main features of the absolute idealism expounded by Hegel
- ▶ understand the dialectical method employed by Hegel
- ▶ appreciate the historicist turn of reason
- ▶ discuss the grounds of Hegel's practical philosophy

### Background

Western Philosophy in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is marked by the rise of German idealism. Fichte, Schelling and Hegel developed their projects as a response to the work of Kant. The first two, with slight differences, depict reality as a rational system based on a self-evident dynamic first principle and explain the moments of the world as corresponding to the manifestation of the same. Hegel attempts to overcome the limitations he noticed in the philosophies of his predecessors and builds a more comprehensive model through his dialectical method. He delivers an organic conception of reality where each element coheres with each other and the system. He shows how abstract reason undergoes concretisation through various stages and finally realises itself in the philosophical activity of the human mind. Hegel introduces the historical method to Philosophy whereby a philosophy is understood as the product of a tradition. The practical philosophy of Hegel conceives the freedom and self-realisation of an individual, not in isolation but as a social citizen. This unit engages the learner with the main features of Hegel's philosophy.

## Keywords

Absolute idealism, dialectical method, triad, logic, historicist turn

## Discussion

### 2.2.1 What did Hegel Find in Kant's philosophy?

► Hegel calls Kant's philosophy critical idealism

Hegel describes Kant's philosophy as critical idealism. It is critical in the sense that it tries to discover the limits of the powers of human reason. Kant's inquiry is not a metaphysical first order inquiry that attempts to explain what exists, but a second order inquiry that investigates into the possibility of such a first order inquiry. The position taken up by Kant is idealism since, according to him, reality as we experience is constructed by our own mind through the *a priori* forms of sensibility (space and time) and that of understanding (the categories).

► Hegel charges subjectivism in Kant's philosophy

One serious charge that Hegel places on Kant's philosophy is subjectivism. Hegel feels that Kant's philosophy, even though it surpasses the subjective idealism of Berkeley, still fails to achieve objectivity. Kant could not describe what reality is in itself and remarks that whatever we know is only with respect to the nature of our understanding. He points at the realm of things-in-themselves. But as he also denies us the knowledge of the same, a kind of subjectivism prevails. Kant advocates that the twelve categories of understanding are common to all humans, and thus, the world we experience has an objective character. However, Hegel claims that Kant's philosophy explains the world as corresponding to the psychology of the subject and not the world as such. Kant gives the twelve categories of understanding mere psychological status. They are not the categories in the world but are the ways in which the human mind thinks. They do not have any ontological status of being but possess only epistemological principles of knowing. To obtain true objectivity, philosophy should be able to prove the existence of real essences of objects. The categories should have been asserted as being the elements of reality.

► Hegel feels that Kant could not do complete justice to the critical approach

Hegel also questions the Kant's conclusion that the number of categories is fixed as twelve. He does not feel that Kant's application of the kinds of judgement in logic to the categories of understanding is appropriate. He could not accept that the categories are the same in all conditions. For Hegel, the categories have been influenced by historical elements. In fact, Hegel criticises that Kant should have put the categories themselves to examination. Kant thinks that before setting out for an inquiry using our mind, the mind itself needs to be examined. However, if we are about to examine the workings of our mind, is it not done using only the same mind? No other instrument is available. So, before the commencement of the examination of the workings of the mind, a check should be done on the scope of doing the same. Or else it is an effort to swim without getting into the water.

► Kant determines knowledge as finite

Hegel says that Kant's philosophy is finite. Kant confines knowledge to the realm of discursive understanding and refuses to give reason the power of infinite and absolute knowledge. Although Kant touches upon the notions of free will, God, *etc.*, that are beyond ordinary sense experience, these are observed as objects of faith and not of reason. Kant gives them the status of regulative ideas only; they help reason to stabilize their search for unity. Hegel feels that human reason can delve into the notions of God, the world, free will, *etc.* It has the power to attain the knowledge of the whole. Whereas Kant says that we are not able to know the noumenal world, Hegel cancels such a distinction between phenomena and noumena and claims that human reason can grasp the whole of reality.

Hegel states that the antinomies faced by human reason on the notions of world, soul, God *etc.* are also the results of finite understanding. The faculty of understanding with its limited scope always meets contradictions and fails to solve them. It witnesses itself as confronted by dualisms – mind and body; self and other; universal and particular; freedom and necessity; individual and social; finite and infinite *etc.* Kant says that the human reason cannot go beyond the dualism posed by the limits of understanding, and whenever it tries to conclude the truth of one among the duals denying the other, it falls into illusion. However, Hegel believes that human reason has the power to seek and obtain a synthesis of the mutually opposing thesis and anti-thesis. The reason can form a new synthesis which subsumes the opposing thoughts as the aspects of a larger whole. For Hegel, the contradictions are not the fea-



tures of human thought, but are the aspects of reality as such. Hegel's dialectic method explains the working of the triad of thesis-antithesis-synthesis in the universe.

► Kant's ethics is accused of formalism

With respect to Kant's practical philosophy, Hegel says that Kant's ethics is formal or without content. He means by this that the categorical imperative cannot generate any specific answer to the question 'What ought I to do?' but can only acknowledge the formal requirement that the actions be consistent with the maxims. This approach fails in real life situations of ethical conflicts.

## 2.2.2 Philosophy of Hegel

► Hegel holds that truth is a whole and is comprehended as such by Philosophy

The task of Philosophy, as Hegel conceives it, is to comprehend the nature of reality as a whole. What it seeks to explain is not the superficial and accidental character of the world, but the eternal essence, the reason and the purpose behind the universe. Hegel believes that the task is possible.

► Hegel proposes reality as dynamic and concrete

According to Hegel, reality is monistic and idealistic – monistic because the whole universe with its diversity can be reduced to one principle, and idealistic because the universe as perceived by us is not ultimately real in itself, but is an expression of that which is ultimately real. The manifold universe is the expression of a single rational principle – Absolute Universal or Idea which reveals itself for a rational mind: hence, the famous saying attributed to Hegel – the real is rational and the rational is real. However, the Absolute Idea is not abstract. An idea is abstract when it is isolated from its particulars. It is impossible to reconcile multiplicity within a single abstract idea. A concrete idea is a whole which includes all its particulars as essentials. Hegel rejects the system of Spinoza where plurality hardly gets any consideration in the all-pervading single substance. With respect to Schelling also, who has maintained 'in the Absolute, all is one,' Hegel accuses monotonousness and abstract universality. Hegel describes such a system as 'the night in which all cows are black.' Such views of reality tell us nothing about the rich and variegated contents of the universe. Reality, hence, cannot be a single substance – a mass of undifferentiated stuff. Hegel thus conceives of a reality that is many-in-one or one-in-many. It is not a static system that cannot account for the changes and developments within, which get dismissed as illusory or unreal. Hegel's Absolute is self-active and dynamic. The universe is an organic whole where the parts are related to each other as well as the

whole. For Hegel, the Absolute evolves through differentiation and objectification and becomes the other and then comes back to realise itself in a broader canvas. The Absolute is at once the producer and the product.

► Reality is a process that proceeds dialectically

Reality is a process. An undeveloped, undifferentiated and abstract entity develops, differentiates, splits up. It assumes different opposing or contradictory forms, until it becomes a unified, concrete, particularised entity – a unity in diversity. The initial indefinite, abstract ground, becomes a definite concrete reality in which the opposites are reconciled or united in the whole. Each higher stage in the process is a realisation of its lower. The lower becomes what it intends to be or it fulfils its purpose. What is implicit in the lower becomes explicit in the higher: “Every stage in the process contains all the preceding stages and foreshadows all the future ones: the world at every stage is both a product and a prophecy. The lower form is negated in the higher, that is, it is not what it was; but it is also preserved in the higher, it has been carried over and sublated” (Thilly 479). Hegel, by adopting the dialectical method, shows how the basic principle undergoes determinations, passing through different stages, finally to realise itself in the concrete all-inclusive form. He depicts reality as an inter-connected organic system.

### 2.2.2.1 Dialectical Method

The deductive method of mathematics consists of a few self-evident axioms from which other concepts are deduced according to the rules of deduction. Hegel admires the proficiency of such a method in the precise definition of a system and the concepts within. However, reality is a dynamic process, not a static system. Reality is full of negations, contradictions, and oppositions. A plant germinates, blooms, withers, and dies. A man is young, mature, and old. To have a true description of an object, all the inherent contradictions in it should be dealt with and explained properly. We should also be able to show how such contradicting features of the object are reconciled and preserved in its life. The intellect with its abstract thought can analyse all phases of an object, each in isolation and not in an interconnected manner. The intellect can only distinguish, oppose and relate. It cannot conceive the unity of opposites, the life and inner purposiveness of things. Thus, Hegel feels that the deductive method cannot deal with

the world process along with the changes and developments therein. Earlier, Spinoza had followed the deductive method of mathematics and could develop only an abstract monistic system, which being static failed to give due respect for the changes and developments of the world.

► The dialectical method proceeds through triads of thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis

To account for an evolving reality, Hegel employs the method which he calls dialectical. The method shows how an abstract concept (thesis) gives rise to a contradiction (anti-thesis) and how the two contradicting positions are further reconciled as complementary aspects of a concrete whole (synthesis). This is the Hegelian triad. However, the synthesised position though concrete has a sort of abstraction left in it. It becomes the new thesis that again gives rise to another anti-thesis and finally further synthesis happens. The process goes on in the form of a series of triads. It should be remembered that each triad shows the way in which concepts that are abstracted from particularities become concretised wholes where the particular features preserve their status. Also, each triad exemplifies the way contradictions are resolved and a unified whole is formed. Hegel portrays reality as a system of concepts interconnected as triads. Each element in a triad incorporates its own inner triads as well.

### 2.2.2.2 Hegelian System

► Idea, Nature and Spirit form the largest triad

The first great triad in the Hegelian system comprises Idea, Nature, and Spirit. This gives the division of Philosophy according to Hegel. Idea stands for Idea-in-itself that is abstract. Nature stands for Idea-outside-itself or Idea-in-its-otherness. These two are reconciled in Spirit or Geist which is Idea-in-and-for-itself. The abstract idea evolves into the concrete form in the Spirit that incorporates all determinations within. Logic deals with the abstract Idea. It is the science of thinking. Philosophy of Nature and Philosophy of Spirit respectively are the sciences of matter and human. Idea-in-itself is again divided into three – being, essence and notion. Each of these three is again subdivided into smaller triads. Similarly, Nature and Spirit are also divided and subdivided. We see that a series of smaller triads themselves constitute the thesis of a larger triad. There are series of smaller triads forming the antithesis and the synthesis of the larger triad. In other words, each of the big divisions contains subordinate triadic divisions, so that each part is a circle rounded and completed

in itself. Philosophy, as a whole, is a circle of circles. Figure 2.2.1 gives a brief outline of the Hegelian system, even though all the triads are not mentioned in it.

► Logic is the science of reality viewed through the medium of abstract thought

We can see how Hegel incorporates every aspect of this universe in his dialectical system. Logic is the science of Pure Idea. It does not mean that logic is a mere science of thought. It is the science of reality looked at through the medium of abstract thought. If logic, in general, is considered the morphology of thought, Hegel's logic becomes the morphology of the world, of life and of reality. In Hegel's words, logic coincides with metaphysics, which is the science of things set and held in thoughts. The first category under logic is being. It is pure thought, simple and indeterminate. This being-in-itself has its own determinations represented as inner triads. It finally becomes essence as its negated form. The completion of the inner triads of essence leads to the notion of being-in-and-for-itself. The culmination of this series is an Idea that incorporates its determinations and behaves in its negated form as Nature. For Hegel, the categories dealt with under logic are not mere forms of thought but are parts of reality. They are not mere formal principles of epistemology but have ontological status.

► Philosophy of Nature deals with matter, life etc.

The abstract Idea realises the determinations within it and evolves through the different categories into its otherness or Nature. In Nature, Idea becomes externalised or particularised. Its unity is concealed. In the philosophy of nature, Hegel deals not with the abstract categories but with concrete things of reality. He works out the interconnections of various forms of nature (matter, life etc.) and the sciences that deal with them. Nature exhibits the laws of mechanics, physics, and organics. Each of these aspects of Nature is in turn analysed by Hegel into its dialectic terms. Philosophy, for Hegel, takes a higher view point than that of science. It represents nature as a series of successful struggles by which the Idea, scattered into plurality, regains unity and self-identity (self-consciousness) in the human mind or spirit. This is the goal of the processes of nature. Nature is a stage of transition through which the Idea passes in its evolution into mind or spirit (Geist).

The Idea which embodies itself or is externalised in nature, returns to itself and becomes mind or Spirit. The Idea which has lain estranged from itself and become mindless in the Nature, evolves and frees itself from the bondage, in Spirit. In Spirit, the Idea reveals itself to itself. The Spirit coming from

► Philosophy of Spirit deals with expressions of human mind

Nature, has germs of development in it. In the Philosophy of Spirit, Hegel explains how the mind passes through the subjective and objective stages in its evolution to become the Absolute Mind. The subjective stage deals with the human mind viewed at the subjective level as the mind of an individual. Its subdivisions are the states of consciousness like sense-perception, appetite, intellect, reason, imagination etc. At this level the mind is self-conscious and introverted. Hegel shows how anthropology, phenomenology and psychology deals with the subjective features of mind. As the mind objectifies itself, it projects its own laws outward to form the human world, the world of institutions like family, society, state etc. These are not mere creations of whims and interests of individual person or a group of persons. They are the manifestation of the spirit to realise its purpose. The subdivisions of the objective mind are given as right (law exterior), morality (law interior), and social ethics (synthesis of law exterior and interior). The ethical and political philosophy of Hegel lies here. At the level of the absolute mind, the Idea realises itself in the concrete form through the manifestations of human mind in art, religion and philosophy. When the human mind explores art, the Idea has an intuitive understanding of itself. In a religious human mind, the Idea experiences itself through representation or imagination in symbols. It is in a philosopher's mind, that the Idea realises itself through pure thought. The Absolute attains self-realisation when a philosopher understands his own thought about reality as the Absolute's thought about itself.

### 2.2.2.3 Historicist Turn of Reason

► Hegel implements historicism in Philosophy

Historicism is the claim that the understanding of any aspect of human life must primarily be concerned with its history or evolution. Rather than relying solely upon the empirical observation of a human phenomenon as it is now, historicism asks for an analysis that explores into the genesis or roots of the phenomenon. Even before Hegel, there has been the call for the historical method in understanding the development of a society, the constitution of a nation etc. The philosophy, religion, literature etc. of a culture are considered as the product of the history of the people. However, it is Hegel who emphasises the need for historical method in Philosophy. By advocating that the development of human thought corresponds to the unfolding of the universal reason, Hegel effects a historicist turn in the Western philosophical tradition.

► Human thought evolves historically

The speciality of Philosophy as compared to other disciplines is that its subject matter is thought itself – i.e., the ideas or concepts by which we comprehend the reality. Now, Hegel believes that thought by its very nature is historical. It is not a fixed state of being, but a restless activity. Our thinking evolves rationally. The rational necessity in the universe is reproduced in our individual thinking. Thought proceeds logically or dialectically, by resolving conflicts. It develops from the indeterminate to determinate, from the abstract to the concrete, from the vague to the clear. The activity of thought takes place not in an instant, but throughout time. Whatever the human reason knows at a point in the timeline of the history of mankind, is not a product of the thought of this or that individual; it is the achievement of a tradition. It has grown out of the life and experience of the whole human race.

► Philosophy develops dialectically

The dialectical structure underlying reality can also be seen in the historical development of a Philosophy. For example, we can see Plato's philosophy as the product or the synthesis of the two opposing philosophies of Heraclitus and Parmenides. Whereas Heraclitus holds that reality is flux and permanence is illusion, Parmenides argues that reality is permanent and change is illusion. Plato preserves the characteristics of both and overcomes the contradictions by advocating two realms, one that is permanent and the other that keeps on changing.

► Origin and development of every philosophy can be analysed historically

Hegel does not believe that Descartes could start philosophizing anew without any presuppositions. No thought originates fresh in an individual reason that is abstracted from the past. A self-enclosed and self-sufficient mind that transcends the realm of history would not produce any philosophy. The path followed by a philosopher, the method employed by him, the assumptions he has taken etc. all emerge out of his historical position. The bundle of efforts made by his predecessors and the social, political, economic and cultural milieu of his own times influence his philosophy. According to Hegel's organic conception, each society is a unique whole whose parts are inseparable from each other. The art, language, religion, etiquette, constitution etc. of a society form a systematic unity. Any change in one among them effects change in others also. This organic whole is what Hegel calls as the 'spirit' of a nation, the ways in which a nation thinks and act. Philosophy is one of those parts that make up the 'spirit.' It cannot leap beyond the social context. Every individual is a child of his times. The philosophy of an age corresponds to the conditions



that prevail at that time. The task of a philosopher is to investigate upon the rational core that underlies his culture and the dialectical changes therein: “Hegel historicizes philosophy, explaining its purpose, principles, and problems in historical terms. Rather than seeing philosophy as a timeless *priori* reflection upon eternal forms, Hegel regards it as the self-consciousness of a specific culture – the articulation, defence and criticism of its essential values and beliefs. This historical conception of philosophy is epitomized clearly by Hegel himself in the famous lines from the preface to his *Philosophy of Right*: ‘Philosophy is its own age comprehended in thought.’” (*The Cambridge Companion to Hegel* 270)

► Objects of philosophical inquiry also undergo historical development

The importance of the step taken by Hegel is understood clearly if we look at the ways in which a historical nature has prevailed in the hitherto existing philosophical traditions. There are certain laws, beliefs and values considered as universal, eternal, natural, etc., even though we can trace their origin in a specific culture. The elements explained as innate or *priori* can be shown as acquired from experience, the product of a tradition. Language, religion, state etc., are attributed with supernatural origin when, in fact, they have gradually originated from human sources. Hegel demands that the objects of philosophical thought be analysed historically. He claims that the objects of classical metaphysics, such as God, Providence, immortality, etc., have historical origins. God is not an entity that exists beyond the world but an Idea realised in history. Providence is not an external end, a supernatural plan imposed by God. It is an internal end, the ultimate purpose of history. Immortality is not life in heaven but the memory of someone’s role in history.

► Philosophy becomes self-critical by employing the historical method

Hegel adopts the historical method as the self-critical method of Philosophy. Even though Kant is right in choosing a self-critical approach to study the working of reason, Hegel feels that Kant endorses some principles exclusively as the products of reason. Instead, the self-critical approach to Philosophy, in its thorough sense, should study the genesis, context and development of its own doctrines. Hegel thinks that the cause of transcendental illusion of our reason is the forgetfulness of the origin and development of its ideas.

► Meaning of philosophy is in its historical development

Hegel brings a new way, the historical way of viewing philosophy. He insists that to understand any specific philosophy, we need not look at it in isolation from its historical setting. Phil-

osophical thought must be understood as a historical development with all its stages playing adequate roles in the process. The meaning of philosophy can be found in its own historical development. The history of philosophy is philosophy.

### 2.2.2.4 Practical Philosophy

► Hegel's practical philosophy is grounded in his organic conception of reality

Hegel's practical philosophy nevertheless follows from his absolute idealism and the organic conception of reality. An individual's life is a part of the project of the universe. The purpose behind the formation of social and political institutions like family, civil society, state etc. is nothing but the actualisation of the Absolute Spirit. Hegel thus takes a shift from the concept prevalent in the Enlightenment era, that of an autonomous individual existing in isolation and leading his life in accordance with the fulfilment of his own needs.

► Individuals realise their freedom not in isolation, but through social participation

Although Hegel places the realisation of the freedom of every individual as the touchstone of his practical philosophy, his conception of freedom differs from the popular views of the same. For Hegel, the freedom of an individual is not about minimising obstacles or restrictions and doing what one wishes to. Obstacles cannot be removed forever how much we try to. Enacting one's own desires most often brings oneself in disharmony with the social institutions. Being an isolated person alienated from all relations indicates lack of freedom in the Hegelian sense. The self-consciousness of an individual in its true sense is his self-recognition as a member of the social institutions – family, working group, state etc. It does not require distancing oneself from social practices. It is compatible with social solidarity. In fact, an individual's self is more realised by acting in accord with institutions of which he forms a part. It is how freedom is reinforced. People realise their true nature within social settings and not in isolation. Freedom is not opposed to social unity. Rather, it is an expression of the same. For the individuals to experience themselves in harmony with the social order, we need to ensure proper recognition of property rights and cultivate a supportive family life, a rationally organised civil society and a well-ordered state.

Hegel conceives State as the divine manifestation of the Absolute. For him, there is no higher moral authority than the State. His practical philosophy is discussed in the next unit.



## Summarized Overview

The idealist philosophy that has emerged in Germany reaches its zenith in the philosophy of Hegel. He charges subjectivism, finiteness and formalism on the philosophy of Kant. He insists that whatever exists is rational and can be known by reason. He develops the project initiated by Fichte and Schelling by overcoming the limitations that he notices in them.

Hegel depicts reality as the manifestation of a rational first principle, the Absolute. The Absolute is dynamic and concrete; it is many-in-one. He recognises that the evolution of the Absolute follows a dialectical pattern, wherein a concept paves way for its own negation and finally the two opposing sides are reconciled as the aspects of a higher concept. Applying the dialectical method, Hegel depicts reality as having an organic interconnected structure, which represents how the abstract principle concretizes and realises itself with all determinations. Pure and Abstract Idea, its negation as Nature, and their synthesis as Spirit form the largest triad in the dialectical system. Each of these three comprises inner triads that represents the unfolding of determinations inherent in them. Hegel expounds Logic that deals with the Abstract Idea. He discusses the rational structure that underlies matter and life in his philosophy of nature. The philosophy of spirit explains the development of human mind in its subjective, objective and absolute forms. The objective mind expresses itself as the institutions of social unity – family, civil society and State. The expressions of the Absolute mind are in art, religion and philosophy. According to Hegel, the Absolute realises itself in the human mind that understands the rational project of the universe.

Hegel effects a historicist turn in Philosophy which affirms that thought develops historically. And that any philosophy is properly understood only when subjected to historical analysis. According to this view, analysis of the history of philosophy is the philosophizing of the hour. For Hegel, an individual recognises his moral identity and realises his freedom only through social participation. There is neither morality nor freedom for an isolated individual. The legacy of Hegel is evident in the post-Hegelian German philosophies as well as in the whole continental tradition. It is based on the dialectical method of Hegel that Karl Marx develops his materialistic conception of reality. Existentialism responds heavily to the Hegelian conception of an individual.

## Self-Assessment

1. Explain the dialectical method of Hegel.
2. How does Hegel effect a historicist turn in Philosophy?
3. For Hegel, freedom is not in isolation but within social settings. Comment.

## Assignments

1. Compare the monistic systems of Spinoza and Hegel.
2. Attempt a historical analysis of the philosophy of any major thinker in the Western tradition.
3. Reflect upon the status of a free individual as propounded by Hegel.
4. Outline the main features of the Hegelian response to the philosophy of Kant.

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## Suggested Reading

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### Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.



## UNIT 3

# HEGEL'S PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY

### Learning Outcomes

Through this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ▶ differentiate between original, reflective and philosophical approaches to history
- ▶ understand Hegel's conception of the rational pattern underlying historical events
- ▶ appreciate Hegel's views on the roles played by state and historic individuals
- ▶ evaluate Hegel's definition of the State as the moral authority

### Background

Hegel is the most discussed philosopher among the proponents of post-Kantian idealism in Germany. He understands reality as a process by which an abstract rational principle unfolds all its inherent determinations and thereby becomes conscious of its own free nature. The unfolding proceeds dialectically by preserving and sublating contradicting standpoints in a successive manner. Hegel decodes the dialectical pattern of the universal project and applies the same to the study of history. This philosophical approach reveals the meaning and purpose of the history of mankind which mere reporting of events cannot accomplish. Hegel claims that different states and heroic personalities have played a huge role in the historical progress. Hegel's philosophy depicts the State as the embodiment of the spirit of people and the exclusive authority of their moral life. He believes that an individual attains freedom through social participation and not in isolation. This unit discusses Hegel's philosophy of history and philosophy of the State.



## Keywords

Philosophical history, State, World-historic individuals, Cunning of Reason, Freedom

### 2.3.1 Introduction

► Hegel answers to the questions on the meaning and purpose of history

It is not common for us as human beings living a common-sensical life, to think about the origin of mankind on this earth, amidst our so-called busy hours of the day. We do not bother much about the generations of people that have preceded us here. Despite some thinkers or activists, hardly anyone among us thinks about the well-being of the future generations. We are concerned only about our individual lives, and the lives of people around us whom we treat as contributing to our happiness. However, it is true that in this age of technology, news from different parts of the globe come to us within seconds. People debate upon, criticize, laugh at or weep for the events that occur thousands of miles away from them. Many persons comment upon the sufferings or joyous moments of individuals or group of individuals, staying far away and differing in race and creed, as pertaining to the suffering or joy of the whole humanity. But is there anything that we possess or strive to achieve as a whole? Are we all part of a universal project? Is it that the people who lived here before us have played their part in the project before perishing? Are we knowingly or unknowingly participating in the same project which after our time will be carried on by the future generations? Consider the revolutions that happened in different regions of the world, the rise and fall of states, all the famous historical events, wars and natural calamities that take the lives of many, and the like. Do they all form stages or levels through which humanity as a whole develops and move closer towards the fulfilment of a purpose? If yes, what is that purpose? How is it known? The nineteenth century German idealist, Hegel, answers these questions in a unique way. The features of his philosophy of history take up the first part of this unit.

The second part of the unit deals with another Hegelian contribution which is nothing but Hegel's philosophy of the State. The problem of priority or prominence is always alive with

► Hegel philosophises the role of State in shaping morality

regards to the relationship between an individual and a group, for example – a family, a society or a nation, in which he is a member. Who is more important, the individual or the family? The citizen or the state? Whose interests need to be valued more? Can it be justified when a citizen's needs or desires or ambitions are sacrificed for the overall development of the nation? Are we denying the individual's essential freedom then? Is it practical to have a perfect balance in the status given to the life of an individual and the well-being of a family or a state? Is it possible to define the well-being of an individual through the well-being of the state? These pressing questions appear now and then in the various conflicts of our daily life. Hegel has his own answers in this field also. His philosophy of the State gives a conception of the State as an expression of the individual human minds in their objective form. It is through a State that an individual realises his freedom. Living a life that is harmonious with the project of the State is what every individual ought to do. It might seem paradoxical at the first glance. We will see how and on what grounds Hegel puts forward such a theory.

### 2.3.2 Hegel's Philosophy of History

► Questions on the meaning and purpose of history

Does the history of human beings in the world have any purpose? Can we find any pattern or significance in the history? Are all the generations of human beings together with all their activities, beliefs, hopes, merely a meaningless array of scenes? Hegel says that the answers to these questions are provided not by original and reflective histories but by philosophical history.

#### 2.3.2.1 Original, Reflective and Philosophical History

► Original history is mere reporting of events

Original history is the firsthand report of a historical event written by someone who has participated in it. It is a narration of the event according to the writer's direct experience. Hegel feels that even though the narration gives us an account of the events of the past, it lacks universal perspective. It considers only the events witnessed by the writer. It does not connect or relate it with other events to derive some meaning out of the whole. It is mere reporting of an event without any attempt to reflect upon it.



► Reflective history is the attempt to make sense of the events by an external observer

► Philosophical history search for the underlying pattern in the series of events

► History of mankind is the story of the unfolding of the Absolute

Then there is what Hegel calls the reflective history which surmounts the defect of the original history. A reflective historian applies concepts and general ideas to the historical events to make sense of them rather than limiting himself to mere narration as done by the original historian. The reflective history has a broader perspective. However, reflective history lacks the identity of the subject and the object. The reflective historian may impose his perspectives on the history. In original history, there is a direct connection between the writer and the event he narrates. There is subject-object identity. The original history lacks reflection and reflective history lacks originality.

Hegel proposes what he calls philosophical history to understand the meaning and purpose of history. He applies to history, his view of reality as the logical and dialectical development of the rational principle. This approach penetrates the exterior realm of factual content to search for the underlying pattern, the rational order, the dialectically developing conceptual core. The rational patterns that the philosophical approach to history discovers are nothing but the facts themselves more deeply understood. This is neither mere narration nor reflection by an external observer. This is the internal critique of the events of the development of mankind.

### 2.3.2.2 History as Conceived by Hegel

History, when philosophically understood, gives the story of the Absolute unfolding itself dialectically and revealing itself to the finite minds through which it attains self-realisation. All the stages in the history of the world, are stages through which the Absolute strives to understand itself. Hegel in a way argues that history has a purpose. It has a meaning. Everything that happens to mankind in different generations is for the realisation of the goal of humanity, which is nothing but freedom.

Doesn't this mean shutting our sensitive eyes towards all the evil in the world, all sorts of bloodshed, all cries of human pain? Don't we feel the urge to ask what kind of good is achieved through so much suffering and despair? In fact, Hegel is not the Dr. Pangloss who looks at all the evil and says, 'this is the best of all possible worlds.' Hegel acknowledges the painful moments of history as the 'terror of history.' He clearly confesses that it is mental torture to think about those events in the history of mankind where the noblest nations and the most innocent of the human beings have been crushed and

► The Cunning of Reason plays with the desires and passions of individuals

ruined. He describes history as the slaughter-bench where the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of states, and the virtue of individuals have been victimised without any mercy. However, Hegel thinks that the slaughter-bench picture of history is only a superficial view of the same. When we look for the pattern that is latent, we can see that the Absolute plays with all kinds of desires and passions of humanity to bring out inherent contradictions, overcome them in a synthesised manner, and finally reach the consciousness of complete freedom. Hegel describes this as the cunningness of the Absolute. The Absolute, with its masterful shrewdness, cleverness and subtlety, uses human will as a means to accomplish its divine will: “Reason, in the form of Absolute, which is the totality of rational conceptual truth, governs the world, and it does so through what Hegel calls the Cunning of Reason. The Cunning of Reason is the power of the Absolute to use the immense force of human passion as means to its end of human freedom” (Lavine 230).

► States are the individuals of world-history

Hegel believes that the play of the Absolute is evident in the history of nations and the lives of historic personalities. He points out that a nation is the embodiment of the ‘spirit of a people.’ By ‘spirit of a people’, he means the language, religion, art, music, poetry, architecture, morality, philosophy, science, and law of a specific group of people. He considers all these as forming a totality. None among these can be isolated from the whole. The spirit of a group of people expresses itself through all these elements. Now, this spirit is incorporated and embodied in the life of a nation or a State which is the largest form of human organisation. Individuals take part in the culture and life-views of their nation. They are the culture-carriers. They are determined by the way their nation has been behaving and they also determine the way their nation behaves. The internal conflicts between the groups within a nation ensure timely changes and developments. Different nations thus embody different spirits or thoughts. Hegel then calls nations as ‘the individuals of world-history’ and says that it is through the rise and fall of nations, the Absolute marks successive stages in its unfolding. The conflicts between nations, the small and big wars, constitute the dialectical transition from one stage to another where opposing spirits or thoughts or life-views are tested against each other. What results is the synthesised thought that could lead the process forward. Hegel argues that war is an essential element for the progress of states and thereby that of humanity.



► World-historic individuals bring out necessary changes in history

Hegel claims that Cunning of Reason also makes use of the great heroes of history to bring about major historical changes. He calls such heroic figures World-Historical Individuals. They are the great agents of change in history. Hegel believes that Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Napoleon etc. belong to the group. These individuals are motivated by their passions only. With their urge for immense political power, they engage in wars and conquer different nations. They, in fact, destroy the cultures or life-views of those nations. They impose their own culture upon those nations. The killing of innocent people for the same, when viewed superficially would seem morally wrong, but is justified in view of the underlying purpose. Hegel depicts this as the play of the Absolute to get rid of the unproductive conceptions and spread the fruitful ones that aid in the progress towards freedom. It is reported that Hegel has once described Napoleon riding a horse as the 'world-spirit' on horseback.' The historic individuals are unconscious that the Absolute is playing through them. It is thus of no surprise that when the Absolute fulfils what it wanted through those individuals, they also perish like other people.

► Oriental, Greek, Roman, and German cultures embody different stages in the progress of humanity towards freedom

Hegel explains how history can be seen as the progress in the consciousness of freedom through his account of the history of four traditions of the world – the Oriental, the Greek, the Roman and the German. In the Oriental world that comprises of China, India and Persia, Hegel sees that only the ruler is free and the other people, living undifferentiated in the caste structure of the society, remain unconscious of their spiritual individuality. In the Ancient Greece, however, the freedom and individuality of the citizens of the city state are recognised. This marks the progress from 'one is free' to 'some are free.' The Roman culture also carries the same conception, but still there is the denial of freedom to slaves and conquered people. The development of the complete consciousness of freedom is seen in the German nation where the positive parts of the previous stages are preserved – Oriental monarchy and Greek constitutional freedom to citizens. The progress of freedom through the dialectical synthesis of 'one is free' and 'some are free' reaches its fulfilment in the 'all are free.' For Hegel, the Germanic nation, by providing the platform for the complete realisation of Absolute's consciousness of freedom, emerge as the pinnacle of World-History.

Hegel's conception of history is not about the progress in the form of the growth of science and technology, or in the form

► Hegel's conception of history is different from that of the Enlightenment

of the growth and spread of natural rights and democracy. In a way, it is against the enlightenment conception. For Hegel, history is not 'a theatre of happiness.' It is a movement towards freedom. It concerns the freedom of nations and not that of individuals. The movement witnesses not only good but necessarily evil also. We may not be consciously intending this progress. But by using our personal thoughts and passions for consequences that we cannot even predict, and thereby making us small pawns in its game, the Absolute leads the journey forward.

### 2.3.3 Hegel's Philosophy of the State

► Hegel rejects the traditional moral authorities

Hegel's moral philosophy might shock a common man as it cuts off all ties with the popular grounds of moral justification – universal moral, religious or legal principles, God or other supernatural entity, private conscience etc. Pure private conscience is not at all infallible. There is no objective standard for morality in it. Moreover, the private conscience of one individual might conflict with that of another. Universal moral maxims like Kant's 'Act in accordance with those maxims that you think should become a universal law' are formal, abstract and empty. They cannot guide us to engage ourselves in or restrict ourselves from doing certain actions. For Hegel, there is no God like the personal God of religion beyond this universe. God is the totality of truth, the Absolute that manifests itself as the universe.

► Ethical life is a life lived in a community

Hegel discusses the spirit of people – the totality of culture, values, language, tradition etc. – which we have already discussed in the previous section. According to him, even if an individual separates himself from other individuals, he cannot isolate himself from and step beyond the spirit of the people. He cannot separate himself from the beliefs and values of the society in his times. Hegel insists that an ethical life is a life lived in a community, as a member of the social unity.

Hegel's idealistic philosophy and organic conception of the universe depict the objective expression of human mind as proceeding dialectically through the stages of family, civil society and the State. The family is the first social group one experiences. It is the first way in which an individual mind enters the moral life. There is a sense of unity, a bond of love that unites the members in a family. The members do not consider themselves as persons with individual rights and stand against



► Family and civil society are the initial social groups

each other. They sense a deeply felt unity and in the well-being of the family, that of the individual is also fulfilled. The next stage is civil society which Hegel considers as a sphere of universal egoism in which the members pursue their own interests and satisfy their individual needs. Each person depends on the work of others in some manner and his work becomes productive for others too. This enables fair and smooth play of economic activity. The proper functioning of a civil society provides a platform for the individual development of each of its members. However, there can be situations where the civil society that is based on consumption demands may fail to achieve equilibrium. This necessitates the existence of a State that regulates the functioning of the civil societies.

► State is the only moral authority

In the Hegelian system, State is the culmination of human organisation. It is the largest embodiment of the spirit of people. Hegel propounds that a man owes to the State for everything he is. He can find his essence only in the State. Therefore, Hegel advocates that there is no higher court of appeal than the State. It is the march of God on earth. The moral values that are followed in one's State provides the only morality he has, his only moral ideals, his only moral obligations. One's moral life has its source only in the State. He possesses a moral identity only with respect to the State. It is to be noted that Hegel binds an individual only with the spirit embodied in the State. He needs to imbibe only that spirit and live accordingly. He should not break away from the State. But there can be situations of conflict in the State, in the form of protesting against the policies or laws enacted from time to time. In those cases, if the policies are in discord with the true spirit of the State, protesting against them also will become the upholding of the spirit.

► An individual enjoys substantial freedom by living in accordance with the policies of his State

Hegel's morality stands in opposition to the views of the enlightenment era, which considers the individual as an autonomous being. The individual is endowed with natural rights of life, liberty, and property, which can never be alienated from him. Such a freedom protects the individual against oppression from higher authorities. But it does not entertain him to act and live as a spiritual being. Hegel describes the freedom enjoyed by an individual in this sense as abstract or negative. Here, freedom is defined only by the absence of oppression or restriction. Hegel distinguishes this from a positive or concrete freedom that leads an individual to the conscious realisation of his free nature. This freedom is substantial; it provides

the individual with some content. Hegel asserts that such a freedom is delivered and ensured in a fully developed State. A fully developed State embodies the fundamental spirit of its people in its laws and institutions. The individuals who have internalised that spirit can recognise the functioning of the State as harmonious to their development. In following the rules and regulations of the State, the individual experiences that he is following his own spirit. Hegel stands for this freedom which has a social character.

To conclude, ethics is social ethics and freedom is social freedom according to Hegel's practical philosophy. The State is what makes it possible to practice social ethics and enjoy social freedom. He stands for unification rather than isolation. It is said that Hegel intends to awaken the German people in his times for a unification.

## Summarized Overview

Hegel calls for a philosophical approach to the study of history. The philosophy of history thus reveals the events of the world as the stages of the unfolding of the universal reason. When viewed philosophically, all the good and bad moments witnessed in the history of mankind are necessary for the realisation of freedom. The Absolute, with its cunningness, makes States and heroic personalities the vehicles of its movement. The rise and fall of States and the blood-shedding wars are all part of the universal plan. The Absolute leads the journey forward by making us pawns in its game. Oriental, Greek, Roman and German traditions mark important stages in the dialectical progress of humanity towards freedom. This conception of history given by Hegel is different from that of the Enlightenment where history is evaluated in terms of the growth of science and technology, and the establishment of liberal and democratic rights.

Hegel dissociates his views on morality from the traditional authorities of moral laws. According to him, an ethical life is a social life. There is no moral identity for an isolated individual. The State is the highest form of human organisation and is the manifestation of the divine. The State is the only source of morality for an individual and he enjoys substantial freedom while imbibing and following the spirit of his State. This conception differs from the Enlightenment picture of the individual as an autonomous being with guaranteed natural rights.

Hegel is one of the most controversial thinkers in the history of Western thought. His stance with respect to the purpose of history, the role of States and heroic individuals, wars etc. and the conception of State as the moral authority have been prone to immense criticism. The later thinkers who discuss socio-political and moral problems take up either a Hegelian or an anti-Hegelian position.



## Self-Assessment

1. How does Hegel distinguish between original, reflective and philosophical approaches to history?
2. Explain how, according to Hegel, States and historic individuals take part in developing the conscious freedom of humanity.
3. What does Hegel mean by the spirit of a people?
4. For Hegel, State is the only source of morality for an individual. Elaborate.

## Assignments

1. Reflect upon Hegel's view of history as meaningful and purposeful.
2. Take any historical event and attempt original, reflective and philosophical histories of the same.
3. Choose any historical hero and discuss the role played by him / her according to Hegel's Philosophy.
4. Analyse the nuances of individual-State relationship based on any incident in your country.

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# UNIT 1

## INTRODUCTION TO MARXISM

### Learning Outcomes

In this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ▶ appreciate the influence of Hegel on Marx
- ▶ understand Marx's philosophy as historical or dialectical materialism
- ▶ analyse Marx's concept of alienation
- ▶ evaluate Marx's depiction of history

### Background

The nineteenth century Philosophy in Germany continues to take different forms after Hegel. Karl Marx adopts Hegel's dialectical method and changes his idealistic conception of reality into a materialistic one. He depicts a history of mankind that is determined by economic conditions. According to the theory, the capitalist economy of the modern world characterised by private property and forced labour will initially proceed by exploiting the working class and depriving them of even the essential elements of humanity. The system, however, will dig its own grave and will finally perish. A revolution then will lead to an interim stage of the dictatorship of the working class. Marx conceives the emergence of a classless society as the end of the historical progress. This unit outlines the main features of Marx's philosophy known as dialectical or historical materialism and his depiction of actual world history. A brief account of the critique of capitalist economy given by Marx also forms the highlight of this unit.

## Keywords

Historical or dialectical materialism, Alienation, Capitalism, Class-conflict, Communism

## Discussion

- ▶ Marx emphasises the practical nature of Philosophy

- ▶ Marx incorporates Hegelian elements

### 3.1.1 Introduction

Karl Marx (1818 – 1883) is a German philosopher, economist and revolutionary socialist. For him, philosophy is no more meant to interpret the world as done by the previous philosophers in a multitude of ways. He considers philosophy as a powerful tool to bring changes in the actual world. It is of no surprise that he emerges as one of the unique figures in the history of Western thought who has been able to attract the minds of people from various parts of the globe. Marx's ideas and their subsequent development which is collectively known as Marxism have influenced the intellectual, economic and political history of the modern period.

Marx belongs to the group of Young Hegelians, the radical left-wing followers of Hegel. He feels that the idealistic philosophy of Hegel should be replaced with a materialistic interpretation of reality. The focal point of the world, to which everything converges and from which everything originates, is not the Idea of Hegel. It is none other than man who creates and transforms the material world through his activity. The history of mankind is the progress in the self-realisation, not of the alienated Absolute, but of the alienated individual who stakes his humanity in the capitalist economy. Marx applies the dialectical method of Hegel and depicts history as the triadic movement of the economic structure of a society in which the inherent conditions pave way for the struggle between the two classes – the owners of the mode of production, and the workers who sell their physical labour to live. Marx foresees the culmination of human history in a society where there is no private property, no forced labour, no exploitation or class-conflicts.

### 3.1.2 What is Hegelian in Marx?

Marx comes to Berlin in 1836, five years after the death of



- ▶ Marx chooses the radical left-wing interpretation of Hegel

Hegel. However, the philosophy of Hegel still influenced the intellectual voice developing in the universities then. Two different interpretations of Hegel have emerged, and accordingly the followers of Hegel have been split into two – the conservative right-wing and the radical left-wing. The left-wing group has become famous as the Young Hegelians, and Marx finds himself attracted to them.

### 3.1.2.1 Marx as a Young Hegelian

- ▶ Young Hegelians refuse to accept the German State as the culmination of human progress

Hegel claimed that the German State is the culmination of the development of humanity. But he has also indicated that the dialectics is an endless process. Everything that exists will be negated and overcome to bring about development towards higher rationality. The Young Hegelians become adamant that the then prevalent German State must also change. Even though Hegel has enthroned the State as the moral authority of the individuals and has opposed the political liberalism and democracy advocated by the Enlightenment, the radical left-wing focuses on Hegel's remark on the history of mankind as the progress in the consciousness of freedom. They feel that the authoritative and restrictive State of their times should transform radically to a better form of government that ensures the freedom of the citizens.

- ▶ For the Young Hegelians, only what is rational must exist

The right-wing and the left-wing also read the famous slogan of Hegel – ‘the real is the rational and the rational is the real’ – in different ways. Whereas the former group takes the first part of the slogan and concludes that whatever exists (real) is necessary for the universal project (rational), the left-wing takes the second part and concludes that only what is reasonable (rational) has the claim to exist (real). They demand that all the existing institutions be examined and criticised in order to identify and resolve irrational elements in them and thus make them more and more rational.

- ▶ Young Hegelians reject the existence of a God beyond man

In addition to these points of differences, the left-wing also disagrees with the Hegelian concept of God. Hegel has defined God as the totality of truth. He also has acknowledged God as not abstract and transcendent, but as manifested, revealed, and embodied in the finite human minds, the social institutions etc. The radical group adopts an atheistic position and establishes man himself as the divine being.

- ▶ Young Hegelians demand criticism of each and everything

Hegel's dialectics seems to the Young Hegelians as a principle of negation that appeals for the destabilisation of existing structures. Marx once writes to another radical Hegelian that the need of the hour is a merciless criticism of everything that exists without any fear of the consequences. The call is made for a worldwide revolution against the existing conditions of the world – all the obstacles that prevent each man from realising his / her true divinity – to bring an environment where man can live as God.

### 3.1.2.2 Hegel Turned Upside down

- ▶ Feuerbach calls for a study of Hegel upside down

Ludwig Feuerbach, considered as a Young Hegelian, in his “The Essence of Christianity” argues that all the qualities with which God has been described in Christianity are nothing but the qualities of humans themselves. We project on an external God our own essential characteristics of knowledge and love with an elevated status. In fact, these are the qualities which constitute our true nature and which we strive to achieve by overcoming adverse conditions. Feuerbach contends that Hegel's concept of the Absolute is the Christian God in the disguised form. According to him, what Hegel has depicted as the historical manifestation of God is nothing but the historical development of mankind. He insists that Hegel's philosophy needs to be studied by turning it upside down, especially that the philosophy of the Absolute should be understood as the philosophy of man. The central point of Philosophy must be the material man and not the ideal Spirit.

- ▶ Marx reinterprets the history of Hegel as the alienation and self-realisation of man

Marx builds on the interpretation given by Feuerbach. According to Hegel, the Absolute gets alienated from its true essence, becomes estranged in the Nature, progresses through different stages and finally achieves self-realisation; for him, history of mankind is the history of the developmental process of the Absolute. As Marx sees, Hegel has given an inverted picture of reality. Hegel has given everything but his philosophy is taken off from its feet and turned upside down on its head. Marx wants to place Hegel's philosophy back on its feet. Instead of descending from heaven to earth, we need to ascend from earth to heaven. We should not set out from the realm of thought to the realm of men in flesh. We must begin from the real and active men and it is based on their material life that we demonstrate the realm of consciousness. Marx reinterprets the ‘mystified history’ given by Hegel, in the light of Feuerbach's reading of Hegel, and proposes an alternate history of



mankind, wherein, man, who is the labourer and the producer, gets alienated from his own true essence in the capitalist economy, passes through various developmental stages, and achieves self-realisation.

► Marx depicts history as the series of changes in the material world

Marx also rejects Hegel's idealism that regards the essence of man as spirit. For Marx, man is a natural being, living in a world of natural objects. The history of man is not the stages of the development of consciousness. It is the history of the changes in the material world and man's experience of the same. Whereas the alienation and the self-realisation of Hegel's Absolute occurs as a rational process, Marx's man gets alienated in the sensuous realm of the material world and requires actions in the same realm to achieve self-realisation. The hindrances to realisation cannot be overcome by mere thought which only provides the individual with a mere belief that he has escaped the problems even though he remains in the same hostile reality. Marx suggests that unlike all the previous philosophies that have only interpreted the world, what we need is something that could change the world.

### 3.1.2.3 Marx's Historical or Dialectical Materialism

► Marx's materialism is different from other materialistic philosophies

In Philosophy, materialism is the name given to any theory that explains reality as fundamentally constituted of matter. Descartes and Hobbes have given such a mechanistic and materialistic conception of the world. For them, the world consists of physical particles which are in motion according to mechanical laws. Newtonian mechanics later scientifically verifies the same. The consciousness and action of man have no independent status and they also are determined as to obey the laws of nature. Marx differentiates his version of materialism from the earlier versions. He advocates that human beings are not passive in this material world; the material world is in fact a human creation. Human activity transforms the material world in the course of history.

For Hegel, the spirit of the Absolute is embodied in the spirit of the people – an organic totality that comprises culture, religion, language, philosophy etc. None among these can be considered in isolation. It is with respect to the spirit of the people, in which manifests the spirit of the Absolute, and which transforms dialectically by overcoming opposing forms, that

► For Hegel, the spirit of people develops dialectically

historical development of humanity is based. Hegel's depiction of history proceeds in the following way – two opposing societies with their own spirits face conflicts and through forces like wars they are overcome and reconciled into a new society whose spirit is the synthesised version of the previous opposing spirits. The new synthesised spirit in turn evokes opposition and the process goes on.

► For Marx, the dialectical development of economic conditions determine history

Marx also envisions such a dialectical movement in his version of human history. However, for him, it is not the spirit of the people that becomes the determining factor, but the material economic foundation. The economic foundation of a society comprises the following components – 1) the conditions of production such as the climate, geography, raw materials, and population 2) the forces of production, i.e., the type and size of labour, the skills, tools, instruments, technologies, etc. and 3) the relations of production, i.e., the social relations, the ownership of property, the manner in which products are distributed etc. The economic foundation with these components generates conflicts within. Different classes of people who are benefitted by the foundation in unequal ways stand against each other. The resulting outrage ends in a revolution by which the foundation is replaced by a better one. The features of the new foundation also might develop issues within which in turn calls for another revolution and the process continues. Marx thus absorbs the dialectical method of Hegel. He depicts a dialectical pattern in the historical progress of mankind and attributes the same to the conflicts within the material foundation of societies.

### 3.1.3 Marx's Depiction of History

► Marx depicts a dialectical history based on the alienation of man and class-conflicts in economy

In the previous section, we have seen that, for Marx, history is the story of the man who, being alienated from his true nature, strives to achieve self-realisation. We have also learnt that Marx incorporates materialism and Hegel's dialectic method in his depiction of the story of mankind. Marx is often attributed with two accounts of history given at two different stages of his life – one based on the concept of alienation and self-realisation and the other based purely on economic structure and class conflicts. For ease of understanding, let us blend both accounts and listen to the story as told by Marx.



### 3.1.3.1 The Thesis: Primitive Communism

► Man realises himself through self-expressive activity

► Primitive communism marks the initial phase in the course of history

► Subsequent phases are marked by class-conflicts

Marx conceives the life of a man as the process of self-realisation. A man is the totality of his talents and passions. He realises himself through activity that allows for self-expressive creativity. The vision of an artist is embodied in his artistic work which is the expression of his creativity. Similarly, every individual expresses himself in his work and the product concretises the self of the individual. Thus, work is regarded as a living expression and affirmation of the worker. But this is possible only when the individual works purely out of genuine inspiration and enjoys the product as his own. Also, for this, the individual should be provided with full sensuous appreciation of the world. He needs a social environment built on respect and cooperation.

Marx postulates that there must have been a first stage in the history where the mode of production is primitive communism. There must have been no division of labour and no separation of classes. People must have been living by doing spontaneous work. Instead of private ownership, there must have been only communal ownership of property.

### 3.1.3.2 The Anti-thesis: Alienation of Human and Class-conflicts

Marx believes that the phase of primitive communism has been followed by subsequent phases that are marked by the modes of production based on private ownership, division of labour, class-conflict, and ideologies reflecting the interests of the ruling class.

Marx distinguishes between the following stages in the actual history of mankind– the Asiatic, the ancient Greek and Roman, the European feudal, and the modern capitalist. The Asiatic phase is described as a despotism without any private ownership of property. In the ancient Greek and Roman phases, there are both private as well as communal properties. Cities maintain their own production. The European feudalism marks the phase where lands are owned by a small number of people who become independent centres of production. There are serfs who become the working class. However, with the expansion of new machine production, the social relations of the feudal system break down. The new system that emerges is the modern capitalist system where the bourgeoisie attains power and develops its own culture.

## Critique of capitalism

► Private ownership of property

A capitalist society allows for the privileged class the private ownership of property. People with private property have the advantage that work is generated by them and the workers need to depend on them to earn their work. They determine the way the work progresses. The workers must obey them. Also, the private property is inherited by the subsequent generations. Thus, life begins unequally for the future generations of the workers as compared to that of the owners of the property.

► Division of labour and the exploitation

Then there is the division of labour. Labour is divided into small repetitive tasks. Each worker is given a small piece of work that he needs to repeat for a long time. The worker has neither the option to choose the work, nor the opportunity to do multiple kinds of work. The varied talent of the worker is ignored. In this process of labour, the worker is forced to work more for increasing the amount of production. But the worker is not paid accordingly. The owner continues to pay the worker with subsistence wages and enjoys himself all the profit earned due to high production rate. The workers remain poor even if they work more and the owner becomes rich through the same. As the amount of human labour available is more than sufficient, the workers who protest are threatened or fired. These mark the extents to which the workers are prone to exploitation in the capitalist system.

► An individual experiences alienation loses identity

### **Alienation**

An individual suffers alienation when he is prevented from realising his true essence. It is not merely a state of discomfort. The alienated individual suffers a violation; the humanity of the individual is compromised. He loses his identity and becomes estranged. Marx feels that in a capitalist society, the labourer or the working man experiences alienation in at least four different ways. The worker is alienated from the product of his work, from the process of his work, from his own self, and from other people.

In the capitalist economic system, the worker produces in accordance with the desire of others. The product is not an embodiment of the worker's creative expression. Thus, even if the workers are allowed to enjoy their product, they do not feel it as their own. Now, in the capitalist system, the product

is enjoyed by someone else, not the worker. And, even if it is an expression of the creativity of the workers, they are not allowed to enjoy it. Thus, workers become alienated from the product of their work.

► Under capitalism, a worker experiences alienation in four ways

The workers also suffer alienation from the process of work when they do not work out of a genuine desire to express and realise their skills and potentialities. Instead, even if the work does not suit the workers' passions, they are compelled to do so to earn their bread and remain alive. They soon feel bored and exhausted. The more they work in that manner, the less they feel human. They then find a sort of escape in fulfilling the animal needs of eating, drinking and sexuality. The capitalist system undermines the humanistic elements in the workers and makes them live like animals, merely meeting their physical needs. They hardly have any time to cultivate knowledge and culture. They are not treated as rational animals and live like ordinary animals but with a human body. Here, the worker is alienated from the essential feature of humanity, the sum-total of which Marx calls 'species-being.' As this is the case for all labourers in capitalist societies, there is no feeling of cooperation or respect. Rather, the workers compete. When the number of workers is greater than the amount of human labour required, each worker must ensure that he does not lose his work. Or else he fails to earn a living. A sense of competition and separation spreads, and each becomes selfish. This is how a worker gets alienated from other workers.

### **Ideology, Class-conflict and Revolution**

► Economic foundation of a society conditions its intellectual life

The economic structure of a society, Marx claims, is the base on which the culture and intellectual life of the society is built. All human thought in the realms of philosophy, religion, law, politics, ethics etc. are conditioned by the economic foundation of a society and the class division within it. Marx is famous for his words that it is not the thought process of a man that determines his life, instead it is his material life, his social existence, that determines the way he thinks and perceives.

Now, if the culture of a society is conditioned by the economic structure thereof, it is of no surprise that the culture that is developed therein would be that of the powerful class of people, the capitalists. They would impose their thought, their beliefs, and their way of perceiving life and the world on the working

► Ideologies are the creations of dominant economic class

► Class-conflict is inevitable

► Revolution takes place

► Dictatorship of the proletariat

class. Ideology is the term used by Marx to denote the system of ideas that the dominant class in society develops in their interest and which they forcefully impose on the subservient class. Marx thinks that such systems portray a distorted picture of reality, a falsified consciousness, that the dominant class can apply to defend and promote the economic structure again for their betterment.

Marx is convinced that if the social relations in a society continue in this manner, if the disparity in the life-conditions of the working class and the dominant class increases, a class-conflict inevitably follows. The working class would want themselves to come out of the chains and the ruling class would try their level best to protect their status by resisting the change.

For Hegel, the history proceeds dialectically by bringing explicit the inherent contradictions at a level and then resolving them to develop to the higher level. Similarly, Marx holds, the economic structure of a society paves the way for a revolution from within. When the ruling class, in view of earning higher profits, demands overproduction from the workers, the latter develops new methods, instruments and technologies of production. The growth of new forces of production gradually comes into conflict with the existing social relations and the distribution of property and income. Even though the ruling class would try putting chains to the overproduction, thereby thinking to resist the change, there comes a time when the working class, through a radical revolution, seizes power. All the ideologies of the ruling class would then disappear. The proletariat would generate their own modes of production which in turn would determine their own culture.

We have already discussed the problems that such a system generates and their indispensable result – the dictatorship of the proletariat. In Marx's words, the bourgeoisie produces its own grave-diggers. Marx acclaims that with the advancements in trade and technology, the capitalist system of the modern world would also witness revolution by the proletariat or the working class, who have hitherto been enslaved by the bourgeoisie. The proletariat would finally come to power and create its own modes of production. At this stage, the old ideology would be replaced by a new one.

### 3.1.3.3 The Synthesis: Classless Society

However, the dictatorship of the proletariat is only an interim stage before the final emergence of a classless so-



► Classless society with communal ownership as the culmination of historical change

ciety. The communist world that marks the end of the historical progress would be a world with no private property, no exploitation of men, and no class-conflict. Marx conceives it as a world where the society regulates the general production ‘from each according to his ability to each according to his need.’ This would enable an individual to do one thing today and another tomorrow. There is no division of labour. There is no competition among the fellow beings. One can hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, raise cattle in the evening, and criticise after dinner, as he wishes to. For this he need not become a hunter, a fisherman, a shepherd or a critic.

This is how Marx tells the story of man. It commences with primitive communism as thesis, passes to its anti-thesis in the long history of division of labour and exploitation that culminates in capitalism, and finally, returns in the synthesis to the advanced industrial communism of the future. It is also characterised by the long history of alienation experienced by the working man which finally comes to an end in the communism where he realises his potential.

## Summarized Overview

Karl Marx begins his philosophical journey as a Young Hegelian in Berlin. Radically interpreting the philosophy of Hegel, he decides to turn it upside down. The absolute idealism of Hegel is replaced by a historical materialism that proceeds dialectically. According to Marx, history is the progress of the man as a worker, from his state of alienation to the achievement of self-realisation. This progress of man does not happen in any transcendent realm, it happens in the material world. The character of the economy of a society is what determines the life of an individual. In the exploitative economic systems, of which capitalism is an extreme example, the man as a worker is forced to work to earn a living. The dominant class makes use of the labour power of the working class to maximize the profit. The worker is deprived of his essential freedom and human experience. He experiences different kinds of alienation. He becomes poorer through his work, but the capitalist gets richer by appropriating the unpaid hard work of the workers. The capitalists create an intellectual environment that promotes their own interests. Class-conflicts that emerge within the system between the oppressed working class and the oppressive capitalists gradually strengthen in suitable situations. Finally, the complete destruction of such systems paves way for the communism of future with neither private ownership of the property nor forced labour. The worker no more suffers exploitation. He gets the opportunity to express himself through desirable and enjoyable work. Marx’s ideas have made great impact not only in Philosophy, but also in the fields of economics, sociology and history.

## Self-Assessment

1. What does Marx mean by historical or dialectical materialism? Elaborate.
2. Explain the different kinds of alienation described by Marx.
3. Outline the essential features of the critique of capitalism given by Marx.
4. Give a brief account of Marx's depiction of history based on economic structure and class-conflicts.

## Assignments

1. Reflect upon Marx's statement – "Philosophers hitherto have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it".
2. Analyse the experiences of forced work and self-expressive work in your life.
3. Justify your views on Marx's point that consciousness is determined by material life.
4. Evaluate the critique of capitalism given by Marx.

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## UNIT 2

# MARX'S CRITIQUE OF MODERNITY

### Learning Outcomes

In this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ▶ appreciate Marx's critique of the modern capitalistic world
- ▶ understand the concept of commodity fetishism
- ▶ examine Marx's labour theory of value
- ▶ reflect upon the relationship between economic base and intellectual super-structure in a society

### Background

Karl Marx is known for his philosophy of historical or dialectical materialism. For him, the economic conditions of a society determine the life and thought process of the individuals in that society. Marx conceives the modern world as built on a capitalist economy. Capitalism has transformed a large part of the world. The advancement in technology, transportation, and communication etc. is heavily indebted to the strong impetus of capitalism. Even though the superficial picture of such a system makes us believe that the world is flying to the heights of prosperity, Marx attempts a critique of the same from the perspective of the workers. The sole aim of the capitalism is the accumulation of wealth. Marx explains how profit is generated in a capitalist economy by discussing several concepts like the real value of a commodity, the surplus value, wage labour etc. The condition of the workers in such an economy is horrible. They are prone to different levels of exploitation. This unit highlights the key themes from Marx's critique of modernity that dwells upon the force of capitalism.

### Keywords

Profit, Commodity fetishism, Use-value and exchange-value, Labour theory of value, Wage labour

## Discussion

### 3.2.1 Marx's Critique of Capitalist Modern World

Marx conceives the modern world as marked by the flourish of capitalism, which as a transformative force sweeps away the old system and imposes an altogether different one. Capitalism has replaced the traditional feudal economic order with a new society. With capitalism, there emerge the wealthy bourgeoisie who owns vast means of production, the proletariat who are forced to sell their labour to earn a meagre livelihood, the modern state that ensures the interests of the dominant class, the economy constituted of giant machine-based factories which replace small-scale manufacture and the modern science and technology that harness human knowledge for the sole objective of profit making. The capitalist revolution abolishes all the strands of the traditional way of living. All relations become money relations and people connect with each other out of nothing but self-interest. Industrial capitalism results in the emergence of new cities. The urban population increases and the rural life gradually gets undermined. New modes of transportation and communication are invented, through which the nations connect to each other. Production and consumption attain a cosmopolitan character. Even the most barbarian lives are driven to the new civilization.

► Modern world is characterised by the transformative force of capitalism

► Marx views the functioning of capitalism from the standpoint of the working class

Marx diagnoses the condition of the modern world from the standpoint of the working class. It turns out to be a critique of capitalism. He conducts an eye-opening examination of the dynamics of the capitalist economy that affect the life of workers who toil day-to-day in the harsh industrial workplace. Marx's writings on the origins of capitalism, the way it functions, and the way it tends to develop, focus on the central problem of the fate of the working class in the society. He unveils certain bitter facts about the capitalist system which have been hitherto neglected. He discovers that the capitalist economic order is fundamentally irrational and inhuman. It is grounded in the exploitation and alienation of the working class.

Marx's critique separates reality from the delusive appearance of things. He shatters the ideological beliefs set up and spread by the ruling class to justify the existence of the capitalist economy. There is no harmonious relationship between the



► Marx abolishes the delusive appearance of capitalism

working class and the ruling class. Instead, there is a conflict of interests. The ruling class and the working class stand in opposition to each other as the oppressors and the oppressed respectively. Marx provides a picture of forced labour where the propertyless workers are compelled to sell their labour power to the owners as the means of production. He destroys the widespread picture of an economic utopia where individual freedom is ensured by the market forces. The society is exploitative; it does not enable the individuals to express their potential. In place of an economic structure that satisfies the needs of the population, the sole aim of the existing system is to maximize profit. Disproving all claims that designate capitalism as an eternal natural necessity and the final destiny of mankind, Marx puts forward the idea of a better society devoid of exploitation and class-conflicts.

We now move on to a brief account of the key themes discussed in Marx's critical diagnosis of the modern system.

### 3.2.1.1 Profit as the Aim of Production

► Private ownership of the means and forces of production

According to Marx, capitalistic mode of production is one in which few people own the major forces or means of production (land, raw materials, tools and instruments etc.) as their private property. They employ other people, who own nothing but their labour power, as workers.

► Maximization of profit as the sole aim

Rather than producing goods for satisfying human needs like food, clothing, education etc., the sole objective of the capitalistic production is to earn more and more money. Money is spent to collect raw materials and to set up better production technology. Money is also spent for labour. The goods produced are later sold to earn money. The total money spent in various stages of production can be termed the cost of production. The produced goods are always sold at a higher price than the cost of production. The difference between the cost of production and the money earned by the sale of the product gives the profit. The capitalist system always aims for the maximization of profit. It is not the fulfilment of human needs that motivates production of goods, but the opportunity that it provides to reap profit which leads to the accumulation of wealth. However, the explanation for how profit is possible in a capitalist economy is not that simple. Marx discusses the same through the concepts like use-value and exchange-value of goods, labour theory of value, and commodity fetishism.

### 3.2.1.2 Value of a Commodity

#### ► Use-value of a commodity

Use-value of something is the value it has for us when we use it. The use-value of the air we breathe is that without it we cannot survive. The use-value of any food is that it satisfies our hunger. It also allows us to fulfil our cravings for different tastes. Similarly, any commodity produced has a use-value. It is what makes people buy and sell the same. Chairs, tables, machines, smartphones, food items – all such produced goods have their own use-value for us.

#### ► Exchange-value of a commodity

The exchange-value of a commodity comes into play when it is bought or sold. It is the item's worth in relation to other items. It expresses the proportion in which the use-value of a commodity can be exchanged for the use-value of another. One kilogram of rice may be traded for two kilograms of iron. One shirt may be traded with a pair of shoes. This exchange-value fluctuates according to the ups and downs of the market. It is not an intrinsic or inherent value of the commodity.

#### ► The role of human labour in the production

Commodities differ qualitatively in their use-values. The use-value of a chair is different from that of a book. But, the exchange-value is quantitatively determined. The commodities, with different use-values, are compared with one another based on some quantitative measure. Exchange of commodities is an act characterised by an abstraction from the use-value. When we make abstraction from the use-value, we are keeping out of consideration all the natural and material features peculiar to the commodity that constitute its use-value. Similarly, if we consider the commodities as the product of peculiar labour, i.e., rice as that of farmer, table as that of carpenter, etc., the comparison is impossible. So, such characteristics of the commodities are also abstracted away. What we are left with as common to the commodities that need to be exchanged with one another is human labour in the abstract. Whether of the farmer or the carpenter, there is labour in the making of the commodity.

#### ► Labour theory of value

Marx concludes that the real value of a commodity in the economy is constituted solely of the human labour needed to produce the same. The value of cotton reflects the human labour behind its planting, harvesting and processing. Even the use of machinery implies human labour as the machines are themselves the products of human labour. This is called the labour theory of value that Marx is said to have borrowed from the British economists Adam Smith and David Ricardo.

► Commodity fetishism

Marx argues that popular economic theories neglect the importance of human labour. The value of a commodity is thought of as something that objectively exist in the commodity and not as the expression of the labour behind its production. Marx considers this as a kind of superstition. Instead of realising the labour that produces the commodity and makes it 'valued,' the commodity is considered as endowed with some mysterious quality. Marx calls it 'the fetishism of commodities.' He gives an analogy to this from religion. In the world of religious superstitions, the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life. They are often conceived in relation to one another as well as to the human race. Similarly, in the world of commodities, that which is the product of human labour and that which possesses value because of human labour is considered as having some special status. The tendency to focus on produced commodities as soon as they are created while ignoring the labour behind them is described by Marx as a kind of fetishism.

► Human labour is treated as a commodity

In the capitalist system, the human labour itself becomes a commodity. The people of the working class possess nothing but physical labour as their own. They sell it to the capitalists who need labour for production. The worker gets a subsistence wage in return and must make a living out of the same. In other words, human labour is a commodity with its own use-value and exchange-value. The capitalists buy, use and sell this commodity just like other commodities.

► Wage labour is considered as one among the many commodities in production

The use-value of human labour with respect to the capitalists is that it produces other commodities that can be sold to earn money. The exchange-value of the human labour is what the capitalist needs to pay in order to manage the human labour for his needs. The economic structure allows the capitalist to spend only a meagre amount as wages for the workers. The worker is paid only what is required to meet the minimum needs of life, i.e., only what is required to keep the worker alive. Marx uses the term wage labour to express the situation of human labour being treated as a commodity. The reason for this is nothing but the features of the capitalist economy where the working classes have no other way of living and the other classes own the means of production as their private property.

The capitalist can force the worker to work for longer hours and thus increase the production. By selling the extra goods

► Surplus value and the profit of the capitalist

so produced, he earns more money. However, he still pays the worker the subsistence wage. The difference between the value of the commodities produced by the worker and the value of the wages paid to the worker is termed by Marx as the surplus value. This makes up the profit of the capitalist.

► The poor workers are exploited by the capitalist

Is not the worker aware that his labour is being commodified? Is not he aware that he is ill-treated? Cannot he decide himself not to be a prey of the capitalist? The response for the first two questions is an affirmation whereas a big 'no' is the answer for the last one. Because, the worker is in such a situation that either he should be satisfied in what he is subjected to or he must give up his wish to live. The number of workers in a capitalist economy is always higher than the amount of work needed for production. The workers are thus in competition to ensure that they get the opportunity to sell their labour to earn their livelihood. Imagine that a worker protests the existing system and refuses to work unless his demand, say for better wages, is not approved. As the capitalist is always provided with an additional group of unemployed people who are ready to sell their labour even for a meagre wage, he can easily fire the protesting worker and hire another. Marx denotes the unemployed group using the term 'industrial reserve army.' In a way, the working class is prone to severe exploitation in the capitalist society.

► Exploitation of the worker leads to his alienation

#### 3.2.1.4 The Alienated Worker

Workers are exploited in the capitalist system as their unpaid labour is appropriated by the capitalist as their profit. As the workers are left to live a substandard life that hardly feels humane, they are in fact alienated. Based on the philosophical conception of human nature, needs and capacities, Marx explains four distinct but interrelated aspects of the phenomenon of alienation that a worker experiences in the capitalist society. All of them describe the detrimental effect of capitalism on the working class.

The worker is alienated from the product of his work. The worker, despite all the hard work he has done for the production, does not own the final product. He might have put his life in cultivating a crop. But in the end the grains are owned by the land-owner, who in turn sells them in the market where somebody else buys and uses the same. The worker cannot possess, consume or enjoy the product of his work. The prod-

► Alienation from the product of work

uct even adds to the power exercised on him by the capitalist. The product stands as something alien to the producer: “It is true that labour produces for the rich wonderful things – but for the worker it produces privation. It produces palaces – but for the worker, hovels. It produces beauty – but for the worker, deformity” (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844).

► Alienation from the work

The worker is also alienated from his work or the productive activity. The worker does not work out of his desire to express his creativity. He is forced to work; the work is imposed upon him. He has no other option than to do the work allotted to him even though he does not like it, or else he risks his livelihood. According to Marx, humans have the exclusive capacity for free and self-actualising labour. He compares the work of a human being with that of a spider and a honeybee. The spider weaves its web like a weaver and the honeybee constructs its honeycomb cells like an architect. But what makes even the worst human architect from the insects is that the human conceives the construction in his mind before he actualises the same in the concrete product. Instead of contributing to the physical and mental development of the individual, work under capitalism leads to the mortification of both body and mind.

► Alienation from the ‘species-being’

The worker under capitalism is alienated from his ‘species-being,’ his essential nature as a human. There is no provision for the cultivation of knowledge, culture or any sort of rational expression. The worker, being exhausted because of the tormenting work, feels at home only while indulging in the animal needs of eating, drinking and procreating. He no longer lives a human life.

► Alienation from other workers

All the individuals in a capitalist society become egoistic. There is no feeling of cooperation and respect for the fellow beings. Under capitalism, all social relationships are transformed into competitive economic relationships. People connect with each other only out of self-interest. Each individual pays heed only to himself. No man worries about the other. Capitalism thus results also in the estrangement of man from man.

Alienation is not a state of mind that can be overcome by disciplining the thought. It is not a psychological imbalance that can be cured through drugs and therapy. It is a social condition. It arises from the inner-workings of the capitalist econ-

► Alienation can be overcome only by changing the economic condition

► Economic structure forms the base for the intellectual realm or superstructure

► Control over material production ensures control over mental production

► Ideologies are the distorted expressions of reality put forward by the dominant class

omy. Alienation can be overcome only by abolishing the irrational economic structure of the society. It is interesting to note that Marx describes religion as the opium through which man attempts a temporary escape from the reality of suffering by contemplating upon a heavenly life.

### 3.2.1.5 Base and Superstructure

Marx uses the term superstructure to denote all that men say, imagine, and conceive. This includes the realms of politics, laws, morality, religion, philosophy etc. For Marx, the economic structure of a society – the mode of production and the relations of production – forms the base on which the superstructure is built. Replacing the traditional view that our material life is determined by our thought process. Marx remarks that it is our material life, our position in the economic structure of our society, that determines the way we think and behave.

The dominant class in the economy always develops their own culture and enforces the same on the subservient class. Marx contends that if we critically examine the culture, ethics, legal system etc. that is dominant in any society, we could see that they all maintain the interests of the class which is dominant in that society based on its economic structure. The class which is the ruling material force is also the ruling intellectual force therein. Control over material production ensures control over mental production. The ruling ideas of a society are nothing but the ideal expressions that justify the existing material condition. They may seem true and real from the perspective of the ruling class. But from the perspective of the oppressed, the same would seem a distorted picture of reality, a false depiction. Marx appears so sure about this claim that he even asks whether a deep intuition is necessary to comprehend this relation between the material and ideal structures of a society.

Marx calls such distorted versions of reality as ideologies. In every society with class-conflicts, the popular life-view and culture is in accordance with the interests of the dominant class. Marx believes that the history of mankind is a history of such ideologies. All the principal values and ideals in the history can be shown as defending the status of the dominant class of each period. They deceptively hide the truth of the exploitative injustice and dehumanising aspects of the society from being recognised and understood by the exploited class of people.



► Marx's concept of ideology enforces serious criticism of all systems

Marx's call for the critical investigating of the origin of the intellectual milieu of a society to find out whether it is an ideological system set up by the then-dominant class of that society, has made tremendous influence in the twentieth century. It is still a prominent way of approaching the theories with respect to the elements of culture – social organisations, mass media, academia, scholarly and technical publications, ethical code of conduct, etiquette etc. All these are now regarded as potentially bound to the interests of some identifiable social group.

## Summarized Overview

The modern capitalistic world appears to many as an eminent and rational way of organising the production and distribution of goods. They believe that the modern world fuelled by capitalism promotes effective allocation of resources and fosters economic growth. Ambitious individuals are provided with the opportunities to become rich and consumers are offered a variety of products to choose from.

However, what Marx presents is a far more critical view of the modernity and its capitalist base. Such a view arises out of the difference in the yardstick that he uses to measure the effectiveness of the system. Marx is not that much concerned about the profit-seeking capitalist or the consumers who are focused only on the availability of a vast array of products and services at reasonable prices. He wants to know what the modern world means to the producers, the working class. Instead of making the capitalist market as the main centre of his study, Marx engages with the world of human labour that lies beneath. He draws attention to the world of hardships marked by the inhumane lives of the working class which has hitherto been invisible because of the enticing superficial picture of the capitalist economy.

Marx has gained enormous importance as one of the forerunners in theorising modernity. For him, the capitalist modern society is not the end, but only a transitional stage. The inherent contradictions in capitalism will gradually pave way for its own destruction. The world will then witness an interim stage of the dictatorship of the working class. What Marx envisions as the goal of humanity is a communist society without exploitation, alienation and class-conflicts. He believes that it is an inevitable result of the historical progress of humanity.

## Self-Assessment

1. Explain Marx's labour theory of value.
2. How does the capitalist generate profit?
3. What do the terms 'base' and 'superstructure' stand for in Marx's philosophy?
4. Give an account of the exploitation of workers in a capitalist economy.

## Assignments

1. Analyse how profit becomes the sole ground for the functioning of a capitalist economy.
2. Attempt a study of different commodities based on their use-value and exchange-value.
3. Discuss commodity fetishism and the neglect of human labour.
4. Evaluate the character of the modern world built upon capitalism.

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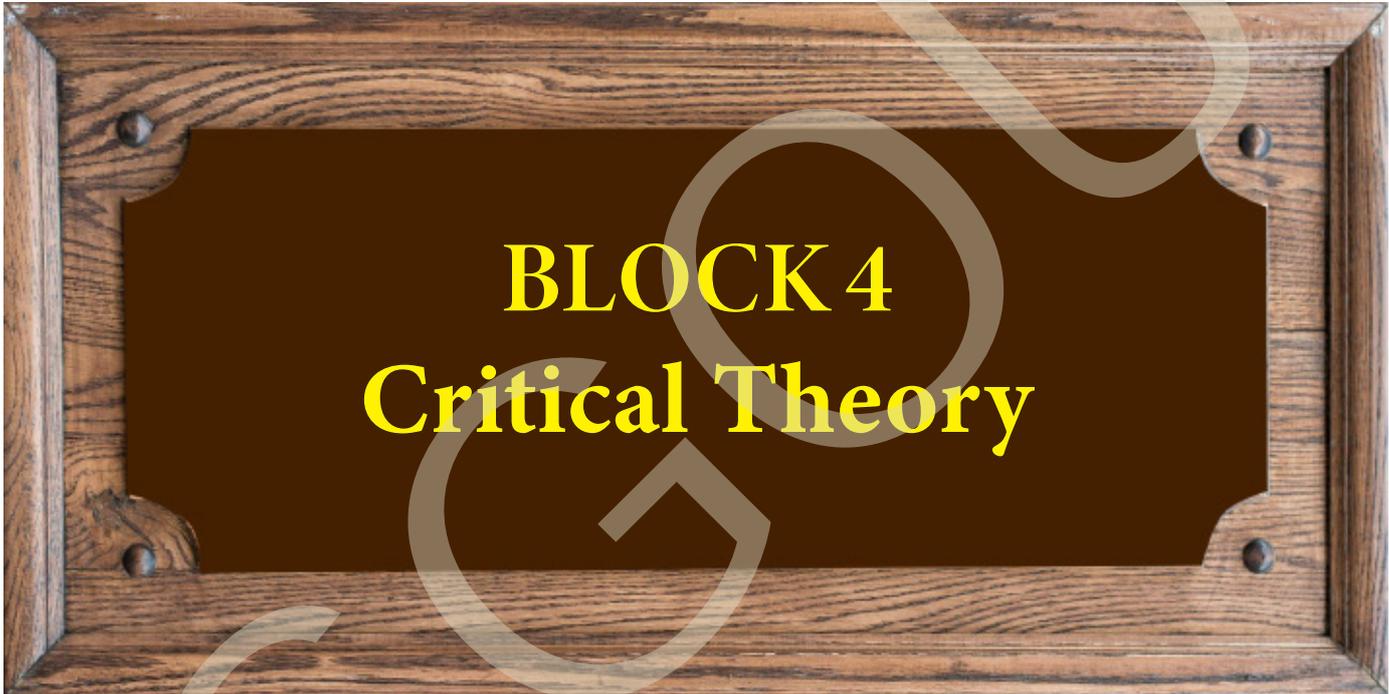
### Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

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**BLOCK 4**  
**Critical Theory**

# UNIT 1

## ORIGINS AND FOUNDATIONS OF CRITICAL SCHOOLS

### Learning Outcomes

In this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ▶ interpret the socio-political milieu of the early twentieth century
- ▶ understand the limitations of Marx's historical materialism
- ▶ appreciate the efforts of the founding figures of the Frankfurt School
- ▶ analyse the methodology of critical theory

### Background

The early twentieth century disproves the claims of Marx's historical materialism. Capitalism does not collapse and the working class lacks revolutionary attitude. Fascist ideologies succeed in gaining the support of the masses. Inspired by the thoughts of a group of Marxists who re-examined the theories of Marx and emphasized the need for a critical approach to explain the course of events, a team of intellectuals associated with the Institute of Social Research at Frankfurt developed a critical theory of society. The critical theory unravels the hidden features that influence one's understanding of the society and the engagement within. The theorists of the Frankfurt School apply the method of critique to understand the functioning of the culture, institutional framework and individual personality of the modern industrialised society. They undertake an interdisciplinary approach to get an enhanced understanding of the social phenomena which would aid in effecting social changes that lead to the emancipation of the exploited people. This unit outlines the historical context in which the critical theory arises and introduces the basic methodology of the same as conceived by its founding figures.



## Keywords

Historical materialism, Western Marxism, Frankfurt school, Critical theory, Immanent critique, Interdisciplinary approach

## Discussion

► Orthodox Marxism adheres to Marx's historical materialism

► Totalitarian state under Stalin in Russia

### 4.1.1 Critical Theory: Socio-political Roots

Orthodox Marxism adheres heavily to the historical materialism or economic determinism put forward by Marx and believes that a class society functions according to certain laws that are grounded in the characteristics of the economic structure of that society. Once the laws are discovered and the strands in the economic structure are made explicit, it could be predicted that the oppressed class with the revolutionary consciousness would mobilize, resulting in the collapse of the capitalist system and the emergence of a socialist economy.

However, the early decades of the twentieth century, especially the years after the first World War, witness a series of events which disprove the claims of orthodox Marxism. The Russian revolution in 1917 is marked by the Bolshevik Party's seizure of power. Even though the leader Lenin is inspired by the Marxist thought, he feels that the then-prevalent conditions in Russia are not ripe for the revolution envisioned by Marx. There has not been sufficient industrial development in Russia to pave way for mature class relations which could result in the majority of the population becoming industrial workers. As the working class has not attained the revolutionary consciousness, Lenin thinks that the Communist Party should lead the revolution from the front. On this ground, he refuses to share power with less revolutionary parties. The centralization of authority, enforcement of the Party discipline and restriction of democratic worker control over industrial production are justified as means to defend the regime from counter-reactions. Although the centralized regime of Lenin is largely more bureaucratic than what Marx would have envisioned, there is still some economic freedom and worker democracy. The economic policy under Lenin allows free enterprise in the agricultural sector and the leasing of many national and state businesses to individuals and groups. However, when Stalin comes to power in 1925, he abolishes the existing economic

policy, and destroys the remaining traces of freedom and democracy.

► Rise of Nazi Germany under Adolf Hitler

On the other side, in Germany, by the end of the First World War, the German Social Democratic Party is in power. In 1919, the same government cooperates with some reactionary elements of the military in brutally suppressing a revolt of the workers. The government thus loses the support of the working class. It also fails to solve the economic problems of the country including inflation and unemployment. The assaults on the government come from different sources, and finally, in 1933, the government falls, leading to the rise of the National Socialists led by Adolf Hitler. The Nazi Germany under Hitler becomes a well organised and determined force. The small independent liberal and democratic parties become ineffective in protesting and they are soon suppressed. The society under national socialists shares the bureaucratic character of the Western capitalist system.

- Fascism gained support from a major part of the working class
- Failure of Marx's predictions about capitalism and revolution

The Hitler-Stalin pact is signed in 1939. It is indeed an irony that the Marxist line that marks the struggle against authoritarian capitalism somehow leads to the emergence of fascism in Europe. Interestingly, fascism gains support even from a major part of the working class. This casts doubt on the Marx's view that the proletariat would be the agent of revolution, at the global level, against the authoritative nature of capitalist societies. In addition, capitalism progresses in a way that had not been anticipated by Marx. What is known as the Great Depression of the 1930s, does not result in the collapse of capitalism. Instead, there happens a gradual recovery from the Depression. The limitations of liberal capitalism are overcome by monopoly or state capitalism which is not something that Marx predicted. To sum up, it can be said that two of the important predictions of Marxian historical or dialectical materialism – that capitalism would collapse due to internal crises and the proletariat would attain a revolutionary consciousness world wide – are disproved by the above-mentioned events of the early twentieth century.

### 4.1.2 Critical Theory: Intellectual Roots

In the light of the events that mark deviations from Marx's claims, many Marxists feel that a critique and revision of the theory of society taken for granted by the orthodox Marxism, is necessary. Karl Korsch, Georg Lukács, Antonio Gramsci, Wilhelm Reich etc. are the main figures of the movement.



- ▶ Western Marxists call for a revision of Marxist theory
- ▶ Western Marxists reject the theory that social change exclusively depends on deterministic laws of economics

- ▶ Karl Korsch points to the subjective factors of social change

- ▶ Georg Lukács on reification stunting the consciousness of the working class

- ▶ Antonio Gramsci on hegemony
- ▶ Dominant class successfully conditions the thought process of the working class

These thinkers, known as Western Marxists for being different from Orthodox Marxism, dismiss the latter's economic determinism and think that any social change depends not exclusively on the deterministic laws of economics but also on some other factors.

Karl Korsch, in his groundbreaking work *Marxism and Philosophy* (1923), claims that there is a subjective factor that plays a significant role in bringing about radical political activity. The genesis of social change could be in the consciousness of the agents of transformation (workers) rather than in any kind of objective laws that exist outside the agents. Only when the working class critically comprehends the social reality that lies beneath the distorted versions of the bourgeois ideology, will it attain the necessary revolutionary consciousness. The social and psychological conditions of the working class need to be examined therefore.

Georg Lukács shares the same view in his work *History and Class Consciousness* (1923). He believes that the worker can critically engage with the social world only when he is able to grasp the relational structure of the society in its depth. The absence of the worker's resistance and revolution against the suppressive characteristics of a society is due to the blockage in his rational comprehension of the functioning of the society. Lukács introduces the concept of reification, according to which the commodity fetishism of the capitalist society has ignored all human relations. According to him, reification stunts the consciousness of the working class and deprives them of the ability for any new emancipatory activity.

Antonio Gramsci probes into the question – why is there less reaction against the capitalist system even though the system is exploitative and oppressive? He discovers that the dominant class has been successfully conditioning the thought process of the working class according to the norms and ideals implemented by the former. He uses the term 'hegemony' to explain the theory by which the culture of the dominant class is woven into the fabric of family life, civil society, education system etc. The result is that the working class is persuaded to endorse the same system that in reality exploits them. He calls for a critique of culture to understand the ways in which the social conditioning by the dominant inhibits the critical consciousness of the dominated.

► Wilhelm Reich on how repression of primitive drives and passions in the individuals result in the embrace of authoritarianism

► Western Marxists' critical attitude inspires the Frankfurt school

► Establishment of the Institute of Social Research at Frankfurt

Wilhelm Reich addresses this as an interesting problem. What is to be explained is not that 'the hungry man steals and the exploited man strikes,' but that 'the hungry man does not steal and the exploited man does not strike.' He traces the reasons, for the limited reaction of the working class against fascism, in the attitudes and emotions of the personality structure of the workers. He appeals to the theory of Freud and remarks that it is the repression of primitive drives and passions in the individuals that result in the embrace of authoritarianism under appropriate situations.

The Western Marxists believe that the main problem lies in the degeneration of Marx's critical method. The Marxist movement has taken up the wise words of their founding father, but ignored his critical intellect. It is the dogmatic rise in the Marxist thought that makes it difficult to get rid of the failing of specific claims of the system. So, they emphasize the *critical* approach of Marxism rather than its *systematic* claims. The development of the Institute of Social Research which later becomes known as the Frankfurt School, is indebted to the framework put forward by the Western Marxists. The Frankfurt School reinvents the critical method of Marx in the form of critical theory.

### 4.1.3 Frankfurt School and its Founding Figures

The Institute of Social Research, affiliated to the University of Frankfurt, gets established in Germany, in 1923. Carl Grunberg, an avowed Marxist, becomes the director of the institute. After the death of Grunberg in 1929, Horkheimer replaces him in the following year. Theodor W. Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Walter Benjamin etc. are the extraordinary intellectuals who, with Horkheimer, lead the Frankfurt School forward. The Institute gets transferred to Geneva when the Nazis rise to power in Germany. Later it moves to New York and then to California. In the 1950s, the Institute gets re-established in Frankfurt. In the 1960s, Jurgen Habermas becomes the leading figure of what is known as the second generation of the Frankfurt School.

### Max Horkheimer

Horkheimer (1895 – 1973) is said to have studied with Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger in Freiburg before the 1920s. He becomes the director of the Institute of Social Research in 1930. His main works include *Critical Theory*,



- ▶ Horkheimer lays the foundation for critical theory

*Eclipse of Reason, Dialectic of Enlightenment* (co-authored with Theodor W. Adorno), and *Critique of Instrumental Reason*. Horkheimer propounds the methodology of critical theory in the initial stages of its development. Horkheimer coins the term ‘critical theory.’ He distinguishes critical theory from other competing philosophies.

- ▶ Focus of the Frankfurt School on bridging the gap between theory and activity

Horkheimer also lays the platform for interdisciplinary research in the study of social life. After officially assuming the directorship of the Institute, he rejects the views of Grunberg who attempts to deduce social phenomena from the material realm, i.e., the economic conditions. Horkheimer directs that the members of the Institute must explore the interconnections between the economy, the psychic development of the individual and the transformations in science, art, religion, law, ethics, fashion, sport, lifestyle etc. The Frankfurt School, under his leadership, focuses on bridging the gap between theory and activity. Horkheimer demonstrates how liberal capitalism paves way for totalitarianism by creating the psychological, racial, and political foundations for the same. He talks much about the liberation of individual experience from all constraints. His views on mass culture, instrumental rationality, and the authoritarian state can be seen in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), which he co-authored with Adorno.

- ▶ Strong collaboration with Horkheimer

### Theodor Adorno

Adorno (1903 – 1969) is a brilliant personality who excels in musicology, philosophy, sociology and psychology. He collaborates with Horkheimer and the Frankfurt school for a long period. He becomes the director of the Institute of Social Research for a few years in the era between Horkheimer and Habermas. His famous works include *Minima Moralia, Dialectic of Enlightenment, Negative Dialectics, Philosophy of Modern Music, Against Epistemology* etc. Being well versed in multiple disciplines, Adorno becomes an embodiment of the interdisciplinary approach of the Frankfurt school. He is said to be the most dazzling philosophical mind of his age.

Adorno is sceptical of all systems and commits himself to the notion of negative dialectic. According to him, identity thinking subsumes all objects under certain general concepts. The particular gets dissolved in the universal. He introduces negative dialectics that explores non-identity. He believes that the falseness of the claims of identity thinking is revealed by

- ▶ Adorno introduces negative dialectics and a strong critique of rationality

- ▶ Marcuse and the evolution of his thought

- ▶ Marcuse on one-dimensional orientation of thought and behaviour
- ▶ One-dimensional man and society lose the ability for critical thought

negative dialectics. Negative dialectics assesses the relation between the properties attributed to the universal concept and the actual features of the object subsumed under the concept. The assessment reveals specific dimensions of the object that are inaccessible to the dogmatic application of categories by identity thinking. Adorno rejects all systems that identify the individual with the whole. Resistance, for him, lies in the non-identification of the individual and the society. Adorno intends to expose the inherent flaws in civilization. He and Horkheimer in the *Dialectic of enlightenment*, attempt a genealogy of human reason. Their analysis of the human history reveals how rationality, that promised to liberate human beings from the constraints of nature, has now become the instrument of domination.

Marcuse (1898-1979) is said to have initially assisted the existentialist philosopher, Martin Heidegger, from 1928 to 1932. He becomes disenchanted with Heidegger when the latter becomes supportive of the Nazism of Hitler. He joins the Frankfurt School in 1933. Marcuse's major works include *Studies in Critical Philosophy*, *Eros and Civilization*, *Soviet Marxism*, *One-Dimensional Man*, *An Essay on Liberation* etc.

Being a member of the Frankfurt school, Marcuse critically examines the liberal state, the relation between monopoly capitalism and fascism, and the degeneration of communism. He appreciates the importance of Marx's early manuscripts. He questions the legitimacy of Stalin's regime as a Marxist society. He attempts to integrate the theories of Freud and Heidegger with Marxism. Many of his ideas like happy consciousness, repressive de-sublimation, and the great refusal gain popularity. In his signature work *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse argues that the advanced industrial society, through mass media, advertising, industrial management and other modern modes of thought, has created a false consciousness in the individuals, which further persuades them to conform to the existing system. What results is an affluent society with one-dimensional orientation of thought and behaviour. The individuals lose the ability for critical thought, and the inspiration to behave differently. Against this, Marcuse calls for the great refusal – a saying 'NO' to the various forms of repression and domination. We will discuss his views in the upcoming units. Marcuse's works *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) and *An Essay on Liberation* (1969) play significant role in stimulating the rise of the New Left in the 1960s.



## Walter Benjamin

► Literary critic, essayist and philosopher

Benjamin (1892 – 1940) is a literary critic, essayist and philosopher. His writings influence Adorno. His efforts to develop a politically oriented, materialist aesthetic theory serves as an important stimulus for the Frankfurt school. He commits suicide in 1940 while trying to escape from the Nazis. His popular works are *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Production* and *Theses on the Philosophy of History*.

► For Benjamin, art assisted by modern technology is a medium for social change

Benjamin's essays are fascinating and provocative. They explore the aesthetic impact that modernity has on individual experience and daily life. He reacts against the fatalism of the scientific socialism or the economic determinism. He is contemptuous of the way in which scientific socialism has made classless society as an unattainable ideal. He wishes to reclaim the utopian ideals of history and thinks that modern aesthetic experience could become a medium for social transformation. In his *The Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility* (1936), Benjamin discusses the rise of modern technologies such as photography and film that make mechanical reproduction possible. He feels that the unique aura and authenticity of the art in its original space and time are lost in the mechanical reproduction. However, he believes that new ways of experiencing art would effect changes in perception and modes of collective engagement. It would open, for the people, a way to perceive the modern phenomena which are otherwise ungraspable for them. These new paths of aesthetic experience, Benjamin hopes, can become politically useful against fascism and in favour of socialism. Whereas Adorno sees the widespread technologization of art as strengthening the ideological manipulation of the minds of people, Benjamin sees the same as a way for emancipation.

► Frankfurt school applies the method of critique to understand the modern society

### 4.1.4 Critical Theory: Main features

The Western Marxists bring a noticeable turn in the direction of Marxist theory in the twentieth century. Their focus on the subjective and psychological dimensions of the individuals, the ways in which dominant culture shapes consciousness etc. form the building blocks for the subsequent generation of thinkers of the Frankfurt school who become known as Critical theorists. The new group of critical thinkers call for a critique of culture, institutions, modern technology,

structure of family life, the character of a modern person etc. to understand the complex ways in which the modern society functions. They integrate various insights into a coherent framework and research paradigm to bring about transformations in the society.

#### 4.1.4.1 Problems that Seek Explanation

The members of the Frankfurt school realise that many of the events of the early twentieth century pose different problems that cannot be explained by the existing theories. A brief outline of the problems, on which an introduction has been given in the earlier section, is as follows.

► Critical theorists confront the problems that existing theories fail to explain

1. The Frankfurt school notices that the numerous labour movements in Europe have not developed into a unified struggle of all workers as anticipated by Marx. The reasons that hinder it are not clear.
2. Authoritarianism and the development of bureaucracy have been increasing day by day. How can this be understood? Nazism and fascism have dominated large part of Europe. How could these movements attain immense support?
3. Social relationships, especially originating in the family, have been undergoing some radical changes. Where is the change heading to? How will this affect the development of an individual?
4. Culture has been prone to manipulation. What might be the grounds for the same and how would they affect everyday life?
5. Marx has envisioned a qualitatively different socialist society in which people would not have to bother much about their material needs and could explore their potentialities through self-expressive works. Orthodox Marxism has led to a fascist society under the so-called Socialist Party. The new society is one in which people have become more materialistic. Is socialism a utopian ideal? Is there any possibility for an effective socialist practice?



#### 4.1.4.2 Limitations of Traditional Theories

- ▶ Traditional theories versus critical theory
- ▶ Traditional theories ignore the historical context within which the theories developed

- ▶ Hegel's dialectic method influences the critical approach

- ▶ Limitations of positivistic and idealistic approaches

In his essay 'Traditional and Critical Theory,' Horkheimer distinguishes critical theory from the existing traditional theories. Traditional theories of reality like materialism, idealism etc. take for granted that a complete knowledge of reality is possible and that their methods are sufficient for the same. Horkheimer points out that each of those theories ignores the historical context of their development. According to him, the way of thinking, the choice of suitable materials, the use of names and words etc. of a theory are influenced by the historical context in which it arises.

Horkheimer endorses the dialectical method of Hegel but rejects the latter's claim for the exact vision of totality. He states that each system of thought is incomplete. The critical approach of the dialectic reveals the insufficiencies and imperfections of the systems that claim to possess the truth. The dialectic exposes the inherent contradictions in the system and leads us to the next level. There is no complete picture of reality. Even the idea of a subject who knows everything in totality is a delusion. However, it does not mean that all the systems hitherto emerged need to be nullified through a sceptical attitude. Horkheimer says that each system grasps a particular dimension of reality which enhances our knowledge.

Horkheimer is against the positivistic approach that attempts to understand the social world through the methods of natural sciences. The experimental method of the sciences that claim objectivity ignores human potentialities and freedom. Such a method treats all social events as facts determined by certain laws. It is not open to the dynamism of the human mind, its feelings and passions which brings about social changes. Moreover, over-emphasis on sense-experience is also not acceptable. Horkheimer relates the historical materialism of Marx, which according to the orthodox Marxists is the complete description of social world, as a version of positivism and rejects the same. Idealist metaphysics that claims the identity of subject and object is also rejected on the ground that there is an ever-present tension between the object as known by the subject, and the actual transient nature of the object.

For Horkheimer, the social world continuously restructures itself. Thus, he criticizes the claim for the knowledge of a complete or perfect picture of social phenomena: "The claim

- ▶ No knowledge of social phenomena is absolute and complete
- ▶ Irreducible tension between concept and being

- ▶ Critical theory takes nothing for granted
- ▶ Watchfulness against one's own error and readiness to accept changes

that there is an absolute order and an absolute demand made upon men always presupposes a claim to know the whole, the totality of things, the infinite. But if our knowledge is in fact not yet final, if there is an irreducible tension between concept and being, then no proposition can claim the dignity of perfect knowledge. Knowledge of the infinite must itself be infinite, and a knowledge which is admittedly imperfect is not a knowledge of the absolute” (Horkheimer 27).

#### 4.1.4.3 Method of Immanent Critique

There is no defined criterion for critical theory. It takes nothing for granted. Critique proceeds from within and does not impose any arbitrary criteria from the outside for the evaluation. The immanent critique of a concept leads to the awareness of the inherent limitations. The concept fails only by its own standards. The hidden contradictions and possibilities are comprehended and the previous image is transcended. This method overcomes the charge of relativism as well. The theory which seems right today may disappear one day because of the changes in the historical and practical interests that played a role in the conceptual development of the theory, or due to the disappearance of the things and conditions to which the theory refers. However, in any case, a later correction does not mean that what was accepted as truth in the earlier stage was false. Uncovering the limitedness and one-sidedness of various systems of thoughts is an important aspect of the process of knowledge enhancement. Refusing to claim perfection in one's knowledge that possesses accuracy to the highest degree as of now and being open to the possibility of a justified criticism of the same in the future – i.e., watchfulness against one's own error and readiness to accommodate changes – are desirable qualities.

While studying the social world, the critical theory begins with certain pre-existing conceptual principles and standards of understanding the social phenomena. The implications and consequences of the principles are then unfolded which lead to a re-examination and reassessment of the phenomena in the light of the revealed implications. The critical theory when applied to the social world generates an enhanced understanding of the existing atmosphere. For example, the critique of a capitalist society that places justice, equality, freedom etc. at the centre of its functioning shows how the actual practice goes against the ideals. The contradictions between ideology

► Critique enhances understanding

of the bourgeoisie and the existent conditions of the working class are revealed. This enhanced understanding of the context evokes the revolutionary consciousness that potentially leads to social transformation. Critical theory is negative in the sense that it focuses more on the denial of the absoluteness of all systems rather than contributing to any new system. At the same time, it has a positive dimension in that it points to the limitations and concealed possibilities of an existing order.

#### 4.1.4.4 Need for an Interdisciplinary Approach

► Integration of the inputs from multiple disciplines

Horkheimer believes that philosophers hitherto have treated the questions of social philosophy like that of the relationship between the individual and society, in the abstract form divorced from social and historical milieu. The result is either the picture of ‘an isolated individual’ or that of ‘a social totality.’ Horkheimer, along with his colleagues, insists on an integration of various disciplines where philosophers, economists, historians, and psychologists work together to pursue the great philosophical problems through the most refined methods. The concepts contributed by each of the disciplines would provide an understanding of the society. But this understanding remains partial. What is needed is an interdisciplinary research programme that reconstructs the whole picture of the society by integrating all the partial perspectives arising from different standpoints. The critical theorists demand the reformulation of philosophical problems with utmost precision, and the devising of new methods for handling them. It is not possible to produce definitive results in any inquiry through a single method. Relying solely on one type of approach would always lead to a distorted picture of reality. To conduct a systematic investigation, several methods, both quantitative and qualitative, should be supplemented with one another.

#### Theory and Practice

► Critical theory and its inherent practical dimension  
► Diagnosis of the existing society and struggle for social transformation

Marx remarked that most of the earlier philosophers had only attempted to interpret the world; but the focus of philosophy should be to change the world. The critical theorists of the Frankfurt School also stand for a politically engaged role of theory. Social theorists are not entitled to provide mere descriptions or explanations; they should do more. They should undertake a diagnosis of the existing society. By acquiring an in-depth understanding of the problems, the theorists should then come to the front to struggle for the social

transformation to preserve the interests of the oppressed and exploited.

► Social theorists should not be passive spectators

According to Horkheimer, theory intertwines with history. The concepts and categories of a theory of society refer to the social relations, human activities and historical struggles. Thus, if a theory is correct, it would be indicated in history. But it does not mean that the correction and determination of the truth of some theory is something which history takes care of by itself so that the thinker merely could look at it passively. There is no objective reality to be passively reflected upon by the social theorists, who are at every moment a part of the societal process. The process of knowledge involves willing, acting, experiencing and conceiving. The advocates of a theory should themselves act according to the theory. They should apply and support the theory. They should make an effort to bring the theory into effect against all resistance from regressive and one-sided minds.

► Critical theory ought to bring about social changes aiming at emancipation

Critical theory intends to liberate the dominated people from the chains that dominate them. The practitioners of critical theory are aware of the changing character of the social structure. They know that new ideas and new problems will emerge in accordance with new social conditions. The critical method that aims at emancipation will also have to alter its character along with the change in the substance of emancipation. The Frankfurt School, within their interdisciplinary approach, thus highlights practice as their core concern.



## Summarized Overview

The early decades of the twentieth century witness the failure of the historical materialism of Marx. Capitalism does not collapse in the way Marx predicted. The working class lacks revolutionary consciousness and there is no worldwide unification of the workers. The rise of authoritative societies in Russia under Stalin and in Germany under Hitler shows how socialism deviates from what Marx had envisioned. Western Marxists like Karl Korsch, Georg Lukács, Antonio Gramsci, and Wilhelm Reich attempt a re-examination of the Marxist theories. They reject the economic determinism of historical materialism and employ the theories of, say Freud, to focus more on the subjective factors that influence the way workers engage with the world.

The call for a critical approach made by the Western Marxists inspires the members of the Institute of Social Research at Frankfurt. The Frankfurt School, under the directorship of Marx Horkheimer and through the contributions of Theodor W. Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Walter Benjamin etc. develops a critical theory that delves into the hidden features of a society unlike the traditional theories that take the existing social order for granted. The new group of critical thinkers undertakes a critique of culture, institutions, modern technology, structure of family life, the character of a modern person etc. to understand the complex ways in which the modern world functions. The interdisciplinary approach taken by the critical theorists aims at an enhanced understanding of the society which could potentially effect social changes leading to the emancipation of the oppressed and dominated.

## Self-Assessment

1. Discuss the events of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that disprove the predictions of Marx's historical materialism.
2. Reflect upon the negative and positive dimensions of critical theory.
3. Theory intertwines with history. Comment.

## Assignments

1. How do the Western Marxists interpret the failure of Orthodox Marxism?
2. Give a brief account of the major figures of the Frankfurt School.
3. Critical theory undertakes an interdisciplinary approach. Explain.
4. Social theorists ought not to be passive spectators. Elaborate.

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## UNIT 2

# THE DIALECTIC OF ENLIGHTENMENT AND CULTURE INDUSTRY

### Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ▶ understand the dialectic character shown by enlightenment
- ▶ analyse the characteristics of instrumental reason
- ▶ evaluate the concept of culture industry
- ▶ realise how mass deception takes place in the capitalist society

### Background

Critical theory that emerged in response to the events of the early twentieth century takes the form of a critique of rationality to discover the nuances behind the self-destructing advent of enlightened human reason. Adorno and Horkheimer, the two famous figures of the Frankfurt School that developed critical theory, attempt a critique of enlightenment in their combined work titled *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. They claim that human reason has become instrumental and is desperate to dominate everything it confronts with. This forms the intellectual root of the domination existing in capitalist human society. Adorno and Horkheimer also portray culture as an effective medium of domination and oppression. They coin the term culture industry and explains how standardization of cultural products aids the powerful in deceiving the masses. The oppressed are conditioned to falsely believe that the existing system with inequalities is good for them. They are alienated from their true individuality. Culture industry works in a way that the domination continues perpetually and an escape from the same becomes almost impossible. This unit looks at the above mentioned concepts in light of the ideas shared by Adorno and Horkheimer.

## Keywords

Dialectic of enlightenment, Instrumental reason, Domination, Culture industry, Standardization of culture, Mass deception

## Discussion

### 4.2.1 Introduction

It is believed that the developments in science, technology and industrial production have enhanced the range of possibilities in human life. However, the critical theorists of the Frankfurt school feel that the new enlightened life is a hell. In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno adopt a critical approach to discover how and why the enlightened reason deviates from its promise of a 'better life' and sinks human life into a kind of barbarism. They state that human reason has become instrumental and is attempting to dominate everything that it confronts with, in all possible ways. This tendency along with the advancements in technology-assisted capitalism has resulted in the domination of humanity by itself in the form of exploitation, oppression etc. The first part of this unit discusses the key ideas put forward by Adorno and Horkheimer with respect to the contradictory character shown by enlightened reason.

- ▶ Problem with Enlightenment
- ▶ Enlightenment leads to domination

- ▶ Culture industry as a medium of domination

Culture is one of the prominent media through which the elite class dominates the masses. Adorno and Horkheimer introduce the concept of a culture industry where different cultural forms like films, music, magazines etc. become commodities manufactured and distributed massively according to the standards established in accordance with the vested interests of the dominant class. The dominated people are deceitfully persuaded to conform to the existing social order by dulling their power to develop alternative thinking. They get alienated from their true individuality. What prevails is a condition of perpetual domination from which an escape is far beyond imagination. The second part of the unit sheds light on the characteristics and implications of culture industry as conceived by Adorno and Horkheimer.



## 4.2.2 Critique of Rationality

Man is called a rational animal for being endowed with the faculty of reason. We use the term 'rationality' to denote the ways of thinking and behaving based on reason. Rationality has replaced the traditional myths and belief systems as the most logical, accurate, and trustworthy way of comprehending the structure of the world and the significance of human life therein. The advent of rationality is known as enlightenment which reaches its zenith in the so-called Age of Enlightenment that includes the late seventeenth century and the whole of eighteenth century. Science, governance, and jurisprudence have then become largely based on rational forms of thinking. Natural sciences have developed rational methods to understand the world. The world is now understood as a scientific universe which only science can systematically comprehend through its methods of observation-cum-experiments and logical deductions. This approach is termed positivism. Social sciences also have adopted the methods of natural sciences. For example, sociology employs the positivist model and treats the society as governed by certain laws. Thus, human beings and social institutions are given the status of objects much like scientific objects. Moreover, reason has been replacing religion in being the chief guide to morality. We are expected to justify our conduct in terms of principles residing in rational consistency. Rationality endows us with greater responsibility and freedom in differentiating between what is right and wrong.

- ▶ Advent of rationality and the enlightenment

We have earlier discussed how Immanuel Kant advocated the supremacy of human reason and attempted to enthrone it as the sole adjudicator of all disputes. He demanded that everything should be subjected to a rational critique. Similarly, we have listened to the call made by the left-wing Hegelians, especially Marx, to endorse only those systems and institutions that withstand the rational judgement. That which fails to conform to the rational principles needs to be undermined as 'irrational.' However, do the assumptions that underlie what is known as 'rational' enjoy a status beyond all criticisms? Do the standards set by reason enjoy universal validity?

- ▶ Is reason the supreme adjudicator?
- ▶ Can reason enjoy a status beyond all criticism?

The critical theorists of the Frankfurt school feel that rationality itself needs to be subjected to rigorous scrutiny. The supreme adjudicator that interrogates all other self-claimed authorities should not itself become an unquestioned author-

- ▶ Need for a critique of rationality

- ▶ Enlightenment is about the development of human reason
- ▶ Dialectic is about the contradictory character of the human reason in the course of its development

ity. The assumptions of rationality should not be endorsed as timeless absolute truths. The standards, based on which everything gets designated as rational or irrational, should themselves be examined. In other words, enlightenment must become enlightened about its own character. If enlightenment is characterized by the critique of everything based on rational standards, what we discuss here is the critical theorists' call for a critique of the standards of rationality as such.

#### 4.2.2.1 Dialectic of Enlightenment

What do the terms 'dialectic' and 'enlightenment' refer to? The former refers to the dialectic as explained by Hegel, whereby a concept unravels its inherent determinations and becomes its opposite. Dialectic conceives all phenomena as dynamic. It depicts everything as a totality comprising of contradictions. The latter has two meanings. In the specific sense, 'Enlightenment' refers to the 'Age of Reason' that comprises the late seventeenth century and the whole eighteenth century. It is that period in the history of mankind that proclaims the autonomy of human reason. The age calls for a rational vocation in all forms of human life by destroying all mysterious accounts of explaining nature and human existence. Increased insistence on individual and public freedom is also a defining characteristic of the era of 'Enlightenment.' However, in the general sense, 'enlightenment' refers to any attempt, since ancient times, in which the darkness of ignorance that causes fear and constraints is overcome by the light of knowledge. The development of humanity is marked by such an enlightenment, or advancement in knowledge, about the world and the position of humans in the world which were earlier accounted for by myths and superstitions. Thus, 'Dialectic of Enlightenment' points at the dual contradictory character shown by human reason in the course of its development.

But the phrase 'Dialectic of Enlightenment' also marks the title of the work of two of the main figures of the Frankfurt School, which plays a significant role in the development of critical theory. The work attempts a critique of enlightenment, and addresses one of the crucial problems that the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School deal with – the rise of reason in its instrumental form through which humanity attempts to dominate nature and itself. In this section, we will discuss the nuances of enlightenment mainly emphasizing the views put forward by Adorno and Horkheimer. Horkheimer and Adorno take up a study of the history of human thought to understand

► How enlightenment which professed to eradicate fear has finally become the cause of terror?

► Knowledge as a tool

► Subjective reason and objective reason

how enlightenment that initially professed to eradicate fear and constraints has finally turned itself the cause of terror. In other words, the authors analyse the conditions through which enlightenment, while opposing myth, has become the new myth. They feel that rationality that earlier attempted to free humans from all sort of domination has now emerged as the new instrument of domination. Horkheimer and Adorno hope to find a way for a positive conception of enlightenment that is no more entangled in blind domination.

#### 4.2.2.2 Instrumental Reason

According to Bacon, the sovereignty of man lies in knowledge. Scientific knowledge is an instrument that can be used to gain mastery over nature. For Hegel, the ethics of Enlightenment is ‘utility.’ For Nietzsche also, a will to power is what drives human life, and knowledge works as a tool for that power. Their insights have contributed to the problem of ‘instrumental reason’ that is crucial in the critical theorists’ critique of rationality.

Horkheimer, in his essay ‘Means and Ends’ differentiates between two diametrically opposing views of reason – objective reason and subjective reason. The objective theory of reason assumes the existence of a rational order in nature and its manifestations and in the structure and functioning of human society. Individual thoughts and actions are measured with respect to the conformity that they show to the rational order. The philosophies of the ancient philosopher Plato and the post-Kantian German idealists endorse the objectivity of reason. They assert the existence of a universal rationality and derive the criteria for everything from the same. The focus is on the ends rather than the means. However, the subjective view of reason considers it as linked with ‘usefulness.’ In this view, reason is what is applied to choose the best among the various means available to achieve pre-determined ends. The purposes or goals are considered as self-explanatory and are not much subjected to the evaluation by reason. If at all reason gets concerned with the purposes or goals, it would still be in the subjective sense to determine whether any purpose or goal serves the interest of the subject as regards to its self-preservation, wherein self-preservation is taken for granted as the highest end.

► Instrumentalization of reason

In the modern world, reason has been largely taking its subjective form. It is only considered as the ability to calculate probabilities so that the most appropriate means to a given end can be found out. Reason has lost the autonomous value that it once possessed. It surrenders before other entities and merely has an operational value now. Ideas and concepts are no longer considered as ends-in-themselves or as possessing a meaning of their own. They become instrumentalized; they are used as the tools to acquire other ends. With the advancements in science and technology, knowledge does not have any inherent value. It is 'used' for some other goals. As the humanitarian values like justice, equality, happiness etc. cannot be measured by the new methods of science; they lose their universal rational status. Reason as a tool is capable of accounting both for and against these values now. Any vested interest can be proved 'reasonable.' Instrumentalization of reason makes it easy for ideological manipulation or the propagation of false pictures.

#### 4.2.2.3 Domination of Nature and Human Society

► Humans wanted to understand nature in order to control nature

Adorno and Horkheimer contend that domination of nature resides at the base of enlightenment in general. According to them, humans want to know about nature to dominate nature and for dominating other humans. Mankind always has fear about whatever lies beyond their knowledge and imagine themselves as free from all fears when nothing remains unknown. Entities whose exact character remain beyond the grasp of human reason have always posed threats to the survival of mankind. Both ancient and modern thought systems are similar in their desperation to attain proper understanding of nature for overcoming the threats. Mythology claims to reveal the secrets of nature through stories where various forces of nature are personified. Magic uses rituals that imitate the natural processes and believes that gaining control over nature is possible through the same. In the modern era, Science also employs its methods to understand nature, expecting to go beyond the constraints posed by nature on human life.

In the Age of Enlightenment, Science conceives nature as pure matter determined by certain laws that can be known through the language of mathematics. Matter does not have any intrinsic significance. Thus, the ancient view of nature as having some inherent powers or hidden qualities is replaced by a neutral or disenchanted picture of the nature. Nature is no more



► Instrumental conception of nature encourages the domination of nature

► Natural entities lack inherent value

► Domination in society is also rooted in the instrumental conception of nature

► Reason deviates from self-preservation to self-destruction

valuable in and by itself. It has meaning only in the utility it has for another, say humans. The significance of nature thus lies in being instrumental to serve the purposes of humans. This leads to the manipulation and alteration of nature by humans. For Horkheimer and Adorno the adjustment of the natural world by humans for self-preservation and satisfaction of desires is rooted in the conception of nature as instrumental in meeting human needs.

The conception of nature as lacking intrinsic value and being merely instrumental is also evident in the way the modern scientific reason deals with its objects. Animals or other creatures or even human beings used as objects of scientific experiments do not have any value in themselves. For example, in an experiment concerning rabbits, each rabbit can be replaced by another without any issue. A man on whom a medical experiment is to be done can easily be replaced by another man. They are all mere objects of experiment and are used as instruments to achieve something else.

The emergence of capitalist economy provides the impetus for exploiting various forms of knowledge. Scientific knowledge becomes an important force of production. The modern mind is largely interested in the domination of nature. The domination of society by a few individuals who use the knowledge and technological apparatus accessible to them with the sole aim of controlling others is also grounded in the instrumental conception of nature.

Adorno and Horkheimer believe that reason has developed into a level where it alone dictates what is significant. Nothing is inherently significant anymore. Enlightenment reason was supposed to be an embodiment of liberation from all domination and entanglement that humanity suffered from. It envisaged to abolish all myths and superstitions that controlled the human thought. However, now a point has reached where human reason itself dominates nature and human species. Reason has itself become the new myth. What was once meant for self-preservation is now the cause for self-destruction.

### 4.2.3 Critique of Culture

It was mentioned in the previous unit that the critical theory has been inspired by the Western Marxists. Rather than focusing merely on the economic structure of a society, they de-

► A sociological study of culture

mandated that attention be paid to socio-psychological factors that influence the minds of the working class and make them reactionary or revolutionary. Antonio Gramsci had introduced the concept of hegemony that describes how the dominant class in a society successfully conditions the thought process of the people whom they wish to dominate. The critical theorists feel that in the modern capitalist society the powerful agencies encroach upon the individual consciousness by the organisation of free time through radio, television, film etc. They hence stress the need for an inquiry into the functioning of the cultural fabric in a society. Such an inquiry should study the social origins, form, content and function of various art works, along with the processes of production, reproduction, distribution, exchange and consumption of the same. This sociology of culture is expected to reveal the ways in which the social order gets crystallized in the cultural phenomena. Even though Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse etc. have dealt with aesthetic theory and the critique of culture even before associating with the Frankfurt School, an emphasis on 'mass culture' comes into effect by the late 1930s and 1940s: "The emergence of an entertainment industry, the growth of the mass media, and the blatant manipulation of culture by the Nazis and other totalitarian regimes, the shock of immigration to the US, the inevitable discovery of the glamour and glitter of the film and record industries: together all made imperative the task of assessing the changing patterns of culture" (Held 78).

► Adorno and Horkheimer introduces the concept of culture industry

*Dialectic of Enlightenment* by Adorno and Horkheimer also contains their ideas on the status of culture in the modern society. The authors have grouped those ideas under the title 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception.' It is proposed that culture in the modern society has nevertheless taken the form of an industry which produces goods like films, magazines etc. that are standardized in accordance with the interests of the dominant class. The dominant class uses these goods to manipulate the thoughts and feelings of the masses. By enforcing the repetitive use of products and the eliciting of suitable responses that conform to their ideology, the dominant group strengthens the false consciousness in the minds of common people and extends the level of domination. Adorno and Horkheimer term this as mass-deception.

This section discusses the views of the critical theorists, especially Adorno and Horkheimer, on culture industry, standardization of culture and mass deception.

### 4.2.3.1 Culture Industry and Standardization of Culture

The term industry here has both its literal meaning and a broader meaning with respect to Adorno. In its literal sense, it just mentions that the contemporary cultural products – music, movies, advertisements, magazines, etc. are largely manufactured by the new technological means, just like other industrially manufactured goods. Culture industry thus includes the film industry, advertisement industry, music industry etc. In its broader sense, industry refers to a particular system of distribution. The attention is drawn to the standardization and distribution of cultural products by a rationalized and strictly controlled organization. As in the economic production, those who are in possession of the new technology for mass production, determine the type, form and content of the product to be produced, say art, which is then distributed to the heterogeneous audience. The actual producers of the art are not autonomous in their work. They hardly have any chance to exercise their creativity or express their own ideas through the art forms they produce. The audience also remain passive in the reception of the distributed art. They believe that the art is in accordance with their interests when the reality is that they are conditioned to believe so.

► Culture as industry

Standardization in any kind of production refers to the way in which it is ensured that the products produced always conform to certain predetermined standards. The standards are set envisioning a specific quality for the product that makes it function in a specific way to meet the desired purpose. The critical theorists argue that this occurs also in the cultural realm of a society. The culture industry produces cultural goods, say art forms, aiming at generating profit. The consumption of such profitable commodities should ensure their reproduction. Therefore, the products are reduced to a uniform standard that is compatible with the aim. The products are merely the repetition of the same type and the responses to the products are also somehow standardized. Autonomous work and genuine response get dissolved. Real spontaneity or real choice is not facilitated.

► Standardization of cultural products

In the culture industry, according to Adorno, it does not matter what the specific quality of a book, television programme or film is. What is important is that the work should fit into the preset forms and norms. There is no choice between different

► Lack of spontaneity  
in cultural production

kinds of art, but only between different arts of the same kind. Adorno argues that the art form lacks coherence in the sense that it is merely a series of parts that are expected to bring ‘momentary thrill’ in the audience. It is not relevant that the parts have a connection between themselves or with the whole art. He also remarks that whereas technique in genuine art is concerned with the internal organization of the art form, in the culture industry it is only about the mechanical reproduction and mass distribution of the art form. The new machinery for mass production and distribution enables to produce and distribute tons and tons of the same art. There is no spontaneity in the production. To show that spontaneity is wanting in the cultural industry, Adorno and Horkheimer give an example where the talents of candidates for a job in the official radio are shaped to conform to the industry standard. Whenever a new form of response from the audience is spotted, the talent-spotters and the organisers of performance competitions take a note of it and incorporate the same in the list of talents expected from the candidates.

► Standardization of  
responses

Standardization of products in the culture industry aims also at standard responses. Not only the distributors and promoters of a product, but the product itself comprise a system of response-mechanism that makes the consumer react automatically in a specific manner. Individual variations are successfully reduced: “Dozens of cues are provided to evince ‘correct’ responses. For example, in case there is any question as to what type of show a comedy is, laughter is often pre-recorded. Continuous commentary is supplied on many radio and television programmes should one be uncertain what to think” (Held 96). The instructions given to the live-audience in a studio for laughing and clapping at particular moments is another example. The standardized product of the culture industry is a ready-meal, made easy for consumption. The consumer need not take much effort in choosing what he / she likes. The only response that matters from the part of the consumer is the consumption. The products are ‘pre-digested;’ the responses are already anticipated.

Adorno and Horkheimer state that the culture industry is infecting everything with sameness: “Something is provided for everyone so that no one can escape; differences are hammered home and propagated.” They also state that “everyone is supposed to behave spontaneously according to a ‘level’ determined by the indices and to select the category of mass product manufactured for their type.” The culture industry assures

► Culture industry infects everything with sameness

that it has everyone under its control by making an illusory appearance of spontaneity and choice. Even though people think they like the products such as films and magazines, it is the oppressive group who make the people falsely believe that they like the products. The fact that the oppressors succeed in the same evidently shows the total subservience of the masses to their capitalist oppressors. This is described by Adorno and Horkheimer as the ‘misplaced love of the common people for the wrong which is done.’

#### 4.2.3.2 Mass Deception and Perpetual Domination

► Mass deception through culture

Culture industry and standardization of culture constitute one of the ways through which the protagonists of an oppressive system defend and maintain their status. The oppressed masses are conditioned to conform to the existing social order using the tool of culture. They are deceived by the false ideologies incorporated into their everyday life through various cultural products that they consume – the films they watch, the songs they hear, the magazines they read etc.

► Repeated use of identical products quells creative and critical thinking

The large-scale production, distribution and reproduction of identical cultural products quell the creative and critical thinking of the consumers. All music, books, movies, and other kinds of entertainment that are in accordance with the pre-established formula, when consumed repeatedly, stunt the consciousness of the masses. The products entertain the masses and they are distracted from the reality of their sufferings. The power to imagine, to criticize, to defy are dulled. This easily paves way for the development of a totalitarian society.

► Oppressed are made to believe that the existing order is the best

The aspirations of the oppressed masses are also diminished through culture. Through movies, for example, they are “assured that they do not need to be in any way other than they are and that they can succeed just as well without having to perform tasks of which they know themselves incapable. But at the same time, they are given the hint that effort would not help them in any case, because even bourgeois success no longer has any connection to the calculable effect of their own work.” The culture industry through its appropriate products, constantly reminds the masses that their attempts to revolt against the inequalities and transgress the class boundaries are futile. The oppressed are pacified and made to believe that they are living the best possible life out there.

► Culture industry alienates individuals from their true nature

The culture industry robs the individuality of a person and make him a 'pseudo individual.' Everyone's attitudes, interests and beliefs have been made same as dictated by the standards of the culture industry. Hence, individuals become mere centres where the general tendencies of the masses meet. People could experience their individuality as existing only in the meaningless and minor variations they try to keep from complete uniformity of the mass culture. This individuality that they experience is fictitious while their true human nature remains hidden from them. This relates to the concept of alienation or estrangement of the individual from his true nature as conceived by Marx in his early writings.

► Perpetual domination

Culture industry hardly provides any room to escape from its effects. It hinders the development of the individual into an autonomous and independent human being, capable of forming rational judgements and taking conscious decisions. The industry is built by exploiting the dependence and weakness of the dominated group of people. It runs by constantly appealing to the same. It conveys a message of passivity, obedience and adjustment – since an alternative is impossible, embrace the present. It provides pain-killers in the form of momentary entertainments that divert and distract the oppressed mind from its sufferings. It aims at nothing but the reinforcement of the domination by inculcating the identification with the conditions that prevail. Culture industry is anti-enlightenment in so far as it undermines the enlightenment prospects – freedom, happiness and integrity of the individual.

► Notion of culture industry does not give any positive sign of liberation

The notion of culture industry as given by Adorno and Horkheimer is somewhat pessimistic in the sense that an escape from the perpetual domination seems impossible for them. Such a view that provides for no positive signs of liberation has been subjected to criticisms. Also, the claim that the consciousness of the masses is highly stunted, so as to become completely unaware of the ways of oppression, has been questioned in the presence of counter-evidence.



## Summarized Overview

Enlightenment is conceived as behaving dialectically by Horkheimer and Adorno, the critical theorists of the Frankfurt school. Human reason that promised to liberate mankind from all sorts of entanglement and domination has itself become in the course of time an instrument of domination. The tendency to dominate nature and other human beings is what characterises the enlightened reason. Nothing is inherently useful or valuable in the modern world. Everything becomes useful with respect to the usefulness it has for another. Nature is no more considered as possessing any intrinsic value. Reason controls and uses nature for its purposes. This tendency of domination extends to social relations also. The emergence of scientific technology along with the capitalist economic structure creates a social world that is diametrically opposed to the one with the humanitarian qualities promised by the enlightenment.

One of the media through which mass domination takes place is culture. Adorno and Horkheimer talk about the culture industry where mass mechanical production, reproduction, and distribution of cultural forms are undertaken. The various art forms considered as profitable commodities are repeatedly produced according to certain pre-established standards. The standards are in tune with the interests of the powerful class, and are aimed at psychologically conditioning the dominated people who are the consumers of the products to conform to the existing inequalities. A mass deception takes place as the scope for critical thinking in individuals is diminished and their aspirations to attain liberation are deceitfully curbed. Individuals are alienated from their true nature. There appears hardly any room for emancipation.

## Self-Assessment

1. Why is there a need to undertake a critique of rationality?
2. Enlightenment leads to domination rather than liberation. Discuss.
3. Reflect upon the standardization of responses to art forms.
4. Evaluate the claim that culture industry robs the individuality of the masses.

## Assignments

1. What do you mean by the dialectic of enlightenment?
2. How does instrumental reason function?
3. Outline the features of culture industry as conceived by Adorno and Horkheimer.
4. Describe how mass deception takes place through standardisation of culture in a capitalist society.

## Reference

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## Suggested Reading

1. Horkheimer, Max, and Theodor W. Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Stanford UP, 2002
2. Horkheimer, Max. *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*. A&C Black, 1972.
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4. Horkheimer, Max, and Theodor W. Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Stanford UP, 2002.



## Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

SGOU

# UNIT 3

## CRITIQUE OF MODERN SOCIETY AND PROSPECTS FOR LIBERATION

### Learning Outcomes

In this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ▶ analyse the new forms of domination in the advanced industrial society
- ▶ differentiate one-dimensional thought from critical thought
- ▶ discuss how science and technology become instruments of domination and liberation
- ▶ appraise the role of aesthetic sensibility in the liberation of human potentialities

### Background

Critical theory attempts to understand the nuances in the functioning of the modern capitalist society of the twentieth century. The critical theorists undertake an interdisciplinary approach to study the contours of capitalist economy and the complex structure of individual consciousness to discover the various ways in which domination and oppression take place. Herbert Marcuse is one such critical theorist who explains how the elite strata of the advanced industrial society successfully dominate the consciousness of the masses by making them believe that their needs are satisfied in the existing system and an alternative is unnecessary. The masses with a happy-consciousness think and behave in accordance with the established norms and are described as one-dimensional men who lack critical thought and voice of dissent. Science and technology become instruments of domination there. But through a re-constructed application of the same as instruments of liberation and by developing a new sensibility that appreciates the aesthetic-erotic dimensions of human existence, Marcuse envisions a new society where there is hardly any toil of labour and human beings experience themselves as free and joyous. This unit provides the learners with a brief account of the one-dimensional society pictured by Marcuse. His vision of an alternate society and the factors that pave for the same are also discussed in this unit.



## Keywords

One-dimensional society, Democratic unfreedom, Repressive de-sublimation, Great Refusal, Aesthetic sensibility

## Discussion

► Recalling Adorno and Horkheimer's notion of culture industry

► Marcuse's description of the modern society as one-dimensional

### 4.3.1 Introduction

We have discussed in the previous units how the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School undertake the method of critique to unravel the features of the capitalist oppressive society and the thought process of the oppressed people thereof. The picture of the culture industry given by Adorno and Horkheimer depicts the ways in which the protagonists of the existing social order use culture as a medium to manipulate the consciousness of the masses so that their thoughts and feelings would always conform to the system, hardly providing any chance for creativity and critique. The society is described as infected with a kind of 'sameness.'

Herbert Marcuse is another prominent critical theorist who puts forward a similar picture of the modern society as prone to ideological manipulation. In the *One-dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (1964), Marcuse argues that the advanced industrial society, built on the grounds of capitalism and characterized by the use of sophisticated technology, is a one-dimensional society. The dominant class conditions the mindset of the masses to a level where the latter misjudge their real needs and are then provided with the access to the fulfilment of those needs. The masses consider themselves as free and satisfied; they are unaware of the chains to which they are tied. What results is a one-dimensional society where everyone thinks and acts in accordance with the interests of the elite class and any voice of dissent or demand for an alternative gets dissolved in or integrated to the prevailing system. Such a society violates the real freedom of the individuals, hinders the actualisation of their potentialities, and prevents their development into autonomous human beings.

Critical theorists do not confine their interest to the mere understanding of the social conditions through their critique.

► Marcuse's conception of an alternate social order

They carry with them the goal of overcoming all exploitation. Marcuse has high praise for the 'great refusal' – the on-ground protesting against oppressive assimilation and dissolution that inspires the revolutionary project. He contends that social change would come into effect when a new form of sensibility develops in the individuals. Science and technology would become instruments of pacification and liberation then. The new society would be one in which the aesthetic-erotic dimensions of human existence are appreciated and valued.

This unit outlines the characteristics of the one-dimensional society as conceived by Marcuse. It also discusses his views on the prospects for an alternate society and the ways that lead to the same.

### 4.3.2 Domination at its Zenith: One-dimensional Society

► One-dimensional society lacks capacity to think and reflect

A society becomes one-dimensional when the thought and behaviour of its members conform to a single pattern. There is neither any instance of dissent from the existing social norms and values nor the demand for an alternative social order. Does this mean that the society is an exemplar of unity and harmony? The answer to this question depends on the answers to a few other questions. Who determines the social norms? Whose ideas and interests do the social order embody? If the answers to these questions point at the powerful class in the society who use their elite ideology manipulatively to shape the aspirations, hopes, fears, and values of other individuals, the society is not characterized by unity and harmony; rather it is an embodiment of domination and oppression. Such a one-dimensional society produces one-dimensional humans who, being the object of domination, lack individuality, autonomy, capacity to think, reflection and awareness of personal needs, creative self-activity, the ability to control one's own development, and the right to dissent. In contrast, a two-dimensional or bi-dimensional society is one in which a thinking mind is free to dissociate with the existing social order and perceive possible alternatives that can be realised through radical human activity.

The critical theorist Herbert Marcuse, in his magnum opus *One-dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, describes the advanced industrial capitalist society in the post World War II era as one-dimensional.



### 4.3.2.1 Domination in Disguise

- ▶ Advanced industrial society exercises domination that seems comfortable

The first sentence in Marcuse's magnum opus reads as follows: "A comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom prevails in advanced industrial civilization, a token of technical progress." The terms comfortable, smooth, reasonable and democratic may seem in contradiction with the term unfreedom. How can a state of unfreedom or oppression be comfortable and democratic? Marcuse explains this in detail.

- ▶ Individuals feel happy and satisfied within the system of domination

The advanced industrial society with its capitalist consumption-oriented production and sophisticated technology upgrades the life situations of the workers. The workers are no more in the poor, depressed state needing to subject themselves to physical and mental toil for earning their bread. Technology-assisted machine production in factories has freed the workers from the unrestrained physical labour of the past. Moreover, there has been an increase in the proportion of workers in the so-called white-collar jobs which do not demand much physical work. The workers do not suffer from the lack of the fulfilment of material needs. The new affluent society provides them with enough opportunities for the gratification of their sensual desires. The workers are happy within the existing social order and do not feel the need for any change in the system. Domination runs smoothly, giving a sense of comfort and satisfaction!

- ▶ Gratification of false needs

Now, how is this still domination? Firstly, it is domination because the individuals are not happy and satisfied in terms of their true needs. True needs like nourishment, clothing, lodging, etc are the vital ones that have an unconditional claim for satisfaction. The fulfilment of these needs is a prerequisite for that of all other needs. By false needs, Marcuse refers to those needs that are imposed on the individual by the society. The gratification of such needs, though most satisfying for the individual, subjects him to further toil, aggressiveness, and misery. It ought not to be entertained as it impedes the development of the individual. The needs to have fun, to relax, to behave in accordance with advertisements, etc. belong to the group of false needs. The new affluent society provides a platform for the individuals to satisfy their false needs. Hence, the happiness that the individuals experience is through the gratification of needs that cause self-destruction.

► Needs are imposed by the society

Secondly, it is domination because the individuals do not determine their needs themselves; it is the society that imposes the needs. The dominant class uses every medium available to instil in the minds of the individuals a bunch of false needs: “The means of mass transportation and communication, the commodities of lodging, food and clothing, the irresistible output of the entertainment and information industry carries with them prescribed attitudes and habits, certain intellectual and emotional reactions which bind the consumers more or less pleasantly to the producers and, through the latter, to the whole.”

► Thought and behaviour become one-dimensional

Marcuse says: “The products indoctrinate and manipulate; they promote a false consciousness which is immune against its falsehood” (Marcuse 1964, p. 14). Even though the ideas of the dominant class, shared by the different kinds of products, at first take the form of publicity, soon they become a way of life. As it feels like a better way of life than before, the thought about a change is gradually destroyed. What emerges, as a result, is a pattern of one-dimensional thought and behaviour, where everyone thinks and acts in accordance with the interests of the elite class. The ideas, aspirations, objectives etc. that outlie the established pattern are either repelled or dissolved into the existing pattern.

► Liberalization of sexuality and repressive de-sublimation

Marcuse also brings in another crucial aspect that intensifies the one-dimensionality. Before writing his magnum opus, he had already undertaken a study to apply the notions from the psychoanalysis of Freud to his critique of the social world. According to Freud, sublimation is by which the sexual drive (*Eros*) present in the form of basic instincts in an individual is channelized in other ways for social development in the course of civilization. Such an adjustment is repressive in character, and the repressed sexual desire and the discontentment thereby, causes various kinds of outrage in the individual. Interestingly, Marcuse claims that even a de-sublimation can be repressive in character. He says that the advanced industrial society grants the individuals a liberalized sexuality. The individuals are provided with maximum chances for the expression and enjoyment of their sexual desires, but in the form of momentary gratification. This makes the individuals reduce their frustration and develop a happy-consciousness. The thought of protest weakens and they become more and more submissive to the existing system. Marcuse feels that this kind of manipulative liberalization of the expression of



instinctual energy contains repressive modes of de-sublimation. It creates a feeling that liberty is getting extended. However, in reality, domination is getting intensified.

► Freedom in disguise

The oppressed group of people would not feel they are under the state of oppression and totalitarianism, and rather would feel comfort, as there does not exist any explicitly terroristic political coordination or fascist rule. Individuals in the one-dimensional society may conceive themselves as free. But Marcuse remarks that the freedom and the power to choose, that the individuals believe they possess, are illusory because they have been pre-conditioned to make choices within a pre-determined system where the boundaries of the choices are set according to the interests of the dominant class.

#### 4.3.2.2 Instruments of Domination

► Science and technology used as profitable instruments add to the one-dimensionality

Science and technology are developed and applied in the advanced capitalist societies to set up the essential technical apparatus of production, administration and domination. However, the new technological rationality also adds to social control, according to Marcuse. He accuses that the vested interests of the dominant class in a society earn profit and exercise their power by developing science and technology for the production and distribution of commodities. The masses who are the consumers of the commodities eventually desire only those items that the dominant class want them to. Capitalism is thus maintained and reproduced by the forms in which technology is used. The emergence of a totalitarian society and the domination in it are not the products of science and technology as such, but the ways in which technology in its instrumentalised form is used to meet the needs of the dominant class are. For Marcuse, "...science and technology are the great vehicles of liberation, and it is only their use and restriction in the repressive society which makes them into vehicles of domination... Not the automobile is repressive, not the television set is repressive, not the household gadgets are repressive, but the automobile, the television, the gadgets which, produced in accordance with the requirements of profitable exchange, have become part and parcel of the people's own existence..." (Marcuse 1969, p. 12).

Language also contributes to the one-dimensionality of thought. The language used by public and corporate officials, mass media etc. follows specific style to confine private think-

► Language promotes one-dimensionality

ing and public discourse within the interests of the existing social order. Marcuse gives an example where concentration camps are termed ‘pacified hamlets.’ Such usage of language helps to make even the most inhumane affairs appear humane, and *vice-versa*. Marcuse also takes a stance against the approach of linguistic philosophy that considers oddity and deviations in the use of language as the cause of many problems, thereby demanding the conformity to an established use of language.

► Critical theory’s concern for emancipation

### 4.3.3 Towards an Alternative

It has been mentioned earlier that critical theory aims at the emancipation of the oppressed through the enhanced understanding of the social conditions that the critique renders possible. However, what we have discussed hitherto are the different ways in which the critical theorists employ the method of critique to bring to light the actual situations that lie beneath the superficial picture of the so-called advanced societies. Now the question is about the scope for a change and the ways for the same.

► Less chance for revolution from within

#### 4.3.3.1 The Great Refusal

Marcuse, initially remarks that even though critical theory reveals the facts about the oppressive social structure and talks about alternatives, the facts and alternatives remain like disconnected fragments and there is no sign of practical activity that makes a change possible. A hopelessness prevails in this sense. The new forces of social control are such that those who are dominated do not realise their state of being dominated and are much submissive to the existing system. So, there is less chance for a revolution from within. Marcuse feels that the advanced capitalism is highly totalitarian and pleasantly repressive and therefore reforms and piecemeal change would not suffice. Only absolute refusal of the system from outside could be sustained as the true revolutionary force.

Marcuse talks about the group of outsiders, subjected to racial exploitation and persecution, and living a miserable life. They are not yet integrated to the system: “Their opposition hits the system from without and is therefore not deflected by the system; it is an elementary force which violates the rules of

► Great refusal of the repressive system as a whole

the game and, in doing so, reveals it as a rigged game. When they get together and go out into the streets, without arms, without protection, to ask for the most primitive civil rights, they know that they face dogs, stones and bombs, jail, concentration camps, even death. Their force is behind every political demonstration for the victims of law and order. The fact that they start refusing to play the game may be the fact which marks the beginning of the end of a period” (Marcuse 1964, pp. 260-61). Their strong refusal to dissolve into the one-dimensional society, to stop cooperating anymore, is termed as the Great Refusal which, Marcuse believes, could provide the impetus for ending all intolerable conditions and institutions. It is a sexual, moral, intellectual and political rebellion directed against the system as a whole.

#### 4.3.3.2 Vision of A New Society

► Concept of liberation and vision of alternative are integral to the revolutionary project

Marcuse insists on the necessity of having in view the goals of liberation so that appropriate political theory and action evolve. This would make sure that the oppressive features are no way being reproduced again. Even though criticisms arise against the conception of alternatives by labelling them as utopian in the sense that they are far from being put into practice, Marcuse says that such utopian ideals are not unreal models that lack a place in history; rather they are ideal structures constantly being blocked from getting actualised. Conception of liberation and utopian ideals of forthcoming life form integral parts of the revolutionary project and attract people to struggle for radical transformations in the social world.

► New version of socialism as an alternative

The alternative system that Marcuse envisions against the one-dimensional capitalist society is socialism. But the failure of existing socialist countries in becoming the emancipatory alternatives for capitalist domination prompts him to decide that a new conception of socialism is required. It should not be socialism like that of the regime under Stalin etc., but libertarian socialism. Marcuse perceives a qualitatively different society where the relations between humans and between human and nature are fundamentally revolutionized. The new society would have a collective control over the forces and means of production. The production and distribution would be aimed at the fulfilment of necessary needs of all humans. Mandatory labour time would be reduced and there would be an expansion of free time. This would allow for the develop-

ment of potentialities in each individual and free them from repressive and aggressive attitudes. Education would aim at fostering autonomy and individuality and to enhance the creative capacity. This society would witness human beings with a different sensitivity and consciousness.

### 4.3.4 Instruments of Liberation

A central dilemma that lies in this context is that as long as the individuals consider themselves happy in the present system, the system becomes more and more dominant and repressive, which would in turn intensify the one-dimensionality of consciousness in the individuals. Is there an escape from this vicious circle? Marcuse answers in the affirmative provided the individuals develop new consciousness and needs by transforming their existing way of thought so that the necessary conditions for social transformation would actualise. He proposes a new technology that would create an environment wherein, the aesthetic-erotic aspects of existence would be enhanced and a life that embodies the expression of joy, happiness and beauty becomes possible.

► New sensibility and new technology as the vehicles of liberation

#### 4.3.4.1 New Technology

In Marcuse's view, radical social change demands technical reorganization. As mentioned earlier, he does not believe that technology as such dominates human life. It is the way in which technology is applied that determines whether it adds to the chain of domination or becomes an instrument of liberation. Marcuse makes it clear that the abolition of the terrors of the advanced industrial society does not imply a return to the pre-industrial world. What is insisted is the fullest utilization of the best products of science and technology.

► Technology can become instrument of domination as well as liberation

The one-dimensional society is irrational with respect to its utilization of technology. It introduces technology to increase the profits and powers of the elite class. It does not tend to create technologies that could eliminate alienated labour and thereby social domination. Is it not an absurdity that the so-called advanced industrial society actually turns its face against the real advancements which it could bring about? Marcuse calls for a radical break with the existing science and technology and a construction of new versions of the same. Whereas the existing system employs technology for creating deadly and destructive weapons, the projected technological revolution would consider technology as an instrument of pacification

► Existing science and technology need to be restructured

► Optimal use of technology can create a free society

► Appreciating the role of senses and imagination

and liberation, thereby effecting a shift from war-technology to peace-technology. Moreover, the technology that produces superfluous luxury items, poisonous chemicals, and large waste that destroy human life and pollute the environment would not be encouraged anymore.

Technology has tremendous potential, the release of which would create a free society. Marcuse suggests the fullest utilization of technology so that the labour process becomes mechanized and automated. This would alter the structure of the society and "... the individual would be liberated from the work world's imposing upon him alien needs and alien possibilities. The individual would be free to exert autonomy over a life that would be his own" (Marcuse 1964, p. 5). When labour is not forced and there is enough emphasis on productive imagination, the skilled working class could themselves experiment with new technical possibilities, for example, new means of transportation, communication, entertainment etc. New energy sources could be developed. Cities and homes would be reconstructed then. In a way, the negative effects of the existing technology would be eliminated. This makes possible radical social change and thereby the transformation from one-dimensional man to multi-dimensional human beings.

#### 4.3.4.2 Aesthetic Sensibility

Emancipatory social change is possible through the reorganization of science and technology. But technology cannot transform itself. Humans are the agents who should convert technology from its mode of domination to the mode of liberation. What is required is a new sensibility in the individuals that would make them create a new technology and thereby a new society. The new sensibility appreciates the active role of senses in constituting human experience unlike the previous philosophies that undermine the senses as passive and receptive. Marcuse points out that the realm of senses that provide material for our reason and imagination, is constrained and mutilated by the existing social order. Only an emancipation of the same can lead to liberating social change. Transcending the powers of reason, Marcuse believes, a new relation of harmony develops between sensibility and rationality. Rather than getting shaped by the rationality of domination, the new sensibility "would be guided by imagination, mediating between the rational faculties and the sensuous needs." (Marcuse 1969, p.30).

- Emphasis on aesthetic-erotic aspects of human existence

Marcuse looks forward to the new sensibility that inculcates aesthetic-erotic aspects which would bring into effect a qualitative difference from the structures of individual personality in the existing society. Aesthetic qualities are non-violent and non-domineering. They enhance the vision of an individual. The aesthetic sensibility sees things in their own respect and makes it possible to experience the erotic energy of nature – the beauty and joy enclosed in everything. The new society is one in which happiness through the fulfilment of the aesthetic needs for beauty and the erotic needs for pleasure, would replace the momentary gratification of the false consumer needs imposed on the individuals by the capitalist system of domination. Aesthetic-erotic needs serve the life-instincts, counter aggressive and destructive traits and build a beautiful and pleasant environment. Marcuse also refers to art by using the term aesthetic. He believes that art can help in the cultivation of the new sensibility. He proclaims the emancipatory potential of art.

## Summarized Overview

A society becomes one-dimensional when the thought and behaviour of its members conform to a single pattern, as the powerful class in the society uses their elite ideology manipulatively to shape the aspirations, hopes, fears, and values of other individuals. Such a one-dimensional society produces one-dimensional humans who, being the object of domination, lack individuality, autonomy, capacity to think, reflection and awareness of personal needs, creative self-activity, the ability to control one's own development and the right to dissent.

According to the critical theorist, Herbert Marcuse, the new advanced industrial society of the post World War II era is a one-dimensional society and it differs in many aspects from the society conceived by Marx. Marx predicted the collapse of capitalism, whereas Marcuse points at the expansion of the capitalist system. Marx portrayed the proletariat as subjected to impoverishment, whereas Marcuse's individuals live in the affluent conditions of the advanced industrial society. Marx envisaged the awakening of revolutionary consciousness in the working class due to oppression and class conflicts that would in turn lead to radical transformation of the society. However, Marcuse shows that capitalism has become more ideological than the previous systems as the process of production, consumption, culture, thought etc. have become permeated by the elite ideology. In an advanced capitalist society, the individuals feel happy and satisfied and identify themselves with the existing social order. They lack the critical thought that leads to transformation.



Marcuse also offers an alternative in the form of a socialist society that minimizes the toil of mandatory labour and provides the individuals a platform to express their creative potential. Science and technology when used as instruments of liberation and pacification help in the implementation of this project. Marcuse proposes the need for a new sensibility that incorporates the aesthetic-erotic dimension of human nature to create a free society of joyous individuals.

## Self-Assessment

1. Evaluate the role played by science and technology in building a one-dimensional society.
2. Distinguish between happy consciousness and unhappy consciousness.
3. How can liberalization of sexuality enforce submissive attitude?
4. Compare and contrast aesthetic sensibility with rationality.

## Assignments

1. Describe how the new forms of social control create a one-dimensional society.
2. Analyse Marcuse's view that technology can be the instrument of domination as well as liberation.
3. What does Marcuse mean by repressive de-sublimation?
4. Give a brief account of the new aesthetic sensibility as conceived by Marcuse.

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## Suggested Reading

1. Marcuse, Herbert. *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. Routledge, 2013.
2. Marcuse, Herbert. *An Essay on Liberation*. Beacon Press, 1969.
3. Marcuse, Herbert. *An Essay on Liberation*. Beacon Press, 1969.
4. Marcuse, Herbert. *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*. Beacon Press, 1966.



## Space for Learner Engagement for Objective Questions

Learners are encouraged to develop objective questions based on the content in the paragraph as a sign of their comprehension of the content. The Learners may reflect on the recap bullets and relate their understanding with the narrative in order to frame objective questions from the given text. The University expects that 1 - 2 questions are developed for each paragraph. The space given below can be used for listing the questions.

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# Western Philosophy II

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