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Philosophy as Inquiry Aimed at the Absolute Knowledge

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Abstract

Philosophy as the absolute knowledge has been studied from two different but closely related approaches: historical and logical. The first approach exposes four main stages in the history of European metaphysics that marked out types of “philosophical absolutism”: the evolution of philosophy brought to light metaphysics of being, method, morals and logic. All of them are associated with the names of Aristotle, Bacon/Descartes, Kant and Hegel. Then these forms are considered in the second approach that defined them as subject-matter of philosophy as such. Due to their overall, comprehensive character, the focus of philosophy on them justifies its claim on absoluteness as far as philosophy is aimed at comprehension of the world’s unity regardless of the philosopher’s background, values and other preferences. And that is its prerogative since no other form of consciousness lays down this kind of aim. Thus, philosophy is defined as an everlasting attempt to succeed in conceiving the world in all its multifold manifestations. This article is to try to clarify the claim of philosophy on the absolute knowledge.

Keywords: Absolute knowledge, Metaphysics, Speculative philosophy, Logic, Science, Unity of the world.

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1. Introduction

The discussion of the absolute knowledge in regard to modern philosophy seems pretty archaic given several waves of positivism that have passed since the time when the status of philosophy (in Modern times – mostly thanks to Hegel) was higher than status of any other form of consciousness. Moreover, to speak about the problem of the absolute knowledge as such in the era that “suffered” charms of postmodernism and its forms seems naive and unproductive. Positivism deprived philosophy of absoluteness and transferred it to empirical sciences whereas postmodernism tempted philosophy to be content with it. In this regard, the main aim of this article is to try to clarify the claim of philosophy on the absolute knowledge and probably to justify it if, as M. Scheler puts it, absolute being as the object of mind is inherent in man’s essence.

2. Historical types of philosophical absolutism

Since there’s no unity in philosophy concerning the very possibility of the absolute knowledge, a type of philosophy that supports “philosophical absolutism” may be called metaphysical. The content of the concept of metaphysics is a topic for a separate investigation, but some key points in the history of metaphysics that played an important role in validating the right of philosophy on absolutism should be pointed out – it will be helpful for further consideration.

As we know, the first historical form of metaphysics was connected with the corpus of works of Aristotle that deals with questions of the First philosophy when the concept of metaphysics completely coincided with its term: what goes after physics was the content of ontology that covered the First principles (causes) of existing things. But the evolution of metaphysics showed a new approach to it when metaphysics turned to be the theory of knowledge rather than the theory of being in the 17th century. On the wave of scientific development we received a new key philosophical problem – the problem of validity of knowledge, and a new metaphysics, metaphysics of method advanced to the forefront as the most important one, regardless of philosophical movements and forms of method that Bacon and Descartes searched for. Anyway, at this point metaphysics seemed to lose an immediate tie with its term. Growing strength of methodological reflection led, as we know, to skepticism and agnosticism in the 18th century in the face of David Hume as the culmination of this trend. At this time metaphysics of method became autonomous, lost connection with ontology and even opposed itself to it: development results in independence and leads to separation. The figure

of Kant is of utmost importance in this respect as well but, which is more significant, we'd like to draw attention to the fact that he definitely contributed to development of the new time trend of autonomation – this time in regard to practical life and rationalization of morality. The foregoing practical philosophy oriented towards empirical analysis and description of ethical issues whereas Kant got down to defining pure principles of morals. Here's what Kant writes about it in his "Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals": "The present treatise is, however, nothing more than the investigation and establishment of the supreme principle of morality, and this alone constitutes a study complete in itself". In fact, completeness of the study of morals led him to the idea of its independence and self-sufficiency, and even opposition of metaphysics of morals to that of being: it is the "ought-to-be" that matters. Furthermore, according to Kant, it is exclusively metaphysics of morals that may claim to be metaphysical: "metaphysics as science"... becomes what it is only on the grounds of practical reason" (see Kalinnikov, 2010: 26).

So, by the beginning of the 19th century the inner relations between the main philosophical areas became obscure. Differentiation of main metaphysical spheres initially contributed to gradual emancipation of the theory of knowledge and of morals from the theory of being. In the above-mentioned treatise Kant further writes: "Where the different kinds of work are not distinguished and divided, where everyone is a jack-of-all-trades, there manufactures remain still in the greatest barbarism", which is not unequivocal. We can't just rule out a kind of barbarism marked by immeasurability, unbalance between division and connection. No wonder that immeasurable and boundless differentiation and specialization in the sphere of knowledge eventually brought philosophy to, in Hegel's words, abstractness and one-sidedness of determinations of knowledge, which doesn't conform to the centuries-long classical philosophical tradition. In this respect, Fichte and Hegel appeared to be the thinkers who tried to "render unto Caesar what was Caesar's" through uniting all corpus of philosophical knowledge. Contemporary Russian philosophers Kasavin and Shavelev nostalgically noted concerning the variety of forms and interpretations of the phenomenon of daily life that nowadays we need a new Hegel to bring this motley diversity to order (Kasavin & Shavelev, 2004), whereas Hegel of the XIX century presented a new form of metaphysics – metaphysics of logic. Kant admired at inalterability of the science of logic since the time of Aristotle but for Hegel it was a ground for its cardinal revision: "logic coincides with metaphysics as a consequence of expansion of bounds of the discipline" (Demin, 2011: 175). It's not merely a study of inference with formal content any longer.

3. Logical constituents of philosophical absolutism

The discussion of the problem of the absolute knowledge cannot neglect dialectics of the absolute and relative truth, and the regular exposition of this issue in philosophical literature is not quite adequate to the Hegel's one. Today, we are accustomed to research dialectics of the absolute and relative knowledge mostly historically: the absolute is an unreachable scope of complete and perfect knowledge of universality of the universe as a whole, the absolute truth is just a guiding light or, rather, the horizon whereas relativeness is socially and historically conditioned by the accepted philosophical world picture, thinking style of the epoch, ethnic language, ethical, aesthetic, ideological intentions and values, etc. Apart from this "horizontal", temporal dimension, Hegel's theory has a clearly expressed logical, "vertical" side that reveals knowledge in all its multiple forms – from plain to most sophisticated. Actually, Hegel was one of the first to trace various forms of knowledge – from naive sense certainty and perception to moral, religious and art conception. So, the absolute knowledge, as he sees it, is the ultimate form of mind that passes through different stages in order to conceive science as knowledge par excellence: "it is science alone which is spirit's true knowledge of itself" (Hegel). It is no wonder that the last part of "The phenomenology of Spirit" called "The Absolute knowledge" deals exclusively with science. For it is the only sphere that demands generality and necessity as valid criteria. Reason as Vernunft gives itself its own criteria, it can't be led by something exceeding its bounds (in this case reason would have something *over* itself), so if we agree that generality and necessity are immanent to reason, then the form that may meet their requirement is science.

In the frame of German idealism Kant was the first to search for a science that would be capable of giving general and necessary knowledge. He valued mathematics as a cognitive ideal in "Critique of pure reason": "If we desire an example from the sciences, we need only take any proposition in mathematics" (Kant). But a search for the absolute knowledge brought Kant at best to *pure* knowledge rather than *absolute* – Einstein was once asked at a classical concert if music could be rendered into language of physics, and he answered that it was possible but for what reason? Same with mathematics – it's a priori status makes it far too abstract and too far from concrete application. Hegel considered mathematics as cognition that is external for its material: "the movement of knowledge in mathematics takes place only on the surface; it does not touch on the thing that really matters, does not touch on the essence" (2017). Can a science, even such a strict and powerful one as mathematics, alone bear the burden of absoluteness? Or it may be borne only by the system of sciences representing the system of knowledge about all forms of reality? The absolute knowledge may be justified only as *total* knowledge about reality *as a whole* provided by the system or encyclopedia of sciences. It's no wonder that one of English translations of "The phenomenology" renders Wissenschaft as *systematic* science (Baillie), which is not true in

word but true in meaning. The meaning implies that the absolute knowledge as the supreme form of spirit validates itself if it performs its function as Hegel sees it, which is *to conceive all as one*: “The one is made up of all things, and all things issue from the one” as Heraclitus used to formulate it. And conceiving all as one means unification of all mentioned forms of metaphysics – metaphysics of being, morals and method – in the total system of knowledge.

To conceive all as one you need the one and the only principle, a kind of the First element that underlies reality in all its multivarious appearances. It proved to be logic. As for the types of metaphysics, “Encyclopedia of the philosophical sciences” narrates about metaphysical totality of logic. Applied to the sciences of nature logic appears as *metaphysics of being* in the form of the law that outer world-nature complies with; applied to the sciences of spirit (that deal with practical reality actualized in human history whereof determinations are marked in state organization) logic is supplementarily positioned as *metaphysics of morals* or, in a broader sense, of spirit because determinations of spirit are logical as well through the law the spirit itself generates and obeys to. Then what part does philosophy play in it? Philosophy is not merely one of the sections within the philosophy of Spirit, and it’s not just a regular science among other sciences. Since it is the last part of “Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences”, it concludes the system and, as a sublation, is the system; speculative philosophy as the mother-science produces the system of (philosophical) sciences observing all forms of reality in the face of one of the most prominent philosophers ever. “Encyclopedia” is just an explication of what the concept of philosophy implies. Thus, applied to speculative systematic philosophy, logic is positioned as *method*, the dialectic method.

Only the highest level of the system, the sphere of philosophy, brings logic to its proper self in the form of *metaphysics of method*. It is the method that distinguishes sciences and, if applied, gives way to cognition and knowledge: “On the one hand, this nature of scientific method is inseparable from the content, and on the other hand, it determines its rhythm by way of itself, and it has... its genuine exposition in speculative philosophy” (Hegel). Inseparability from the content implies inseparability of philosophy from being and morals. The last two are united in the higher form of being – the spiritual being of the philosopher that, with the help of the true method, observes the reality in all its forms as a *knowing-spiritual-being*.

It is the philosophy that results in absolute synthesis of knowledge when it conceives the totality of logic in nature, spirit and scientific speculative method. It comprehends this comprehensive idea as distinct identity of all fundamental forms of metaphysics on the basis of the ultimate one that may be ‘detected’ in all of them thus uniting them.

4. Discussion

To render this idea into more contemporary discourse, we may say that *the absolute subject matter of philosophy is the inner side of the world that is exposed to enlightenment via logical comprehension and, in this way, reflected in mind and confirmed axiologically through the word that gives weight to the comprehended*. And this philosophical intention is shared by true philosophers – Plato and Democritus, Anaxagoras and Bergson, Spinoza and Heidegger, Parmenides and Marx... The Russian philosopher of the late XIX century V. Sazeman marked methodical idealism as a distinguishing feature of philosophical thinking in contrast to realism which natural mind pertains to. The latter is confined and satisfied with the outer world of physical things whereas philosophical theoretical thinking arises over physical reality to the world of ideal entities that underlie reality.

We'd rather not agree with A. Kojève who qualified the absolute knowledge as wisdom opposed to philosophy (Kojève, 1969: 75). If it had been pure wisdom, human thinking would have stopped with Hegel who was called the "Wise man" by Kojève. In this respect, philosophy is intellectual contemplation, pure *theoria* as only philosophy can focus on the world as total and, at the same time, on man as an essential part of the world. Therefore, *Arche*, the first reality is essentially related to the last reality of man who reflects the world in his mind. For this reason, cognition at a certain point turns into self-cognition.

V. Toporov in his etymology study of the word "sophia" states that it descends from the Sanskrit "suobhia" that surprisingly unites two different meanings – *apartness* (which characterizes man's topos in relation to the world around) and *involvement* in a broader shared reality (which characterizes man as the world's integrated element). Apartness and involvement give man a particular status in the universe: from the cognitive side man as the subject is separated from the Cosmos and thus can make it the object for inquiry but from the ontological side they constitute the whole. Consequently, knowledge of the outer world proves to be self-deepening, self-knowledge. In this light, the old Socratic idea that cognition of abstract forms at a certain point turns into moral metanoia becomes justified. And this is the road to the above-mentioned methodical idealism – metaphysical reality is proper for the non-physical immaterial human mind.

As for modern philosophy that generated a new form of metaphysics, metaphysics of language, it is just partially aware of that in the form of scientism of the analytical philosophy of language or through metaphorical and poetical Heideggerian discourse. Between them philosophy as the absolute knowledge positions itself - a particular mental activity that, as R.

Rorty puts it, “became, for the intellectuals, a substitute for religion” (Rorty, 1979: 4). It guards this knowledge as far as philosophy, following the common, is attempting and capable of conceiving the unity of the world through its multifold manifestations. It might be symptomatic that nowadays rejection of fundamental metaphysical abstractions like universality from the part of postmodernism gives way to introduction and incorporation of some other substitute concepts such as “common to all” and “general” by P. Virno, “commonwealth” by M. Hardt and A. Negri, “generic” by A. Badiou.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of historical forms and logical components of philosophy as the absolute knowledge undertaken in this article shows that historical types of metaphysics existing in the history of philosophy (from Aristotle to Hegel) are not just stages of European philosophy development but key logical elements of philosophy as much as it performs its function of a special form of spiritual activity which is characterized by reflection on ultimate causes of nature, humanity and reflection itself. What makes philosophy absolute is the very intention to comprehend the unity of the world no matter what methods the philosopher uses, regardless of his ideological and axiological preferences, historical and social conventionalities. It makes philosophy different from any other science and form of consciousness.

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