

Comment on “What Is Reasonable Is Real; That Which Is Real Is Reasonable”

Xiangyun Xie

Academy of Arts & Design, Sichuan University of Arts and Science, Dazhou, China

Email: 2804351673@qq.com

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Abstract

When Hegel demonstrated this proposition, he showed that his historical philosophy theory contains the historical process spirit featuring a never-ending spiral, and the theoretical system of historical philosophy he established is completely ended. Between his spirit and theoretical system, there exists the paradox of content and form, between metaphysics and physics. This sentence contains two propositions in the necessity of the movement of self-denial, self-sublation, and self-development; the two are the premise and essence of each other, and they are unified propositions. They point to the fact that historical progress of the development of human society will eventuate a communist society; the infinite possibilities of human development will eventually realize the “true free man” and become the real “free man”.

Keywords

Reality, Realization, Sublation, Transcendence

1. Introduction

“What is reasonable is real; that which is real is reasonable.” This sentence comes from Hegel’s *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* and is one of the most controversial philosophical propositions in the 19th century. At that time, it caused a great social sensation. Philosophy lovers have different opinions on the interpretation of this sentence so that even today there does not exist a unified notion of it, a fact that also speaks for the charm of this sentence, since the more controversial a proposition is, the richer implications it can yield. Most people simply understand this proposition in this way: everything that exists is reasonable, and everything that is reasonable is existing. Combining the background of the time, most people understood that Hegel aimed to adulate Friedrich Wilhelm III (King

of Prussia) That is to say, he wrote this famous quote just to defend the authoritarian system of the Kingdom of Prussia under the leadership of Friedrich Wilhelm III. Therefore, everything that actually existed in the real world of the Prussian country was reasonable, and everything that was reasonable existed in the real world of the Prussian country. With that in mind, we should not oppose everything that existed in the Prussian country but to approve and support everything that existed in the Prussian state instead. There are many reasons for this erroneous view. I think the main reason is that we do not understand this sentence from the language and the social background at that time and with due considerations to Hegel's entire philosophy.

2. Etymological Misunderstanding of “Reality” and “Existence”

There is only a one-character difference between “reality” and “existence” in Chinese, but the connotations in the context of western European philosophy are quite different. “Reality” is “wirklichkeit” in German from its original etymology. It has an active meaning. The root of the word “wirken” means work, activity, production, which refers to doing things, and it becomes “wirklich” when used as an adjective. To view it from its root, “reality” is actually something that is developing, something that you must strive for, not something that already exists. It is very possible that existence is not real, the existing thing is no longer real, and it will definitely be sublated by the actual thing (Deng, 2006). “Reality” is a dynamic word in the western context, a word with initiative and purpose. In the Chinese context, “reality” only means a static state of existence, not a dynamic being or activity. It means “presence” and “existence”. Therefore, the “reality” in the western context often refers to the “realization” in the Chinese context, and only the word “realization” can embody this initiative, necessity, and purpose. This can be traced back to Aristotle's explanation of the dialectics of “data and reality”. Aristotle believes that data and form are not two things, but the same thing. Form is the material of reality, a process activity that realizes the material. Form is realization, and it is often translated as reality. As far as the process is concerned, “realization” can be understood as “the reality as the ability and the reality as the activity”. “Reality” is the result of this realization, not in terms of the process of activity but in terms of results. The translation of “reality” into “successful completion” means that this reality is fully realized. “Motion” is the complete realization of potential things, that is, actualization, realizing potential things (Deng, 1986).

Given the etymological meaning and Aristotle's explanation, we know that “reality” and “existence” are at once related and different. “Existence” is something that has been fully realized in the world of daily life, something already exists, and is ready-made. It does not point to the process of realization, but points to the result of realization. It is the actual existence of Dasein that is successfully completed. “Reality” means “realization”. It is relying on the spirit of Nous that a

thing of potential realizes itself, develops itself into reality, and become an existence after it is successfully completed. From this, we know that “reality” is the process of the potential’s realization, not the result of the activity; the existence is the result of the realization of potential. The relationship between the two is not the relationship between two things, but the relationship between the process and result of self-movement within the same thing. There are many possibilities in the development process of things, but only one development result becomes existence, indicating that there are reasons, grounds, and necessity of the existence. Reality can be realized and become existence because, in addition to “reality” itself being rational and necessary, existence is the result of reality, which shows that existence is essentially rational and necessity. From this perspective, reality and existence are the same thing, both are rational and necessary. The biggest difference between the two is: reality refers to the process of the development of things; whereas existence refers to the results of the development of things. And Hegel also defines “reality” in *Lesser Logic*.

Reality is the unity directly formed by essence and existence or by the interior and the exterior. The manifestation of reality is the reality itself. Therefore, the reality of things in its performance is still essential...“Reality”, as a specific category, contains the previous categories and their differences, and therefore is their development...When this externality of reality develops into two categories of possibility and direct reality, (intermediating each other) circles, generally speaking, it is true possibility...developed reality, as the replacement of the union of the inside and the outside, as the replacement of the union of two opposite movements of the inside and the outside into one movement, is necessity (Hegel, 2009).

The “essence” mentioned by Hegel refers to the possibility of reality, which is what Aristotle called the potential necessity. Being is “existence”, that is, direct reality, and “reality” is the unification of essence and being in the development process. “Reality” develops from essence to being, that is, from potential necessity to direct reality. We can observe from Hegel’s definition of “reality” that Hegel’s “reality” is developed from and is in direct line of succession of the dialectics of Aristotle’s potential and reality. We can also identify the initiative, development, process and necessity of “reality” from Hegel’s definition of “reality”. If the word “reality” in those two propositions is replaced with the word “existence”, the word “existence” will forsake the implications of initiative, purpose and the process of the word “reality”.

Due to a slight difference of characters in the Chinese translation of “What is reasonable is real; that which is real is reasonable”, the connotation of this proposition has undergone earth-shaking changes. Essentially, this proposition is a philosophical one, but people understand it from ordinary daily life and turn it into two independent propositions, causing errors and becoming dogmatisms. From its core, this proposition is an integral part of the development process of a self-substituting movement with vitality. When it is misunderstood, it becomes

two propositions that are isolated, rigid, formalized, and inanimate. The original proposition is the premise of each other, the essence of each other, so it is a unified proposition. The two cannot exist separately from either side, and cannot be divided into two parts, otherwise they will become dogmatism; they are rich and dynamic in connotation, and they entail the necessity of self-denial, self-sublation, and self-development.

3. The Historical Background of Hegel's Life

In his youth, Hegel worked as a tutor for eight years, and then worked as an unpaid lecturer at the University of Jena, but it was also very common. He became famous after writing *The Phenomenology of Spirit* and *Science of Logic* in Jena. He went to the University of Nuremberg as an unpaid lecturer and worked as a professor at the University of Heidelberg (1816-1818). Finally, due to his fame, he was hired by the King of Prussia as a professor at the University of Berlin. Later, he became the university president and worked there from 1818 until his death. It is precisely because of his status as an “official philosopher” that most people thought that he was to cater to the King of Prussia and that he was saying this for the protection of Prussian national interests, and from this that he was a Prussian patriot in his later years. This is also one of the reasons for misunderstanding his proposition.

It is said that Heine once asked Hegel regarding the meaning of “what is reasonable is real”. Hegel laughed and said: “In fact, this sentence means ‘all reasonable things should be realized.’” Having said that, Hegel was immediately taken aback by what he said and looked around in a panic. Upon finding that there was no one else around, he calmed down and told Heine not to mention this to anyone else (Deng, 2006). Hegel believes that everything that is reasonable and inevitable will sooner or later be realized on its own initiative, from potential to reality or Dasein existence. With the continuous development of history, reality gradually loses this. When the conditions and meaning of existence become unreasonable and become accidental, they will gradually withdraw from the stage of history and give way to something that is more reasonable and inevitable, and history gradually moves from a lower level to a higher level. Hegel was not defending the Prussian dictatorship; it was just the typical Hegelian “cunning” of rationality. In the course of Prussian historical development, the classes that did not conform to the historical development trend gradually withdrew from the historical stage and will eventually become the past tense of history; the classes that conform to the historical development trend in the historical development of Prussia will eventually realize themselves and become a historical reality.

4. The Paradox of the Spirit and System of Hegel's Historical Philosophy

Fundamentally speaking, this is the inevitable result of not understanding the

paradox between Hegel's philosophy and the system. On the one hand, Hegel wants to find an end to complete his philosophical system completely; on the other hand, Hegel's philosophical spirit presents a never-ending spiral ascending process, which has no end. The paradox between the two is actually the paradox between form and content. It is generally understood that the Prussian form was the perfect end of the form that Hegel thought, and they failed to realize that the spirit of Hegel's philosophy is an unending one, featuring continuous development. This paradox has never been resolved by Hegel, nor can it be resolved. To view it as an end to a system, the sentence "What is reasonable is real; and that which is real is reasonable" seems to have a certain degree of rationality in that the Prussian form was the existing and reasonable form. But analyzed with Hegel's philosophical spirit in mind, this sentence is completely wrong. The development of reality is a process without an end, and the Prussian form was only a link in process that needed to be sublated. For slavery society, the Prussian form of feudal system had superiority; for the form of feudal system, the capitalist form had more superiority so that it would inevitably sublimate the Prussian form of feudal system.

Engels believes that as an effort to meet the demand of his "system", Hegel often has to call for help from mandatory structures, and these structures are just the skeleton and scaffolding of his buildings; people should go deep into the building instead of staying in front of them. When we go deeper, we will find countless treasures, which are of full value even today (Engels, 1972). Marx discards the form of Hegelian philosophy system, absorbs the "reasonable core" of Hegelian philosophical spirit, and forms a distinctive dialectics. Marx and Engels agree that philosophy ends in Hegel. On the one hand, he summarizes all the development of philosophy in a magnificent form in his own system; on the other hand, because he (though unconsciously) points out to us a way out of the labyrinth of this system to truly understand the world (Engels, 1972).

We should put these two propositions into the spiritual content of Hegel's entire philosophy, and should not take them out of the context, let alone understand this sentence with contemporary thinking. When Engels later talked about this sentence, he thought that there was something in Hegel's words, and there was a revolutionary edge buried in it, which is everything that exists is bound to change. Therefore, Engels takes this proposition one step further and reaches another proposition: "Everything that exists is going to perish" (Deng, 2006). That is to say, the autocratic system of the Kingdom of Prussia under the leadership of Friedrich Wilhelm III contained self-contradictions. On the one hand, the autocratic system denied its own degenerate feudal system, and on the other hand, the autocratic system itself must be denied and sublated by higher institutions. It was destined to perish and be replaced by a new and higher system. This is in line with the development of Hegel's philosophy.

Engels writes *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of German Classical Philosophy* in order to point out a sunny avenue for people who were confused at the time

and clarify the confusion caused by the Hegelian system of philosophy. The practical significance of Engels's writing of this article is just like what he himself criticizes in his book: "With the outbreak of the revolution in 1848, the 'cultivated' Germany abandoned theory and turned to practice." (Engels, 1972). Engels makes his criticism from the perspective of the socio-political field, which also shows that "what is real is reasonable; that which is reasonable is real." The misunderstanding of these two propositions had caused extremely bad things to people at the time. At that time, German theory had already produced results that stood still and refused to make progress. And Engels wrote this book in order to reveal as well as clear the dangers of all kinds of misunderstandings, and point out a sunny avenue to the confused people at that time. From this book, we can also learn that German experienced "the process of completion of other people's historical development" in its intellectual development. This means that although Germany was still a divided country, it realized this process of self-development and self-unity in its thought and spirit.

As Marx and Engels pointed out, when Hegel demonstrated this proposition, Hegel showed that his philosophy of history contains a never-ending spiral of historical development spirit and the establishment of a complete and systematic theory of historical philosophy. There is a paradox between metaphysics and physics, content and form. Therefore, we should also align "what is real is reasonable; that which is reasonable is real" with Hegel's entire philosophical content and his philosophical spirit to understand its specific meaning, and under no circumstances should we separate it from the language environment of the time. We are not to understand these two propositions according to the language background, thinking pattern, living habits of modern people and thus petrify their meanings. It is even more inappropriate to understand them under the realities of that time. Instead, we should understand this sentence in view of the historical development to unravel its contemporary practical significance. We should discard everything that hinders historical progress without hesitation; we should actively support everything that can promote social development. It is also our obligation to actively promote the rapid development of society at all costs, strive to make step-by-step progress of the Chinese nation and realize the Two Centenary Goals in light of the dynamics of the proposition "What is real is reasonable; that which is reasonable is real". In this way, the real liberation of all mankind will be promoted, and the communist society will finally be realized and become a reality.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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