

Hegel In the Future, Hegel On the Future

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The claim I want to defend is that Hegel is the philosopher most open to the future precisely because he explicitly prohibits any project of how our future should look—as he says toward the end of the “Preface” to his *Philosophy of Right*, like the owl of Minerva, which takes off at dusk, philosophy can only paint “grey in grey,” i.e., it only translates into a “grey” (lifeless) conceptual scheme a form of life which has already reached its peak and entered its decline (is becoming “grey” itself) (Hegel 2008, p. 16). To put it very simply and brutally, this is why we should reject all those readings of Hegel which see in his thought an implicit model of a future society reconciled with itself, leaving behind the alienations of modernity—I call them the “not-yet-there Hegelians.” With his latest masterpiece *The Spirit of Trust* (2019), Robert Brandom asserted himself as perhaps the most prominent “not-yet-there Hegelian”: for him, Hegel outlines an ideal (formulated in the liberal terms of mutual recognition) which we have not yet reached. In a short text on Hegel, Judith Butler provides a succinct version of this “not-yet-there” stance:

In his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, [Hegel] shows us that we are not simply solitary creatures, disconnected from one another, although he knows very well that we sometimes see ourselves precisely in that way. [...] [O]nly as a social being can I begin to reflect upon myself. It is in the course of encountering another that I stand a chance to become self-conscious.

Hegel reviews for us a dramatic scene in which one human subject seeks to destroy another, and then another extended scene in which one human subject seeks to destroy another, and then another extended scene in which one human subject seeks to dominate another. Destruction and domination turn out not to work very well. One reason they fail is that modes of acting seek to deny both social interdependency and reciprocal ethical obligation. It turns out that if the other can be destroyed, so too can the first, that their fates are in that sense interlinked, and that the strategy of destruction inevitably imperils them both. But there is a problem of self-knowledge here as well: one cannot have certain knowledge of the self without being recognized by another. So if we thought we could know ourselves by turning inward, away from the social world, we were mistaken, for only in the context of the social world is it possible to gain certainty about oneself. Only as alive and social do we stand a chance of knowing ourselves, and once we come to know ourselves, we grasp the way in which we are fundamentally tied to others and the sensuous conditions of our own existence: the earth as a network of living processes.

[...] And this means that I cannot destroy another's life without attacking a set of living processes of which I am a part. In other words, in destroying another's life, I destroy my own [...] [T]his idea of a living socius is a possible argument for non-violence that emerges from Hegel's text.

Only by turning away from violence as a viable alternative do the social bonds that define our lives appear for the first time. Violence emerges as a distinct possibility, but recognition that violence will not work is what inaugurates the sense of an ethical imperative to find a way of keeping oneself and the other alive, regardless of the conflict between us. Hegel takes account of angry and destructive relations as well as the lethal ruse of social domination. He understands the fury of the individual who wants no one to be like him or equal to him. And yet, he leads us to the realization that I cannot do away with this other without also doing away with myself, that I cannot dominate another without losing track of the social equality that ideally defines us both. At the moment that destroying or dominating the other are ruled out as possibilities, I realize that I am bound to this other who is bound to me, and that my life is bound up with the other's life. (Butler 2019)

Yes, but it is only THROUGH destroying/dominating that mutual recognition emerges: we arrive at mutual solidarity only through acting as solitary creatures and suffering the consequences. It is not that once we realize this mutual dependence we can then enjoy it forever and go on living in a blissful state of mutual recognition. The path to truth is part of the truth, *la vérité surgit de la méprise*, all there is is struggle, violence, domination, and the story of how it fails, the calvary of the spirit. Butler begins with the claim that “we are not simply solitary creatures, disconnected from one another.” OK, but who exactly is saying that we are “simply solitary creatures, disconnected from one another”? My answer is: Hegel himself posits this as a thesis, which he then undermines through its immanent self-deployment. The only way to truth is to go through such extremes which cannot but appear ridiculous. And what about the claim that “I cannot destroy another’s life without attacking a set of living processes of which I am a part. In other words, in destroying another’s life, I destroy my own”—really? An obvious example: What about fighting Hitler, trying to defeat Nazi Germany? At a more general level, is it not Hegel’s point that wars are necessary, that they are the culminating point of our ethical lives?

This long passage was worth quoting because it resumes the future-oriented reading of Hegel—which is why I find it problematic. In Hegel’s thought, violence does not emerge as a possibility but as an ethical necessity, and remains there up to the end—the end of Hegel’s philosophy of right is WAR as the ultimate point of reference of the ethical order. To make this key point clear, let’s recall the well-known passage from the *Phenomenology* in which, analyzing the infinite judgment of phrenology “the Spirit is a bone,” Hegel draws a parallel with the double function of the penis:

The *depth* which the Spirit brings forth from within—but only as far as its picture-thinking consciousness where it lets it remain—

and the *ignorance* of this consciousness about what it really is saying, are the same conjunction of the high and the low which, in the living being, Nature naïvely expresses when it combines the organ of its highest fulfilment, the organ of generation, with the organ of urination. The infinite judgement, *qua* infinite, would be the fulfilment of life that comprehends itself; the consciousness of the infinite judgement that remains at the level of picture-thinking behaves as urination. (Hegel 1977, p. 210)

A close reading of this passage makes it clear that Hegel's point is not that, in contrast to the vulgar empiricist mind which sees only urination, the proper speculative attitude has to choose insemination. The paradox is that the direct choice of insemination is the infallible way to miss it: it is not possible to choose the "true meaning" directly, i.e., one has to begin by making the "wrong" choice (of urination)—the true speculative meaning emerges only through a repeated reading, as the after-effect (or by-product) of the first, "wrong," reading. And the same goes for social life, in which the direct choice of the "concrete universality" of a particular ethical life-world can only end in a regression to pre-modern organic society, which denies the infinite right of subjectivity as the fundamental feature of modernity. Since the subject-citizen of a modern state can no longer accept his immersion in some particular social role that confers on him a determinate place within the organic social Whole, the only way to the rational totality of the modern State leads through the horror of the revolutionary Terror: one should ruthlessly tear up the constraints of the pre-modern organic "concrete universality" and fully assert the infinite right of subjectivity in its abstract negativity. In other words, the point of Hegel's deservedly famous analysis of the revolutionary Terror in his *Phenomenology* is not the rather obvious insight into how the revolutionary project involved a unilateral direct assertion of abstract Universal Reason, and was as such doomed to perish in self-destructive fury, since it was unable to organize the transposition of its revolutionary energy into

a concrete stable and differentiated social order; Hegel's point is rather the enigma of why, in spite of the fact that revolutionary Terror was a historical deadlock, we have to pass through it in order to arrive at the modern rational State.

But is it not obvious how the whole point of Hegel is that, through all these deadlocks, a final reconciliation arises? Therein resides the crux of the matter. The wonderful title of Gérard Lebrun's first book on Hegel—*La patience du Concept, The Patience of the Concept* (Lebrun 1972)—can be read in two opposite ways: as trust in the teleology of history (when you think you are caught in a chaotic meaningless mess of events, be patient, wait and analyze, and you will see that there is a deeper meaning behind this mess), or as an assertion of radical contingency (the stories that we tell ourselves about the chaotic mess we're in always come too late, after the fact, they are themselves contingent attempts to organize our experience into a meaningful Whole). Although the first reading is the usual one, the second one is the only option if one wants to assert Hegel as our contemporary. Here, everything is decided—if we make the second choice, we should reject what Brandom sees as the “principal positive practical lesson of Hegel's analysis of the nature of modernity, the fruit of his understanding of the One Great Event in human history”: “If we properly digest the achievements and failures of modernity, we can build on them new, better kinds of institutions, practices, and self-conscious selves—ones that are normatively superior because they embody a greater self-consciousness, a deeper understanding of the kind of being we are” (Brandom 2019, p. 456).

Along these lines, Brandom proposes three stages of socio-ethical development: in Stage One (traditional societies), we get *Sittlichkeit* (the order of mores accepted as a natural fact) but no modern subjectivity; in Stage Two, we get alienation—modern subjectivity gains its freedom but is alienated from the substantial ethical order; finally, in Stage Three, which is on the horizon, we get a new form of *Sittlichkeit*, compatible with free subjectivity:

As he is writing the *Phenomenology*, Hegel sees *Geist* as beginning to consolidate itself at Stage Two. The book is intended to make possible for its readers the postmodern form of self-consciousness Hegel calls ‘Absolute Knowing,’ and thereby to begin to usher in Stage Three. The new form of explicit philosophical self-consciousness is only the beginning of the process, because new practices and institutions will also be required to overcome the structural alienation of modern life. (Ibid., p. 458)

Really? So what about Hegel’s insistence that philosophy can only paint “grey in grey,” since, like the owl of Minerva, it only takes off at dusk? Here, Brandom talks like Marx: Absolute Knowing is for him (as Marx put it about revolutionary thought) like the crowing of the Gallic cock at the beginning of a new dawn. It ushers in a new social age, when “new practices and institutions will also be required to overcome the structural alienation of modern life.”

The three stages are generated along two axes, *Sittlichkeit* or no *Sittlichkeit* and modern free subjectivity or no subjectivity, so that we get traditional society (*Sittlichkeit* without free subjectivity), modern society (free subjectivity without *Sittlichkeit*), and the forthcoming postmodern society (*Sittlichkeit* with free subjectivity). Brandom immediately raises the question of the status of the fourth option in his scheme, which fits none of the three stages, the situation with no *Sittlichkeit* and no free subjectivity: “What is wrong with the idea of pre-modern alienation?” (ibid.). But why does he automatically read the absence of free subjectivity as “pre-modern”? What about a properly “postmodern” option of losing free subjectivity and nonetheless remaining in a state of alienation? Is this not what so-called “totalitarianism” is about? And is this not the state we are approaching with so-called “digitalized authoritarianism”? Would this not be the properly Hegelian insight into the dialectics of modernity—we want to overcome the gap of alienation between substantial *Sittlichkeit* and a free subjectivity that no longer recognizes the mores as its

own, but instead of bringing them together in a kind of higher synthetic unity we *lose both*? Did Stalinism not promise to implement a synthesis between a strong communal spirit and free individuality, promising actual freedom as opposed to alienated formal freedom—and was the result not the loss of freedom itself in conditions of total alienation?

More precisely, there are three levels to be distinguished here: norms as such (the ethical substance, the “big Other”); subjective attitudes toward norms; and institutions and social practices which embody the norms. Brandom mentions this in passing when he claims that pure consciousness “reflects on the relations between norms and the institutions that embody them, on the one hand, and their relations to the subjective normative attitudes of those whose practice they govern, on the other” (ibid., p. 488). In a system which functions in a cynical way, we have public norms, we have individuals who participate in rituals and institutions that enact these norms, but participation and enactment not only do not imply the appropriate inner acceptance of these norms—there are also systems of norms and ideological rituals in place which function only on condition that they are not “taken seriously” by the participating individuals.¹

Brandom sees the key to the Third Stage in the notion of “forgiving recollection,” deployed by Hegel towards the end of the chapter on Spirit in his *Phenomenology*: the gap that separates the acting subject and its severe judge is there overcome through their reconciliation, when not only the agent confesses his sin but

¹ In a more refined approach, one should distinguish two levels of distance here. First, there is the widespread stance of distance, which only confirms our inner belonging—say, true patriots are not stupid fanatic zealots, they love to make fun of their country, etc. Then, there is the more radical cynical distance, such as, for example, the one that prevailed in the Soviet Union in Brezhnev’s time of “stagnation”—after the fall of Khrushchev, the *nomenklatura* no longer took its own ideology seriously; Khrushchev was the last Soviet leader who really believed in Communism.

the judge also confesses the unilateral nature of his own position, his participation in what he condemns: “Evil is also the gaze which sees evil everywhere around it.” Brandom’s notion of forgiving recollection is very useful today: it enables us to see what is false in precisely those who advocate tolerance and reject “hate speech.” Is an exemplary case of rigid moral judgment today not the Politically Correct subject who sternly condemns those who are accused of practicing “hate speech”? We all know how swift and cruel such judgments can be—one wrong word, one joke considered inappropriate, and your career can be ruined

Remember what happened to the film critic David Edelstein.² Edelstein made a rather tasteless joke on his private Facebook page regarding the death of *Last Tango in Paris* director Bernardo Bertolucci: “Even grief is better with butter,” accompanied by a still of Maria Schneider and Marlon Brando from *Last Tango in Paris* (the infamous anal rape scene). He quickly deleted it (before the public outcry broke out, not as a reaction to it!). Actress Martha Plimpton immediately tweeted to her followers: “Fire him. Immediately.” Which happened the next day: Fresh Air and NPR announced that they were cutting ties with Edelstein because the post had been “offensive and unacceptable, especially given Maria Schneider’s experience during the filming of *Last Tango in Paris*.” So what are the implications of (or, rather, the unstated rules to be inferred from) this incident? Laura Kipnis notes that, first, “there’s nothing inadvertent about inadvertent offense”: it cannot be excused as a momentary mistake, since it is treated as revelatory of the true character of the offender. This is why one such offense is a permanent black mark against you, however apologetic you might be: “One flub and you’re out. An unthinking social media post will outweigh a 16-year track record.” The only thing that might help is a long permanent process of self-critical self-examination: “Failure to keep re-proving it implicates you

² For all of the following paragraph, see Kipnis 2018.

in crimes against women.” You have to prove it again and again, since, as a man, you are *a priori* not trusted: “men are not to be believed, they will say anything.”

What would “forgiving recollection” have meant here? The accuser would not only have had to forgive the offender the “hate speech” act he was responsible for, she would also have had to confess and renounce *her own hatred*—great hatred is easily discernible in such Politically Correct inexorable demands for swift punishment, definitely more hatred than in the condemned act itself. A paraphrase of Hegel’s dictum about Evil fits perfectly here: “Hatred resides in the gaze which recognizes hatred everywhere.” Most of “hate speech” definitely displays patronizing superiority, brutal irony, etc., but only rarely pure hatred, which, in the case of PC condemnation, (mis)perceives itself as a well-grounded exercise of justice. Such condemnation doesn’t bother to reconstruct the reasoning that guided the offender, who perhaps perceived his post as a tasteless but inoffensive display of humor. As a result, we get a duality of how things were for the (offender’s) consciousness and how they were “in themselves” (in the eyes of the judge or the victim who was offended). However, the same gap was also at work in the PC judge’s condemnation: a gap between how things stood for his consciousness (I am just passing righteous judgment) and how they were in themselves (a display of hatred aimed at destroying the life or career of the offender).

But there are clear limits to this notion of forgiving recollection. “Hegel incorporates, adapts, and transforms the traditions he inherits—what we will come to recognize as the way he recollectively forgives them” (Brandom 2019, p. 514). To be brutal in a simplified way: Can we also “recollectively forgive” Hitler? And if the answer is no, is this because Hitler cannot be forgiven in this sense or because we ourselves are not yet at a high enough level of ethical reflection to do it? The only way to avoid regression to the position of a “beautiful soul” (which passes judgment from an external position, exempted from its object) is

to endorse the second option—that our castigation of Hitler as evil must be a reflexive determination of the Evil that persists in ourselves, i.e., of the non-reflected particularity that persists in our own position, from which we pass judgments. Let us note that many rightist revisionists today try to enact precisely such a recollective forgiving of Hitler: yes, he made terrible mistakes, he committed horrible crimes, but in doing so, he was just fighting for the ultimately good cause (against capitalist corruption, for him embodied in the Jews) in the wrong way. (It is easy to construct a more rational and not rightist-revisionist version of how we who condemn Nazism should also ask forgiveness: not only was anti-Semitism by no means limited to Germany, it was also very strong in nations at war with Germany, and not only did the obvious injustice of the treaty of Versailles as an act of revenge against the defeated Germany contribute to the Nazis' rise to power, at a more general level, Fascism grew out of the dynamics and antagonisms of Western capitalism, in which those who were its victims also fully participated.) These revisionists also try to balance responsibility in a pseudo-Hegelian way: Were Hitler's crimes not mirrored in the one-sidedness of the Jewish position (their exclusive stance, their unwillingness to integrate themselves into the German nation)? While we should totally reject this line of reasoning, the solution is definitely not to draw a line between sins that can be recollectively forgiven and those that are too great and cannot be—such a procedure introduces a duality which is totally at odds with Hegel's approach. What one should do is to change the very notion of recollective forgiving: to deprive this notion of any echoes of “you are now forgiven, you are no longer really bad.” Brandom, of course, raises this issue:

Some things people have done strike us, even upon due reflection, as simply unforgivable. In these cases, though we might try to mitigate the consequences of evil doings, we have no idea at all how to go about discerning the emergence of a governing norm we could ourselves endorse. (Ibid., p. 716)

His answer is:

But now we must ask: Whose fault is it that the doing, or some aspect of it, is unforgivable — the doer or the forgiver? Is the failure that of the bad agent or of the bad recollector? Is whose fault it is a matter of how things anyway just are? Or is it at least partly reflective of the recollector's failure to come up with a more norm-responsive narrative? (Ibid.)

But, again, should we “acknowledge at least equal responsibility on the part of the unsuccessful forgiver” (ibid., p. 717) even in the case of the Holocaust? And should we, in this case, *also* claim that “one must trust that this recollective-recognitive failure, too—like the failure of the original, inadequately forgiven doer—will be more successfully forgiven by future assessors (who know more and are better at it)” (ibid., p. 718)? Furthermore, what about cases such as cliterodectomy (or torture, or slavery in general), which we today experience as atrocities, but for which it is easy to reconstruct a normative background that makes them acceptable not only to the perpetrators but even to their victims? What about such cases where the retroactive view makes them more unacceptable than they were in their original context? Here, also, we are dealing with the unity of making and finding: if we sternly judge and reject such cases, we not only make new norms and impose them onto past acts; in a sense, we also find that such acts were always unacceptable, even if they appeared acceptable to those committing them.

Let's once again take the example of Hitler and the Holocaust. The way to deal with it is perhaps indicated by the biblical story of Habakkuk's complaint, the most poignant expression of what one might call “the silence of the gods,” of the big question addressed to God since Job: “Where were you when that horror [the Holocaust, etc.] happened? Why were you silent, why didn't you intervene?” Here are the words of this complaint:

How long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, 'Violence!' but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds. Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted. (Hab 1, 2–4)

So how does God answer? One should read his reply very carefully: "Look at the nations and watch—and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told" (Hab 1, 5). There is no simple teleological justification here in the style of "be patient, strange are the ways of the Lord, your suffering serves a purpose in the wider divine plan, which you cannot grasp from your narrow finite standpoint," etc. To say that the Holocaust (or anything similar to it) serves some higher purpose unknown to us is an anti-Christian obscenity, since the whole point of Christ's compassion is unconditional solidarity with those who suffer. To use Agamben's expression, one should gather here the full courage of hopelessness.

Back to the Holocaust. What does it mean that we should be "utterly amazed," and that something will happen that we "would not believe, even if we were told"? While utter amazement can be read as referring to the incomprehensible horror of the Holocaust, the unbelievable thing that happened later was the founding of the state of Israel, which, one might surmise, would not have happened without the Holocaust, and only in this sense could Hitler be retroactively "forgiven," by the existence of Israel, which his crimes contributed to. But, again, one has to be very precise here: this in no way justifies the Holocaust as a sacrifice the Jews were ready to make for returning to their land (the thesis of some anti-Semites), or the claim that the Holocaust was part of a secret divine plan to make possible the return of the Jews to their homeland (also the thesis of some anti-Semites)—it just means that the founding of Israel was an unexpected and

unplanned consequence of the Holocaust. And it also says nothing about other injustices that resulted from this set of acts: the land to which the Jews returned has for a long time been inhabited by other people and cannot be simply designated as “theirs.”

The main trap to be avoided here is that of holistic teleology: something that appears to us as a horror can, from a larger perspective, be an element which contributes to global harmony, in the same way that a tiny stain in a large painting contributes to its beauty if we look at the painting from a proper distance. The legacy of Job prohibits us from taking any such refuge in the standard transcendent figure of God as a secret Master who knows the meaning of what appears to us as a meaningless catastrophe, who sees the entire picture, in which what we perceive as a stain contributes to global harmony. When confronted with an event such as the Holocaust or the death of millions in the Congo in recent years, is it not obscene to claim that these stains have a deeper meaning in that they contribute to the harmony of the Whole? Is there a Whole which can teleologically justify and thus redeem/sublate an event such as the Holocaust? Christ’s death on the cross means that one should drop without restraint the notion of God as a transcendent caretaker who guarantees the happy outcome of our acts, the guarantee of historical teleology—Christ’s death on the cross is the death of *this* God, it repeats Job’s stance, it refuses any “deeper meaning” that would obfuscate the brutal real of historical catastrophes. Even a strong version of this logic—that forgiving does not mean the sacrifice/erasure of a particular content, but the recognition that that particular content is necessary for the actualization of the universal Good—is not strong enough: recollective forgiving remains an ambiguous notion. In the ethical sphere, it can be read as “trying to understand what appears to us as evil,” reconstructing a hidden positive motivation that just got expressed in a perverted way. However, retroactivity implies a much more radical dimension of contingency—things are not what they are, they “will have been,” their truth is decided retroactively:

Concrete practical forgiveness involves doing things to change what the consequences of the act turn out to be. For example, one might trust one's successors to make it the case that one's inadvertent revelation, one's sacrifice, or the decision to go to war was worthwhile, because of what it eventually led to—because of what we made of it by doing things differently afterward. Something I have done should not be treated as an error or a crime, as the hard-hearted *niederträchtig* judge does, because it is not yet settled what I have done. Subsequent actions by others can affect its consequences, and hence the content of what I have done. The hard-hearted judgment wrongly assumes that the action is a finished thing, sitting there fully formed, as a possible object of assessment independent of what is done later. The *Kammerdiener's* minifying ascription of the hero's action to low, self-interested motives rather than acknowledgment of a norm as binding in the situation depends on a defective atomistic conception of what an intention is. Recall the model of agency discussed in connection with the Reason section. Whether any particular event that occurs consequentially downstream from the adoption of a practical attitude (*Vorsatz*) makes an expressively progressive contribution to the fulfilment of an intention depends on its role in the development of a retrospectively imputed plan. And the role of a given event in the evolving plan depends on what else happens." (Brandom 2019, p. 602)

At the level of immediate facts, things are what they are—millions died in the Holocaust, nothing can retroactively change this, the past can only be changed at the level of its symbolic mediation. But here, things get complicated: What about the opposite case (evoked by Hegel himself)? What if an agent acts with the best intentions in mind, but the unpredictable consequences of his act are catastrophic? How does recollective forgiving/forgiving recollection work here? Can the judge construct a partial forgiving by way of proving that the most probable consequence would have been benevolent and that the catastrophe was due to a contingent, unpredictable accident? And what if we introduce a third level on top of the duality of one's subjective intention in performing an act and the actual outcome of the act: that of

unconscious motivations? This third level should in no way be limited to “base” motifs as the concealed truth of the publicly-professed “noble” motifs (say, when a person who claims to have performed an act out of a sense of duty was effectively motivated by personal revenge)—it should also include the opposite case (while I thought I acted out of some private “pathological” inclination, it was actually a deeper sense of justice that motivated me).

If we concede that the actual significance of an act “will have been,” we touch here the paradoxical nerve of morality, termed by Bernard Williams “moral luck” (see Williams 1981). Williams evokes the case of a painter ironically called “Gauguin,” who left his wife and children and moved to Tahiti in order to fully develop his artistic genius. Was he morally justified in doing this or not? Williams’s answer is that we can only answer this question *in retrospect*, after we learn the final outcome of his risky decision. Did he develop into a painting genius or not? Exactly the same holds for the legal status of a rebellion against (legal) power in Kant: the proposition “what the rebels are doing is a crime which deserves to be punished” is true if pronounced when the rebellion is still going on; however, once the rebellion wins and establishes a new legal order, this statement about the legal status of the same past acts no longer applies. Here is Kant’s answer to the question, “Is rebellion a rightful means for a people to cast off the oppressive authority of a so-called tyrant [...]?”:

The rights of a people have been injured and it would be no wrong to him (the tyrant) to be dethroned, there is no doubt about that. Nonetheless it is wrong in the highest degree for the subjects to pursue their rights in this way, and they therefore would have no cause to complain of injustice if they were defeated in their endeavor and subsequently subjected to the most extreme punishment. [...] And it is fully consistent with this view that, if the revolt of the people succeeds, then that head of state will withdraw to the position of subject, and will thus likewise not be permitted to initiate any attempt to regain power, but also ought not fear being held accountable for his earlier government. (Kant 2006, pp. 105–106)

Does Kant not offer here his own version of “moral luck” (or, rather, “legal luck”)? The (not ethical, but legal) status of a rebellion is decided retroactively: if a rebellion succeeds and establishes a new legal order, then it brings about its own *circulus vitiosus*, i.e., it erases into the ontological void its own illegal origins, it enacts the paradox of retroactively grounding itself. Kant states this paradox even more clearly a couple of pages earlier: “If a violent revolution, engendered by a bad constitution, introduces by illegal means a more legal constitution, to lead the people back to the earlier constitution would not be permitted; but, while the revolution lasted, each person who openly or covertly shared in it would have justly incurred the punishment due to those who rebel” (ibid.). One cannot be clearer: the legal status of the same act changes with time. What is a punishable crime while the rebellion is underway, becomes, its opposite after a new legal order is established — more precisely, it simply disappears, as a vanishing mediator that retroactively cancels/erases itself in its result.

Let’s take an extreme case of “forgiving recollection” (without too much forgiving, more with a retroactive attribution of responsibility and guilt). Someone made the simple, perspicuous observation that until somewhere around the early or even mid-twentieth century, most sex would be considered rape by today’s standards — this is a definitive sign of some kind of progress. What we encounter here is the key feature of the Symbolic: it renders visible the fundamental “openness” the Symbolic introduces into reality. Once we enter the Symbolic, things never simply are, they all “will have been,” they, as it were, borrow (part of) their being from the future. This de-centering introduces an irreducible contingency: there is no deeper teleology at work here, no secret power that guarantees a happy outcome. Due to his true knowledge of Hegel, Brandom has to admit this retrospective nature of historical progress:

The progression is retrospectively necessary. It is not the case that a given stage could have evolved in no other way than as to produce

what appears as its successor. Rather, that successor (and ultimately, the final—so far—triumphant, culminating conception) could not have arisen except as a development from the earlier ones. Necessity is always retrospective in Hegel: the Owl of Minerva flies only at dusk. (Brandom 2019, p. 608)

So far so good—but Brandom continues this quote with: “The passage closes with Hegel’s expression of trust: his summons to the next generation to do for its time what he has done for his: to take on the forgiving recollective labor of explicitation that makes a rational history” (ibid.). I find this jump into the future, this “trust” in progress, totally unwarranted and at odds with Hegel’s basic metaphysical stance. Why? It implies a gap between two levels: Hegel’s actual thought (constrained to its time, painting grey in grey), and a more basic universal view (meta-language), which locates Hegel’s thought in a progressive series, in a “recognitive cycle of confession, trust, and recollective forgiveness, followed by confession of the inadequacy of that forgiveness and trust in subsequent forgiveness of that failure” (ibid., p. 610). We are thereby fully back to what Hegel called “spurious infinity”: what Hegel did for the entire past up to his time (recollecting it into a rational totality), Brandom himself tries to do with Hegel (paraphrasing his thought with contemporary terms, etc.), and he invites his future readers to do the same with his work.

There is another aspect of the same inconsistency: If necessity is always retrospective, what legitimizes Brandom to read Hegel’s idea of Absolute Knowing as going well beyond the retrospective “painting grey in grey,” as pointing towards a more emancipated social future beyond the antagonisms of alienated modernity, which Brandom calls the Third Phase? “Hegel’s astonishing aspiration is for a morally edifying semantics. The truth shall set us free, and guide us to a new age of Geist whose normative structure is as much an improvement over the modern as the modern was over the traditional” (ibid., p. 614). But wouldn’t the proper Hegelian move be precisely to leave open a space for

the retroactive realization that this bright(er) future (the Third Phase) will bring out new unpredictable antagonisms and forms of violence? What if we should be forgiven exactly for that—for the illusory hope that progress will go on and that we can already do more than just paint grey in grey to outline the basic contours of a new future epoch of full emancipation? Would it not be much more in Hegel’s spirit to presuppose that this phase will also somehow go terribly wrong (as it did with Fascism, Stalinism, etc.)? For example, what Marx should be “forgiven” for is that he remained blind to how his vision of Communism inspired new forms of political oppression and terror: from today’s perspective of forgiving recollection, it is not enough to play the usual game of how Marx’s noble vision was misused, and how he shouldn’t be held accountable for this misuse.

Rocío Zambrana (2020) contrasted the standard Hegelian-Marxist notion of immanent critique with “a conception of critique that, rather than being guided by normative criteria that can be distilled from the socio-historical phenomenon at hand, is attuned to, following Adorno, the ‘undiminished persistence of suffering’ that remains in a world ‘which could be paradise here and now—[yet] can become hell itself tomorrow’. It is a form of ongoing critique that remains vigilant of the inversion of any normative criteria immanent to social reality” (Zambrana 2020, p. 110). Does this form of critique not resuscitate the deepest lesson of Hegelian critical analysis, i.e., that it is not enough to criticize the present on behalf of its own immanent norms or, more broadly, emancipatory potentials, but that one should remain vigilant of how these emancipatory potentials reproduce the (antagonist) structure of the present at a deeper level, so that their actualization can turn into its opposite? “The object of critique not only remains the modes of suffering distinctive to a given form of life, but also the normative commitments implicated in these forms of suffering. [...] It tracks not how these commitments are distorted by contingent conditions. Rather, it tracks how suffering is an effect of the work of those commitments” (ibid., p. 112). Is the

fate of the October Revolution not an exemplary case of how a world “which could be paradise here and now [...] can become hell itself tomorrow”? The emancipatory dream of a Communist paradise turned into the hell of Stalinist terror.

So, to conclude, should we not turn around Brandom’s motif of the “spirit of trust,” i.e., is the deepest feature of a truly Hegelian approach not a spirit of *distrust*? That is to say, Hegel’s basic axiom is not the teleological premise that, no matter how terrible an event is, at the end it will turn out to be a subordinated moment that contributes to the overall harmony; his axiom is that no matter how well-planned and well-meant an idea or a project is, it will somehow go wrong: the Greek organic community of the *polis* turns to fratricidal war, the medieval fidelity based on honor turns into empty flattery, the revolutionary striving for universal freedom turns into terror, etc. Hegel’s point is not that these bad turns could have been avoided (say, if only the French revolutionaries had constrained themselves to realizing the concrete freedom of an organic social order of the estates, and not the abstract freedom and equality of all, the bloodshed could have been prevented)—we have to accept that there is no direct path to concrete freedom, the “reconciliation” resides just in the fact that we resign ourselves to the permanent threat of destruction, which is a positive condition of our freedom. For example, Hegel’s vision of the state is that of a hierarchic order of estates ethically held together by the permanent threat of war. So what if we consider progress which goes further, towards a post-Hegelian parliamentary liberal democracy? It would have been easy for Hegel to point out how the unheard-of carnage of the Great War emerged as the truth of the gradual peaceful progress of the nineteenth century. It is easy to imagine the glee with which Hegel would have analyzed the immanent logic of how a liberal society leads to Fascism, or how a radical emancipatory project ends up in Stalinism, or how the triumph of global capitalism in 1990 paved the way for the populist New Right. This is the task of us, Hegelians, today.

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