

Rage Against the Machine: Adorno, Hegel, and Absolute Mastery

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In one of his *Three Studies on Hegel* (1963), Adorno argues that “rescuing Hegel – and only rescue, not revival, is appropriate for him – means *facing up to his philosophy where it hurts most* [*wo sie am wehesten tut*]” (Adorno 1993, p. 83). Adorno takes aim at the pain that Hegel’s dialectic causes the non-conceptual by dissolving its polymorphous matter into the cold logic of thought (Adorno 2004, p. 24).¹ The *rage* deployed by the Hegelian system against the non-conceptual and the collateral damage it produces along the way, in turn, gives rise to Adorno’s *outrage* in the *Negative Dialectics* (1966), where he delivers his final verdict on the untruth of Hegel’s philosophy of identity.² Deeming Hegel’s system a “kind of philosophy [that] sides with the big guns,” Adorno never wonders whether suffering is only inflicted by the concept on the non-conceptual or whether the concept also *patiently* endures its pain when confronting the limits of its experience (Adorno 1993, p. 83).³ Does not the Absolute also suffer insofar as it pushes against its limits (*Grenzen*), which shape it as

¹ “The system, the form of presenting a totality to which nothing remains extraneous, absolutizes the thought against each of its contents and evaporates the content in thoughts” (*ibidem*).

² See “Idealism as Rage” (Adorno 2004, pp.22-24): “The system is the belly turned mind, and rage is the mark of each and every idealism” (p. 23).

³ See Gérard Lebrun, *La patience du concept* (1972).

both a complete and infinite totality (Mascot 2014b, p. 137) or, in Adorno's words, as "something infinite and conclusively given" (Adorno 1993, p. 86)?

Suffering is not foreign to Hegelian speculation; it is undoubtedly part of the experience of the phenomenological consciousness, of its *pathway of doubt* and *way of despair*, as well as of the life of the *Geist* affected by "the seriousness, the suffering, the patience and the labour of the negative" (Hegel 1977, pp. 10, 49). The question is rather whether and when such pain could ever disappear, namely, if the Absolute could ultimately enjoy a painless existence and be impervious to all discomfort by virtue of its absoluteness.

Contingencies can be taken as the litmus test of the speculative mastery of Hegel's Absolute and of his philosophy as a science of freedom (Mabille 1999, p. 364). Therefore, this paper engages with the modal category of *contingency* (*die Zufälligkeit / das Zufällige*) as it appears in the *Science of Logic*, as well as with the *contingencies* (*die Zufälligkeiten / das Zufall*) that occur in nature and in the realm of the spirit to revisit the painful endurance of the Hegelian concept, which Adorno took for a monster of cruelty and Gérard Lebrun considered a master of patience.

If the contingent is the limit *par excellence*, the specter that haunts the Hegelian system and that which may endanger and sabotage the very speculative enterprise of the Absolute, what is the fate of contingencies in the dialectical economy of the concept? Does the *calvary* of the speculative consist in the dialectical torment of unceasingly and unsuccessfully attempting to *overcome* (*überwinden*) and *eliminate* (*entfernen*) the contingencies of the world?⁴ Is the contingent the "speculative Good Friday" of Hegelian philosophy (Hegel 1988, p. 71)?

⁴ The *calvary* of Absolute Spirit is evoked in the last passage of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Hegel 1977, p. 493). In § 145 of the *Encyclopedia* Hegel writes, "Now, *overcoming the contingent [dies Zufällige zu überwinden]*, so

1. *The Torment of the Absolute*

In the *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno evokes different instances of pain. On the one hand, he argues that pain exists in the world and the crime of Hegel's philosophy is to give it a speculative foundation: "Its agony is the world's agony raised to a concept" (Adorno 2004, p. 6).⁵ On the other hand, and seemingly contradictorily, Adorno remarks that "the smallest trace of senseless suffering in the empirical world belies all the identitarian philosophy that would talk us out of that suffering" (Adorno 2004, p. 203). By opposing the grip of speculative reason, the absurd experience of pain simply undermines the truth of speculation itself. Instead, Adorno argues, "The need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth" (*ibid.*, p. 17). Adorno identifies the many targets of the dialectical harm caused by Hegel's philosophy: "They are non-conceptuality, individuality, and particularity – things which ever

*construed, is generally the task of knowing [Erkennens], on the one hand, as much as in the domain of practice, on the other, it is a matter of not standing pat with the contingency of willing or arbitrary choice [Willkür]. Nonetheless, especially in the modern era, it has often happened that contingency has been elevated to an illegitimate level and accorded a value in relation to nature as well as the spiritual world that does not in fact suit it" (Hegel 2010b, p.216, emphasis added). Along the same lines in the Introduction to his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, Hegel remarks that, "The sole aim of philosophical enquiry is to eliminate [entfernen] the contingent. Contingency is the same as external necessity, that is, a necessity which originates in causes which are themselves no more than external circumstances. In history, we must look for a general design, the ultimate end of the world, and not a particular end of the subjective spirit or mind; and we must comprehend it by means of reason, which cannot concern itself with particular and finite ends, but only with the absolute" (Hegel 1975, p. 28, emphasis added).*

⁵ As Adorno writes in the *Negative Dialectics*, "It is the horror that verifies Hegel and stands him on his head. If he transfigured the totality of historic suffering into the positivity of the self-realizing absolute, the One and All that keeps rolling on to this day—with occasional breathing spells—would teleologically be the absolute of suffering" (Adorno 2004, p. 320).

since Plato used to be dismissed as transitory and insignificant” (p. 8). By worshipping the laws of identity, Hegel’s dialectic hurts everything it dismisses as an expression of “lazy *Existenz*” (ibid.): it smashes the merely accidental and ephemeral, it crushes the right of the non-identical, it annihilates the concrete under the weight of abstract categorization,⁶ it asphyxiates the individual and the singular in the name of the universal, which shows no “sympathy with the utopian particularity that has been buried underneath the universal” (p. 318), and, finally, it dissipates the very substance of being under the cognitive power of reason. Adorno stands up for all that resist the brutal constraint of the Hegelian concept by reclaiming the primacy of the non-identical against the imperative of identity thinking. However, as Alison Stone has highlighted, Adorno’s notion of the non-identical is in the end nothing but a regulative concept – like Kant’s notion of the Thing-in-itself – which he employs to circumscribe a “zone of resistance” against the expansion of the “insatiable principle of identity” (Stone 2014, p. 1135).⁷ In fact, the concept of the non-identical does not express any knowledge of the singular things that it strives to assert and rather serves as a mere placeholder: the non-identical only names the side of things that no concept can reach or master. Drawing

⁶ In the second essay of his *Drei Studien zu Hegel*, entitled “The Experiential Content of Hegel’s Philosophy”, Adorno provides a much more generous reading of Hegel’s understanding of experience and of the empirical. According to Adorno, “Hegel went beyond the limits of a science that merely ascertained and arranged data” rooting experience into the speculative and rejecting any positivistic drift. Therefore, Adorno remarks that “because of his idealism, Hegel has been reproached for being abstract in comparison with the concreteness of the phenomenological, anthropological, and ontological schools. But he brought infinitely more concreteness into his philosophical ideas than those approaches, and not because his speculative imagination was balanced by a sense of reality and historical perspective but by virtue of the approach his philosophy takes by virtue, one might say, of the experiential character of his speculation” (Hegel 1993, p. 66-67).

⁷ See also Stone 2014 and Tertulian 1983.

on the pain of the non-identical – “what the concepts suppress, disparage, and discard” (Adorno 2004, p. 9-10) – Adorno defines the task of negative dialectics. Its prerogative, he explains, “would consist of the qualities that [philosophy] downgrades as contingent, as a *quantité négligeable*,” and whose legitimacy and dignity are to be reclaimed (p. 8). Such negligible contingencies lying under the yoke of the *Begriff* are the unsettling *others* that reveal the *untruth* of Hegel’s philosophy despite its efforts at grasping and reconciling them through its dialectic (p. 5).

In the opening lines of his *Margins of Philosophy*, Jacques Derrida emphasizes the importance of the *limits* of philosophical thought as points of encounter where speculation comes into close contact with that which cannot be reduced to it, namely, its *other*: “*Its other: that which limits it and from which it comes in its essence, its definition, its production*” (Derrida 1982, p. x). The question is, thus, to what extent the *recalcitrant others* of speculation – such as madness and irrationality, faith and the sacred, the mundane and the transient, and pure contingency – push philosophy to the limits of its conceptual resources and challenge the validity of its speculative ambition (Desmond 1992). The danger comes from the *margins* of the Absolute, where the Absolute meets its *limits*. This is precisely the issue raised by Derrida: “To think its other: does this amount solely to *relever (aufheben)* that from which it derives, to head the procession of its method *only by passing the limit*? Or indeed does *the limit, obliquely, by surprise, always reserve one more blow for philosophical knowledge? Limit/passage*” (Derrida 1982, p. x-xi, emphasis added). Derrida evokes the unsettling and unpredictable character of liminality suggesting that the limit is always twofold: it is *one’s own limit* – the limit one can push or overcome – and *the other as a limit* in its untamed and ungraspable nature.

Indeed, if the Hegelian dialectic functions as a reductive mechanism that simply relocates the other-of-thought into the speculative script of *the pure concept conceptually comprehending*

itself [*der sich begreifende reine Begriff*], which is the ultimate achievement of the *Science of Logic*, and brings the non-identical back into the cage of identity, then the dialectical deployment is painless for the concept, while its speculation is *unlimited* and anaesthetic (Hegel 2010a, p. 752). If, on the contrary, the dialectic's unfolding happens through pain, insofar as the Absolute only gains its absoluteness by meeting its own *limits* and suffering from them, its painful mastery testifies to the torments of the speculative.

2. *The Contingency of Contingency and its Necessity: A Logical Digression*

Adorno's statement that philosophy as negative dialectics should assert the denied right of the non-conceptual seems to recall that made by W.T. Krug in his *Letters on Latest Idealism* (1801), one of the most well-known provocations in the history of Western philosophy. In it, Krug required the system of the Absolute to deduce his pen, a demand that Hegel repeatedly derided and rejected. However, Adorno's and Krug's interests in contingencies are driven by quite different concerns. Adorno relies on non-conceptual singularities to denounce the totalitarian character of Hegelian philosophy, whereas Krug aims to point out the weakness of a philosophical system – in this case Schelling's transcendental idealism – that is unable to conceptually grasp and give account of the totality of knowledge, including of the most contingent things. Hegel's famous reply to Krug in the article *Wie der gemeine Menschenverstand die Philosophie nehme*, published in 1802 in the *Critical Journal*, seems to confirm Adorno's preoccupation that the non-conceptual is doomed to be dismissed by the Hegelian dialectic: Krug's pen is of little interest to speculation, whose main *raison d'être* lies in the effort to “put God again absolutely at the head of philosophy as the sole ground of everything,

as the only *principium essendi et cognoscendi*" (Hegel 1985, p. 299). Almost thirty years later, in a note to § 250 of the *Encyclopaedia*, Hegel returns to this episode with the same sarcasm: "It was in this – and other respects too – quite naive sense that Herr Krug once challenged the Philosophy of Nature to perform the feat of deducing *only* his pen. One could perhaps give him hope that *his* pen would have the glory of being deduced, if ever philosophy should advance so far and have such a dear insight into every great theme in heaven and on earth, past and present, that there was nothing more important to comprehend" (Hegel 2004, p. 23, § 250 add.). In Hegel's view, Krug's alleged naivety remains emblematic of a widespread misunderstanding of the mission of philosophy, which he never ceased to despise: "The infinite wealth and variety of forms and, what is most irrational, the contingency which enters into the external arrangement of natural things, have been extolled as the sublime freedom of Nature, even as the divinity of Nature, or at least the divinity present *in* it. This confusion of contingency, caprice, and disorder, with freedom and rationality is characteristic of sensuous and unphilosophical thinking [...as] it is quite improper to expect the Concept to comprehend – or as it is said, construe or deduce – these contingent products of Nature" (ibid., trans. modified).

But what is the relationship that the Hegelian system entertains with contingencies? Studies on the notion of *contingency* in Hegel's logic pave the way towards further questioning the status of the *contingent* in his philosophy. The works of Dieter Henrich (1971), Bernard Mabille (1999), and John Burbidge (2007) in particular have definitively proven the logical and ontological dignity of this notion.⁸ In the *Logic*, Hegel places contingency at the heart of his treatment of the *Wirklichkeit* and defines it as the identity of the possible and the actual. While referring to

⁸ See Henrich 1971; Mabille 1999; Burbidge 2007; Di Giovanni 1980; Houlgate 1995.

the modal categories of traditional logic, Hegel reverses Kant's hierarchy of priorities, making actuality as *konkreter Gedanke* superior to possibility, which is only one of its merely abstract moments: "When we therefore say of something that 'it is possible', this purely formal assertion is just as superficial and empty as the principle of contradiction, and any content that we put into it; 'A is possible', says no more than 'A is A'" (Hegel 2010a, p. 479). Contingency, instead, is the "unity of possibility and actuality" or "this *absolute restlessness* of the *becoming* of these two determinations" (p. 481). The contingent is a *weak* actual so to say, or, as Hegel states, "The contingent is an actual which is at the same time determined as only possible, an actual whose other or opposite equally is" (p. 480). Interestingly, in Hegel's view, necessity also relates to contingency – its negation – which is in fact incorporated in it, as "the *determinateness* of necessity consists in its having [...] contingency within it" (p. 485). Absolute necessity, the highest stage of *Notwendigkeit*, presupposes contingency as the foundation of its own necessity, since, without the overcoming of its contingent moments, necessity could not be absolute. Thus, contingency itself emerges as *absolutely necessary* or, as has been pointed out, the only *Ur-necessity* recognized by Hegelian logic seems to be the necessity of *Ur-contingency* (Burbidge 2007, p. 47).

Upon closer inspection, however, necessity and contingency, which together determine the logical movement leading from (formal) possibility to the realization of (concrete) actuality, turn out to be worlds apart since the respective definitions of the two categories put them in a relationship of opposition: necessity indicates what *cannot be otherwise*, whereas contingency names what *can or cannot be, while being as it is or otherwise*.⁹ Yet, as in a final *coup de théâtre*, following the last steps of Hegel's reasoning, contingency and necessity end up being again very close to each other: contingency refers to that which *has no foundation* in

⁹ See Johnston 2017.

itself and depends on something else, while absolute necessity is only because it is; it has otherwise *no condition nor foundation*. The common lack of foundation, though, has different ontological implications for the two categories and Hegel dispels any possible conflation by distinguishing the freedom enjoyed by absolute necessity, which is groundless insofar as it is *unconditioned*, from that of contingency, which is groundless to the extent that it is *unfounded* – hence abstract and inessential. Therefore, while admitting its necessity (“*contingency* is rather absolute necessity”), Hegel also acknowledges the true and primordial *contingency of the contingent*, as well as its troubling consequences for speculation (Hegel 2010a, p. 488). Indeed, contingency reintroduces a surprising glimpse of immediate being within the logic of essence on its way to the concept. As Hegel highlights, contingency “is the *essence* of those free, inherently necessary actualities [...that] are grounded purely in themselves, are shaped for themselves, manifest themselves only to *themselves* – because *they are only being*” (ibid., *emph. added*). And it is “the very *simplicity* of their being” and “the *freedom* of their reflectionless immediacy” that permeate the interstices of the Absolute, making contingencies a painful reminder of its limitations (*ibidem*).

3. *What Happens in Nature*

Dieter Henrich has rightly pointed out that, while the notion of contingency is crucial to Hegelian logic, the “determinate contingent” (*das bestimmte Zufällige*) – i.e. the series of the contingencies that happen – is not, and thus, according to Hegel, does not deserve philosophy’s attention. Nevertheless, precisely because of their non-necessary and inessential character, contingencies in nature and history create a number of problems for speculation (Henrich 1971). Contingencies – the many and multifarious occurrences of the contingent – are characterized

by their ontological insufficiency. *Zufällig* literally means that which is destined *to fall*, that which is null and meaningless, and therefore transitory. In the 1802 article in which he develops his polemic against Krug, Hegel sketches out a scale with several levels of ontological consistency, moving from inanimate objects – such as Krug’s pen – at the very bottom of the scale, passing through organic nature, and ending in a higher realm of the spirit. If a pen is unworthy of interest for speculation (whereas the moon, roses, oak trees, and horses are taken into account by the philosophy of nature), it is not because it is too concrete, but, on the contrary, because it is too abstract (i.e. detached and distant from the totality of phenomena), and thus cannot be grasped by the movement of the concept. Hegel’s ontological hierarchy recognizes the superiority of organic forms (*Organisationen*) and individualities (*Individualitäten*) – such as Alexander the Great, Moses, or Cicero – based on the higher level of subjectivity they achieved (Hegel 1985). In this order, then, a human being is more comprehensible than a planet. Simple things, on the other hand, are determined by an excess of abstraction that makes speculative intelligibility impossible.

Hegel counters the traditional conception of nature as the realm of determinism and makes it the realm of the contingent, a seemingly anarchic universe where the absence of order (*Ordnungslosigkeit*) rules. In Hegel’s terms, externality – which is the main mark of nature as “the Idea in the form of otherness” [*in der Form des Andersseins*] (Hegel 2004, p. 15) – is also the quintessential attribute of the contingent.¹⁰ From this perspective, the *free sway* (*freies Ergehen*) of contingencies that unfolds in nature is nothing but blind chance without the slightest trace of inner necessity, which exists only in the spiritual world (Hegel 2010b, p. 217, add. § 145). Hegel repeatedly stresses that the great multiplicity of organic and inorganic

¹⁰ In the second part of the *Encyclopaedia*, Hegel defines nature as *die Idee in der Weise der Äußerlichkeit/the Idea in the guise of externality* (Hegel 2004, p. 418).

forms in nature is less a sign of richness than the evidence of its “indeterminable irregularity”. The manifold variety of genera and species that testify to the infinite divisibility of matter proves “the immeasurableness of Nature, which at first excites our wonder,” but it is actually just another mark of its externality and accidentality (Hegel 2004, p. 22, §250). Lost in the “infinite diversity of its shapes” (Hegel 2010a, p. 536), the *history of nature* is dominated “by external contingency and playfulness [*von äusserlichem Zufall und vom Spiele*] rather than by reason [*nicht durch Vernunft*]” (Hegel 2010b, p. 44, § 16 add., trans. modified). In nature, as Hegel writes, “not only is the play of forms a prey to boundless and unchecked contingency [*ungebundene, zügellose Zufälligkeit*], but each separate entity is without the concept of itself” (Hegel 2004, p. 17, §248 add., trans. modified); therefore in nature one cannot appeal to the *concept*, but only to reasons [*Gründe*] (Hegel 2010b, p. 44, §16). In Hegel’s view, at its primordial stages of development, nature can be partially deciphered by the philosophy of nature: it can be portrayed, explained, and above all admired. However, as he stresses, such admiration is still “without concept [*ohne Begriff*]” (*ibidem*) and its “object is the irrational [*Vernunftlose*]” (Hegel 2010a, p. 536). Only in the realm of the spirit, which Hegel conceives as the *being-at-home-by-oneself within-the-other* (*in seinem Anderen bei sich selbst zu sein*), can the concept ascend to its dialectical mastery (Hegel 2010b, p. 60, § 24, add. 2).¹¹

While nature displays itself as an “unresolved contradiction” [*unaufgelöste Widerspruch*] for the concept – a definition that resonates strongly with the *Unauflösigkeit* Adorno so praises as a crucial feature of the non-conceptual – natural contingencies are alien to the *Begriff* insofar as they resist any possibility of conceptual comprehension (Hegel 2004, p. 17, add. § 248). In

¹¹ Hegel writes, “Thus spirit relates purely to itself and is therefore free, for freedom is precisely this: to be at home with oneself in one’s other, to be dependent upon oneself, to be the determining factor for oneself” (Hegel 2010b, p. 60, § 24, add.2).

this way, the *impotence of nature* – its conceptual limitedness – is echoed in the weaknesses of the concept facing the raw givenness of the contingent it encounters in nature (Hegel 2010a, p. 536).¹² As Hegel recalls, by holding to inconceivable and irreducible contingency, nature assigns limits (*Grenzen*) to philosophy in a way that allows philosophy to experience its own limits (Hegel 2004, p. 23, § 250). Philosophy’s task, therefore, “consists in knowing the necessity hidden beneath the semblance of contingency,” while acknowledging, at the same time, that “*contingency is still to be accorded its due* even in the objective [*gegenständlich*] world” (Hegel 2010b, § 145, p. 217, *emph. added*).¹³ In other words, contingencies cannot be discarded, and the Hegelian concept must learn how to find its way around them.

4. *The Absolute and the Contingent*

Contra Adorno, rather than being a victim of the dialectic, the non-conceptual (or the contingent, in Hegel’s terms) emerges as a destabilizing and painful matter for the concept on its route to the Absolute (Di Giovanni 1980).¹⁴ The challenge for the Absolute is about preserving both its absoluteness and the manifestation of contingencies within it, without which it would be nothing but “lifeless solitude” (*das leblose Einsame*) with neither *pathos* nor *mathos* (Hegel 1977, p. 493, *trans. modified*).

¹² Hegel writes, “This is the impotence of Nature, that it cannot abide by and exhibit the rigor of the concept and loses itself in a blind manifoldness void of concept [*begrifflose*]” (Hegel 2010a, p. 536).

¹³ Hegel adds that “this should not be so understood as if the contingent pertained merely to our subjective representation and that, therefore, it must be completely *set aside* in order to arrive at the truth” (Hegel 2010b, § 145, p. 217).

¹⁴ For Di Giovanni, the final verification for every system of thought is not “whether it dispels irrationality but whether it shows that irrationality is contained in reality itself”, and this is especially true in the case of Hegel’s philosophy, for which reality “would not be self-sufficient if it did not contain its own irrationality (Di Giovanni 1980, p. 193).

Can the sacrifice by the Absolute facing the infinite irreducibility of the contingent thus be interpreted as the highest and noblest expression of its absoluteness?¹⁵ At the end of the *Phenomenology*, Absolute Knowing's plunge into the *night of consciousness* to immerse itself into the exteriority of space-time may be well conceived as the seal of its perfect completeness. The concept of limit (*Grenze*) is, once again, crucial to this passage. As Hegel states, "The self-knowing Spirit knows not only itself but also the negative of itself, or its limit: to know one's limit is to know how to sacrifice oneself." The sacrifice of the Absolute, in Hegel's view, amounts to "the externalization in which Spirit displays the process of its becoming Spirit in the form of *free contingent happening* [*freien zufälligen Geschehens*], intuiting its pure Self as Time outside of it, and equally its Being as Space" (Hegel 1977, p. 492). Absolute Knowing, as Hegel explains, knows itself absolutely *only by knowing its limits*. To *know absolutely* thus means to know how to embrace one's own limitations and conduct the sacrificial act that delivers speculative knowledge to the contingencies of the world. This sacrifice is epitomized by the gesture of *Entlassung*, which intervenes at the climax of the realization of the Absolute, whereby Absolute Knowing frees itself from the form of its pure concept to be reincarnated in the sensuous shape of self-consciousness. The *Entlassung*, which is inaugurated by the recommencement of the phenomenological journey, is an act of liberation: when the Absolute frees itself from its form (*Form*) in order to take on new figures (*Gestalten*) of the spirit, it is the very *Entlassung* of its own form that testifies to "the supreme freedom and security of its self-knowledge."¹⁶

Entlassung resurfaces at the end of the *Logic*, which culminates in the Absolute Idea. Hegel writes:

¹⁵ See B. Mabille 1999 p. 365.

¹⁶ See F. Ruda 2014.

The pure idea into which the determinateness or reality of the concept is itself raised into concept is rather an absolute *liberation* [...]; in this freedom, therefore, there is no transition [into something else] that takes place; the simple being to which the idea determines itself remains perfectly transparent to it: it is the idea that in its determination remains with itself. The transition is to be grasped, therefore, in the sense that the idea *freely discharges* [*frei entläßt*] itself, absolutely certain of itself and internally at rest. On account of this freedom, the *form of its determinateness* is just as absolutely free: the externality of space and time absolutely existing for itself without subjectivity. (Hegel 2010a, p. 752-3)¹⁷

As in the conclusion of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, at the end of the *Logic* freedom and absoluteness converge in the polysemy of *entlassen*, to reaffirm that there is liberation for the concept only in the movement of freeing its other, i.e. the non-conceptual or the non-conceivable. The concept “is absolute power precisely because it can let its difference go free [*entlassen*] in the shape of self-subsistent diversity, external necessity, accidentality, [*Zufälligkeit*], arbitrariness, opinion, all of which, however, must not be taken as anything more than the abstract side of *nothingness*” (p. 536). To liberate one’s other, to *let it be* – or as Bernard Bourgeois puts it, “to be liberal” towards its other – is the highest demonstration of the freedom of the concept, as for Hegel “to be free is to liberate.”¹⁸ The freedom of the Absolute, in its true

¹⁷ At the end of the first part of its *Encyclopaedia* (§ 244), Hegel writes, “Yet the absolute *freedom* of the idea is that it does not merely pass over into *life* or let life shine in itself as finite knowing, but instead, in the absolute truth of itself, *resolves to release freely from itself* [*frei aus sich zu entlassen*] the moment of its particularity or the first determining and otherness, the *immediate idea*, as its *reflection*, itself as *nature*” (Hegel 2010b, p. 303). See also Mabile 1999, p. 321.

¹⁸ See B. Bourgeois’s footnote n.1 in his translation of the first tome of Hegel’s *Science of Logic* (Hegel 2015, p. 51): “C’est un grand theme hégélien celui selon lequel la puissance absolue, d’abord maîtresse de soi, est, en cette liberté vraie d’elle-meme, libératrice de ce qu’elle crée comme son Autre. *Etre libre c’est bien liberer que ça soit au niveau du logique, de la nature ou de l’esprit*” (emph. added).

absolute mastery, thus corresponds to its liberation *in and of its other*, namely *in and of* the infinite domain of the contingent.

At the summit of the dialectical adventure, the hold of the concept (*begreifen*) finds a significant counterweight in the movement of release (*entlassen*) accomplished by the concept itself, which constantly reopens the doors of philosophy to unpredictable spaces and times. The dialectical pain that the sacrifice of its conceptual form causes the Absolute finds a counterpart in the realization of its freedom that, in turn, coincides with the liberation of *its other*, the non-conceptual. Overcoming the contingent is at the same time an act of surrender and of acceptance whereby the Absolute, by assuming its limits and giving free rein to contingency, ends up reasserting its absolute mastery. Its sacrifice, moreover, is not a passive gesture that merely makes room for the contingencies of the world; it rather implies the labor of an active speculative recovery (*Erinnerung*) from the external dispersion of the *Geist* (its *Entäusserung* in nature and in history). Yet, such a speculative *reprise* can only make do with the irreducible inconceivability of contingencies.

5. A History of Contingencies

If the *Phenomenology* settles its account with the contingent through the sacrifice of Absolute Knowing, what about the destiny of contingencies in the realm of spirit, in the ethical life, and in history? The insights that Hegel provides on the matter in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* and in the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* demonstrate a radical hostility towards the contingent that the philosophy of spirit is called upon to dispel in the various domains that it embraces in order to recognize, as the Preface to the *Grundlinien* explains, “in the semblance of the temporal and transient the substance which is immanent and the eternal which is present” (Hegel 1991, p. 20). In the first paragraph

of the introduction to the *Grundlinien*, Hegel expresses an even more categorical judgment about everything that is not posited by the concept itself and is thus relegated to “transitory existence [*Dasein*], external contingency [äußerliche Zufälligkeit], opinion, appearance without essence, untruth, deception.” In his view, it is not “the business of philosophy” to engage with such an infinite and indeterminate matter (Hegel 1991, p. 25). As he further recalls in the addition to §145 of the *Encyclopaedia*, “With regard to spirit and its active manifestation, one must be careful not to let oneself be led astray by the zeal [...] of a rational knowledge, to want to show as necessary or, as one is accustomed to say, to construct *a priori*, apparitions to which belongs the character of contingency.” For this would, at best, amount to nothing more than “vacuously playing around and being obstinately pedantic” (Hegel 2010b, p. 217).

The approach of the philosophy of spirit to contingencies is similar to that of the philosophy of nature, as philosophy as such is not devoted to the comprehension of contingent phenomena, but to the conceptual apprehension of the Idea that reverberates in them. However, the world of spirit (the object of the philosophy of spirit proper) is less dominated by the external necessity of the contingent than is the natural universe. Hegel recognizes the presence of a greater freedom in the realm of spirit than that which nature enjoys, yet contingency also inhabits the spiritual world – which in turn presupposes and relies on the natural world – and manifests itself mainly as arbitrariness. As he remarks in the *Encyclopaedia* (§ 145, add.), “the contingent asserts itself in the spiritual world as well, [...] that contains in itself what is contingent in the form of arbitrary choice, albeit only as a sublated moment” (ibid.). Hegel thus maintains that the task of philosophical knowledge in this context is not to “stand pat with the contingency of willing or arbitrary choice”, but rather to “overcome this contingency” (ibid.). What does Hegel actually mean by that? In the world of spirit, as in logic, the contingent

has two meanings: chance (which is groundless) and contingency proper (which depends on external circumstances and therefore has its grounding in something else). At the level of ethical life, contingency appears as *arbitrary choice* [*Willkür*]. Hegel therefore stresses the importance of properly understanding the role of contingency in the determination and definition of free will, and explains that the actual freedom that allows the individual to freely recognize the inner necessity of the *Sittlichkeit* is often erroneously confused with whim and arbitrariness, which are instead merely the manifestation of the will in the form of contingency. In his view, although free choice is an important component of the will, it ultimately stands for a mere formal freedom that is to be considered the weakest stage of ethical freedom.¹⁹

However, speculative reason allows room for contingency in the course of history. History unfolds amidst external and unpredictable circumstances. Singular aims, individual interests, and subjective passions feed the progress of history towards its telos, the actualization of freedom. In history, alongside the cunning of reason, a *cunning of contingency* also emerges so that in the spiritual world all liberation is won in hand-to-hand combat with and against contingencies. At the level of lived history – *Geschichte*, literally conceived as the field of *Geschehen*, of events that merely happen – for each individual, overcoming contingency means making do with it by living and acting freely in a world that is neither governed by chance nor driven by Providence. At the level of the philosophy of history (*Philosophie der Weltgeschichte*), where it is a matter of distinguishing the different styles of conceiving history, the self-actualization of the Idea towards the realization of human freedom takes precedence over

¹⁹ Hegel's critique of the paroxysms of romantic irony and its extreme subjectivism is echoed in the realm of the *ethical life*, in his critique of the arbitrariness of the will which turns away from the objectivity of the world in which it is supposed to realise itself to pursue its volatile and ephemeral goals. See Mascot 2017.

the contingent as an object of philosophical consideration. As Hegel notes, “Philosophy ought not to be a narrative [*Erzählung*] of what happens [*was geschieht*], but a cognition of what is true in what happens, in order further to comprehend [*begreifen*] on the basis of this truth what in the narrative [*Erzählung*] appears as a mere happening [*als ein blosses Geschehen erscheint*]” (Hegel 2010a, p. 519). The philosophy of history, like philosophy in general, is less concerned with the contingent existence of what is (*Dasein*) and rather focuses on actuality (*Wirklichkeit*). History (*Geschichte*), instead, as a positive science only shares a rational basis with philosophy. Like other disciplines such as jurisprudence and geography, it is among those sciences whose “rational beginning passes into the contingent, insofar as they have to bring down the universal into the empirical singularity and effectivity.” If the Idea is history’s essence, its appearance nevertheless unfolds “in contingency and in the field of the arbitrary” (Hegel 2010b, p. 44, add. §16).²⁰ Therefore, while philosophy is destined to Truth and freed from the burden of engaging with the contingent that inhabits the life of the spirit, history as the sheer recollection of

²⁰ See what Hegel writes in the same paragraph of the *Encyclopaedia* about positive sciences (§16 add.): “The positive element of the sciences comes in several forms. First, what is in itself a rational starting-point passes over into something contingent due to the fact that they have to trace the universal back down to *empirical singularity* and *actuality*. In this field of the changeable and the accidental it is not the *concept* but only reasons [*Gründe*] that can be appealed to. Jurisprudence, for instance, or the system of direct and indirect taxation, require definitive, exact decisions which lie outside the *determinateness in-and-for-itself of the concept*. They therefore admit of a wide margin of discretion that may lead to one result for one reason and a different result for another, but is not capable of a final certain determination. Similarly, when pursued down to its individual details, the idea of *nature* fades away into contingencies. Thus, the *history of nature, geography, medicine, etc.*, end up with determinations of concrete existence and with species and genera that are determined by external coincidence and playfulness rather than by reason. *History* belongs here as well, insofar as its essence is the idea, while its appearance unfolds in contingency and in a field of arbitrariness” (Hegel 2010b, p. 44, §16 add.).

events is required to recount and account for the contingencies of the world:

If it is not the truth which is at issue but only narration [*Historie*],²¹ as it is the case in pictorial and phenomenal thinking [*im Vorstellen und dem erscheinenden Denken*], then we might as well stay with the story [*Erzählung*] that we begin with feelings and intuitions, and that the understanding then extracts a universal or an abstraction from their manifold, for which purpose it quite understandably needs a substrate for these feelings and intuitions which, in the process of abstraction, retains for representation the same complete reality with which it first presented itself. (Hegel 2010a, p. 519)

Thus, in the last instance, philosophy's overcoming of the contingent amounts to deferring it to the domain of representation.

6. The Cunning of *Vorstellung*

Hegel recognizes the right of the contingent to be *represented* and thus assigns to representation (*Vorstellung*) – in its multiple aesthetic, religious and historical manifestations – the task of taking care of contingent events. The division of labor between representation and concept with regards to the spiritual realm of the *Weltgeschichte* corresponds to the disciplinary distinction between history and the philosophy of history. This division follows from the respective functions of each faculty; while the

²¹ *Historie* from the Greek *historia* is a word designating an inquiry into or an account of a series of events. *Geschichte* is the German word deriving from *Geschehen* that indicates originally “the events that happen” rather than their account. Later, from the 15th century onward, *Geschichte* has equated with the meaning originally attributed to *Historie* to designate a narrative or the systematic investigation of historical events. In the above passage, Hegel is using *Historie* as a synonym for *Erzählung*, while *Geschichte* stands for both the series of the historical events and the study of such events (Inwood 1992, p. 118).

Begriff (*begreifen* / to seize) aims at grasping the speculative logic of things, the *Vorstellung* (*vor-stellen* / to make present) *re-presents* contents of thought that “have the characteristic of not having been conceived [*nicht begriffen zu sein*]” and thus remain in an external relation of independence (Hegel 1977, p. 624). In Hegel’s view, contingencies can be accounted for within the non-conceptual medium of the *Vorstellung*, the *other of philosophy*, to which he ascribes an ambivalent status at the margins of the *Begriff*. If, on the one hand, the purpose of philosophy is to overcome representation, on the other hand, philosophy could not do without the *Vorstellung* (representation, instead, can do without philosophy).

As Paul Ricoeur points out in his essay “Le status de la *Vorstellung* dans la philosophie hégélienne de la religion” (1985), for Hegel representation is in fact both irreplaceable and inadequate;²² it is an imperfect and insufficient form of knowledge that is characterized by a residual element of externality and yet remains ineliminable (Lebrun 1972, p. 89). In § 451 of the *Encyclopaedia*, Hegel describes representation as “the intuition recalled to itself by internalization” (*die erinnerte Anschauung*) that oscillates between sensible experience and conceptual thought. Furthermore, in the Preface to the second edition of the *Encyclopaedia* (1827), he points out that representation (as religion) and thought (as science) share the same content even if they express it in distinct ways. The chapter on “Religion” in the *Phenomenology*, nevertheless, insists on the need for philosophical knowledge to supersede the *Gestalt* of representation, and the chapter on Absolute Knowing presents a speculative narrative that has purified its contents of the attributes of the *Vorstellung*, namely of their contingency, their externality, and their temporal nature. Ricoeur suggests thinking of Hegel’s *Vorstellung* as the expression of a figurative thought that includes not only images and symbols, but also language and

²² See P. Jonkers 2004 and Mascot 2014a.

conceptually elaborated elements. Representation would thus be *thinkable*, but *never completely thought*, and so according to Ricoeur, a relation of hermeneutic translatability could be established between concept and representation (Ricoeur 1985, p. 58). His proposal, however, underestimates the *recalcitrant otherness* of representation that results from its being bound to time in its simplest and crudest instantiation, namely *time as it goes by*; as Lebrun recalls, representation obeys “the secret sovereignty of duration and time” (Lebrun 1972, p. 77).

The destiny of *Vorstellung* is deeply intertwined with the linear time of succession. Representation is precisely the *recollected intuition* (*die erinnerte Anschauung*, as recalled in §451 of the *Encyclopaedia*) that intuits time, which Hegel in turn defines as “the becoming directly intuited” [*das angeschaute Werden*] (Hegel 2007b, p. 184, §451; Hegel 2004, p. 35, §258). If time is the being that “inasmuch as it is, is *not*, and inasmuch as it is *not*, is,” representation consists in the presentification of this being that comes and goes (*ibid.*). Without representation, that which is lost in time would be lost forever, while by representing it, the *Vorstellung* brings back and rescues what is no longer present (and can thus only be re-presented). In §565 of the *Encyclopaedia*, Hegel provides further details of the specific connectivity performed by the *Vorstellung*: representation “gives the moments of the content of the absolute mind a subsistence-by-itself and makes them, with respect to each other, presuppositions (*Voraussetzungen*) and phenomena that follow each other (*aufeinander folgende Erscheinungen*).” Therefore, the relation representation establishes between disparate phenomena is conceived as “a connection of the happening (*ein Zusammenhang des Geschehens*) according to finite determinations of the reflection.” Representation follows the linear unfolding of discursive narrative, whereas the concept moves in comprehending circles that retrospectively posit rational groundings to their contingent presuppositions (Hegel 2007, p. 264, § 565). The margin existing between *Vorstellung* and *Begriff*

is then configured as the margin existing between time and the thought of time, a *décalage* that can never be completely sublated by the concept and in which the fluctuating limit of Absolute Knowing is to be found. This ineliminable *décalage* epitomizes the nature of representation, which *stands up for the other as other*, and embodies “the affirmative irreducibility of a certain heteronomy” *vis-à-vis* the concept (Desmond 1992, p. 180).

Interestingly, at the very end of the *Phenomenology*, Absolute Knowing also emerges as “comprehended history” (*begriffene Geschichte*). Representation paved the way for this by weaving the chronological series of events as they happen, ordering in sequence the materials of “actual history” (*wirkliche Geschichte*) that the concept is meant to transfigure by elevating them to the level of speculation. Speculation must thus overcome contingencies to achieve the *sense* of the world as it goes, whereas the *Vorstellung* can merely represent the *course* of the world. The contingent, or the inconceivable “as something that happens without being conceived [*ein unbegreifliches Geschehen*]” and which therefore remains on the margins of conceptual comprehension, finds in the *Vorstellung* the possibility of finally being *re-presented* and *made present* (Hegel 1977, p. 493). The cunning of contingency thus translates into the cunning of the *Vorstellung*, which makes representation necessary and ineliminable in the economy of speculative knowledge. The sacrifice of the *Vorstellung* accomplished by Absolute Knowing anticipates the sacrifice of the conceptual form of the Absolute through the *Entlassung* that occurs at the peak of its own consummation and preludes its return to the contingent externality of the world in order for consciousness to begin its journey again. The painful sacrifice of the Absolute eventually discloses the very essence of Hegel’s speculation as a *specular* game of infinite deferrals between concept and representation. Pace Adorno, Hegel’s Absolute cannot spare its *pathos*. And yet, it is through its *pathos* that it proves and celebrates its absolute mastery.

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