

Hegel on Tragedy and the World-Historical Individual's Right of Revolutionary Action

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§1. Introduction

THIS CHAPTER ANALYZES overlooked connections between Hegel's theory of tragedy and his account of revolutionary action from a world-historical perspective.¹ Although commentators have recently noticed parallels amid Hegel's discussion of tragedy and his philosophy of action or history,² they haven't yet turned to questions concerning Hegel's thought and revolutionary action with his theory of tragedy in mind. In fact, relatively little has been said in recent years about the prospect of a right of revolutionary action in Hegel's ethical thought,³ let alone from the perspective I take here. This may be because

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1. I use the following standard abbreviations for Hegel's works: LFA=*Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975); PhS=*Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: OUP, 1977); PR=*Philosophy of Right*, trans. H.B. Nisbet, ed. A. Wood (Cambridge: CUP, 1991). I cite the latter two works by section and not page number; r=remark and a=addition. Because Hegel lectured on world history for numerous years, I have consulted several editions of the manuscripts and notes, in addition to translations. LPWH1=*Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: CUP, 1975); LPWH2=*Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, trans. and ed. R.F. Brown & P.C. Hodgson, with assistance from W.G. Geuss (Oxford: Clarendon, 2011). I cite Kant's writings according to the volume numbers and pagination of the AA=*Akademie-Ausgabe* (Berlin: Reimer, later de Gruyter, 1900ff.). Translations of Kant are from *Political Writings*, trans. H.B. Nisbet, ed. H.S. Reiss (Cambridge: CUP, 1991).
 2. Christoph Menke, *Tragödie im Sittlichen* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1996) discusses tragedy and Hegel's ethical thought from several perspectives. Allen Speight, *Hegel, Literature, and the Problem of Agency* (Cambridge: CUP, 2001), Chs. 2 and 5 considers tragedy and action in particular. Rachel Falkenstern, "Hegel on Sophocles' Oedipus the King and Moral Accountability of Ancient Tragic Heroes" in *Hegel Bulletin* 41 (2018) uses resources from Hegel's philosophy of right and history to clarify issues in his aesthetics. Fiacha Henegan, "Hegel's Tragic Conception of World History" in *Hegel, Tragedy, and Comedy: New Essays*, ed. M. Alznauer (Albany: SUNY, 2021) does something like the converse, as do I in this chapter. More ambitiously, Karin de Boer, *On Hegel: The Sway of the Negative* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) puts the Hegelian notion of tragedy front and center in order to reconsider Hegel's thought broadly, for instance including not just his philosophy of right and history, but also his logic.
 3. Thom Brooks, *Hegel's Political Philosophy: A Systematic Reading of the Philosophy of Right* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), for instance, makes no mention of the

Hegel holds the state in rather high esteem, infamously proclaiming it “the march of God in the world,” and therefore unsurprisingly rejecting the idea that freedom of speech could license incitement to rebellion (PR 258a, 319r). But my aim in this chapter is to offer an interpretation of Hegel that affirms a right of revolutionary action, overcoming these and other barriers while responding to recent accounts in the literature.

I do so partly by acknowledging the qualified nature of this right. In short, as I clarify in this chapter, Hegel’s ‘world-historical individuals’ are, like many of his tragic protagonists, both guilty and innocent in certain respects insofar as they reject some present order; but in important and different ways, recognition of their paradoxical status comes belatedly. This means that the rightful revolutionary action of the world-historical individual can only be understood as rightful after the fact. It doesn’t mean that world-historical individuals lack a right of revolutionary action. They do have such a right, and the philosophical historian will eventually see that world-historical individuals are ‘on the right side of history.’

Because I understand Hegel’s position on a right of revolutionary action to stand in stark contrast to Kant’s, I begin in §2 by laying out Kant’s strict views. Kant not only denies that there can be any justification from within a state for undermining that state, but furthermore rejects the possibility that revolutionary action may be recognized as rightful on any other basis (despite some recent interpretations that I must accordingly discuss). Kant thus rules out the tragic

matter. Karin de Boer, “Freedom and Dissent in Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*” in *Hegel and Resistance*, ed. B. Zantvoort and R. Comay (London: Bloomsbury, 2017) primarily considers more minor cases of dissent, for which Hegel doesn’t make much room. Dean Moyar, “Recht gegen Recht: Widerspruch, Kollision und Revolution” in *Ein Recht auf Widerstand gegen den Staat? Verteidigung und Kritik des Widerstandsrechts seit der europäischen Aufklärung*, ed. D.P. Schweikard, N. Mooren, & L. Siep (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018) very helpfully contextualizes Hegel’s views among those of Kant and Fichte. Finally, Klaus Vieweg, *Das Denken der Freiheit: Hegels Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* (München: Fink, 2012), 448-463, arguably following Dieter Henrich, “Einleitung” in *Philosophie des Rechts: Die Vorlesung von 1819-20 in einer Nachschrift* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1983), tries to find a right of revolutionary action in Hegel; but both encounter a major obstacle that I shall return to briefly in conclusion.

developments that Hegel sees in history, such that clarifying Kant's position helps bring Hegel's into relief. Next, in §3, I provide a brief overview of Hegel's theory of tragedy, in order to then formulate most vividly his position on the world-historical individual's right of revolutionary action throughout §4. I conclude in §5 that recent work is correct to stress the limited nature of the world-historical right of revolutionary action that we find in Hegel, but that we go too far if we try to defang this right altogether, as troublesome (or not) as it may be. Although Hegel's views acknowledging a right to contravene morality and ethics may be hazardous in several respects, we ought to clarify their attractive side. We must also continue to revise our understanding of the status of Hegel's thought on this basis. While the idea that Hegel's political thought embodies a stale and reactionary Prussian conservatism—i.e., the idea that Hegel is entirely anti-revolutionary—has long since been debunked, this has only proven something like this universal affirmative's subalternate claim: that there are some progressive elements in Hegel. To my mind, this debunking has not shown the contrary: that Hegel is ultimately a revolutionary thinker. But a close look at where Hegel's political philosophy, or his philosophy of 'right,' transitions into his philosophy of history indicates that this contrary proposition indeed holds.

§2. Kant's hardline rejection

Thus far, I have only briefly hinted at the account of Hegel's view on a right of revolutionary action that I develop in this chapter—the world-historical individual has such a right to clash with the present, but this can only be recognized after the fact. Still, even with this quick gloss, readers familiar with some recent literature on Kant and revolution might wonder whether Hegel is following Kant here. I suggest that we would be thoroughly mistaken to think so.⁴

According to a surprisingly prevalent reading proposed in particular by Christine Korsgaard and also David Sussman,⁵ Kant denies the right to

4. I draw liberally in this section from Jason M. Yonover, "Kant on Sovereignty and Rebellion" (manuscript).

5. Christine Korsgaard, "Taking the Law into One's Own Hands" in *The Constitution of*

incite rebellion, but makes room for a belatedly recognized right of successful revolution. This would be very interesting if correct, since Kant is famously averse to considering the outcome of actions in determining their value (AA IV 394 etc.). And more important in the present context: if Korsgaard's and Sussman's interpretation were accurate, Kant would prefigure Hegel in a significant sense, rendering Hegel's position less original, insofar as the right of revolutionary action in Hegel is indeed retrospectively recognized.⁶

Now, of course I don't mean to say that Hegel arrives at his position *ex nihilo*—in fact, Hegel's view on revolution is best understood as a descendent of Spinoza's, though I don't have the space to discuss this here. Neither do I want to give the impression that interpreters have explored only one route to a right of revolution in Kant.⁷ Yet while the move made by Korsgaard and Sussman to

Agency (Oxford: OUP, 2008), 259 concludes: "revolution may be justified, but only if you win." David Sussman, "Unforgivable Sins? Revolution and Reconciliation in Kant" in *Kant's Anatomy of Evil*, ed. S. Anderson & P. Muchnik (Cambridge: CUP, 2010), 225 similarly claims that "[a] successful revolution may [...] be justified retrospectively should it in fact succeed, although it must always be condemned from a forward-looking perspective, where such success, even if highly probable, has yet to be made real."

6. Korsgaard and Sussman both seem to have in mind *retrospectivity*, but then actually appear to argue for *retroactivity*. That is, I take them to ultimately suggest the stronger view according to which Kant thinks some right obtains *in virtue* of success. I leave aside this issue for now, and anyhow propose below the weaker thesis regarding Hegel, namely that his world-historical individual has a right that's retrospectively recognized, as they are fighting for major progress on behalf of some new and higher principle all the while, though this is only clear later on.
7. One ought also to consider the interpretations developed by, among others, Jan Joerden, "From Anarchy to Republic: Kant's History of State Constitutions" in *Proceedings of the Eighth International Kant Congress, Memphis Volume 1* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1995) and Arthur Ripstein, *Force and Freedom: Kant's Legal and Political Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: HUP, 2009), Ch. 11, according to which Kant's distinction between despotic and barbaric states can license revolutionary action. Ripstein's thought seems to be that where the despotic state is undesirable in many respects but still legitimate, the barbaric state deeply contradicts right and so is entirely illegitimate; and since an entirely illegitimate state isn't even really a state, we can—or in fact must—found one on Kant's view. Now, this move merits detailed attention, but I mention two brief points here. First, on the reasonable assumption that revolution institutes only by eliminating, such a

uncover a belatedly recognized right of revolutionary action isn't the only one open to the commentator, these scholars provide the most relevant account of Kant's stance in the context of the present chapter, and so we ought to consider it in brief.

Kant's arguments against the existence of a right to *go about staging* a revolution are clear enough; there can be no recognized right of revolution under some state, because this would undermine the sovereign, who represents the general will. If one were to try to make available a space in which some people could claim a right of rebellion—and assuming that the present sovereign were not in charge of deciding the rightfulness of such a claim, as this would render the space meaningless—one would need some third party to determine whether the people's decision to rebel is rightful. Yet, Kant thinks, to have “another head above the head of state to mediate between the latter and the people [...] is self-contradictory,” for it dissolves the sovereignty of the sovereign (AA VIII 300, and see also AA VI 319). Kant draws a harsh conclusion from such reasoning: “There can thus be no rightful resistance on the part of the people”; and “it is the duty of the people to tolerate even what is apparently the most intolerable misuse of supreme power [for] it is impossible ever to conceive of their resistance to the supreme legislation as being anything other than unlawful and liable to nullify the entire legal constitution” (AA VI 320). Yet, as clear as this conceptual argument is, one might wonder about a more complicated case. Imagine that a rebel has ignored their duties and yet turned out successful in their rebellion. That rebel and their allies now hold power after the revolution. What are we to make of this?

For Kant, the successful rebel has still committed a severe wrong insofar as they *have staged* a revolution. Although they must be respected as sovereign for the same reasons that any other sovereign must be so respected,⁸ they can

right would better be called a founder's right, not a right of revolution. And second, for reasons that should become clear in this section, I submit that there's ultimately no room in Kant's theory for citizens to judge a state despotic or barbaric. Thus, we should remain as skeptical of this move, which seems to posit a view from nowhere, as of the one that argues for a belatedly recognized right of revolution in Kant, which I discuss in this chapter.

8. See AA VI 323: “The unlawfulness of [some state's] origin and success cannot free the

never be redeemed with regards to their rebellious actions; they have acted, and will always have acted, without right. This matters. Remarkably, retribution is continuously owed to the revolutionary even though they are now sovereign, and if the erstwhile sovereign manages to regain power, they should give the revolutionary this “deserved punishment [*verdiente Strafe*]” (trans. mod.; AA VI 320n). In this spirit, even after a successful rebellion, the deposed sovereign who doesn’t concede retains a “right to his property [...] since the rebellion which deprived him of it was unjust” (AA VI 323).

Of course, such consequences are only relevant if the former sovereign survives the revolution—but that may not happen, and Kant considers two further possibilities here, again putting pressure on any commentator who would hope to preserve a belatedly recognized right of revolution in Kant. The first possibility is that the sovereign is murdered extralegally or behind the scenes, so to speak, in the course of a disordered rebellion. Kant recognizes the appeal of such a move for a rebel, given that it may help secure their new state. Kant is quite clear that this act of “self-preservation” is wrong, and for all of the reasons that rebellion or murder would normally be wrong for Kant. Meanwhile, a second possibility worries Kant much more: eradicating the previous sovereign under the guise of the law. Informal assassination is bad, but really “it is the formal execution of a monarch which must arouse dread in any soul imbued with ideas of human right”; “[this] is seen as *a crime which must always remain as such* and which can never be effaced [...] and it might be likened to *that sin which the theologians maintain can never be forgiven either in this world or the next*” (emphasis mine; *ibid.*). Kant’s emphasis on permanence in such passages show just how austere he is in rejecting any right of revolution. Even after the fact, there’s no room for justification. Success plays no role in evaluating whether or not one might have a right of rebellion. There isn’t any real clash of ethical forces—we have here only right and wrong forces—and there’s no room for any sort of belated recognition of rightfulness to obtain. Thus, there’s no tragedy of the sort we will soon find in Hegel.

Commentators like Korsgaard and Sussman disagree, but they seem to

subject from the obligation to accommodate themselves as good citizens to the new order of things.”

overlook an important distinction between *enjoying legitimacy qua sovereign*, on the one hand, and *enjoying legitimacy qua successful rebel*, on the other. Kant clearly allows for the former regardless of how one has attained sovereignty—the revolutionary sovereign must still be obeyed (AA VI 318f., 323)—but Kant also rejects the latter wholesale. Thus, even when Kant takes on what Hegel would call ‘a world-historical’ perspective, he strongly denies the possibility of a belatedly recognized right:

It can scarcely be doubted that if the revolutions [*Empörungen*] whereby Switzerland, the United Netherlands or even Great Britain won their much admired constitutions had failed, the *readers of their history* would regard the execution of their celebrated founders as no more than the deserved judgement of great political criminals. For *the result usually affects our judgement of the rightfulness of an action, although the result is uncertain, whereas the principles of right are constant. But it is clear that these peoples have done the greatest degree of wrong in seeking their rights in this way [...]* for such procedures, if made into a maxim, make all lawful constitutions insecure and produce a state of complete lawlessness (emphasis mine; AA VIII 301).

In this passage, Kant acknowledges how our evaluation of some actions, particularly revolutionary ones, can shift in light of their consequences. Then, he explicitly denies that we ought to authorize this shift. Kant points out that certain “readers of history” might judge rebels positively should their actions bring about something positive—and judge them negatively if they don’t—but Kant makes clear that *he* will not alter his judgement of such acts just because they may institute a freer ethical order. Kant doesn’t think that revolution will bring about progress at any rate. Antagonism is important (without it, “all human talents would remain hidden forever in a dormant state,” AA VIII 21), but this need only occur on a smaller scale, for instance in competition, and, at most, through passive, minimal resistance.

Though Kant is an advocate of autonomy, he is strict in his view that it’s best promoted under a state that holds full authority, as Rachel Zuckert has helpfully noted.⁹ This is why Kant writes explicitly that “this prohibition is

9. Rachel Zuckert, “Kant, Autonomy, and Revolution” in *Humanism and Revolution*:

absolute” (emphasis in original; AA VIII 300). Some readers feel that such a hardline rejection of revolution is abominable.¹⁰ These readers may well be correct to harbor such feelings. But whether one likes it or not, Kant’s doctrine is still Kant’s doctrine,¹¹ and it should be appreciated as such, keeping in mind everything that’s worrisome—or perhaps even appealing—about it.¹²

When faced with such difficulties, we ought to look elsewhere in the history of philosophy; and when it comes to Kantianism, we may for instance consult thinkers immediately following Kant who *do* try to countenance a right

Eighteenth-Century Europe and Its Transatlantic Legacy, ed. U. Steiner, M. Vohler, C. Emden (Heidelberg: Winter, 2015).

10. Sussman, “Unforgivable Sins?” 215 calls it one of Kant’s two “least popular” doctrines.
11. This being said, a reader can disagree with my interpretation of Kant and still proceed to the next section without issue. I don’t depend on any interpretation of Kant in putting forward my account of Hegel’s position, but only use Kant as a foil given that I take his to be a historically-relevant position in great tension with Hegel’s.
12. I take it as obvious that we should be *worried* when there’s no room whatsoever to rightfully dismantle a state we perceive to be thoroughly corrupt. But I think it’s less apparent that there could be anything that *appeals* in Kant’s position. I can only hint at some thoughts here, but consider the consequences of Kant’s strict views for the post-revolutionary state, which is in an extraordinarily sensitive condition. (Of course, revolutions will still happen, despite Kant’s injunction.) The revolutionary party now has great power—they have probably used violence to attain their goal, and this will be known. Fear will thus predominate, which is all too likely to sour things. What the revolutionary government *should* do is immediately set to work on fixing the problems that led them to rebel in the first place. But what they may *instead* do is reap the benefits of their newfound grasp on society, even enjoying the riches of the previous sovereign. They may be tempted to exploit the fear they have cultivated, as well as the disregard for the former administration that couldn’t maintain power; and they may thus carry out a scapegoating campaign of persecution. Instead of fixing problems, then, the revolutionary government may distract everyone, including themselves, by focusing on the past, playing the blame game. Kant’s decisive views proclaiming revolution as unrightful helpfully categorize all of this as off-limits. As we saw above, according to Kant the revolutionary sovereign has no right to pursue any of these diversions; they may not persecute the prior sovereign, make any claim to that former sovereign’s property, etc., given that they took up their new sovereign position unrightfully. In short, Kant thus has the resources needed to condemn any post-revolutionary government that wrongly dwells on the past. But note that this potentially attractive side to Kant’s harsh views, which deserves further attention, only becomes clear when we let Kant be Kant.

of revolution, like the unduly neglected J.B. Erhard.¹³ Indeed, such a turn to overlooked post-Kantian thinkers in the period is long overdue.¹⁴ Meanwhile, though, our concern in this chapter is with Hegel.

§3. Hegel's two-ingredient recipe for tragedy

Against this Kantian backdrop, we can now start to paint Hegel's complex stance on a right of revolutionary action. But doing so with full clarity requires that we first take a closer look at his account of tragedy, one of the fundamental dramatic forms he considers,¹⁵ for Hegel's world-historical individuals that have—I argue—a right of revolutionary action also have much in common with Hegel's tragic protagonists. Although these figures must ultimately be distinguished, they share several very illuminating structural similarities.

According to Hegel, particularly in his lectures on aesthetics, tragedy is first and foremost about (1) conflicts of principles. As such, tragedy is host to at least the following elements: (1.1) a principle that prescribes x and not- y ; (1.2) a principle that prescribes y and not- x ; plus (1.3) one or more figures who

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13. See Michael Nance, "Erhard on Revolutionary Action" in *Practical Philosophy from Kant to Hegel: Freedom, Right and Revolution*, ed. J. Clarke and G. Gottlieb (Cambridge: CUP, 2021).
14. I have attempted to make progress on this front in Michael Nance & Jason M. Yonover, "Introduction to Salomon Maimon's 'On the First Grounds of Natural Right'" in *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 29, no. 1 (2021), pgs. 146-156. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2020.1749029>
15. On the essential characteristics of the three main dramatic forms Hegel distinguishes (tragedy, comedy, and the stage play or *Schauspiel*) in relation to one another, see Allegra de Laurentiis, "Substantial Ends and Choices Without a Will: The Quintessence of Tragic Drama according to Hegel" in *Hegel on Tragedy and Comedy: New Essays*, ed. M. Alznauer (Albany: SUNY, 2021), "The Systematic Context." On Hegel's theory of tragedy, and particularly for insightful analysis of various tragedies in Hegelian terms (which I will not be able to develop here), see the next few notes. On several interesting issues concerning Hegel's account of comedy, see Andrew Huddleston, "Hegel's Theory of Comedy: Theodicy, Social Criticism, and the 'Supreme Task' of Art" in *British Journal of Aesthetics* 54, no. 2 (2014).

wholly identify with just one of these principles for some period (LFA 1195). For Hegel, the definitive example of classical tragedy is Sophocles's *Antigone*, which he thinks is about: (1.1a) the principle of the family (indicating that Polyneices should, like any other kin, receive burial rites); (1.2a) the principle of the state (indicating that Polyneices should, like any other traitor, be denied burial rites); plus (1.3a) Antigone who one-sidedly identifies for some period with the first principle and Creon who one-sidedly identifies for some period with the second. Antigone and Creon each have some right, but each understands only half of the story as they narrow-mindedly adhere to their principles (LFA 1217). Thus, as Stephen Houlgate puts it, for Hegel "tragedy consists in doing wrong precisely in doing the right thing."¹⁶

Of course, there may be any number of ingredients on the recipe list for some given tragedy; but for Hegel this is, so to speak, the flour for the bread. So where's the water? In addition to this side of Hegel's theory of tragedy concerned with (1) collision, we may say that there is another side, epistemic in nature, according to which (2) recognition of error comes too late. Hegel formulates this aspect of his account of tragedy most clearly in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, where his focus shifts, both because of the context of that work and because of the specific transition from "Reason" to "Spirit" that takes place around particularly relevant passages. In the case of *Antigone*, at least on Hegel's reading there, the epistemic lapse is (2a) the eponymous hero's realizing, just prior to her unglorified punishment, that her unfailing commitment to (1.1a) the ethical principle of the family only makes sense alongside a commitment to (1.2a) the ethical principle of the state, to which Creon rigorously adheres.¹⁷ Hegel reads Antigone to concede as much in a crucial line that he forcibly translates from the Greek: "Because we

16. Stephen Houlgate, "Hegel's Theory of Tragedy" in *Hegel and the Arts*, ed. S. Houlgate (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 149. Houlgate is particularly helpful on the role of collision in Hegel's account of tragedy.

17. Such an epistemic lapse is clear in the case of Creon as well, namely insofar as he comprehends, after losing various family members, that he must hold not just (1.2a) the principle of the state but also (1.1a) the principle of the family in esteem. (After Creon's son Haemon, engaged to Antigone, tries to strike his father with his sword, Haemon turns it against himself, and Creon's spouse Eurydice then takes her own life too.)

suffer, we recognize that we have erred” (trans. mod.; PhS 469). Such recognition that comes too late is the water for Hegel’s flour.¹⁸

Each of these two ingredients, namely (1) collision of principles and (2) belated recognition, is necessary but not sufficient for tragedy. Take one away, and little remains: without a real conflict, we would be left with merely idiosyncratic tensions and confusion; and without epistemic opacity in the collision—such that protagonists would then recognize themselves and their error, seeing what’s needed to avoid a profound clash—resolution would be nigh, and no real conflict could obtain. Altogether, Hegel’s theory provides us with a picture of a battle that’s only fully understood after much of the fighting has taken place. In this clash, the figures do wrong in some respect, but only in simultaneously doing right in some other respect; and as such, they may be said to stand with right against right. This is primarily what Hegel has in mind when he notes that tragic protagonists are “just as much innocent as guilty” (LFA 1214). Although we ought not think that things will go well for tragic protagonists insofar as they hold this paradoxical status, it does mean that we can expect some resolution according to Hegel. “The tragic complication leads finally to no other result [...] but this: the two sides that are in conflict with one another preserve the justification which both have, but what each upholds is one-sided, and this one-sidedness is stripped away [such that] the inner, undisturbed harmony returns.” That is, we are left with “the cancellation of conflicts as conflicts” (LFA 1215).

With this brief sketch of Hegel’s two-ingredient recipe for tragedy, we can finally turn to his account of world-historical individuals and their right, which will lead us to several of the same themes, if with important differences that we must explore.

§4. Hegel on a “right of a wholly peculiar kind”

In a fascinating move made within his late lectures on what he often calls the

18. On tragedy and this more epistemic side of Hegel’s theory, see especially Julia Peters, “A Theory of Tragic Experience According to Hegel” in *European Journal of Philosophy* 19, no. 1 (2011), §3.

‘theater’ of world history, Hegel explicitly confirms the link between tragic protagonists and so-called world-historical individuals like Socrates. Socrates was ahead of his time in championing what Hegel considers to be the principle of subjectivity: turning to one’s “inner life” and gathering confirmation of what is “right and good” there (PR 138a). But as important as it is, the arrival of this principle wasn’t smooth. “The fate of Socrates is that of the highest tragedy,” for “on his own behalf he had the justification of thought; but for their part the Athenian people were completely in the right too” (LPWH2 418). While Socrates was right in defending his principle, he also did so against right, i.e. in simultaneously undermining the state by encouraging doubt. According to Hegel, “the great tragic figures are those [like Socrates] who do not die innocently” (ibid.).¹⁹

The purpose of this section is to make sense of such claims, and to develop my proposal that Hegel countenances, with important limitations, a right of revolutionary action. In arguing for such a proposal, with the help of reference to Hegel’s account of tragedy (see §3), I aim to show that there is a great distance between Hegel and Kant on the rightfulness of such action (see §2).

α. Hegel’s Philosophy of History

Until now, I have referred to Hegel’s ‘world-historical individuals’ without clarifying their nature; but because this is technical terminology for Hegel, we must consider it in at least some detail—along with other aspects of his philosophy of history—in the first of three steps in this section. Hegel thinks that history is about the course of ‘world spirit.’ But as strange as it may sound, and despite some misconceptions, this is no transcendent being,²⁰ for “spirit is

19. Without noting this passage, Ido Geiger, *The Founding Act of Modern Ethical Life: Hegel’s Critique of Kant’s Moral and Political Philosophy* (Stanford: SUP, 2007), 132 insightfully references Antigone in a discussion of Hegel’s world-historical individuals, and mentions several of the issues I aim to explore in this section.

20. John Searle, “Social Ontology and the Philosophy of Society” in *Analyse & Kritik* 20 (1998) references and unnecessarily distances himself from a “kind of Hegelian *Weltgeist* that is floating around overhead, or something like that” (149). Perhaps ironically, Searle’s

only what it does” (PR 343), and ‘its’ doing is just our doing. Although we may all have a part to play here, world-historical individuals are the particularly relevant actors when it comes to advancing human freedom. As such, world-historical individuals play a decisive role in Hegel’s teleological picture. But we have to say a bit more about the latter in order to understand exactly where these crucial actors come in.

For Hegel, spirit (or mind) is essentially free and comes to know itself as such; “since spirit in and for itself is reason, and since the being-for-itself of reason in spirit is knowledge, world history is the necessary development, from the concept of the freedom of spirit alone, of the moments of reason and hence of spirit’s self-consciousness and freedom” (PR 342). Call this (1) Hegel’s *rationalism*, or a new flour—the first of two crucial ingredients in this second dough, now a recipe for Hegel’s ethical thought insofar as it’s relevant here.²¹ (And note that these two ingredients or strands of Hegel’s philosophy of history and right are not meant to line up in any substantial manner with the two aspects of Hegel’s theory of tragedy discussed in the previous section, though I will return to these soon.)

According to Hegel, this self-actualization of freedom is pushed along by actions of world-historical importance that correspond to particular principles: “The states, nations, and individuals involved in this business of the world spirit emerge with their own *particular* and *determinate principle*,” and carry it out (PR 344). Such principles are decisive so long as they lead. Hegel thinks that the presently world-historical *nation* is truly “dominant [*herrschend*]” such that “the spirits of other nations are without right [*rechtlos*]” (PR 347), which shows

discussion of revolution in this piece is comparable to Hegel’s in at least one important sense, namely insofar as success plays a major role: “you can do this if you can get away with it” (157). (As I will stress in conclusion, however, for Hegel world-historical revolutionary action isn’t *just* about success, and must be genuinely progressive.)

21. Here I follow Mark Alznauer, *Hegel’s Theory of Responsibility* (Cambridge: CUP, 2015), 170f., who shows that Hegel’s relevant positions—or, as he puts it, “Hegel’s problems”—emerge from commitments both to the truth of progress as well as the importance of context. (I order these commitments or ingredients of Hegel’s ethical thought differently than he does, however, so as to stress what I see as the ultimate priority of Hegel’s interest in progress over his respect for the status quo.)

how committed he is to the progressive development of actualized freedom, even at serious costs. But how do these entities first reach ‘their’ principle? Most important in the context of this chapter is what happens in transitions to arrive at—or to depart from—such a principle; and again, this is where world-historical *individuals* come in.

They act in the most robust sense: “At the forefront of all actions, including world-historical actions, are individuals [who] are the living expressions of the substantial deed of the world spirit and are thus immediately identical with it” (emphasis in original; PR 348). Here too we must be careful not to take this language to indicate that world spirit is something thoroughly beyond us. On Hegel’s account, he can only speak in such a way insofar as he has recognized reason in history after extended analysis, including empirical study of the limited number of individuals who he thinks have undertaken world-historical revolutionary action.²² Similarly, when Hegel clarifies to students in the introduction to one of his courses on the philosophy of world history that history is about the progressive realization of reason and freedom, he emphasizes: “What I have said in a preliminary way and have still to say is not [...] to be regarded as a presupposition but instead as an *overview* of the whole, as the *result* of the inquiry that we have initiated—a result that is known to me because I am already familiar with the whole” (emphasis in original; LPWH2 80). World-historical individuals bring about what must come, and the philosophical historian can later see how this work is in line with the self-realization of freedom. We will have to say more here, but before doing so we must dwell on an important fact: the manner in which the world-historical individual moves things forward involves acting contrary to some current world-historical moment and its principle. The necessity of such transgression is a major concern within Hegel’s framework, because for him what is right and good is normally tied to one’s context.

Call this (2) the *contextualism* of Hegel’s ethical thought, or a new water for this second recipe. Both in his *Philosophy of Right* (e.g. 153r) and in his lectures on the philosophy of history, Hegel repeatedly emphasizes the straightforward nature of ethics: being a proper citizen “consists in fulfilling the duties imposed

22. Though Hegel doesn’t provide many examples, he certainly leaves us room to develop our own.

upon one by one's social station; these can be recognized without difficulty, and their particular form will depend on the particular class to which the individual belongs" (trans. mod.; LPWH1 80). In short, "duty is rooted in the soil of civil life" (LPWH1 81). How, then, shall we treat an individual who acts contrary to the current ethical order and its principle, which one ought to follow according to Hegel's contextualism? What if an individual acts out of context in anticipating the arrival of a higher principle, which should indeed arrive according to Hegel's rationalism?

Hegel's kneading the flour and water of this sphere of his ethical thought is no simple matter, and it's here that a tragic dimension begins to emerge—along with a right of revolutionary action. In one respect, history moves forward, and the means by which it does so are absolutely right; but in another respect, what's right is constantly determined by the historical moment, and so breaking off from some order will mean betrayal. According to my view, Hegel ends up combining the two major ingredients of his ethical thought summarized above in the following way: Hegel's rationalism or (1) this new flour has priority, and holds for any cases of transition, i.e. entering and exiting an ethical condition, where his contextualism or (2) this new water covers day-to-day matters. World history and its absolute right stand above all—though not so high above that we're talking about an entirely different, transcendent perspective.

With mention of this last issue, I may begin to position my interpretation between that of the two commentators who have dealt most carefully in recent years with the question of a right of revolutionary action in Hegel. Mark Alznauer has argued that Hegel draws a "principled division of labor" between the "two standpoints" of right and world history such that our responsibilities "bottom out" in a context of right.²³ Here I disagree with Alznauer, and concur with Allen Wood that a true *collision* of rights claims, made namely by the present context and then the necessity of progress, does obtain in the case of revolutionary action. As such, the first aspect of tragedy that I examined in the previous section—(1) the flour to Hegel's account to tragedy—is indeed present. However, I disagree with Wood, and agree with Alznauer, that for Hegel the world-historical individual

23. Alznauer, *Hegel's Theory*, 173.

could never truly know themselves as world-historical when acting, such that the second aspect of tragedy examined in this prior section—(2) the water to Hegel’s account of tragedy—likewise obtains. Wood has even gone so far as to argue, though, that a world-historical individual could “undertake radical social change with a rational knowledge of the fact that [they] are creating a new and higher order.”²⁴ Here I propose that Wood isn’t faithful to opacity conditions that hold for Hegel’s world-historical individual. Throughout the rest of this section, I consider the world-historical individual with each of these two aspects of tragedy in mind before concluding that Hegel affirms their right of revolutionary action—a right which Alznauer mistakenly excludes, and which Wood correctly points to, albeit without sufficient qualification.

β. The Flour to Hegel’s Theory of Tragedy: World-Historical Individuals and Collision

In order to clarify that there is a genuine collision of rights claims in the case of the world-historical individual—as in the case of the tragic protagonist—and in order to specify the nature of this collision, we must first take a step back and note an important characteristic of Hegel’s ethical thought: its hierarchical nature. Right or *Recht* is simply the existence of freedom for Hegel (PR 29).²⁵ Much can be said here, but in brief, such right holds at various ascending levels, each of which outdoes the other (PR 30r). The world-historical perspective, especially as taken at the conclusion of the *Philosophy of Right* (PR 341-360), is the highest perspective of right vis-a-vis several major perspectives of right, primarily those of “abstract right” (PR 34-104), “morality” (PR 105-141), and “ethical life” (PR 142-360)—though other more minor perspectives can be distinguished across

24. Allen Wood, *Hegel’s Ethical Thought* (Cambridge: CUP, 1990), 233.

25. Although, e.g. in PR 104, Hegel occasionally references “right” and means “abstract right” specifically—the first and lowest major sphere of right—we can safely differentiate this sense of right from the broader one that is the focus of Hegel’s ‘philosophy of right’ as a whole.

these stages.²⁶ Thus, while laying out the spheres of right in relation to one another in his introduction to the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel speaks of the moment of the state, within ethical life, as “superior to [*höher als*] the other stages,” mainly that of abstract right and morality; but although it’s “freedom in its most concrete shape,” the right of the state is still “subordinate to [*fällt unter*]” one other right: “the supreme absolute truth of world spirit” (PR 33a). “Only the right of the world spirit is absolute in an unlimited sense” (PR 30r), and thus on the other end of his *Philosophy of Right*, in the transition from international law to world history, Hegel reiterates: “it is this [world] spirit which exercises its right—which is the highest right of all—over finite spirits in world history” (PR 340). World history, the progressive actualization of freedom, may thus involve superseding a whole host of things. Hegel doesn’t shy away from listing them: “Justice and virtue, wrongdoing, violence, and vice, talents and their deeds, the small passions and the great, guilt and innocence, the splendor of individual and national life, the independence, fortune, and misfortune of states and individuals [...]” (PR 345).

Like the tragic protagonist, the world-historical individual and the principle they defend with revolutionary action can be said to collide with the principle of whatever ethical orders are *ex hypothesi* on their way out. In clarifying that the ascent of a new principle can only come with the descent of another, Hegel succinctly confirms in the *Philosophy of Right* that this new principle will be “the negative” of the prior one (PR 347r). Hegel expands significantly on this point in lectures on the philosophy of history, however, claiming:

26. The careful reader will notice that the third major section of the *Philosophy of Right*, translated as “Ethical Life,” includes Hegel’s account of world history. But this shouldn’t be taken to mean that some other normative claims of ethical life are on par with the normative claims of world history, which I have indicated to be preeminent. For instance, recall that Hegel thinks the right of civil society (PR 182-256) is subordinate to the right of the state (PR 257-329) even though both similarly fall under the umbrella of ethical life. Indeed, this subordination, embodying Hegel’s concern about reigning in the anarchic forces of the market (see already PR 33a), is one of several aspects of Hegel’s philosophy of right that have guaranteed its continued relevance. See, among others, Axel Honneth, *Leiden an Unbestimmtheit: Eine Reaktualisierung der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2001).

One of the essential moments in history is the preservation of the individual nation or state and the preservation of the ordered departments of its life [...] but the second moment in history is that the further existence of the national spirit is interrupted [...] in order that world history and the world spirit may continue in their course (LPWH1 82).

Change doesn't come easy:

It is precisely at this point that we encounter those great *collisions* between established and acknowledged duties, laws, and rights on the one hand, and new possibilities which conflict with the existing system and violate it or even destroy its very foundations and continued existence, on the other (emphasis in original; *ibid.*).

In short, because there is a true conflict of claims of right, with world history and the world-historical individual's highest right up against the right of an existing ethical order, the world-historical individual certainly does some wrong. But this wrong is only wrong-in-some-respect—namely wrong with respect to spheres of right that have a weaker claim to existence than that of the progressive actualization of freedom. According to Hegel, the right that the world-historical individual asserts will outdo any other, such that they are justified in contravening other demands. In fact, they must do so. On this point I disagree with Houlgate, according to whom “tragedy is not an inevitability in human life.”²⁷ Clearly, Hegel thinks that progress only comes with protest (taken in the strongest sense).²⁸ Thus far, the world-historical individual has much in common with the tragic protagonist, namely as their action inevitably triggers collision.

Hegel goes at least two steps further when it comes to the tragedy of the world-historical individual, though. Here we can mention a first crucial departure

27. Houlgate, “Hegel’s Theory,” 149; see also 169.

28. Compare Frederick Douglass, *Two Speeches by Frederick Douglass* (Rochester: Dewey, 1857), 21f.: “The whole history of the progress of human liberty shows that all concessions yet made to her august claims have been born of earnest struggle [...] If there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are men who want crops without plowing up the ground.”

from figures such as Antigone and Creon, previously discussed; I will return to a second departure when concluding in §5. While on Hegel's reading each of these tragic protagonists defends one of two principles that are, in the standard case, otherwise to be synthesized (LFA 1197), the principle of the world-historical individual is really new, and won't be 'harmonized' with some other principle. Instead, the new successor principle will defeat this prior principle—all of which only emphasizes the gravity of the collision at hand. That is, while resolution in tragedy is a return to the status quo, resolution in world history is a shift to a higher ethical order. As we have seen, Hegel is explicit that arrival is departure in the case of world history: "this is accompanied by the debasement, fragmentation, and destruction of the preceding mode of reality" (LPWH1 82).

Again, I have until now clarified only the first structural similarity among world-historical individuals and tragic protagonists (and then emphasized the important difference that the world-historical individual's principle is novel). In order to fully understand the world-historical individual, we must now turn to the second main aspect of tragedy examined above in §3, or what I call there the water to Hegel's theory of tragedy—namely belated recognition.

γ. The Water to Hegel's Theory of Tragedy: Hegel's World-Historical Individuals and Belatedness

Not only do world-historical individuals take part in a collision, but the importance of their doing so is recognized belatedly, as proper evaluation is only possible after the fact. In the case of tragedy, according to Hegel, the protagonists with their "tragic firmness" of will (LFA 1203) just recognize their error once it's too late; the spectators, and perhaps the chorus, can meanwhile see where things are heading, but the tragic protagonist is blinkered. Where in the case of tragedy audience members are one or more steps ahead as they watch the protagonists make key mistakes, at real-life historical junctures *both* the world-historical 'protagonists' and their contemporaneous 'spectators' are rather one or more steps behind. This has consequences that press on Wood's affirmation of an absolute world-historical right in Hegel—a right that, Wood claims, could

knowingly be claimed in the present. To be fair, Wood acknowledges some of these limitations, writing “Hegel’s philosophy of history is not innocuous [and] includes a genuine amorality, *though a restricted and conditioned one*.”²⁹ But Wood ultimately underestimates the importance of this second tragic aspect of the world-historical individual’s revolutionary action. World-historical individuals can’t fully know themselves as world-historical when acting, and neither can their non-world-historical peers. Although there may be reason for all of them to hope, this hope must remain thoroughly aspirational. Such a qualification has consequences for what the world-historical individual can reasonably claim in advancing history.

Let’s first consider in greater detail the opacity that obtains in the world-historical individual’s *self-perception*. In one respect, world-historical individuals are oblivious: in his lectures on history, Hegel claims for instance that these figures “realize the end appropriate to the higher concept of the spirit” as “*instruments*” who are host to “a power within them which is stronger than they are” (emphasis mine; LPWH1 83f.). Hegel stresses such self-opacity in his *Philosophy of Right* as well: world-historical individuals are “the unconscious instruments and organs of that inner activity in which the shapes which they themselves assume pass away, while the spirit in and for itself prepares and works its way towards the transition to its next and higher stage” (PR 344; see also PR 348). With such passages in mind, Wood nearly acknowledges that anyone who wanted to invoke a world-historical right *today* would have to have a sort of futuristic knowledge;³⁰ but given these briefly summarized conditions, which I don’t have the space to investigate further here, this special epistemic state seems out of reach.

Still, to be fair to Wood, things aren’t so simple. Amid passages just cited, Hegel claims that world-historical individuals “[have] discerned what is true in their world and in their age, *and have recognized the concept, the next universal [or principle—JMY] to emerge*” (emphasis mine; LPWH1 83). On this picture,

29. Emphasis mine; Wood, *Hegel’s Ethical Thought*, 235.

30. See Wood, *Hegel’s Ethical Thought*, 231: “If, as a practical matter, you wanted to avail yourself of the absolute right of the world spirit in history, you would have to have reason to believe of your own crimes and ambitions that they promote the further actualization of spirit’s freedom [in] history.”

which seems to be in direct tension with the one just sketched, world-historical individuals “are the far-sighted ones” (ibid.). However, the crucial point is that Hegel is here speaking after the fact, qua philosophical historian, for “the owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk” (PR pref). The world-historical individual definitely knows how to get things done. But this doesn’t mean they know with certainty if or when their purportedly higher principle will be taken up. Thus, regardless of whether or not they can tell just where things are heading and why, they sense “what is necessary and timely” (LPWH1 83). This is sufficient for their carrying out revolutionary action, but it’s insufficient for their recognizing that this is precisely what they are up to. We can eventually see that they anticipated something, but insofar as we do so, we view things from the standpoint of the philosophical historian who retrospectively finds reason in history, which thus nearly appears as if it were carrying out its work without us all along.

We must now turn to how the world-historical individual’s *contemporaries* perceive them. Hegel is more straightforward here with regards to the question of recognition by others—though still not perfectly clear, and so again we must be careful to remember that Hegel is looking backwards, having already grasped what has happened in a range of cases. On the one hand, the world-historical individual’s peers “flock to their standard,” i.e. the new principle that the world-historical individual defends, “for it is they who express what the age requires” (LPWH1 84). That is, there will always be some allies who perceive the gravity of this novel force that’s clashing with the present one, which seems to be on its way out. But on the other hand, there’s no way that the world-historical individual’s contemporaries can properly evaluate what’s going on.³¹ As noted at the end of §3, no real tragedy would obtain otherwise, for resolution would immediately arrive. Everyone would throw their hands up and concede to the world-historical individual and their allies, who are clearly in the right. Unfortunately, though, things don’t usually work this way; and instead, history is often a violent affair.

31. Compare Andreja Novakovic, “Hegel on Passion in History” in *International Yearbook of German Idealism* 15 (2019), n16: “when it comes to actions that take place at the cusp of historical change, the social institutions needed in order to evaluate a passion’s object are not yet established.”

Hegel thus goes so far as to claim that “in history the periods of happiness are blank pages” (LPWH1 79).³² Ultimately, world-historical individuals “draw their inspiration from another source, from that hidden spirit whose hour is near but which still lies beneath the surface and seeks to break out without yet having attained an existence in the present” (LPWH1 83). Because the next principle hasn’t been actualized, as necessary as that is according to Hegel’s rationalism—and because non-world-historical individuals must judge the world-historical individual by contemporary standards according to Hegel’s contextualism—world-historical individuals are, we might say, fundamentally considered guilty until proven innocent when they act in a way that fails to conform to contemporary standards. Or to be more careful, and to return to §2: world-historical individuals will always have disobeyed some contemporary ethical order, as in Kant; but unlike in Kant, their actions are eventually understood as rightful from a higher—indeed the highest—perspective.

This is where Wood overlooks the importance of the opacity conditions on the recognition of the world-historical individual’s right, and where Alznauer is correct to temper Wood’s account.³³ Wood muses that we could with Hegel “undertake radical social change with a *rational knowledge* of the fact that we are creating a new and higher ethical order”³⁴; but as attractive as this sounds, it goes too far for Hegel, given the opacity conditions referenced throughout this section. Still, since we are in the final analysis accountable to the course of world spirit, we shouldn’t take this to mean that the demands of right “bottom out” in the status quo, as in Alznauer’s view. Joseph McCarney has similarly argued: “It

32. See also LPWH2 109: “[Spiritual] development is not just a harmless and conflict-free process of emergence”; LPWH2 421: “One must be prepared for blood and strife when one turns to world history, for they are the means by which the world spirit drives itself forward”; etc. Hegel thinks that the brutality of historical progress poses nothing less than the ultimate challenge to thought: “there is no arena in which [...] a reconciling knowledge is more urgently needed than in world history” (LPWH2 86). This being said, Hegel of course also thinks that he is up to meet the challenge, and that the course of world history is ultimately intelligible.

33. For an earlier discussion of such opacity conditions on the world-historical individual in English, see also Joseph McCarney, *Hegel on History* (London: Routledge, 2000), 113-119.

34. Emphasis mine; Wood, *Hegel’s Ethical Thought*, 233.

seems that the judgement of history cannot legitimately be appealed to in the midst of events by any of the forms of historical spirit. It follows that there can be no alternative in practice to the authority of ethics and morality.”³⁵ Although the premise holds, the inference is invalid. Hegel clearly thinks that there are individuals who ‘practice alternatives’ to these lower spheres of right—and he thinks that they do so rightfully insofar as they advance things. Indeed they have no choice: “A mighty figure tramples, as it proceeds, many an innocent flower underfoot, and must destroy many things in its path” (LPWH1 89). McCarney and Alznauer do help us see, however, that the aspiring world-historical individual takes a great risk in their revolutionary action, as they can never really know how their actions will later be evaluated.

§5. Conclusion

Tragically, the world-historical individual must collide with some ethical order insofar as they advance the progress of freedom. Tragically, this collision is all the more necessary insofar as ethical evaluation normally takes place with reference to the current ethical order, and the world-historical individual’s revolutionary actions can only be properly understood later on.³⁶

Worse still, we can note in conclusion that tragedy obtains in another more colloquial sense in the case of Hegel’s world-historical individual. This is the second sense in which Hegel’s world-historical individual may be understood as more tragic than his tragic protagonist (see §4, β above for the first). According to a simple understanding of tragedy, it’s drama that ends with downfall. This simple

35. McCarney, *Hegel on History*, 182.

36. One might wonder whether, having worked out this philosophy of history, Hegel or the Hegelian could help us avoid such battles. According to Hegel, though, “statesmen, sovereigns, and generals are referred to history; but [...] history and experience teach that peoples generally have not learned from history. Each people lives in such particular circumstances that decisions must [be] and are made with respect to them, and only a great figure [*Charakter*] knows how to find the right course in these circumstances [...] Peoples find themselves in such individual circumstances that earlier conditions never wholly correspond to later ones because the situations are so different” (LPWH2 138).

understanding of tragedy doesn't follow Hegel's, but it does hold for the world-historical and their revolutionary action, as Hegel thinks recognition comes so late that world-historical individuals are rarely there to enjoy it. According to Hegel, it's the "fate" of world-historical individuals that "once their [world-historical—JMY] end is attained, they fall away like empty husks" (LPWH1 85; see also LPWH2 96n44 and PR 348). These figures don't live to witness the success of their movement. Given this, and assuming downfall as something like a third ingredient in tragedy—some salt would be nice—we could say that here too Hegel's world-historical individuals end up even more 'tragic' than his tragic protagonists with which they have so much in common, as Hegel actually thinks that tragic drama doesn't necessarily demand the demise of the protagonists (LFA 1218).

In any case, it should be clear that, unlike Kant, the very different "reader of history" that is Hegel provides us with a perspective from which we can judge revolutionary action as rightful. Where Kant locks up the room in which we evaluate from the perspective of world history rather than just morality and the present order, Hegel leaves the door open—if only cracked. In particular, a tragic right of revolutionary action arises in Hegel out of his mixing the two ingredients of the bread that is his ethical thought. Although the flour of his ethical thought has priority (his rationalism), this doesn't mean that the water of his ethical thought is irrelevant (his contextualism). Notably, if the latter were irrelevant—if our evaluative position *didn't* play such an important role above, and if the world-historical individual's actions were always immediately known to be right—then the world-historical individual would simply have a *right to right* full stop, which would be far more straightforward. The implications of Hegel's contextualism (that what is rightful is normally context-dependent) are essential if there is to be any sort of tragic right of revolutionary action against right, to some degree a *right to wrong*, in Hegel. For Hegel, one principle holds sway so long as an ethical order remains in power. Once that world-historical order is no longer in power, following the new world-historical individual's actions that usher in the successor order's principle, this next world-historical order establishes a new context—which can, however, always be contested in the future by the progress of world history. The philosopher's work stops here,

in any case, as the philosophy of history is the philosophy of what has happened, not what will happen.

A careful reading with Wood's interpretation as a reference, and informed by Alznauer's, demonstrates that there is a tragic right of revolutionary action in Hegel. While Wood and Alznauer are each on to something, I have argued that their accounts end up too one-sided—not unlike Hegel's tragic protagonists with their principles. I note in conclusion that the interpretation I have presented here avoids a major pitfall of prior defenses of a right of revolutionary action in Hegel put forward by scholars like Dieter Henrich and Klaus Vieweg,³⁷ who attempt to ground this right in lower spheres of right (*Recht*), especially the moral right of necessity (*Notrecht*). With the right of necessity, one may safeguard one's life by stealing bread while starving or similar, contradicting property rights that are grounded in the most basic sphere of right (so-called abstract right). Although there isn't sufficient space to engage with these commentators here, recall from the previous section that it's precisely Hegel's hierarchical account of right and freedom leading him to argue that world history outdoes morality and more. Only world history stands at the tip of the triangle that is right—'use sparingly'—and so only it could outdo the otherwise decisive claims of the state against which one might stage a revolution, even violently. It should therefore come as no surprise when, as Dean Moyar has recently stressed, Hegel emphasizes in handwritten marginalia the very narrow scope of the right of necessity, clarifying that it's only valid within a "highly limited sphere" and subordinate to the demands of ethical life.³⁸

Hegel gives us reason to think that history is rife with ruthless but necessary revolutionary episodes. This may sound just as worrisome as Kant's views considered in §2, if from another direction. But as with Kant, of course, our worries don't tell us anything about what views Hegel really held. And before these views appear too troubling, recall that Hegel's rationalism looms large and

37. See my note 3 above.

38. Cited in Moyar, "Recht gegen Recht," 84. To be clear, Moyar goes on to argue that Hegel's notion of 'the good' as realized freedom can, however, ground a right of revolutionary action and also clarify Hegel's account of the French Revolution. I understand our proposals to be largely harmonious, though formulated in very different terms.

is, after all, significantly what got us here in the first place. Hegel is committed to genuine progress as concerns the self-actualization of spirit. Thus, history isn't just a neutral proceeding: "*it is not just the power of spirit which passes judgment in world history—i.e. it is not the abstract and irrational necessity of a blind fate*" (emphasis mine; PR 342). This means that Hegel's world-historical individual must actually be moving things along, and isn't just there to exercise their prominence. "It is this which gives them their power in the world, and only in so far as their ends are compatible with that of the spirit which has being in and for itself do they have absolute right on their side—although it is a right of a wholly peculiar kind" (LPWH1 84). In short, though this position may occasion plenty of other reservations, it should be clear that Hegel avoids Kant's conservatism and leaves us with a progressive, revolutionary position.

Among other things, one might be concerned that there could be a slippery slope from the revolutionary to the purely immoral. There will always be individuals who falsely claim to be advancing the progress of humanity, and we must consider them with the utmost caution. Perhaps, despite the limitations Hegel holds over us with regards to evaluating the present, he can help us try to do that. But Hegel certainly affirms the rightfulness of the world-historical individual's revolutionary action. Recognizing as much—if belatedly—helps us to see how Hegel prefigures related and more radical theorists of social change like Marx, Luxemburg, King, or Fanon; and it also demonstrates the continued relevance of Hegel's ethical thought on its own terms.³⁹

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