

EVIL AS A MODAL MISMATCH:
ON HEGEL'S DISTINCTION BETWEEN *WHAT IS*
AND *WHAT OUGHT TO BE*

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ABSTRACT: G.W.F. Hegel argues that a philosophy of history should engender comprehension of evil in the world. And yet some commentators have charged his philosophy with transcending mere explication by justifying the existence of these evils. In defense of his words, Hegel famously characterizes evil as a modal mismatch; namely, as the incompatibility between what is given and what ought to be the case. Unfortunately, some readers of Hegel's grand narrative either continue to struggle with or overlook this fine distinction. Against such readings, I organize my paper into three sections that speak directly to these concerns. In §1, against the concern that Hegel's view of the "actual world" justifies suffering, it is shown that his philosophy does not endorse the merely extant world, which is a whole world apart from the actual world. In §2, I articulate the premises of Hegel's *Doppelsatz* to argue that the famous slogan is not, as some commentators take it, an endorsement of "things as they are." And in §3, I expose a category error that mistakes an epistemological claim made by Hegel about contingency as a metaphysical assertion in support of evil. Ultimately, I argue that Hegel views evil as neither actual nor necessary nor justified.

KEYWORDS: Hegel; Actuality; Contingency; Evil; History

G.W.F. Hegel argues that a philosophy of history should engender comprehension of evil in the world.¹ And yet some commentators, past and present, view his philosophy not as an explication but as an attempt to justify the existence of these evils. In defense of his words, Hegel famously characterizes evil as a modal mismatch; namely, as the incompatibility between what is merely extant and what ought to be the case. In his own lifetime, Hegel was aware that this disparity would lead some of his readers to fall into the abyss of interpretive

¹ G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 42-43. Hereafter, *LPWH*.

misapprehensions.² Notwithstanding the enormous influence he exerted on the humanities and social sciences following his death in 1831, thinkers continued to struggle in their attempts to understand the subtle moves of Hegel's philosophy. Such failures were addressed more than sixty years after Hegel's death by R.B. Haldane, who classified a certain shortcoming in Hegel's critics as follows: "What philosophy has gained from Hegelianism is a demonstration of the *mischief that arises when categories which are applicable in a certain way are indiscriminately applied in every other.*"³

Understanding Hegel's writings, much less his categories, is widely acknowledged by as a complicated undertaking. Béatrice Longuenesse warns that Hegel's category of actuality (*Wirklichkeit*) is "difficult to follow;"⁴ Stephen Houlgate alerts us to the fact that "Hegel's texts and lectures are difficult to read – at times formidably so;"⁵ Robert Stern attributes this daunting problem to a cluster of emblematic auctorial features – Hegel's work can be "dense, obscure, and overburdened with technical terminology and neologisms;"⁶ and Robert Pippin writes about a certain reception to Hegel's writings that takes it as "the ugliest prose style in the history of the German language."⁷ Perhaps it was because of all these difficulties that Walter Kaufmann once remarked: "Hegel is known today, at least in the United States, less through his own works than through secondary sources."⁸

Although contemporary scholars take precautions to avoid the pitfalls outlined above, we note that there continues to this day a certain tendency to interpret and relate Hegel's thoughts through inculcating catchphrases and sweeping oversimplifications. To paraphrase Goethe, these kinds of interpretations undertake the task of erecting a tower, but run the risk of spending

² G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel's Logic, Being Part One of the Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences (1830)*, trans. J.N. Findlay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), §6, p. 9. Hereafter, *EL*.

³ R.B. Haldane, "Hegel and His Recent Critics," *Mind*, Vol. 13, No. 52 (Oct., 1888), p. 586. My italics.

⁴ Béatrice Longuenesse, *Hegel's Critique of Metaphysics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 122.

⁵ Stephen Houlgate, *The Hegel Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 3.

⁶ Robert Stern, *Hegel and the Phenomenology of Spirit* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. xii.

⁷ Robert Pippin, *Hegel's Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 5.

⁸ Walter Kaufmann, "The Hegel Myth and Its Method," *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 60, No. 4 (Oct., 1951), p. 459.

no more labor on the foundation than would suit a hut.⁹ Consequently, in this paper I attempt to explicate what Hegel's philosophy identifies as the medium in which evil appears, namely, human history, and work to avoid the Goethean reproach by arguing that Hegel views evil as neither actual nor necessary nor justified. Against such readings, I organize my paper into three sections that speak directly to these concerns. In §1, against the concern that Hegel's view of the "actual world" justifies suffering it is shown that Hegel's philosophy does not endorse the merely extant world, which is a world apart from the actual world. In §2, I articulate the premises of Hegel's *Doppelsatz* to argue that the famous slogan is not, as some commentators see it, an endorsement of "things as they are." And in §3, I expose a category error that mistakes an epistemological claim made by Hegel about contingency as a metaphysical assertion in support of evil. Ultimately, I argue that Hegel views evil as neither actual nor necessary nor justified.

I HEGEL'S *ACTUAL* WORLD

Susan Neiman's *Evil in Modern Thought*¹⁰ has many virtues, not least of which is its nuanced explication of natural and moral evil in the wake of the 1755 Lisbon earthquake. Moreover, her book provides an opportunity to evaluate Hegel's stance on evil in a section titled "Real and Rational: Hegel and Marx." In this chapter, Neiman quotes a sentence from Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* before charging it with reprehensible moral consequences:

"Philosophy should help us to understand that the actual world is as it ought to be" ... If you set out to justify suffering, you may find in the end that you've justified suffering. And then you are left with consequences that Hegel was willing to draw (EMT, p. 100).

The italicized sentence rightly captures the central tenet of Hegel's philosophy; however, *pace* Neiman's interpretation of these words, an alternative reading can extricate Hegel from engaging in bad moral business. Although Hegel argues that the *actual world* is as it *ought to be*, some qualifications need to be made regarding what he means by 'actual' world, which can help nullify the horrible

⁹ Johan Wolfgang Von Goethe, *William Meister's Apprenticeship and Travels* Vol. 1, trans. Thomas Carlyle (Chicago: A.C. McClurg, 1890), p. 400.

¹⁰ Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002). Hereafter, *EMT*.

implication Neiman draws from this passage.

In Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* from which Neiman quotes, we find that in his account of universal reason, the world that Hegel is interested in,

has of course nothing to do with individual empirical instances....When we consider particular instances, we may well conclude that there is much injustice in the world, and there is certainly much to find fault with among individual phenomena. But we are not concerned here with empirical details; they are at the mercy of chance, which has no place in the present discussion (*LPWH*, p. 66).

For Hegel, “empirical instances,” “particular instances,” and “empirical details,” while certainly having effect in the unfolding of Spirit, which is Hegel's term for free and rational humanity, are “at the mercy of chance,”¹¹ and thus, might well be the study of original and reflective historiography, but cannot be not the *subject* matter of philosophical history. While it is true that Hegel tried to establish philosophy as scientific (*Wissenschaftlich*), there is, as Shlomo Avineri warns, an attendant danger of reading Hegel's notion of ‘science’ in positivistic terms.¹²

For Hegel, *Wissenschaft* is an activity of systematic enquiry, and it is actuality (*Wirklichkeit*), not a merely positivistic empirical reality, which provides the subject matter for Hegel's vision of thought or, perhaps more properly, thinking, as the self-organizing structure of world history.¹³ In a thoroughly modern move to offer a philosophic historiography, Hegel maintained that it was the task of the philosopher to think through, grasp, and articulate world history.¹⁴

¹¹ Cf. Kant's belief that it would be a betrayal of rational hope to forfeit the notion that there are purposive principles operating in history, thereby resigning ourselves to the lawless and aimless “dismal reign of chance” (trostloses Ungefähr). See Immanuel Kant, “Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Perspective,” in Pauline Kleingeld (ed.), *Toward Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), IaG 8:18.

¹² Shlomo Avineri, *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972). Shlomo correctly points out that, “[O]ne should eschew as much as possible the positivistic analogy with the natural sciences. *Wissenschaft* to Hegel relates to what can be known in this sense through a system of rigorous ‘scientific’ concepts needed to comprehend it” (p. 122).

¹³ See, e.g. Rolf-Peter Horstmann's account of Hegel's ‘monistic ontology’ in “Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* as an Argument for a Monistic Ontology,” *Inquiry* 49, pp. 103-118: “The point for Hegel is to completely justify the monistic thesis according to which actuality is a rational totality, a self-developing organic whole” (p. 104).

¹⁴ Frederick C. Beiser's essay “Hegel's Historicism” gives an excellent overview of the tripartite distinction Hegel makes between original history, reflective history, and his argument for the superiority of

Consequently, the ‘actual world’ that Hegel’s philosophy of history seeks to comprehend is not just the merely extant world, but rather a developmental unfolding of world history which is constituted by thought or *reflection*.¹⁵ In his philosophy, Hegel uses ‘thought’ or ‘thinking’ in the constitutively rich sense of an *activity* which is self-determining and appears in successive shapes of historical development, i.e. from an implicitly present, but not fully developed, historical stage to more explicitly manifest and developed progressive stages.¹⁶

Thus we see, already, that interpretations which appear to implicate Hegel’s philosophy with setting out to justify the world as a warts-and-all, *de facto*, state of affairs risks discounting the constitutive element of self-determining thought in Hegel’s observation about reason being apportioned to the domain of the *actual* world. Thus, the distinction between appearance and actuality is crucial for an understanding of Hegel’s philosophy of history to see the difference between ‘what is’ and ‘what ought to be;’ for what is merely extant hardly captures what Hegel envisions as the “world as it ought to be.”

Having thus framed the context for these two worlds, we now can juxtapose Neiman’s abbreviated passage with the full sentence from Hegel’s text (N=Neiman; H=Hegel):

Neiman: “*Philosophy should help us to understand that the actual world is as it ought to be.*” If you set out to justify suffering, you may find in the end that you’ve justified suffering. And then you are left with consequences that Hegel was willing to draw (*EMT*, p. 100).

Hegel: But to return to the true ideal, the Idea of reason itself, *philosophy should help us understand that the actual world is as it ought to be.* It shows us that the rational will, the concrete good is indeed all-powerful, and that this absolute power translates itself into reality (*LPWH*, p. 66: my italics).

Neiman uses the italicized sentence to suggest that Hegel’s philosophy of history justifies suffering as something that is actual and ‘ought to be.’ The idea that Hegel’s philosophy justifies suffering is very similar to Hannah Arendt’s belief that

philosophic history. See Beiser, “Hegel’s Historicism” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 270-300, esp. 282-288.

¹⁵ Spirit requires reflection in order to progress toward its actualization, and, hence, becoming able to recognize itself as the principle of its own self-development.

¹⁶ See, e.g. Hegel’s narrative of Spirit’s development in four stages: its *childhood* stage in the Oriental World, to its *youthful* or *adolescent* stage in the Greek World, to its *manhood* or *adult* stage in the Roman World, to its wise, but bittersweet, *old age* in the Germanic World of Hegel’s own time (*LPWH*, pp. 129-31).

Hegel helped pave an inexorable route toward the “monstrous immorality”¹⁷ of the totalitarian state and is accepting of “things as they are,”¹⁸ as well as Leo Strauss’ notion that for Hegel, “the vindication of providence means the justification of evil.”¹⁹

Arendt’s, Strauss’s, and Neiman’s interpretations of Hegel’s philosophy would seem to align with an anachronistic reading of Hegel’s alleged conservatism²⁰ amid reprehensible twentieth century historical events, e.g. Stalin’s Purges and Hitler’s Nazism. Moreover, such readings appear to charge Hegel’s own words with producing evil in the world:

[Hegel] went so far as to state that “the finest and noblest individuals were likely to be immolated on the altar of history”...In nineteenth-century Berlin, such lectures could still be heard without a shudder; *Hegel could not know what images those words would produce one century later* (EMT, p. 261; my italics and bold type).

Perhaps one reason why some thinkers interpret Hegel as justifying extant reality can be attributed to writings such as Friedrich Engel’s infamous misreading of Hegel’s philosophy as a “sanctification of things that be.”²¹

However, Hegel’s philosophy neither espouses a mechanistic progression of historical events (as understood by Arendt’s “moving movement”) nor validates asymmetrical or unjust power relations (as glorifying the State to the point of quietism). For example, with regard to Arendt’s claim that Hegel validates “things as they are,” Hegel himself admitted that his philosophy is not a manifesto on how to derive an *ought to be* from a mere *what is*. As Hegel writes in the Preface

¹⁷ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harvest Books, 1973), esp. p. 239.

¹⁸ It bears mentioning that Neiman acknowledges Arendt’s ardent anti-Hegelianism: “[Arendt] expressed her lifelong anti-Hegelian conviction that Hegel’s alternative [to Kant] resigns us to the triumph of things as they are” (EMT, p. 103, see also, p. 318).

¹⁹ See “Reason in History and the Nature of Spirit” in *Leo Strauss on Hegel*, ed. Paul Franco (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), p. 58.

²⁰ See also Karl Popper’s notorious misreading of Hegel’s philosophy for its linking Hegel’s alleged conservatism with the rise of the totalitarian state. See Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies, Vol. 2: Hegel and Marx* (Oxford & New York: Routledge, 2002): “The historical significance of Hegel may be seen in the fact that he represents the ‘missing link’, as it were, between Plato and the modern form of totalitarianism. Most of the modern totalitarians are quite unaware that their ideas can be traced back to Plato. But many know of their indebtedness to Hegel, and all of them have been brought up in the close atmosphere of Hegelianism (p. 34).

²¹ Frederick Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1946), p. 10.

to his *Philosophy of Right*:

This book...is to be nothing other than the endeavour to apprehend and portray the state as something inherently rational.... *The instruction which it may contain cannot consist in teaching the state what it ought to be; it can only show how the state, the ethical universe, is to be understood....One more word about giving instruction as to what the world ought to be. Philosophy always comes on the scene too late to give it [i.e. to give instruction as to what the world ought to be].*²²

In the above overture to his political theory, Hegel writes that philosophy, properly understood, does not, indeed cannot, prescribe what ‘ought to be’ because the wisdom received through philosophy is always a belated gift. The reason for this belatedness is underwritten by Hegel’s phenomenological method.

Critics of Hegel’s philosophy charge Hegel with imposing his own *a priori* schemes on the content of his studies in order to conform them to his own metaphysical preconceptions.²³ However, Hegel was acutely aware of this danger and recommended a *presuppositionless* methodology in which the philosopher suspends her own *a priori* principles and examines her subject matter according to its own internal standards.²⁴ We see this restraint called for in the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, wherein Hegel cautioned against “being the arbitrarily moving principle of the content,” and that, instead, the philosopher should allow the content to “move spontaneously of its own nature...and then to contemplate this movement.”²⁵ Stephen Houlgate characterizes Hegel’s phenomenological method as follows: “All that phenomenological thought sets out to do is...to think through the tensions and contradictions that are inherent in the manifold ways in which consciousness and its objects appear to consciousness.”²⁶

²² G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 11-12. My italics. Hereafter, *PR*.

²³ See, e.g. W.H. Walsh, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of History* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1967), pp. 134-49.

²⁴ Frederick C. Beiser is again helpful in offering an exposition of Hegel’s methodology. See Beiser, “Hegel’s Historicism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel*, ed. Frederick C. Beiser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 270-300.

²⁵ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 36. Hereafter *PhG*.

²⁶ Stephen Houlgate provides excellent commentary by characterizing Hegel’s phenomenological method as follows: “All that phenomenological thought sets out to do is...to think through the tensions and contradictions that are inherent in the manifold ways in which consciousness and its objects appear to consciousness.” See, Stephen Houlgate, *The Hegel Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 48.

Some scholars have argued that Hegel's method is dialectical.²⁷ This is a famous designation, and seems plausible in light of the enormous influence of Aristotle's immanent teleology in Hegel's philosophy,²⁸ and Karl Marx's appropriation of Hegel's philosophy in forming his own dialectical materialism, history of class struggle, and theory of alienation.²⁹ However, in an influential paper on Hegel's methodology in the *Phenomenology*, Kenley R. Dove rightly addresses the issue in the following manner, which is worth quoting at some length:

There is probably no aspect of "Hegelianism" which has attracted more attention and occasioned more confusion than the so-called "dialectical method." Every university student has doubtless heard at least one lecture on this "secret" of Hegelianism, whether in terms of the notorious triad: thesis-antithesis-synthesis, or in some more sophisticated terminology What, then, is the method of Hegel's *PhG* if it is not dialectical? Insofar as it can be characterized in a word, it is descriptive. The study of a science, in Hegel's sense, requires that the student, through a tremendous effort of restraint, give himself completely over to the structural development of that science itself The true philosopher must strenuously avoid the temptation of interrupting the immanent development of the subject-matter by the introjection of interpretive models.³⁰

Charles Taylor follows Dove in saying, "If we want to characterize [Hegel's] method we might just as well speak of it as 'descriptive.'"³¹ The Aristotelian influence of Hegelian dialectic can be harmonized with the descriptive phenomenological method by noting that for Hegel we come at an understanding of a thing's (self)determinacy through examples or representations of its most

²⁷ E.g. see Michael Forster, "Hegel's Dialectical Method," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel*, ed. Frederick C. Beiser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 130-70.

²⁸ For a contemporary study of Hegel's relation to Aristotle, see Alfredo Ferrarin, *Hegel and Aristotle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). For an elaboration of Aristotle's immanent teleology see David Ross, *Aristotle* (New York: Routledge, 2006 [1923]), p. 129.

²⁹ "The outstanding thing in Hegel's *Phenomenology* and its final outcome - that is, the dialectic of negativity as the moving and generating principle - is thus first that Hegel conceives the self-generation of man as a process, conceives objectification as loss of the object, as alienation and as transcendence of this alienation." See Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and the Communist Manifesto*, trans. Martin Milligan (New York: Prometheus Books, 1988), p. 149.

³⁰ Kenley R. Dove, "Hegel's Phenomenological Method," *Review of Metaphysics*, 23:4 (1970), pp. 615-16.

³¹ Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 129.

developed form, and that only after a long process of formation can a thing like history be understood. When “The True is the whole” (*PhG*, p. 11), because the “whole” or totality takes a while to develop and actualize its essential nature, knowledge is always retrospective. As Hegel famously characterizes that Epimethean bird which is all hindsight, “The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk” (*PR*, p. 13).

In his philosophy, history, understood as a development, is the content from which Hegel strenuously refrains from introjecting *a priori* schemes to avoid one-sided, *parti pris* suppositions. Hence with regard to the Stalinism, Nazism, Totalitarianism, the alleged deification of the state that had, for example, Karl Popper so up in arms, and Arendt’s characterization of Hegel philosophy of history as: “*Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht* [world history is the world court of judgment], leaving the ultimate judgment to Success,”³² Hegel unequivocally affirms in his section on “World History” in the *Philosophy of Right* that “world history is not the verdict of mere might [but rather] is the necessary development, out of the concept of mind’s freedom alone, of the moments of reason and so of the self-consciousness and freedom of mind” (*PR*, p. 216, §342).

Related worries that “For Hegel, evils are necessary, thus justified”³³ can be allayed by distinguishing between the external necessity of mechanical inevitability and internal metaphysical necessity. This is an important distinction because for Hegel, evil events, *e.g.*, wars, genocide, etc., are certainly real insofar as they are things that happen in the course of human history in the form of a negative that needs negating (*LPWH*, p. 43). This might seem like a tragic acceptance of historical conflict, but, nevertheless, evil is not an end, it is not a finality. It is one thing to say that the Melian Massacre by the Athenians or the Mongol raids of Genghis Kahn or the Cambodian Killing Fields, etc., are the causally inevitable consequences of antecedent states of affairs, and it is quite another thing to say that any one or all of those events were metaphysically necessary, *i.e.* that they had to happen as they did, that all of its victims had to die as they did, and that such manifestations of evil are necessary, they could not

³² Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: Vol. 1, Thinking, Vol. 2, Willing* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1978), p. 216. The German quoted here is a phrase from Friedrich Schiller’s poem *Resignation* (1786).

³³ See Susan Neiman, “Theodicy in Jerusalem,” in *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem*, ed. Steven E. Aschheim (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), p. 74.

be otherwise. But this is precisely the point that is made by critics of Hegel's philosophy.

Consequently, it is crucial to note that in the *Encyclopedia Logic*, Hegel draws attention to how the modal category of actuality is thrown around without discrimination. Moreover, he argues against classifying evil as an actuality, instead giving it the transitory designation of a "mere appearance":

[P]hilosophy should understand that its content is no other than actuality In common life, any freak of fancy, any error, evil and everything of the nature of evil, as well as every degenerate and transitory existence whatever, gets in a casual way the name of actuality. But even our ordinary feelings are enough to forbid a casual (fortuitous) existence getting the emphatic name of an actual; for by fortuitous we mean an existence which has no greater value than that of something possible, which may as well not be as be (EL, §6, pp. 8-9. My italics).

In this passage, Hegel is not trivializing evil by calling it a "freak of fancy," i.e. as something contingent, but is pointing out that evil is neither 'actual' nor something which 'ought to be.'

What *ought to be* is rational, which is also actual; evil is neither.

II HEGEL'S *DOPPELSATZ*

We have seen that readings which charge Hegel's philosophy with accepting the *status quos* of history and justifying suffering seem to miss that his writings are making claims to the opposite. Subsequently, the provocative sentence that Neiman quotes from Hegel's philosophy of world history ("that the actual world is as it ought to be") is complimentary to the conjunctive proposition that Dieter Henrich coined as Hegel's *Doppelsatz*:³⁴ "*Was vernünftig ist, das ist wirklich; und was wirklich ist, das ist vernünftig*", i.e., *What is rational is actual and what is actual is rational* (PR, Preface, p. 10).

Emil Fackenheim related that these words have seldom been straightforwardly interpreted; scholars partial to Hegel have been "baffled" by them, and scholars averse to Hegel find them "scandalous or senseless."³⁵ As we

³⁴ See Dieter Henrich, "Einleitung des Herausgebers: Vernunft in Verwirklichung," in Dieter Henrich, ed., *Hegel: Philosophie des Rechts: Die Vorlesung von 1819–20 in einer Nachschrift* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983).

³⁵ Emil Fackenheim, "On the Actuality of the Rational and the Rationality of the Actual," *Review of Metaphysics*, 23: 4 (1970), p. 690.

have seen, Hegel was aware that he could be misunderstood, but perhaps no way greater than in his *Doppelsatz*. As he writes in the *Encyclopedia Logic*, “These simple statements have given rise to expressions of surprise and hostility” (*EL*, §6, p. 9). To avoid this confusion, we must return to the distinction between *what is* and *what ought to be*; namely, we must again recognize that Hegel means to distinguish between brute existence and actuality: “existence is in part mere appearance, and only in part actuality” (*EL*, *loc. cit.*).

Thus, with regard to the distinction between the actual world and the merely real or extant world, what sets these worlds, as it were, worlds apart is that the *actual* world is the realm of self-developing freedom through subsequent stages of rational development. In contrast, the merely real world is confined to a disarray of external and ephemeral forces that can produce inevitable, mechanistic events, but only via external necessity without “what really deserves the name of actuality” (*EL*: §6, p8). Subsequently, the actual world that interests Hegel is that segment of the world which comports with, has *achieved* the potential for, and is the *embodiment* of, Spirit’s nature as presented by reason.

The more that rationality and freedom is emptied out into the world, the more actual, the more hospitable that world *becomes* to rational human subjects. However, because “existence is in part mere appearance” (*EL*, §6, p9), there are segments of the world that do not comport with, have not achieved the potential for, and are not the embodiment of, its nature as presented by reason. These segments of the world are not rational, and hence cannot be actual. But the mere fact that these segments exist, e.g. as *not*-rational and hence *not*-actual social organizations and institutions, do not violate the *Doppelsatz*’s underlying claim, as these merely real worlds fall outside of actuality’s purview.³⁶ As Kenneth Westphal succinctly puts it, “Hegel’s slogan is not a blanket endorsement of extant

³⁶ Shlomo Avineri articulates this crucial distinction as follows: “When Hegel says that the state is something ‘inherently rational,’ it does not follow that everything in every state is rational, but that the very phenomenon of the state – men living under a common bond – expresses a rational aspect of human life. Otherwise, there would be no state.” See Shlomo Avineri, *Hegel’s Theory of the Modern State*, p. 125, fn. 28. Avineri also writes, “Philosophy, Hegel reiterates time and again, deals with the world, with actuality; it should not...stop at external appearances, nor should it be deterred by conformist accommodation with powers that be.”

institutions.”³⁷

Therefore, with respect to interpretations of Hegel’s alleged quietism, it is pretty difficult to see how the *rational will* of an *actual world* can feel *at-home* under, say, slavery, Stalin’s purges, Nazi Germany, totalitarian *régimes*, etc. In Hegel’s philosophy, there is no category collapse between the actual and the merely real. The latter represents ‘what is;’ the former represents ‘what ought to be.’ And finally, to address commentators with moral concerns over the seeming endorsement of evil with Hegel’s idea of what ought to be, Hegel writes in no uncertain terms in the *Philosophy of Mind* that, “Evil is nothing but the incompatibility between *what is* and *what ought to be*.”³⁸

Subsequently, Neiman’s use of the sentence “*Philosophy should help us to understand that the actual world is as it ought to be*” to charge Hegel’s philosophy with justifying suffering and evil fails to grasp that Hegel is not endorsing *what is* or “things as they are,” but rather is saying that the actual world *ought to be* rational, with increasing manifestations of human freedom and richer forms of subjectivity. The development of Spirit and the unfolding of freedom in history ought to contribute to our feeling at-home in the world. “The history of Spirit,” writes Herbert Marcuse, “is the history of the actual world in the true sense of the word.”³⁹ Spirit can only feel “at home” in the world when it has developed an understanding of itself in reciprocal freedom with all others. It is a perpetual project of working towards manifesting more of *what ought to be* in the world.

Hegel argues that Spirit requires reflection in order to become actualized, and, hence, recognize itself as the principle of its own self-development. He relates that when Spirit self-reflects, it exhibits the divine attribute of being both *subject* and *substance*.⁴⁰ The movement from substance to subject is, again, one of development, namely, of a self-moving, self-actualizing rational process: “Reason is Spirit when its certainty of being all reality has been raised to truth, and it is

³⁷ See Kenneth Westphal, “The Basic Context and Structure of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel*, ed. Frederick C. Beiser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 325.

³⁸ G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel’s Philosophy of Mind, Part Three of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences (1830)*, trans. William Wallace (Oxford: Oxford University Press, §472, p. 232. My italics.

³⁹ See Herbert Marcuse, *Hegel’s Ontology and the Theory of Historicity*, tr. Seyla Benhabib (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), p. 299.

⁴⁰ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 476. Hereafter *PhG*.

conscious of itself as its own world, and of the world as itself” (*PhG*, p. 263). What is important to understand is that Spirit is not static, but dynamic. Spirit has to re-examine and re-construct its values and norms, and by doing so, the movement in which substance becomes subject follows a self-articulating, immanent purpose (*Zweck*).

Hegel’s philosophy of history is purposive insofar as it moves towards actualizing richer levels of freedom:

This development is by nature a gradual progression, a series of successive determinations of freedom which proceed from the concept of the material in question, i.e. the nature of freedom in its development towards self-consciousness. The logical – and even more so dialectical – nature of the concept in general, i.e. the fact that it determines itself, assumes successive determinations which it progressively overcomes, thereby attaining a positive, richer, and more concrete determination – this necessity, and the necessary series of pure abstract determinations of the concept, are comprehended by means of philosophy (*LPWH*, p. 138).

Thus, the purposive activity of Spirit in history is immanent and develops to achieve richer and more concrete manifestations of rationality and freedom. Theodore Adorno puts it as follows: “Freedom and reason are nonsense without one another. The real [i.e. actual] can be considered rational only insofar as the idea of freedom, that is, human beings’ genuine self-determining, shines through it.”⁴¹

Consequently, Hegel’s philosophy of history is not necessitarian and closed-ended. Rather, it is open-ended, open to a multiplicity of alternative possibilities because the speculative end of a dialectical cycle serves as the beginning of a new cycle, and so on. Here is Hegel’s elaboration, which will be quoted at some length:

[S]pirit too rises up again [like the metaphoric image of the Phoenix], not only rejuvenated but also enhanced and transfigured Admittedly, [Spirit] becomes divided against itself and destroys the form it earlier occupied, but in so doing, it rises up to a new stage of development The solution to its problems creates new problems for it solve, so that it multiplies the materials on which it operates. Thus we see how the spirit in history issues forth in innumerable directions. (*LPWH*, pp.

⁴¹ See Theodore Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholzen (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), p. 44.

32-33).

Hegel's philosophy points towards a future fulfillment, it has an anticipatory power. But the proleptic power of speculative thinking does not anticipate an ultimate end, but rather a series of penultimate ends in which increasing manifestations of reason and freedom are its ever-present goals. And lest one confuse Hegel with playing the role of prophet,⁴² Hegel wrote that it absurd to fancy that an individual can transcend his contemporary world and leap over their own time (*PR*: Preface, p. 11). Indeed, Walter Kaufmann observes that, "[Hegel] did not attempt to play the prophet and was content to comprehend the past."⁴³ Contemporary analyses that conflate Hegel's idea of what merely 'is' and what 'ought to be,' and with reading Hegel's philosophy as justifying things as they are, are examples of what R.B. Haldane rightly observed as the mischief that arises when categories are indiscriminately applied.

III HEGEL'S ALLEGED ELIMINATION OF THE CONTINGENT

In contradistinction to readings that take Hegel's philosophy as offering a necessitarian historical plan, Spirit's purposive development does not follow a plan in which every calamity and unhappy event in history had to unfold in a way that could not be otherwise. But this is exactly Neiman's claim in her interpretation of the following sentence from Hegel's writings on historical contingency: "The sole aim of philosophical inquiry is *to eliminate the contingent*" (*EMT*, p. 89).⁴⁴ She writes: "To tell an individual that an awful event could not have been different offers consolation's barest bones" (*EMT*, p. 90). Neiman understands this to mean that individual examples of human suffering from wars, genocide, etc., are understood by Hegel's philosophy as metaphysically necessary. She takes it that Hegel would view an event like, for example, the Holocaust, with all of its evil and suffering, as but the collateral damage of a grandiose metaphysical system. According to this view, in Hegel's

⁴² See Arthur Danto, *Narration and Knowledge: With a new introduction by Lydia Goehr and a new conclusion by Frank Ankersmit* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007). Danto criticizes philosophers of history like Hegel and Marx with positing a "substantive philosophy of history," which plays at offering prophetic pronouncements of the future.

⁴³ Walter Kaufmann, *From Shakespeare to Existentialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 113.

⁴⁴ The passage is from Hegel, *LPWH*, p. 28.

understanding of history, an individual like the Holocaust victim Edith Stein had to die an unavoidable death because it was necessary, as Neiman puts it, “could not have been different” (*EMT, loc. cit.*).

The problem with this interpretation is that Hegel’s remark about philosophy’s aim to eliminate the contingent is not an ontological claim; it is epistemological. The statement is made in the Introduction to his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, and what Hegel means is that to call a thing contingent is to say that we can give no rational account of why it is as it is. Hence, readers like Neiman appear to make a category mistake. By stating that the purpose of philosophical study is to grasp the necessity underlying world history, Hegel is showing a Spinozistic bent in his thought. Contingency can give the rule to nothing and thus cannot explain anything. In the *Ethics*, Baruch Spinoza understood ‘contingency’ as a name we give to things that expose “a defect of our knowledge.”⁴⁵ Hegel’s philosophy does not aim to eliminate contingency from the world (as if it could), but rather is emphasizing that the philosopher is concerned mainly to understand the necessary relationship between thought and the world. And things can certainly be different.

Although contingency plays an important role in the development of subjective and objective Spirit (*EL*, p. 206, §145 *Zusätze*),⁴⁶ contingency is precisely that which the rational will sets itself against and seeks to overcome: “Instead of being the will in its truth, arbitrariness is more like the will as contradiction (*PR*, p. 27, §15 *Remarks*). Moreover, with regard to the elimination of contingency simpliciter, Odo Marquard amusingly puts the matter as follows:

To get rid of what is accidental would mean, for example, to get rid of philosophers; but without philosophers (whether they are amateur or professional makes no difference) there would be no philosophy, so that in the end one would rid philosophy, in the name of philosophy, of philosophy. So the accidental has to be retrieved for philosophy; for it is only through it that philosophy has reality.⁴⁷

Eliminating the contingent, the accidental, would necessarily get rid of all of us! What is contingent, accidental, and arbitrary has very important roles to play

⁴⁵ Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics* in *The Rationalists*, trans. R.H.M. Elwes (New York: Anchor Books, 1974). See especially, Bk I, Props. 29 & 33 and Bk II, Prop. 31.

⁴⁶ See also Dieter Henrich, “Hegel’s Theorie Über den Zufall,” *Kant-Studien*, 1958/59, 50.

⁴⁷ Odo Marquard, *In Defense of the Accidental*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 109.

in Hegel's philosophical system, but it is not the substance and subject matter of the *actual world*. As we have seen, evil may be seen as emanating from the contingent realm (*EL*, §6, p.9), and Hegel can be understood as answering Neiman's charge that he takes evils as necessary, thus justified, in the following passage: "With this facet of evil, its necessity, there is inevitably combined the fact that this same evil is condemned to be that which of necessity ought not to be, i.e., the fact that evil ought to be annulled" (*PR*, p. 93, §139 *Remarks*).

For Hegel, evil is tied to a one-sided estrangement from being in spiritual community with others, which is a disavowal of our freedom with others. It is the annulment of one-sidedness which can usher in the world as it ought to be, i.e., rational and free. All of world history is the actualization of this freedom (*LPWH*, pp. 54-55), which requires finding oneself in a relationship to otherness, thereby taking part in the unity of a social whole. Consequently, evil can be attributed to denying our recognition of this mutual condition of freedom, e.g. in the 'I' that is not 'We' and 'We' that is not 'I,' in the Lord that withholds recognition of his servant's humanity (*PhG* 110-19), and in a self not-relating to otherness.⁴⁸ Failure to see one's freedom mirrored in others results in evil, which Hegel identifies as "the sphere of separation and estrangement, which has to be negated."⁴⁹ Merely acknowledging that evil exists (as something that needs to be annulled) is hardly a justification for it. For Hegel, evil is contingent and thus not actual, it is what is overcome by the gradual development of Spirit in history.

Certainly, there are passages in Hegel's philosophy that would suggest a rather cold acceptance of what William Shakespeare called "the thousand natural shocks the flesh is heir to."⁵⁰ For example, there are memorable passages in Hegel's philosophy where we find such potentially incendiary snippets as history being "the slaughter-bench" of victimization; the exploitative irony of "the

⁴⁸ Hegel, *PR*, §36, §40, pp. 37-38. A rich expression of mutual recognition and a free social structure is articulated in Frank B. Farrell's phrase, "self-relating-in-relating-to-otherness." See Frank B. Farrell, *Subjectivity, Realism, and Postmodernism: The Recovery of the World in Recent Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 24, and *How Theology Shaped Twentieth-Century Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 42-43.

⁴⁹ G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion: Vol. I*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 359.

⁵⁰ William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), Act 3, Sc. 1: p. 1705.

cunning of reason”); and, of course, who can fail to note those world-historical figures that “must trample many an innocent flower, crush[ing] to pieces many things in its path.”⁵¹

However, considered under the subtle moves of his thought, and by performing the due diligence of not reading a philosopher in isolation from his greater corpus, it is difficult to see how Hegel’s philosophy of history sanctions or justifies the instances of evil that Neiman, Arendt, and others are right to condemn. Neiman states that Hegel’s philosophy offers “consolation’s barest bones” (*EMT*, p. 90); however, it seems only fair to apply this somber appraisal to any philosophy that attempts a theodicy, which is how Neiman reads Hegel. On my reading, however, Hegel’s philosophy transcends theodicy and tries, rather, to perform a *theophany*, which, if we read him with care and patience, we will recognize as *the appearance of Spirit*, i.e. of our rational selves, the creators of world history, who continuously reflect on our thoughts and values which is expressed in our worldmaking.

On the surface, Hegel’s critics might be right to think that his philosophy presents cold comfort, but he never claimed that philosophy’s role is to provide consolation. The unconsoling aspect of philosophy is made explicit in Hegel’s grand narrative, which states that even though philosophy aims to reconcile actuality with the rational, consolation is merely something received in compensation for a misfortune which never ought to have happened in the first place, and it belongs to the world of finite things. Philosophy, therefore, is not really a means of consolation (*LPWH*, p. 67).

Instead of offering consolation, Hegel sees philosophy’s task as setting out to identify the actual and true, and not to mistake these terms with things that are merely extant and false.

Finally, Hegel’s philosophy does not condone the evils of poverty (*PR*, p. 150, §§244-45); it does not sanction the evils of slavery, arguing instead that human beings are not “natural objects” and for “man’s absolute unfitness for slavery” (*PR*, p. 48, §57 *Zusätze*); and it does not uphold evil hatreds like antisemitism (*PR*, p. 169, fn. to §270 Remarks). Given critics’ readings of Hegel’s philosophy, should

⁵¹ G.W.F. Hegel, *Reason in History*, trans. Robert S. Hartman (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1953), respectively, pp. 27, 43, 44.

not his alleged justification of evil and suffering “be made of sterner stuff.”⁵²

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⁵² “When that the poor have cried, Caesar hath wept. Ambition should be made of sterner stuff.” William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar* in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: Norton, 1997), Act 3, Sc. 2: p. 1566.