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Necessity and Contingency in Hegel's *Science of Logic*[1]

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I

In this essay I propose to examine Hegel's account of necessity and contingency in the *Science of Logic*. Anyone who dares to take Hegel's *Logic* seriously in public risks being accused by legions of formal logicians of "elementary logical fallacies" (and also has to be able to hear the thundering laughter of a Nietzsche without flinching). Nevertheless, John Burbidge, Dieter Henrich, and others have demonstrated that it is possible to discuss the *Logic* with clarity and intelligibility, and I shall endeavor to emulate their example as best as I can (and leave Nietzsche to his laughter). One should take heed, however; even Hegel admits (in § 147 of the 1830 *Encyclopedia*) that "the concept of necessity is very difficult," and rendering the concept of necessity intelligible will not eliminate that difficulty.[2] All I can hope to do, therefore, is take us from the point at which we are not even sure what the difficulty is supposed to be to the point at which the nature of the difficulty itself becomes clear.

Not much has been written about Hegel's concept of necessity, but there are one or two important articles that need to be mentioned. The best known of these is Dieter Henrich's groundbreaking essay, "Hegels Theorie über den Zufall," pp. 157-186 of his *Hegel im Kontext* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1971), in which he argued for the necessity of contingency in Hegel's system. I should also like to draw attention to two related articles, one by

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[1] A version of this essay was presented to the Society for Systematic Philosophy at the APA in Boston in December 1994 in response to a paper by Prof. J.N. Mohanty entitled "Hegel's Concepts of Necessity." I should like to thank Prof. Mohanty and the other participants in this session for their comments on my paper. (As of March 1995, Prof. Mohanty's paper has not yet been published.)

[2] All quotations from Hegel are from the *Theorie-Werkausgabe* edition of Hegel's *Werke*, ed. by Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1969-1970), hereafter cited as *'TWA'*. All translations are my own, with the exception of those from Hegel's *Wissenschaft der Logik*, which are from his *Science of Logic*, trans. by A.V. Miller, foreword by J.N. Findlay (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International, 1989), hereafter cited as *'SL'*. Here: *Enc.*, § 147; *TWA*, v. 8, p. 288.

George di Giovanni and one by John Burbidge, both of which I have found particularly helpful.[3] Much of what I have to say is indebted to the pioneering struggles of these three writers and will inevitably repeat points they have already made. However, I believe that there is still more to be said about Hegel's understanding of necessity and contingency — neither Henrich, nor di Giovanni, nor Burbidge pays much attention, for example, to Hegel's idea of absolute necessity — and I hope that this essay will open up some lines of thinking on this topic that have not been considered before.[4]

Necessity, for Hegel, is not an immediately evident feature of the world, but is what there turns out *in essence* to be. We do not begin with necessity, therefore, but rather *come* to the thought of necessity through considering what there *actually* is. Hegel's analysis of necessity thus begins not with necessity itself, but with actuality. However, the concept of actuality is itself a derived one in the *Logic*. In order to get a clear idea of what Hegel understands actuality to be, therefore, we need briefly to review one or two of the concepts that precede it.

The *Logic* as a whole is the progressive determination and clarification of what it is *to be*. It begins from the thought of being as simple immediacy or sheer being-there and seeks to understand what such immediacy is in truth. In the course of Hegel's analysis, we learn that being is not just immediate being-there (or *Dasein*) but is quality, quantity, and proportion. We learn, further, that such qualitative and quantitative immediacy is in fact always the process of *emerging* into existence (*Hervortreten in die Existenz*) (*SL*, p. 477; *TWA*, v. 6, p. 122). We also learn that such emerging existence is in truth the process of actualizing what it intrinsically is — the process of actuality or *Wirklichkeit*. In moving from the idea of immediate being to the idea of actuality in this way, we are not changing the object of our attention, but are discovering more and more about the nature of being itself. That is to say, we are discovering that, although being *is* immediacy and *is* there, it is not *just* that, but — in being what it is — is in fact the process of emerging and of actualizing what it is. Actuality is thus nothing other than being itself, understood as explicitly self-relating.

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[3] George di Giovanni, "The Category of Contingency in the Hegelian Logic," in *Art and Logic in Hegel's Philosophy*, ed. by Warren E. Steinkraus and Kenneth L. Schmitz (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1980), pp. 179-200; and John Burbidge, "The Necessity of Contingency," in *Art and Logic in Hegel's Philosophy*, pp. 201-217.

[4] Other works that I consulted in preparing this article include: Joël Biard, *et al.*, *Introduction à la lecture de "La science de la logique" de Hegel*, v. 2: *La doctrine de l'essence* (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1983); J.N. Findlay, *Hegel: A Re-examination* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1958); Joseph Flay, "Hegel and Merleau-Ponty: Radical Essentialism," in *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*, ed. by Galen A. Johnson and Michael B. Smith (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1990), pp. 142-157; Errol E. Harris, *An Interpretation of the Logic of Hegel* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1983); Paul Owen Johnson, *The Critique of Thought: A Re-examination of Hegel's "Science of Logic"* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1988); J.M.E. McTaggart, *A Commentary on Hegel's Logic* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1910); Georges Noël, "La logique de Hegel: La science de l'essence," *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 2 (1894), 644-675; Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1975); and Gerhard Martin Wölfle, *Die Wesenslogik in Hegels "Wissenschaft der Logik": Versuch einer Rekonstruktion und Kritik unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der philosophischen Tradition* (Stuttgart - Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1994).

The defining characteristic of being as actuality, for Hegel, is that it actualizes, or gives external existence to, what it is implicitly, intrinsically, or "in itself" (*an sich*). Since *actuality* is precisely what actualizes that which is implicit or "in itself," that which is "in itself" is not to be regarded as already actual prior to its actualization. It is thus not to be thought of as something real that is simply hidden to begin with and is then later brought forth into the light, but rather as that which only *becomes* real and actual in being *actualized.* Accordingly, the nature of actuality is that it actualizes that which is *not yet actual.* Yet the process of actualization is not simply one of creating something where there was nothing whatsoever before. It is the process of explicitly actualizing — of giving immediacy and externality to — that which is implicitly present already. Such unactualized being, which is nevertheless not just nothing whatsoever, is, of course, *possibility.*

Actuality, in Hegel's view, is thus always the actualizing of possibility; and possibility taken by itself is in its turn always actuality that is *not yet* actualized, and so is the possibility *of* actuality (cf. *SL*, pp. 542-543; *TWA*, v. 6, pp. 202-203). As Burbidge (p. 202) notes: "That the actual actualizes the possible, specifies its difference from the apparently synonymous terms, being, and existence." Now, even though actuality and possibility are inextricably entwined with one another, there is nevertheless a clear difference between them. After all, actuality as such is not *mere* possibility, and possibility taken by itself is not yet concrete actuality. Actuality, *as opposed to* the possibility it actualizes, is, for Hegel, simply external immediacy, existence, actually *being* there; whereas possibility as such, *as opposed to* the actuality which actualizes it, consists in simple self-identity *without* concrete existence. The mere possibility of A does not require the actual existence of A, therefore, but it does require that A at least be identical with itself and so not contradict itself. "In the sense of this formal possibility," Hegel says, "*everything is possible that is not self-contradictory ... A is possible* means only that *A is A*" (*SL*, p. 543; *TWA*, v. 6, p. 203).

To this extent, of course, Hegel agrees with, among others, Leibniz and Hume. Yet, Hegel is quick to point out that unactualized self-identity and non-contradictoriness is not all there is to possibility. The reason for this is easy to see: By itself, the mere possibility of A is not yet the actual presence of A. It is, as Hegel puts it, *only* the possibility of A (*nur Möglichkeit*) (*SL*, p. 544; *TWA*, v. 6, p. 205). But, precisely because possibility by itself does not in any way entail actuality, there is nothing in sheer possibility *as such* that guarantees that the possible will be actualized. The mere possibility that A might occur is thus — as mere *possibility* — just as much the possibility that A might *not* occur. In other words, the possibility of not-A is itself contained in the possibility of A. Indeed, this is precisely what sheer possibility, as opposed to actuality, means: the possibility that A might, *or might not*, occur. For, if there were no such possibility that A might not be actualized, A would not just be possible but rather *necessary.* "Because, therefore, it is only a possible content, *another* and its opposite is equally *possible.* A is A; equally -A is -A" (*SL*, p. 544; *TWA*, v. 6, p. 204).

But does this recognition that the possibility of A is always the co-possibility of A *or* not-A take us beyond the idea that possibility resides in sheer non-contradictoriness? Surely, the possibility of not-A rests just as

much on non-contradictoriness (namely, that of not-A) as does the possibility of A. For darkness to be possible, it must be just as conceivable and non-contradictory as light, and so on. This is true enough; but we have nevertheless made a small advance in our understanding of possibility. For we have come to recognize that possibility does not *just* consist in unactualized self-identity by itself, but in unactualized self-identity in conjunction with — or rather *dis*junction from — its negation. Furthermore, Hegel thinks that this very insight itself brings about a much more dramatic advance in our understanding of possibility, for it profoundly alters the relation between possibility and actuality which we have taken for granted so far. The reason for this is that, once possibility is understood to be the possibility of A *or* not-A, it has itself to be understood as *irreducible, actual* possibility. Possibility may well consist in something's not-yet-being-actualized, therefore, but such possibility is itself not merely something that *we* imagine or conceive: When it is understood properly, it is seen to be an *actual* feature of the world.

The fact that possibility is always actual possibility is something that is not evident from the initial conception of possibility as simple, unactualized self-identity. For the possibility that consists *simply* in A's being A is not definitive, irreducible possibility, but possibility that can be cancelled. This is due to the fact that any self-identical item which is possible when taken by itself, may *not* be possible when considered in conjunction with something else. For example, it may well be possible in itself for me to be the tallest person in the world; however, it is clearly not possible for me to be the tallest person, to the extent that there are, and always will be, others who are taller than I. So, although there is nothing intrinsically contradictory about my being the tallest person, that lack of contradiction does not by itself establish my being the tallest person as a *definitive* possibility, because that possibility can be removed. Indeed, the simple self-identity of A can never establish the definitive possibility of A, for Hegel, but can only constitute the *abstract* possibility of A — a possibility that may or may *not* be a possibility, depending on the circumstances.

However, once we recognize explicitly that possibility does not *just* lie in unactualized self-identity, but in the possibility of A *or* not-A, then we can see that possibility is indeed something definitive, irreducible, and actual. For, unlike the abstract possibility of A or B or C or any combination of these, the possibility of A *or* not-A *cannot* be removed or cancelled. There is *always* the possibility of A *or* not-A; it is not just a possible possibility, but an actual possibility — the possibility that there always is *in actuality*.

However, if possibility is indeed always actual possibility, then the clear distinction which we drew earlier between actuality and possibility disappears, for possibility is now recognized to be an irreducible element *of* actuality itself. It, too, is what there actually is. This in turn means that actuality itself has now to be understood in two ways. On the one hand, actuality is to be thought as suspending possibility as such by actualizing one possibility rather than its opposite (by being the actual presence of A rather than not-A); but, on the other hand, actuality has now also to be thought as embracing the actuality *of* possibility itself, the actual possibility of being or not being what it is. Insofar as actuality is itself thought as the actual possibility of being or not being, it is thought as *contingent* or *zufällig*. In the words of the

Encyclopedia, "we consider the contingent ... to be that which can be or also not be, that which can be thus or also otherwise" (*Enc.*, § 145, Addition; *TWA*, v. 8, p. 285). The result of the dialectic we have been following is thus that there is in fact no such thing as *sheer* possibility in the abstract, but that all possibility takes the form of contingency, of some actuality that can just as well not be as be. Possibility does not just exist in some ideal realm, in the mind of God, or in the minds of formal logicians, therefore, but exists here and now in the simple fact that certain things that *do* actually exist can just as easily *not* be what they are.

Note that possibility *must* take the form of contingency because of the very nature of possibility itself. Genuine possibility is always the possibility of A *or* not-A; such possibility is utterly *irreducible* and thus *actual*; therefore, possibility must form part of the very fabric of actuality itself and be present as actual possibility or contingency. Anything less than contingency is not obviously possibility at all. But, to the extent that possibility *must* take the form of contingency, it is apparent that not only contingency but also *necessity* arises from the ideas of actuality and possibility.

Many commentators, including Findlay, di Giovanni, Burbidge, and Henrich, have stressed that Hegel regards contingency as a necessary feature of the world. But it is not usually noted that the very idea of necessity first arises in Hegel's *Logic* in the context of contingency itself. For Hegel, indeed, necessity is initially nothing but the necessity *of* contingency. If we briefly review what it means to think of contingency as *necessary*, we will thus gain our first understanding of necessity itself.

Hegel claims that contingent events are *groundless* insofar as they simply occur and could just as well not occur. But, he claims that they also have a *ground* insofar as they are contingent *upon* one possibility or another being actualized. Since what makes an event contingent is, however, precisely the *contingent* fact that this possibility rather than that one is actualized, contingency is in fact "grounded" in nothing other than contingency itself and in that sense remains ultimately without ground. Yet, contingent events are grounded in possibility in another, more significant sense, in that the very presence of contingency as such is rooted in the fact that possibility cannot be anything other than actual possibility. This rootedness in the irreducible actuality of possibility is what makes contingency as such *necessary*. We might thus say that contingent events occur for purely contingent reasons, but also because there *must* be contingency in actuality. What should be noted here is that the *necessity* that grounds the very presence of contingency as such is not some independent power or force that overwhelms actuality and possibility from the outside or subjects them to its iron rule, but is simply the impossibility of *possibility* itself being anything other than *actual* possibility, the impossibility of possibility's being *mere* possibility. That is to say, necessity is generated by the self-*negation* or self-*Aufhebung* of possibility itself. This, I believe, is what Hegel is getting at in the closing paragraph of section A of the chapter on "Actuality" in the *Logic* when he says that "the possibility of the necessary is a sublated possibility" (*die Möglichkeit des Notwendigen ist eine aufgehobene*) (*SL*, p. 546; *TWA*, v. 6, p. 207).

Let me stress once again — for it is an important point — that Hegel is not pointing here to any independent force of necessity in the universe. He

is simply pointing out that possibility *cannot not* be actual and so *must* be present as actual possibility or contingency. Because necessity has its source in what *possibility* cannot but be, all that can be understood by necessity at this point is the necessity *of* contingency. Note that the only thing necessitated by such necessity is the presence of contingency *as such*. Such necessity is not thought to govern what specific possibilities or contingent contents are actualized, because that is — *necessarily* — a matter of contingency. Hegel thus agrees with the tradition that necessity lies in the foreclosing of possibility; but the twist he adds to this is that necessity lies in the foreclosing of the possibility that possibility itself might *not* be something actual.

For those who are still somewhat skeptical about Hegel's willingness to acknowledge a sphere of genuine contingency in the world, let me briefly draw attention to some other passages from his work which confirm this interpretation. For example, in the *Encyclopedia*, § 145, Addition, we read the following:

> Although, according to the discussion so far, contingency is only a one-sided moment of actuality and is therefore not to be confused with this latter itself, as a form of the Idea as such contingency still deserves to be accorded its right in the objective world. This holds first of all for nature, on the surface of which contingency, as it were, enjoys free rein — a freedom which should be acknowledged as such, without the pretention (sometimes erroneously ascribed to philosophy) of wanting to find something therein that can only be this way and not otherwise. (*TWA*, v. 8, p. 286)

In the chapter of the *Logic* on the "Concept," Hegel notes that it is not just single events in nature that are contingent, but also the species and genera that are to be encountered there:

> We can *wonder* at nature's manifold genera and species and the endless diversity of her formations, for *wonderment* is *unreasoning* and its object is the irrational. Nature, because it is the self-externality of the Concept, is free to indulge itself in this variety ... [and] the manifold natural genera or species must not be esteemed as anything more than the capricious fancies of spirit in its representations. (*SL*, pp. 607-608; *TWA*, v. 6, p. 282, translation slightly modified)

In § 250 of the *Encyclopedia* Hegel explicitly remarks that this "impotence of nature sets limits to philosophy (*setzt der Philosophie Grenzen*), and [that] the most inappropriate thing to do is to demand from the Concept that it comprehend such contingencies" (*TWA*, v. 9, p. 35). It is clear, then, that for Hegel there are many things in the world that are not explicable by philosophy because, from the perspective of absolute reason, they are ultimately contingent and without ground. (Hegel points out, for example, that in his day there were apparently over sixty species of parrot [*SL*, p. 682; *TWA*, v. 6, p. 375]). These things just *are* as they are, and there is no ultimate reason why; indeed, they could just as easily not be as be (cf. Henrich, p. 167).

In section B of the chapter on "Actuality," Hegel goes on to claim that any given contingency manifests the fact that it could just as easily not

be as be, by harboring within itself the possibility of something *else* arising, that is to say, by supplying the *conditions* that make it possible for something else to arise. Abstract possibility, we recall, lies in non-contradictoriness, whereas actual possibility lies in contingency, in being the actual possibility of being *or* not being. What becomes clear in section B is that, for Hegel, the actual possibility of being *or* not being always takes the form of the *real* possibility of something else, that the sheer contingency of something is expressed in the fact that it itself contains the possibility of its being replaced by another. Peace is merely contingent, therefore, to the extent that it itself contains the possibility of war, and dry weather is merely contingent to the extent that it itself contains the possibility of rain. Specific contingencies are thus in fact contingent in *two* senses: (a) they are not governed by any ultimate necessity but are rooted in the fact that things simply *are* this way rather than that; and (b) they themselves *are* the real possibility of their being negated into something else.

In Hegel's view, however, a given situation does not contain an infinite range of possibilities, but only the particular, determinate possibilities which are in fact inherent in it. But this means that given conditions can only ever give rise to what they in particular make possible; they can *only* lead to what in the circumstances is *really* possible. Furthermore, the contingent conditions of something do not just represent the real *possibility* of that thing, for when they are all present, they themselves bring about the very thing for which they provide the conditions. When the air pressure, temperature, and so on, are right, it is no longer just possible that it will rain; it *rains* — necessarily. Given conditions do not just *enable* something to occur, therefore, they *necessarily* give rise to whatever it is they make possible. As Hegel himself puts it, "what is really possible can no longer be otherwise; under the particular conditions and circumstances something else cannot follow. Real possibility and necessity are therefore only *seemingly* different" (*SL*, p. 549; *TWA*, v. 6, p. 211). Contingent things manifest their contingency by harboring the possibility of being replaced by other things; but they do not just harbor that *possibility*, for they themselves *necessarily* give rise to whatever takes their place.

Once again, then, Hegel argues that possibility produces necessity by *not* just being simple possibility — only, in this case, what is shown to be necessary is not just the presence of contingency as such, but some specific occurrence that must arise under these or those circumstances. Yet, the insight we gain at the end of section B does not merely offer a variant of an earlier theme, but actually seems to *contradict* Hegel's earlier assertion that there is genuine contingency in the world. For, since all contingent circumstances and conditions are themselves rooted in prior conditions and give rise to subsequent conditions, it is clear that the whole course of contingency itself must be necessary. But, if the whole course of contingency is necessary, then there can be no real *contingency* in the world at all, since things could not be otherwise than they are.

Here, surely, we reach the real Hegel. He may claim that there is genuine contingency in the world, and may even want to believe that there is; but, when one examines more closely what Hegel actually means by contingency, it becomes evident that, for him, whatever happens in nature or in

history is in fact under the governing thumb of real *necessity*.

What such a reading overlooks, however, is that the course of real necessity is itself *contingent* upon what there actually and contingently is. That is to say, specific "necessary occurrences" are contingent upon their antecedent conditions, and the whole course of real necessity is itself contingent upon what there actually is or happens to be as a whole. Indeed, the whole course of real necessity *is* simply what there actually and contingently is. Real necessity is thus not some independent power or force governing or determining what there is; it is simply reality itself *being* what it actually is and *occurring* as it actually occurs. As Nietzsche has put it, "occurring and necessarily occurring is a *tautology*."[5]

This, I believe, is what Hegel is getting at in the opening paragraphs of section C of the chapter on "Actuality" — paragraphs which McTaggart (p. 167) could only describe as "extremely obscure." In the second paragraph of section C, Hegel refers to the whole course of real necessity as the "actuality which can no longer be otherwise," as *absolute* actuality (*SL*, p. 550; *TWA*, v. 6, p. 213). But, in the third paragraph, he then refers to such actuality as contingency and absolute possibility, as "the possibility of being determined equally as possibility or as actuality" (*SL*, p. 551; *TWA*, v. 6, p. 213). This obviously makes no sense at all if real necessity is understood to *govern* and *determine* actuality altogether, for in that case there would be no such thing as simple contingent happening. However, if real necessity is understood simply to be actuality itself being what it actually and absolutely is, then Hegel's move from the second to the third paragraph makes perfect sense. For it means that what we regard as real *necessity* in the world is in fact identical with contingency in its two senses; that is to say, real necessity is nothing but the working out of what there *happens* to be and of what is actually and really *possible*. As long as we remain within the realm of nature, it makes little difference whether we talk of actuality and possibility or of real necessity, since what occurs is what occurs either way. But when we consider whether there is a place for human freedom and intervention in nature, we can see that it makes a considerable difference how the world is understood. For, if the whole course of the world were under the thumb of ineluctable necessity, then human freedom would be impotent, indeed illusory. However, if the course of the world is simply the working out of what is actually possible, then human freedom itself can be a genuine possibility, because no overriding necessity will be present to predetermine how events will unfold. Human freedom will always have to take account of real conditions, but it will be able to *alter* the course of the world precisely to the extent that it is *actually possible* for it to do so. That will be decided in actual practice, *not* by any *a priori* necessity. Hegel's belief that human beings can indeed intervene in, and change the course of, the world is evident from the Addition to § 127 of the *Philosophy of Right*, where he asserts plainly and simply that "the future is not absolute and remains given over to contingency" (*die Zukunft is nicht absolut und bleibt der Zufälligkeit anheimgestellt*) (*TWA*, v. 7, p. 241).

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[5] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Werke*, ed. by Karl Schlechta (München: Hanser, 1954-1956), v. 3, p. 586 (*Die Wille zur Macht*, § 639).

Hegel is sometimes accused of being a determinist who allows for no contingency and no future; but it is clear from his account of real necessity in the *Logic* that he is in fact simply a *realist* who thinks that the world takes the contingent course it takes until human beings intervene and tease out new possibilities from the conditions they encounter — possibilities which are actually contained in those conditions, but which would not be actualized without human intervention.

II

What I have tried to suggest in this essay is that there is no *independent* power of necessity in Hegel's universe which determines all that occurs. On the contrary, Hegel insists on the necessity of contingency which is rooted in the nature of possibility and which requires that certain features of the world just *are* the way they are because they happen to be that way. He also thinks that the real necessity which we encounter in nature is nothing other than the working out of all the real (*not* just logical) possibilities contained in what there actually happens to be.

Yet, these are not the only forms of necessity that Hegel recognizes; he also insists that there is such a thing as *absolute* necessity. Such necessity no more predetermines everything that occurs in the world, for Hegel, than do formal and real necessity. Nevertheless, absolute necessity is the first form of necessity Hegel discusses to determine *out of itself* specific aspects of what occurs in the world, because it is the first form of necessity to give rise to a distinctive *content* of its own.

Hegel says of absolute necessity that "it is as much simple immediacy or *pure being* as simple reflection-into-self or *pure essence*" (*SL*, p. 552; *TWA*, v. 6, p. 215). What he means by this is that absolute necessity simply is what it is, and is such *through itself* alone. Vacuous though this may sound, it is in fact the only way that absolute necessity can be thought. For, if necessity is to be *absolute*, then it clearly cannot be grounded in anything other than itself but must be its own ground. But, if absolute necessity is indeed to be its own ground, then the only thing that can make it necessary is the fact that it simply *is* necessary in itself. Necessity is absolute, therefore, not when it follows from certain prior given conditions in the manner of real necessity, but when it follows from the simple fact that it is necessary *schlechthin*. As Hegel himself puts it, absolute necessity "*is ... because it is*" and so combines immediacy and self-mediation into one (*SL*, p. 552; *TWA*, v. 6, p. 215).

One should note, however, that there is a subtle ambiguity in what Hegel is saying here. For he is not only claiming that absolute necessity is necessary because it *is* necessary; he is claiming that it is necessary because it is nothing but *being* that is *because* it is. That is to say, Hegel does not regard absolute necessity as something other than being; he understands it to be identical with being, to be being that is what it is through itself alone.

But what exactly does it mean for being to be through itself alone and so to be absolute necessity? The first thing it means is that the form of being itself is *irreducible*, is what there cannot not be. This irreducibility of being

was implied by the dialectic of being-nothing-becoming at the very beginning of the *Logic*. For there Hegel argued that, even if there were nothing, there would be still be being, since nothingness would still *be* what there is. At that point, however, Hegel merely *showed* being to be irreducible by discovering it in the very idea of nothingness, but he did not define being *as* irreducible or necessary because the concepts of ground, mediation, impossibility, and so on, were not available for him to do so. Now that those concepts are available to him, however, he can think being explicitly as necessary and self-grounding. To say that being is absolute necessity is thus to say that there must be *being* as such and all that being involves; and it is to say that there must be being because it is the very nature of being *to be*. *Pace* Burbidge, therefore, I do not think Hegel believes that "it is completely contingent that there be anything at all" (p. 211), but only that certain features of being are contingent.

But, to say that being is absolute necessity is to say not only *that* it is through itself, but also that it is *what* it is through itself. In other words, it is to say that what being is — the "content" that being has — follows of necessity from the very nature, or being, or "form," of being itself. What follows from the very nature of being is itself twofold, in Hegel's view, reflecting the two sides of being as absolute necessity itself: It encompasses the sheer *contingency* of being's simply *being* the way it is, and the absolute necessity of being's being a certain way *because of* the nature of being. What being is necessarily or through itself, therefore, is *both* contingency *and* what is absolutely necessary. Or, to put it another way, there is a side to what occurs that just is that way, and there is a side to what occurs that *must* occur. What is it, then, that must occur?

The answer Hegel gives is blindingly simple: What must occur is what follows from the fact that there are and must be finite, contingent beings in the world at all, namely that at some point those finite, contingent beings must *cease* to be. What is absolutely necessary in this world of contingency, therefore, is negation, destruction, and death. Insofar as things are held to stand alone and simply *be* what they are, Hegel says that the necessity of their destruction appears to come upon them from the outside in the form of *fate*:

> This negative breaks forth in them because being, through this its essence, is self-contradiction, and indeed [the negative breaks forth] against this being in the form of being, therefore as the *negation* of those actualities, which is *absolutely different* from their being, as their *nothing*, as an equally *free otherness* over against them than is their being. (*SL*, p. 553; *TWA*, v. 6, p. 216, translation slightly modified)

Necessity is, of course, often represented in this way, especially in tragedy. However, the truth of such destructive necessity, for Hegel, is that it is not ultimately other than beings themselves, but is *immanent* in them, indeed is immanent in what makes them determinate, finite beings or things in the first place. For what makes things determinate, for Hegel, is determinacy, negation, and limit, and it is precisely because they are limited finite things that they *must* at some point meet their end. As Hegel puts it, in an earlier sec-

tion of the *Logic*: "Finite things *are* ... but the truth of this being is their *end*. The finite not only alters, like something in general, but it *ceases to be*: ... the hour of their birth is the hour of their death" (*SL*, p. 129; *TWA*, v. 5, pp. 139-140). Negation, determinacy, and limit thus constitute what Hegel calls "the mark impressed upon [things] by necessity ... when it lets them go free as absolutely actual." Hegel adds, "to this mark necessity appeals as witness to its claim, and, smitten by it, actualities perish." The destruction of things in the world is thus not simply the result of some external fate, but is nothing other than the "manifestation of that which *determinateness* is in truth — negative self-relation" (*SL*, p. 553; *TWA*, v. 6, pp. 216-217). That is to say, things do not simply perish because they are destroyed by other things, but because ceasing to be follows — with absolute necessity — from the very nature of finite, contingent thinghood itself. (It should be noted here, by the way, that although Hegel is in many ways close to Spinoza, this is one respect in which the two philosophers clearly differ, for Spinoza denies that finite things are destined to perish through what they are in themselves: "The definition of anything affirms, and does not deny, the thing's essence. ... So while we attend only to the thing itself, and not to external causes, we shall not be able to find anything in it which can destroy it."[6])

What needs to be emphasized about Hegel's concept of absolute necessity is that the course laid down by such necessity converges completely with the course followed by the contingent things of the world — *whatever* that may turn out to be. This is because absolute necessity determines nothing other than the unavoidable fate *of* all contingent things, namely that they will end. The paths laid down by absolute necessity and contingency thus do not constitute two distinct sets of events in the world, but rather form *one* course of events which, in one respect, is wholly contingent and dependent on what there actually is and, in another respect, is structured by the absolute necessity of negation. Absolute necessity and contingency do not stand in *relation* to one another, therefore, nor does one underlie the other; rather, they are one and the same process: "... contingency is absolute necessity" (*SL*, p. 553; *TWA*, v. 6, p. 217). Taylor (pp. 284-285) provides an excellent example of what Hegel means:

> My car is smashed because of my driving over the icy road. This is indeed a contingent event. It could have been other, were it not for certain differential factors (e.g. my deciding to go out on this day). But this contingency is evident because I single out the entity concerned as "a car," or even more particularly as "my car." If I consider it as a finite thing, then I see that it *must* go under, although the day and manner of its passing is contingent. ... The car as a finite thing must break up some day. But on the superficial or detailed level the content does not exhibit the form. Hence there is contingency: that this accident comes today.

In the contingent course of events itself, therefore, there unfolds the necessary fate of things which is determined simply by what it is *to be*.

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[6] Cf. Benedictus de Spinoza, *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works*, ed. and trans. by Edwin Curley (Princeton: P.U.P., 1994), p. 159 (*Ethics*, III, prop. 4, dem.).

III

There are two important lessons to be learned from Hegel's analysis of absolute necessity. The first is that the being and ceasing to be of finite, contingent things is as absolutely *necessary* for Hegel as it is for Nietzsche. It must and does occur, *whatever* there is in the world, because it is what being *minimally* has to be. Indeed, coming-to-be and ceasing-to-be constitute, as Hegel puts it, the very *substance* of things, "the being in *all* being" (*SL*, p. 555; *TWA*, v. 6, p. 219). However, Hegel's analysis tells us secondly, that, if being is only thought of as the realm of what is *necessary*, then it is *only* thought of as such being and ceasing to be. In other words, the idea of necessity taken by itself *reduces* being to the "simple immediacy that is absolute negativity" (*SL*, p. 552; *TWA*, v. 6, p. 215). For at the heart of the thought of absolute *necessity* is the thought of that which absolutely constrains and negates what is.

This needs to be particularly borne in mind when interpreting Hegel's philosophy of history, for if (as some claim) Hegel regards history as the realm of utter *necessity*, then, by his own criterion, there is nothing that history can be *except* "the slaughter-bench on which the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of states and the virtue of individuals have been sacrificed" (*TWA*, v. 12, p. 35). A history that is simply the work of necessity, therefore, cannot be a history of freedom but only of death and destruction. On the other hand, a history of freedom that amounts to something more than a trail of death and destruction cannot just be the work of sheer necessity.

Hegel complicates matters, however, by stating quite clearly in his lectures on the philosophy of history that "world history is the progress in the consciousness of freedom — a progress which we have to understand in its necessity" (*TWA*, v. 12, p. 32). Is this simply a contradiction, or is there a way in which freedom and necessity can be reconciled with one another? There is, if we open our eyes to something to which the concept of absolute necessity itself blinds us, namely, that necessity is not just to be encountered in the form of sheer, blind *necessity*, but is also to be found *within* freedom and self-determination itself. The necessity that is inherent in freedom is not just the formal necessity of contingency, nor just the real necessity that follows from given conditions; nor is it sheer, absolute necessity that just *is* because it is. It is a fourth form of necessity that is *internal* to freedom itself — the necessity that there is because human beings have the *real* capacity for free self-determination. It is this internal necessity, rather than absolute necessity as such, that Hegel understands to be operative in giving structure to human history. It is also such internal necessity which is operative in Hegel's philosophy itself. I thus agree completely with Mohanty (p. 14 of his unpublished manuscript) that "the only category available for understanding the totality of the system is 'Freedom' — the idea of a free self-development of the *Begriff*." However, I disagree that it is misleading to think of this process as one of necessity. It is simply not one of *sheer* necessity; but it is nevertheless one of necessity, because freely self-determining thought itself yields a definite series of categories that arise immanently from one another and cannot be ordered in any which way, and, as Hegel himself states, "what is necessary [is what] *cannot be otherwise*" (*SL*, p. 549; *TWA*, v. 6, p. 211).

That freely self-determining thought does involve its own internal necessity can only be proven, however, by examining the actual course, say, of the *Logic* and determining whether the individual categories do indeed follow directly from one another.

Even though the necessity that is internal to freedom is not *sheer, blind* necessity, it is nevertheless bound up with contingency, most especially in the realm of history. Hegel thus insists that what is necessary in history unfolds *in* the process of historical contingency itself and is in no way independent of that process. What Hegel seeks to understand in his philosophy of history, therefore, is not the essence behind appearances, but the single course of events in which human beings do what they contingently do and *thereby* become what they inwardly have to become by virtue of their freedom. As Mohanty (p. 15) notes, "history is full of contingent truths ... but it is in and through these contingencies that a higher purpose — i.e., consciousness of freedom — is being realized."

Human beings thus *necessarily* develop a consciousness of their freedom because it is in their very nature as free, self-determining beings to learn and become self-conscious; but that necessary development occurs in and through the *contingent* course of events in history, a course of events which includes such contingencies as the invention of the printing press and the birth of Martin Luther. Indeed, in the philosophy of religion Hegel even goes so far as to say that contingent events constitute the essential *condition* of such necessity (cf. *TWA*, v. 17, p. 29). That means that the necessity which is immanent in freedom and which is at work in history cannot be *all* powerful, but must remain exposed to contingencies that it does not control. The fact that human beings necessarily develop a consciousness of freedom through being the free beings they are thus cannot prevent an asteroid from crashing into the earth and eradicating human life. We should also remember that Hegel thinks that such eradication is not at all beyond the bounds of logical possibility; for, as he puts it in § 135 of the *Philosophy of Right*, "the idea that there is *no property* contains in itself just as little contradiction as the idea that this or that individual people, family, etc, does not exist or that *no human beings* whatsoever *are alive*" (*TWA*, v. 7, p. 253). (Of course, whether the eradication of human life is *really* possible remains yet to be seen.) Freedom may therefore develop to self-consciousness through its own internal necessity, but such self-consciousness is clearly not *utterly* and *absolutely* necessary like the being and ceasing to be of finite things, since it could fail to arise. One of the sobering, but overlooked lessons of Hegel's philosophy of history is indeed that, far from being absolutely necessary, self-conscious freedom in the state and civil society is itself ultimately subject to the *absolute necessity* of destruction.

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