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Our All-Too-Human Hegelian Agencyⁱ

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My title is meant to challenge a common pre-conception of Hegel, a pre-conception we might plausibly associate with a philosopher who designates his form of idealism as “absolute” and who claims that modern philosophy (at least his version of it) has arrived at the standpoint of “absolute knowledge.” In the area of practical philosophy, the pre-conception is that Hegel’s claims are similarly immodest, and that he awards human nature the capacities of unlimited freedom and perfect self-awareness.

In this paper, I offer some reasons for why we should not take this view of Hegel seriously. Very generally, I am interested in the role he allows contingency to play in his system. My aim in these pages is to make a few suggestions about the implications of his views about contingency for his account of human agency.

I begin by taking a look at a piece of the story of human freedom Hegel lays out in the *Philosophy of Right*. The *Philosophy of Right* outlines the progression of human history from ‘lower’ to ‘higher’ forms of freedom, and from ‘less’ to ‘more adequate’ forms of agency. I will be drawing attention to Hegel’s characterization of the *mechanics* of the development, that is, the underlying causal forces that are supposed to move the process along. I want to consider questions such as: What conditions does Hegel identify as necessary for securing the transitions from ‘lower’ to ‘higher’ forms? What insures the emergence of ‘higher’ from ‘lower’ forms of agency, on his account?ⁱⁱ

The focus of my discussion will be the transition that occurs between the first and second chapters of the *Philosophy of Right*, the transition from Abstract Right to Morality. For Hegel, this transition represents an important piece of philosophical progress in the history of modern political theory. Very roughly, it is the transition from Locke and Hobbes to Rousseau and Kant.

Nothing significant turns on my decision to single out this particular transition over one of the other transitions Hegel lays out in the *Philosophy of Right*. Again, my concern is to highlight features of the *general causal story* he tells of the progressive development of right. I have chosen the transition from Abstract Right to Morality as one example of this development, but my purpose could just as well be served by reviewing some other transition in the text.

I will be asking these questions: What is the causal story Hegel tells to explain the transition from Abstract Right to Morality? What role does he award contingency in moving the process along? What can we learn from the role Hegel assigns contingency about the respect in which our agency, in his view, is all-too-human?

I

In Abstract Right, the first chapter of the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel portrays human freedom in a primitive or natural condition, before anything like a modern state is in place. He aims in this chapter to call our attention to essential elements of modern western state of nature narratives, and to remind us of arguments deployed by philosophers such as Locke and Hobbes for the rationality of trading the state of nature condition for that of the modern state.

We can divide the causal factors responsible for the transition from Abstract Right to Morality into two main classes. First, some of the causal factors are *situational*. As just noted, Abstract Right describes a state of nature. Particular wills in this natural condition are initially unaware that they would be better off, individually as well as collectively, leaving this natural condition behind and allowing themselves to be governed by a certain kind of state. They believe that the best situation for them is one in which, as private individuals, they exercise the powers to judge, make and execute law.

It is Hegel's view that once we have made the details of these situational factors explicit, we will have at least *part* of the explanation for the transition to the higher level of Morality. But he highlights a second set of causal factors as well, factors we can classify as *psychological*.ⁱⁱⁱ These psychological factors include both the particular will's self-understanding and its motivational set. The particular will in the state of nature has a specific conception of its unique nature. It considers itself to be more than a mere animal or mere natural creature, and as therefore driven by more than the desire to satisfy its basic physical needs. On Hegel's representation, the particular will in the state of nature is indeed unlike other animals in that it is endowed with the capacity for thought. In addition, it possesses a *will* precisely because of its ability to do what other animals cannot do: to *act* on its thoughts. In possessing a will, the particular individual in the state of nature is in Hegel's terminology a "person" and not a mere "thing [*Sache*]" (PR §§34, 35).^{iv} As a person, it not only puts its will into things, it considers itself *entitled* to put its will into things. That is, it considers itself entitled to claim things as its own. In short, the particular will or "person" thinks of itself as a bearer of right (PR §§35-7). Hegel thus identifies the "person" as the "basis" of "abstract . . . right" (PR §36).

Hegel wishes us to appreciate that a particular will's status as a "person" is not derived from the desires and capacities that *distinguish* it from other particular wills. A particular will is a bearer of right only because of its nature *qua person*. Strictly speaking, the particular will, *qua person*, has no particularity. This is why Hegel writes that particularity is "not yet contained" in "abstract personality" (PR §37). It is why he describes Abstract Right as a system of right that "remains indifferent to particularity" (PR §49A).

Since Hegel is interested in retracing the steps of intellectual history that explain as well as justify the origin of the modern state, he highlights factors associated with Abstract Right that generate conflict and therefore account for the transition to the 'higher' stage of right that he calls Morality. As a person, a particular will is entitled to rights and shares this entitlement with other persons. But a particular will in the state of nature is not *just* a person. It is motivated above all by a concern to satisfy its own interests. At this stage, the particular will does not care about the fact that rights are something to which all persons, *qua persons*, are entitled. Insofar as what motivates it is its particularity, this will has a reason to violate right when it serves its interests to do so.

Furthermore, since effective and impartial laws and effective means of enforcement do not exist in the state of nature, particular wills in that state cannot settle disputes by relying on those resources. They must resolve conflict privately and by any means available. Following Hobbes, Hegel describes the state of nature condition as a state ravaged by insecurity and violence. Although each particular will seeks to realize its freedom, it finds itself in a situation "governed entirely by force," a situation of *unfreedom* (PR §93, 194).^v

Part of what makes the state of nature insecure is the fact that particular wills in this condition don't just possess the *capacity* for freedom but desire also to *express* their freedom. Each person in other words seeks to give its will an existence and thereby *exercise* its right (PR §57).^{vi} Each will exercises its right by putting its will into things, by designating things as its own (PR §46). Each designates things as its own with the help of various means of expression or externalization – from primitive forms such as physical seizure, to more subtle modes of signifying ownership such as making contracts.

If we wonder why self-expression is *necessary* for the particular will, we get our answer by specifying the situational details more completely. It is significant, first of all, that the wills Hegel describes in the natural condition do not enjoy perfect solitude. Did they enjoy such solitude, they would not only have no need to assert their right to things, they would most likely not even be *aware* of themselves as bearers of right. Also significant is the fact that the state of nature is no paradise. It is a state in which particular wills experience some form of physical and psychological scarcity. Were this not the case, these wills would presumably likewise experience no need to assert their right to things. Finally, were particular wills in the state of nature so constituted that their overriding concern was the welfare of others, it is doubtful that they would possess the idea of property -- of 'mine versus thine' -- at all.

On Hegel's description, however, the state of nature situation is one in which self-interested wills must contend with each other as well as with conditions of scarcity. The "persons" of Abstract Right are motivated by a concern for their own well-being over the welfare of others, and each person seeks above all to insure that its own natural right to

property is respected. The particular will's need for self-expression in the state of nature is thus parasitic on at least these factors.

Hegel portrays the general conflict generated in the context of Abstract Right as a conflict between the will as "person" and the interests of its particularity. As a person, a particular will is entitled to rights and shares this entitlement with other persons. But as also having particularity, a particular will seeks to satisfy its unique interests. As Hegel puts it, the particular will at this stage does not "will the universal as such" (PR §103); it does not care about right "as right" (PR § 99).^{vii} The particular will of Abstract Right is in other words not yet moved by the idea that *all* persons have rights and are entitled to have those rights respected.^{viii}

Taken together, these motivational and situational factors propel the dialectical movement forward. For modern western political thought, as Hegel portrays it, they provide key premises of the argument justifying the modern state. In the final chapter of *Philosophy of Right*, Ethical Life, Hegel joins Hobbes, Rousseau and Kant in defending the thesis that the modern state is a necessary remedy for the state of nature condition.

Since my focus in this essay is Hegel's description of the transition between Abstract Right and Morality rather than his discussion of the transition to Ethical Life, I am not going to comment on his treatment of the role the ethical state plays in resolving the conflicts of Abstract Right. In the transition with which we are concerned here, Hegel is interested in another piece of the solution to the deficiencies of Abstract Right. He outlines the way in which Rousseau and Kant address what I will call the *motivation* problem.

There is a motivation problem, at the stage of Abstract Right, for reasons we just reviewed. At this stage, the particular will does not yet *identify* with its own nature as a universal will or person. The particular will seeks to have *its* rights respected, but this is only because it wishes to satisfy its particular ends. It doesn't at this stage recognize that its universal aspect -- its identity as a person -- is the *essential* aspect of its will.^{ix} The particular will is therefore unmoved by the implications of this essential aspect of its will. It has no interest in the fact that personhood is a feature it shares with other wills; nor does it acknowledge that other particular wills have the same rights that it does. The particular will of Abstract Right experiences right as "external," that is, as not necessarily compatible with its particular interests, and therefore as not necessarily worthy of its respect.

Hegel suggests that we are indebted to both Rousseau and Kant for the insight that this motivation problem can be solved if we think of right in a new way. What secures the transition to Morality is a new self-awareness on the part of the particular will. The transition is secured by the will's recognition that right is an expression of and derives from an essential part of itself. The particular will that has been enlightened by this new self-awareness comes to appreciate that it is not just a *bearer* of right but is also the *author* of right. In Hegel's terminology, the particular will of Morality thinks of itself as no longer a mere "person" but as also a "subject."

The standpoint of Morality derives the following lesson, then, from the conflict generated by Abstract Right: The particular will of Abstract Right experiences right as "external" or "coercive," and therefore lacks the motivation to care about right.^x It is only able to care about right if it finds itself somehow reflected in right. Unless it can

find its own interests reflected in right, the particular will experiences right as issuing only prohibitions -- as merely limiting versus also enabling its freedom.^{xi}

II

Clearly, Hegel takes conflict to play an essential role in making possible the transition from Abstract Right to Morality. He is clearly also convinced that, rather than produced out of thin air, conflict arises in response to the situational and psychological factors we just outlined. These factors are internal to the system of Abstract Right; for this reason, Hegel tells us that the conflict is itself *internally* generated.^{xii}

As we saw, the transition to Morality is Hegel's representation of part of the solution modern western political theory has provided to the violence and insecurity of Abstract Right. With this transition come at least three major changes. First, there is a change in the will's self-understanding. It no longer thinks of itself as just a particular will driven to realize its particular interests and entitled to right because of its special status as a person. The particular will of Morality now appreciates that its essence is defined by its status as a person. It grants, in addition, that other wills are persons as well and are thus entitled to precisely the same rights.

Second, there is a change in the particular will's motivational set. Precisely as a consequence of its new self-understanding (its recognition that right derives from the essential aspect of its nature), the particular will or "subject" of Morality is now willing to submit to the governance of its essential nature. It is motivated to will the universal.

Third, the "subject" of Morality is now aware that it can express its freedom, not just *externally* but also *internally*. That is, it knows not only that it can put its will into

things and claim mastery over those things; it can also express its freedom internally by making and giving itself law. By means of the law that it makes and gives itself, it can determine the practical fitness of its acts and intentions. The subject of Morality now recognizes its freedom as having in this respect an inner as well as outer existence.^{xiii}

Returning to our central concern: How does any of this story about the transition from Abstract Right to Morality support the thesis that Hegelian agency is all-too-human? I have been drawing attention to key *causal factors* that Hegel takes to be responsible for the transition. On the basis of this causal story, we can conclude that he considers human agency all-too-human at least in the following respect: As he portrays the system of Abstract Right, the particular will must confront certain situational and psychological givens. It must contend with its own natural tendency to look after its own welfare over that of others; it must contend as well with other particular wills which are similarly motivated, with conditions of scarcity, and with a state of nature condition in which the roles of judge, lawgiver and executor have not yet been handed over to impartial and effective state powers. These factors and the conflicts they generate are not themselves products of choice; in this respect, they are factors external to the will.

Particular wills must nonetheless contend with them and cannot simply wish them away.

From these points, we can safely conclude that Hegel believes our freedom depends on external factors of this kind for its *awakening or activation*. It seems clear that he grants that our freedom is *to this extent* all-too-human. The conflicts of the system of Abstract Right are causally implicated in the will's response and therefore in the transition to Morality. The conflicts of Abstract Right, furthermore, have their own

causal history as well. They result from the fact that, in the state of nature, particular wills are forced to confront each other in conditions of scarcity and are largely indifferent to the welfare of others.

Far more difficult to determine, however, is whether Hegel is in addition convinced that our freedom is all-too-human in the following further respect: Is it his view that contingent or external factors play a role, not just in *triggering* the development or maturation of our freedom, but also in *generating its content*? That is, is Hegel also committed to the thesis that the idea of freedom itself -- and the norms or laws we associate with it -- depend for their very being on contingent factors? Is it his view that there *is* no contentful or non-empty idea of freedom prior to the interactions of thinking beings with situational and psychological givens, and that there is therefore no innate or a priori normative compass that merely requires the presence of the right conditions to get activated or expressed? And if Hegel is indeed committed to the assumption that the idea of freedom gets generated in this way, is it also his view that new *motivations* come into being thanks to contingent factors as well? Does he hold, for example, that the particular conflicts associated with Abstract Right are responsible not for awakening in the “subject” of Morality an already-given but still dormant interest in willing the universal, but rather for actually producing or generating that interest?

These are questions about how deep Hegel’s appreciation for the role of contingency really goes. It is important that we appreciate that our discussion so far does not give us the resources to answer them. The reason it does not is that Hegel’s assumption that external factors have to be in place as conditions of the expression or development of human freedom, does not by itself commit him to the further assumption

that external factors *shape the nature of freedom itself*. He could consistently affirm the former assumption and deny the latter. His view could simply be that the nature of our freedom is set from the start and requires the right conditions for its actualization.

What evidence is there, then, that Hegel endorses the latter, more generous view of the role of contingency? Why should we think that he defends the thesis that the enlarged conception of freedom or agency that results from the conflicts generated in Abstract Right, comes to be only in response to a particular constellation of highly particular contingent factors, and *not* because of an original endowment by God or fate or pure reason? What basis is there for supposing that there is, for Hegel, no original, essential moral self waiting to realize itself, no particular pre-set conception of ourselves as free agents, no wholly innate or a priori moral law? Why should we assume that he holds that freedom or agency depends upon contingent factors not just for its *activation* but also for its *content*? Why should we think that he believes that our freedom is all-too-human in this further respect?

III

It might seem that there is plenty of evidence *against* this second interpretative suggestion, according to which Hegel takes freedom or agency to depend upon contingent factors for its *content*, that is, for the meaning as well as principles or laws we associate with it. After all, he frequently asserts that the progressions he lays out in the *Philosophy of Right* are “necessary.”^{xiv} In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, he complains about the merely “formalistic” conception of development that regards historical progress as a series of “external contingencies [*äußerliche Zufälligkeiten*]”

(IPH 59/HW 12:77). He insists that human freedom or “Spirit” “does not toss itself about in the external play of contingencies [*äußerlichen Spiel von Zufälligkeiten*] . . . [but] determines history absolutely against contingencies [*schlechthin fest gegen die Zufälligkeiten*]” (IPH 58/HW 12:75).

But what kind of necessity is Hegel really committed to? This is an important and difficult question, requiring far more extensive treatment than I am able to provide here. In this section, I gesture towards an answer by contrasting two interpretative proposals.

According to the first proposal, Hegel defends the bold thesis that the course of history is necessary in that it unfolds according to a plan that was set from the start. While he acknowledges that we may sometimes be tempted to identify certain events as merely accidental or contingent, his view is that in such cases, we fall prey to an illusion. We classify an event as accidental when we are ignorant of its cause. In fact, however, all causes are set in advance, and we are mistaken if we think that an alternative event or series of events could have occurred. Since everything that happens in history unfolds according to a pre-set blueprint or plan, there are no accidents or contingencies in history.

According to the second, and I believe, more defensible interpretation, Hegel’s remarks about the necessity of the historical progressions have no such fatalistic implications. The necessity of history, on his account, refers instead to the patterns and regularities historians or philosophers discover in their efforts to construct a coherent narrative out of the multifarious phenomena. In undertaking a science of history or a science of right, this is what we do. We seize upon perceived regularities in order to separate out the essential from the inessential. In telling our story, we focus on what we take to be essential, and we tell a causal story about how the essential moments are

connected. In telling the story of the history of right, for example, we discover in the age of Rousseau and Kant evidence of a genuine revolution in our understanding of ourselves and of our freedom. We seek an explanation for how this new self-understanding came to be. We assume that this revolution in the history of ideas did not arise out of nothing; we suppose that its emergence came to be in response to a particular set of problems. We offer a causal account of the conditions that led up to it – an account of the conflicts resulting both from human reason’s prior self-conception and from a variety of situational factors. We understand the new system of ideas to be *necessary*, because we believe we can explain its emergence with reference to conflicts and deficiencies internal to its predecessor system.^{xv}

Hegel holds that, as thinking creatures, we cannot *but* seek unity or coherence in the diversity of the given phenomena. Thinking just *is* the activity of sorting through the chaos and discovering patterns. Hegel’s view is not simply that there can be no history of right or of human consciousness without the effort to separate out the essential from the inessential. His view, instead, is that there can be *no acts of thinking* at all without this activity.

What we do in telling the story of human freedom, then, is weave together a narrative of the conditions that caused and therefore explain the various historical advances. We seek conditions that sufficiently explain the transitions from lower to higher forms. It is important to note that in doing so, however, we need not also commit ourselves to the assumption that the conditions we discover are the *only* ones that could possibly explain the occurrence of a particular event. We don’t in other words rule out the possibility that some other set of conditions could have produced the same results.

(Some other set of conditions, then, could have caused the transition from Abstract Right to Morality.) Our claim to have identified the conditions *sufficient* for event X, thus does not by itself commit us to the view that these conditions were also *necessary* for event X. Moreover, our search for sufficient conditions does not commit us to the further assumption that any particular event X *had to happen*. Our search for sufficient conditions is in other words fully compatible with the assumption that human history could have unfolded differently than it has.

This second interpretation of what Hegel has in mind by the necessity of history allows a role for contingency in at least the following four ways: First, it assumes that Hegel grants that the conditions he identifies as sufficient to explain a given event need not be the *only* conditions that could have produced that event; alternative causal pathways were really as well as logically possible. Second, this interpretation assumes that Hegel is open to the possibility that the actual events of history could not have occurred. Human history could have taken a different course. Although the conflicts of Abstract Right sufficiently explain the emergence of Morality, nature could have molded us differently. She could have fashioned us into absolute altruists. Or, she could have insured that we never encountered conditions of scarcity.

This interpretation of Hegel's thesis of necessity allows for a third kind of contingency. Within this interpretative framework, the historian identifies as "contingent" those events she deems insignificant for her overall narrative, events she takes to have little or no explanatory value. Hegel frequently uses the term "contingent [*zufällig*]" in this way. If what we are after is a "scientific" understanding of history, our task is to separate out the essential in human action from the inessential (IPH 68/HW

12:87f.). This by no means requires us to wholly ignore the richness and multiplicity of human activity, but our attention should be directed to what is “lawful” or “rational” in our subject matter.^{xvi}

Fourth and finally, this interpretation allows for contingency in designating some events or states of affairs as “external” or beyond the control of any agent. The situational and psychological givens Hegel associates with Abstract Right count as contingent in this respect. They are beyond our control and limit our freedom.

IV

What we have yet to determine is whether there are good reasons for attributing this second interpretation of necessity to Hegel. Is this really the interpretation that most faithfully captures his position? In this section, I highlight one consideration in its favor.

Our main question, at this point, is this: Why should we suppose that Hegel is *not* a proponent of the first and more extreme interpretation of necessity, according to which the course of history and the development of our freedom is settled from the start? Before we try to answer this question, it may be helpful to recall some implications of this extreme interpretation of necessity. The thesis, again, is that historical development is necessary because it is the carrying out of a program or blueprint, decreed from the start by God or nature or pure reason or fate. This extreme view leaves nothing to contingency or chance; at most, it acknowledges that events may *seem* contingent to us, especially when we are ignorant of their causes. Strictly speaking, however, nothing contingent or accidental happens in history. There is one pre-set developmental path and no possible alternatives.

Of course, if we attribute this view of necessity to Hegel, we are left with the considerable challenge of explaining how it can be compatible with his insistence upon the reality of human freedom. If it is really the case that history's course has been settled in advance by forces external to human agency, then it would appear that the prospects for saving human freedom in any meaningful sense look bleak. Perhaps this more extreme view of necessity *is* indeed incompatible with Hegel's theory of freedom. If so, this may give us reason to doubt that it is the conception of necessity he endorses.

As fruitful as it may be to defend Hegel against the charge that he endorses the extreme view of necessity in just this way (that is, by arguing that this version of the necessity thesis is at odds with his theory of freedom), I am going to pursue a different line of argument here. I will suggest that the extreme view of necessity conflicts with Hegel's *theory of knowledge*. As I understand it, the extreme view of necessity is committed to assumptions about the nature of human knowledge that Hegel does not endorse.

The extreme view of necessity I have been sketching carries with it pretensions of what we might call of transcendent insight. It claims not just that, "so far, the empirical evidence seems to suggest that history has unfolded in keeping with a certain plan or purpose, a plan or purpose that perhaps will continue into the future." Instead, it claims to know absolutely that history could not have unfolded in any other way and will continue to follow a progressive course. As I am portraying it, the extreme view draws its evidence about history's purpose or the workings of fate from reflection or insight. It is confident that its knowledge is necessary, because it assumes that human reflection or insight is capable of accessing a trans-historical or "God's eye" point of view.

It is here that I think we can see the problem of attributing the extreme view to Hegel. Hegel unambiguously and repeatedly insists that a “God’s eye” perspective is unavailable to us. One of his frequent refrains is that it is not possible for us, either in thinking or in knowing, to wholly detach ourselves from this world. This is the message, for example, of his often-quoted remark in the Preface to the *Philosophy of Right* that,

each individual is . . . *a child of his time*; thus philosophy, too, is *its own time comprehended in thoughts*. It is just as foolish to imagine that any philosophy can transcend its contemporary world as that an individual can overleap his own time.^{xvii}

Hegel conveys a similar message in the Introduction to his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* where he sketches his particular approach to the philosophy of history. He tells us there that the philosopher of history, on the one hand, “deals with history as a raw material, not to be left as it is, but to be construed according to thoughts . . . a priori” (IPH 10/HW 12:20). But although Hegel acknowledges in this remark that the philosopher of history construes the raw material “according to thoughts,” he at the same time clearly wishes to distance himself from those who practice what he calls “critical reflective” history. “Critical reflective” historians take themselves to be in the business of producing what Hegel refers to as “a priori fabrications [*apriorische Erdichtungen*]” in history (IPH 13/HW 12:22). They offer interpretative frameworks, but fail to appreciate the extent to which their interpretations reflect their own debt to history. They forget or ignore that “our thinking is subordinated to the given and to what exists” (IPH 10/HW 12:20).

This remark that our thinking is “subordinated to the given and to what exists” is revealing. It gives us a clue to Hegel’s understanding of his own methodological stance. In claiming that our thinking is “subordinated to the given,” Hegel arguably concedes that in his own narration of the progressive development of history, he, too, is a child of his time. He cannot escape history and therefore has to tell his story from where he is.^{xviii} Any hypothesis he advances about the general shape of historical progress – any claim he defends about what is and is not “necessary” in the course of events – must reflect his own limited historical perspective.

What I am suggesting, in short, is that Hegel’s methodological allegiances require him to grant the contingency as well as fallibility of his own causal narrative. He undeniably makes bold pronouncements about the necessary course and plan of history, and he repeatedly asserts that history’s plan can be known.^{xix} But we need to interpret Hegel’s bold claims through the lens of his theory of knowledge. Because Hegel denies that we can know or even think a world wholly beyond this world, he is committed to the view that the only kind of evidence we could have for our claims about the past and future shape of history is evidence that derives from our acquaintance with *this* world. And our thoughts about this world – about what is – have to reflect where we are; our philosophical consideration of history, as he says, is “subordinated to the given and to what exists.” In proclaiming that philosophy is “its own time comprehended in thoughts,” Hegel effectively grants the fallibility and revisability of his own assertions about the necessity of history. He at least implicitly acknowledges the fragility, even, of the self-knowledge underlying those claims.

My larger objective in this essay has been to identify the degree to which Hegel allows a role for contingency in his system. In particular, I have wanted to determine the extent to which he grants that our freedom as well as our self-knowledge as agents is all-too-human. With these objectives in mind, I have considered two interpretative proposals regarding what he could mean in claiming to discover necessity in history. I have outlined two proposals, but there may be others worthy of attention.

I hope to at least have given some reasons for doubting that Hegel is committed to what I have been calling the extreme view of necessity. Essentially, my suggestion has been that the extreme view claims to possess a kind of knowledge or insight Hegel doesn't believe is available to us. The problem is not so much the boldness of its assertions that we can know with necessity that the course of history is settled from the start and that history will continue its progressive course. After all, Hegel makes his own bold assertions about the course and purpose of history. The problem is connected with the fact, rather, that the bold claims of the extreme view are taken to rest on a special kind of knowledge, knowledge we can achieve thanks to our capacity to escape this world in thought. I have suggested that, for Hegel, this is knowledge no human thinker can have. His own claims to discover necessity in history and to know its progressive nature rest on a more mundane kind of evidence, the only kind of evidence he could have for them. They are justified by his thinking consideration of history, a form of thinking that, as he says, is "subordinated to the given and to what exists."^{xx}

But where does all of this leave us with respect to the main thesis of this essay, the thesis that agency, for Hegel, is "all-too-human"? At this point, we can say at least

this: If the foregoing effort is successful in casting doubt on Hegel's purported commitment to the extreme view of necessity, then there is hope for the suggestion that his appreciation for the role of contingency in history and in the formation of our agency runs deep.

Recall that the second interpretative proposal we considered a moment ago allows a role for contingency in at least four respects: (i) It allows for the real as well as logical possibility that the causal story the historian tells is contingent in that a different causal path could have produced the same event. (ii) It allows for the possibility that human history could have consisted of a different sequence of events. History's course did not have to be progressive, and its progressive course did not have to follow the path that it did. (iii) The second interpretation allows for contingency in the further sense that it recognizes that in the historian's search for patterns, she is likely to designate some events as contingent in the sense of inessential -- as making no significant contribution to her historical narrative. (iv) Finally, this interpretation allows for contingency in granting that much that happens in history is beyond the control of individual or collective human agency. These are the 'givens' with which we as agents must contend and to which we must react, givens that constrain our freedom.

I have not established beyond a doubt that Hegel takes history be contingent in any of these senses, but I have given a few reasons for not taking him to be committed to the extreme view of necessity. I have also suggested that if Hegel is not committed to this view of necessity, then the door is open for him to accept a role for contingency in at least some of these four senses. This includes allowing for the possibility that contingent factors don't just stimulate or awaken our capacity for freedom, but give our freedom a

content. And this would imply that we are indebted to contingent or external factors for the very shape our freedom comes to take. More precisely, we are indebted to contingencies that, in interaction with our capacity for thought, actually *generate* new ideas and laws of freedom.

Applying this interpretation to Hegel's philosophies of right and history, we would then be warranted in asserting that the psychological and situational factors that belong to Hegel's causal story of the dialectical progressions, shouldn't be understood as providing the conditions which stimulate into existence an already-given or pre-formed agency or freedom. The causal role of these factors shouldn't be understood in this way, because Hegel's view is that there *is* no already-given or pre-formed freedom awaiting activation. Instead, these psychological and situational contingencies are responsible for the very nature of our freedom; they contribute to the determination of the kind of agents we take ourselves to be.

On this line of interpretation, we have the contingencies of Abstract Right to thank, for example, for generating in us a new self-understanding. It's not that we were destined from the start to arrive at the conception of ourselves associated with the higher standpoint of Morality. Rather, the contingent features of Abstract Right and the conflicts they generate explain why, instead of thinking of ourselves merely as "persons" entitled by nature to the right to property, we now appreciate that we are also "subjects" capable of giving ourselves law and of respecting this "essential" aspect of ourselves. We have the contingencies of Abstract Right to thank, as well, for the origin of the new kinds of laws and rights that appear at the level of Morality. The "persons" of Abstract Right think of themselves as governed simply by laws of nature, and they understand

nature to command them to secure their own survival and well being above all else. In contrast, the “subjects” of Morality recognize an additional, ‘higher’ law. They understand that this higher law originates in their faculty of reason and requires the subordination of self-interest to the ends of rational agency as such. The “subjects” of Morality now recognize more than their own right to put their will into things; they accept in addition their obligation to honor the fact that *all* rational nature possesses this same right.

We have been focusing, here, on the transition from Abstract Right to Morality, but were we to expand our discussion to include the *further* dialectical progressions in Hegel’s story of human freedom, we would discover how those progressions, too, generate in us new understandings of the nature of our knowledge and of our freedom. At the highest level (the level Hegel indeed designates as that of “absolute knowledge”), we arrive at the awareness that philosophy is “its own time comprehended in thoughts.” That is, we arrive at the awareness that the only kind of knowledge we can have about who we are as agents and about the nature of our freedom is historical knowledge. This is knowledge that is both informed and generated by our particular place in history. At this highest stage, we recognize that our agency is tied to our special nature as thinking animals – thinking animals that seek to give their thoughts existence. But we appreciate that our thinking as well as our willing occurs only in historical time. As such, both activities are limited or conditioned by history. At the higher level, we appreciate that even our ideas, for example, of a “transcendental” subject and of “noumenal” freedom owe their origin to actual historical conflict.

The position I have been defending in this essay may seem implausible for the simple reason that I have been suggesting that Hegel – the philosopher who identifies his system as that of “absolute knowledge” – isn’t after all guilty of some of the totalizing, dogmatic claims often attributed to him. My proposal has been that he cannot be guilty of such claims, given the role he allows contingency to play in his system. If I am right, it is because Hegel’s hyperbolic pronouncements need to be interpreted through the lens of his methodological commitments. By this I mean: they need to be interpreted in light of his own characterization of the kind of knowledge that he, as a philosopher sensitive to the inescapability of history, is able to achieve.

ⁱ I presented an earlier version of this paper at the University of Tübingen in July of 2013 and owe thanks to Ulrich Schlosser and members of the audience for valuable feedback.

ⁱⁱ I have explored some of these questions in “On Becoming Ethical: The Emergence of Freedom in Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*,” in *The Freedom of Life: Hegelian Perspectives*, ed. Thomas Khurana (Berlin: Der Verlag der Buchhandlung Walter König, 2012), 209-227. Published in German as “Die Emergenz des sittlichen Charakters in Hegels *Philosophie des Rechts*,” *Akten des Hegel-Kongress Stuttgart 2011, Veröffentlichungen der Internationalen Hegel-Vereinigung*, Bd. 25, ed. Gunnar Hindrichs and Axel Honneth (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann Verlag 2013): 513-527.

ⁱⁱⁱ At the level of Morality, “the question of the self-determination and motive of the will and of its purpose now arises” (PR §106A). The “A” here indicates that this passage belongs to an “addition [*Zusatz*]” to Hegel’s text. The additions should in every case be treated with caution since they were compiled by editors of the various editions of the *Philosophy of Right* from notes students took from Hegel’s lectures.

^{iv} A “thing” “has no subjectivity” and hence no will or “soul” (PR §42A).

^v As Hegel writes in his Heidelberg *Encyclopedia* of 1817: “A natural condition is . . . a condition of violence and injustice, about which nothing truer may be said than that one ought to depart from it. Society is in contrast the only condition in which the law [*das Recht*] has reality; what is to be limited and sacrificed are precisely the arbitrariness and violence of the state of nature” (EPS ¶415). Hegel thus agrees with Hobbes: there *is* no right, effectively speaking, in the absence of law. In Hobbes’s words from *De Cive* I, ¶ 10n., “what any man does in the bare state of nature, is injurious to no man . . . ; for injustice against men presupposeth human laws, such as in the state of nature there are none.”

^{vi} “The free spirit consists precisely in not having its being as a mere concept or in itself,” but in “giving itself an existence” (PR §57). At PR §92, Hegel describes property as the “being [*Sein*]” of freedom.

^{vii} “In abstract right, I have the right and someone else has the corresponding duty” (PR §155).

^{viii} Hegel writes in the Morality section that what is required as a cure for the ills of the state of nature is “a justice freed from subjective interest and subjective shape and from the contingency of power . . . Primarily, this constitutes a requirement for a will which, as a particular will, also wills the universal as such” (PR §103).

^{ix} “[T]he relation of the good to the particular subject is that the good [in Morality] is the *essential* character of the subject’s will, which thus has an unqualified obligation in this connection” (PR §133).

^x Hegel describes the state of nature condition of Abstract Right as a “state governed entirely by force” (PR §93). Right is so far experienced as “external” versus as having an “internal determination” (deriving from the will of the subject) (PR §114A).

^{xi} Right “appears at first only as obligation, because the will is not yet present as a will which has freed itself from the immediacy of interest in such a way that, as a particular will, it has the universal will as its end” (PR § 86; see also § 29).

^{xii} It is Hegel’s view that *all* of the conflicts responsible for the transitions of the *Philosophy of Right* are internally generated. In his Introduction to that work, he

describes the development in his science as one of “*immanent* progression” (PR §31). In his *Philosophy of History*, he tells us that “Spirit’s” development is the product of a “hard, unending struggle against itself” (IPH 59/HW 12:76).

^{xiii} “In right, the will has its existence in something external, but the next stage is for the will to have this existence in itself, in something internal” (PR §104A). The “next stage” is that of Morality, which concerns itself with how actions can be “inwardly determined” by the will (PR §110A).

^{xiv} The *Philosophy of Right* is an exercise in “philosophical cognition” versus “positive” law, which merely describes which laws are accepted as valid at some particular time. A “philosophical” approach to right is chiefly concerned, instead, with the “necessity [*Notwendigkeit*]” of the concept of right. In demonstrating the “necessity” of the concept of right, the “philosophical” approach provides an account of the rationality of a particular conception of right at a particular time. It gives us a “proof and deduction” of the “route” by which a concept has “become a *result*” (PR § 2A).

^{xv} Who are the historians and philosophers constructing the historical narrative, for Hegel? What determines the validity of their interpretations? Although I cannot do justice to these difficult questions here, a few points are worth highlighting. Hegel is surely convinced that his own interpretation has validity, but he also insists upon the following: (i) The validity of any interpretation of history will depend in part on its success in faithfully capturing the facts. He insists that it is the job of the philosopher of history to “apprehend the historical faithfully” (IPH 14/HW 12:23.). He thus chastises those who are insufficiently concerned to establish a factual basis for their claims, those who indulge in “a priori fabrications [*apriorische Erdichtungen*]” in their treatment of history (IPH 13/HW 12:22). (ii) Valid historical narratives are not the achievements of individuals thinking in a vacuum. Just like great warriors or statesmen, the great historians or philosophers of history, for Hegel, are those through whom the “spirit of the times” is powerfully expressed. (I provide some justification for attributing this position to Hegel in the discussion to come.)

^{xvi} We can extract from these points an explanation for Hegel’s unsavory-sounding remarks, in his Introduction to the *Philosophy of History*, about the “insignificance” or ordinary individuals in world history. A philosophy of history is concerned with the universal, not with particulars. For that reason, it principally aims to describe the actions of the “great men” or “heroes” of history (IPH 32ff./HW 12:45ff.).

^{xvii} He makes a similar remark in his Introduction to the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*: “each individual is the child of his people, and likewise the child of his time . . . No one is left behind by his time, nor can he overstep it” (IPH 55/HW 12:72).

^{xviii} I say “arguably,” because it would take more argument than I am providing here to establish that I am interpreting Hegel correctly.

^{xix} For Hegel, history’s overall trajectory or “purpose” is not a mere “idea” of reason that, as such, refers to an object of thought or belief but not of knowledge. In this respect, he parts ways with those such as Anaxagoras, Leibniz, Schlegel and Kant, who claim that the purpose or plan of history cannot be known by the human mind. Hegel indeed states that an explicit aim of his own philosophy of history is to “recognize the ways of providence in history” (see e.g. IPW 16f./HW 12: 26f.).

^{xx} In the Introduction to his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Hegel identifies his own method as that of “philosophical history” (IPH 10/HW 12:19). Philosophical history is neither an uncritically empirical approach to history, which supposes itself able to simply report the facts unmediated by an interpretative framework or conceptual scheme. Nor is philosophical history, according to Hegel, identical with the “reflective” approach, which in his view places *too much* faith in our powers of creative or a priori reconstruction.