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## Reconciling Ourselves to the Contingency that is a Moment of Actuality

### Hegel on Freedom's Transformative Nature

#### *Abstract*

Hegel sometimes seems to suggest that there is no place for contingency in his philosophy of human action and history. He conveys this impression, for example, when he tells us that human freedom or “Spirit” does not “toss itself about in the external play of chance occurrences or contingencies.” A closer reading of his work, however, reveals that he holds that there is indeed much that is contingent in what happens to us. In this paper, I discuss passages in which his serious engagement with the implications of contingency is on display. In particular, I focus my attention on remarks from his *Encyclopaedia Logic* in which he critically evaluates two proposals for coping with – or reconciling ourselves to – the fact of contingency. My larger aim is to extract from this discussion clues to Hegel’s own coping strategy. I shed light on his prescription for reconciling ourselves to the fact of contingency.

Hegel sometimes seems to suggest that there is no place for contingency in his philosophy of human action and history. He conveys this impression, for example, in his frequent descriptions of world history as “rational” and “necessary”, and when he tells us that human freedom or “Spirit” does not “toss itself about in the external play of chance occurrences or contingencies [*äußerlichen Spiel von Zufälligkeiten*]”.<sup>1</sup> A closer reading of his work, however, reveals that he indeed holds that there is “much that is contingent [*viel Zufälliges*] in what happens to us”.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (PH). In this, as in most citations of Hegel’s works, I first give page numbers of English translation, then of Suhrkamp *Theorie-Werkausgabe* edition (W), in this case PH 58 / W XII 75. I omit Suhrkamp page numbers when it is possible to provide a section number. Note that elsewhere in the *Lectures*, Hegel writes that, “the world is not subject [*preisgegeben sei*] to chance and to external contingencies” (PH 15 / W XII 25).

<sup>2</sup> *Encyclopaedia Logic* (EL) § 147 Z. There is much controversy over the authenticity of the Additions (*Zusätze*) included in the EL in light of the fact that they are compiled from notes taken by students present at his lectures. A fuller version of what I seek to accomplish in this paper

In this paper, I discuss passages in which Hegel's engagement with the implications of contingency is much on display. Hegel describes contingency in these texts as essentially connected to the human condition, as something we must contend with and cannot wholly escape. I focus my attention, in particular, on a passage from the *Encyclopaedia Logic* (EL) in which Hegel critically evaluates two general proposals for coping with contingency. My larger aim is to extract from this discussion clues to his own coping strategy. I want to shed light on his recommendations for how we are to reconcile ourselves to the fact of contingency.

## 1

I begin by highlighting a few features of Hegel's highly abstract definition of contingency in the *Encyclopaedia Logic*. There, Hegel identifies the "contingent [*das Zufällige*]" with what is "possible [*das Mögliche*]": the "contingent is an existence that has no greater value than that of something *possible*, something that can just as well *not be* as be" (EL § 6).

Hegel tells us in this discussion that he is not interested in all forms of possibility; in particular, he is not interested in what is merely *logically* possible, that is, in what may be thought without contradiction. Contingency as logical possibility is of little interest to him, he says, because it excludes so little. After all, it is logically possible "that the moon will fall on the earth this evening... [or that] the Sultan may become Pope" (EL § 143 Z). Serious philosophy does not waste its time contemplating mere fantasies or "phantasms" (EL § 6). It concerns itself, instead, with possibilities that have become "actual". Indeed, Hegel asserts that the "content" [*Inhalt*] of philosophy is "actuality" [*Wirklichkeit*].

A central Hegelian claim is that the actual (or what he also calls the really possible) contains contingency as a "moment" (EL § 145). Everything actual contains contingency as a moment, in that everything actually real was at some time only possibly real.<sup>3</sup> The transition from possible reality to actuality occurs when the right conditions are in place, such that a merely possible actuality *must* become actual. In the *Science of Logic* (SL), Hegel paradoxically describes realized contingencies or actualities as 'necessary' contingencies (SL 546 / *W*

would have to show that his remarks in the Additions conform to texts we can reasonably consider to be more authentic.

<sup>3</sup> Until what is contingent becomes actual, it is merely possible (EL §§ 146 Z, 147). The contingent or possible is the "inessential" or "outer" aspect of the actual (EL § 144).

VI 207). He confuses matters more by alternating between referring to realized contingencies sometimes simply as “contingencies” and sometimes simply as “necessities”.

As I mentioned a moment ago, I am going to review a discussion in the *Encyclopaedia Logic* in which Hegel evaluates strategies for dealing with actuality [*Wirklichkeit*] and with the contingency that belongs to it as a “moment”. My goal is to abstract from this discussion insight into the implications he takes contingency to have for our freedom.<sup>4</sup>

## 2

Hegel’s remark that “there is much that is contingent [*Zufälliges*] in what happens to us” occurs in the context of a rich passage from the *Encyclopaedia* in which he considers two general strategies for coping with contingency (or with what he here sometimes refers to as “necessity” [*Notwendigkeit*]) (EL § 147 Z). The passage is illuminating, because it provides clues to his own view of how we are to cope with – or reconcile ourselves to – actuality [*Wirklichkeit*]. In doing so, the passage sheds light on the kind of freedom Hegel thinks is available to us.

In the passage in question, Hegel contrasts what he labels the “modern” or “Christian” view of the implications of necessity with what he refers to as the “ancient” conception. He is clearly convinced that the particular conception of necessity we endorse has profound implications for our lives. Our view of necessity, he says, “determines our human contentment and discontent, and thereby our very fate or destiny [*Schicksal*]” (EL §147 Z). As we will see, Hegel finds neither the modern nor the ancient mode of coping fully satisfactory. He accepts and rejects features of both.

I begin with Hegel’s portrayal of the “modern” or “Christian” view. He suggests that the modern or Christian is involved in a kind of blame game. The modern blames necessity for the fact that we have bodies, experience pain, and are prone to be swept away by passion. The modern blames necessity, in addition, for the fact that our choices are constrained by social and environmental factors. On top of that, the modern or Christian holds necessity respon-

<sup>4</sup> The category of the contingently or possibly actual includes a whole range of existences, and Hegel does not suggest that the philosopher either can or should consider all of them. He says that some contingencies are of so little interest that they do not deserve to be called “actual” – at least not “in the emphatic sense” (EL § 6).

sible for the fact that we can never be perfectly good. We can never be perfectly good, according to this view, because perfection would effectively require us to do what we cannot do: *escape* necessity, fully detach ourselves from our bodies, from laws of nature, and from our particular place in history.

The modern or Christian seeks “consolation” [*Trost*] – even “compensation” [*Ersatz*] – for the ways in which necessity constrains our freedom, and for the various ‘renunciations’ we have to endure in our efforts to be good. Moreover, the modern or Christian is persuaded that wholly satisfactory compensation is unavailable to us in *this* life. Because such compensation is unavailable in this life, the modern urges us to satisfy our demand for compensation elsewhere. We are to comfort ourselves with faith in the possibility of future reward or payment – dispensed in a life *after* this life.

Hegel denounces this coping strategy as both a doctrine of “unfreedom” and source of “unhappiness”. The modern or Christian, he tells us here, encourages us to “shift the blame for what befalls us onto other people, onto unfavorable circumstances, and the like” (EL §147 Z). For the modern, fate or destiny is something “external” in that it just happens to us and is not in any significant respect up to us. Although Hegel does not put the point this way, he implies in these remarks that the modern approach commits us to what the Sartrean would call instances of “bad faith”.

Turning, now, to Hegel’s treatment of the *ancient* response to necessity: in certain respects, he finds this response more attractive. On his portrayal, the ancients offer us neither a means of escape nor a doctrine of consolation. Instead, they recommend that we cultivate in ourselves an attitude of “serene submission” [*ruhiger Ergebung*] to destiny. We are to accept or reconcile ourselves to our fate, they counsel us, because whatever happens was meant to happen. For the ancients, as Hegel puts it, something “is so, *because* it is, and it ought to be just *the way* it is” (EL § 147 Z). According to this view, then, the proper response to fate is one of quiet acceptance. There is no point in trying to fight or escape what is beyond our control.

As I mentioned, Hegel finds certain aspects of this kind of reconciliation to *Wirklichkeit* attractive. His admiration is apparent in his discussion of the proverb “Everyone is the smith who forges his own fortune”:

What this [proverb] means [...] is that man has the enjoyment only of himself. The opposite view is the one where we shift the blame for what befalls us onto other people, onto unfavorable circumstances, and the like. But that is just the standpoint of unfreedom [...], and the source of unhappiness as well. By contrast, when we recognize that whatever happens to us is only an evolution of our own selves, and that we

carry only the burden of our own debts, we behave as free men; and whatever may befall us, we keep the firm faith that nothing unjust can happen to us. People who live in discord with themselves and their lot get involved in much that is wrong and awry, precisely because of the false opinion that injustice has been done to them by others. Now, certainly, there is much that is contingent in what happens to us. But this contingency is grounded in the natural dimension of man [*Die Zufällige is in der Natürlichkeit des Menschen begründet*]. And, since we also have the consciousness of our freedom, the harmony of our souls and our peace of mind will not be destroyed by the misfortunes that befall us.<sup>5</sup>

Note that, in the final sentence of this passage, Hegel suggests that the ancient view offers us a certain comfort. It assures us that, as long as we remain conscious of our freedom, the “misfortunes that befall us” will not destroy our “peace of mind.” Hegel’s remark here is curious in light of the fact that, elsewhere in this discussion, he characterizes the ancient view of necessity as *denying* us comfort (as “*trostlos*”). Apparently, his position is not that the ancient account of necessity is to be admired because it denies us comfort altogether; rather, he holds that the ancient view is to be admired for denying us a *certain kind* of comfort. What the ancients deny is that we have grounds for hoping that our virtuous deeds will be rewarded and that wrongs will be righted *in a life beyond this life*. In place of such assurances, the ancients confidently affirm that we can derive comfort *here and now* from our consciousness of our freedom. This kind of assurance is surely key to what Hegel finds attractive about the ancients’ view.<sup>6</sup>

But it is important that we not overlook the fact that Hegel discovers weaknesses in the ancient view as well. He complains that the ancient doctrine of destiny is one of “unrevealed” necessity (EL §147 Z). The ancients take fate or necessity to be “unrevealed” or “blind” in that they assume that it must forever remain a mystery to us. We are to accept our fate, and not expect to be ‘saved’. We are to carry the burden of our own debts. But since necessity on this view is blind or incomprehensible, we remain dumbfounded in the face of it. Since we cannot know it, we have no option but to give into it; we lack the means to develop active strategies for responding to it.

<sup>5</sup> EL § 147 Z.

<sup>6</sup> The fact that Hegel found this aspect of the ancient (Greco-Roman) conception of necessity attractive is apparent in some of his earliest writings. See, e.g., the Bern fragment “Every People [...]” (*Gesammelte Werke*, Hamburg, Meiner, Bd. 1, text 34, pp. 359–378). He praises the ancient view of the state in which was healthy enough that there was no need for reliance on the idea of individual immortality (see esp. pp. 368–370). For discussion of this text, see N. Ross: *On Mechanism in Hegel’s Social and Political Philosophy*, Routledge, New York 2008, S. 38.

In this particular respect, Hegel believes that the modern or Christian response to necessity has the upper hand. The Christian commands us not just to love but also to know God; and this ‘ought,’ for the Christian, implies a ‘can’. Christian doctrine, on Hegel’s interpretation, is in other words committed to the thesis that God can indeed be known by us (EL §147 Z). In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Hegel praises the Christian doctrine of revelation, according to which God has

allowed human beings to understand what He is, so that he is no longer hidden and secret. With this possibility of our knowing God, the obligation to know Him is placed upon us. God wants no . . . empty heads for his children (PH 17 / *GW* XII 27).

### 3

The passage from the *Encyclopaedia* we have been considering has the virtue of condensing into a few paragraphs Hegel’s thoughts on our options for coping with contingency. The passage reveals that he is interested in assessing the ancient and modern coping mechanisms because he is convinced that there is in fact something to cope with. Contingency, for Hegel, is a moment of actuality; it is a force to be reckoned with. We have to contend with accidents of birth and situation, with natural catastrophes, with our fragile bodies and minds. Such contingencies (or necessities), he says, are “grounded in the natural dimension of man” (EL § 147 Z). We have to find ways of coping, because our home is nature, and nature (even for the Hegelian idealist) is more than just an idea. We cannot entirely eliminate its inconveniences by thinking hard.<sup>7</sup>

The passage from the *Encyclopaedia* furthermore suggests that Hegel is impatient with the proposal that we best cope with contingency by seeking comfort or compensation and even salvation in a life beyond this life. Hegel has a number of reasons for rejecting this particular coping strategy. From the passage we have been considering, we know that he thinks that the blame game is a cop out or expression of bad faith. In blaming necessity, we misidentify the sources of our misery; in doing that, we sell ourselves short. We tell ourselves that we are creatures too poor or pathetic to save ourselves and settle our own debts.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> I focus in this paper on contingencies “grounded in the natural dimension of man,” only because Hegel does so in the passage I am discussing. I do not mean to suggest that these are the only kind of contingencies whose existence he acknowledges.

<sup>8</sup> “Das Christentum enthält bekanntlich die Lehre, Gott wolle, daß allen Menschen geholfen werde” (EL § 147 Z).

We sell ourselves short, in addition, if we infer from the necessities or externalities imposed upon us that satisfaction or salvation is not available to us in this life. As Hegel portrays the modern or Christian view, the 'ought' can only sufficiently become an 'is' in a life *beyond* this one. This is precisely why the Christian counsels us to project our hopes and dreams onto another life. We can detect in Hegel's impatience with this view anticipations of Nietzsche's critique of the double-edged nature of the Christian doctrine of God's love. The Christian counsels us to derive comfort from the fact that God sacrificed his only son in order to save us. But this act of God's 'love' was necessary, in Nietzsche's estimation, only because the Christian considers humanity too pathetic to save itself.<sup>9</sup>

Our passage from the *Encyclopaedia* reveals *some* of the reasons for Hegel's impatience with the modern or Christian view, but he defends further criticisms in other texts. As I have suggested, Hegel takes the Christian reliance on the idea of a world beyond this world to be an instance of bad faith. In blaming necessity for our ills and in expecting compensation in a life after this one, we sell ourselves short in the ways we have just reviewed. But Christianity's reliance on the idea of a world beyond this world serves yet a further dubious purpose, on Hegel's account. Although the Christian is to be praised for not following the ancients in shrouding God in mystery, the Christian doctrine of *how* we come to know God relies on the assumption that we can access that other world in thought. In effect, the Christian attributes to us extraordinary cognitive powers, powers Hegel believes we do not possess. The Christian commands humility and modesty, but is in fact guilty of a certain *hubris*, in his view.

The Christian or modern idea of a world beyond this one is of course an abstraction. *Hubris* comes into play, Hegel thinks, when we flatter ourselves that we are capable of *total* abstraction, when we suppose that we can give birth to ideas that owe no debt to our particular historical circumstances. Hegel reminds us in various texts that each of us is a child of our time and is as such incapable of wholly overreaching or transcending our time.<sup>10</sup> This Hegelian point would hardly be interesting if it amounted to no more than the claim that our *bodies* are confined to the realm of nature. The implications for our *minds* that Hegel derives from this thesis are profound and worth dwelling on for a moment.

<sup>9</sup> Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, Second Treatise, § 22.

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., PH 55 / W XII 72; *Philosophy of Right* PR 21 / W VII 26.

Precisely because our only home is nature, in Hegel's view, there are limits to our powers of abstraction. Try as we may, we cannot wholly escape this world even just in thought. The very idea of a world beyond this world itself has all-too-human roots. As Feuerbach would say, it is a projection we tend to forget is a projection.<sup>11</sup> Ideas, for Hegel, belong to the realm of growth and corruption no less than bodies do; they come and go. As necessity bears down on us in different ways at different times, not just our bodies but also our minds have to respond and adjust. In the face of necessity or conflict, we re-think our place in the world and our relations to others, we replace old Gods with new ones, design new institutions in response to our evolving demands, and imagine our identities in new ways.

But although Hegel charges that the Christian or modern overestimates our powers of abstraction and is therefore guilty of *hubris* in this respect, and although he rejects the Christian's proclivity for escapism and bad faith as well, we know from the passage we have been considering that he does not wholly embrace the ancients' recipe for coping either. Hegel favours reconciliation over escapism, but not the ancients' version of reconciliation. He is too much of a believer in the transformative power of human reason to recommend the serene submission to what 'is'. He grants that, in declaring fate or necessity to be in principle mysterious and unknowable for us, the ancients successfully avoid *hubris*. They avoid *hubris*, but they pay the price of *underestimating* the human capacity for knowledge. No less than the Christian or modern, the ancients sell us short – they just do so in a different way.

Of course, with knowledge comes responsibility. Hegel is persuaded that, since we can *know* our fate, we can do something about it – at least, we can assume an active stance in response to it. Although it is not possible for us to entirely conquer or dispense with contingency, we can do more than simply surrender to it, in his view. We are dependent creatures whose actuality is contingent rather than necessary, but we nonetheless possess impressive resources for actively coping with fate – resources that far exceed those of other animals.

<sup>11</sup> Feuerbach, *Principles of a Philosophy of the Future*, § 29. I am attributing a Feuerbachian insight to Hegel here, but Feuerbach would not agree with my interpretation of Hegel. In his view, Hegel is a neo-Platonist (a "German Proclus") who projects the all-too-human desires of man onto the realm of the divine and super-sensuous. Feuerbach charges Hegel with indulging in the very kind of projections I say he warns us against.



## 4

What special coping mechanisms does Hegel think we possess? I have been emphasizing his point that we cannot transcend nature even in thought. It is important that we appreciate the implications this thesis has for the coping resources Hegel believes are available to us. His insistence upon the limits of our powers of abstraction is meant to expose the futility of efforts to access timeless truths or absolutely universal and necessary laws of reason. These efforts are of course understandable responses to the hard fact of contingency; in the face of what we cannot control, we seek solid ground. But as I have suggested, the search for solid ground is based on what Hegel believes is a mistaken estimation of what human cognition can achieve.

The Hegelian lesson, here, is not just Kant's, namely that the idea of freedom as a wholly non-natural or extra-temporal causal power refers to an object our sciences can never know. The Hegelian point is more radical than this. For Hegel, there is a sense in which the idea of a freedom wholly outside nature cannot even be coherently articulated or said. For as soon as we start digging into the details of what is put forward as a brainchild of pure reason or of special insight or intuition, we discover that our idea, which was meant to capture an absolutely fixed or universal and necessary condition of practical imputation, has humble roots. Once we start digging, we learn that the conception of a freedom that is supposedly completely independent of nature owes its very determinacy to concrete historical reality. Like any other idea, it is a product of its time and reflects the needs and demands of its time. It cannot originate in a wholly pure reason or in a purely intellectual intuition, because these are not faculties we humans possess.

Hegel thus warns us to be wary of those captivated by the idea of a freedom that is wholly of a world beyond this one, and by those who claim to have discovered the nature of that freedom by completely stripping away the influences of nature and history on thought. Such claims, I have been suggesting, rest in his view on a false estimation of our powers of abstraction. Hegel discovers in the history of philosophy a long series of vain efforts to perform precisely this kind of abstraction. He discovers this effort, for instance, in Kant's bold claim to have laid out the absolutely a priori laws of theoretical and practical knowledge. Kant of course appreciated that his own creative endeavors owed a debt to Newton among others, but his philosophy is nonetheless an "empty formalism", Hegel tells us, because his appreciation of that debt did not go deep enough. If it had, he would have been more sensitive to the extent to which his own system was responsive to the particular intellec-

tual challenges of his time; he would have moderated his claim to have articulated absolutely universal and necessary conditions of human knowledge and freedom. To cite just one further example, Hegel discovers the fallacy of empty formalism also in Plato's ideal of the perfect state. What for Plato was supposed to be a timeless truth was in fact no more than a reflection of the norms of his own time. The Platonic idea of the perfect state, in Hegel's words, was really nothing more than "the embodiment of [...] the nature of Greek ethics".<sup>12</sup>

Because Hegel doubts that any thinker can completely transcend history, he is skeptical of the proposal that a world beyond this world can be wholly captured in thought. He is therefore also skeptical of the idea of an otherworldly form of freedom, a freedom that is supposed to escape the necessities of this realm and exert its causal power from a standpoint outside time. But the fact that Hegel casts doubt on the very idea of an otherworldly form of freedom does not mean that he denies the reality of human freedom altogether. As we have seen, he believes it is our "consciousness of our freedom" that allows us to combat despair in the face of the "misfortunes that befall us" (EL § 147 Z). He is committed to the view that some form of freedom is available to us; and his commitment to human freedom is of course key to his doctrine of how we are to reconcile ourselves to *Wirklichkeit*.

## 5

I conclude with some remarks on Hegel's alternative to the modern and ancient coping strategies. This will involve piecing together a few features of his positive account of freedom. Once again, I rely on our passage from EL § 147; but since that passage can only take us so far, I fill out Hegel's view with references to other texts.

We know from our review of Hegel's critique of the modern or Christian response to necessity that he is impatient with appeals to worlds outside this world. If humanity is capable of freedom, it has to be a freedom firmly grounded in *this* world; it has to be a freedom that derives from and is compatible with the realm of nature. From Hegel's critique of the ancients, we furthermore know that he resists identifying human freedom with the complete submission to external forces, including forces of nature. Freedom, in his view, does *not* consist in wholly giving ourselves up to some other. Finally, we know from our passage that Hegel believes it is our "consciousness of our freedom"

<sup>12</sup> PR 20 / W VII 24.

that protects us from despair. Although we are creatures of nature, it is thanks to our consciousness of this capacity that, “the harmony of our souls and our peace of mind” need not be “destroyed by the misfortunes that befall us” (EL § 147 Z).

What more can we say, in just a few paragraphs, about the uniquely Hegelian conception of human freedom? What resources does Hegel think we have for coping with contingency without having to wholly surrender to it, and without being consumed by despair? Earlier, I mentioned that Hegel holds that we are endowed with special resources for coping with fate. This commitment is apparent in the following remark from his *Philosophy of Right*: “Human beings do not arrive by instinct at what they are to become” (PR § 174 Z). On Hegel’s account, we are not simply driven by instinct in all that we think and do. What makes us special – what gives us a freedom that other animals lack – is our power to *think*: to not just answer nature’s call, but be capable of pondering it, reconsidering it, and shaping our attitude towards it. It is our capacity for self-conscious thought that separates us from other animals and explains what Hegel says is our ability to ‘triumph’ over externality.<sup>13</sup> We are creatures wholly of this world, the realm of nature; but as self-consciously *thinking* creatures we can nonetheless significantly distinguish ourselves from nature:

[It] is man who first raises himself above the singleness of sensation to the universality of thought, to self-knowledge [...] in a word, it is only man who is thinking mind and by this, and by this alone, is essentially distinguished from nature (EG § 381 Z).<sup>14</sup>

Considered from a certain perspective, there is nothing terribly radical or unusual about this conception of freedom. We are different from other animals thanks to a *natural* capacity, the capacity for thought or representation. Thanks to a further natural capacity, which Hegel refers to as the “will,” it is possible for us to translate thought into existence, that is, to convert our thoughts into actions (PR § 4 Z). These capacities afford us special transformational powers that other animals lack. Other animals can transform nature to a certain extent.

<sup>13</sup> See his discussion, for example, in § 381 Z of the third part of his *Encyclopaedia* (the *Philosophy of Mind* [*Geist*], EG).

<sup>14</sup> Victory over externality is achieved in *Geist*, which “distinguishes itself from Nature” (EG 381 Z). “Geist [...] is not the mere result of Nature, but is in truth its own result [*sein eigenes Resultat*]” (EG 381 Z). Because the human is a “thinking being,” it is a “born metaphysician,” Hegel writes in his EL § 98 Z1. Only non-human animals are “true blue physicists,” since they “do not think”.

They can set out to satisfy their desires: make tools out of sticks, consume nature for nourishment, and so forth. Other animals cannot, however, self-consciously form ends, reflect on the viability or appropriateness of those ends, and perhaps alter or reconceive those ends as a consequence of reflection upon them. Non-human animals cannot think of nature or of other creatures as their property, as something to which they have a right. Non-human animals cannot even recognize nature or other creatures *as other*, as superior or inferior, as objects of either fear or admiration.

To those hoping for something that more sharply separates our capacities from those of 'lower' creatures, this Hegelian conception of freedom is likely to seem too weak. Nevertheless, the transformative power Hegel associates with human freedom is significant. We cannot violate or exempt ourselves from laws of nature, in his view, but we can mold nature to serve our self-conscious purposes. We can put our wills into our bodies, for example. Hunger inescapably drives us to eat, but we can choose what to eat and whether to overeat; we can shape and reshape our habits. We have the ability to control the bodies of others, as well: we can obstruct their movement, damage or enhance them, perhaps put them to work for us (PR §47). We can establish institutions that attend to their well-being and regulate their activity.

The transformations Hegel takes to result from human acts of will indeed extend far beyond this. As creatures capable of freedom, it is within our power to transform not just bodies moving through space but minds as well. For Hegel, that is, acts of will can result in changes in how we think about ourselves and others, changes in the value we attach to ourselves versus other creatures, changes in how we understand our humanity and even our freedom.

This brings me to the point with which I wish to conclude. In coping with contingency, the will, as Hegel understands it, shapes *itself* in a certain respect. As we have seen, Hegel defines the will as thought translating itself into existence. This is an austere, functional definition that fixes the will's nature with reference to what it does. But Hegel in addition holds that, in translating itself into existence, the will in some respect also *acquires* a nature. It acquires concepts and laws – that is, it acquires a *content*. The will inhabits nature, and must accommodate or reconcile itself to the contingencies of nature. Since these contingencies come and go, the content of the will comes and goes as well. As I suggested a moment ago, it is Hegel's view that ideas belong to the realm of generation and corruption just as bodies do. The laws and concepts of our freedom are not fixed or set in advance; this is why there is no single, stable idea of human freedom over the course of history. In the process of transforming and reconciling itself to what 'is', the human will acquires a na-

ture in that its meaning or content evolves. For Hegel, then, reconciling ourselves to *Wirklichkeit* is – no less for our minds than for our bodies – a dynamic and on-going affair.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Hegel thus describes the development of human freedom or “Spirit” as the product of a “hard, unending struggle against itself [*ein harter unendlicher Kampf gegen sich selbst*]” (PH 58 f, 82 / W XII 76, 104). In this struggle, the will transforms itself. The will is capable of transforming what Hegel calls its “life” – and the term “life” refers not just to the human body but also to its soul or spirit (PR § 47). (In his PR discussion, Hegel refers back to remarks in his *Encyclopaedia*: §§ 161, 164, 259 f, 298, 318).