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A Lógica e a Narração da Contingência em Hegel

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Abstract

Os principais objetivos do artigo podem ser formulados da seguinte forma: a) Hegel tem uma noção forte de contingência. Contingência não é, para ele, a ausência simples de necessidade, tampouco subdeterminidade simples. Contingência é uma noção original, que tem o mesmo peso e a mesma dignidade lógica e metafísica que a noção de necessidade; b) essa noção forte de contingência é decisiva para a concepção de Hegel de subjetividade na medida em que pode ser remetida a sua filosofia do real. À diferença do que é assumido em muitas outras interpretações comuns de Hegel, sugiro que a possibilidade de ir da necessidade à contingência caracteriza uma parte essencial da liberdade subjetiva, tanto quanto a possibilidade de ir contingência à necessidade. Isso tem consequências importantes, especialmente na filosofia da história, que aparece não como apriorística ou dogmática, mas como aberta à contingência (mesmo que não o esteja às conclusões céticas); e, c) consistentemente com o reconhecimento da irreducibilidade da contingência à conceitos a priori, Hegel também reconhece a necessidade da narração não-filosófica da contingência e nos fornece algumas pistas importantes sobre isso e sobre sua relação com a filosofia. Ao longo da minha argumentação dessas três teses, espero fornecer evidências para a tese de que a construção dogmática na filosofia da história de Hegel (incluindo, mas não se limitando à tese do fim da história) pode ser atenuada pela referência ao entendimento de Hegel da contingência. Em uma escala geral, isso também mostra que o fundamento lógico da filosofia do real de Hegel não pode ser abandonado sem que se prejudique o potencial da filosofia de Hegel de contribuir aos debates filosóficos contemporâneos. Meu argumento estrutura-se como se segue. Eu irei, primeiramente, comentar algumas passagens da Ciência da Lógica de Hegel do começo da Lógica Subjetiva sobre a lógica da contingência (I) e a presença da contingência na estrutura lógica da subjetividade (II). Eu irei, então, ilustrar, com referência a um caso específico, o papel desempenhado pela contingência na filosofia hegeliana da história (III). Na última seção (IV), discutirei a relação entre verdade e contingência, por um lado, e filosofia e narrativa, por outro, tentando esboçar as principais linhas da narração da contingência sob bases hegelianas.

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Hegel's Logic and Narration of Contingency

A Lógica e a Narração da Contingência em Hegel¹

ALBERTO L. SIANI²

“Und da wir doch von Schicksal gesprochen haben, / es ist auch so, als hätte man zwei Schicksale:/ ein regsam-unwichtiges, das sich vollzieht,/ und ein reglos-wichtiges, das man nie erfährt” (Robert Musil, Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften)

Abstract: The paper's main aims can be formulated as follows: a) Hegel has a strong notion of contingency. Contingency is for him not simple absence of necessity, and not simple under-determinedness either. Contingency is an original notion, having the same logical and metaphysical weight and dignity as the notion of necessity; b) this “strong” notion of contingency is decisive for Hegel's conception of subjectivity. Insofar it can be tracked up to his real philosophy. Other than assumed in many commonplace interpretations of Hegel, I will suggest that the power to go from necessity to contingency makes up an essential part of subjective freedom as much as the power to go from contingency to necessity. This has important consequences especially in the philosophy of history, which is shown to be not aprioristic and dogmatic, but open to contingency (though not to sceptical conclusions); and c) consistently with the recognition of the irreducibility of contingency to a priori concepts, Hegel also recognizes the need for a non-philosophical narration of contingency and gives us some interesting clues about it and its relationship to philosophy. Throughout my argumentation of these three theses, I hope to provide evidence for the thesis that dogmatic constructions on Hegel's philosophy of history (including, but not limited to the so-called thesis of the “end of history”) can be undermined by referring to Hegel's understanding of contingency. On a more general scale, this also shows that the logical groundwork of Hegel's real philosophy cannot be abandoned without jeopardizing the potential of Hegel's thought to contribute to current philosophical debates. My argument is structured as follows. I will, first of all, comment on some passages of Hegel's *Science of Logic* from the beginning of the “Subjective logic” regarding the logic of

¹ Earlier drafts of this paper were presented at the workshop “Das Problem der Kontingenz in Hegels Logik” at the Universität Münster (December 2012) and at the conference “Hegel's Conception of Contradiction: Logic, Life and History” at the KU Leuven (May 2013). I wish to thank the audiences for fruitful discussion.

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contingency (I) and the presence of contingency in the logical structure of subjectivity (II). I will then proceed to illustrate, with reference to a specific case, the role played by contingency in Hegel's philosophy of history (III). In the last section (IV), I will discuss the relationship between truth and contingency on the one side, and philosophy and narrativity on the other side, attempting to sketch the main lines of a "narration of contingency" on Hegelian basis.

Keywords: Hegel. Contingency. Narration.

Resumo: Os principais objetivos do artigo podem ser formulados da seguinte forma: a) Hegel tem uma noção forte de contingência. Contingência não é, para ele, a ausência simples de necessidade, tampouco subdeterminidade simples. Contingência é uma noção original, que tem o mesmo peso e a mesma dignidade lógica e metafísica que a noção de necessidade; b) essa noção "forte" de contingência é decisiva para a concepção de Hegel de subjetividade na medida em que pode ser remetida a sua filosofia do real. À diferença do que é assumido em muitas outras interpretações comuns de Hegel, sugiro que a possibilidade de ir da necessidade à contingência caracteriza uma parte essencial da liberdade subjetiva, tanto quanto a possibilidade de ir contingência à necessidade. Isso tem consequências importantes, especialmente na filosofia da história, que aparece não como apriorística ou dogmática, mas como aberta à contingência (mesmo que não o esteja às conclusões céticas); e, c) consistentemente com o reconhecimento da irreducibilidade da contingência à conceitos a priori, Hegel também reconhece a necessidade da narração não-filosófica da contingência e nos fornece algumas pistas importantes sobre isso e sobre sua relação com a filosofia. Ao longo da minha argumentação dessas três teses, espero fornecer evidências para a tese de que a construção dogmática na filosofia da história de Hegel (incluindo, mas não se limitando à tese do "fim da história") pode ser atenuada pela referência ao entendimento de Hegel da contingência. Em uma escala geral, isso também mostra que o fundamento lógico da filosofia do real de Hegel não pode ser abandonado sem que se prejudique o potencial da filosofia de Hegel de contribuir aos debates filosóficos contemporâneos. Meu argumento estrutura-se como se segue. Eu irei, primeiramente, comentar algumas passagens da Ciência da Lógica de Hegel do começo da "Lógica Subjetiva" sobre a lógica da contingência (I) e a presença da contingência na estrutura lógica da subjetividade (II). Eu irei, então, ilustrar, com referência a um caso específico, o papel desempenhado pela contingência na filosofia hegeliana da história (III). Na última seção (IV), discutirei a relação entre verdade e contingência, por um lado, e filosofia e narratividade, por outro, tentando esboçar as principais linhas da "narração da contingência" sob bases hegelianas.

Palavras-Chave: Hegel. Contingência. Narração.

INTRODUCTION

Hegel's holistic systematic conception implies the grounding of the real-philosophical forms of nature and spirit upon the logical-metaphysical basis, as aspects or moments of the unique and necessary process of self-

determination of the idea³. In some cases, this seems to lead to implausibly aprioristic conclusions regarding the philosophy of nature and the philosophy of spirit. This is why some interpreters proposed to “actualize” parts of Hegel’s philosophy of spirit by detaching them from their metaphysical groundwork. In my opinion, this leads not only to historical and textual misunderstandings but also, more importantly, to trivializations of a highly complex and challenging philosophical system. Such mutilations are in many cases uncalled for, as a more careful and deep-going exegesis of the Hegelian text would suffice to assess the plausibility of the theses asserted and their capacity to contribute to current debates⁴.

In this paper I will move from a specific and yet fundamental question, which can also be used as a study case for the overall issue of the relationship between logic and real philosophy: if the system of thought determinations in Hegel’s logic is complete, necessary and without alternatives how is it possible to save a room for contingency both at the logical and at the real-philosophical level, and especially at the level of the philosophy of history? As a matter of fact, saving this room seems to be a necessary condition to understand history as an open process and not as a teleologically oriented progress toward an ahistorical, aprioristically established goal, in which case the planning, acting and evaluating freedom of the individual subject risks being emptied of value. The establishment of an irreducible notion of contingency in logic and, consequently, in the philosophy of history, is thus a necessary (though not sufficient) condition for any attempt of reactualization of Hegel’s philosophy of history⁵.

My overall aim is to show that: a) Hegel’s subjective logic provides the groundwork for a strong notion of contingency. Contingency is there not simple absence of necessity, and not simple under-determinedness either. Contingency is an original notion, having the same logical and metaphysical weight and dignity as the notion of necessity; b) this “strong” notion of contingency is decisive for Hegel’s conception of subjectivity. Insofar it can be tracked up to his real philosophy. Other than assumed in many commonplace

³ See Quante 2011, 23.

⁴ Vieweg 2012 strongly advocates the necessity of reading Hegel’s philosophy of right on the basis of the logic. See also my discussion of his book in Siani 2016b (with Vieweg’s reply).

⁵ See my Siani 2016a.

interpretations of Hegel, I will suggest that the power to go from necessity to contingency makes up an essential part of subjective freedom as much as the power to go from contingency to necessity. This has important consequences especially in the philosophy of history, which is shown to be not aprioristic and dogmatic, but open to contingency (though not to sceptical conclusions); and c) consistently with the recognition of the irreducibility of contingency to a priori concepts, Hegel also recognizes the need for a non-philosophical narration of contingency and gives us some interesting clues about it and its relationship to philosophy. Throughout my argumentation of these three theses, I hope to show that dogmatic constructions on Hegel's philosophy of history (including, but not limited to the so-called thesis of the "end of history") can be undermined by referring to Hegel's understanding of contingency. On a more general scale, this also shows that the logical groundwork of Hegel's real philosophy cannot be abandoned without jeopardizing the potential of Hegel's thought to contribute to current philosophical debates.

My argument is structured as follows. I will, first of all, comment on some passages of Hegel's *Science of Logic* from the beginning of the "Subjective logic" regarding the logic of contingency (I) and the presence of contingency in the logical structure of subjectivity (II). I will then proceed to illustrate, with reference to a specific case, the role played by contingency in Hegel's philosophy of history (III). In the last section (IV), I will discuss the relationship between truth and contingency on the one side, and philosophy and narrativity on the other side, attempting to sketch the main lines of a "narration of contingency" on Hegelian basis.

My aims and claims as briefly exposed here might appear overambitious, so I should like to point out why they are actually more modest than it seems. To begin with, I do not claim to offer an exhaustive analysis of Hegel's treatment of modal categories in general or even of contingency in particular. Secondly, I will only deal with Hegel's outline of the logical structure of subjectivity at the beginning of subjective logic. I will not deal with the question of whether Hegel's logic of contingency is consistent throughout his work. Thirdly, my overall reading of Hegel aims at contributing to an alternative to the still widespread interpretation of Hegel as a strong essentialist or even a necessitarianist. What I present in this

paper, however, is only a small piece of this overall reading, and in no way claims to be by itself sufficient to establishing an alternative interpretation of Hegel.

I. THE LOGIC OF CONTINGENCY

In his groundbreaking study on Hegel's theory of contingency, Dieter Henrich strongly and convincingly contested a traditional view of Hegel's philosophy, according to which this latter, as a system of necessary determinations, did not leave any room for contingency and thus inevitably failed to deliver a satisfactory explanation of reality. Henrich showed on the contrary that the very systematic tendency to necessity does leave a fundamental space for a strong notion of contingency. Further studies, like the books by John Burbidge and Konrad Utz and the articles by George di Giovanni and Stephen Houlgate, have further developed this idea with different outcomes, but still defending the same core intuition, namely that contingency plays a fundamental role in Hegel's system, even though Hegel himself admittedly sometimes brings about the opposite impression⁶. Defending the role of contingency in Hegel's philosophy further implies the claims that 1) Hegel is not trying to logically deduce all particular aspects of reality and that therefore 2) he leaves room for the contingency of the individual planning and action also within his philosophy of spirit.

The transition from the substance to the concept at the beginning of the "Subjective logic" is the systematic point where the relationship between necessity and contingency, which up to that point had been implicit and abstract, becomes explicit and concrete. To be sure, Hegel had already discussed modal categories (possibility, actuality, and necessity – and, of course, contingency) in the "Logic of essence". The discussion of the substance, to be found there, makes up at the same time the genesis of the concept: "Thus the concept is the *truth* of substance, and since *necessity* is the

⁶ See Henrich 1971, Utz 2001, Di Giovanni 1980 and Houlgate 1995. Padui 2010 moves from the endorsement of this idea to the critique of the failure to distinguish between two senses of contingency in Hegel, namely the logical category of contingency and a pre-categorical sense of contingency in the philosophy of nature. I am not persuaded by the author's argument, but I will not confront it since my contribution does not directly deal with the philosophy of nature.

determining relational mode of substance, *freedom* reveals itself to be the *truth of necessity and the relational mode of the concept*⁷.

In the “Logic of essence”, however, categories are still exterior to each other and find their limit in each other. Hence, as Hegel remarks, they find themselves in an abstract and exterior contrast to each other and they are bound to become indiscernible from each other. The concept operates a mediation, through which the contingent is sublated to necessity:

For the determination that constitutes the negative of the universal is in the concept simply and solely a *positedness*; essentially, in other words, it is at the same time the negative of the negative, and only is as this self-identity of the negative which is the universal. To this extent, the universal is also the *substance* of its determinations, but in such a way that what for the substance as such was an *accident*, is the concept’s own self *mediation*, its own *immanent* reflection. But this mediation, which first raises the accidental to *necessity*, is the *manifested* reference⁸.

The core of this transition is the mediation of the concept with itself. This mediation is an immanent one, that is it is not accomplished in an exterior way, but through the very power of negativity of the concept itself. Determinations become thus internalised: they are no longer something exterior, passively received by the substance, but they are the positions of the concept itself. While determinations were something contingent for the substance, as they were not freely posited but exterior and limited through each other, in the concept they are now necessary. The concept does not disappear while positing the determinations, but

even when it posits itself in a determination, *remains* in it what it is. It is the *soul* of the concrete which it inhabits, unhindered and equal to itself in its manifoldness and diversity. It is not swept away in the *becoming* but *persists* undisturbed through it, endowed with the power of unalterable, undying self-preservation⁹.

In the position of the determinations the concept has to do only with itself: determinations, as immanent to it, are a product of its freedom. The

⁷ Hegel 2010, 509.

⁸ Hegel 2010, 531-532. Thus “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” (Houlgate 1995, 41).

⁹ Hegel 2010, 531.

transition from the contingent to the necessary becomes “manifested”. Necessity and freedom are bound together in the concept as the two perspectives of its immanent reflection:

In the *concept*, therefore, the kingdom of *freedom* is disclosed. The concept is free because the *identity that exists in and for itself* and constitutes the necessity of substance exists at the same time as sublated or as *positedness*, and this *positedness*, as self-referring, is that very identity¹⁰.

The becoming explicit or manifested of the determinations constitutes at the same time the genesis of the “I”, to be sure not the I of the real philosophy, but the logical structure of subjectivity¹¹. The concept, “when it has progressed to a concrete existence which is itself free, is none other than the ‘I’ or pure self-consciousness”¹².

II. CONTINGENCY IN THE SUBJECTIVITY

Once we are at the stage of the logical structure of subjectivity, the question to ask is whether contingency maintains its presence within this structure. One might claim that contingency plays for sure a role in the genesis of this structure, but the resulting concept or I entails ultimately only the power of necessity, and contingency is once and for all removed. I think this conclusion is false, as the subject is now free negative activity and no longer substance, or with other words it has a dynamic, not static structure. The logical structure of subjectivity refers necessarily to otherness, and this is because its determinations have now been internalised. In the substance, every relation to otherness was bound to be abstract, since the position of determinations took place in an exterior, contingent way. The concept, on the contrary, is self-referring, and this enables a clear separation between “inner” and “outer”, opening the space for a concrete reference to the otherness. There is no self-reference without reference to the otherness and no freedom without contingency.

¹⁰ Hegel 2010, 513.

¹¹ See Iber 2002, 184.

¹² Hegel 2010, 514.

The subject, whose logical structure is engendered from the substance, is a result, not a presupposition. Hegel overcomes in this way both Spinoza's substantialism and Fichte's subjective voluntarism. Moreover, this genesis allows overcoming two opposite points of view that would both compromise a strong role of contingency, namely the ones according to which everything is respectively contingent or necessary (we might also conceive of this opposition in terms of nominalism against iperessentialism or relativism against determinism). As a matter of fact, the conceptual structure is preserved in its position of the determinations: it identifies itself with these latter, but at the same time negates them. The concept is the source of the determinations, but at the same time it has the power to distance itself from them and be preserved as pure concept. The concept is, to be sure, the power of necessity, but this power has a limit. The power of necessity is characteristic to the concept or subject in the logical space of selfness, but not in the relation to otherness, and more specifically to nature. Let me develop this point.

The sublation of contingency into necessity consists ultimately in the internalisation and becoming explicit or manifest of the determinations through the free activity of the concept and of the subject. This does not mean, however, that the *Science of Logic* claims for a complete dissolution or sublation of nature's contingency into necessity. On the contrary, as it is known, Hegel insists that "this is the impotence of nature, that it cannot abide by and exhibit the rigor of the concept and loses itself in a blind manifoldness void of concept"¹³. With an almost Platonic hint, Hegel adds:

The manifold genera and species of nature must not be esteemed to be anything more than arbitrary notions of spirit engaged in pictorial representations. Both indeed show traces and intimations of the concept, but they do not exhibit it in trustworthy copy, for they are the sides of its free self-externality¹⁴.

However, if the concept itself gave up searching for its own traces in nature, then it would be free only in a very abstract and limited sense. As a matter of fact, the contingency of nature is necessary for the freedom of the concept: "The concept is the absolute power precisely because it can let its

¹³ Hegel 2010, 536.

¹⁴ Hegel 2010, 536.

difference go free in the shape of self-subsistent diversity, external necessity, accidentality, arbitrariness, opinion”¹⁵. This passage is central for my argument. According to it, not only does the contingency of nature *not* contradict the freedom of the concept, but, on the contrary, it is the ground and the evidence of its absolute freedom and power. However, this is not because the concept imposes its determinations and necessity over the outer, accidental nature:

The universal is [...] *free power*; it is itself while reaching out to its other and embracing it, but without *doing violence* to it; on the contrary, it is at rest in its other as *in its own*. Just as it has been called *free power*, it could also be called *free love* and *boundless blessedness*, for it relates to *that which is distinct from it as to itself*; in it, it has returned to itself¹⁶.

The concept has the power to elevate to necessity the appearing contingency of logical determinations, but surely not the power to reduce the contingency of nature to an absolute necessity. The concept is free only insofar as it “exposes itself” and takes on the challenge of liberating its otherness as and into contingency. In this letting free, the concept or I preserves itself. Other than Spinoza’s substance (at least in Hegel’s interpretation), the concept does not have any claim to self-sufficiency and to the complete correspondence of nature to its own determinations. The concept posits its own determinations, which are no longer exterior limitations to overcome and destroy. The concept is, therefore, free to act toward its other not in a violent, but in a free loving way. At the real-philosophical level this means, according to my interpretation, that the freedom of the I respects or even needs the contingency not only of nature but also of all spiritual configurations insofar as they have a natural, exterior side. Even more, only on the basis of the transition from the substance to the subject, required and prepared by the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and carried out in the *Science of Logic*, an understanding of history conciliating necessity and contingency becomes possible. As a result of this transition, contingency in its manifested form is shown to be originated in the free activity of the subject, and not to disappear in it.

¹⁵ Hegel 2010, 536.

¹⁶ Hegel 2010, 532.

III. CONTINGENCY IN THE REAL PHILOSOPHY: THE CASE OF CHRISTIAN RELIGION

I now proceed to consider contingency in the real philosophy. As I attempted to show, the doctrine of the concept in the *Science of Logic* offers a solid ground for a philosophical foundation and understanding of contingency. My idea is that, in order to keep true to Hegel's goal "to revive the concept in such a dead matter"¹⁷, we have to conceive the concept and the logical structure of subjectivity as the negative power of both necessity and contingency. This applies also to the philosophy of spirit: as contingency and necessity are nothing but free positions of the subject, subjective freedom entails not only the faculty of sublating contingency into necessity but also the opposite one. In a historical, no longer simply logical dimension, this means that something posited as necessary at a certain point of time can be recognised to be contingent at a later point of time.

To substantiate this thesis, I will make reference to a specific case in the philosophy of history: the relationship between state and (Christian) religion. I need to point out, first, that others example could be made¹⁸, and, second, that I am not interested in a discussion of this issue *qua* this issue, but only *qua* real-philosophical instantiation of my argument on contingency. That is, I am not interested in either affirming or criticizing the plausibility of Hegel's argument in a historical or political-philosophical perspective, but only in showing the functioning of the logical structure of subjectivity (in which contingency plays a fundamental role) as emerging in a specific case of the philosophy of history.

Christian religion is for Hegel, as it is known, a necessary moment of the historical progress of the consciousness and actualization of freedom, which has its most adequate embodiment in the modern state. However, the same solidly developed modern state, which is a result of this development including the necessity of Christian religion, can and should be so liberal as to consider a private and contingent matter the citizens' choice to belong to this or that institutionalised religion. For reasons I cannot discuss here, Hegel

¹⁷ Hegel 2010, 507.

¹⁸ Among others, the case of art, which is – as classical art – the necessary form of the absolute spirit for the substantial Greek ethical life, whereas in the modern world – as romantic art – is characterised by the highest contingency (see below, footnote 27).

claims that the state “should even require all its citizens to belong to a church – any [*irgendeiner*] church is all that can be said, since the state cannot interfere with the content of faith insofar as it depends on the inner realm of representation”¹⁹.

“Any” is the keyword here. Christian religion makes up for Hegel the very transition point to modernity and to the establishment of the principle of subjective freedom²⁰ and constitutes insofar a necessary moment in world history. At a later point of time and from another perspective, however, this determination becomes accidental, based on the same principle that had made it necessary in the first place (subjective freedom), as it is no longer connected with a universal necessity, but with the private, contingent “inner realm of representation”. Affirming this contingency is an essential part of the modern conception of freedom: in modern societies, a specific religious belonging cannot be imposed. This case shows that, at the real-philosophical level, the ability to conceive and actualize the transition from necessity to contingency makes up a dimension as essential to subjective freedom as the ability to perform the opposite movement.

Freedom is thus grounded on this oscillation between self-reference and reference to other and between necessity and contingency. We can say that subjective freedom as the power of negation is this oscillation and not a unilateral progress from contingency to necessity. To be able to think as accidental what we assumed to be necessary also means to be able to question what currently exists and has a value or what is “positive”. The recognition of the necessity of contingency makes up a constitutive pillar of the individual right to critique. Thus, recognition of the role of contingency, subjective freedom and individual right to critique belong together. As already remarked, one might believe that Hegel only cares about the transition from the contingency of nature to the necessity of spiritual determinations and that he is not very eager to recognise the role of contingency (nor, for that matter, the right of individual critique). But I believe this has more to do with the specific – and contingent! – context of his

¹⁹ Hegel 2008, 246, translation slightly modified. See the whole Annotation to § 270 in this regard.

²⁰ See Hegel 2008, Annotation to § 124.

philosophical-critical goals rather than with a fundamental incompatibility of his system with the recognition of the necessity of contingency.

In this regard, I want to close this section by quoting a largely neglected passage in which Hegel, while answering some observations by Göschel on the ineliminability of the representational dimension from religious experience and from philosophy of religion, matches “the transition in general *from the representation to the concept* and [the transition] *from the concept to the representation*”. Science should not be indifferent to the “language of representation [*Sprache der Vorstellung*]” as this is “a different one from that of the concept, and men not only get to know things first of all with the names given by representation, but through these names they can in the first place feel alive and at home in the things”. Strikingly enough, Hegel does not criticise this point of view: in fact, he explicitly apologizes for not having granted it a place in his works. By way of apology for the limits of his own work in this regard, he points to the fact that especially the beginning of a philosophical enterprise requires one to keep true and straight to the pure concept in order to gain certainty about it. Insofar, the beginning (*Anfang*) of science requires

“to violently keep off the distractions provoked by the variety of representation and the form of contingency in the connection of its determination. [...] Once reached, the greater stability within the movement of the concept will allow to be less worried against the seduction of representation and to grant this latter more freedom under the dominion of the concept”²¹.

²¹ Here is the original passage: “Der Herr Verfasser [Göschel] hat damit einen interessanten Gesichtspunkt berührt, - das Herübergehen überhaupt *von der Vorstellung zum Begriffe* und *von dem Begriffe zur Vorstellung*, ein Herüber- und Hinübergehen, das in der wissenschaftlichen Meditation vorhanden ist und [von dem,] daß es auch in der wissenschaftlichen Darstellung allenthalben ausgesprochen werde, hier gefordert wird. Wie Homer von einigen Gestirnen angibt, welchen Namen sie bei den unsterblichen Göttern, welchen anderen bei den sterblichen Menschen führen, so ist die Sprache der Vorstellung eine andere als die des Begriffs, und der Mensch erkennt die Sache nicht bloß zunächst an dem Namen der Vorstellung, sondern in diesem Namen ist er als lebendig erst bei ihr zu Hause [...]. Referent [Hegel himself] dürfte, wenigstens zum Behufe einer Entschuldigung von Unvollkommenheit seiner Arbeiten nach dieser Seite, daran erinnern, daß eben der *Anfang*, den auch der Herr Verfasser nennt, vornehmlich es auflegt, sich fester an den der Vorstellung in oft hartem Kampfe abgerungenen Begriff und dessen Entwicklungsgang, wie sein Ausdruck in dem reinen Gedanken lautet, anzuschließen und in seinem Gleise sich strenger zu halten, um desselben sicher zu werden und die Zerstreungen, welche die Vielseitigkeit der Vorstellung und die Form der Zufälligkeit in der Verbindung ihrer Bestimmung mit sich führt, gewaltsam abzuhalten; diese Vielseitigkeit bringt die Gefahr der Bequemlichkeit zu nahe, in der Strenge der Methode des Gedankens nachzugeben. Die

Once we are, so to say, confident with the pure concept and able to deal with it scientifically, we might and actually should also perform the opposite movement, the one from the concept and its necessity to the representation and its contingency, just like a solidly established rational state should be liberal with regard to the religious convictions of its citizens, i.e. it should be open to their contingency and not imposing a necessity²².

IV. THE NARRATION OF CONTINGENCY

This demand, however, risks remaining abstract if we do not specify how it can be answered on a Hegelian basis. That is, given that philosophy is not concerned with what contingently happens but only with what is true therein, how can contingency be narrated or expressed? And what is the relationship between the narration of contingency and the truth of philosophy? Hegel himself, as the above passage shows, is not concerned with “the narration of contingency”, even though he recognizes its function. However, being able to have a perspective for the narration of contingency without renouncing “the dominion of the concept” is an essential point for an open, fruitful interpretation of Hegel’s understanding of contingency. This last section is devoted to outlining the main features of such a narration of contingency on a Hegelian basis.

We saw that in Hegel’s both anti-Spinozian and anti-Fichtian argument, the concept preserves itself and stays by itself also in the world of contingency, in fact *only* in it, as a concept that is not related to otherness cannot concretely and freely be related to itself either. Now, in its relationship with the otherness, the concept to be sure reconstructs the inner

erlangte größere Festigkeit in der Bewegung des Begriffs wird es erlauben, gegen die Verführung der Vorstellung unbesorgter zu sein und sie unter der Herrschaft des Begriffes freier gewähren zu lassen; wie die Sicherheit, die im göttlichen Glauben schon vorhanden ist, von Haus aus gestattet, ruhig gegen den Begriff zu sein und sich in denselben sowohl furchtlos über seine Konsequenzen als auch unbekümmerter über seine Konsequenz, welche bei vorausgesetztem Glauben sich nicht selbst als frei zu erweisen hat, einzulassen” (Hegel 1986, 376-378).

²² Hegel makes clear, however, that the relationship between concept and representation is not a symmetrical one, as philosophy can find its own form and contents in the form of religious representation, but not vice versa (see *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Outline* (1830), Annotation to § 573; I thank Federico Orsini for pointing out this passage to me). In general, any attempt to outline an Hegelian standpoint on reality different from the philosophical one has to acknowledge that for Hegel the truth of any alternative account is to be found in the philosophical concept, but not vice versa.

necessity within the world of contingency. However, contingency is thus not simply removed, but rather embedded in a different perspective: the perspective of the philosophical reconstruction of the conceptual necessity of contingency and *in* contingency. This brings, incidentally, to Hegel's exposition of different kinds of history writing in the opening of the lectures on the philosophy of history, ranging from an empirical-descriptive to a philosophical one.

But already in the *Science of Logic* one can find a significant digression on the “narration of contingency”. This digression shows that the reconstruction of necessity does not remove contingency at all, but rather introduces a philosophical perspective on it, and with it a necessity that does not contradict the contingency of individual moments and actions. Now this philosophical perspective is, of course, the highest one according to Hegel. However, this is not because philosophy proceeds abstractly a priori, but, on the contrary, because it takes contingency seriously. Hegel deals here with “the prevailing fundamental misunderstanding [...] that the *natural* principle, or the *starting point* in the *natural* development or the *history* of an individual in the process of self-formation, is regarded as the *truth* and *conceptually the first*”²³. Hegel's view is, on the contrary, that “intuition or being are no doubt first in the order of nature, or are the condition for the concept, but they are not for all that the unconditioned in and for itself; on the contrary, in the concept their reality is sublated and, consequently, so is also the reflective shine that they had of being the conditioning reality”²⁴. Thereafter he distinguishes the two, not mutually excluding, perspectives of “narration” and “philosophy”. Regarding the former: “If it is not the *truth* which is at issue but only *narration*, as it is the case in pictorial and phenomenal thinking, then we might as well stay with the story that we begin with feelings and intuitions, and that the understanding then extracts a universal or an abstraction from their manifold”²⁵. Regarding the latter: “But philosophy ought not to be a narrative of what happens, but a cognition of what is *true* in what happens,

²³ Hegel 2010, 519.

²⁴ Hegel 2010, 519.

²⁵ Hegel 2010, 519.

in order further to comprehend on the basis of this truth what in the narrative appears as a mere happening”²⁶.

Admittedly, Hegel here grants the perspective of “narration” not much more value than a simple passing remark²⁷. However, this very reticence tells more about Hegel’s conception of contingency than a direct thematization would have. In fact, this reticence undergirds my thesis of the attractiveness of Hegel’s understanding of contingency and of the relationship between this latter and philosophy. Let me first of all briefly comment on the last quote, which is a very pointed definition of philosophy. This definition claims a role for philosophy that we might possibly judge too “grand”, or even arrogant. We would certainly no longer separate that sharply the historical-empirical narration (to which also a good part of what we currently call “science”, including social sciences, would belong) from “the” truth. Yet, even with this proviso, I take Hegel’s understanding of philosophy to be plausible with regard to my current topic. Philosophy’s claim to necessity is limited to the comprehension of what is true, in the sense of “effective”, in what happens. We may still call it a grand claim, but at any rate it is not the claim for a philosophical knowledge concerned with every contingent aspect of reality and with their dissolution into an apriori established necessity. What is contingent is not philosophically forced to surrender to universal principles. The right of contingency is not touched or questioned by philosophy, but rather left to different “narrations” (history, art, “pictorial and phenomenal thinking” and so on)²⁸.

Hegel’s understanding of philosophy is from this point of view everything but totalitarian and aprioristic. What is purely contingent may not be “true” according to it, but its right to freely exist and find the most different expressions is never questioned. This is an implication of the transition from the absolute as substance to the absolute as subject. While in the substance the determinations are connected to an object excluding the coexistence of necessity and contingency, the subject freely recognizes

²⁶ Hegel 2010, 519.

²⁷ But see also Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Outline* (1830), Annotation to § 549.

²⁸ I have argued in Siani 2010 and Siani 2011 that the Hegelian romantic form of art, in particular, is the most important instance and even the paradigm of this alternative narration, and that Hegel’s reticence about art in his philosophy of right can actually be interpreted as a way to grant independence to this alternative narration.

contingency and can behave toward it in a loving way. The subject posits by itself the determination of contingency and preserves itself while confronting contingency and within contingency, whereas necessity and contingency would collapse into each other in the substance. In fact, the free subject *is* this self-determined oscillation between reference to self and reference to the other, and between necessity and contingency²⁹.

An important implication is that the subject is historical (*geschichtlich*) already on the basis of its logical constitution (even though, of course, that logical constitution is not in turn historically variable). The subject gives itself freely to the ephemeral finitude of things in order to reconstruct its necessity by finding itself in it, and exists as this process. As the subject is now the absolute, there can be no given absolute anymore, but rather the absolute is the free activity itself which the subject exercises on its object³⁰, and through which it constructs itself as subject. In this oscillation not only the object but also the subject changes. The logical structure of subjectivity does not contradict, but, in fact, requires the historicity of the subject. Only such an understanding of contingency allows the comprehending knowledge of history as the actualization of freedom³¹. History is neither what simply happens contingently, nor a necessary process predetermined and teleologically oriented by principles external to the subject. Hegel's distinction of pure happening and truth on the one side, and of narration and philosophy on the other side, allows as well a clear distinction of the two levels: the level of history as a sequence of contingent individual facts and deeds and the level of history as self-determination of the idea, as actualization of human freedom and as object of philosophical reconstruction.

In this way philosophy gets deprived of any capacity of prediction and prescription for the future: the future course of history is not predetermined by an ahistorical absolute, but its determination is left to our action. Yet, the rejection of a prescriptive role of philosophy does not result in scepticism or in an "atheistic view of the ethical world"³². Whereas philosophy cannot predict the future, it provides us with the tools to evaluate

²⁹ See Iber 2002, 184-185.

³⁰ See Burbidge 2007, Chapter 5.

³¹ See Houlgate 1995, 48.

³² Hegel 2008, 8.

and criticize our actions and their outcomes whenever we cannot retrieve our freedom in the objective world and behave toward it in a loving way. On the one hand, philosophy does not stand in the way of the largely contingent character of subjective actions and plans in the individual case. On the other hand, it provides us with the cognitive and critical tools necessary to orient the intricacy of the individual cases toward the establishment of forms of subjectivity and objectivity in which the freedom of the subject is actualized³³.

To conclude: I have argued that the preservation of a space of contingency in a strong sense is a necessary, though not sufficient condition of Hegel's understanding of freedom. Of course, one should not claim the primacy of contingency either, as it seems to be the case of Burbidge's book, which comes to the conclusion that the correspondence of concept and reality in history can be no more than a kind of regulative ideal: this is a Kantian, not a Hegelian point of view³⁴. But all in all, Burbidge is right when claiming that understanding Hegel's conception of contingency is hard for us because we usually take the moves from the theoretical premises of classic Platonic metaphysics, where contingency is understood on the basis of the primacy of necessity and deduced from universals of reason. On the contrary, contingency is to be understood as something originary, and not as *privatio necessitatis*. Therefore, as Burbidge underlines, the investigation of the role of contingency in Hegel also offers a privileged access to the understanding of his overcoming of classical metaphysics toward the knowledge of a logical structure allowing to take history seriously, and not as a teleological process led by and oriented to an ahistorical ideal³⁵. In my opinion, Hegel keeps true to this approach in his philosophy of history, thus categorically excluding the idea of a philosophically predictable "end of history".

A last, maybe not wholly Hegelian concluding remark might be allowed here. From the irreducibility of contingency follows that contingency cannot be fully explained and dealt with philosophically. Of course,

³³ On the co-implication of rejection of the prescriptive and predictive power of philosophy, assessment of the right of the subject in the individual, contingent case and possibility of a philosophically informed critique see also Quante 2011, 226-227. On individuality in Hegel's philosophy see the essays contained in Rózsa 2007.

³⁴ See Burbidge 2007, 151-152.

³⁵ See Burbidge 2007, 9.

philosophy gives us an orientation to find the traces of the concept – and of human freedom – in a world of contingent events. But contingency is not a universal category. We are always confronted as individuals with this or that individual case. We always need to plan, act, and evaluate in a different way: there simply cannot be a universal theory for individual cases. But this means also that there cannot be a theory of human freedom telling us from case to case “how should we act”, to use again Kant as a counter-example³⁶. The desire for such a theory obviously originates from the basic existential need to see the broadest possible necessity, order, and predictability in a world that is otherwise unfathomable. To accept that there cannot be a full liberation from contingency, and that in fact we can only be free through contingency, is itself ultimately rather an existential decision than a question of theory³⁷. For it, a courage for contingency is needed, not the logical deduction of contingency. Yet we still need a philosophical theory enabling and encouraging this recognition, and I argued that Hegel’s philosophy does. Philosophy can only reconstruct a process or a configuration in its inner necessity, but does not have anything to do with the individual case: *individuum est irrationale*³⁸. The individual case can only be *narrated* through other forms. That this narration not only has to do with truth but is also a fundamental counterpart to philosophy, is something that we might object to Hegel on the basis of his own thought, but this lies outside the scope of the present article.

³⁶ About this whole context see Utz 2001, 309. Here one should discuss Hegel’s understanding of forgiveness in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, whereby it is clear that actions and evaluations can only be concrete and effective if they recognize the contingency of the “Other” and do not refuse it based on aprioristic universal principles, as it happens in the figures of the “beautiful soul” and the “hard heart”. See my Siani 2013.

³⁷ Insofar I fully agree with the thesis that Hegel “addresses a famous existentialist objection raised by Kierkegaard, who complained that Hegel’s philosophical ‘Science’ may be beautifully constructed, yet he, as this particular individual, cannot find himself in it. Though Hegel did not know Kierkegaard, he had fully concurred with his demand” (Yovel 2005, 43).

³⁸ “The ultimate test of any system of thought is not whether it dispels irrationality, but whether it shows that irrationality is contained within reality itself” and “for Hegel reality would not be self-sufficient if it did not contain its own irrationality” (Di Giovanni 1980, 193 and 197).

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