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The Greatness and Limits of Hegel's Theory of Tragedy

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Hegel's Theory of Tragedy

Next to Aristotle's account of tragedy, the theory of tragedy developed by the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831) has become the most studied and quoted in the West. Even scholars who openly criticize Hegel sometimes unwittingly reproduce aspects of his theory (Moss 1969–70). Tragedy arises, according to Hegel, when a hero courageously asserts a substantial and just position, but in doing so simultaneously violates a contrary and likewise just position and so falls prey to a one-sidedness that is defined at one and the same time by greatness and by guilt.

Born the same year as the composer Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827) and the poets Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843) and William Wordsworth (1770–1850), Hegel lived in an era of transition. Raised in the provincial Duchy of Württemberg in southern Germany, Hegel celebrated the advent of the French revolution while he was still a teenager, only to be sobered by the subsequent movement to terror. By the time of his death in 1831, the Industrial Revolution was well underway in Europe, though still barely on the horizon in the German-speaking principalities. Hegel lived in an age of the flowering of German letters. The philosophers Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814), and Friedrich Schelling (1775–1854) and the writers Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1749–1832), Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805), and Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829) were all contemporaries. After a slow start as a professional philosopher, Hegel became the leading philosophical figure of his day, gaining chairs in philosophy, first in Heidelberg and then in Berlin. He was the first great philosopher to have detailed knowledge of non-European cultures and to integrate them into his thinking.

Hegel was one of the broadest minds in the history of philosophy. His writings, which are all interconnected, range widely and address, for example, logic, the philosophy of nature, the philosophy of history, political philosophy, aesthetics, the

philosophy of religion, and the history of philosophy. Hegel sought to develop a complex logic of categories that illuminated the absolute and its appearance in the world. In the Hegelian dialectic, which encompasses both thought and history, each category or thesis reveals its one-sidedness and passes over into its antithesis, which is likewise recognized as one-sided, eventually giving way to a synthesis, which both negates and preserves the earlier terms; the synthesis itself becomes absorbed in a larger process in which it, too, is recognized as partial, though at a higher and more complex level. This continual progression, whereby partial categories give way to their own internal contradictions, leads to an ever greater realization of reason, self-consciousness, and freedom. Hegel's influence on Western thought is immeasurable to this day. Even many thinkers who are skeptical of the Hegelian system recognize Hegel's extraordinary powers of integration and his profound insights into wide-ranging areas of human inquiry.

Tragedy plays a role in both Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind* and his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, arguably his two best-known works in the Anglo-American world. In chapter 5 of the *Phenomenology* Hegel discusses character, ethical action, and guilt partly by way of an analysis of Sophocles' tragedy *Antigone*. In his introduction to the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* Hegel analyzes the world-historical individual who shapes history often beyond her conscious intentions; such figures emerge ahead of their time, come into conflict with their ages, and prepare a new world. In his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* Hegel offers a fascinating portrait of Socrates in the light of this tragic dialectic. Also in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* Hegel touches on tragedy, especially in the Greek world and in relation to reconciliation. Tragedy is most prominent in Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics*, which is one of his most accessible texts. The *Aesthetics*, which was compiled and edited by Hegel's student Heinrich Gustav Hotho, is based on Hegel's lecture notes and on student transcriptions of the lectures. Hegel lectured on aesthetics in Heidelberg in 1818 and in Berlin in 1820/1, 1823, 1826, and 1828/9. Toward the end of his lectures Hegel discusses drama and devotes most of his attention to tragedy. These reflections represent Hegel's most mature and most extended discussion of tragedy, and they relate to his entire corpus insofar as the structure of tragedy parallels the dialectic and insofar as the content of tragedy involves the most essential dimensions of human action and divine providence (15:502; A1179).[1]

For Hegel tragedy is the conflict of two substantive positions, each of which is justified, yet each of which is wrong to the extent that it fails either to recognize the validity of the other position or to grant it its moment of truth; the conflict can be resolved only with the fall of the hero, such that unity is restored and the whole of ethical life is purged of its one-sidedness.

> The original essence of tragedy consists then in the fact that within such a conflict each of the opposed sides, if taken by itself, has *justification*, while on the other hand each can establish the true and positive content of its own aim and character only by negating and *damaging* the equally justified power of the other. Consequently, in its moral life,

> and because of it, each is just as much involved in *guilt*. (15:523; A 1196, translation modified)

Hegelian tragedy is the conflict of two goods. What should be a single unity has been split into two. For Hegel, this is an inevitable consequence of the absolute realizing itself in individuals. In order to become manifest, the absolute must pass over into the particular; this generates conflict within the absolute, to be resolved only with the transcendence (or death) of the particular (15:523–4; A 1196–7). In the course of history one-sided positions emerge that transcend previous errors but which still contain within themselves their own limitations (15:486; A 1167); these, too, eventually give rise to conflict and transcendence, such that history progresses dialectically, through contradiction and negativity, toward an ever more comprehensive and rational goal.

Not only does the tragic hero refuse to acknowledge the validity of the other position; the other position – or at least the sphere it represents – is also an aspect within the hero even as she denies it. This is especially clear in Sophocles' *Antigone*, which Hegel describes as the most beautiful of all tragedies (15:550; A 1218; see also 17:133). In this play Creon, King of Thebes, decrees that because of treason the body of Polynices may not be buried. Antigone, Polynices' sister, recognizes a higher, divine law and tries to cover his body. Though Antigone is affianced to Creon's son, Haemon, Creon sentences Antigone to death. Before the sentence is carried out, Antigone and Haemon commit suicide, as does Creon's wife, leaving Creon devastated and alone. Not only is Creon stubborn and steadfast in Sophocles' play; Antigone, too, fails to recognize a legitimate conflict of goods and is in this sense as single-minded as her nemesis, if nonetheless more valid in her stance. According to Hegel, the action of each hero is both destructive of the other and self-destructive: Antigone is not only a family member but a member of the state, Creon not only a ruler but a father and husband; the tragic heroes transgress

> what, if they were true to their own nature, they should be honouring. For example, Antigone lives under the political authority of Creon [the present King]; she is herself the daughter of a King [Oedipus] and the fiancée of Haemon [Creon's son], so that she ought to pay obedience to the royal command. But Creon too, as father and husband, should have respected the sacred tie of blood and not ordered anything against its pious observance. So there is immanent in both Antigone and Creon something that in their own way they attack, so that they are gripped and shattered by something intrinsic to their own actual being. (15:549; A 1217–18)

According to Hegel, the tragic hero adheres to a one-sided position, denies the validity of its complementary and contrasting other, and eventually succumbs to the greater process in which it is submerged. The tragic adherence to a partial position is stripped away and yields to the larger rational process of historical development. Tragedy thus contains within itself a hidden moment of resolution and reconciliation (15:524; A 1197; 15:526; A 1198; 15:547; A 1215).

The Greatness of Hegel's Theory of Tragedy

Most interpreters of tragedy, beginning already with Aristotle, focus their accounts of tragedy on the effect of tragedy, on its reception. Hegel, along with Hölderlin, Schelling, and Peter Szondi (1929–79), is one of the few figures in the tradition to take a different path. Here is the first appealing feature of Hegel's theory. The history of the philosophy of tragedy is marred by an overemphasis on reception, an undue focus on the (emotive) effect of tragedy at the expense of tragic structure. Hegel, in contrast, focuses on the core structure of tragedy. Hegel does share with Aristotle an interest in organic plots, with an appropriate reversal and an ensuing recognition, but Hegel's aspirations for organic structure may be said to exceed Aristotle's: Hegel places far more emphasis on the way in which the hero's flaw must be intertwined with, and in a sense result from, her greatness.

Paradoxically, Hegel's focus on the structure of tragic collision gives him a new angle on the traditional motifs of fear and pity. For Hegel the audience is to fear not external fate, as with Aristotle, but the ethical substance which, if violated, will turn against the hero (15:525; A 1197–8). Insofar as suffering flows inevitably from the tragic hero's profound identification with a just and substantial position, suffering for Hegel is not quite the undeserved suffering that for Aristotle elicits pity. Hegel reinterprets pity as sympathy not merely with the suffering hero as sufferer but with the hero as one who, despite her fall, is nonetheless in a sense justified. According to Hegel we fear the power of an ethical substance that has been violated as a result of collision, and we sympathize with the tragic hero who, despite having transgressed the absolute, also in a sense upholds the absolute. Thus, Hegelian tragedy has an emotional element: we are torn between the values and destiny of each position; we identify with the character's action but sense the inevitable revenge of the absolute, which destroys the hero's one-sidedness.

Second, collision draws out the ambivalence central to the tragic intertwining of greatness and limits, divinity and nothingness. Because the tragic hero acts both for and against the good, her nature is as paradoxical as the situation in which she finds herself: she is both great and flawed; indeed, her very greatness is her flaw, since greatness comes at the price of excluding what the situation also demands. The hero is both innocent and guilty: innocent insofar as she adheres to the good by acting on behalf of a just principle; guilty insofar as she violates a good and wills to identify with that violation. Guilt presupposes action for which the hero is responsible; as a result, the hero seeks not sympathy or pity but recognition of the substance of her action, including its consequences. In this spirit Hegel offers the paradoxical formulation: "It is the honour of these great characters to be culpable" (15:546; A 1215). The traditional notion of *hamartia*, often misunderstood simply as a tragic flaw, can be grasped with the help of Hegel as an error or disaster that is nonetheless related to a greatness. Kurt von Fritz argues that *hamartia* is best understood as action according to an immanent necessity that nonetheless leads to catastrophe (1962: 3–14). In other

words, the hero suffers from her greatness (which necessarily also violates a good) rather than simply from a weakness (or a flaw). Hegel's theory is more complex than either the traditional notion of tragic flaw or the counterstrand that elevates greatness: for Hegel the hero's greatness and flaw are one and the same; in fulfilling the good, the hero violates the good. Not surprisingly, the audience likewise experiences both admiration and despair, pleasure and pain, renewed reconciliation and irretrievable loss.

Third, we might note the dramatic intensity generated by Hegelian tragedy. The collision of two goods is *in principle* the dramatically richest structure of tragedy. Even Arthur Schopenhauer, who develops a concept of tragedy in *The World as Will and Representation* (1819) that is far removed from Hegel's reconciliatory focus, privileges that form of tragedy defined by a collision of goods; it is the most dramatic and most powerful. Our understanding of a work that seemingly lacks a collision may be enriched by a reading that recognizes submerged moments of collision. An interpretation of Goethe's *Faust*, for example, that stresses moments of collision between Faust and Mephistopheles, might shed a different and fuller light on the play than a reading that argues merely for the conflict of good and evil. So, too, might one emphasize the structure of tragic collision in works such as Euripides' *Bacchae*, Schiller's *Wallenstein*, Ibsen's *Ghosts*, and Brecht's *The Good Person of Sezuan*.

As if to underline the hidden identity of the two forces, the competing heroes in a Hegelian tragedy are often presented, despite their obvious differences, as mirror images of one another. Antigone and Creon, for example, are specular figures: each pursues justice in a narrow way, each is isolated, stubborn, imperious toward others, and the cause of doom for self and others. A mirroring structure is also evident in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, where the similarities of Caesar and Brutus are presented in parallel and adjoining scenes (2.1 and 2.2), and in Büchner's *Danton's Death*, where both Robespierre and Danton compare themselves with Christ and near one another, intellectually, in their soliloquies.

Fourth, great psychological depth is found within the complex reactions of a hero who is aware of competing and equally justifiable demands. I would make a distinction within tragic collision which Hegel does not make. In some tragedies the conflict of goods is represented by more than one person or institution, what one could call external collision, for which Sophocles' *Antigone* would be an example. In other tragedies a single hero is aware of competing obligations, what one might call internal collision; an example would be Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In external collision the hero sees only her own perspective and fails to recognize, as the audience does, that her position is as invalid as it is valid. Some tragic heroes, however, see both sides of the conflict. In not differentiating the two types of collision, Hegel appears to be overestimating the role of reception. For Hegel the two goods are united in the consciousness of the audience as it sees the fall of the hero and her one-sided principle. It makes a great difference, however, whether the hero is aware of the collision; this affects not only the dramatic and psychological complexities of the work but also the movement toward reconciliation on the stage itself.

External collision offers us the most dramatic form of tragedy. An internal collision may become less dramatic because of the unity of two positions within a single self; on the other hand, internal collision tends to be intellectually and psychologically more differentiated. It allows for richer characterization, a trait Hegel admired in modern drama, and conduces to a more explicit thematization of tragic essence, that is, the connection between greatness and suffering. Internal collision is also formally rich, giving rise to some of the greatest rhetoric of world drama, monologues and dialogues that presuppose awareness of an ineradicable conflict of goods. That the hero must sacrifice her naive belief in a just world – by violating one good in order to preserve another – has extraordinary intellectual and emotional consequences.

The danger may, of course, arise that the hero will simply waver back and forth between one pole and the other, thus destroying the hero's resolve and any unity of character, and that this indecisiveness, not the substance of the poles, will be heralded as the essence of art (13:312; A 241; 15:562–3; A 1228–9). In this context Hegel distinguishes characters who hesitate because they are confused and weak from those who see a genuine and irresolvable conflict of goods.

> It is already different if two opposed spheres of life, duties, and so forth, seem equally sacrosanct to a self-assured character, and yet he sees himself compelled to align himself with *one* to the exclusion of the other. In that case the vacillation is only a transitional phase and does not constitute the nerve of the person's character. (15:563; A 1228–9, translation modified)

A central insight in Hegel's analysis of tragedy in the *Phenomenology* is that, even when the tragic hero becomes conscious of the justice of a competing position, character demands consistency, and with this not vacillation, but action, acknowledgment, and guilt (3:348). According to Hegel, Shakespeare's characters are defined by their passions and their compelling action, not their vacillation or hesitation. Hegel describes Macbeth:

> In the beginning he hesitates, but then he stretches out his hand to the crown, commits murder to get it, and, in order to maintain it, storms away through every atrocity. This reckless firmness, this identity of the man with himself and the end arising from his own decision, gives him an essential interest for us. Not respect for the majesty of the monarch, not the frenzy of his wife, not the defection of his vassals, not his impending destruction, nothing, neither divine nor human law, makes him falter or draw back; instead he persists in his course. (14:200–1; A 578, translation modified)

Writing later not only of Macbeth, Othello, or Richard III, Hegel comments:

> It is precisely Shakespeare who gives us, in contrast to that portrayal of vacillating and inwardly divided characters, the finest examples of firm and consistent figures who come to ruin simply because of this decisive adherence to themselves and their aims. Without ethical justification, but upheld solely by the formal inevitability of their

> individuality, they allow themselves to be lured to their deed by external circumstances, or they plunge blindly on and persevere by the strength of their will, even if now what they do, they accomplish only from the necessity of maintaining themselves against others or simply because they have reached the point that they have reached. (15:564; A 1229–30, translation modified)

To elevate to tragic status Hamlet's lack of will as a simple inability to act, the common view among Hegel's contemporaries, is to transform tragedy into mere suffering (13:316; A 244). For Hegel the apparent weakness of Hamlet derives, rather, from the energy of his thought, which recognizes a conflict between the emotional need to act in the face of corruption and indecency and insight into the immoral nature of the contemplated action. Because Hamlet is idealistic, conscientious, and sensitive, he hesitates to add to the pollution and sickness of the age; he must first weigh the merits of restoring justice and order through treachery and murder. Thus, he hesitates, disgusted with the world, but tormented in his conscience, weary within himself (14:207–8; A 583–4; 15:559; A 1225–6; 15:566–7; A 1231–2).

Fifth, we see with the help of the Hegelian model how tragedy, like much of art, also has a proleptic function: presenting the boundary cases of ethics, it not only exhibits the good; it portrays conflicts that can in turn give rise to philosophical reflection on the good. Any Hegelian tragedy implies alternatives; the hero of internal collision knows of these alternatives. Her choice is conscious, and her act of deliberation brings forth the fullest range of consciousness, the weighing of ends and means, of duties and obligations, the totality of conflicting claims. Traditional definitions of tragedy often stress knowledge and self-recognition; these aspects receive their fullest development in the tragedy of internal collision. Hegel argues in the *Phenomenology* that even when two individuals collide and recognize only their own ethical values, in violating the other and destroying self and other, they gain a late recognition of the validity of the contrasting ethical power (3:348).

For Hegel tragic fate is rational: reason does not allow the individuals to hold onto their positions in their one-sidedness. Because each stance is constituted through its relation to the other, the elimination of one stance leads to the destruction of the other. The human result is death, but the absolute end is the reestablishment of ethical substance. This unity is, for Hegel, the catharsis of tragedy, which takes place in the consciousness of the audience, as it recognizes the supremacy of the whole of ethical life and sees it purged of one-sidedness. Catharsis, then, is for Hegel an act of recognition; tragedy gives us ethical insight into the untenability of one-sided positions.

Sixth, we recognize the utility of Hegel's theory for a philosophy of history that stresses the importance of paradigm shifts. Hegel's theory of tragedy deals not just with conflict but with the dynamics of historical change. Tragedy rarely occurs in an eminently ordered universe, such as the Christian Middle Ages, where suffering is fully rationalized, or in a chaotic age such as our own that is less attuned to the idea of

binding ethical norms and views suffering as either arbitrary or external to greatness. Tragedy is more likely to arise when there is partial order and partial disorder, a transition between paradigms, and thus often a collision.

Precisely because tragedies of collision frequently arise during paradigm shifts, Hegelian tragedy has particular relevance for historical drama. Hegel is attuned to historical conflicts, crises, and transitions; periods of tranquility and happiness, according to Hegel, are "empty leaves" in the annals of world history (12.42). Hegel invites audiences to ask: Which values have come into conflict? Which positions are rooted in the past and which are harbingers of the future? In what ways do individual characters embody the conflicting strands of history? To what extent are forces beyond the hero's intentions and passions shaping the events as they unfold? The importance of historical drama has been developed partly under Hegelian influence by the nineteenth-century German dramatist Friedrich Hebbel (1813–63), who tries to show the clash of values as one norm is pushed aside and another comes into being. Often a self-sacrificing hero arrives before a new paradigm is set and collides with tradition, or a stubborn hero holds onto her position long after a new norm has taken shape. Both moments are present in Schiller's *Don Carlos*. It is important to note that for Hegel the individual can be morally right, the state retrograde, such that the individual person is more aligned with the universal, the state more with the false particularity that must ultimately give way (or adjust to the ideas represented by the moral individual). In this sense we should be careful not to see in Hegel's view of tragedy simply a deflation of the value of the person in the march of history. After all, for Hegel the telos of history is freedom and self-consciousness.

According to Hegel tragedy presupposes profound identification with normative values, to which a hero is attached and for which the hero is willing to sacrifice herself. Hegel recognizes a shift from tragedy to comedy when what is substantial gives way to what is subjective, and the particular becomes more important than the universal (15:527–31; A1199–1202; 15:552–5; A 1220–2; 15.572–3; A 1236). For Hegel, like Nietzsche, tragedy vanishes in an age of self-consciousness and enlightenment. For Nietzsche, however, the obstacle to tragedy is the abandonment of irrationality; for Hegel the problem is the dissolution of objective values.

Finally, whereas Aristotle, along with certain formal theorists in the mid twentieth century, developed ahistorical theories of tragedy, and contemporary critics tend to dispute any transhistorical concept of genre, Hegel was aware of both, offering a universal definition, but suggesting at least one significant shift in its articulation, the difference between ancient and modern tragedy. In ancient tragedy the characters completely identify with the substantive powers and ideas that rule human life; characters act "for the sake of the substantial nature of their end" (15:558; A 1225). In modern tragedy, in contrast, we see greater internal development of character as well as the elevation of more particular concerns: "what presses for satisfaction is the *subjectivity* of their heart and mind and the privacy of their own character" (15:558; A 1225). Also the complexity of modern causality diminishes the extent to which one single person can affect the world around her; complexity and the contingency of

circumstances play a greater role in modern tragedy (15:537; A 1207;15:558; A 1224;15:560; A 1226).

The Limits of Hegel's Theory of Tragedy

Several criticisms of Hegel's theory of tragedy have been advanced, some legitimate, others less so. I have already made one modest criticism: that Hegel fails to distinguish collisions between individuals and collisions within individuals. In truth, this is less a criticism than an attempt to build on what Hegel has already sketched, for the distinction between external and internal collision parallels in some respects Hegel's account of the difference between ancient and modern tragedy. More formidable criticism has been launched at Hegel's claim that the tragic heroes embrace conflicting positions that are "equally justified" (15:523; A 1196; cf. 3:349). I concede that this criticism is valid; Hegel cannot be right when he says that all tragic collisions contain poles of *equal* value; this is already clear in the problems classical philologists have found in Hegel's otherwise magisterial reading of *Antigone*. Even Hegel, in fact, despite his overarching interpretation, is in his language slightly more sympathetic to Antigone. Nonetheless, Hegel is right if we understand him to mean that in the *best* tragedies the conflict is equal. In works where the conflict is unequal, tragic intensity diminishes.

In response to this criticism, one might propose two forms of collision where the poles are not equally weighted, the tragedy of self-sacrifice and the tragedy of stubbornness. These would represent modified versions of Hegelian collision. The tragedy of self-sacrifice would be a collision not of two goods but of good and evil, whereby the hero does the good knowing that she will suffer for it. To preserve a value, its bearer must sometimes perish. One thinks of Gryphius' *Catharina von Georgien*, Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, or Miller's *The Crucible*. The tragedy of self-sacrifice is the noblest and most didactic of tragic subforms, though it is dramatically – owing to the simplicity and nonambiguity of the conflict – the weakest. Heroes of self-sacrifice ideally trigger transitions in history even as they give their lives for these transitions. The other, often the state, adheres to a principle of the past, yet it still holds power; the tragic hero of self-sacrifice represents the future. Self-sacrificing heroes stand for truths that are too new to have a majority behind them; after the hero's sacrifice the situation will change. We can cite Hegel on this issue:

> That is the position of heroes in world history generally; through them a new world dawns. This new principle is in contradiction with the previous one, appears as dissolving; the heroes appear, therefore, as violent, destructive of laws. Individually, they are vanquished; but this principle persists, if in a different form, and buries the present. (18:515)

The unambiguous contrast between good and evil evident in self-sacrifice often weakens the potential richness of the work, reducing complex art and intricate

questions to an almost black-and-white formula. The audience has unadulterated compassion for the tragic hero of self-sacrifice (there is no awareness of the complexity of action or of moral choice) and clear disdain for the enemy (there is no awareness of the good that sometimes lies hidden behind the façade of evil). Hochhuth's *The Deputy*, considered by many the one tragedy in twentieth-century German literature, is weakened by the clearly evil nature of the other, in this case the pope. An admirable and a good work, it is nonetheless not great. Modern Britain's most significant contribution to tragedy, Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*, a play about Sir Thomas More, is likewise a noble but undramatic tragedy of self-sacrifice.

The tragedy of stubbornness is morally less admirable than the tragedy of self-sacrifice but formally and, in most cases, dramatically richer. Here the hero adopts an untenable position but nonetheless displays formal virtues: courage, loyalty, or ambition, for example. Stubbornness – or for the general case let us say steadfastness – belongs as a moment to all tragedy. The greatness of the tragic hero of stubbornness lies in the consistency with which she adheres to a position, false and one-sided though it may be. The hero will not yield; she has no capacity for, or interest in, moderation or compromise, and there is something impressive, even inspiring, about this intensity and perseverance. Ajax wants the world on his own terms and is willing to destroy himself and others to get it. Medea would have profited empirically from stilling her anger, but she remains steadfast in her hate, consistent in her desire for vengeance. Coriolanus could have won the favor of all Romans by being flexible, perhaps simply by being mild, but he will not stray from his principles and resoluteness. His honor and pride will not bear it. Though Hegel does not introduce the idea of tragic stubbornness, he is, as we have seen, not blind to the "greatness of spirit" in a character such as Macbeth (13:538; A 420), and he presents an insightful description of what is necessary for any successful aesthetic portrayal of evil: "Here above all, therefore, we must at least demand formal greatness of character and a subjectivity powerful enough to withstand everything negative and, without denying its deeds or being inwardly shattered, to accept its fate" (15:537; A 1207, translation modified).

One form of tragic stubbornness comes especially close to a concept of collision. I'm thinking of a particular manifestation of what is traditionally called tragedy of character. The collision is not of two justified goods, but instead of two formal virtues. An asymmetry arises, with one virtue being cultivated, the other neglected. The hero has a particular greatness (one formal virtue in excess), coupled with a weakness (another virtue neglected). Coriolanus, for example, is a great warrior but incapable of peaceful compromise. Goethe's Egmont exhibits honesty, openness, and trust but is unaware of the need for caution and calculation. Dr. Stockmann in Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* exhibits the virtues of truth, honesty, and fearlessness at the expense of pragmatism, restraint, and considered action, and so he, too, represents this type of tragic hero. When Gregers Werle in Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* elevates honesty over sensitivity, he also becomes a tragic hero of stubbornness who exalts one formal virtue at the expense of another. Precisely in these cases greatness stands in a

dialectical relationship to the traditional concept of tragic flaw. The hero becomes great by neglecting a contrasting virtue, which is thus the hero's flaw.

Let us return briefly to *Antigone*. Hegel views this play as the paradigmatic tragedy of collision. His view has been frequently contested, but if we see in the play a conflict not between Antigone and Creon but between Antigone and the institution of the state, then we could view the work in modified Hegelian terms (Hösle 1984: 97). Antigone's resistance to the state is based on her adherence to the law of the family, but in following this law, she violates the law of the state. Creon's particular law may be unjust (it is not an established law but a subjective decree); nonetheless, it belongs to the idea of the state that its laws be just and that they be obeyed. Hegel writes: "For the first principle of a state is that there is no reason, conscience, righteousness, or anything else higher than what the state recognizes as such" (18:510). Creon's decrees are wrong, such that law and justice do not coincide. Thus, the state here is only formally right; in terms of content it is wrong. Antigone's act of resistance is just (and so it belongs to self-sacrifice), yet she collides with the state (and so it is collision), even as the state is weakened by a ruler whose position is untenable (Creon represents stubbornness).

Self-sacrifice and stubbornness, along with the drama of suffering, a genre in which we see suffering independently of greatness, might be viewed as deficient forms of the Hegelian model. In a tragedy of collision one hero will likely exhibit the supremacy of a position by pledging her life for it; another is stubbornly unwilling to compromise, even when the limits of her position are evident; and in the wake of such a collision innocent persons suffer. In their autonomy the forms are deficient. They render individual moments absolute: content at the expense of complexity, form at the expense of content, and suffering at the expense of conflict and greatness. What they gain in terms of focus, they lose in terms of wholeness. The greatest tragedy has all moments: moral goodness, formal strength, complexity, and suffering.

Self-sacrifice reaches a peak when it borders on collision, when it is presented as a conflict of goods (the hero's life or well-being versus action on behalf of the good). Likewise, stubbornness fulfills its highest potential when it points toward a collision, the conflict of goodness versus formal virtues or, in a particular variant, the elevation of one virtue at the expense of another. Even as self-sacrifice and stubbornness differ from collision, they find therein their greatest fulfillment. In addition, both self-sacrifice and stubbornness surface more frequently and are more dramatic in periods of conflict, that is, during paradigm shifts, which are in part pushed forward or held back by the tragic heroes. Heroes who are in advance of their time, as are many heroes of self-sacrifice, invite a conflict of values. At times the herald of the new pursues her course in such a way as to ignore the value of the present or to undermine her own position, thus embodying stubbornness. More commonly, however, the stubborn hero holds onto the stability or formal greatness of the past and is destroyed by historical developments that transcend her. From a reverse angle, we can say that certain instances of collision contain within them subordinate moments of self-sacrifice and stubbornness. The claim of equal justification, then, is best dealt with by recognizing

also unequal collisions (self-sacrifice and stubbornness) and by acknowledging the virtues of any tragedy that equalizes the conflict.

A third criticism of Hegel's theory is that Hegel insists on an element of harmony in tragedy, which is anathema to the modern insistence on ineradicable and unrelieved suffering. Hegel argues that despite negativity and destruction, despite the hero's suffering and death, tragedy also offers us a window onto reconciliation and harmony. This point has been criticized most especially in modernity (for references, see Roche 1998: 355). Goethe, writing in Hegel's day, argues, with Hegel, that "a reconciliation, a solution is indispensable as a conclusion if the tragedy is to be a perfect work of art" (1986: 198). Rare, however, is the modern reading of tragedy that sees in tragedy even a glimmer of reconciliation or rational order. Almost accentuating his critique of Hegel's thesis that tragedy contains a moment of reconciliation, Ludwig Marcuse elevates the modern drama of suffering, which he calls "the tragic tragedy," insofar as suffering is given no meaning, no context, no reason: "The absolute tragic essence of the tragic tragedy is suffering without meaning" (Marcuse 1923: 17–18). Marcuse continues his definition: "Modern tragedy is now only a cry of existence; not overcoming, not mitigation of suffering: only a compression and formulation as last and only reaction still possible" (Marcuse 1923: 20). In this account tragedy becomes simple suffering – removed from greatness, from causality, from its position within any overarching narrative. Recognizing neither an overarching order nor any absolutes that might give meaning to suffering, many contemporary theories of tragedy, like Marcuse's, along with an abundance of contemporary "tragedies," elevate suffering and the irrational, chaotic, and often arbitrary forces that elicit suffering. Suffering in this context becomes the whole of tragedy.

In analyzing tragedy, Hegel stresses not the hero's suffering, nor even her endurance in suffering, but her relation to the absolute. For Hegel, as we have seen, the essence of tragedy is structural conflict, not the effect of suffering. Critics of Hegel are sometimes led to equate tragedy with suffering and so divorce tragedy from greatness. I side with Hegel on this issue. Obviously not all suffering need derive from greatness and not all great heroes need suffer. The richer argument is that some suffering is linked to greatness and some forms of greatness cannot avoid suffering; this specifically organic sphere defines the tragic.

Nonetheless, and here I come to a fourth criticism, Hegel might have more clearly differentiated tragedy from the drama of reconciliation, a genre that greatly interested such early Hegelians as Carl Ludwig Michelet (1801–93) and Moritz Carriere (1817–95). Some of the contradictions in Hegel's discussion of drama derive from the failure to differentiate these two genres adequately. Though there is a connection between catharsis and reconciliation, a significant difference exists between tragedy and the drama of reconciliation, namely, whether reconciliation takes place in reception, that is, in the consciousness of the audience, or in the story line itself, that is, in the action on stage. Hegel mentions in this context Aeschylus' *Eumenides* and Sophocles' *Philoctetes* as well as Goethe's *Iphigenia*, which he elevates even higher than the Greek plays insofar as its harmonious resolution is unambiguously organic,

deriving as it does from the action itself (15:532–3; A 1203–4). In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* Hegel returns to this elevation of resolution, arguing again for a transcendence of tragedy: "The higher reconciliation would be that the attitude of one-sidedness would be overcome *in the subject*... and that it renounce injustice in its mind" (17:134). In Hegelian terms, tragedy portrays the transcendence of one-sided positions through death, thus offering an objective reconciliation. The drama of reconciliation, in contrast, exhibits a shift of consciousness on stage; the warring forces give way, thus creating a subjective or "inner reconciliation" (15:550–1; A 1219).

That a nondualistic philosopher like Hegel should articulate a harmonic form of drama, is natural, especially when we consider that Hegel consistently views art in connection with what he calls the speculative, or the higher unity of two conflicting forces (8:176–9). Hegel claims, for example, that the either-or mentality of understanding cannot grasp the unity of art (13:152; A 111), and that poetic, as opposed to prosaic, consciousness represents the literary equivalent of the speculative (15:240–5; A 973–7). Unfortunately, Hegel never fully develops his brief discussion of the drama of reconciliation, and when he does return to it, his comments are as frequently derogatory as they are laudatory. The form is "of less striking importance" (15:531; A 1202). It runs the danger of not fully developing a conflict (15:533; A 1204). The hero who alters his position may appear to lack character (15:550; A 1218). Such changes may diminish the determination and pathos of the hero's position (15:568; A 1233). Finally, harmonic resolutions are frequently unearned (15:569; A 1233). Most of these points can weaken a drama of reconciliation, but they do not belong to it in principle. Hegel himself seems unsure whether these characteristics are contingent or necessary.

If Hegel were to have analyzed the drama of reconciliation more fully and stressed more clearly the difference between it and tragedy, he may not have been led to overstress the reconciliatory moment within tragedy itself. To a degree the critics who assert that Hegel over-idealizes tragedy and gives insufficient attention to the moment of ineradicable suffering are right: the genre is not exhausted by its harmonic resolution; tragedy also suggests the inevitable calamities and inconsolable suffering that result when greatness surfaces in a complex world. On the other hand, it is equally one-sided to assert, as many contemporary critics do, that tragedy offers us only destruction, uncertainty, and gloom, and that any hidden visions of greatness, harmony, or hope are anathema to the tragic spirit. Tragedy is too multifaceted and complex for an either-or reception.

A fifth and related criticism involves the claim that the Hegelian universe in which all conflict is in principle solvable is incompatible with tragedy. Why doesn't the possibility of the drama of reconciliation eliminate the reality of tragedy? Aren't, as Otto Pöggeler (1964) suggests, Hegel's dialectical–teleological reflections and his optimistic worldview in the long run incompatible with the gravity of tragedy? One might answer in the following way. First, according to Hegel, already in tragedy a moment of reconciliation surfaces – though this reconciliation comes at a price (the

hero's destruction) and may be visible only to the audience. Second, tragedy can in many cases be overcome. Either under alternative conditions or from the perspective of the universal many conflicts are in principle solvable. Even the collision of two goods can often be resolved by the argument that in such a conflict, one good can and *should* be violated on the basis of another good whose value is greater and in the interest of whose preservation the violation of the lesser good is demanded. From this perspective tragedy can be partially overcome, but this is not the entire picture.

In some instances tragedy is not only possible, it is unavoidable. That is, even if it is possible to justify the morality of violating one good in favor of a higher good, we still transgress a good. Such a violation is tragic, even when it is justified, even when it is inevitable, even when it alone leads to the preservation of the higher good. One must recognize the importance of contingency for Hegel. If from the perspective of the universal, tragic failure is frequently overcome, from the perspective of the concrete such transcendence is rare. Moreover, only in the particular, in history is the universal realized; tragedy is indispensable for the realization of spirit in history. Here Hegel would agree with Hölderlin's stimulating reflection in his drama and essays on Empedocles that in tragedy the universal comes to itself through the particular, as sacrifice. When faced with a collision of goods, the great and tragic hero does not simply choose the higher good and feel she has made the correct choice, she senses also the loss of the lesser good, which is indeed still a good. She chooses with regret and remorse, if also with necessity. Duke Ernst in Hebbel's *Agnes Bernauer* knows how he must act, but this does not erase his guilt. Moreover, even if we recognize history as generally progressive, at any given time there are both individual conflicts engendering tragedy and broader conflicts, shifts between paradigms, that create inevitable collisions. In addition, conflicts exist where there is no Hegelian resolution or synthesis whatsoever. No hierarchy of values can solve the hero's dilemma. Which is higher in a conflict between freedom and life, for example? The answer is not so simple, for, whereas freedom is the ideal meaning of life, life is the necessary condition of freedom; conflicts between the two are in many cases irresolvable. The drama of reconciliation thus supplements, rather than replaces, tragedy.

A sixth criticism of Hegel's theory is the claim, advanced, for example, by Johannes Volkelt (1897: 28–32, 300), that tragedy portrays particular individuals, not metaphysical ideas. We can defend Hegel by saying that the two are not mutually exclusive. It is, of course, possible to stress the metaphysical at the expense of the psychological, but that is in no way the necessary result of a Hegelian approach. Indeed, in his account of Hegel's aesthetics, Peter Szondi speaks with admiration of "the extraordinary capacity of his thinking, in the abstract dialectic of thought not, let's say, to dissolve the concrete but rather first and foremost to make it transparent" (1974: 445). Hegel himself insists that dramatic works should not offer "abstract presentations of specific passions and aims" (15:499; A 11777). Instead, they should contain the subtlety and vitality of life, truly living individuals, "the all-pervasive individuality which collects everything together into the unity which is itself and which displays itself in speech as the one and the same source from which every

particular word, every single trait of disposition, deed, and behaviour springs" (15:500; A 1177–8). Tragic collision can in principle run the danger of being overly schematic and allegorical – an abstract weighing of position *x* versus position *y*, but that is the opposite of Hegel's explicit preference. If art is defined by its empirical concreteness and sensuous externality, with which it distinguishes itself from philosophy, and its wholeness and harmony, which it shares with philosophy, the artist should present full and whole and concrete characters, and the artist who presents abstractions – be it Corneille, Racine, or Ernst – falls short of the aesthetic ideal. The best tragedies avoid this danger by focusing on character as well as conflict, by presenting strong if complex individuals, and by rendering the conflict not only complex and multifaceted in its ramifications and consequences but also immediate and existential. Indeed, authors who reach this level of tragedy tend to satisfy audiences in this regard. No one would argue that Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, or Kleist's *Penthesilea* lack the fullness of character, the subtlety and complexity, the irresolvable questions and inevitability of suffering, in short, the mystery and awe we associate with tragedy. Allegory is a potential danger but in no way a necessary consequence of Hegelian tragedy.

Finally, the claim has been made that Hegel's theory applies to only a handful of plays. Hegel's typology of tragedy, brilliant though it is, appears to exclude all but a dozen or so world tragedies. The true Hegelian may want to assert "so much the worse for the plays," and indeed she would be right in arguing that Hegel's typology, normative as it is, cannot be refuted by individual dramatic texts. Just because a work is called a tragedy does not mean that it is a tragedy or deserves to be called one. Consensus and usage are for Hegel no grounds for legitimation. Nonetheless, self-sacrifice and stubbornness, modified versions of Hegelian collision if you will, suggest that other types of tragedy exist, even if they fail to reach the heights of the Hegelian model.

Note

All references to Hegel are to his collected works (indicated by volume number and page number). Most of the passages stem from the *Aesthetics*. In those instances I have also given page numbers to the Knox translation, prefaced by the letter A.

References and Further Reading

Bradley, A. C. (1903–4). "Hegel's Theory of Tragedy." *Hibbert Journal* 2, 662–80. Reprinted in *Oxford Lectures on Poetry*. London: Macmillan, 1909, 69–95. Presents an original theory of tragedy and remains one of the best introductions to Hegel's theory.

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reconciliation: it alone survives as the complete articulation of what all Greek tragedy ultimately included, a final or reconciliatory moment.

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Finlayson, J. G. (1999). "Conflict and Reconciliation in Hegel's Theory of the Tragic." *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 37, 493–520. Notes similarities between Aristotle and Hegel on tragic action and seeks to distinguish two forms of reconciliation, only one of which is tragic.

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Hegel, G. W. F. (1978). *Werke in zwanzig Bänden* [Works in twenty volumes], ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp. The most accessible edition of Hegel's collected works, containing in volumes 13, 14, and 15 the Hotho edition of the *Aesthetics*. Although other editions of the *Aesthetics* are available in German, they are restricted to the student transcriptions of single lectures. The Hotho edition, though filtered through Hotho's own thinking, is the most comprehensive edition.

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Houlgate, Stephen. (1986). *Hegel, Nietzsche, and the Criticism of Metaphysics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Culminates in a comparison and evaluation of Hegel and Nietzsche on tragedy (182–220).

Jaspers, Karl. (1952). *Tragedy is Not Enough*, trans. Harald A. T. Reiche, Harry T. Moore, and Karl W. Deutsch. Boston: Beacon. Justly argues that Hegel renders tragedy overly harmonic (79), yet recognizes the validity of the Hegelian definition of tragedy as collision (57, 95), and skillfully deflates the anti-Hegelian view that there is nothing but tragedy and within tragedy nothing but ambiguity and despair (80–7, 97–101).

Kaufmann, Walter. (1971). "Hegel's Ideas about Tragedy." In *New Studies in Hegel's Philosophy*, ed. Warren E. Steinkraus. New York: Holt, 201–20. A useful introduction to Hegel's theory, with a positive assessment of its applicability to dramatic works.

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Volkelt, Johannes Immanuel. (1897). *Ästhetik des Tragischen* [Aesthetics of the tragic]. Munich: Beck. Criticizes Hegel with the argument that tragedy portrays particular individuals, not metaphysical ideas.