

The Necessity of Illusion: on Hegel's cunning of reason

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In Hegel's *Philosophy of History*, one encounters the idea of the “cunning of reason” [*List der Vernunft*], which describes the unintended (universal) consequences of (particular) individual actions. However, the *Philosophy of History* is one of the most (if not the most) maligned of Hegel's works, attacked by non-specialists and anti-Hegelians who use it to easily stereotype and dismiss Hegel, for instance, as a teleological anti-individualist, while most serious Hegel interpreters avoid this work at all costs. To redress the lack of serious attention to Hegel's *Philosophy of History*, this paper aims to offer the strongest possible reading of Hegel's weakest “text,” reading it alongside his strongest, the *Science of Logic*, thereby bringing together two seemingly contradictory instances of the cunning of reason in Hegel's corpus. In the *Logic*, the cunning of reason shows how the universal emerges through the *means* which individuals use toward their particular ends. However, in the *Philosophy of History*, the cunning of reason describes how the universal acts *through* individuals, as it were, behind their backs and, problematically, Hegel goes on to claim that the universal (spirit [*Geist*]) ultimately sacrifices individuals on the “slaughter bench” of history to advance its own purpose(s). This paper's two-part thesis is: (1) the cunning of reason in the *Philosophy of History* is an internal illusion of the structure of cunning of reason in the *Logic*, and (2) this illusion is absolutely necessary. In particular, this paper builds upon the Hegel interpretations of Todd McGowan and Slavoj Žižek.

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Introduction

In Hegel's *Philosophy of History*, one encounters the idea of the "cunning of reason" [*List der Vernunft*], which describes the unintended (universal) consequences of (particular) individual actions. However, the *Philosophy of History* is probably the worst place to encounter Hegel (for the first time) because, paradoxically, it has received too much and too little attention. On the one hand, too much attention from non-specialists and anti-Hegelians who take the *Philosophy of History*, and *only* this work, as representative of Hegel's thought as a whole and, thus, easily stereotype and dismiss him, for instance, as a teleological anti-individualist. For example, [Benedetto Croce \(1915\)](#) declared: "Before Hegel seeks the data of facts, he knows what they must be" (140) and as per [Karl Popper \(1966\)](#), "it was child's play for his [Hegel's] powerful dialectical methods to draw real physical rabbits out of purely metaphysical silk-hats" (27). However, Todd [McGowan \(2019\)](#) has argued that the *Philosophy of History* is not representative of Hegel's overall philosophical system because its pivotal terms, such as the "world historical individual," appear nowhere else in Hegel's oeuvre (131–132; also see [Ruda, 2016, 101–104](#)). On the other hand, the *Philosophy of History* has received too little attention: "The majority of the significant interpreters of Hegel writing today—Slavoj Žižek, Catherine Malabou, Rebecca Comay, Sally Sedgwick, and Susan Buck-Morss, just to name a few—avoid the *Philosophy of History* like the plague" ([McGowan, 2019, 145](#)).

This paper is an attempt to begin redressing the lack of serious attention given to Hegel's *Philosophy of History*, which, to be sure, can only be done through contextualizing this work alongside the rest of Hegel's philosophy. The paper takes up two contradictory instances of the discussion of the cunning of reason in Hegel's corpus to bring together, arguably, the strongest and the weakest points of his philosophy: chronologically, first, in *The Science of Logic* (1812/1816), the zenith of Hegel's philosophical system, and then in the much-maligned *Philosophy of History* (1822–1831). In the *Logic*, the cunning of reason shows how the universal emerges through the *means* which individuals use toward their particular ends. Restricted to Hegel's *Logic*, the cunning of reason seems like a great logical structure that explains how human freedom manifests in the world. However, as mentioned, things become much more complicated when Hegel deploys this structure of reason's cunning to philosophize the progression of world history. In the *Philosophy of History*, the cunning of reason describes how the universal acts *through* individuals, as it were, behind their backs, operating through the unintended consequences of their actions. But problematically, Hegel goes on to claim that the universal (spirit [*Geist*]) ultimately sacrifices individuals on the "slaughter bench" of history to advance its own purpose(s). [Hegel \(2010b\)](#) also mentions reason's cunning in his *Encyclopedia*, mostly in line with the characterization in the *Philosophy of History* (hence I do not address this reference separately):

Reason is as *cunning* as it is *powerful*. The cunning consists generally in the activity of mediating, which, by letting the objects, in keeping with their own nature, act on one another and wear themselves out on one another,

without meddling immediately in this process, achieves *its* purpose alone ([Hegel, 2010b§209, 281](#))

The paper aims to reconcile the problematic characterization of reason's cunning in the *Philosophy of History* with its (unproblematic) logical counterpart in Hegel's *Logic*, following McGowan's interpretive suggestion that Hegel's *Philosophy of History* can only be properly understood if read in conjunction with *The Science of Logic*. The two-part thesis of this paper is: (1) the characterization of the cunning of reason in the *Philosophy of History* is an internal illusion of the structure of cunning of reason in the *Logic*, and (2) this illusion is absolutely necessary and constitutive of the logical structure of the cunning of reason. In other words, Hegel's problematic statements in the *Philosophy of History* (about spirit sacrificing individuals, history as a teleology, the actual is rational) are not to be taken as *literal* descriptions of historical reality but interpreted through the critical Hegelian lenses of retroactivity and reflection, as a constitutive illusion(s) necessary for the movement of thought, which has the logical structure of the cunning of reason. In other words, thinking cannot exist and move without a constitutive illusion, which, through reflection, we recognize only retroactively as an illusion, which is, nevertheless, absolutely necessary.

Section 1 provides a (philosophical/technical) exposition of Hegel's discussion of the cunning of reason, first in the *Logic* and then in the *Philosophy of History*. Given Hegel's problematic description of the cunning of reason in the *Philosophy of History*, Section 2 argues that this description generates the illusion of reason/spirit as a transcendental entity that governs history teleologically through the cunning of reason, which we must recognize as illusion. Section 3 insists on the absolute necessity of this illusion to the pure, distilled logical movement of the cunning of reason in the *Logic*. This third and final section builds upon, in particular, Slavoj Žižek's interpretation of the Hegelian cunning of reason. Following Samuel Beckett's famous lines from *Worstward Ho* ("Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better") this project thinks of (Hegelian) freedom, through the cunning of reason, as failing better, i.e., freedom as not conceding to the dichotomy of illusion and truth, which is homological to the dichotomy of the particular and universal. Failing better as opposed to failing worse, i.e., failing to grasp the illusion as illusion and its paradoxical necessity, and, thus, succumbing to either pure universality or pure particularity.

1. The Cunning of Reason: First as Logic, then as History

Hegel introduces the "metaphor" or the (logical) structure of the "cunning of reason" towards the end of his *Science of Logic*. Through this structure, Hegel articulates a nuanced, dialectical relationship between the particular (e.g., the individual human being) and the universal. He contends that reason does not violently determine the end (or purpose) of a particular object with its own (reason's) universal purpose. [Hegel \(2010a\)](#) writes:

That the purpose immediately refers to an object and makes it into a means, as also that through this means it determines another object, may be regarded as *violence* inasmuch as purpose appears of an entirely different

nature than the object, and the two objects are in like matter mutually independent totalities. But that the purpose posits itself in a *mediate* connection with the object, and *between* itself and this object *inserts* another object, may be regarded as the *cunning* of reason (Hegel, 2010b§209, 663)

Thus, the universal (reason) does not immediately, violently intervene in the particular purposes of human beings. In other words, reason does not *reduce* human beings to the means for its universal end. Instead, reason's cunning lies in its intervention *through* the means that human beings use for their particular purposes. The Hegelian insight is that human beings do not achieve their particular purposes directly but only through the mediation of a means to their particular ends. To be sure, as I will elaborate, reason here is not to be opposed to the human subject. Reason does not exist as a transcendental entity independent of the subject. Rather, reason and subject are dialectically linked: no reason without the subject and no subject without reason. Further, for Hegel (2010a), "It is in their tools that human beings possess power over external nature, even though with respect to their purposes they are subjected to it" (663). In other words, human beings are not free vis-à-vis their (choice of) particular purposes, which are more or less (naturally and culturally) predetermined: they only choose from a set of pre-given ends. Hence, Hegel (2010a) argues that:

the *means* is higher than the *finite purposes* of *external* purposiveness: the *plough* is more honorable than are immediately the enjoyments which it procures and which are the purposes. The *tool* lasts while the immediate enjoyments pass away and are forgotten (Hegel, 2010b§209, 663)

Thus, the site of reason (and human freedom) is not the end (or purpose) but the means the subject chooses toward that end. In other words, reason operates and intervenes in the means human beings choose towards their particular, and therefore finite, ends.

According to McGowan, the upshot of the cunning of reason is that human freedom emerges when the subject invests itself in the means without regard for the ends, without consciously planning to do so. He gives the example of a person who (at least momentarily) finds satisfaction in their work for its own sake rather than working for survival alone. McGowan (2019) writes:

Just as a tool can become more valuable than the end it serves, my work can become more valuable for me than what it accomplishes. When this occurs, I break from the constraints of survival and reproduction. I even break from the social demand for productive labor. While occupied with the means, I am free from the prescribed ends, and it is the cunning of reason that makes this freedom evident. Though the cunning of reason seems to mark the absence of freedom within Hegel's system, there is no freedom without it (McGowan, 2019, 149)

For McGowan, the most significant modern example of reason's cunning is the creation of the public transport system. We use public transport as a means to our individual ends (traveling for work, entertainment, leisure, etc.), but the means become more important than the ends insofar as they create an interconnected public world *through* the private ends. Through the examples of "free" labor and the transport system, McGowan lucidly illustrates the operation of the cunning of reason both at the individual and the social-institutional level. Indeed, restricted to Hegel's *Logic*, the cunning of reason becomes the key to understanding freedom in Hegel's system as well as understanding how freedom manifests in the world. However, the Hegelian cunning of reason takes a complicated and problematic turn when it intervenes in the progression of world history.

With Hegel's *Philosophy of History*, difficulties begin even before beginning to read the text. Unlike the *Logic*, Hegel never wrote and published a philosophy of history. Instead, he extensively lectured on the subject of world history and repeated this widely popular series of lectures on five occasions during 1822–1831 (Hegel, 2011, 1). Thus, the existing versions of the "text" are reconstructions based on notes by Hegel's students as well as Hegel's own lecture manuscripts, which, however, are not extant in their entirety. Unfortunately, in the manuscripts, the pages on the cunning of reason are missing, so Hegel's discussion on the topic is available only through the reconstructions of his lectures. With these caveats, I nevertheless proceed with the available version(s) of the text/lectures. In the context of Hegel's philosophy of history, the cunning of reason describes how an individual's subjective exercise of freedom, without their (conscious) knowledge, furthers the objective work of the spirit [*Geist*], i.e., the spirit's self-consciousness and self-realization of freedom (Hegel, 1988, 33). Even here, the cunning of reason articulates a dialectic between the particular (historical individual) and the universal (spirit). Further, for Hegel (1988), the cunning of reason applies to individuals within a nation(-state) and, on the planetary level, to individual nation-states (100–101). Thus, the subjectively free, self-interested, and passionate actions of individuals and nation-states necessarily go beyond the conscious intentions and intended outcomes of the actors whom the spirit cunningly puts to work (Arndt, 2020). Typically, the point of Hegel's philosophy of history is taken to be that there is "reason in history," i.e., there is a logic to the progression of world history, which takes the form/structure of the cunning of reason. Thus, Hegel vitiates the commonsensical view of world history as contingent, irrational, illogical events directed merely by the self-interest and caprice of individuals, empires, and nation-states.

For Hegel (1988), the logic of history's progression is that of the spirit's self-consciousness and self-realization of its freedom through history's concrete progression (22). As mentioned earlier, spirit (as the universal) is not to be opposed to the (particular) human subject. According to Hegel (1988), spirit's self-consciousness of freedom entails the recognition that every human being is free by virtue of being human (21), and the spirit's self-realization of freedom, its final goal, is the actualization of this freedom, which, for Hegel, is also history's end-goal: "The *final goal of the world* ... is spirit's consciousness of its freedom, and hence also the actualization of that very freedom" (22). Thus, in the

philosophy of history, as opposed to its distilled structure in the *Logic*, the cunning of reason opens itself up to the charge of reason/spirit directing history teleologically, which the next section argues is illusory.

2. The Illusion of Reason's Cunning

In Karl Löwith's regnant account, Hegel's cunning of reason philosophically translates the Christian notion of providence into history's unfolding (Löwith, 1949, 56–59). However, whereas providence, as God's predetermined will for the world, is radically unknowable, for Hegel, God's plan is knowable through human reason. Thus, for Löwith (1949), God's will become a transcending purpose that unconsciously directs the passionate, self-interested actions that individuals pursue with a kind of "animal faith" (55) and makes the very idea of (individual) human freedom "ambiguous" (58). He views Hegel as transposing the Christian idea of final judgment at the end of all history within the historical process itself. Löwith's reading is based on an accurate but *literal* consideration of some of Hegel's grand claims. For instance, [Hegel \(1988\)](#) writes:

The insight to which philosophy ought to lead, therefore [...], is that the real world is as it ought to be, that the truly good, the universal divine reason is also the power capable of actualizing itself. This good, this reason—in its most concrete representation—is God. God governs the world: the content of His governance, the fulfillment of His plan, is world history. Philosophy seeks to understand this plan: for only what is fulfilled according to that plan has reality; what is not in accord with it, is but a worthless existence. In the pure light of this divine idea (which is no mere ideal) the illusion that the world is a mad or foolish happening disappears. Philosophy seeks to know the content, the actuality of the divine idea, and to justify the despised reality—for reason is the perception of God's work ([Hegel, 1988, 39](#)).

Thus, ultimately, Löwith easily dismisses Hegel as too outdated and too Christian for the modern world. According to Simon Lumsden (2020), Löwith's "comprehensive teleological account" of Hegel's philosophy of history assumes that, for Hegel, history has a predetermined end given by a supra-individual entity (whether God or spirit). Is another reading of this passage possible, different from Löwith's literal reading?

For [Hegel \(1988\)](#), world history does not begin with the conscious goals of its individual actors but with a universal goal of the fulfillment of the spirit's concept, which is an "innermost, unconscious drive" (27) that the historical process makes conscious. In Simon Lumsden's account, the individual is interested in an inchoate or implicit principle, which they passionately pursue until its accomplishment (Lumsden, 2020, 467–470). The universal (laws and principles) does not exist until made actual through individual agency (Hegel, 1988, 35). Against Löwith, Lumsden (2020) asserts:

There is a logic to history's development, and its transformations must be conceived as necessary, but this does not mean that history's trajectory is progressing towards

an end that reason or a supra-individual cosmic spirit has designed for human existence. (467–470)

Lumsden highlights retroactivity, which remains a central motif in all of Hegel's philosophy, and argues that while freedom remains the necessary end goal of history, this in no way allows a prediction of the exact path through which this goal will be realized in history. This path can only be retroactively understood in its necessity *after* its actual manifestation in history. In other words, philosophy of history can only understand the necessity of "what has happened" (Lumsden, 2020, 472). Hence, Hegel's philosophy of history cannot be thought of as teleological in any strong sense. To be sure, even Löwith (1949) acknowledges Hegelian retroactivity but without much credence: Hegel is not "a prophet predicting future catastrophe but [...] a prophet in reverse, surveying and justifying the ways of the spirit by its successive successes" (58). In a similar vein as Lumsden, for Žižek (2012), this is how the cunning of reason works: "it is not that Reason is a secret force behind the scenes using human agents for its purposes: there are nothing but agents following their particular purposes, and what they do 'auto-poetically' organizes itself into a larger pattern" (528). Against a holistic teleological approach, Žižek (2020) argues that Hegel's philosophy of history is not a trust in teleology but an assertion of radical contingency and the admission that the stories that organize historical chaos into a meaningful whole are in themselves contingent efforts that come too late (304–305). Hegel's so-called "rational" approach to history has been criticized, at best, as fundamentally misguided and, at worst, as complicit with unreasonable, violent acts: on history's "slaughter-bench" (Hegel, 1988, 24) horrific events and the sacrifice of individual lives are means to the spirit's and history's end-goal (cf. Ruda, 2016, 102). In contrast, Žižek insists that no unknown higher purpose can justify events such as the Holocaust, not even the founding of the Israeli state, which is simply an intended, unplanned consequence of the Holocaust. Any claim of a "whole" that can justify, redeem, or sublate such events is obscene. Against a teleological justification of evil, Žižek (2020) asserts a radical dimension of contingency, which entails that "things are not what they are, they 'will have been,' their truth is decided retroactively" (305).

More recently, echoing Löwith's criticism, David Carr (2014) has charged Hegel with an anti-enlightenment closure of the historical process wherein the cunning of reason reduces subjects to passive, externally-determined non-agents (95). *Pace* Carr, Hegel cannot be accused of robbing individuals of their agency. I have been stressing the dialectical relation between the individual and the universal: one cannot exist without the other. Indeed, for Hegel, the spirit's end goal has to be realized necessarily *through* individual actions; the idea in itself is nothing without its concrete manifestation and realization through human activity. Hegel (1988) asserts "the infinite right of the subjective individual, to satisfy himself in his activity and work" (25), without which nothing can be achieved in history. Thus, contrary to the typical understanding of reason determining individuals, the central question of Hegel's philosophy of history is how reason can determine anything in history

if history's agents are self-determining individuals (Lumsden, 2020, 474). To explain how, through the cunning of reason, complex social-institutional structures and universal notions develop out of particular self-interested, passionate pursuits, Hegel (1988) resorts to the following metaphor (30; Lumsden, 2020, 474–475). In building a house, natural elements are deployed to transform building materials: air to blow the fire that melts iron, water to turn the wheels for wood-cutting, etc. In the final result of the finished house, which is fire-, water-, and windproof, the very elements that were means of its making are excluded. Further, the stones and beams, in their very obedience to earth's gravity, take the form of walls that rise up against gravity. Thus, the *satisfaction* of the goals of human passion (and not their repression) produces the edifice of human society, wherein law and order act as forces against the very passions that created them.

In the context of Hegel's example discussed above, Lumsden (2020) locates historical conflict between the passions and interests of *individuals* and not so much between the individual and the universal: "passion is not by its nature in conflict with justice" (475). And even if the "universal structures of right may be in conflict with the particular pursuits of individuals but this does not negate the universality of its laws" (Lumsden, 2020, 475). Surprisingly, Lumsden undermines the dialectical relation between the individual and the universal and relegates all conflict to the side of individuals over whom the universal dominates. Thus, while Lumsden seriously takes into account the retroactive dimension of the cunning of reason, the universal for him is not an illusion but a substantial reality, albeit one that we can only identify retroactively. In sum, the accounts of Löwith and Carr that attribute to Hegel's philosophy a teleological closure of the historical process, and agents can do so only by not taking the dimension of retroactivity seriously. Hence, I contend that given Hegel's insistence on retroactivity, the cunning of reason as a substantial determining force is an illusion.

Further, the cunning of reason is not just about the unexpected goodness of apparently bad events. Hegel also evokes the opposite case of seemingly good or justifiable actions going awry. Anticipating the discussion of the cunning of reason, Hegel gives the example of a man who, perhaps justly, seeks revenge on his enemy and, thus, sets the latter's house on fire. Unintended by the revenger, the fire burns down the entire neighborhood, and the apparently just act of vengeance turns into a punishable crime of arson. For [Hegel \(1988\)](#), this implies that "the substance of an action, and thus the action itself, can turn against the agent, recoiling against him, to destroy him" (31). Therefore, against Robert Brandom's thesis of *The Spirit of Trust* (2019) in a future, non-violent society of mutual recognition of the co-dependency of human life, [Žižek \(2020\)](#) calls for a "spirit of distrust," which accepts that there is no direct path to concrete freedom and the only possible reconciliation is to resign ourselves "to the permanent threat of destruction, which is a positive condition of our freedom" (311). This perspective supplements McGowan's more positive reading of the cunning of reason.

To recall the discussion of the cunning of reason in the *Logic*, McGowan finds the modern transport system exemplary of how, through reason's cunning, the (universal)

means become more important than individual ends. McGowan's account has some Kantian undertones of perpetual cosmopolitan progress ([Simoniti, 2020](#)) and misses the negative, dialectical potential of inversion inherent to any established social structure. While the global public transport system is a great achievement of the reason's cunning in the modern world, this very system has unintentionally led to the planetary COVID-19 crisis. If our world had not been as interconnected with its numerous daily transnational travel and trade flows, the COVID-19 virus would have barely left Wuhan, if not China ([Badiou, 2020](#)). However, the point is not that progress is bad and we must regress to a less connected pre-globalized world (which, in many ways, is already happening); rather, we must be alert to the inherent destructive capacity of any social form of life—to the power of negativity (and the possibility of destructive reversals) that Hegel highlights vis-à-vis the cunning of reason and elsewhere. With this, I move to the second part of my thesis: it is not enough to recognize the illusion as an illusion; we must also recognize the absolute necessity of the illusion to the logical structure of the cunning of reason, and ultimately, to the structure of reason itself. In the next and final section, I first argue for the necessity of the illusion by describing the cunning of reason as a Beckettian failing better.

3. The Illusion is Necessary

According to McGowan (2019), the great insight of Hegel's *Logic* is that contradictions in thought entail contradictions in being, and hence, for [Hegel \(2010a\)](#), “the thought of contradiction is the essential moment of the concept” (745). McGowan argues that, for Hegel, freedom arises from the contradictory nature of all being (even God) and, hence, the inconsistency of all authority. Even in the philosophy of history, [Hegel \(1988\)](#) obliquely makes this point when he characterizes thought as the innermost, infinite form of negativity that dissolves everything that exists and appears as objective, given, immediate, and as authority (80–81). In other words, freedom is the correlate of the subject's recognition of being as contradictory. Supplemented with the *Logic*'s definition of freedom, McGowan claims that freedom is no longer an idea separated from any material origin but becomes the ideal correlate of the contradictory structure of being. Thus, he understands Hegel's infamous end of history thesis as simply the inescapable realization that, given the contradictory nature of all being, we are all free, a realization that historically unfolded in modern Europe, Haiti, and North America. The end of history condemns us to freedom.

McGowan argues against two of the most prominent interpreters of Hegel's end of history thesis, Alexandre Kojève and Francis Fukuyama. The most influential in the 20th century, Kojève's interpretation idiosyncratically reads Hegel's philosophy of history through the *Phenomenology*'s lordship-bondsman dialectic (which Kojève rendered the master-slave dialectic) as *the* drive of historical progress (Kojève, 1980, 50; McGowan, 2019, 139–141). In a nutshell, for Kojève, history ends when slaves finally revolt against their master(s) and establish a non-conflictual society of mutual recognition. And Kojève locates history's definitive end, variously, in the post-French Revolution Napoleonic regime, then in American capitalism and, finally, in Japanese “snobbism.” On the other

hand, Fukuyama (1989) claimed that history ended with (neo-liberal) capitalism's planetary defeat of communism in 1989 (McGowan, 2019, 138–139). To be sure, McGowan argues against Žižek's "modest" claim that Hegel's end of history thesis implies that there is no exit from history because every epoch experiences itself as living at history's end. Thus, he agrees with Kojève and Fukuyama that history has an actual end: both a terminus and a goal (i.e., freedom) reached at the terminus. However, he disagrees with Kojève and Fukuyama on the implications of history's end. For Kojève, history ends in a non-contradictory society of mutual recognition, which goes against Hegel's definition of freedom as the ideal correlate of being as contradictory. Similarly, for Fukuyama, history's end is the end of all political struggle, whereas for McGowan, the end of history marks the beginning of authentic political struggle because, given that, at history's end, freedom is ineluctable, subjects must struggle for a form of life most suitable for freedom. But, on this account of the unsurpassability of the realization of freedom at the end of history, why doesn't history *actually* end after its end? McGowan answers that Hegel lectured on the philosophy of history in the 1820s and early 1830s in the aftermath of the American, French, and Haitian revolutions, which, in their realization of freedom, seemed to have irreversibly transformed the world and allowed Hegel to declare the end of history. However, since Hegel's death, this realization of freedom has been repeatedly covered over through attempts at establishing new authority in the world. And Hegel never dealt with the question of what if, after the ineluctable realization of freedom, people simply don't want to be free?

Thus, McGowan ventures an answer through Freud's theory of neurosis. At history's end, the neurotic subject very well confronts the absence of any consistent authority but, instead of accepting the consequent freedom, erects a fantasy of a non-contradictory and consistent authority. Two guises of this fantasy are naturalism (the fantasy of nature as an undivided, self-consistent authority) and fundamentalism (belief in God, ethnicity, or nation as non-contradictory authority). For McGowan, the symptomatic eruption of fundamentalist violence globally is the impossible attempt to substantialize these contradictory authority figures. And this violence always undermines itself because true authority would not require repeated violent acts of substantialization. But, for McGowan, this neurosis is a post-philosophical political response to the truth of freedom in history, which has been unconcealed by (Hegel's) philosophy. He remarks:

The end of history is not the end of politics. In some sense, it marks the beginning of political contestation in its most authentic form. Rather than struggling for freedom, subjects must now struggle for the form of life most adequate to their freedom (McGowan, 2019, 152).

In his *Encyclopedia*, Hegel (2010b) writes:

Within the finite, we cannot experience it [the concept as purpose] or see that the purpose is truly attained. To accomplish the infinite purpose is thus merely to sublate the illusion [*Täuschung*] that it is not yet accomplished.

The good, the absolute good, brings itself to completion in the world eternally and the result is that it is already brought to completion in and for itself, without needing first to wait for us. It is this illusion in which we live and at the same time it alone is the activating principle upon which the interest of the world rests. The idea in its process fabricates that illusion for itself, positing another opposite itself, and its action consists in sublating this illusion. Truth emerges only from this error and herein lies the reconciliation with error and with finitude. Otherness or error, as something sublated, is itself a necessary moment of the truth, the truth which only is by making itself its own result (Hegel, 2010b, 282).

The first part of this passage, which McGowan attacks, gives credence to his argument about how, after the realization of freedom in modern Europe, we simply suffer from the neurotic illusion that freedom is not always already here. We must, therefore, get rid of this illusion and embrace our freedom: “To accomplish the infinite purpose is thus merely to sublate the illusion that it is not yet accomplished.” However, McGowan misses the import of the crucial lines that follow, “truth emerges only from this error.” The illusion that covers over the spirit’s purpose is not an external, reactionary, post-facto neurosis but is immanent to thought itself. As Hegel puts it, the idea self-fabricates the illusion that it must sublate, and the idea’s action lies in this sublation. Hegel’s point is that illusion is not a contingent (political) impediment to philosophical truth but absolutely necessary to the movement of thought (Žižek, 2019, 3–5). In other words, the idea does not exist without the illusion. The truth of freedom cannot be assumed directly but must proceed through illusion and error and their sublation.

Similarly, in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel (2018) writes:

The *true* and the *false* belong to those determinate thoughts that are regarded as motionless essences unto themselves, with one standing fixedly here and the other standing fixedly there, and each being isolated from the other and sharing no commonality. Against that view, it must be maintained that truth is not a stamped coin issued directly from the mint and ready for one’s pocket [...] it is not truth in the sense that would just discard inequality, like discarding the slag from pure metal, nor even is it truth in the way that a finished vessel bears no trace of the instrument that shaped it. [...] Take the saying that “In every falsehood, there is something true” – in this expression both of them are regarded as oil and water, which cannot mix and are only externally combined [...] [this] expression must no longer be employed in the instances where their otherness has been sublated (Hegel, 2018, §39, 24).

Thus, truth is not a self-consistent, fixed essence that can be pocketed like a freshly minted coin, and neither is truth arrived at by simply discarding falsity and illusion. Truth and

illusion cannot be separated like oil and water. As Comay (2015) explains, truth is “not a blind lump of theoretical or pre-critical positivity but a practical *result*” (251). The *Phenomenology* is commonly read as a narrative “of progressive demystification or consciousness-raising” (Comay, 2015, 261), i.e., the overcoming of external or irrational impediments to rationality, something like separating the truth from illusions and falsity. Against this, Comay (2015) argues that “the ultimate obstacles to reason are those generated by reason” (262) and the *Phenomenology* shows that inertia and resistance are not external obstacles that thought must overcome but are immanent to the process of thinking itself. Spirit doesn’t become neurotic after history’s end but rather thought (or reason) is neurotic as such. As Frank Ruda (2016) puts it:

because of the very structure of reason itself, it is also absolutely necessary that reason cannot simply assume its own rational(ist) insight. Reason is inventive and invents infinite ways of resisting the assumption of a truly rational position. [...] Reason constantly invents new ways of resisting what it must think. It constantly shies away from what it has to confront (Ruda, 2016, 123).

Thus, as opposed to what McGowan suggests, we cannot simply get rid of all the illusions of authority and accept our freedom. Because if Hegel is right, illusions are part of the very structure of thought. The following comment by Comay and Ruda on the necessity of illusion apropos of Hegel’s move from the *Phenomenology* to the *Logic* is equally applicable to the lesson to be learned in moving from the philosophy of history to the *Logic*, the lesson of the cunning of reason:

We do not simply pierce through the curtain of illusions to reach an “other side” unfettered by the obfuscations of natural consciousness; rather we encounter reality as the objective truth of these illusions. There is nothing beyond the curtain of appearances except for what we put there. This is the essential difference between the Kantian and Hegelian dialectic. For Hegel, the antinomies produced “nothing beyond tortuous antitheses.” In moving from the *Phenomenology* to the *Logic* Hegel does not simply violate the Kantian prohibition: we do not simply step away from appearance to reality, from the phenomena to the things themselves. We rather learn that our propensity to illusion does not derive simply from the deficiencies of natural consciousness but is inscribed in the act of thinking—and therefore in being—as such. We move from the illusion that there is something real beyond illusion to the real of this illusion. We become disillusioned with the illusion of the dichotomy of truth and illusion (Comay & Ruda, 2018, 50-51).

Thus, the point is to become disillusioned with the illusion of the dichotomy of truth and illusion. And so, the acceptance of illusion as necessary should not, as a result, elevate

reason into an external, transcendent authority that sets up illusions for itself and sublates them at the cost of sacrificing individuals, thereby making reason something external to the historical process, which directs history through its cunning. This would revive the specter of all the standard teleological readings of the cunning of reason. To be clear, we have to accept the illusion as an illusion (not as reality) while accepting its absolute necessity.

However, to be sure, at the exact point Hegel introduces the cunning of reason in the philosophy of history, he maintains that the spirit does not endanger itself in contingent historical events but lets individuals suffer and sacrifice themselves for their particular ends, through which spirit accomplishes its goal. In Hegel's words:

It is not the universal idea which involves itself in antithesis and struggle, exposing itself to danger; it remains in the background, and is preserved against attack or injury. This may be called the *Cunning of Reason*, that it allows the passions to work for it, while what it brings into existence suffers loss and injury. [...] Compared to the universal, the particular is for the most part too slight in importance: individuals are surrendered and sacrificed. The idea pays the ransom of existence and transience—not out of its own pocket, but with the passions of individuals (Hegel, 1988, 35).

The solution lies in Hegel's logic of reflection, developed in the *Logic*:

Reflection therefore *finds before it* an immediate which it transcends and from which it is the return. But this return is only the presupposing of what reflection finds before it. What is thus found only *comes to be* through being *left behind*; its immediacy is sublated immediacy. Conversely, the sublated immediacy is the return-into-self, the *coming-to-itself* of essence, simple, self-equal being. [...] It follows, therefore, from the foregoing considerations that the reflective movement is to be taken as an *absolute recoil* upon itself. For the presupposition of the return-into-self—that from which essence *comes*, and *is* only as this return—is only in the return itself (Žižek, 2008, 241ff).

To apply this logic of reflection to the previous passage about reason's cunning, the universal idea or spirit is not a given immediacy that exists prior to the individuals who sacrifice themselves for spirit. As Hegel maintains, immediacy is always sublated immediacy: the immediate only comes to be by being left behind. Thus, spirit, which reflection on history finds before itself as an immediacy, comes to be only through the sacrifice of the individuals for it. As Dolar (2020) explains:

The 'in itself' [or immediacy] is never simply there, or always deceptively so—it is created retroactively by its turn into 'for itself.' It's only the second step that constitutes the first, and the third step, 'in and for itself,' is perhaps nothing but an insight into the constitutive nature of this inadequacy and retroactivity. (41)

In other words, spirit doesn't exist "in itself" prior to the actions of individuals; rather, particular actions retroactively create spirit "for itself." And, the third step, the "in and for itself," is nothing but the absolute recoil of reflection upon itself: this dialectical movement between the individual and spirit. Spirit is nothing but this movement between the individual and spirit.

Spirit as a substantive entity prior to reflection and historical action is a structural illusion of the movement of the cunning of reason, but, as discussed before, this illusion is absolutely, immanently necessary to the movement of thought. On the one hand, the illusion is necessary, and we cannot simply get rid of it. On the other hand, neither can we *accept* the illusion of reason as a transcendent agency that unconsciously directs our actions. Because while the illusion is *necessary*, it is still an *illusion* and not the truth. However, to claim that there is no higher agency, that we are simply free to pursue our egotistical goals, and the means somehow rise up to the level of universality, doesn't do justice to the negative, destructive, and illusory element that is constitutive of thought and of the historical process. To repeat, the point is to become disillusioned with the illusion of the dichotomy of truth and illusion, which, following Beckett, I want to call failing better.

[Žižek \(2002\)](#) reads the passage from Hegel's *Encyclopedia* quoted earlier in light of Hegel's logic of reflection to articulate a nuanced structure of the cunning of reason, which I call the structure/logic of failing better. Failing better accounts for the necessity of the illusion of reason as a transcendent agency without simply rejecting it or accepting it as truth. Žižek gives the example of the October Revolution (1917–1923) in Russia to explain this paradoxical structure of reason's cunning. To affect the revolution, the Bolsheviks acted with the ideological belief that they were mere tools of history, executing historical necessity. Of course, in retrospect, this ideology was totally false and illusory (the ultimate evidence of the failure of Soviet historical materialism and so-called scientific communism). However, the crucial point is that the Bolsheviks could not have brought about the revolution without the illusory belief that they were merely fulfilling history's necessary mission. In Žižek's words,

the Bolsheviks believed in the 'cunning of reason,' they took themselves for instruments of historical Necessity, and this deception was in itself 'productive,' a positive condition of their accomplishment ([Žižek, 2002, 170](#)).

Thus, the logic of the cunning of reason as failing better is as follows. Historical subjects don't know that they are absolutely free, or at any rate, they cannot assume this knowledge directly. Even if they know they are free, they act as if their actions are determined by some unknown laws of universal reason and/or history. However, while acting under the (conscious or unconscious) illusion of being guided by universal reason, historical subjects achieve something that becomes universal—they retroactively produce that which they thought they always already possessed. In other words, only through their actions do agents retroactively produce something akin to the universal for the sake of which they believed

they were acting. The universal does not exist prior to action, but it cannot come to be without the illusion that it always already exists. This is how error is constitutive of truth, and illusion is a necessary, productive condition of universal historical achievements.

Reason doesn't transcendentally pull the strings of individuals, but this truth cannot be accessed directly. We cannot simply assume that we are free, so we attain freedom paradoxically through our failure to be free from the illusion that we are directed by the universal. Thus, there is a certain necessary, illusory parallax that separates the individual agent from the universal spirit; however, it's precisely this split that animates the movement of history and thought, both of which have the structure of the cunning of reason. And, so, we fail worse if we try to act too directly without the mediation of illusion (as in the Terror of the French Revolution) or accept the illusion as true (viz., the contemporary acceptance of capitalism as the end of history, which simply enables us to enjoy our own unfreedom endlessly). Whereas, to fail better is to act—interminably—on the split between the individual and universal, between illusion and truth.

Conclusion

Through its interpretation of the cunning of reason, this paper set out to give the strongest possible reading to Hegel's weakest "text," the *Philosophy of History*, reading it alongside his strongest, the *Logic*. However, the point of reconciling the philosophy of history with the *Logic* is not to justify the problematic content of Hegel's statements. Such a justification is not a battle worth fighting. Rather, the point is not to fixate solely on the content and, thus, forget the form of Hegel's thought, or, more precisely, the dialectic between form (universal) and content (particular) that animates Hegel's philosophy, which is yet another manifestation of the structure of the cunning of reason. I argued that Hegel's description of the cunning of reason in the philosophy of history is an internal illusion of the logical structure of the cunning of reason, elaborated in the *Logic*. To this end, I showed that Hegelian reason is not teleological, exposing the illusion of the cunning of reason as illusion. Then, I showed the paradoxical structure of reason's cunning wherein neither can we directly reject the illusion and have unmediated access to the truth nor accept the illusion as reality. To fail better, we have to confront the *real* of the illusion: the constitutive split between truth and illusion that structures reason. To repeat once again, the lesson of failing better is to become disillusioned with the dichotomy between illusion and truth. To fail better is to traverse the symmetrical fantasies of truth without illusion and illusion as truth. In other words, illusion becomes absolutely necessary to the movement of thought because truth is nothing but the (constitutive) split between illusion and truth.

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