

Tragedy and Ethical Agency: Remarks on Hegel's Early Essay on *The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate*¹

Martin Thibodeau

Bratislava International School of Liberal Arts

ABSTRACT: In recent years much attention has been devoted to Hegel's interpretation of Greek tragedy. To be sure, authors dealing with Hegel's understanding of tragedy have adopted different perspectives. However they do share one common basic assumption, namely, that tragedy plays a crucial role in shaping some key features of Hegel's philosophy. This article pursues along these lines, and demonstrates that tragedy, or some aspects of tragedy, reinterpreted and reformulated, inform Hegel's theory of ethical agency. It performs this task on the basis of a reading of Hegel's early essay *The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate*.

KEYWORDS: Hegel, Ethics, Agency, Tragedy

In recent years much attention has been devoted to Hegel's interpretation of Greek tragedy.² Admittedly, authors dealing with Hegel's understanding of tragedy have adopted different perspectives and pursued different goals. However they do share at least one common basic assumption, namely, that tragedy plays a crucial role in shaping some key features of Hegel's philosophy.

One can identify at least four such features. First, it has been suggested that tragedy or, more specifically, 'tragic conflict' became for Hegel the model for the development of his so-called dialectical or speculative logic.³ Second, tragedy became Hegel's model for the unfolding

¹ This paper is a modified version of an article entitled Tragedy and Ethical Agency in Hegel's *The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate*, published in **Philosophy & Theology**, n. 24-2, 2012, p. 191-216.

² I'm specifically referring here to the following works: GEORGE, T. D. **Tragedy of Spirit: Tracing Finitude in Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit**. Albany, NY: The State University of New York Press, 2006; SPEIGHT, A. **Hegel, Literature and the Problem of Agency**. Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 2001; SCHMIDT, D. **On Germans & Other Greeks. Tragedy and Ethical Life**. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001; MENKE, C. **Tragödie im Sittlichkeit. Gerechtigkeit und Freiheit nach Hegel**. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996; TAMINIAUX, J. **Le théâtre des philosophes**. Grenoble: Éditions Jérôme Millon, 1995.

³ For such a view, see LACOUE-LABARTHE, P. **L'imitation des Modernes**. Paris: Galilée, 1986.

of history. Of course, there is the widespread view of Hegel's conception of history as the unfolding of spirit leading to reconciliation and achieving unity. Nevertheless, this unfolding is informed by conflict, collision and strife. The third feature refers to Hegel's key notion of experience – most notably as it has been developed in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Once again, tragedy becomes the model for the 'education' of consciousness. Finally, the fourth feature has to do with ethics and politics. Accordingly, Greek tragedy is seen as containing key elements for a theory of ethical and political agency. In what follows, I will focus on this last element concerning ethical life and agency, and I want to suggest that tragedy, or some aspects of tragedy, reinterpreted and reformulated, inform Hegel's theory of ethical action. Yet, I do not intend to do this with reference to Hegel's understanding of tragedy in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* or in some of his later works. Rather, I want to perform this task on the basis of a reading of one of Hegel's earlier essay, namely *The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate*. Of course, in this early essay, Hegel's interpretation of tragedy is not as thorough and comprehensive as in his late works. Nevertheless there are, I believe, good reasons to turn toward the essay on Christianity if one wants to begin appreciating the ethical and political motives driving Hegel's understanding of tragedy.

Indeed, in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* as well as in the later works, Hegel deals with tragedy in the larger historical context of an analysis of the decline and fall of the ancient Greek *polis*. In this context, tragedy is certainly also examined in regards to ethical and political import, but it is first and foremost seen as an art form belonging to a bygone past. By contrast, the essay on Christianity, which is rather a piece of 'comparative theology' concerned with the status of Christian religion in modern post-medieval and post-revolutionary Europe, refers to tragedy in order to highlight what Hegel believes are internal insufficiencies of either Judaism or Christianity. In other words, in his essay on Christianity, Hegel does not consider tragedy as expressing a world belonging to an historical past, but he is rather essentially interested in its 'actual' ethical and political content as such. One might then say that this content appears more 'immediately' and is more directly thematized than in his later works.

Tragedy appears twice in his essay on the *Spirit of Christianity*. It first appears in the course of an analysis devoted to what Hegel calls the "spirit of Judaism," and it reappears at a moment

where he deals with issues related to law, penal justice and punishment. Here, I will focus on this second appearance for it is there that Hegel's discussion on tragedy is most extensive and that its ethical import is most directly at stake.

The broader context of this discussion is one in which Hegel is busy defining the specifics of the moral teaching of Jesus. He undertakes to do so by examining some key features of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and by comparing it, on the one hand, with the Judaic or Mosaic Law, and with moral law and duty, broadly understood in Kantian terms, on the other. Pursuing this line of thought, Hegel is then led to examine the understanding of justice underlying these different conceptions. It is in the course of this analysis that he comes to focus on tragedy and more specifically on the notion of tragic fate.

Thus, according to the properly juridical conception of justice — a conception Hegel attributes equally to Old Testament, to legal law as well as to Kant's practical philosophy — a crime is essentially understood as a particular deed that has broken a universal law. For Hegel, this conception is grounded on a distinction between the form and the content of the law, and what happens when a criminal breaks a law is that she replaces the content — the universal content of the law — by another content, which is no longer universal, but rather the expression of a particular or a singular interest. But, of course, the law will punish the criminal by forcing him back to the universal content of the law.

In Hegel view, such a conception of the relationship between law, crime and punishment is undermined by insoluble problems and contradictions. One of these problems is that this juridical model of justice, he believes, is unable to generate the terms of a possible reconciliation between the punished criminal and the violated law. By conceiving law as a completely separated entity opposed to the particular deed, this model precludes any possibility of forgiveness. Should it practice forgiveness, it would lose its universality and would deny itself.⁴ To be sure, the imposed punishment fulfills the requirements of law, which essentially consist in imposing on the criminal a punishment that is proportionate to the harm her deed has done. However, even when this requirement is met, law still maintains its hostility toward the criminal. And if the criminal –

⁴ As Hegel puts it: "If the law persists in its awful majesty, there is no escaping it, and there is no canceling the fact that punishment of the trespass is deserved. The law cannot forgo the punishment, cannot be merciful or it would cancel itself." HEGEL, G. W. F. **Early Theological Writings**. Trans. T. M. Knox, with an introduction and fragments translated by R. Kroner. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1948, p. 278.

precisely because she's a thinking and human being – begs the others to acknowledge that she cannot be 'reduced' to her crime and that she can be better than what she did, she will inevitably, then, go against the law and the reality of justice, which has once and for all labeled her as a criminal. Consequently, punishment here is not a sanction that would open up the possibility of overcoming the hostility between the one who broke the law and the one who suffered harm from this violation, but it rather appears as a pure principle of equivalence, the expression of vengeance or of the *lex talionis*.⁵

It is at this juncture that the tragic conception of justice, i.e. justice understood as tragic fate reveals for Hegel a significant advantage. Of course, the punishment suffered at the hands of fate is also a highly 'negative' experience. However, punishment as fate, Hegel insists, is "of a different kind."⁶ Punishment represented as fate is certainly a power and even a hostile power (*eine feindliche Macht*). Nonetheless this power is one in which the "universal and particular are united,"⁷ and constitutes what Hegel designates as an 'individual' (*ein individuelles*). This means that fate is not an 'abstract', 'higher' or 'transcendent' entity, but rather a power which is immanent and remains at the same level as the agent or the hero confronting it.

According to this conception, it then follows that crime is not the uprising of a particular against a universal. It is not a deed whereby an individual undertakes to free herself from an authority she is subjected to, for, before she acts, Hegel points out, "there is no cleavage, no opposition between universal and particular."⁸ Before her deed, an agent is immersed in the totality of her community, which Hegel calls the "united life." In fact, it is the deed itself that creates the opposition, and thus destroys or nullifies the unity of life. However, this nullification is not purely a destruction of life, but solely a breach in the unity of life. And in his view, it is this very life that will turn against the hero and transform itself into an enemy.⁹

⁵ Referring to the Gospel according to Matthew, Hegel, a few pages earlier, states this point as follows: "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, says the law [Matthew v. 38-42]. Retribution and its equivalence which crime is the sacred principle of all justice, the principle on which any political order must rest." HEGEL. **Early Theological Writings**, p. 218.

⁶ HEGEL. **Early Theological Writings**, p. 229.

⁷ HEGEL. **Early Theological Writings**, p. 228.

⁸ HEGEL. **Early Theological Writings**, p. 229.

⁹ For, as Hegel puts it, "life is not different from life." HEGEL. **Early Theological Writings**, p. 229.

Yet, at first glance, it seems as if reconciliation here is even more highly improbable than in the context of right and law. But in fact, what triggers fate is not so much the ‘being’ of the destroyed life, but the process itself by which life as a whole has been damaged and injured. Punishment as fate is the consequence of the process by which an agent has ‘absolutized’ one moment of the whole of life and thus has broken its unity. But insofar as life is the truth of its moments, it then follows, Hegel argues, that the possibility is opened up for the criminal to acknowledge the other parts of life. In fate, the possibility arises for an agent to recognize that she can only be and exist insofar as she is a part of the totality of life. According to Hegel, it is precisely this recognition that renders reconciliation possible and gives tragic fate a decisive advantage over law and juridical justice.

In his view, it is this conception that has to be rejuvenated and reformulated. Of course, his goal here is not to advocate for something like a rejuvenation of the tragic ‘worldview’. As a worldview, tragedy irremediably belongs to ancient polytheism, and is incompatible with modern, enlightened Europe.¹⁰ What drives Hegel’s attention toward ancient Greek tragedy is rather its ethical content that lies in the tragic understanding of fate as an unrealized possibility. And for Hegel, this content as such does not irremediably belong to ancient polytheism. Admittedly, it needs to be ‘reinterpreted’, which, roughly speaking, means, for Hegel, that it has to be translated into ethical concepts commensurate with the philosophical premises of enlightened modernity¹¹ But once so reformulated, it would, he believes, significantly contribute to an understanding of ethical agency that would avoid, on the one hand, the contradictions of the juridical and moral conceptions, and, on the other, remedy the limitations inherent to Christian love.

¹⁰ On this issue, Hegel agrees with Schelling who a few years earlier (1795) also wrote on tragedy in the context of an essay devoted to what he then believed was the key philosophical conflict or ‘antinomy’ of his time. In his view, tragedy, tragic art also irremediably belongs to a bygone past. This is how Schelling puts this point in his *Letters on dogmatism and criticism*: “you are right, one thing remains, to know that there is an objective power which threatens or freedom with annihilation, and with this firm and certain conviction in our heart, to fight against it exerting our whole freedom, and thus to go down. You are doubly right, my friend, because this possibility must be preserved for art even *after having vanished in the light of reason*; it must be preserved for the highest in art” (emphasis mine). SCHELLING, F. W. J. *Philosophical Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism*. In: **The Unconditional in Human Knowledge. Four Essays (1794-1795)**. Trans. F. Marti. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1980, p. 192. For a brief but excellent analysis of this issue, see SCHMIDT, *On Germans & Other Greeks*, p. 73-87.

¹¹ As well known, Hegel, in his later writings — namely in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* — will understand these premises in terms of subjectivity, individual freedom and autonomy.

Hegel will not perform this reformulation in the *Spirit of Christianity* essay. For this, one has to turn to his later philosophical writings. Nevertheless, I want to suggest that some key features of Hegel's later ethical theory can be traced back to his earlier reading of ancient Greek tragedy. Here I would want to focus more specifically on one of these features. Thus, it has been held by a number of contemporary interpreters that the later Hegel defends a 'retrospective' theory of action, i.e. a theory that holds that the ethical content and meaning of an action done by an agent as well as the agent's ethical character cannot be known prior to the deed itself, but rather are necessarily linked to the unfolding of the deed and its consequences.¹² Obviously, the key issue here as to do with the link between intentions and action. Indeed, in the standard and widespread view Hegel opposes, intentions are understood as being prior to action, and this priority can be said to be both temporal, in the sense, that intentions are seen to precede the agent's action — and evaluative, in the sense that they are the ultimate criteria on the basis of which the agent's deed can be assessed. Hegel's retrospective conception of the unity between intention and action is precisely meant to oppose this view.

In opposing the view that separates intentions and actions, Hegel is not simply trying to make the somewhat 'skeptical' point that it is often impossible to know in advance whether our actions will realize our intentions, and that our actions have 'a life of their own'. Rather, he is asserting that the notion of intention, understood as prior to and separate from the deed and its consequences, is precisely often used as a shield to protect us against the unpredictability of action. It can serve us to distance ourselves from an act by allowing us to explain that our intentions were good, but that, unfortunately, things did not unfold as we thought they would. For Hegel, the agent's ethical character as well as the content and meaning of her actions are rather to be found in nothing else than her deed.¹³ In other words, it is rather deeds that are prior to intention. And ultimately, if by intentions one exclusively means something that is 'in' the agent's

¹² Hegel scholars defending this conception include PIPPIN, R. **Hegel's Practical Philosophy. Rational Agency as Ethical Life.** Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 2008; SPEIGHT. **Hegel, Literature and the Problem of Agency;** TAYLOR, C. Hegel and the Philosophy of Action. In: Stepelevitch, L.; Lamb, D. (Eds.). **Hegel's Philosophy of Action.** Atlantic Highlands: N. J.: Humanities Press, 1983, p. 1-18.

¹³This is how Hegel puts this point in the *Elements of Philosophy of Right*: "What the subject is, is the series of his actions. If these are a series of worthless productions, then the subjectivity of volition is likewise worthless; and conversely, if the series of the individual's deeds are of a substantial nature, then so also is his inner will." HEGEL, G. W. F. **Elements of the Philosophy of Right.** Trans. H. B. Nisbet, Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 151.

mind, ‘behind’ and ‘before’ her deed, and which can be used as a criterion or a benchmark to understand and judge her actions, then Hegel rejects this view by claiming that, in fact, there is no way to clearly identify such ‘inner’ and ‘prior’ intentions and to neatly distinguished them from her deed.

Now, it also has often been noticed that Hegel’s retrospective theory of action is deeply indebted to Aristotle’s understanding of action as developed in *Nicomachean Ethics*. In effect, Hegel’s claims about the unity of intentions and actions and about the agent’s ethical character as being essentially linked to his actions directly echo Aristotle’s own claims about the same issues. Yet, what I would want to stress here is that Hegel’s primary source — and most probably Aristotle’s himself¹⁴ — for this retrospective conception of action is actually ancient tragedy.

In chapter 6 of his treatise on *Poetics*, Aristotle more specifically deals with tragic art, and he does so by focusing on tragic action as such and its relevance for the understanding of ethical life and agency. Tragedy, he holds, is essentially a representation (*mimesis*), not of characters, but rather of human action, of human life, of human happiness or unhappiness.¹⁵ It is by their deeds, that, in tragedy, agents realize and become who they are. In different terms, what is at issue in tragedy is not first and foremost the character or the psychological complexes — or one might want to say here the ‘inner intentions’ of those who are acting; rather, what makes tragedy relevant and instructive are the particular insights it offers into the nature of action as such. Furthermore, Aristotle, as is well known, undertakes to define the specificity of tragic action or tragic plot by putting forward a series of concepts, among which the concepts of *hamartia* and *anagnorisis* figure as crucially important ones. With the notion of *anagnorisis* — which is translated as ‘tragic recognition’ —, he describes, on the one hand, the particular way by which, in the course of events, the tragic hero comes to painfully discover and recognize that he was wrong about himself, about the situation as well as about the content and meaning of his deed.

¹⁴ For a detailed analysis that undertakes to link Aristotle’s understanding of tragedy to his ethical theory, see SCHMIDT. *On Germans & Other Greeks*, p. 47-71.

¹⁵ ARISTOTLE. *Poetics*. In: Ackrill, J. L. (Ed.). *A New Aristotle Reader*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987, p. 544 (1450a).

Tragic recognition is a process in virtue of which the hero comes to understand that his prior self-knowledge and as well as his knowledge of the situation in general was false and misguided.¹⁶

On the other hand, the notion of *hamartia* — which is usually translated as tragic error of fault — expresses the fact that, in tragedy, the criminal deed is not committed by a villain, but rather by a noble man, a noble character whose intentions are good.¹⁷ For Aristotle, this then entails that tragic error does not stem from bad intentions — or from any intentions at all — but it is rather triggered by the situation as such in which the hero finds himself. More precisely, the tragic hero unwittingly enters a very difficult situation and, in keeping with his ethos, he wants to act according to law and justice. However, events unfold in such a way that, in the end, he, so to speak, betrays himself and commits a crime. Therefore he will be held responsible for a crime he had no intention of committing. Yet, he assumes full responsibility for his deed. Without any hesitation, he recognizes his error and guilt, and accepts to be punished for his deed, which he originally thought was nothing but the realization of law and justice.

One can here easily identify several elements Aristotle has recuperated and reformulated from what he understands as the tragic conception of action for his own ethical theory. Yet, this, I believe, is also the case for Hegel; and this is not only true in respect to his later so-called retrospective theory of ethical agency, but it is also true regarding his earlier essay on the *Spirit of Christianity*. As we saw, the young Hegel already rejected the moral and juridical understanding of action, in favor of a conception of agency grounded on the unity of intention and action, a conception, he believed, had been exemplarily expressed in ancient Greek tragedy. In sum, in his essay on Christianity, Hegel had already identified the key elements of what would later become his retrospective conception of agency.

As mentioned above, Hegel will develop these ethical issues further in his later writings, namely in his first philosophical essays of the Jena period, as well as in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, and, finally, in the *Elements of the*

¹⁶ For this notion see, ARISTOTLE. *Poetics*, p. 548-549 (1452a). For an analysis that links tragic recognition (*anagnorisis*) to Hegel's later notion of recognition, see JURIST, E. Recognition and Self-Knowledge. *Hegel-Studien*, n. 21, 1985, p. 143-150.

¹⁷ On the notion of *hamartia*, see ARISTOTLE. *Poetics*, p. 550-551 (1453a). For a thorough analysis on this notion, see SHERMAN, N. Hamartia and Virtue. In: Rorty, A. O. (Ed.). *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics*. Princeton: NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992, p. 177-196.

Philosophy of Right. Yet, between the two and half decades separating his essay on *The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate* and his *Philosophy of Right* he will have developed and put forward his so-called ‘dialectical’ and ‘speculative’ system of philosophy. For many commentators, this development amounts to a significant shift in regards to Hegel’s philosophy as a whole, a shift that will also have enormous impact on the content of his ethical theory. As H. Glockner once phrased it, Hegel’s early philosophy may be best described as the expression of a ‘pantragic’ vision of the world, but in the course of its later developments, it shifts towards a ‘logical’ and ‘dialectical’ worldview. So, as a result, ‘panlogicism’, argued Glockner, may retrospectively be qualified as the “fate of Hegel’s philosophy.”¹⁸ This may be perhaps true. However, it does not rule out, I believe, the idea that a better and more accurate understanding of Hegel’s ethical theory (earlier and later) is made possible by taking into consideration his interpretation of ancient tragedy as thematized in his earlier works, namely in his essay on *The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate*.

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¹⁸ GLOCKNER, H. **Hegel. Entwicklung und Schicksal der hegelschen Philosophie**. Bd. 2, Stuttgart: Frommann, 1940, p. 333.

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