Tragic Entanglements: Between Hegel and Derrida

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1. Introduction

In an early text on Bataille, Derrida notes that Bataille's reinterpretation of Hegel "is a simulated repetition of Hegelian discourse. In the course of this repetition a barely perceptible displacement disjoints all the articulations and penetrates all the points welded together by the imitated discourse. A trembling spreads out which then makes the entire old shell crack."[1] There is no doubt that this remark refers not just to Bataille's reading of Hegel, but also to the way in which deconstruction intends to make the old shell of Hegelianism, and hence of the history of philosophy in general, tremble. By doing this, deconstruction can be said to open up a way of reflecting on contemporary culture that from Plato onwards had been foreclosed by the predominant tendency of philosophy.

According to a famous saying by Hegel, philosophy grasps its own time in thought.[2] This is to say that philosophy explicitly articulates the implicit self-understanding of the culture to which it belongs and out of which it emerges. If contemporary philosophy still faces the task of comprehending its own time, then it should develop a logic which is as philosophical as Hegel's, but which distinguishes itself from the latter by addressing the radical finitude of any effort to bring about meaning, truth, presence, harmony, stability, or justice. Such a logic should respond to the experience that the moments in which human life threatens to lose its dignity are not cancelled out by what is commonly called 'progress'. To my mind, it is precisely this experience that deconstruction seeks to grasp in thought. I understand deconstruction as drawing attention to that which allows something — for instance a culture — to constitute itself, yet at the same time threatens to make it fall apart. Whereas philosophy can be said to have always shied away from the insight into the radical instability of whatever human beings may venture, Derrida, on the other hand, can be considered to take this very instability as the guiding principle of his philosophy. On the basis of such a principle, the ways in which human life organizes itself will no longer be interpreted in terms of increasing self-actualization, autonomy, or control, but rather by addressing the conflicts from which the various modes of human self-organization may not be able to disentangle themselves.

Derrida's text on Bataille argues further that Hegel uncovers a mode of negativity which constitutes the principle of all processes of self-actualization, but that he does this by blinding himself to a mode of negativity which "can no longer be called negative [...] because it can no longer permit itself to be converted into positivity".[3] One might say that Hegel, like no one before him, saw that everything, in order to become what it is, must distinguish itself into itself and the other of itself in order to actualize itself by means of this otherness. Insofar as this

otherness lets itself be subordinated to the movement in which something actualizes itself, the negation of the primordial unity is itself negated and hence turned into something positive. Thus, Hegel surely acknowledges differentiation as a necessary precondition for any accomplishment of identity, sense, presence, and self-presence. But insofar as he conceives of this differentiation as a movement in which the one necessarily becomes *opposed* to the other of itself and hence is capable of sublating its internal contradiction, Hegel can be considered to suppress a mode of negativity which *not only makes possible any self-actualization, but simultaneously threatens to make any kind of self-actualization impossible*.[4] In other words, insofar as Hegel conceives of negativity as a principle without which no movement, change, or development would be possible, he has achieved an insight that Derrida would be the last to criticize. But whereas Hegel goes on to interpret this negativity as necessarily being able to sublate the contradictions it brings about, Derrida argues that he "through *precipitation*, blinded himself to that which he had laid bare under the rubric of negativity".[5]

The mode of negativity that Derrida considers to be Hegel's blind spot is such that it brings about the difference between the one and its other without which no self-actualization is possible, yet does so in such a way that this very difference also tends to make impossible the self-actualization of the one. Although Derrida seldom pursues this self-undermining dynamic in terms of negativity, I believe that the stakes of his philosophy can be clarified by showing how its guiding principle unwinds out of Hegel's concept of negativity and, through a "barely perceptible displacement", turns against Hegel and hence against the ontological domain within which Western philosophy could unfold itself.

According to Derrida, "Hegel must be followed to the end, without reserve, to the point of agreeing with him against himself and of wresting his discovery from the too conscientious interpretation he gave of it" (380-81 / 259-60). Clearly, Hegel's discovery concerns the principle of negativity as such; his too conscientious interpretation of it consists in his determination of the essence of negativity as absolute negativity, that is, as a movement that necessarily resolves its different moments into their higher unity. Even if there was never a time when Hegel could have refrained from a dialectical interpretation of the negativity he had laid bare, this distinction enables us to investigate whether Hegel's oeuvre might contain a possible determination of negativity which, as a germ, never yet had a chance to unfold. I take it that Hegel's oeuvre indeed contains such a germ. And I believe that deconstruction — at least in one of its strands — seeks to let this germ develop into a philosophical perspective that, contrary to Hegel's, might do justice to the radically finite character of the ways in which human life organizes and interprets itself.

How, then, can we follow Hegel to the end, to the point of agreeing with him against himself? The route I propose to take here is different from Bataille's and also from those that Derrida sometimes takes, but more often merely indicates. Without directly referring to Derrida's texts, I hope to show that Hegel's initial discovery of negativity does not necessarily coincide with the dialectical interpretation he gave of it. In order to do this, I will follow Hegel

back to his remarks on tragedy in his early essay *The Scientific Ways of Treating Natural Law* (1802/03).[6] This essay addresses the way in which two contrary determinations of ethical life are entangled to the extent that they depend on each other to become what they are, while simultaneously tending to make each other impossible. It is this entanglement that I wish to reinterpret, following Hegel's own interpretation of it up to the point where he blinded himself to one of its possible implications.

2. Hegel's Essay on Natural Law

In his essay on natural law, Hegel sets out to criticize both the empiricist and the transcendental approach to the issue of natural law in order to make room for a truly speculative comprehension of ethical life (NL 439 / 59). He considers these prevalent views on ethical life to be inadequate in that they are not guided by the principle of absolute negativity (437 / 57). Although both philosophical perspectives are aware of the opposition between the realm of formal principles and the realm of empirical events, neither can grasp the inner unity of these realms. Hegel, to the contrary, argues that the absolute principle of ethical life accomplishes itself empirically by first allowing its different moments to acquire a certain independence and subsequently resolving them into a higher unity. If ethical life as such actualizes itself according to the principle of absolute negativity, then a science seeking to comprehend the true nature of ethical life should be grounded in a philosophical perspective no less constituted by this principle (480 / 92). Hegel's subsequent draft of what he calls absolute ethical life (cf. 481 / 93) refers implicitly or explicitly to the historical manifestations of this life in the Greek, Roman, and Christian world. It is clear, however, that his analysis is primarily intended to sketch out the dynamic that one way or another informs the ways in which human life organizes itself.

Hegel wishes to show that the absolute principle of ethical life must distinguish itself into itself and the other of itself in order to accomplish itself as the concrete unity of both moments. Just as an organism is constituted by the difference between its ideal principle and the totality of its bodily organs and members, a community must distinguish itself into different classes, such that one of them is devoted to the absolute principle of ethical life, that is to say freedom, while the other is devoted to the satisfaction of particular physical needs (489 / 99).[7] Hegel's references to Plato and Aristotle indicate that he considers the Greek *polis* to embody this primordial twofold self-organization of ethical life. Although he recognizes that further differentiations might occur (490 / 100), his reflections primarily concern the way in which a community organizes itself by dividing itself into two classes, each of which adheres to a different determination of the absolute good. According to the perspective of speculative science, this amounts to saying that absolute ethical life has a double nature and that it accomplishes itself concretely by letting these two natures acquire a relative independence. Hegel also refers to these two moments of ethical life as its organic and inorganic nature (487 / 98): just as a plant subsists by means of mechanical and chemical processes, an ethical organism subsists by means of a class devoted to satisfying its physical needs.

Hegel argues that the system of property "must constitute itself in a class of its own, and in that case must be able to expand in its whole length and breadth, really separate and isolated from the class of the nobility" (492 / 102). Thus, a truly ethical community — whose basic features Hegel seems to recognize in bourgeois societies — should allow the inorganic nature of ethical life to develop freely. However, this realm should not be allowed to transgress its proper bounds. Since the rampant growth of the inorganic nature of ethical life would endanger the health of the ethical organism as a whole, the opposition between the two natures of ethical life should be subordinated to the absolute principle of ethical life as such. This is to say that the state, represented by king and government, should simultaneously recognize the vital importance of the inorganic moment of ethical life and prevent this moment from becoming a principle dominating the whole of ethical life.[8]

The movement in which the absolute principle of ethical life brings about the opposition between itself and its inorganic nature and, in the course of its historical actualization, subordinates the latter to the first, clearly manifests the principle of absolute negativity. The force of this negativity is necessarily such that it prevents the inorganic nature of ethical life from becoming predominant. Wherever this subjugation of otherness occurs, absolute negativity is at work.[9] Hegel conceives of this subjugation as the reconciliation between an ideal principle and the other of itself, which it had to posit over against itself in order to actualize itself. He notes that this reconciliation occurs at the plane of ethical life as the "right which ethical life concedes to its inorganic nature and to the subterranean powers by handing over and sacrificing to the latter one part of itself."[10] One might wonder what these powers are and why Hegel would summon them up at this point. Laws protecting the worldly interests of citizens would seem to have little to do with the underworld. Yet it now turns out that, right from the outset, Hegel's analysis of absolute ethical life took its orientation from a conflict within ethical life that dates back to when the Greek *polis* first began to reflect upon itself. This initial conflict did not unfold between the realm of freedom and the realm of private interests, but rather between a mode of ethical life based on rational deliberation and one based on kinship, pollution and revenge. I will call these the 'rational' and the 'archaic' modes of ethical life. Hegel does not hesitate to regard both the realm of worldly interests and the archaic sense of justice as manifesting modes of the inorganic nature of absolute ethical life. Just as Greek culture was initially confronted with the conflict between civilized public life and an archaic system of justice, later societies, having resolved this initial mode of the absolute ethical conflict, have been faced with the tension between true ethical life and a system of laws protecting the private interests of the citizens.[11]

Although Hegel devotes less than two pages to the conflict between the rational and the archaic sense of justice that occurred within Greek culture, I would argue that his analysis of ethical life is moulded from beginning to end by the way in which Greek ethical life struggled to overcome the initial conflict between its two different natures. Or, to be more precise, Hegel offers an interpretation of this conflict which allows him to take it as an outstanding example of the movement in which the absolute principle of ethical life accomplishes itself. We will see,

however, that this interpretation allows for a reinterpretation that might complicate the movement of the negative which Hegel takes to constitute the essence not only of ethical life, but of reality as such. In his remarks on the initial conflict between the two modes of Greek ethical life, Hegel explicitly draws on Aeschylus' trilogy, the *Oresteia*, and especially on its last part, *The Eumenides*.[12] The subterranean powers that unexpectedly break to the surface of Hegel's essay refer to the Furies that haunted Orestes after he killed his mother. Before turning to Hegel's remarks on this tragedy, I will first briefly recall its content and then consider why Hegel could regard Greek tragedy as reflecting the absolute principle of speculative science.

3. The Oresteia

Abstracting from the subtle complexities of the plot, we can take the tragedies preceding *The Eumenides* to represent tragic conflicts that its heroes are unable to resolve because they identify with one pole of the conflict. Agamemnon, faced with the dilemma of killing his daughter or forsaking his duties as a commander of the Greek war fleet, one-sidedly identifies with his role in public life and sacrifices not just his daughter, but the value of kinship altogether. Upon returning from Troy, he is killed by his wife Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus. Although multiple motives may have prompted her crime, Clytemnestra's revenge of her daughter's murder indicates that she forsakes her public role as a wife and blindly identifies with the values of kinship. The archaic ethical realm, defined by the absolute value of kinship, demands that murdering one's child be paid for with one's life. Clytemnestra claims that her deed "swept from these halls the murder, the sin, and the fury", but she might have realized that her act of vengeance would provoke her son Orestes to avenge his father's murdering.[13] The figure of Orestes can be taken to represent the question of whether it is possible to break the self-perpetuating chain of revenge fueled by the Furies, that is, whether the ethical realm defined by kinship can be reconciled with the ethical realm defined by public life, the equality of all citizens, and the right to a fair trial.[14]

After murdering his mother, Orestes wanders for years, haunted by the Furies who demand that he be punished for his crime against one's kin. But since it was Apollo who told Orestes to kill his mother and who wants to keep him alive despite his crime, the question arises whether Apollo will succeed in stealing the prey of the Furies from their clutch.[15] This question is answered in *The Eumenides*, which depicts the trial of Orestes, held in Athens and presided over by Athena. The tie vote of the Athenian people, represented by the jury, would imply that both ethical powers should be allowed to co-exist. Hegel suggests, however, that their true reconciliation can be brought about only by a mode of wisdom higher than the human one. Athena's own vote delivers Orestes to Apollo, while she at the same time dissuades the Furies from taking revenge on the city. She disentangles the two ethical realms not just by letting them co-exist, but by ordaining the Furies to accept a subordinate place in the ethical life of the polis. Forced to give up their destructive power, they assent to use their power only to benefit the ethical community as a whole.

4. Greek Tragedy

Hegel considers the outcome of *The Eumenides* to reflect the tragedy of the absolute, such as it manifests itself in the element of ethical life (495 / 105). This tragedy consists in the movement in which the absolute principle of ethical life distinguishes itself into its organic and its inorganic nature, plays off its different moments against each other, and finally subordinates its inorganic nature to the totality of both moments. According to Hegel, this movement manifests the principle of absolute negativity, a principle restricted neither to the element of ethical life nor to Greek culture at large. One might argue, however, that Greek tragedies as we know them explore in one way or another the tragic conflict between two opposed principles, and do this in a manner that would turn out to be decisive for the self-understanding of Western culture as a whole.

With respect to their formal structure, Greek tragedies might be taken to reflect on the way in which two opposed principles, neither of which is absolutely good in itself, mutually destroy each other as soon as individual human beings hold them to obtain absolutely. Since human beings necessarily tend to blind themselves to the one-sidedness of the principles they base their actions on, this mutual destruction takes on the character of a necessary fate.[16] I consider the most essential occurrence of this conflict in Greek culture to be the conflict between the archaic, pre-legal determination of justice based on kinship, rituals, and revenge on one side, and the emerging determination of justice based on public life and rational deliberation on the other. I would argue that this conflict provided the model for the tragic representation of other conflicts possibly tearing apart the lives of individuals and societies.[17]

If it is true that Greek culture accomplished itself by letting a rational organization of ethical life unfold at the expense of the prevailing archaic organization of ethical life, it is not difficult to see how this culture came to face the question of the relation between these two contrary determinations of ethical life. Greek tragedies can be considered to explore the possible answers to that question. Some of them, among these the *Oresteia*, interpret the tragic conflict between the opposed determinations of ethical life in view of its dialectical resolution. Others, like the *Antigone*, represent a specific occurrence of the same tragic conflict without indicating how the mutual destruction of the one-sided determinations of the good might bring about a mode of ethical life sublating these determinations. In other words, the *Antigone* articulates the experience of the tragic without giving way to its dialectical reconciliation.

Without pretending to determine something like the essence of Greek tragedy, I would like to argue that these tragedies somehow delimit the domain within which the two basic tendencies of Greek culture — and hence of Western culture as a whole — could emerge: on the one hand the tendency to acknowledge the tragic, self-undermining dynamic that haunts the efforts of human life to organize itself, on the other hand the tendency to subordinate this dynamic to its dialectical resolution.

Tragedies articulate tragic conflicts by means of a plot derived from an already existing body of myths. The writers of tragedies draw on such myths in order to explicitly expose the essential conflicts inherent in them. In doing this, they grasp their own time in thought just as much as the philosopher does. I would hold that Greek philosophy from Plato onwards follows in the wake of the self-reflection occurring in tragedy in that it explicitly reflects on the principles of human life as such. More precisely, the mode of philosophy that emerged after the golden age of tragedy can be seen to carry forward one of the distinctive tendencies of tragedy, namely the attempt to subjugate the conflict between two opposed principles to their dialectical synthesis.[18] One might argue that Greek philosophy could become what it did precisely by letting this tendency gain sway. As philosophy gradually turned into a theoretical investigation of the principles underlying not only human life, but reality as a whole, it undertook to reconcile not so much the opposition between archaic and rational ethical life, but rather ontological oppositions such as those between essence and appearance, truth and opinion, reason and will, soul and body, spirit and nature, inside and outside, meaning and writing. In line with the dialectical mode of tragedy, philosophy seeks to comprehend the unity of these opposed determinations by subjugating the second moment to the actualization of the first, thus warding off its possibly destructive force. Hegel comprehended this dialectical logic like no one else and he adopted it as the absolute principle of his speculative method. It is, therefore, not surprising that he draws on the mode of self-reflection achieved by Greek tragedy to expose the movement in which the absolute principle of reality as such plays off its different moments against each other in order to reconcile itself with itself.[19]

5. Entanglement

If we take a closer look, however, things turn out to be more complicated. In his essay on natural law, Hegel suggests that the rational, divine, or organic nature of the ethical can only become what it is by freeing itself from its initial entanglement in the inorganic nature of the ethical:

> Tragedy consists in this, that ethical nature divides off (*von sich abtrennt*) its inorganic nature, as a fate, and posits it over against itself in order not to become entangled with it (*damit sie sich nicht mit ihr verwickele*); and by acknowledging this fate in the struggle against it, ethical nature is reconciled with the divine being as the unity of both natures. (496 / 105, tr. mod.)

Hegel seems to be arguing that the rational mode of ethical life which began to manifest itself in Greek culture was initially bound up with the archaic mode of ethical life to such an extent that it could not yet unfold itself as itself. As long as the archaic mode of ethical life prevailed, the rational principle of ethical life as such had to remain a mere principle. In order to actualize itself, this rational principle had to unwind itself out of its initial entanglement in the inorganic nature of the ethical. However, by thus positing the other of itself over against itself, it

not only freed itself from the force that prevented its own unfolding, but also deprived itself of the force to which it owed its life. For the life of the rational ethical principle can be what it is only "in being connected with this other life" (495 / 104). Just as an organism depends on inorganic processes and remains alive as long as it subordinates these processes to its self-preservation, the rational self-organization of a society cannot be healthy unless it feeds on the archaic mode of ethical life. Thus, Hegel suggests that Greek society had to take care that its citizens' actions were guided not only by rational deliberations, but, to some extent, also by age-old rituals and primitive emotions like fear. For fear of the consequences might deter people from committing terrible acts like murdering one's kin.

In any case, a society determined by a rational mode of ethical life cannot flourish without its inorganic counterpart. Yet neither can it truly accomplish itself as long as it remains tangled up in archaic ethical life. How, then, can it find a way out of this aporetic entanglement? We have seen that the principle of rational ethical life initially must allow archaic ethical life to hold sway over individuals and societies. In other words, rational ethical life must hand over a part of itself to archaic ethical life. Since the archaic mode was the first to have occurred historically, this handing over must always already have begun. Only when rational ethical life becomes, as it were, aware of itself — and this is what happens as the Greek *polis* develops — can it face its initial entanglement in the other of itself and struggle to undo that entanglement. In order to constitute its own purity, rational ethical life has to unwind out of the other of itself.[20] But by positing itself over against its inorganic nature, it simultaneously risks its own life. It can save itself from an untimely death only by recognizing that archaic ethical life is as much as itself a manifestation of the absolute ethical principle and that, as such, it should be allowed to continue its hold on a part of ethical life. Yet, at the same time, rational ethical life should subjugate the proper force of archaic ethical life to the purposes of society as a whole, that is, annul its destructive effects. Thus, the two natures of ethical life need to be unified, not by being folded back into one another, but in such a manner that the absolute principle of ethical life makes archaic ethical life "into its reconciled and living body, which, as body, simultaneously dwells in the realm of difference and transience" (495 / 104-5).

6. Reinterpreting the Initial Entanglement

Although Hegel sometimes refers to the absolute principle of ethical life as if this principle would precede the distinction between its two natures, his emphasis on their initial entanglement suggests that this principle is determined from the very outset as the rational principle of ethical life such as it is enfolded in the archaic mode of ethical life.[21] Evidently, their reconciliation can take place only if the initial entanglement of the two natures of ethical life is not symmetrical: according to Hegel, the absolute principle of rational ethical life is initially tangled up in archaic ethical life, while the latter is nothing but the first and therefore poorest manifestation of this principle.[22] Even though archaic ethical life may have been the first to have actually manifested itself, its old age does not imply that its reign should be perpetuated; lacking a principle of its

own, it can never acquire the strength to seriously threaten the necessary unfolding of the principle of rational ethical life.[23]

Hegel's interpretation of the relation between the two natures of ethical life clearly reveals his dialectical conception of what is at stake in tragedy, a conception in line with one of the tendencies of Greek tragedy itself. However, his interpretation offers the possibility of reinterpreting the nature of this entanglement in a way that is rather in line with the other tendency of Greek tragedy, namely its tendency to acknowledge the necessity of essential conflicts without claiming their necessary resolution. This possibility seems to have disappeared in Hegel's later works. We have seen that Hegel speaks of the two natures of ethical life. One might take this to imply that the inorganic mode of ethical life is not just an externalization of the rational principle of ethical life, but rather possesses a force of its own. Seen in this way, there is no reason why the one nature of ethical life should necessarily possess the force to subordinate the other, and not the other way round. According to Hegel, the rational mode of ethical life initially seeks to constitute its own purity by expelling the archaic mode of ethical life from itself. Now one might argue that the rational mode of ethical life can only become a true principle — rather than a mere mode — insofar as it succeeds in expelling the other of itself and positing it as a mere modification of itself. But why should this not be equally true for archaic ethical life? Archaic ethical life may just as well be seen as aspiring to become the unique principle of ethical life. If, then, the initial entanglement of the two modes of ethical life should be such that neither has yet established itself as a principle, one would no longer be able to decide beforehand which mode of ethical life is to become the reigning principle and which one would be reduced to a mere subservient mode.

For Hegel, the struggle between the two modes of ethical life *begins* at the point where the rational mode has already determined itself as the true principle of ethical life. That is why its struggle against the proper force of the archaic mode of ethical life ultimately cannot result in its downfall. But one might argue that Hegel, interpreting their initial entanglement in terms of a principle enfolded into its poorest manifestation, has blinded himself to an even more primordial way in which two opposed moments struggle to overcome their entanglement. One would turn against Hegel by *reinterpreting* this struggle as the effort of two opposed moments to become more than just moments, that is, to establish themselves as principles capable of reigning over the other of itself and hence over ethical life as a whole. If both moments of ethical life are initially enfolded into one another in such a way that neither is necessarily capable of positing the other of itself over against itself as a mere secondary moment, then their subsequent struggle to disentangle themselves from their opposed moment would not necessarily entail the victory of rational ethical life over archaic ethical life. Seen from this perspective, both modes of ethical life would at once make possible and threaten to make impossible the accomplishment of the other.

Hegel's dialectical interpretation of the conflict between the opposed modes of ethical life follows in the wake of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* in that it tends to play down the radically tragic

nature of this conflict. One might argue — still with Hegel — that philosophy from Plato onwards has predominantly tried to interpret reality as a whole in the light of the principle of absolute negativity. Even if it was not aware in most cases of the light that ultimately delimited the realm of its reflections, it has always sought to grasp the totality of what is in terms of the unity that overarches oppositions such as essence and appearance, spirit and nature, soul and body, inside and outside. This is to say that philosophy has always attempted to undo the initial entanglement of such oppositions so as to let one of the contrary determinations become a principle, a principle capable of reducing the other of itself to a moment of its own self-actualization.

Hegel, being the first to reflect on this light itself, was able to develop his speculative system by deliberately letting the principle of absolute negativity organize the unfolding of the totality of conceptual determinations that is constitutive of our knowledge of reality as a whole. His speculative method exposes the self-actualization of a specific concept by starting out not from the aporetic entanglement of two contrary conceptual determinations, but from a unity that has already become the reigning principle.[24] Only a unity which subsequently divides off the other of itself can control its contrary in such a way that their conflict will necessarily produce their synthesis. By no means do I wish to contend that Hegel could have developed his speculative system in any other way. What I do wish to argue, however, is that this principle is not adequate for also moulding the philosophical interpretation of the conflicts constitutive of human life, of its ethical and political self-organization, and of its history as a whole. One might well hold that Greek culture to some extent has been able to overcome the conflict between archaic and rational ethical life by subjugating the first to the latter. Yet it does not follow from this that human culture had thenceforth found the means to definitively control any further modes of the conflict that emerges whenever it sets out to actualize itself. It could well be that such modes not only generate higher levels of rational self-organization, but also — and perhaps increasingly — threaten to tear human culture apart to the extent that its gains no longer cancel out its losses. Given the history of the twentieth century, it has become impossible to maintain that the rational foundation of modern societies guarantees their ability to steer the conflicts emerging within them in the right direction. Even if people have shown themselves capable of recovering from immense losses, and even though societies plunged into social, political, and economical disintegration can evolve new modes of self-organization, recent history — if not history as such — no less testifies to the essential incapacity of human life to reconcile itself with itself. Hegel, for his part, would surely affirm that failure, alienation, loss, and destruction are inevitable insofar as individual human beings and particular states are concerned. Everything that is finite must necessarily perish. But he cannot but interpret these negative moments as the means by which the absolute principle of reality increasingly actualizes itself. In other words, these moments remain embedded within the movement in which this absolute principle negates its negative moments so as to let them produce a higher mode of its self-actualization. The ultimate outcome of the tragedy — which, according to Hegel, is eternally enacted by the

absolute — is, in the end, anything but tragic. If, then, contemporary philosophy is to do justice to the radical finitude of human life, it should let its reflections be enlightened by a principle different from that of absolute negativity.

7. Derrida

Drawing on Hegel's early conception of the initial entanglement of the opposed determinations of Greek ethical life, I have tried to show that the principle of absolute negativity has not always been the only one to mould the self-interpretation of a culture. I have pointed out that this principle has remained entangled with the awareness of what I propose to call tragic negativity in such a way that the former has always tended to overshadow the latter. Since the principle of tragic negativity only implicitly moulds one of the possible self-interpretations articulated in Greek tragedy, it has never yet had the chance to develop into a principle capable of grounding a philosophical interpretation of human life. A philosophical perspective opened up by this principle would allow us to comprehend human life as being divided against itself in such a way that it may not succeed in subjugating the other of itself to the movement in which it attempts to actualize itself. Human life might be such that its two contradictory moments are entangled to the extent that the one cannot expel the other from itself without losing its proper life. Yet neither might be capable of opposing itself to the other of itself and hence of preventing the latter from becoming predominant.

By means of a long detour I have tried to argue that Derrida's philosophy is intended to account for the radically finite character of the ways in which human life organizes and interprets itself. Since this self-interpretation arises out of an implicit or explicit interpretation of reality as a whole, Derrida first of all seeks to disjoin the ontological distinctions by means of which philosophy has always tried to establish its proper domain. He does this by arguing that whenever philosophy opposes a pure principle to its external mode of appearance, it erroneously presumes that the latter can be reduced to a secondary moment and as such cannot seriously threaten the movement in which this principle actualizes itself. As we have seen, the struggle of a principle to disentangle itself from its external mode of appearance can be considered to cover over the more primordial struggle between two entangled moments, a struggle in which either moment attempts to posit itself as the unique principle and to expel the other moment from itself, reducing it to a mere mode of appearance. What philosophy has usually conceived of as a mere secondary moment may well be older and more principle-like — that is to say, more archaic — than that which purports to be the true beginning and end of whatever it is that actualizes itself. Thus, that which philosophy refers to by terms like difference, nature, the inorganic, the body, matter, writing, externality, chance, or appearance, may well be able to resist being subjugated to what is referred to by terms like identity, culture, the organic, spirit, form, pure thought, interiority, necessity, or essence. This by no means entails, however, that the alleged secondary moments will necessarily gain the power to corrode their alleged primary counterparts; if, as I have argued, it is impossible to decide in advance which of them will

succeed in positing itself as the reigning principle, then the outcome of their conflict becomes undecidable.

In order to indicate how I think this reinterpretation of ontological oppositions might ground a philosophical comprehension of our own time, I would like to briefly refer to Hegel's interpretation of a conflict proper to modern societies. As I have noted, Hegel argues in his essay on natural law that modern societies must allow the realm of economic values to freely expand: citizens pursuing their private interests will contribute to the well-being of the society as a whole. A society should profit from these positive effects of selfishness, but it should not allow the destructive effects of this selfishness to endanger its health. I have argued, however, that the relation between a purported principle and the other of itself can be reinterpreted to the effect that the first is not necessarily capable of reining in the force of the second: the realm of economic interests would thus always threaten to go its own way, regardless of the purposes it was supposed to serve. In that case, there is no guarantee that modern societies, for all their rationality, will be able to control the conflict between the purposes of society as a whole and those of its economic realm. The same applies to the typically contemporary conflict between environmental and economic interests. In a similar vein, one might argue that there is no guarantee that modern societies — and hence the world at large — will be able to control the inevitable conflicts between contradictory moments like identity and difference, power and respect, safety and hospitality, generality and particularity, the public and the private, progress and tradition, technology and ethics, reason and terror. If a society, for instance, were to organize itself exclusively according to the principle of identity so as to exclude its counterpart — cultural diversity — from itself, it would thereby deprive itself of an element on which the well-being of the society as a whole depends. At the same time it should recognize that it may not be capable of dialectically subjugating the principle of cultural diversity to its own purposes, that is, to keep the resistance against homogenization under control. Such resistance may take on forms reminiscent of the hate, terror and anxiety conjured up by the Furies in ancient Greece. I would like to emphasize, however, that violence inheres just as much in the effort towards homogenization as it does in the effort to resist it; it is precisely when individuals, groups, or societies blindly identify with one of these contrary moments that violence occurs. Whenever a society opposes the principle of rationality to that of tradition, faith, and ritual in order to subjugate the latter, it refuses to recognize that it owes its possibility to what it attempts to exclude from itself.

If, then, any self-organization of human life were constituted not by a single principle of rationality, but rather by the counterstriving tendencies towards unity or universality on the one hand, and multiplicity, otherness, or singularity on the other, and if neither tendency were necessarily strong enough to accomplish itself as the synthesis between itself and the other of itself, one should acknowledge the utter precariousness of any event through which human life attempts to come into its own. If contemporary culture, reflecting on itself, should attempt to philosophically respond to this precariousness, one way of doing this would be to assume the

awareness of tragic negativity that is manifested to some extent in Greek tragedy. When Derrida in *Specters of Marx* refers to the "irreparable tragedy" and even to "the essence of the tragic", he is addressing, no less than in his early work, a mode of negativity which at once opens up the possibility *and* tends to make impossible the reconciliation of the contrary determinations it brings about.[25] According to this mode of negativity, the tragedy which the absolute eternally enacts with itself may not necessarily be able to repair the rift that eternally tears open between the absolute and the other of itself.

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1 J. Derrida, 'De l'économie restreint à l'économie générale', In : *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris : Éditions du Seuil, 1967), p. 382 / 'From restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve', in: *Writing and Difference*, translated by A. Bass (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 260, hereafter referred to as 'WD', followed by the page numbers of the French and English editions respectively.

2 G.W.F. Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), eds. E. Moldenhauer and K.M. Michel, p. 26 / *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, translated by H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 21.

3 WD 381 / 259. Cf.: "The blind spot of Hegelianism, around which can be organized the representation of meaning, is the point at which destruction, suppression, death and sacrifice constitute so irreversible an expenditure, so radical a negativity […] that they can no longer be determined as negativity in a process or a system." (WD 380 / 259).

4 In *Glas* Derrida addresses this issue as follows: "As soon as the difference is determined as opposition, no longer can the phantasm […] be avoided: to wit, a phantasm of infinite mastery of the two sides of the oppositional relation […] All the oppositions that link themselves around the difference as opposition (active/passive, reason/heart, beyond/here-below, and so on) have as cause and effect the immaculate maintenance of each of the terms, their independence, and consequently their absolute mastery." J. Derrida, *Glas* (Paris: Galilée, 1974), p. 250a / *Glas*, translated by J.P. Leavey and R. Rand (Lincoln and London: Nebraska University Press, 1986), p. 223a.

5 WD 381 / 259. According to Hegel, "Spirit is this power only by looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it." G.W.F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1988), p. 26 / *Phenomenology of Spirit*, translated by A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 19, hereafter referred to as 'Phen'. The nature of this looking is such, however, that it transforms the negative into a mode of negativity which, as Hegel himself puts it, "converts this negative into being" (*ibid.*). Whereas Hegel holds that the "tremendous power of the negative" brings about true positivity, Derrida, not unlike Adorno in this respect, unearths a negativity rather defined by the lack of power to convert itself into positivity. In his recent book *On Germans and other Greeks: Tragedy and Ethical Life* (Bloomington / Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), Dennis Schmidt considers it the supreme challenge of thinking "to grasp the tragedy of spirit speculatively, that is, as a unity which is a unity precisely because it is lodged in the antinomy of its own contradictions […] And so the question becomes whether or not spirit can take the idea of the tragic into itself without thereby

extinguishing the truth of the tragic" (90). Although Derrida rarely uses terms like 'the tragic', he would answer this question, when put in terms of negativity, in the negative.

6 G.W.F Hegel, 'Über die wissenschaftlichen Behandlungsarten des Naturrechts, seine Stelle in der praktischen Philosophie und sein Verhältnis zu den positiven Wissenschaften', in: *Jenaer Schriften 1801-1807* (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt am Main, 1970) / *Natural Law: The Scientific Ways of Treating Natural Law, its Place in Moral Philosophy, and its Relation to the Positive Sciences of Law*, translated by T.M. Knox (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), hereafter referred to as 'NL'. In *Tragödie im Sittlichen. Gerechtigkeit und Freiheit nach Hegel* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996) Christoph Menke also argues that Hegel's reflections on tragedy and the tragic, although intended to develop a philosophy of reconciliation, can be deployed to develop a critical, non-metaphysical theory of the tragic conflicts characteristic of modernity (25). He considers the tragic conflict between the general and the particular to have reemerged in modernity as the conflict between social justice and authenticity. Although the title of his book is taken from Hegel's essay on natural law, Menke hardly discusses this text and focuses instead on Hegel's readings of *Antigone*. This may be due to the fact that he takes Hegel's early remarks on tragedy to pertain to modernity (243) and not to the two opposed moments of Greek ethical life and hence to ethical life as such.

7 "Thus, two classes are formed in accordance with the absolute necessity of the ethical. One is the class of the free, the individual of absolute ethical life, of which the organs constitute the single individuals […] The other class consists of those who are not free; it exists in the difference of need and work." (NL 489 / 99-100, tr. mod.).

8 "As a result of the supersession of this confusion of principles, and their established and conscious separation, each of them is done justice." The reality of ethical life has now been brought about both as absolute indifference and as the — relative — opposition between the two ethical principles, in such a way "that the second is restrained (*bezwungen*) by the first." (NL 494 / 104, tr. mod.).

9 "In absolute ethical life, infinity — or form as the absolutely negative — is nothing other than the subjugation […] taken up into its absolute concept." (NL 481 / 93, tr. mod.).

10 NL 494 / 104, tr. mod.

11 Miguel de Beistegui addresses this issue in his interesting article 'Hegel: or the Tragedy of Thinking' (in: M. de Beistegui and S. Sparks (eds.), *Philosophy and Tragedy* (London / New York: (Routledge, 2000). He does not distinguish, however, between the ancient and modern forms of the inorganic nature of ethical life (18).

12 Contrary to the predominant interest in Hegel's reading of Sophocles' *Antigone*, Walter Kaufmann argues in *Tragedy and Philosophy* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1968) that "the tragic poet whose worldview most closely resembled Hegel's was Aeschylus. One could not wish for more perfect illustrations of collisions in which neither side is simply wicked […] than we find in the *Oresteia* and *Prometheus*" (203). At the same time, Kaufmann considers Aeschylus the most optimistic of the tragic poets and therefore in a way — not unlike Hegel — anti-tragic (165, cf. 176f.). Kaufmann resolves this paradox by arguing that "what is decisive is not the end but whether we participate in tremendous, terrifying suffering" (181). To my mind, this (Aristotelian) emphasis on the psychological effect of tragedies forecloses a philosophical understanding of the diversity of Greek tragedies.

13 Aeschylus, 'Agamemnon', translated by R. Lattimore, in: D. Grene and R. Lattimore (eds.), *The Complete Greek Tragedies* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1959), l. 1575.

14 At the end of *The Libation Bearers* the chorus asks whether Orestes will become the savior of Argos or will bring death and destruction: "Third is for the savior. He came. Shall I call it that, or death? Where is the end? Where shall the fury of fate be stilled to sleep, be done with?" (ll.1072-76).

15 Aeschylus, 'The Eumenides', in: *ibid.*, l. 325.

16 Cf. Phen 305-08, 310-11 / 280-82, 285.

17 I therefore regard the conflict between the sphere of the family and the sphere of the state as represented in Sophocles' *Antigone* to concern primarily the collision of these two determinations of justice, rather than that between woman and man (who in ancient Greek culture were 'naturally' identified with the spheres of the family and the state).

18 One might argue that Heraclitus, on the other hand, is still far better able to articulate the essentially tragic character of reality. In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche sees Socrates as the first philosopher to have shied away from the destructive character of the tragic. Socrates' eye "was debarred from ever looking with pleasure into the abysses of the Dionysiac." F. Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, Sämtliche Werke I, (Berlin / New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1980), p. 92 / *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, translated by R. Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 68. Cf.: "Socrates, the dialectical hero in Platonic drama, recalls the related nature of the Euripidean hero who must defend his actions with reasons and counter-reasons and thereby is often in danger of losing our tragic sympathy; for who could fail to notice the *optimistic* element in the essence of dialectics, which celebrates jubilantly at each conclusion reached, and which can only breathe where there is cool clarity and consciousness." (94 / 96-70). In *On Germans and other Greeks* Dennis Schmidt distinguishes between tragedy as a "form of art in which [...] human life is liquid contradiction confronting the weight of destiny" and "philosophy which searches for a way to stabilize this liquidity of human life, thereby assimilating and taming the elemental claims of tragic art" (*op.cit.* 274). Such a clear-cut distinction does not take into account that the tendency to tame and stabilize the conflicts that tragedies address is a tendency inherent in these tragedies themselves.

19 However, Hegel takes into account that natural ethical life does not permit of a complete reconciliation between its opposed tendencies. The concrete realization of ethical life manifests its absolute idea — the movement of absolute negativity — as yet "in a distorted way " (499 / 108).

20 Rational ethical life "has all at once recognized the right of inorganic ethical life and cleansed itself of it" (NL 495 / 104).

21 The few passages referring to the entanglement of the two modes of ethical life are somewhat ambiguous. Hegel maintains that "ethical nature divides off its inorganic nature itself in order not to become entangled with it." (NL 496 / 105). The first part of the sentence suggests that the entanglement of the two natures of ethical life is primordial, the second that it is preceded by their undifferentiated unity. In another passage Hegel considers the rational mode of ethical life to bring about their reconciliation by "facing and objectifying the entanglement in the inorganic" (494-95 / 104), thereby also suggesting that this entanglement is primordial.

22 This is also the way Hegel's philosophy of nature conceives of the relation between inorganic nature and the absolute principle of organic nature (i.e., self-determination): inorganic nature actually manifests itself before organic nature, whereas from the outset it harbours the absolute principle of organic nature. From a logical perspective this principle itself precedes its first and poorest manifestation.

23 In *The Eumenides* the Furies claim repeatedly that they deserve to be honoured because of their old age. They call Apollo a "young god" who has "ridden down powers gray with age" by taking Orestes away from them (*op. cit.* l. 150, cf. ll. 728, 778-79). One might see the conflict between Apollo and the Furies as mirroring, among others, the primal conflict between Cronus and his son Zeus: the son seeks to seize power so as to be no longer the second, and in order to prevent this the father attempts to kill his son. Were he to succeed, however, he would no longer be able to define himself as the one who came first. Cronus can only become the first by getting a son, but he thereby causes his own downfall. The Furies once allude to this myth (ll. 641-42). Cf. also *Oedipus the King*, where Laius is told by the oracle that he would be killed by his son were he to have one.

24 It is no coincidence that the Greek term *aporia* occurs both in Greek tragedies and in Derrida's thought. Cf. J. Derrida, 'Apories. Mourir — s'attendre aux "limites de la vérité"', in: *Le passage des frontières. Autour du travail de Jacques Derrida* (Paris, Éditions Galilée, 1994), esp. pp. 312, 337. Derrida, however, is not so much concerned with the possibility or impossibility of a way out of the aporia as with the dynamic that necessarily threatens to make impossible any way out.

25 J. Derrida, *Spectres de Marx* (Paris : Galilée, 1993), pp. 46, 51 / *Specters of Marx*, translated by P. Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994) pp. 21, 25.