

## **Hegel on Comedy: Theodicy, Social Criticism, and the ‘Supreme Task’ of Art**

### Introduction

One of the guiding ideas of Hegel’s voluminous lectures on aesthetics is the notion that there is a *telos* of art properly-so-called. According to Hegel, art, at its best, is engaged in the grand cognitive task of ‘bringing to our minds and expressing the *Divine* [*das Göttliche*], the deepest interests of mankind, and the most comprehensive truths of the spirit’ (A, 7; HW, 13:20-21).<sup>1</sup> This exalted endeavor he refers to as art’s ‘supreme task’ [*höchste Aufgabe*] (A, 7; HW, 13:20-21). In the second half of these lectures, Hegel considers a range of different media and genres, seeking to work out their inner dynamics and their place within the history of art, as well as seeking to explain how they can be seen as distinctively taking up the ‘supreme task’ of art, given the advantages, limitations, and conventions specific to each of them. At the end of this discussion, in the final section devoted to drama, ‘the highest stage of poetry and of art generally’ (A, 1158; HW, 15:474), Hegel turns his hand to comedy.

Coming from one inclined, as Hegel is, to approach the arts on broadly cognitive grounds, comedy might seem to fare poorly against its artistic cousins — an entertaining enough, if ultimately frothy diversion. Yet it is interesting to note that Hegel, rather than dismissing or ignoring comedy as a lesser artistic genre, tries to integrate it into the rest of his system. That he includes comedy at all is itself telling; he, for example, says very little about dance, and one

---

<sup>1</sup> In what follows, I rely primarily on Hegel’s *Lectures on Aesthetics*, compiled and edited by his student H.G. Hotho and published shortly after Hegel’s death. I make reference to the standard translation of the *Aesthetics* (henceforth ‘A’) by T.M. Knox (Oxford: OUP, 1975), with occasional modifications of my own. Citations are to the page number in the English translation, followed by the volume and page of the German edition—Hegel, *Werke* (henceforth ‘HW’), Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (eds.) (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970). I cite this German edition on its own when mentioning other works of Hegel’s. In the past decade or so, student notes of Hegel’s lectures have also been published. There is considerable scholarly debate about the significance of these. Their primary editor Annemarie Gethmann-Siefert has championed their importance and has suggested that they give telling evidence of ways in which Hegel’s ideas were distorted by Hotho; other commentators are more skeptical of these claims. Robert Pippin gives a fair-minded assessment of this issue in ‘The Absence of Aesthetics in Hegel’s Aesthetics’, in Frederick Beiser (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel and 19th Century Philosophy* (Cambridge: CUP, 2008). The portions of these student notes relevant to comedy are very brief (for example, the 1826 lecture notes have one paragraph) and the 1823 lectures (from Hotho’s own notebook) are only somewhat longer. They do not shed much additional light on the issues here discussed.

suspects him of the prejudice of thinking it too insubstantial to warrant serious discussion. And that comedy should come as the capstone of his lectures is more telling still. Investigating Hegel's account of comedy will help us not only better understand Hegel's curious views on that genre itself, but also, and more importantly, will help us better understand the supreme task of art, as Hegel envisages it.

Raymond Geuss, in a highly illuminating paper, has connected Hegel's conception of art's supreme task with the project of theodicy—albeit in the non-traditional way that Hegel understands that enterprise, namely as an attempt to demonstrate the world's basic rationality and goodness.<sup>2</sup> Art serves to show us the truth, and this is the paramount truth (or purported truth) it shows. In what follows, I am going to be looking at Hegel's aesthetics through this theodicy-based framework Geuss has proposed, and I will be considering what light this framework can shed on comedy and, reciprocally, what light comedy can shed on it. In particular, invocation of a theodicy can give the impression of art as a kind of Panglossian propaganda for the status quo. In seeking to present an image of the world as fundamentally rational and good, art, it might seem, is not going to be directing our attention to any glaring flaws in the socio-political order. If one focuses on Hegel's remarks on, say, classical sculpture or paintings of the Madonna and Child as paradigmatic of his aesthetic theory, one will have this impression all the more. It floats above any idea of social critique.

Yet Hegel's brief, but pivotal remarks on comedy complicate this story in an interesting way. Aristophanic comedy — the sort he lauds as the best and the most truly comic — has a strongly social-critical streak that Hegel notes with admiration. It is true that comedy in its supreme task as art will also serve to reassure us about the basic rationality and goodness of the world. But Aristophanic comedy is unusual among the art forms Hegel discusses in, as he sees it, making the failings of individuals and in particular the failings of contemporary society its prime focus.

---

<sup>2</sup> Raymond Geuss, 'Art and Theodicy' in his *Morality, Culture, and History* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999).

Whatever the biases and limitations of Hegel's account as an extensionally-adequate or normatively-attractive *general theory* of comedy, if we are attentive to Hegel's remarks on that genre, they will offer us a point of resistance against overly conservative interpretations of the Hegelian supreme task of art and will help us better understand in what way active social criticism through art is compatible with that higher calling. And, moreover, once we understand how comedy is to function in its supreme task as art, we will go *some* way at least to explaining another interpretive puzzle: namely, why Hegel holds Old Comedy in high esteem and why he has complaints about other stalwarts of the comedic canon, including New Comedy and Molière.

### The 'Supreme Task' of Art

Perhaps more than at any other time in history, German Romanticism was a period of great ambitions for the arts. The arts were thought to be a mode of access to reality higher than that available to philosophical reflection. Hegel is in large part reacting against this tradition epitomized by Hölderlin and Novalis. He is skeptical of the idea that the arts might deliver us mystical, unspeakable glimpses of a noumenal beyond. In this way, he is considerably more sober and rationalistic than many of his contemporaries.<sup>3</sup> Yet there are also important affinities. Hegel's approach, like that of the Romantics, is deeply cognitivist in orientation, especially in comparison with formalistic views taking art to be valuable mainly for affording pleasure in beautiful patterns, or for stimulating the free play of the faculties. Art, in its highest function, is not about offering pleasure alone, but about offering *insight*. The relevant insights that art tries to give are not just run-of-the-mill truths about the world. Although we might learn about the petal structure of various flowers from certain intricate Dutch paintings, the sort of insight that is relevant here is of a particularly elevated kind — again a similarity between Hegel and the Romantics. For Hegel, art in

---

<sup>3</sup> See Frederick Beiser, *Hegel* (London: Routledge, 2005), 283ff.

its supreme task presents, in the words of the famous passage quoted above, ‘the *Divine*, the deepest interests of mankind, and the most comprehensive truths of the spirit’ (A, 7; HW, 13:21).<sup>4</sup>

Although Hegel, it must be stressed, does not use the explicit terminology of “theodicy” in the *Lectures on Aesthetics*, it is a notion Hegel uses elsewhere in his work, and it is a nice framework for understanding his various remarks about the supreme task of art, coupled with his optimistic orientation regarding the rationality and goodness of the world.<sup>5</sup> By theodicy, Hegel means something less explicitly theological than showing how the existence of evil in the world can be reconciled with the benevolence and omnipotence of the traditional Judeo-Christian God. The idea of theodicy, as he spells it out in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* and elsewhere, is instead the broader one of showing us that the world, appearances sometimes to the contrary, is one that is basically rational and good and one that is hospitable to the realization of our deepest interests.<sup>6</sup> (Such a theodicy needn’t be showing us that this is the best of all possible worlds, or that evil is an illusion, or anything else of that extreme sort). In coming to see things in this way, we thereby come to see the world as one in which we can be ‘at home’ [*zu Hause*] and to which we can be ‘reconciled’ [*versöhnt*].<sup>7</sup> Bringing us to awareness of the truth is the prime task of the forms of

---

<sup>4</sup> How is Hegel understanding ‘the Divine’ here? Art, it is important to note, needn’t have an explicitly religious subject matter in order to express the Divine. The Divine, as Hegel makes clear in the *Aesthetics*, is presented not only ‘as an object of religious consciousness as such, but as it enters the world and individual action’ (A, 1195; HW 15:522). The Divine as manifested in art (and here he is talking about drama especially), thus needn’t refer to the bearded man in the sky, Mary and Jesus, or various pagan divinities either, but rather to the rational tendencies that Hegel takes to be animating human affairs for the good and which get manifested in the actions of individuals and get instantiated in the ‘concrete ethical order’ (A, 1195; HW 15:522). Exactly what relation these tendencies bear to a God, and to what extent they are thanks to Him, is a complex issue that I cannot explore further here. I want what I say to be neutral when it comes to various contentious issues in the interpretation of Hegel’s metaphysics.

<sup>5</sup> Hegel is more explicit elsewhere about the centrality of theodicy [*Theodizee*] to his philosophical enterprise. See, for example, his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* (HW, 20:455) or his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (HW, 12:28). For further discussion of theodicy, and its connection to Hegel’s wider philosophical project, see Allen Wood, *Hegel’s Ethical Thought* (Cambridge: CUP, 1990), 9-10; Michael Hardimon, *Hegel’s Social Philosophy: The Project of Reconciliation* (Cambridge: CUP, 1994), 19-20; Frederick Neuhouser, *Foundations of Hegel’s Social Theory: Actualizing Freedom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 217; Joseph McCartney, *Hegel on History* (London: Routledge, 2000), Ch. 12.

<sup>6</sup> Geuss interprets these particular interests as having a degree of historical variability. See ‘Art and Theodicy’, 85 and 113, note 17. But despite this variability, Hegel, on Geuss’s reading, thinks we all have an ‘absolute’ need to be ‘at home’ in the world—to come to see it as one that is basically rational and good and in which our needs can find fulfillment.

<sup>7</sup> See Michael Hardimon, *Hegel’s Social Philosophy*, esp. Ch. 3, for further elucidation of these notions.

Absolute Spirit—art, religion, and philosophy.<sup>8</sup> And Hegel thinks that, whatever rifts in prevailing modes of thought may be present, whatever failings particular societies may have, the nature of things is (at core anyway) rational and good, not because they *are* perfect now, but because, in the progress of history, they are tending toward increasingly greater rationality and goodness. This, according to Hegel, is the basic truth about things, and the business of art, religion, and philosophy is to deliver us such truth. Hence the aptness of the notion of a theodicy in describing Hegel's view of art. As an exegetical matter, I unfortunately do not have the space here to substantiate Geuss's promising theodicy reading fully or to work out most of its details. I have, though, set out this line of thought and, I hope, indicated its *prima facie* interpretive plausibility as a way of making sense of the supreme task of art, in the context of Hegel's optimistic and rationalist outlook.

In this revelation of truth about the world, the main difference between art and philosophy is that whereas philosophy carries forward this agenda by discursive means, art paradigmatically conveys its insights in a sensuous [*sinnlich*] way, appealing to feeling more than to reflective ratiocination (A, 7; HW, 13:21).<sup>9</sup> Art, as Hegel understands it, implicitly aims to give us insight into the 'comprehensive truths of the spirit' (A, 7; HW, 13:21). But, given its sensuous approach, it is not sophisticated enough to do so in a fully adequate way. In order to arrive at a genuinely comprehensive view of the world, and thereby to come to see it as a rational and good one to which we can be reconciled, we will need philosophy.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, we can see what art was grasping for, even if it is a task in which art, given its inherent limitations as a reflective medium, cannot ultimately succeed.

---

<sup>8</sup> Hegel's main characterization of art functioning as a form of Absolute Spirit comes in the *Enzyklopädie*. See HW, 10:367-72. (Religion and philosophy *qua* Absolute Spirit are discussed in the sections immediately following the cited ones.) Hegel elaborates things here in terms of his highly abstract idealist metaphysical apparatus and the attendant jargon associated with that. The basic idea is that forms of Absolute Spirit are progressively more sophisticated ways of coming to know the nature of reality.

<sup>9</sup> See also the characterization of art, contrasted with religion and philosophy, in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, (HW, 16:135 ff). Cf., Beiser, *Hegel*, 288.

<sup>10</sup> This is why Hegel understands philosophy, when functioning in its 'highest purpose', as 'the true theodicy' [*wahrhafte Theodizee*] (HW, 20:455). He contrasts it unfavorably in this regard with the reconciling attempts of art and religion, which he suggests cater more to the feelings instead of to the intellect.

A few clarifications: This is not a claim about what *individual artists* were intentionally aiming to do. It is instead an attempted reconstruction of the aim of art itself, as a form of Absolute Spirit.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, this is not a claim that is supposed to capture our present engagement with art. Artworks do not have this place in the lives of most of us today (A, 11; HW, 13:25). Hegel is not even, it seems to me, meaning to imply that past communities (e.g., the Ancient Greeks or Medieval Europeans) could have really understood, let alone conceptually articulated, exactly what art was then seeking to do for them, as they stood awestruck in front of the statue of Apollo or inside the majestic cathedral. Although there is the notion of art bringing the Divine to mind, bringing our deepest interests into view, and so on, Hegel's important claim, I think, is not one about whether a majority of people actually *reflectively understood themselves* as having this rarified experience most of the time, but rather about whether the inner content of art would have been such as to make sense of this potential reaction on their part and to account for a more inchoate response they felt. Hegel tends to focus more on artworks themselves and on unfolding their immanent cognitive content, with the description of the subjective response to that art playing a more secondary and derivative role.

Now, it is easier to see how statues of gods, or pictures of the Assumption or of the Resurrection and so on might operate in this way. In *explicitly representing* various human conceptions of the divine, and casting them in a certain resplendent light, they intimate a reassuring truth about the order of the world. But what of tragedy — presenting, as it does, conflict, death and destruction? How can Hegel fit that into this rather upbeat story, whereby art reveals the truth in such a way as to suggest the basic order and goodness of things? It will be helpful for framing Hegel's remarks on comedy first to sketch briefly his theory of tragedy, since, as we shall see, there are a few important similarities.

---

<sup>11</sup> How a suprapersonal entity like this can be said to *have* an implicit aim or a *telos* is no doubt a vexing matter too, but not one I can treat here. We might describe Spirit as operative through the artists in what they do and indeed operative through the institution of art itself. Beiser, *Hegel*, 297-8. On such a view, the aims of Spirit (e.g., the desire to come to know itself) give art its *telos*. In a way, though, this may just shift the puzzlement up a level.

As Hegel understands the best classical Greek tragedy, what we have in it are two competing positions, personified by different characters.<sup>12</sup> We have, to use Hegel's example of *Antigone* (A, 1213; HW, 15:544), Creon representing the claims of the *polis* (Polynices cannot be buried, because he is a traitor) and Antigone representing the claims of the *oikos* (Polynices must be buried, because he is her brother).<sup>13</sup> For Hegel, each of the characters is putting forward a position with normative weight. Yet 'although the characters have a purpose which is valid in itself [in this case, to further the claims of the *polis* or the *oikos* respectively], they tragically can carry it out only by pursuing it one-sidedly and so contradicting and infringing someone else's purpose' (A, 1197; HW, 15:524). Though these positions they cling to have an important grain of truth to them, they are unhelpfully extreme, wrongly taking their claims to be the whole truth. Although tragedy does present these conflicts of principle, it also—and this is key—intimates that these conflicts are not insurmountable. The larger truth that the drama as a whole (supposedly) suggests is a more optimistic one, and thus 'in tragedy the eternal substance of things emerges victorious in a reconciling way' (A, 1199; HW, 15:527).<sup>14</sup> (Hegel is never very clear on exactly how this is supposed to happen.) In any event, tragedy is theodicy-like because, superficial appearances to the contrary, it gestures at things fundamentally being in accordance with rationality and spiritual truth, and thereby to that extent good.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> It is important to remember that this model of the tragic is supposed to apply only to a particular sub-class of the tragic that Hegel holds in high esteem. His theory is *not* offered as an exhaustive model of all tragedies in the standard canon. It is clear from Hegel's own discussion that he doesn't mean to extend it to modern tragedies (e.g., Shakespeare's) and in fact explicitly contrasts them with this model (A, 1223-26; HW, 15:556-560). Nor does he mean it to apply to the ancient 'dramas of reconciliation', e.g., *Philoctetes*, the *Eumenides* (A, 1204; HW, 15:550-551), which, on his view, show the reconciliation being achieved within the dramatic narrative itself. Hegel thinks we need to tell a different kind of story about what is going on in each of these.

<sup>13</sup> Whereas in classical sculpture, we get the idealized and beautiful god in humanized form, here we get an idealized image of free human subjectivity active in the world and tenaciously pursuing an ethical purpose. S. Houlgate, 'Hegel's Theory of Tragedy', in Stephen Houlgate (ed.) *Hegel and the Arts*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007) draws attention to this strongly Schillerian dimension of Hegel's view.

<sup>14</sup> Of course, a natural rejoinder to Hegel is that what tragedy shows us is that there are *inescapable* conflicts among legitimate normative principles. One might, *contra* Hegel, think that this is the very essence of a tragic dilemma in fact.

<sup>15</sup> In his discussion of tragedy, Hegel is adamant that 'the only important thing for a work of art is to present what is in agreement with reason and spiritual truth' [*das, zur Darstellung zu bringen, was der Vernunft und Wahrheit des Geistes zusagt*] (A, 1197; HW, 15:525). Because of this, he thinks we should understand the artistic significance of tragedy in terms of its cognitive content about the world instead of its cathartic effects (A, 1197; HW, 15:525).

To many of course, this is exactly the *wrong* lesson to draw from tragedy; it warrants much less optimism on many fronts. It says as much about Hegel as about tragedy that he interprets it in this way. Moreover, the optimism aside, the whole Hegelian picture of the arts, and their supreme task, will strike many as completely alien, to the point of being at once both grandiose and quaint. The very idea that art has a ‘supreme task,’ and one of such exalted cognitive and existential import, to many is passé, a relic of the 19th century best forgotten. It is worth noting in his defense, however, that Hegel’s claim is one about the task of art that is ‘supreme,’ not about the only task of art that is worthwhile. Art can afford us sensuous pleasure, or amusement, or free play of the faculties. Yet it is compatible with this pluralism to think that while what we would ordinarily call ‘works of art’ have many different aims, some of these aims are more significant, serious, and important than others — and that one of these aims is most important of all and is most truly definitive of art. I don’t really see how one would go about arguing for Hegel’s hugely ambitious view, let alone decisively, against the person either doubtful of whether the arts have a supreme task or doubtful of whether, if they did, this would be it. In any event, my point is not to vindicate Hegel’s agenda for the arts, but to outline it and to see how the various parts of it fit together. Given the backdrop of such a grand task for the arts, there is the question of how comedy, which many would think of as fundamentally unserious, can participate in it. There is the further puzzle of whether, and to what extent, art can be socially critical when it is playing this reconciling role. It is to this set of questions that I would now like to turn.

### Hegel on Comedy



Comedy needn't simply be about giving us a hearty laugh and nothing more.<sup>16</sup> Hegel is explicit that comedy can be brought into the fold of those art forms that take up art's supreme task (A, 1202; HW, 15:530). (Indeed, there is even a case to be made that Hegel thinks of comedy as the highest form of art.<sup>17</sup>) Based on what I have said so far about the 'supreme task' of art in the previous section, one might be prone to think that Hegel will most admire comedy for the straightforward sense of reconciliation it so frequently grants at the end. After the tribulations that the characters undergo, things in most comedies end happily with a wedding or general revelry or some reintegration of an outsider into the community — often some combination of these. In this respect, comedy, in the note of reconciliation on which it characteristically closes, might seem to be the optimistic Hegelian art *par excellence*. But this simple trajectory to a happy ending is *not* the aspect of comedy that Hegel focuses on as paramount, though he does admit (and how can one be surprised?) that he enjoys a happy resolution to things (A, 1232; HW, 15:567). The main feature that Hegel focuses on is instead comedy's presentation of the resilient free subjectivity of the protagonist. Comedy offers a vivid sensuous image of the freedom that for him is ethically paramount. Yet what is especially interesting about Hegel's view of comedy, I shall further suggest, is that this presentation is compatible with a considerable degree of criticism leveled at existing social institutions and ways of life. Although commentators have noted both aspects of Hegel's view of comedy — its focus on free subjectivity and its social-critical dimension — they have not made explicit its crucial lesson for understanding Hegel's aesthetics as a whole, when viewed through this theodical framework. Art, it would seem, can traffic in its supreme task, here

---

<sup>16</sup> A preliminary issue of scope: What is meant by comedy? As with the term 'tragedy', the term 'comedy' has come to be used in a very broad sense. Everything from romantic comedies to political parody to satire to slapstick, and so on, comes under its fold. Hegel is mainly confining himself to a certain comic canon: Aristophanes, New Comedy, Shakespeare, Molière. (And he has some dismissive remarks about other, more (in his view) peripheral practitioners of the genre, Kotzebue, for example (A, 1202; HW, 15:530)). It is difficult to delineate the genre of comedy precisely, and there are not really the conceptual resources in Hegel's work to do so neatly anyway. The important thing for us to remember is that Hegel's attention is fixed on a certain, fairly narrow, historical canon of comedies.

<sup>17</sup> Stephen Law, 'Hegel and the Spirit of Comedy: *Der Geist der Stets Verneint*', in William Maker (ed.) *Hegel and Aesthetics*, (SUNY, 2000), 113-14. Cf. also, S. Houlgate, 'Hegel's Theory of Tragedy', who is in sympathy with this point, 178, note 82.

understood as the project of theodicy and reconciliation, *without ignoring, denying, or glossing over the problems of the existing socio-political order*. Work in Hegel's social and political philosophy has borne out an analogous conclusion.<sup>18</sup> Comedy provides an important foothold for extending the idea to Hegel's aesthetics too. I would like to explore, in particular, how this critical dimension fits in with art's supreme task. In the process, I try to explain Hegel's evaluations of particular kinds of comedies by reference to his background commitments — for example, why he markedly prefers Old Comedy to New Comedy and Molière.<sup>19</sup> (It is not, dare I say, a preference rooted in finding the former's lusty humor involving phalluses<sup>20</sup> and flatulence<sup>21</sup> particularly funny.) Unfair as his judgments may be to the aesthetic merits of the *The Brothers Menaechmus* or *The Misanthrope*, these evaluations of Hegel's are bound up with his conception of what comedy should be, when functioning in its supreme task.

For Hegel, when comedy is participating in the supreme task of art, it will present a certain idealized image of a free subject.<sup>22</sup> This is immediately puzzling, since the characters presented in this way are also objects of humor for having silly goals, or lacking the wherewithal to realize serious goals, or encountering amusing, pretension-deflating obstacles along the way (A, 1200-1201; HW 528-530). All this indignity may seem incompatible with presenting them as free. But Hegel's idea appears to be that these characters maintain a certain good-natured composure in the process. Such characters thereby 'reveal themselves as having something higher in them

---

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, A. Wood, *Hegel's Ethical Thought*; M. Hardimon, *Hegel's Social Philosophy*; F. Neuhouser, *The Foundations of Hegel's Social Theory*.

<sup>19</sup> Hegel also registers his great regard for Shakespearean comedy (A, 1235-6; HW, 15:572), but says much less about it.

<sup>20</sup> "The characteristic costume of an actor playing a male role included an artificial penis of abnormal size," K. Dover, *Aristophanic Comedy* (London: Batsford, 1972), 29.

<sup>21</sup> *Clouds* 382ff

<sup>22</sup> In the small literature on Hegel and comedy, many commentators agree that there is some important connection between comedy and the nexus of issues surrounding freedom, subjectivity, and agency. See, for example, Stephen Bungay, *Beauty and Truth: A Study of Hegel's Aesthetics*, (Oxford: OUP, 1987), 151; Mark Roche, 'Hegel's Theory of Comedy in the Context of Hegelian and Modern Reflections on Comedy' in *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 3 (2002), 411–430, at 412; Law, 'Hegel and the Spirit of Comedy'; Allen Speight, *Hegel, Literature, and the Problem of Agency* (Cambridge: CUP, 2001), Ch. 3; Lydia Moland, 'Hegelian Comedy', *Proceedings of the 2011 European Society of Aesthetics*; Martin Donougho, 'Hegelian Comedy', presented at the American Society of Aesthetics Meeting, October 2012.

because they are not seriously tied to the finite world with which they are engaged but are raised above it and remain firm in themselves and secure in the face of failure and loss. It is to this absolute freedom of spirit which is utterly consoled in advance in every human undertaking, to this world of private serene cheerfulness [*Heiterkeit*] that Aristophanes conducts us' (A, 1221; HW, 15:553). The presentation of this freedom is not unique to comedy.<sup>23</sup> In tragedy the protagonist typically gets crushed, though manifests a certain tenacious freedom in sticking to his or her ideals in the process. In comedy, by contrast, the protagonist survives, and this freedom shines resplendent. It is for this reason that the artistic presentation of freedom, for Hegel, arguably reaches its most triumphant pinnacle in Aristophanic comedy.

Freedom, we must remember, is Hegel's highest good and foremost among our interests as human beings.<sup>24</sup> And the supreme task of art is to reveal, among other things, 'the deepest interests of mankind' (A,7; HW, 13:21). Comedy traffics in Hegelian theodicy because, in its dramatic presentation, it gives a vision of a world where freedom is regnant. To be sure, what comedy is showing us is far from an *accurate picture* of the instantiation of the sort of freedom Hegel really prizes. The connection between this picture of freedom and full-fledged Hegelian freedom is very attenuated. But everything, we must remember, is happening at a much more sensuous level: Art is

---

<sup>23</sup> Some commentators emphasize that, for Hegel, the presentation of freedom is the most central content of art as such. Pippin, 'The Absence of Aesthetics in Hegel's Aesthetics', 397–398 and Stephen Houlgate, 'Hegel and the "End" of Art', *Owl of Minerva* 29, No. 1, esp. at 15–19. While I am in agreement with the idea that Hegel puts great emphasis on freedom, my own sense, following Geuss, is that the best umbrella notion is to see the arts as giving theodicy-like expression to the fundamental Hegelian truth that the world is basically rational and good. The presentation of freedom is thereby also paramount, because the fact that the world is tending toward the realization of human freedom is in large part what *makes* it basically rational and good. Yet the broader theodicy account, I believe, has an explanatory advantage in cases where what art is suggesting is broader than just something about freedom: In tragedy, for example, we get not just the presentation of the protagonist's freedom, but, in the best exemplars of the genre, also a certain intimation of conflicting ethical principles as ultimately reconcilable too — and indeed, of the world as one that is basically rational in part because such reconciliation is possible. And in the so-called "symbolic" arts, it is less about freedom *per se* than about *gestures* at the divine and at a higher truth, which such art, characteristically, points toward but cannot adequately embody (A, 300; HW 13:390–391).

<sup>24</sup> See A. Patten, *Hegel's Idea of Freedom* (Oxford: OUP, 1999) for further discussion of Hegel's views on freedom. Hegelian freedom is not an ahistorical, intrinsic property of all human subjects in virtue of being rational creatures, but a partly *extrinsic* property of them. Possessing this property, in its fullest sense, depends on standing in mutually-recognitive relations with other subjects and being in a society which has the social and political institutions that can secure this freedom. For most (perhaps all?) of human history, humans have not been free in the fullest sense of the word. Although Hegel's conception of freedom has some important affinities with the Kantian idea of freedom as rational autonomy (see Patten, Ch. 2), it is far more intersubjective and social than the sort of freedom emphasized in the Kantian tradition.

not giving a rational argument to the effect that such freedom is possible for human beings, nor is it giving us a detailed portrait thereof. It is *showing us* the triumph of a *kind* of freedom, for which the character becomes a sort of avatar. It thereby gestures toward the freedom that Hegel holds in highest esteem.

Two main aspects of Old Comedy further bolster this presentation of free subjectivity. First, in Old Comedy, the characters have considerable particularity as individuals.<sup>25</sup> In New Comedy from Menander through Plautus and Terence, there is, by contrast, a tendency toward greater ossification. We basically get stock stories and stock situations; not images of real people, or people who seem like they could be real people.<sup>26</sup> Second, in Old Comedy, we laugh with the character and not simply at him. At least this is what Hegel apparently means when he writes: one ‘must be very careful to distinguish whether the *dramatis personae* are comical for themselves [*für sich selbst*] or only in the eyes of the audience. The first alone can be counted as really comical, and here Aristophanes was master’ (A, 1220; HW, 15:552). Hegel draws attention to this feature, and it can be puzzling why, unless we situate things in the context of his views on comedy’s celebration of the protagonist’s free subjectivity. This ability on the part of the comic character not to take himself too seriously, although at first glance somewhat paradoxical, dovetails with the presentation of subjective freedom for two reasons. The character in Old Comedy may thus have a dawning inkling of his own silliness and the silliness of his projects and thus a kind of freedom in that self-consciousness.<sup>27</sup> And in laughing *with* the character, the audience, in a sense, stands in a certain respectful and recognitive relationship with a (fictional) free subject. The character is not treated *simply* as the object of their mockery. This is one of Hegel’s most interesting points about comedy, I

---

<sup>25</sup> Dover, *Aristophanic Comedy*, 28. The masks worn by the actors typically showed this greater individualization too, in making them out as distinct people and not simply generic types. Often, there were actual political or cultural figures who were being portrayed on stage, but many of the protagonists in Aristophanes are fictional.

<sup>26</sup> Even scholars of New Comedy readily acknowledge this tendency toward rigidity and woodenness of character and situation. See Erich Segal’s ‘Introduction’ to his edited collection *Oxford Readings in Menander, Plautus, and Terence* (Oxford: OUP, 2001).

<sup>27</sup> Cf., S. Law, ‘Hegel and the Spirit of Comedy’, 119.

think, and it deserves to be explored more fully on another occasion. The idea is rather woolly, but it helps explain the unsettling sense of cruelty we find in some comedies and in the stance they invite us to take up toward their characters. Furthermore, this all helps to explain Hegel's basic (if contentious) complaint about Molière (A, 1234; HW 15:569). A character such as Alceste has a kind of priggish over-seriousness of purpose. But he doesn't have an inkling of himself as funny and is comical only in the eyes of the audience, who are enticed to mock him with a kind of *Schadenfreude*. Of course, many characters in Aristophanic comedy are relentlessly mocked too. But I suspect that Hegel must think that Aristophanes's attitude toward them is ultimately more good-natured in the way he portrays them as self-consciously relating to themselves and in the way he invites the audience to relate to them too.<sup>28</sup>

The mocking humor that I have just mentioned leads us to the next main point. The sort of comedy that Hegel most admires is also engaged in a kind of topical social criticism.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, it is really the most actively critical of the arts that Hegel discusses. Even though classical tragedy, as we saw, is critical of the false one-sidedness of various principles, it is usually not directly critical of existing social, political, and cultural institutions, being set, as it typically is, in a mythic or historical past. Aristophanic comedy, however, is topical. It faces up to the many unfortunate aspects of the social world in which it is produced. According to Hegel, 'the figures of comedy expose the general corruption into which the fundamental tendencies of public life' have fallen. They grapple with 'general public interests...statesmen and their way of steering the state, war and peace, the people and its moral situation, philosophy and its corruption, and so forth' (A, 1206; HW, 15:535). They show that certain aims are silly and unimportant, or certain people are incapable of achieving significant goals because of their limitations of character, or that certain institutions are

---

<sup>28</sup> Hegel notes at one point that Aristophanes is 'not a cold or malignant scoffer' [*kahler, schlechter Spötter*] (A, 1222; HW, 15:554).

<sup>29</sup> Many commentators are in agreement on this point, see, e.g., S. Bungay, *Beauty and Truth*, 173; Terry Pinkard, *Hegel's Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason* (Cambridge: CUP, 1994), 248-249; Michael Forster, *Hegel's Idea of a Phenomenology of Spirit*, (Chicago: UChicago, 1997), 34, note 47; M. Donougho, 'Hegelian Comedy'.

intellectually or morally or artistically bankrupt. They thereby take on what deserves to be criticized. ‘Aristophanes, for example, did not make fun of what was truly moral in the life of the Athenians, or of their genuine philosophy, true religious faith, and serious art. On the contrary, what he does put before our eyes in its self-destructive folly is the downright opposite of the genuine actuality [*wahrhaften Wirklichkeit*] of the state, religion, and art’ (A, 1202; HW, 15:530).

‘Actuality’ [*Wirklichkeit*] is a key word in this passage, and it is important to understand how Hegel is using it. Hegel’s aesthetics is sometimes treated in isolation from the rest of his philosophy, but here it is vital to have the latter shed light on the former. Especially for analytic philosophers, the main sense that the word ‘actuality’ conjures up is that familiar from modality and modal logic. Yet Hegel, in his technical use of the word, distinguishes ‘actuality’ from what simply exists. For Hegel, the actual has a key teleological component: Something is actual *only insofar* as it realizes its underlying essence.<sup>30</sup> This terminological issue has become very important in the debate surrounding the infamous *Doppelsatz* in the *Philosophy of Right*, which has it that ‘The rational is actual [*wirklich*] and the actual is rational’.<sup>31</sup> Often this remark has been pilloried as a kind of sanctification of ‘what is’ that is incompatible with social criticism. Yet a common opinion in Hegel scholarship, based on an attentiveness to Hegel’s own usage, is that Hegel is not endorsing this strongly quietistic view.<sup>32</sup> The presently-existing social, political, and cultural world needn’t, in Hegel’s technical sense of ‘actuality’, be *actual*. In fact, throughout human history, it hasn’t been.<sup>33</sup> Although Hegel’s view is not compatible with a completely despairing form of social criticism, one

---

<sup>30</sup> HW, 8:279. Hardimon glosses the point as follows: ‘Things are actual (*wirklich*) only to the extent that they express, manifest, realize, and correspond to their inner essence. What makes them actual — to the extent that they are actual — is not that they exist but rather that they exist *and* express their essence’, *Hegel’s Social Philosophy*, 53.

<sup>31</sup> HW, 7:24.

<sup>32</sup> M. Hardimon, *Hegel’s Social Philosophy*, Ch. 2; F. Neuhauser, ‘Hegel’s Social Philosophy’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel and 19th-Century Philosophy*; A. Wood, *Hegel’s Ethical Thought*, 8; Dudley Knowles, *Hegel and the Philosophy of Right* (London: Routledge, 2002), 68 ff.

<sup>33</sup> Slavery, for example, has been a prevalent feature of past societies. It is fundamentally unjust and will be eliminated in fully rational states. It was present in these states because they were not yet fully rational (HW, 12:120-9). (As admirable as these sentiments are, they are interlaced with remarks of shockingly grotesque prejudice, perhaps to be expected at this historical moment, in the explanation of why black Africans in particular have hitherto been enslaved.)

holding that things are irredeemably rotten to the core, Hegel's endorsement of the *Doppelsatz* is compatible with a biting critique of existing social, cultural, and political institutions for being insufficiently actual.<sup>34</sup> When Hegel talks then about comedy as presenting the opposite of the 'genuine actuality of the state, religion, and art,' he is not meaning that it is presenting the opposite of society as it really exists in the contemporaneous socio-political moment. Rather, it is showing it as it is, but suggesting that this is incongruous with a teleological ideal of what it *should* be, an ideal which is occluded in the institutions that are in place. After all, Hegel's narrative is one of older, insufficient modes of social and political organization (for example, the Greek polis) collapsing and gradually giving way, after a chain of intermediate historical steps, to newer ones that better actualize human freedom (the modern Prussian state).

As with his social and political philosophy, there is a parallel danger in Hegel's aesthetics that in talking about art in connection with reconciliation and theodicy, one can make it seem as if art will need to be acquiescent to the existing order in a way that it is thereby rendered incapable of social criticism. Hegel's remarks on comedy make it clear that he certainly did not think this. Aristophanes's comedies thrive on leveling trenchant criticism at the failings in Athenian political, religious, artistic, and philosophical institutions.<sup>35</sup> In the Aristophanic comedies that Hegel holds in highest esteem, this critical element is seemingly not just an adventitious facet of them; it is arguably one of their most distinctive and (on his view) commendable features.

When it comes to the supreme task of art, though, what are we to make of the fact that Hegel sees this socially critical role for comedy? A weaker claim is that it is compatible with comedy's functioning in its supreme task as art that it also engage in social criticism. The texts are clear on

---

<sup>34</sup> F. Neuhauser, 'Hegel's Social Philosophy'

<sup>35</sup> 'Of all the men whom we know from historical sources to have achieved preeminence in Athens during 445-385, there is not one who is not attacked and ridiculed either in the extant plays of Aristophanes or in the extant citations from the numerous lost plays of the period', Dover, *Aristophanic Comedy*, 34.

this point.<sup>36</sup> The stronger claim, which is more exegetically controversial, is that for comedy anyway, it can be *part and parcel* of taking up the supreme task of art that it have this socially critical dimension. While the weaker claim is certainly true, I think there is something to be said for the stronger thesis too.

About comedy functioning in the supreme task of art, Hegel writes: ‘For as a true art, comedy too has to submit to the obligation of using its presentation to bring the absolutely rational [*das an und für sich Vernünftige*] into appearance, not at all as what is broken up and perverted in itself but on the contrary as what assigns neither the victory nor, in the last resort, permanence, in actuality [*Wirklichkeit*] to folly and unreason, to false oppositions and contradictions’ (A, 1202; HW, 15:530). Now, it *could* be that comedy is using its presentation to bring the absolutely rational into appearance only through the presentation of the free subjectivity of the protagonist. But a more likely reading, it seems to me, is that it also presents the corrupt side of things (‘what is broken up and perverted in itself,’ ‘folly and unreason,’ ‘false oppositions and contradictions’) in order to intimate that they are *not* ultimately going to be victorious or permanent. In this way, the socially critical edge would be to some degree constitutive of art in its supreme task, not merely an incidental feature of it. Like tragedy in this regard, comedy, it would seem, can suggest the basic goodness and rationality of the world (in part) *negatively*. Comedy of course gives us, in (so to speak) a glowing light, the image of freedom. But in its best form, it *also* shows us divergence between the socially real and the truly actual. In making us aware of this divergence, it thereby intimates — the exact details, as with tragedy, of how this is supposed to work are unclear — that the actual, though imperfectly realized in the world presented onstage, has a normative grip even so and is in that respect triumphant.

---

<sup>36</sup> Even as comedy is engaging in this, it is able to carry on in presenting the avatar of human freedom in the form of the comic protagonist: ‘For even if what comes on the scene is only the show [*Schein*] and imagination [*Einbildung*] of what is substantive, or else mere downright perversity and pettiness, there still remains as a loftier principle the inherently firm subjectivity [*Subjektivität*] which is raised in its freedom above the downfall of the whole finite sphere and is happy and assured in itself’ (A, 1202; HW, 15:531).



Nonetheless, I think it is fair to say that the textual evidence is not decisive on this issue. In any event, whether we wish to adopt the stronger reading, or simply the weaker one, the recognition that social criticism is carried forward by the best comedies is an important lesson about Hegel's aesthetics. Geuss's paper sets up Hegel and Adorno as polar opposites when it comes to how they think about art and its relationship to social criticism.<sup>37</sup> I think this is accurate and informative in its broad outlines. Yet we should also not obscure the fact that social criticism is at the very least compatible with art in its highest Hegelian calling, as the case of comedy shows.

### Conclusion

Hegel on comedy is not a widely-discussed topic, perhaps because it is thought that unlike his reflections on, say, classical sculpture, this is not a place where Hegel's theory is at its strongest, and it does not shed much light on the genre as a whole. (Even the advocate of Hegel must admit that his ideas here are fairly sketchy.) Although it seems to me that Hegel's remarks about comedy, as with his remarks about tragedy, tell us as much about Hegel as they do about either genre, these remarks on comedy are revealing for understanding how Hegel conceives of the supreme task of art and the possibility for a social-critical dimension there.

Comedy on the whole tends to be a rather neglected topic within philosophical aesthetics—the present special issue being a salient exception proving the rule. Whereas philosophers have a great deal to say about tragedy, they have far less to say about comedy. Aristotle, of course, wrote about both topics in the *Poetics*, and it is one of those unfortunate accidents of history that the later portions of the book did not survive intact. While this may be part of the explanation for comedy's continued neglect today, I suspect there are two factors that further sustain this: First, many have a lower estimation of comedy as a genre, compared to tragedy, which they perceive, rightly or wrongly, to be more profound and intellectually significant. (This, as we've seen, is not an opinion

---

<sup>37</sup> Geuss, 'Art and Theodicy'

Hegel shares.) Second, with comedy, there is not a clear central puzzle, as there is with the so-called “paradox of tragedy,” that lends itself naturally to philosophical argumentation. The issue of why we are drawn to comedies, or why we take pleasure in them, doesn’t seem to stand in need of explanation, in the way the parallel question about tragedy seems to do. Philosophers may thus shy away from the philosophy of comedy because they are not sure what philosophical issue they should be focusing on, or if there is an issue in the vicinity that their conceptual tools are suited to addressing.

Even if we don’t like Hegel’s own account of comedy, or his commitment to such an extreme form of cognitivism about the arts, we can take a cue about some general questions to think about further in connection with comedy: What is the value and significance of comedy as a production of human culture? What does it appeal to in us? There are many routes one might go here.<sup>38</sup> But the idea of theodicy, stripped of the ambitiousness of Hegel’s own program, is a suggestive one, I think. Especially in the well-worn model that has been bequeathed to us in *New Comedy*, there is a tendency for things to be wrapped up neatly. The piece ends with weddings, or at least with some other kind of amorous reconciliation between estranged lovers. This is virtually the universal formula of so much comedy over the past two millennia: ‘Jack shall have Jill/ Nought shall go ill/ The Man shall have his mare again, and all shall be well’.<sup>39</sup> Comedy offers a kind of reassurance that ours is a world in which ordinary human happiness is possible. Of course we know, or should know, that this image is just an oversimplification. Yet the resounding success of *New Comedy*, and its legion descendants, must surely be connected with more than just laughter, but also with the way its comic trajectory and resolution present this alluring vision of human life. In his peroration to the audience, Puck makes apologies for the play’s ‘weak and idle theme’, and invites

---

<sup>38</sup> We see promising directions in which this might go in the work of Northrop Frye, ‘The Argument of Comedy’, in P. Lauter (ed.) *Theories of Comedy*, (New York: Doubleday, 1964) or in a more psychoanalytic vein in the work of Freud, *On Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1960).

<sup>39</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Act III, Scene 2

them to think that they have ‘but slumbered’, their time in theater only an idle dream. Dreams, as here, can be dismissed as insignificant fancies. But they can also be profound manifestations of the human spirit. Comedy gives voice to a collective dream for how we long for the world to be—and how, if only sometimes, it turns out to be.