

For the contingent, as that which *may either be or not be* (G 11, pp. 383–84/SL, p. 545), puts a check on the aspirations of the philosophical rationalist, who seeks “to find in [nature] a could-only-be-so-and-not-otherwise” (*Werke* 8, p. 286/EL, p. 206). The contingent entity can be “shown as necessary” and “construed a priori” no more than Herr Krug’s pen can be deduced.<sup>12</sup> Hegel cautions philosophers to heed this lesson, lest their systems devolve into “rigid pedantry” (*Werke* 8, p. 286/EL, p. 206).<sup>13</sup>

What are we to make of this dichotomy in Hegel’s views? If “reason rules the world,” then why is its domain so limited? Surely Hegel did not intend a tautology with that repeated proclamation, yet in the face of the contingency and the irrationality of nature, it seems as though Hegel’s considered position becomes the driveling concession, “reason rules the world, except when it does not.” Matters become worse when we substitute “God” and “providence” for “reason”: if we are to “regard the world . . . as ruled through divine providence” (*Werke* 8, p. 369),<sup>14</sup> then not only does nature’s irrationality appear to derogate from God’s wisdom and power, but it also would appear to compromise Hegel’s claim that his philosophy is a “theodicy” (*Werke* 12, p. 28). For how could one praise God for his “plan” (*Werke* 12, p. 25) for the world while simultaneously acknowledging that the plan is not followed in the case of what exists? By contrast, Leibniz’s theodicy, if not ultimately persuasive, can at least get off the ground: God chooses the best world, and he knows everything that will happen in this world, because reality is thoroughly intelligible, because everything that happens in it transpires in accordance with the principle of sufficient reason.

Hegel seems to affirm the principle of sufficient reason, only to deny it; he maintains the world is rational (*vernünftig*), only to concede that it is irrational (*vernunftlos*); he maintains an identity of thought and being, only to acknowledge an extra-conceptual domain of reality, *das Vernunftlose*. In this paper, I hope to resolve these tensions in Hegel’s views, which I will refer to collectively as *the paradox of irrationalism*. I thereby intend to show the error in some traditional readings of Hegel, but also that resolving this paradox enables us to read Hegel as a philosopher of the absurd.

Traditionally, the paradox of irrationalism has not found a favorable reception, because Hegel has commonly been read as a rationalist. Interpreted as such, Hegel’s views on nature and contingency are bound to come across as in conflict with his core philosophy. Such critics—let us call them *materialists*, to indicate their opposition of “matter” to “thought”—hold that

the irrationality of nature gives the lie to the rationalism of Hegel's *Logic*, by showing that rationality is found only in pure thought abstracted from reality. Such critics maintain that Hegel's attempt to incorporate matter, as thought's irrational other, within thought itself, is *ad hoc* and incoherent.

We find a polemical statement of this view in the *Economic and Political Manuscripts* of the young Karl Marx:

The entire *Logic* is proof that abstract thought is nothing for itself, that the Absolute Idea is nothing for itself, and only *nature* is something. . . . This entire transition from *Logic* to Philosophy of Nature is nothing but the transition from *abstracting* to *intuiting*, very difficult for the abstract thinker and hence so quixotically described by him. The *mystical* feeling which drives a philosopher from abstract thinking to intuiting is *boredom*, the longing for a content. (Marx 1994, p. 94)

On Marx's reading, Hegel's philosophy of nature shows that his *Logic* is rationalist fantasy pure and simple, and that Hegel simply lacked the capacity to recognize or resolve this contradiction in his system.<sup>15</sup>

This materialist objection persisted throughout the twentieth century and continues to this day. We thus find Stace (1955), pp. 308–09 arguing that Hegel's famous repudiation of Krug's demand that the idealist deduce his pen "will not bear examination" (p. 308) because the "centre and core" of any existent in Hegel's philosophy "is thought" (p. 309), and consequently each thing is capable of deduction (pp. 309–10).<sup>16</sup> The admission by Hegel of any truly irrational element in the universe would, on Stace's account, introduce "an absolute separation and opposition between the rational and the irrational . . . an opposition so complete that it introduces a fatal dualism into the system" (p. 309), a dualism between two kinds of reality—the rational and the irrational. But if Hegel's system is made consistent in this way, such that there is no *real* contingency, then, Stace argues, it never can be completed—at least not by a finite intellect (p. 310).

More recently, Beiser (2005) puts a challenge to Hegel in terms that are strikingly similar to Stace's.<sup>17</sup> He too argues that Hegel's affirmation of the reality of the contingent lands him in "a straightforward contradiction" (p. 77): for Hegel believes, on Beiser's telling, both that "everything happens of necessity according to reason" (p. 76), and that "the contingent can be otherwise" (p. 77). Beiser contends that this presents a dilemma for Hegel: either admit that contingency is only apparent,<sup>18</sup> or concede that there really is contingency, in which case the absolute is limited by "something that exists outside it" (p. 77).<sup>19</sup>