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# Autopoiesis and (Prosaic) Heroism: Of Gods and Overmen (and Giant Insects)

With regard to the hero, I do not think as well of him as you do. At any rate: he is the most acceptable form of human existence, especially if one has no other choice.  
(Nietzsche's letter to Heinrich von Stein)

**Abstract:** Autopoiesis lies at the centre of what we understand as modernity – the individual and society build themselves up from themselves, or so the narrative goes. This modern effort of the self-made man and the world is linked to a peculiar form of heroism, which is reflected by modern authors. In Hegel's work, we encounter the “world-historical individual”, and in Nietzsche's work, we encounter the “overman”. Their heroism is of a specific kind; it is founded on the dialectic of power and powerlessness. Man creates himself in his own image and then, having achieved this, realises that he, as an individual, holds no power over the world that he has created, that is, over society. Eventually, this emerges even in the most unheroic, even antiheroic, author of modernity, Franz Kafka. In his *Metamorphosis*, he presents a model that appears, though on the surface, to be a decisive separation from any form of heroism.

**Keywords:** world-changing individual; will; time; overman; creation story; reconciliation; regression; history; failure; Kafka; Nietzsche; Hegel

## 1 Introduction

If the classic philosophical injunction is to “know thyself”, modernity, with its emphasis on action, phrases the imperative differently; it says “make thyself”. In this respect, a form of autopoiesis is the very foundation of modernity. Both the individual and modern society build themselves up from themselves, or so the narrative goes. One creates oneself and one's world out of one's thoughts, turning one's back on transcendence. Hegel expresses this self-made aspect of modern thought and its world in a dense remark – his goal is to conceive of the true “not only as Substance, but [also] as Subject” (PS, p. 10). In our context, this means that the world is not constituted by divine laws; instead, our freedom consists in our willing subjection to legislation passed by the government. Our duties do not precede us; rather, they are born out of our collective mindedness and actions, and they must be, at least theoretically, open to criticism or revision.

With the constitution of the realm called society, the world changed and, with it, man's self-understanding. The self is no longer defined by the ability to use language, to relate to God, or to think in universals, neither is the individual determined by his or her position in the hierarchy. Henceforward, it is the Cartesian "I think", or even the Fichtean "I am I", which is considered the essence of the self and substantial for its proper relationship with the world as well.<sup>1</sup>

It is here that a peculiar and paradoxical form of heroism steps in. I will analyse the relation of modern autopoietic structures and heroism primarily in motifs taken from two thinkers – Hegel and Nietzsche. I am aware of the principal differences between them. These differences found a classic portrayal in Löwith's monograph *From Hegel to Nietzsche: The Revolution in Nineteenth-Century Thought* (1964). Here, however, I will offer a different approach. Focusing on the concept of heroism, wherein I will uncover a specific junction of will and time, I want to highlight distinct similarities between both thinkers.

That both were fascinated by Greek tragic heroes is well known. Rather than analysing this fascination that they shared with (at least) the entirety of the nineteenth century, I want to focus on the manner in which they relate the classic concept of heroism to modern greatness. Here, we will witness a peculiar uneasiness stemming from the fact that modernity is heroic and prosaic at the same time. Heroic is the injunction "make thyself"; prosaic is the insight that apart from this self-creation, there is not much else to create, to change, or to impact. This notion is adequately expressed in Niklas Luhmann's statement: "In modernity, anything could be different, and you can change nothing" (Luhmann 1971, p. 44).<sup>2</sup>

Hegel's thought on world-changing individuals is symptomatic. As individuals, they do not change anything, since *as* individuals they do not possess the means to do so. Instead, their achievement is noticing a distinction that has already appeared and making it explicit by acting in accordance with that. Thus, in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Hegel says: "It was theirs to know this nascent principle; the necessary, directly sequent step in progress, which their world was to take; to make this their aim, and to expend their energy in promot-

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<sup>1</sup> Based on this self-positing I, Fichte later develops an evolved concept of heroism. "Whatever name they may have borne, it was Heroes, who had left their Age far behind them, giants among surrounding men in material and spiritual power. They subdued to their Idea of what ought to be, races by whom they were on that account hated and feared; through sleepless nights of thought they pondered their anxious plans for their fellow men; from battlefield to battlefield" (Fichte 1847, p. 45).

<sup>2</sup> Translations are – unless stated otherwise – my own.

ing it” (Hegel 2011, p. 31). In other words, the significance of the world-changing individuals stems from the fact that they understand the conditions and inner structure of the present better than others.

Accordingly, they share a more intimate relationship with these principles, which, in turn, means that they are, in a sense, less free, and their knowledge restricts their actions. However, this is precisely where their uniqueness steps in. Through their actions, they make the necessity of the present, the dynamic towards which it gravitates, explicit. In this regard, coinciding with necessity, they, in fact, are the freest.<sup>3</sup>

Nietzsche’s conception of the overman stems from a rather similar idea. The overman stands over others precisely on account of his knowledge that his task is to succumb to the world or even to, according to Hegel’s words, “revere one’s fate” (Hegel 1986, p. 533), or, in Nietzsche’s words, to love one’s fate (Nietzsche 2007a, p. 87). I will interpret this fate as the necessity one incites by one’s own actions. We, thus, notice a provoking entanglement of power with powerlessness.

Upon self-creation, one realises that all has been accomplished and that what has not been accomplished has not been done as it could not have been accomplished, at least not by an individual. This is the ambiguous essence of modern heroism; the best create themselves in the image of powerlessness. In this regard, Hermann Melville, a reader of Hegel’s work,<sup>4</sup> presents the essence of modern heroism aptly: “Seeking to conquer a larger liberty, man but extends the empire of necessity” (1987, p. 174).

In certain respects, the situation appears even more dramatic. In modernity, trust becomes a scarce commodity – in oneself and in others. In this regard, both my concept of modernity and what I call modern heroism are different from the victorious portrayals of modern humanity as found, among others, in Lyotard, who suggests that “the hero of knowledge works towards a good ethico-political end – universal peace” (1984, pp. xxiii–xiv). While I do not doubt that such naïve visions and self-conceptions are present too, I dispute that they were mainstream modernist narratives, and although this victorious narrative is often

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<sup>3</sup> In this regard, I do not agree with the thesis put forward by Dieter Thomä in his otherwise very insightful book *Warum Demokratien Helden brauchen*. Thomä argues that Hegel formulates a heroism in the context of the philosophy of history while withdrawing from it in his lectures on aesthetics; in the latter lectures, he emphasises the fact that modernity is essentially prosaic and, consequently, anti-heroic. Instead, I claim that Hegel’s concept of the world-changing individuals is already prosaic. See Thomä (2019, p. 195f.).

<sup>4</sup> At least one journal entry (Melville 1989, p. 8) testifies to the fact that Melville was a reader of Hegel’s work.

linked to Hegelianism, it is difficult, if not impossible, to relate it to Hegel's work itself.

My approach will also differ, in that, throughout my article, I will follow the loss of trust experienced in its various forms, especially as it relates to time and will. Humans lose trust in their past, in their history, and curiously, in their memory, nor do they trust their beginnings – events traditionally invested with hope. Modern beginnings are awkward to such an extent that they may be viewed as “proemia of mistrust” (Mayer 2015, p. 97). While classical tragic heroes have only retrospectively learned that they have failed, modern heroes know it even before they start to act.<sup>5</sup> In this respect, the cardinal question that the modern hero faces is not how to deal with success but with failure. Certainly, this skill cannot be ignored by the classical hero either. The enticing aspect, however, is that the question of failure and the manner of confronting it is the very essence of what I call “modern heroism”.

In regard to Franz Kafka, Walter Benjamin noticed that “once he was certain of eventual failure, everything worked out for him en route as in a dream” (2007, p. 145). This inspires me to take the audacious step of introducing the figure of Kafka into the dialogue between Hegel and Nietzsche, with Kafka being *the* modern expert on failures and lost combats – with his family, with the other sex, and with oneself. In doing so, I do not suggest that there is a significant intellectual alliance among these three thinkers. Rather, I intend to use Kafka's perspective to shed light on the many forms of regressions and devolutions that are essential to modern heroism, as instantiated in the world-historical individual or the overman.

## 2 Modern Myth: Basic Structure

To grasp modern heroism, it is important to understand the slippery concept of modernity. I will elucidate its essence by contrasting modernity's “creation story” with the Western classical creation story. First, we notice that, traditionally, the act of creating takes effort. Gods and heroes had to kill primordial beasts and form the world out of their corpses; such is the Babylonian epic of creation, a work of some one thousand verses on seven tablets, probably composed

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<sup>5</sup> Kleist offers a nice illustration of a related fact in his play *Broken Jug* (Kleist 1986). The play adopts the structure of Sophocles' *Oedipus*; however, as opposed to Oedipus, the judge Adam already knows from the time he embarks on the investigation that it is he himself who is guilty. Kleist's biographer, Günter Blamberger, comments on this modern adoption of the topos: “In modernity, tragedy and knowledge are not mutually exclusive” (Blamberger 2011, p. 254).

around the year 1200 BC in Babylon. In this story, Marduk first slays the primordial beast Tiamat. He bursts her belly and severs her internal parts, after which “he flung down her carcass, he took his stand upon it” (Heidel 1963, IV 103f.) and, eventually, “split [Tiamat] in two, like a fish for drying” (IV 137). From the corpse of the defeated enemy, Marduk establishes the world. For this heroic feat, he is promoted to the head of the pantheon since he saved other gods from the mortal dangers of the primordial Tiamat (cf. Bottéro 1995, p. 243).

With the Judeo-Christian God, the narrative changes profoundly. Here, creation does not take work. It is, in a sense, prosaic as God does not have to face a competitor, and hence, the story lacks drama – “And God said, ‘Let there be light’, and [then] there was light.” In Luhmann’s words, we may claim that we witness a process of an unprecedented “trivialisation” of the creation story; God invests neither effort nor works, and the fact that he rests on the seventh day is likely for the purpose of contemplation than as a day of recovery from intense labour. Although God was indeed active during the days of creation, He does so without any struggle or effort – he creates through performative speech.

How do the aforementioned stories relate to modernity’s “creation myth”? Or, more importantly, what is modernity’s creation myth? I suggest taking Nietzsche’s pronouncement of God’s death as the “narrative incipit” of a new era. Not only does Nietzsche stand – with his work *and* life – at the beginning of a new era from the philosophical perspective. I consider it to be an even more important fact that the figure of the Persian prophet and his announcement of God’s demise have proven culturally and socially pervasive, in a sense, even convincing for the moderns. In this respect, Western modernity in its cultural and social forms considers itself an offspring of this philosophical poet and his metaphysical crime story.

If we accept this suggestion to trace modernity’s cultural beginning from Nietzsche’s Zarathustra, we notice that the modern creation story is, in a sense, archaic, even anti-biblical. The new era is inaugurated by the death of the previous divinity. While this divinity is considered in many respects just as much a tormentor as the poisonous Tiamat, the nature of the torment has transformed profoundly, or, to be more precise, it has been dedramatised. In the Babylonian creation story, Marduk kills Tiamat who, with her poisonous blood, threatens other gods. In the modern creation story, the victim has a lesser offence to answer for: “It is his gaze, his curiosity, his superobtrusiveness. The witness of our disgrace has to die” (Z, p. 216).

Both the threat and its treatment have been sublimated. The Judeo-Christian God is killed not by aggression but by indifference, and the divine torments do not threaten the integrity of our bodies but our peace of mind, infringing on our sense of privacy. However, we notice another interesting aspect in that the begin-

nings fail to be bearers of real hope. In fact, initially, those responsible for the killing do not even notice that they have killed their divinity. Why does such a world-changing beginning pass unnoticed? It is because it is not a real beginning. The moderns already know that they are not the true beginners; rather, they are doomed to exist with their competitors, whose energy is never exhausted and who, on the contrary, furnish the necessary energy for further development. Both Hegel and Nietzsche approach this idea from differing perspectives. Everything is thoroughly historical, which means, among other things, beginnings also escape us – they too have a history, and thus, nothing ever truly begins. We thrive and suffer from a battle that we have not initiated, which we have to carry on without the hope of arriving at any conclusion.

Recall that in the biblical tradition, God speaks, and by his thought, he sets objects into the world. Modern man finds himself in a situation, not dissimilar to God's,<sup>6</sup> where he believes it is possible to create a world out of his thoughts and actions. However, this new world is not a world of mountains, rivers, and horses. It is a human – indeed, all too human – world. It is a historical world of markets, laws, divorces, and subjects. In modernity, we, thus, witness a profound subjectification. Divine laws turn into laws gleaned from public discussions and political procedures. With this, the world is, in the original sense of the word, debilitated or ontologically weakened.

Put provocatively, this very debilitating process is the modern collective mindedness of the modern spirit; whatever is built on social consensus, collective mindedness, language, and mutual recognition is ontologically weak. In this ontological sense, modernity is the apex of weakness. At the time of creation, that God creates something out of nothing, in the absence of an enemy, is, in a certain sense, a sign of weakness and, from a different perspective, a sign of power since His divine logos can create nonlinguistic things, and thus, linguistic and nonlinguistic objects coincide. As opposed to this, our language and objects coincide only in certain aspects, exclusively related to society; marriage, murder, money, and poetry are what we permit them to be or what the respective systems permit them to be. Modernity selfconsciously bases itself on human categories of

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<sup>6</sup> Hegel's appreciation for the creation story is well known. As he has shown, it fits perfectly into the context of his own philosophy and his "provocation": "what is rational, is actual, and what is actual, is rational" (see Hegel 2010, § 6, p. 33). If we are capable of understanding the world, it is because it has already been of thought before – by God. Analogously, the understanding of the human, that is, the social, world stems from the fact that something has already been thought about by someone else. Thinking is thinking of what has already been thought – yet, in modernity, we do not think the thinking of God (either the Judeo-Christian or the Aristotelian) but the thinking of others.

thought and language. It is no coincidence, therefore, that it is a time that simultaneously witnesses the birth of comparative grammar, the hypothesis about an Indio-European language, and the publication of the *Science of Logic* (see Steiner 2001, p. 11).

### 3 The Impotence of World-Changing Individuals

The moderns realise that language itself is time sedimented, and consequently, this linguistically founded world is essentially historic. The meanings of words are their history – recorded and unrecorded – with their own usage (Steiner 2001, p. 19). In this context, the traditional idea that God is beyond time, that he is eternal, appears difficult to both bear and understand. Accordingly, Hegel and Nietzsche refuse a certain concept of eternity and, instead, offer an “innovated” version thereof. From the perspective of (“traditional”) eternity, the human life is a moving shadow, a “moving image of eternity” (*Timaeus*, 38c), the “telos” of humans being to liken themselves to eternity already during their life – to become timeless over time.<sup>7</sup>

Hegel and Nietzsche reject this idea and, instead, regard the ability to live up to the challenge of time to be something that testifies to greatness. Rather than resisting time, a person exhibits greatness by embracing the weakness built into the temporal; exceptional individuals express time itself, and thus, they are embodiments of the fleeting – their life is shorter than that of the average man, and they suffer more immensely. Hegel even applies this modern concept of heroic “being in time” to classical ancient heroes:

That which endures is regarded more highly than that which soon passes, but all blossom, all that is exquisite in a living being, dies early. Achilles, the flower of Greek life, and the infinitely powerful personality of Alexander the Great, are no more, and only their deeds and influences remain through the world that they have brought into being.<sup>8</sup> (PhN, p. 232)

Why are people who are capable of great deeds so easily consumed by time? There is one obvious answer – for Nietzsche, “living dangerously” is dangerous.

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<sup>7</sup> This too receives a paradigmatic portrayal in Plato’s *Phaedo* (64a), “those who pursue philosophy aright study nothing but dying and being dead”.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. PH, p. 31: “They die early like Alexander; they are murdered, like Caesar; transported to St. Helena, like Napoleon... They are *great* men, because they willed and accomplished something great; not a mere fancy, a mere intention, but that which met the case and fell in with the needs of the age.”

On the other hand, Hegel expresses a subtler point – heroes wane quickly because they act. Acting, the precipitation of change, accelerates time, and with it, one’s vulnerability; one is consumed by the changes one incites. This is even more true in the case of modernity with its accelerated time consciousness. In accelerated modernity, everyone lives long enough to witness one’s strengths and victories fade.

Man is historical because he acts.<sup>9</sup> By acting, he disturbs the link between cause and effect and introduces unpredictability, making the world less stable, even introducing misunderstandings and newness. This newness is of a specific human kind, not the godly *creatio ex nihilo* that is seminal for understanding heroes in the Hegelian reading. In the Hegelian worldview, heroes do not “have” ideas; rather, they see that ideas have already materialised without being noticed by the multitude. Thus, world-historical individuals act out differences in the world and, by this, transform not necessarily our world but our understanding of time. In the present, they reinterpret the past and, thus, stand at the origin of the future.

That human action is not a creation out of nothing is reflected in the fact that revolutionaries often only retrospectively learn what they have enacted. The wonder of action is that its meaning often appears only after the performance. The reason for this is that human actions never belong exclusively to an agent but equally to the space of action that responds to the agent. In Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, we encounter a poetic image of what happens if one misunderstands this aspect of human action. Revolutionaries, representing a certain type of heroism, although a misguided one in Hegel’s eyes, strive to create a new society from scratch. They confront the world with the idea that their society should be whatever they think it to be. This, however, cannot be the case since humans bear no potential for the immaculate. In fact, humans have the ability to think precisely *because* there is something that transcends thought, something we necessarily fail to capture, and therefore, both thought and action tend to be unsettling. Once one acts, one commits “to the objective element and risk being altered and perverted” (PS, p. 193).

Revolutionaries are not prepared to endure these twists, and thus, their action opens the gates to nihilism, according to which, today has no meaning in itself, it is tomorrow that is decisive. Furthermore, such a conception awakens wishes and hopes that the present fails to stabilise and the future fails to satisfy. The problem of this conception is, in short, that it misses the present. Hegel ex-

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<sup>9</sup> Of course, this is not a new insight; what is new is that action and change brought about are now embraced as the essence of human nature.



presses this in an overtly poetic language – the revolutionary form of consciousness that he calls “absolute freedom” turns the present into a “fury of destruction” (PS, p. 359).

Why is this so? Thinking and acting take time, which is precisely something that we might not be prepared to invest in the periods we deem to be revolutionary. Therefore, such a relationship with the world can “produce neither positive work nor a deed; there is left for it only negative action” (PS, p. 359). This destruction is precisely caused due to excessive attention to the future. Nietzsche, who has been critical of modern forms of progressivisms, dubs this tendency the “phantasmagoria of anticipated future bliss” (GM, p. 29). In addition, against this, both strive to reconcile with the present.

Yet, how? Hegel’s portrayal of revolutionaries offers a clue to this question. They are what we might call “neurotics of thought”; they insist on having absolute control and absolute will over the world. Significantly, they are neurotic about time as well. They want it to start with them, as attempts at constructing revolutionary calendars bear witness. Against this, Hegel and Nietzsche address the past in a different manner, calling on us to love our past as it is precisely the way to reconcile with the present – the past being the present’s structure. The essence of time rests neither in the future nor in an unmoved present, but in a past captured, understood, and remembered here and now.

However, we have seen that a peculiar neurosis is linked to both time *and* will. For Hegel, ontologically speaking, the will has different layers. The first, from which ontological evolution proceeds, is the stage of “pure indeterminacy”. Applied to the individual, one might at this stage experience an “unrestricted infinity of absolute abstraction or universality, the pure thought of oneself” (PR, § 5, p. 28). This is a highly abstract formulation that expresses the above-mentioned stage of the absolute will of revolutionaries or, to put it in more general terms, of all those who believe that the world is something to be subdued. We have noted already with regards to the revolutionaries that Hegel considers this stage something that one needs to overcome, lest it should take on the form of “fanaticism of destruction”, even the “elimination of individuals” (PR, § 5, p. 29).

Rather than submitting to the fantasy of the all-powerfulness of one’s own reason, one needs to limit oneself, which requires determination and, thus, submission to given conditions rather than conjuring up an ideal world for the future. In other words, one needs to be able to “make oneself” finite and, therefore, accept one’s past and take into account the restrictions of the present. Inevitably, this is linked to a loss of a certain kind of freedom. However, this very loss is constitutive of the self in its actuality (and thus finitude). In this sense, it is the task

of the individual to realise that a negative impediment, that is, external heteronomous determination, is also a positive condition of being a free self.

Applied to the context of the world-changing individual, we learn that this individual does not change the world but, in fact, changes himself or herself and, in doing so, gains a unique insight into the present. Acting on this insight is “world-changing” insofar as the individual functions as an accelerator of change, rather than the creator of change. In other words, in the case of world-changing individuals, the world transforms once they enter the dynamics of self-negation. Thus, the will, the organon of the world-changing individual, is to be, to a considerable extent, *not* willing; it grows by means of abnegation, which, however, does not entail asceticism or quietism. In contrast, this abnegation opens the realm of action. World-changing individuals are heroic due to the fact that they identify with something beyond mere self-centredness, beyond even personal achievement, and thrive from the realm opened by this very resignation.

## 4 The Subjection of Overmen

While Hegel went as far as to stylise himself as the philosophical counterpart of Napoleon, Nietzsche does not discern anything heroic in himself. In fact, he considers himself the “very opposite of the heroic nature” (EH, p. 32). Although he is not above admiring a certain form of heroism, he is hesitant to consider it something one should strive for. The main reason for this ambivalent relation is that Nietzsche considers heroism to be indebted to metaphysics or to a metaphysically conceived reality, to be more precise. Heroic is the destruction of those who strive for a supra-individual truth; the better their instantiation of truth, the more fatal is their failure since *as* individuals they are shattered by the weight of the supra-individual truth. In this regard, Nietzsche adopts Schopenhauer’s conception of the individual, that is, the individual’s very particularity is an offence to the impersonal will. Similarly, tragic heroes perish due to their ineluctably one-sided expression of truth.

Nietzsche does recognise the merits of this perspective, but he eventually refuses this heightened form of subjectivity feeding on a metaphysical narrative.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. esp. GM, p. 111. “These ‘no’-sayers and outsiders of today, those who are absolute in one thing, their demand for intellectual rigour [*Sauberkeit*], these hard, strict, abstinent, heroic minds who make up the glory of our time, all these pale atheists, Antichrists, immoralists, nihilists, these sceptics, ephectics, hectics of the mind [*des Geistes*] (they are one and all the latter in a certain sense)... These are very far from being free spirits: because they still believe in truth...”

From this perspective, Nietzsche's Zarathustra is the antithesis of the heroic trope. As we can find in "On the Three Metamorphoses" from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the hero's merits lie in the fact that he rejects the "thou shalt" that feeds from the past in favour of the future-orientated "I will". Despite the praiseworthiness of the metamorphosis into the symbolical rendering of the lion who "wants to hunt down its freedom and be master in its own desert", this is not the last stage (Z, p. 16). Eventually, the highest form of individuality resides in one's ability to utter "I am". Nietzsche does not encounter this ability in the roaring lion, but rather in the innocent laugh of the playing child: "The child is innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, a game, a wheel rolling out of itself, a first movement, a sacred yes-saying" (Z, p. 17).

Despite Nietzsche's detached attitude towards the heroic lion, I will not give up on my concept of "prosaic heroism". Instead, I want to reserve it for the awkward modern attempt to reach individuality, not in the form of heightened will and anticipation of the future, but in the form of reconciliation. In my reading, it is this peculiar concept of heroism that Hegel and Nietzsche share, one that well captures the ambivalence of the self-conception of the modern man.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, as in Hegel's case, we encounter in Nietzsche's work a distinct link between will and time. Nietzsche grippingly describes the problem that moderns encounter in view of their past. However, while Hegel related this "pathology of time" to a limited historical period of revolutionary times, Nietzsche assumed it to be a general trait of human beings. People tend to hate their past, not because something bad had happened to them, but because the past is something that cannot be changed. It is the memento of our incapacity. "'It was': thus, is called the *will's gnashing of teeth* and loneliest misery. Impotent against that which has been – it is an angry spectator of everything past. That time does not run backward, that is its wrath" (Z, p. 111). Thus, *we* are the memento of our impotence, and this memento is very physical and visible – once again, the inner is the outer. Nietzsche elucidates this awareness of our incapacity to move our past through the image of deformed human beings.

The "cripples" ask Zarathustra to exercise his healing powers on them and relieve them of their deformities. However, Zarathustra, a modern saviour, refuses to heal the needy as they are to heal themselves. This self-therapy is phrased in peculiarly Hegelian terms; humans need to reconcile with their deformities, a representation of their accumulated past. Any other healing will result in the destruction of their personality, in the loss of themselves. "If one takes the hump

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<sup>11</sup> It is not insignificant that Hegel too expresses the highest form of the individual spirit in the "reconciling Yea" (PS, p. 409).

from the hunchback, then one takes his spirit too – thus teach the people” (Z, p. 109).

As opposed to this false form of time consciousness, true heroes embody memory or recollection; they become who they have been. According to Nietzsche, the past is something to be accepted; we even have to embrace what he calls *amor fati*, the “formula for the greatness in a human being” (EH, p. 87). We recall that Hegel himself emphasises reconciliation with fate. But this is strange. After all, both Nietzsche and Hegel underscore the importance of action, which seems to stand in opposition to the emphasis on fate.

However, taking up the love of fate is a key insight, one that is often mistaken for determinism. What Nietzsche wants to tell us instead is that we must work with what is present. It is a description of our attitude towards what is necessary and what is due to be given; it is the ability to live up to the conditions of the present – a politician needs to work with the population that is present here and now; a poet works with the words of the given language; a gardener nurtures the soil he or she has at his or her disposal. In short, it means overcoming the “neurosis of the revolutionaries” who fail to understand that thought is conditioned by the unthought.

In this regard, Nietzsche’s concept of the eternal return, or at least one possible interpretation thereof, is enlightening. Nietzsche claims that what is eternal and what recurs are not *das Selbe*, the same, but *das Gleiche*, the identical (Löwith 1997; see Moore 2006, pp. 311–330). In this reading, what eternally returns is not every individual event but the *eternal* structure of time.<sup>12</sup> In the absence of a human being, “all things are baptised at the well of eternity” (Z, p. 132). Only once a perspective, a will, an intention – in short, consciousness

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<sup>12</sup> Hannah Arendt had already put forward this interpretation in *Between Past and Future* (2006, pp. 3–16). The virtue of this interpretation is that it can be some form of reconciliation between two common, but opposed, interpretations of Nietzsche’s teaching (that he himself calls a “riddle”). According to the “cosmological interpretation”, the idea of a “cosmos cycle” is a theory about the actual nature of the universe (Löwith 1987). Others suggest that the eternal return is meant to be a thought experiment. In this “ethical interpretation”, Nietzsche summons human beings to act “as if” they were to live the life that we live innumerable times (Williams 2001). According to the interpretation put forth in this paper, Nietzsche’s eternal return deals with the nature of time; along these lines, his teaching elucidates the nature of a key cosmological aspect, namely, time. However, this cosmological aspect depends on the performance of the human being. In time, there occurs a junction of cosmos and subject, since it is *as* we relate to the cosmos that we constitute time and, through this, bestow meaning upon it. In this regard, I put forward a hybrid interpretation. For another attempt at such a “hybrid interpretation” of metaphysics and psychology, see Dudley (2002, pp. 201–210).

– appears, meaning and time appear with it. Crucially, the structure of person-ality depends on how we understand time.

Such a reading might suggest that the human being is the “master” of his or her time. However, this conclusion is not inevitable. Through its presence, the agent constitutes a situation that escapes one’s power and that, additionally, changes constantly. Therefore, the particular kind of modern heroism is linked to a form of willing subjection to one’s deeds, the acceptance of one’s fate that is nourished from one’s own actions and, thus, is sort of a “homemade fate”. This *fatum*, however, has a human, even personal, voice since it arises from the very tissue of action.

## 5 Of Victorious Insects

Hannah Arendt calls attention to the fact that the Nietzschean eternal structure of time receives a follow-up in Kafka’s short story *He*. According to Arendt, in the story, the peculiar portrayal of a battle is to be read as a parable dealing with the nature of time. In Kafka’s imagination, time, then, is a fight of three antagonists – more precisely, of one agent and two antagonists: “He has two antagonists: the first presses him from behind, from the origin. The second blocks the road ahead. He gives battle to both.”<sup>13</sup>

In Arendt’s reading, the protagonist, encircled by the two antagonists, represents anyone who is consciously experiencing a specific moment. Thus, the “He” represents the origin of a perspective, an intention. In other words, “He” is anyone who takes a position, which means blocking the onslaught of the past and future without defeating them. The true victory resides in introducing a gap into time and, thus, creating past and future. In this sense, past and future themselves are forms of achievement – a *martial* achievement. The nature of past and future crucially depends on one’s position without being sufficient – a form of a battleground does pre-exist the He, yet it is He who structures it.

If Kafka did indeed portray the essence of time in this story, two points are significant. First, time is related to a battle, and second, it is related to a battle that we would better leave behind. “He will jump out of the fighting line and be promoted, on account of his experience in fighting, to the position of umpire over his antagonists in their fight with each other.” Arendt criticised this defeatist ending, suggesting that the fighter should remain on the battleground; after all, it is exclusively here that “every human being... inserts himself between an

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<sup>13</sup> I am citing here the translation Arendt worked with (cf. Arendt 2006, p. 7).

infinite past and infinite future” to “discover and ploddingly pave it anew” (2006, p. 13). Arendt aptly notes that Kafka vacillates regarding the temper of the He – once, as in this story, He is promoted to the position of the umpire and, thus, to the conqueror of time, yet in other scenarios, He “dies of exhaustion” (2006, p. 12). Of course, the question is whether the promotion and the death from exhaustion are alternative endings. It rather seems that exhaustion is the counterpart of intense and restlessly executed self-knowledge and self-inquiry. Not fatally wounded but fatally fatigued, modern heroes eventually change their attire and slip into the figure of the triumphant anti-hero who is beyond time.

This “embracing” of time beyond time may be well illustrated by yet another modern story, not a creation story in this case but a “regression story” – Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*. It is telling that in Kafka’s story, time – the time of work and duties – is omnipresent, the alarm clock never ceases ticking. However, Gregor Samsa wakes up transformed into a “gigantic insect” (M, p. 95) with its own archaic temporality. Due to his retarded rhythms, Gregor cannot catch up to his family’s sense of time, and this chronological rupture leads to eviction from the human world that ends in death from hunger.

In this narrative, we witness a strange type of devolution that should not be simply understood as regression. Gregor’s descent into solitude opens up a new realm of experiences, a new realm of music. Although he has never enjoyed music, he is the only member of the audience who really delves into his sister’s violin playing. This, however, does not attest to his inner humanity but, on the contrary, to the fact that he has, in one way or another, transcended humanity, as expressed in the rhetorical question: “Was he an animal, that music had such an effect upon him? He felt as if the way were opening before him to the unknown nourishment he craved” (M, p. 140).<sup>14</sup> Even in this most severe reversal of humanity, we witness a form of reconciliation – reconciliation with failure. In this regard, we glimpse at greatness, even a “secret victory of the one who chooses failure” (Sontag 2009, p. 189).<sup>15</sup>

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**14** It is likely that Gregor’s enjoyment of music is Kafka’s reflection of Schopenhauer’s philosophy, wherein music incites the metaphysical insight into the essence of the Will, while it, at the same time, offers a way to escape suffering and eventually reach, as per Schopenhauer’s adoption of Buddhist terminology, *samsara* (cf. Schopenhauer 1974, ii, p. 302). One may even speculate that Gregor’s surname “Samsa” hints to the same Buddhist term “*samsara*” as Ritchie Robertson does in his “Introduction” to Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* (2009, p. xxvii). For Kafka’s engagement with Schopenhauer’s philosophy, see Oschmann (2010, pp. 59–64).

**15** Eventually, Gregor dies in a “state of vacant and peaceful meditation” (M, p. 145).

## 6 Conclusion

The fear of reversal, even its anticipation, seems to lurk in modern narratives. However, even more so, what is lurking in them is the idea that some form of reversion might, in fact, be the “formula for the greatness”, to use Nietzsche’s words. Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* is an unlikely illustration of Luhmann’s thesis that “[i]n modernity, anything could be different, and you can change nothing” (Luhmann 1971, p. 44).

In contrary to our expectation of an abyss separating Kafka’s and Hegel’s thoughts, what we find in Kafka’s writings is an illustration of a human situation that is quite similar to what Hegel has showcased in his works, but not from the perspective of a successful agent who eventually finds a way to positively reconcile with the fatefulness of the action he himself has initiated. Instead, Kafka shows the stifling nature of this reconciliation, and yet, he equally shows that this very stifling nature might, in fact, be a triumph.

Most importantly, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Kafka all show, albeit from differing angles, that the structure of freedom (and will) and that of unfreedom are related in the most paradoxical ways. For all three, both conflict and combat, in which the will puts itself into action, are essential for understanding reality. However, if modernity stems from this heightened sense of conflict, the nature of freedom cannot be left untouched by this. We notice combat in Kafka’s conception of time in the form that all three antagonists find themselves in a firm grip, but it is precisely from this grip – and only from it – that freedom is wrenched.

Paradoxically, freedom and unfreedom share in one and the same structure – that of being in the other, that of escaping oneself, that of shedding one’s shape and metamorphosing into something else. Eventually, the injunction of “make thyself” can be translated into “lose thyself”. However, the most important thing is: do not allow it to happen to you – do it.

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