



## But Wait—It Gets Worse

On Frank Ruda's *Abolishing Freedom*

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Andrew Cutrofello, "But Wait—It Gets Worse: On Frank Ruda's *Abolishing Freedom*," *Provocations* 1 (2017), pp. 10-17.

"Never to naught be brought. Never by naught be nulled. Unnullable least. Say that best worse."

—Samuel Beckett<sup>1</sup>

Fatalistic readers of Frank Ruda's 2011 book *Hegel's Rabble* knew that it was only a matter of time before Donald Trump would be elected President of the United States.<sup>2</sup> As Ruda explained, the modern Hegelian state produced its own grave-diggers—not in the form of a revolutionary proletariat, but in the form of a politically disaffected, economically idle rabble. It was Marx's contribution to philosophy to see the practical necessity of transforming Hegel's rabble into a revolutionary proletariat. The difficulty of completing this transformation—the difficulty of passing from Hegel to Marx—was due (at least in part) to the fact that the rabble consisted not only of the disaffected idle poor but of the disaffected idle rich. Mobilizing the rich rabble to counter the revolutionary tendencies of the poor rabble was the Hegelian state's best defense against its own dissolution. The only question for a fatalist resigned to expect the worst was whether it would be Donald Trump or some other representative of the rich rabble who would succeed in rechanneling the revolutionary tendencies of the poor rabble. In the inverted world of counterrevolutionary politics, it is no wonder that Steve Bannon, Trump's alt-right-hand man, has called himself a Leninist.<sup>3</sup>

So the worst had already happened well before the 2016 US presidential election actually took place. Now that it has happened twice—the first time as a certain virtuality (as opposed to a virtual certainty), the second time in actuality—we can seek practical advice in Ruda's new book, *Abolishing Freedom*, a philosophical analysis and defense of the fatalistic thesis that "the worst has already happened."<sup>4</sup>

Ruda defends a specifically "comic" type of fatalism that he attributes to Hegel. In a neat dialectical reversal of excoriations of Hegel as the "worst philosopher," he represents Hegel as the "philosoph[er] of the worst" (105). *What is worst is actual, and what is actual is worst*. To understand the nature of Hegel's comic fatalism, it is helpful to contrast it with the pessimism of Schopenhauer. Besides being famous for excoriating Hegel as the worst philosopher, Schopenhauer explicitly defends the anti-Leibnizian

thesis that the actual world is the “worst of all possible worlds.”<sup>5</sup> So, what’s the difference between saying that the actual world is the worst of all possible worlds and saying that what is worst is actual, and what is actual is worst?

In the second volume of *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer argues that if the actual world were even minimally worse than it is, it would necessarily cease to exist. Since worse worlds are impossible worlds, the actual world is the worst of all possible worlds. Worse worlds have existed *in the past*, but these are no longer possible. We can infer this on the basis of the evidence of fossils of extinct lifeforms—signs of worlds more horrible than our own. It follows that the actual world—i.e., the present world—is not the *absolutely* worst world, but only the worst of the worlds that are possible *now*.

Given Schopenhauer’s temporally indexed conception of possibility, along with his (implicit) general claim that whatever world exists at any given moment in time is the worst that is possible at that moment, we may presume that the overall sequence of worlds is the worst of all possible sequences. But if worse worlds have existed in the past, doesn’t this leave room for the optimistic hope or belief that the overall sequence of worlds might be tending toward less and less “worst” worlds? Wouldn’t a more thoroughgoing pessimist hold either that the series of worlds is itself worsening over time (tending toward an absolutely worst world) or that it is at least maintaining an impressively high level of overall badness? How should we understand the overall sequence of worst worlds—or, for that matter, the overall course of any particular worst world? Should we include among the candidates for worst world those whose sum total of badness occasionally lessens (perhaps to increase the despair of those who are temporarily deceived by false hopes)? How about worlds (or sequences of worlds) that get progressively better over time, but never enough to disqualify them from being the worst (or, at least, *among* the worst—a title that could conceivably be shared by more than one world or sequence)?

In “An Old Question Raised Again: Is the Human Race Constantly Progressing?” (the second section of *The Conflict of the Faculties*), Kant raises an analogous question about the overall course of human history. He distinguishes three possibilities: (1) humanity is getting morally worse over time (there is “continual *retrogression* toward wickedness”); (2) humanity is getting morally better over time (there is “*progression* toward improvement in its moral destination”); and (3) humanity is in a state of “eternal *stagnation*” (we are neither getting better nor getting worse). Kant calls these positions (1) “moral *terrorism*,” (2) “*eudaemonism*,” and (3) “*abderitism*” (a name derived from Wieland’s *History of the Abderites*).<sup>6</sup>

Kant dismisses moral terrorism on the grounds that, if humanity really were getting steadily worse over time, it would eventually destroy itself—a situation that would evidently contradict the hypothesis of *perpetual* worsening. Eudaemonism fares no better, at least on the basis of the mixed (at best) record of human history. We seem to be left with abderitism—the most popular and empirically plausible position—but Kant

finds it morally objectionable on the grounds that eternal stagnation would reduce human endeavor to a “mere *farcical comedy*.”<sup>7</sup>

Since we cannot observe the totality of human history from a position outside it (let alone inside it), we seem to have no rational grounds for refuting abderitism. Luckily, Kant argues, there is another way to approach the question. Instead of searching for an overall pattern in the incomplete record of past human deeds, we can seek a clue to the future course of history in the affective responses of spectators to a present historical event. By “looking awry” at the French Revolution—in the sense of turning our gaze away from the revolutionaries’ actual deeds—we can discern a subjectively universal feeling of enthusiasm for the republican ideal that inspired those deeds. Even if this (virtually present) ideal failed to be actualized the first time(s) it appeared in history, the enthusiasm it inspired guarantees that it “*will not be forgotten*.”<sup>8</sup> On this basis, Kant predicts that the overall course of history *will be* toward the better.

The difference between Kant’s predictive eudaemonism and the empirically grounded eudaemonism he rejects involves a difference between a “not yet” and an “always already.” This difference is not merely epistemic but ontological: it is not that we cannot know what the overall course of human history *is* (in some tenseless sense of “is”); rather, the overall course of human history doesn’t yet fully exist. This temporal difference corresponds to that between Leibniz’s theological optimism and Kant’s moral optimism. For Leibniz, God has already created the best of all possible worlds, so that, in effect, *the best has already happened*. By contrast, Kant ascribes to humanity the ongoing *task* of creating the best of all possible worlds—a world whose coming into existence has precisely *not* already happened. Since the actual world doesn’t fully exist, the most we can say is that *what is best should be actual, and what is actual should be best*.

Schopenhauer rejects both types of optimism in favor of a moral pessimism. In his view, every past, present, and future world contains, at every moment, a maximal amount of pointless, irredeemable suffering. If there’s anything to hope for at all, it is the absolute annihilation of the metaphysical ground (the will) of all worlds. As long as we remain in existence, our only meaningful response to universal suffering is to commiserate with one another while realizing that no amount of actually felt compassion can prevent the present world from being the worst it could possibly be. Since the overall sequence of worlds doesn’t involve progressive worsening, Schopenhauer isn’t a moral terrorist, but neither does he provide any reason to affirm a (pessimistically qualified) version of eudaemonism. He seems to be a kind of abderite for whom the sequence of worlds is in a state of eternal stagnation—the situation that Kant describes as making a farce of human endeavor.

How, then, does Schopenhauer’s farcical pessimism/abderitism differ from the comic fatalism that Ruda attributes to Hegel? The answer has to do with the idea, developed in different ways by Hegel and Marx, that every world-historical event happens twice.

For Ruda, to say that the worst has already happened is not to say that the worst belongs to a past that is simply over and done with—the kind of past that would justify the exclamation, “Thank Goodness That’s Over!” (the title of a paper about the nature of time by Arthur Prior).<sup>9</sup> The worst that has already happened weighs down on the present “like a nightmare,” looming in the guise of an inevitable future (its second coming).<sup>10</sup>

Consider the fate of Oedipus. When he learns that he is destined to kill his father and marry his mother, the worst has already happened. However, this fact doesn’t absolve him from having to live through the worst. For Oedipus, everything happens twice: the first time as prophecy, the second time as tragedy. The irony of his tragedy is that the very steps he takes to avoid his fate lead him to it. So, what if Oedipus hadn’t tried to avoid his fate? What if he had accepted that the worst had already happened? We can imagine numerous alternative scenarios, including the following four.

1. A fatalistic Oedipus could embrace his fate in a perversely active manner (perhaps out of a desire to get it over with as soon as possible) by deliberately killing Polybus (his adoptive father) and marrying Merope (his adoptive mother). After discovering that they were not his real parents, he could then travel to Thebes where, having learned that he is the son of Laius and Jocasta, he could deliberately kill Laius and marry Jocasta. What happened in the first instance as prophecy would happen in the second as Grand Guignol.
2. Alternatively, a fatalistic Oedipus could perversely try to kill Polybus and marry Merope but repeatedly fail in these endeavors. After concluding that the prophecy was false, he could abandon his home, only to end up killing an arrogant stranger named Laius and marrying his wife Jocasta. In this case, the second time would have the character of Theater of the Absurd.
3. Instead of actively striving either to avoid or to fulfill the prophecy, Oedipus could passively resign himself to his fate. He could then be led by some other path to kill Laius and marry Jocasta. Instead of the heroic tragedy depicted by Sophocles, we would end up with a kind of religious drama.
4. Finally, a fatalistic Oedipus could accept his fate without seeking either to evade or enact it, only this time his acceptance could somehow enable him to perform a last-minute act that would prevent him from killing Laius and marrying Jocasta. This result would be comic in a Hegelian sense, for reasons to be developed below.

First we should note that the fatalism Ruda embraces—and that he attributes to Luther, Descartes, Kant, Carl Christian Erhard Schmid, Hegel, and Freud—is not an abstract negation of freedom *tout court*, but a determinate negation of the specific conception of freedom as a capacity for choice. For Ruda, this conception stretches from Aristotle to Erasmus, all the way to apologists for a supposed right to sell one’s labor power to those who have the power to exploit it. It is theoretically empowering, but practically

stultifying (as instanced by Buridan's ass).<sup>11</sup> By tarrying with fatalism, we not only escape the false lure of free choice but thereby open up the possibility of a higher type of freedom. To vary a phrase of Kafka's, the logic of this shift is not that of "an infinite amount of freedom—but not for us!" but rather "less than no freedom—but for us!"<sup>12</sup>

Ruda gestures toward this higher type of freedom when he translates the speculative doctrine of fatalism into a series of categorical imperatives, including "Act as if you were not free!" (71) and "Act as if everything were always already lost!" (129). To this list we might add, "Act as if you were Luther at Worms!"—that is, as if in taking a stand you couldn't do otherwise.<sup>13</sup> Not *Hic Rhodus, hic salta!* but *Hic Wormis, hic status!*<sup>14</sup>

Despite their fatalistic character, each of these imperatives exhibits the strategy of *Reculez pour mieux sauter!* By accepting that the worst has already happened, we embrace a necessary condition for the possibility of *preventing* the worst from happening (as in Case 4 above).<sup>15</sup> This is very close to the Kierkegaardian double act of infinite resignation followed by a leap of faith ("Here is Mount Moriah—here make your leap!"). Faith is required because in accepting that the worst has already happened we only *potentially* avoid the worst (whence the possibility that Case 4 could collapse into Case 3). If the worst occurs in the first instance as tragedy (or as prophecy of tragedy), in the second it *may* occur as comedy.

In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx famously quips that although "Hegel observes somewhere" that everything in history happens twice, he "forgot to add: the first time as high tragedy, the second time as low farce."<sup>16</sup> For Marx, the events associated with Napoleon Bonaparte were tragic, while those involving his nephew Louis Bonaparte were farcical. But farcical in what sense?

For Hegel, second events can happen either (1) as actualizations of things that initially manifested themselves only as virtual apparitions, or (2) as dissolutions—perhaps re-virtualizations—of things that initially appeared to be fully actual. Hegel's celebrated example of the first is the way in which the virtual crowning of a Caesar (Julius) was actualized when *his* nephew (Octavian) was crowned as Caesar Augustus.<sup>17</sup> If the first event was tragic, the second was comic to the extent that it dissolved the conditions upon which the tottering Republic had been based. At the same time, it actualized the new conditions of the Empire, which until then had been only virtual, and in this it went beyond the merely comic.

A purer type of comic event involves sheer dissolution without the actualization of anything new. This is what happens whenever high expectations suddenly "come to nothing"—a formula that, as Ruda notes, both Kant and Hegel identify as the essential feature of things that make us laugh (168). For Ruda, Hegel's fatalism is comic—as opposed to tragic, existentialist, or (passively) nihilistic (170-71)—in that it embraces the absolute annihilation of everything there is.<sup>18</sup> Ruda is right to point out that when "nothing is achieved" in comedy, "it is precisely Nothing that is achieved" (169). But if the worst that has already happened is annihilation, wouldn't its comic repetition involve the dissolution of Nothing? What would be more comic than the coming to



nothing of Nothing? Isn't the essence of comedy to be found in the blithe continuation of Being, in the negation of negation?

For Schopenhauer, nothing could be more *horrifying* than the negation of the Nothing. Far from being the *worst* that could happen, absolute annihilation would be the *best*. It is “a consummation devoutly to be wish'd” because it would spell the final end of the abderitic farce of world history (or the history of worlds).<sup>19</sup> Significantly, Schopenhauer complains that Sophocles's Oedipus isn't sufficiently resigned to his fate—resignation being an essential feature of Christian but not ancient tragedy.<sup>20</sup> A completely resigned Oedipus would accept that he was living in the kind of world that Kant characterizes as farcical. This suggests that the religious drama we identified in Case 3 above—the one in which a fully resigned Oedipus passively accepts his fate—has the character of a *metaphysical farce* in which all teleological endeavor would be in vain.<sup>21</sup> No doubt, there is something equally farcical about Case 2, the situation we subsumed under the generic category of Theater of the Absurd, but there we were dealing with the farce of ineffective active endeavor as opposed to that of passive resignation. A farcically pessimistic Oedipus would be unwilling, if not unable, to seize a “last chance” to avert his fate. By contrast, a comically fatalistic Oedipus would leave room for just such a transformative act.

If Hegel is a comic fatalist, as Ruda has taught us to see, it is not because he thinks that the overall course of history has the form of a comedy. What the future holds “is all uncertain.”<sup>22</sup> Hegel isn't a moral terrorist, an empirical eudaemonist, or an abderite, but neither is he a Kantian moral optimist. His speculative remark that the True is “the Bacchanalian revel in which no member is not drunk” recalls the situation at the end of Plato's *Symposium*, when everyone except Socrates has fallen into a drunken stupor.<sup>23</sup> The last men to fall down—Agathon and Aristophanes—do so only after Socrates has clinched the point that “he who is by art a tragic poet is also a comic poet.”<sup>24</sup> For Hegel, whoever is by art a comic fatalist is also a tragic fatalist, not because history has an overall uniform character of tragicomedy but because the worst both has and hasn't already happened. We can accept that the worst has already happened without eliminating the possibility of a transformative leap (or stand) of faith.

Marx was right, at least to an extent: sometimes when things happen twice, the second time is utterly farcical in that it makes a mockery of human endeavor. The coup of Louis Bonaparte was a farce. So was the election of Donald Trump. Farcical leaders are no laughing matter. As Foucault points out, farcicality—or what he calls “the grotesque”—is essential to the functioning of administrative power: “The grotesque character of someone like Mussolini was absolutely inherent to the mechanism of power. Power provided itself with an image in which power derived from someone who was theatrically got up and depicted as a clown or a buffoon.”<sup>25</sup>

This is why the lesson of *Abolishing Freedom* is so important today. To embrace Hegel's distinctively comic fatalism is not to passively (or perversely) accept the

counterrevolutionary successes of the rich rabble. It is to remember that even when the worst has already happened, it hasn't completely happened—at least not yet.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho*, in *Nohow On: Three Novels*, (New York: Grove, 1996), 106.

<sup>2</sup> Frank Ruda, *Hegel's Rabble: An Investigation into Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (New York: Continuum, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Ronald Radosh, "Steve Bannon, Trump's Top Guy, Told Me He was 'A Leninist' Who Wants to 'Destroy the State,'" *The Daily Beast*, August 22, 2016; <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/08/22/steve-bannon-trump-s-top-guy-told-me-he-was-a-leninist.html> (accessed January, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Frank Ruda, *Abolishing Freedom: A Plea for a Contemporary Use of Fatalism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016), 13. All further page references will be given parenthetically in the text.

<sup>5</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation, Vol. II*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1966), 583.

<sup>6</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, trans. Mary J. Gregor and Robert Anchor, in *Religion and Rational Theology*, ed. Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 298.

<sup>7</sup> Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, 299. Emphasis added.

<sup>8</sup> Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, 304.

<sup>9</sup> A. N. Prior, "Thank Goodness That's Over," *Philosophy* 34, no. 128 (January 1959): 12-17.

<sup>10</sup> Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," in *Later Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Terrell Carver (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 32.

<sup>11</sup> Hence Ruda's diagnosis that we live in "a *time of universalized assthetization*" (4).

<sup>12</sup> *Less than no freedom* rather than *no freedom* because Ruda embraces Žižek's introduction of negative magnitudes into Hegelian philosophy. See, Ruda, *Abolishing Freedom*, 1, 12, 68, 122, 127.

<sup>13</sup> "When something is at stake, we act like Luther did at Worms: we are and feel compelled" (Ruda, *Abolishing Freedom*, 145).

<sup>14</sup> My thanks to Russell Newstadt for formulating this phrase in Latin. As he points out: "Latin *status* corresponds to the Greek *stasis*, which although it too can mean stand, standing or position, is also the word for uprising or dissent."

<sup>15</sup> As Ruda acknowledges, his position here is close to that of the "enlightened doom-saying" of Jean-Pierre Dupuy (*Abolishing Freedom*, 10).

<sup>16</sup> Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire," 31.

<sup>17</sup> After the assassination of Caesar, "it became immediately manifest that only a *single* will could guide the Roman State, and now the Romans were compelled to adopt that opinion; since in all periods of the world a political revolution is sanctioned in men's opinions, when it repeats itself." G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Prometheus, 1991), 313.

<sup>18</sup> "Comic fatalism ... turns the apocalypse into a category of comedy .... Comic fatalism follows one ultimate ... rule ... *there is no there is*" (Ruda, *Abolishing Freedom*, 171).

<sup>19</sup> Schopenhauer cites the words of Hamlet to this effect in *The World as Will and Representation, Vol. I* (324).

<sup>20</sup> “[R]arely in the tragedy of the ancients is this spirit of resignation seen and directly expressed. Oedipus Colonus certainly dies resigned and docile; yet he is comforted by the revenge on his native land” (Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation, Vol. II*, 434). Though here he refers to Oedipus’s resignation *after* he has lived through his tragedy, he elsewhere suggests that Oedipus should have been resigned to it *beforehand* as well, that is, after having learned of the prophecy. Evidence for “the strict necessity of all that happens” can be found in the fact that “both in the tragedies [including *Oedipus Tyrannus*] and the history of the ancients, the calamity predicted by oracles or dreams is brought about by the very measures that are employed to prevent it” (Arthur Schopenhauer, “Transcendent Speculation on the Apparent Deliberateness in the Fate of the Individual,” *Parerga and Paralipomena: Short Philosophical Essays Volume 1*, trans. E. F. J. Payne [New York: Oxford University Press, 2000], 203).

<sup>21</sup> See Rosette C. Lamont, “The Metaphysical Farce: Beckett and Ionesco,” *French Review* 32 (February 1959): 319-28. As Kant put it: “To watch this tragedy for a while might be moving and instructive, but the curtain must eventually fall. For in the long run it turns into a farce; and even if the actors do not tire of it, because they are fools, the spectator does, when one or another act gives him sufficient grounds for gathering that the never-ending piece is forever the same.” Immanuel Kant, “On the Common Saying: That May Be Correct in Theory, But It is of No Use in Practice,” *Practical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Mary J. Gregor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 305-06.

<sup>22</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850*, eds. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (New York: Norton, 1979), 480, 481 (line 390 of Book Thirteenth of the 1805 *Prelude* and line 394 of Book Fourteenth of the 1850 *Prelude*).

<sup>23</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 27.

<sup>24</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Seth Benardete (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 54 (223d).

<sup>25</sup> Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France 1974-1975*, eds. Valerio Marchetti and Antonella Salomoni, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2003), 13.

<sup>26</sup> Here it is worth recalling the words of Sartre: “To-morrow, after my death, some men may decide to establish Fascism, and the others may be so cowardly or so slack as to let them do so. If so, Fascism will then be the truth of man, and so much the worse for us. In reality, things will be such as men have decided they shall be. Does that mean that I should abandon myself to quietism?” (Jean-Paul Sartre, “Existentialism,” in *Basic Writings*, ed. Stephen Priest (New York: Routledge, 2001), 36. My thanks to Nathan Gorelick, Lydia Kerr, and Russell Newstadt for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.