

**A SACRED OUTRAGE:
ON TRAGEDY AND MORALITY**

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For my mother who, like Antigone, is the most beautiful description of integrity

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is centered around explaining the nature of tragedy and its relation to moral life. My thesis is that the fundamental nature of tragedy is the world's inhospitality to what matters. This provides insight into moral life by illuminating the tragic aspect of moral dilemmas. In these dilemmas, individuals often believe that they are left with no morally acceptable option. I argue that this belief is characteristically a rational response to the tragic aspect of the dilemma, but that this does not make moral obligations in these situations incoherent. This is because moral tragedy does not entail inevitable moral failure, but the world's inhospitality to what matters more generally. This conception of tragedy additionally provides insight into other areas of practical life, including the peculiar aesthetic features of tragedy such as its beauty.

“There are two occasions when the sacred beauty of Creation becomes dazzlingly apparent, and they occur together. One is when we feel our mortal insufficiency to the world, and the other is when we feel the world's mortal insufficiency to us.”

- Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*

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INTRODUCTION

Moral life is *suffused* with tragedy. Moral life is suffused with tragedy because *life* is suffused with tragedy. Moral life's being suffused with tragedy does not threaten morality's significance in life. This is because tragedy is a window into what is significant in life, moral and otherwise. These are the theses of this project.

Tragedy in Philosophy

Before explaining the structure of this project and how the above theses come into play, it is helpful first to illuminate some of the history of philosophy's dealings with tragedy. Most discussion of tragedy in the history of philosophy has viewed it as something to be evaluated on aesthetic grounds with only indirect significance outside this context. Plato complains in *The Republic* that the tragedians engage in manipulating the public against reason through the use of tragic *pathos*. Aristotle, in the first book of his *Poetics*, explicates tragedy as a literary type that functions to arouse *catharsis* in its audience. Schiller's "On the Art of Tragedy" analyzes the tragic form to explore the sensuous nature of human beings, but still understands tragedy as a form of art to be evaluated as such. Schopenhauer, in *The World as Will and Representation*, likewise uses tragic art to explain a curious fact about human reason: how we can take pleasure in the depiction of terrible events. Hume's "Of Tragedy" explores the same problem. Hegel, in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and Nietzsche, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, also discuss the genesis and evolution of tragic art from a philosophical point of view, with profound implications for human life more generally. What each of these approaches has in common, however, is an understanding of tragedy as first and foremost an aesthetic category that has either indirect or secondary application to practical human life more generally.

Contemporary philosophical explorations of tragedy have not always followed suit. Martha Nussbaum, for instance, argues that in difficult moral dilemmas pure cost-benefit analysis does not capture what she calls "the tragic question," or the question concerning whether any of the available options in a dilemma involve serious moral

wrongdoing.¹ Thomas Hill similarly understands “tragic choices” as occurring when an individual is faced with options all of which involve something any good person would find morally repugnant.² In locating tragedy in the context of moral life, Nussbaum and Hill recognize that tragedy is a phenomenon that exists in the real world independently of its literary form. Other contemporary philosophers have extended this application of the tragic to practical dilemmas generally, especially in circumstances of value incommensurability (Richardson,³ Wiggins⁴). However, these discussions typically assume that tragedy occurs narrowly in contexts of conflict between values. This narrow conception of tragedy is characteristically assumed without independent argument. *Tragedy* itself is usually left unanalyzed. Reflection shows, I think, that tragedy is a broader phenomenon than this. It thus deserves careful analysis independent of the contexts of serious practical or moral dilemma where it is found in much of contemporary philosophy. Tragedy is not primarily an art form, nor is it solely found in contexts of value conflict or moral dilemma. Instead, I claim that tragedy is a phenomenon of practical life that occurs when the world is inhospitable to what matters. This understanding of tragedy has significant implications for understanding the tragic aspects of the practical, moral, and aesthetic dimensions of human life.

Tragedy and Morality

This project is centered around understanding and explaining the tragic aspect of moral dilemmas. In tragic moral dilemmas, individuals find themselves with a characteristic set of beliefs and feelings that make up what I call *tragic remainder*: a belief that they are left with no good option for action, and the feelings often associated with moral wrongdoing such as regret and distress. Consider an individual tasked with killing an innocent person to save the lives of many others. This individual is likely to find each of their options objectionable on moral grounds, and to be wracked with feelings of distress and regret no matter what they do. It would be reasonable to see these

¹ Martha Nussbaum, “The Costs of Tragedy: Some Moral Limits of Cost-Benefit Analysis,” pg. 1007.

² Thomas Hill, “Human Dignity and Tragic Choices,” pg. 78.

³ See Henry Richardson, *Practical Reasoning about Final Ends*, pg. 117.

⁴ See David Wiggins, “Weakness of Will, Commensurability, and the Objects of Deliberation and Desire,” pg. 64.

residual beliefs and feelings as understandable but irrational. But this is to dismiss the genuine role tragic remainder plays in moral dilemmas. My thesis is that these are rational responses to the tragic aspect of the dilemma, but that this tragic aspect is not representative of unavoidable moral violation. This is best seen by reflecting on situations where moral obligations have been fulfilled, but the constituents of tragic remainder persist. This consistency between moral success and tragic remainder is a window into how binding moral obligations remain coherent in tragic moral contexts. This is the paradigm that characterizes the overall theme of this project: to help make sense of how morality's theoretical coherence and overriding authority are consistent with tragic moral experience.

In order to best make this case concerning moral tragedy, I begin in Chapter 1 by taking on the challenge of providing a general theory of tragedy as a phenomenon in practical life generally. This is crucial for understanding tragedy's pervasiveness and oft-mundanity. I claim that tragedies are phenomena that exist independent of the literary genre, and can be understood in everyday contexts apart from their most well-known iterations in history and literature. The root of tragedy is the inhospitality of the world to what matters.

In Chapter 2, I argue that tragedies can be taxonomized into three domains: non-moral tragedies, moral tragedies, and absolute tragedies. Non-moral tragedies involve the world's inhospitality toward choiceworthy non-moral aims, such as when an accidental house-fire destroys a long-gestating book project. Moral tragedies involve the world's inhospitality to what matters in contexts of moral obligation: for example, an adult son who must choose between taking care of only one of his ailing parents. This is a moral tragedy because the world prevents the adult son from simultaneously taking care of each of his parents, resulting in morally inflected feelings of regret and distress. Finally, absolute tragedies involve the termination by the world of things that matter-as-such, or that matter independently. Persons are characteristic bearers of this type of value. When a person dies, something of inherent and irreplaceable value is irrevocably lost. This loss is distinct from other types of tragedy because it does not involve the failure of an aim, but the loss of an individual who matters-as-such.

In Chapter 3, the crux of the project, I argue that popular moral theories (such as utilitarianism and intuitionist deontology) fail to satisfactorily explain the tragic aspect of moral dilemmas. This is because they attempt to safeguard the authority of morality by deflating or dismissing the function of tragic remainder. I call this the Deflationary Approach. In contrast, some moral theorists (Bernard Williams, Lisa Tessman) attempt to give explanatory priority to tragic remainder by either rejecting the overriding authority of morality, or by claiming that there are occasions of unavoidable moral wrongdoing. I call this the Anti-Theoretical Approach. I argue that my theory of moral tragedy can account for what's right about both of these views. Alongside the Anti-Theoretical Approach, tragic remainder is given explanatory priority: the remainder is a rational response to the world's inhospitality toward something that matters. With the Deflationary Approach, moral overridingness is secured since the tragic aspect of these dilemmas is not found in moral wrongdoing, but in recognition of the loss of something else that matters. This is best seen by reflecting on the tragic aspect of situations of moral success. The reason why the feelings associated with tragedy (regret, distress) arise in contexts of moral success, and are often confused for moral feelings like guilt, is because they are driven by recognition of the same value: the distinctive value of persons. Worries about wrongdoing in moral success are thus a virtuous confusion, as they orient us toward what matters in tragic circumstances, as fits the proper function of tragic remainder.

In Chapter 4, I argue that moral tragedies can be distinguished into three types: inter-individual moral tragedies, tragedies of justice, and universal moral tragedies. These three kinds of moral tragedy are individuated by their causal origins, degree of inescapability, and the types of moral obligations they generate, including differences in their success conditions. Universal moral tragedies are unique, however, in being totally inescapable. For example, finite human moral nature means that the aim of moral perfection will never be fully realized. I consider whether this makes the aim absurd, arguing instead that this is a tragic fact of moral life.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I briefly explore how tragedy's beauty can be understood more robustly than through traditional functional conceptions from Aristotle, Hume, and

others. I argue that part of tragedy's beauty is the unique frame it places on its constituent values lost. It is only because something matters that its loss can be registered as tragic. In Susan Sontag's words, it has a "charm" that representations of mere badness lack. This makes tragedy an indirect window into what matters. Artistic representations of tragedy can be appreciated along this measure: the unique and creative ways they represent their values lost, providing through this representation a novel and enriching perspective on what matters. One fruitful consequence of this view is that it can help explain why in some situations individuals find themselves "stuck" on tragic narratives of their own lives or of their communities. This is because the tragic narrative form affirms the value of the subject of tragedy. Tragic narratives often result in a kind of practical paralysis for their adopters, and should for this reason be overcome. But their adoption is not irrational, as the tragic form is apt for appreciation in this sense. A synthesis should instead be reached where tragedy is recognized without being given exhaustive authority to define a life. The key is to recognize the way tragedy's features are illuminated by the light of its grounding value.

The overall structure of the project can thus be conceived as follows: Chapter 1 serves as fixing the reference of tragedy. Chapters 2-4 provide inputs to the theory and develop taxonomies of the various types of tragedy and moral-theoretic responses to them. Chapter 5 steps into the waters of application, elaborating on outputs of the theory in the overlapping domain of aesthetics and practical philosophy. This chapter makes good, I hope, on the promise from Chapter 1 that while literature is not the main source of our understanding of tragedy, a theory of tragedy ought to enlighten our appreciation of its literary manifestations.

Philosophical Methodology

A note about philosophical methodology is worthwhile. In this project, I aim not merely to ascertain what we mean by use of the term "tragedy" in the vein of conceptual analysis. Nor am I arguing from first principles that tragedy must be understood a certain way because of tendentious metaphysical commitments. Instead, I adopt a middle ground between these two approaches: painting a broad picture where several domains of philosophical reflection work together to make sense of the tragic aspects of human life.

This takes the form of an abductive argument, seeking to build out an explanation of tragedy that fits with our well-understood everyday experiences, and that provides illumination for the tougher cases.

In Chapter 1, for instance, I do not directly attempt to convince a skeptic concerning my claims about objective values, practical reason, or moral obligation. I take for granted that these are real features of human life that can be analyzed through philosophical reflection on their everyday functions. My aim is holistic: to explain how all of these phenomena fit together in a way that illuminates and is illuminated by instances of tragedy in human life. This is why I begin with paradigmatic examples of tragedy in human life and seek to discover what it is that ties them together.

This strategy is grounded in the confidence that our well-established beliefs can provide this kind of insight at the level of abstract principle, and that such illumination treads the same territory in reverse, back to everyday experience. Some of our experiences with tragedy can occupy this illuminative role, I think. In the words of Richard Eldridge: “When we seek to reach some understanding of the mind and its places in culture and nature, then tragic representations have some claim to being regarded as the most illusion-free representations of reality.”⁵ I extend this thought to understanding not just of the mind, but of the world in general. Tragedy, both in art and in life, often serves the function of puncturing the various mirages constructed to blind us to uncomfortable reality. At the same time, tragedy itself has a kind of strange beauty capable of enchantment. Antigone, in her initial diatribe against Creon’s edict not to bury her brother Polynices, protests that her tragic predicament involves “an outrage sacred to the gods.” Tragedy is both an indignation worthy of dissent and something sacred warranting a kind of responsive reverence. I explore both of these facets of tragedy in this project, and hope to reconcile whatever tension is apparent between them.

⁵ Richard Eldridge, “How Can Tragedy Matter For Us?,” pg. 164.

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CHAPTER 1

THE THEORY OF TRAGEDY

1.1 What is Tragedy?

Tragedy is pervasive in human life. But it is not always clear what makes something tragic, and many cases appear tragic for distinct and conflicting reasons. Consider the following cases of tragedy:

- 1) A young child dies from a preventable disease.
- 2) An airplane is struck by lightning and crashes, killing all on board.
- 3) A writer works on a novel for years, but loses it in a house fire.
- 4) A son must decide between taking care of one of two ailing parents.

Each of these cases is tragic, but it is not immediately clear what they have in common that makes them tragic. Cases 1 and 2 include instances of death, but 3 and 4 do not. Case 4 likely includes moral obligations, but there is no requirement that the tragedy of the novelist includes a moral obligation to finish their novel. Additionally, case 3 does not necessarily include something of terrific importance. It is mundane relative to the existential weightiness of the other cases, but is still clearly tragic.

Furthermore, what makes the cases tragic appears incongruous. Case 1 seems tragic because of lost potential. Children dying is paradigmatically tragic because they have so much life left. But cases 2 and 4 do not lose their tragic element if the individuals involved are elderly or near death. In case 4, it would not make sense to help alleviate the tragic burden on the son by reminding him that both of his parents are near death. His obligations to them do not deflate without the weight of death.

Additionally, cases 2 and 4 appear tragic partly in virtue of their *inescapability*. An airplane pilot cannot reasonably be expected to dodge incoming crashes of lightning, nor can the son escape the fact of his parents' simultaneous illnesses. But cases 1 and 3 are more easily escapable. Access to medicine would have alleviated case 1, and case 3 would have been avoided through the simple action of having a backup or better fire protection. What is crucial to recognize is that the latter cases do not appear to be tragic in virtue of their inescapability, whereas the former do. It is reasonable to worry that among these cases there does not seem to be a common tragic element.

Any account of tragedy must take into account the following features of tragedy. Some tragedies involve conflicts of moral obligation (case 4), but tragedies are ultimately found in practical life more generally (cases 1-3). Death is paradigmatically tragic, but not all tragedies are existential in nature. Some tragedies are relatively mundane (case 3). At least some cases are tragic in virtue of their inescapability (cases 2 and 4), while others do not appear to be at first glance. If they are inescapable, this must be explained.

In this chapter, I provide an account of tragedy that captures these features, among others. My view is that tragedies arise out of a relation between individuals and their practical world. This relation is one of *inhospitality*. Tragedies occur due to the inhospitality of the world to what matters. In the practical lives of individuals, one way the world is inhospitable is by thwarting the values associated with choiceworthy aims. This means that although tragedies are bad for those who suffer them, not all bad things that happen are tragic. It also means that not all aims thwarted by the world are candidates for tragedy. Tragedies befall individuals in the pursuit of what matters.¹ Tragedies do not occur solely in moral dilemmas, or only in contexts of tragic irony, or narrowly where values irresolvably clash. These are specific *modalities* of tragedy. The fundamental feature of tragedy is the world's inhospitality to what matters.²

1.2 Tragedy as a Philosophical Concept

This thesis concerning the nature of tragedy entails that tragedies are real-world phenomena appropriate for philosophical analysis. Walter Kaufmann notes in his *Tragedy and Philosophy* that the Greek word *tragoidia* was coined only *after* the Greek tragedies had been composed.³ According to Kaufmann, “the tragic” did not refer to a commonly recognized phenomenon or experience that the tragedians depicted in

¹ This chapter chiefly focuses on the practical domain of tragedies I call *non-moral tragedies*. I begin with this class because it includes the most obvious and clear tragic cases. Analyzing these before moving on to more difficult cases is the best strategy for fixing the reference of tragedy. In Chapter 2, I taxonomize the different domains of tragedy.

² I distinguish *what matters* from *the good*. There are several types of things that are good (goodness relative to function, welfare, instrumental goods, etc.) and not all of their instances matter. Additionally, the value of some things that matter is not analyzable in terms of their goodness (most notably, the status-value borne by persons). I explore this distinction in the next chapter.

³ Walter Kaufmann, *Tragedy and Philosophy*, pg. 310.

narrative form. Instead, the narrative form created the logical space for analyzing real-life events as tragic insofar as they resembled the tragic formula. If *tragedy* is first and foremost a literary form, then this would undermine the theory of tragedy as a legitimate real-world object of philosophical analysis. Instead, *tragedy* would be a mere literary genre descriptor that real-world events sometimes resemble.⁴

Etymology notwithstanding, *tragedy* does refer to a common, real-world phenomenon. In the context of analyzing tragedy, there are two main reasons for rejecting Kaufmann's argument: 1) The pervasiveness of the concept of tragedy across cultures, including those without strong roots in Ancient Greece.⁵ 2) Everyday recognition of tragedy is more conceptually basic than its paradigmatic portrayal in literature. This helps explain why tragic literature formed in the first place: to elaborate on and explore a common existential phenomenon. Even if the literary form gave rise to the term *tragoidia*, this is consistent with the concept of tragedy preceding the literary innovation. The birth of tragedy in literature must itself be explained, and this is best accomplished by positing a pre-existing concept of tragedy which the tragedians helped fix in their works.⁶

One upshot of exploring the etymological argument against tragedy as a real-world phenomenon is that it exposes the main drawback of focusing on literary examples as paradigmatic cases of tragedy. Literary tragedies are typically meant to function cathartically for their audience.⁷ Catharsis requires comprehension of events, but it does not necessarily lead to deep theoretical understanding of the nature of tragedy. This makes literary tragedies poor candidates for philosophical analysis done at the

⁴ Think here of the American *noir* films from the 1940-50s. There is likely no real-world phenomenon of *noir-ishness* that exists independently of the genre. But those familiar with the genre's trappings will see femme fatales and hardboiled detectives in the real world.

⁵ For example, in the Jewish tradition, the *Book of Job*. In the Buddhist tradition, the story of Patavara in the *Pali Canon*.

⁶ That the concept of tragedy is pre-literary does not entail that it is pre-narrative or pre-cultural. Tragedies have narrative structure that forms in response to things that happen in individual and community life. Thanks to Dawn Coleman for prompting this clarification. For more on the narrative form of tragedy, see Chapter 5.

⁷ See Aristotle, *Poetics*, Book 13. The cathartic function of tragic art is not exhaustive, however. See Chapter 5.

ontological ground level. Everyday cases of tragedy are what should be in view. Once there is a satisfying analysis of everyday cases of tragedy, the more complex literary cases can be more fruitfully analyzed.

The paradigm cases of tragedy given in 1.1 provide the means for analyzing its fundamental nature. Of first concern is what constitutes the *subject* of a tragedy. As cases 3 and 4 make clear, the subjects of tragedy are often everyday people in the course of their practical lives. It is misleading to posit a narrow and unique character to the tragic subject such as the tragic hero of many Greek narratives. In addition to the paradigm cases already given, Sophocles (especially in his characterization of Antigone) illustrated that tragic flaws are not necessary for tragic subjects. And Shakespeare's tragedies are well-known for their amoral character. Narrow requirements on the subjects of tragedy over-specify its ingredients. Tragedy is not necessarily quotidian, but it does occur in the lives of unexceptional individuals in the course of their everyday lives. Tragedies are not typically world-historical events, even if these are the cases that are often dramatized in literature.

A second feature of tragedies is that they involve *events*. All four of the paradigmatic cases in 1.1 involve events in the sense of temporally (and sometimes spatially) extended but limited occurrences (as distinct from mere *instances*). However, given that tragedies necessarily involve subjects, tragedies cannot be *mere events*. Not any old event is a tragedy. Such an account would be overbroad. A natural disaster that occurs on a planet without individuals would for that reason not be a tragedy.

Tragedies are not merely descriptions of types of individuals, nor of mere events, but of a circumstantial relation *between* individuals and their relevant practical environment - what I call their "practical world." The airplane crash of case 2 is a tragedy because the circumstances of the world cause the irreversible destruction of individuals. The young child who dies in case 1 is a tragic subject because the circumstances of the world prevent the means for their survival. Circumstances are tragic in virtue of a relation between individual subjects and their practical world.

1.3 Inhospitability and Inescapability

Tragedies are best understood as a circumstantial relation between individuals and their practical world. This relation is one of *inhospitality*. Hospitality is a relation between an individual and the relevant conditions of their environment. These relevant conditions together make up the individual's "practical world." A practical world is hospitable when it provides conditions adequate for the success of an individual's aims.⁸ A practical world is inhospitable when it fails to provide these conditions.

It is important to recognize that world-hospitality does not entail that practical success be as easy or efficient as possible for individuals. Reflection on the quotidian use of the term is instructive: A host is hospitable in virtue of providing the conditions for friendly relations in their home. These conditions include acts like making dinner, providing warmth and a place to sit, and a general demeanor of friendliness. A host who spoon-feeds their guests might make the activity of eating dinner less effortful for their guests, but would not through this action express the virtue of hospitality. Aims require action and effort on the part of the individuals who have them. It is no tragedy that the world does not spoon-feed us our aims.

Tragedies emerge from the inhospitable conditions of the world. In order for tragedy to occur, these conditions must also be *inescapable*. Consider an individual who aims to become a film director, but never purchases a camera, watches films, or involves himself with other filmmakers. He would fail in his aim to become a film director, but not because of the inescapable conditions of his practical world. The failed film director is not a tragic subject because his predicament predictably arises from conditions within his control. Contrast this with an aspiring woman film director living in a context where women lack the opportunity to work behind the camera. She would be a tragic subject because the conditions of her world are inescapable. It is not within her control to prevent the failure of her aim to become a filmmaker.

The inescapability criterion captures what most conspicuously characterizes tragedies: the individual fails because their aim is *at odds* with the circumstances of their

⁸ Not any aim is a candidate for tragedy, however. As I will add later, tragic inhospitality occurs only for *choiceworthy* aims.

practical world. I may have an aim to practice playing guitar, but if I fail because I decide to read literature in my free time instead, this is not a tragedy. I have merely decided to attend to one aim over another. Since this decision does not follow from the inhospitable conditions of the practical world, it is not tragic. Contrast this with an individual with an aim to play guitar who cannot because a terrible accident has left their dominant hand disfigured. Their failure is tragic due to the inhospitable conditions of their practical world.

These examples illustrate that the mere failure of an aim is not sufficient for tragic circumstances, nor is merely having two or more aims in conflict. Tragedy emerges when practical failure is brought on by the inhospitable conditions of the world. If a photographer does not practice photography because they would rather watch television, this is not a tragedy. But if they cannot practice photography because *no cameras are available*, then tragic circumstances arise. This is a tragedy because the inhospitable conditions of the practical world are *inescapable*.

This framework concerning the inescapability of tragic circumstances helps illuminate one of the most famous cases of tragedy from literature: Oedipus is a tragic subject not merely because he happens to kill his father and marry his mother (undoubtedly terribly accursed things to happen to someone). He is a tragic subject because the world outside of his control, a world governed by the Fates, has directed these outcomes. The inhospitable conditions of his practical world are inescapable for him. No matter what he does to avoid it, he will fail. The tragedy of Oedipus is not merely due to great suffering or the curse that follows kin-slaying. It arises from the inescapability of the conditions that determine these outcomes.

The inescapability of tragedy reintroduces a problem mentioned in 1.1: Some tragedies appear to have easily escapable conditions, and their status as tragedies constituted in part by the fact that they nevertheless occur. Consider a tragic case of the bystander effect, where several individuals refrain from helping someone in dire need because they assume someone else will come to the rescue. This is an instance of collective failure where several individuals could have prevented disaster, but each failed to do so. This tragedy appears to be as easily escapable as the non-tragic case of the failed

filmmaker since it is within the power of each bystander to avoid disaster. Crucially, this escapability appears in part to constitute the bystander effect *as a tragedy*. It is the stark coincidence of disaster and avoidability that seems to fix an instance of the bystander effect *as a tragedy*. If these reflections are accurate, then the thesis that tragedies involve inescapable conditions is undermined.

What this line of thinking misses is the locus of inescapability in tragedies. It is not the unfortunate outcome of tragedy that is inescapable, but its *underlying conditions*. These conditions consist of whichever elements of the environment are relevant to practical success. Inescapability obtains when the relevant inhospitable conditions are outside the control of the individual. This can occur locally or globally. Locally inescapable conditions arise when practical conditions cannot be changed at a particular time, but can be changed over time. Practical conditions are globally inescapable when they cannot be changed at all.⁹

In the case of the bystander effect, individuals in its grip find themselves in locally inescapable conditions. The fact that understanding of the bystander effect appears to weaken its hold means that it is escapable over time.¹⁰ This makes sense of how determinant instances of the bystander effect are in fact tragedies (partly due to the locally inescapable conditions), while acknowledging that they can be avoided by taking measures to reform underlying conditions (realizing their escapability).

This same pattern of argument can be used for other examples of apparently escapable tragedies. Alcohol addiction is a tragedy not because each individual drink is fated,¹¹ but because human physiology and psychology allow for, and in some cases partially facilitate, addiction. Addiction creates locally inescapable conditions, but with the right measures these can often be overcome. Economic disasters are often tragic not because they are radically contingent effects of individual choices, but because they

⁹ Illustrative here are certain features of human finitude, both physical and psychological. I explore these issues in more detail in Chapters 2 and 4.

¹⁰ See Marco van Bommel, et al. "Be aware to care: Public self-awareness leads to a reversal of the bystander effect," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*.

¹¹ Such rhetoric is often well-meant, but fails to explain how some individual alcoholics *do* in fact stop drinking. The tragedy of addiction for the addict is found foremost in the having of a self-destructive desire in the first place, not the token action's inescapability.

create deleterious conditions outside the local control of individuals. Losing your job due to a recession is paradigmatically tragic for this reason. Macroeconomic realities are characteristically inescapable for those who suffer their consequences, but they are alterable.

Tragedies arise from the inhospitable and inescapable conditions of the world. Those that appear to be tragic in virtue of their escapability must be reframed in order to expose their underlying inescapability. Consider the following: An individual realizes that if she had not taken a different route to work in the morning, she would have avoided a disastrous car accident. This realization is not grounded in tragedy's avoidability, but in recognition that human fate is largely governed by elements outside individual control. It would be right in this instance to recognize the tragic nature of her circumstances not in terms of whether her route to work was within her control (it obviously was), but on the tragic fact that there are often unpredictable large-scale consequences to otherwise mundane decisions. Tragedies thus characterize our finitude in relation to the immensity of the world.¹²

1.4 Tragedy and Irony

Discussion of seemingly avoidable tragedies invites analysis of tragedy's relationship to narrative irony. Reflection on tragic irony in literature illuminates how inescapable conditions constitute tragic circumstances.

Tragic irony involves cases where an individual's intention directly produces practical failure. Consider Oedipus, who attempts to subvert a prophecy claiming he will kill his father by fleeing his parents and hometown. This action leads to a confrontation

¹² One thing the tragic picture of the world helps illustrate in this context is the mistake made in over-indexing on one side of this relation. Nihilism, on the one hand, sacrifices what matters before the immense inhospitality of the world. A naively optimistic anthropocentrism, on the other hand, assumes that the world must cater to what matters. The tragic picture mediates these extremes: some things really do matter, but that does not entail that the world recognize and affirm this fact. Likewise, the world's inhospitality does not fundamentally undermine the value of what matters. Instead, tragic loss entails that the object of loss *matters*. For an inspiring and broad account of the history of modern philosophy in a similar spirit, see Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*. Neiman argues that the history of modern philosophy ought to be reframed from fundamentally oriented toward responding to epistemological skepticism to the question of whether the existence of evil undermines the intelligibility of the world. Understanding the nature of evil is thus a window into knowledge of the world more generally. Much the same can be said, I think, about the world-illuminating nature of tragedy.

with his real father on the road where Oedipus kills him in self-defense. This case is ironic because of the direct causal relationship between Oedipus' intention and its subversion. The irony of his circumstances is not the reason why his circumstances are tragic, however. Oedipus' world is governed by the Fates. It is the Fates who determine that Oedipus' intention is subverted. This latter condition illustrates the thesis that tragedy occurs due to the world's inhospitality, ironically or otherwise. When Oedipus kills his father precisely by attempting *not to do so* (by fleeing his adoptive parents), the irony of the relationship between his intentions and the outcome of his actions is tragic because it reveals the degree of his world's inhospitality.

Tragic irony is thus best understood as a proper subset of tragedy. That tragic irony has become the basis of many literary depictions of tragedy is due to its placement of the fundamental feature of the tragic (inescapable world-inhospitality) unmistakably in the foreground. It should not be inferred that *only* cases of tragic irony, where an intention directly produces its failure, are properly tragic. These cases merely put what is common among all tragedies on the surface through the use of an especially potent dramatic device.

1.5 The Demarcation Problem of Tragedy

I have argued that tragedies emerge from the inhospitable conditions of the world. This characterization is helpful for resolving what I call, following Walter Kaufmann's question in his *Tragedy and Philosophy*, the demarcation problem of tragedy: *What separates the tragic from the merely pathetic or bad?*¹³ I have warned of the dangers of over-specification with regard to the subjects of tragedy. What of the dangers of under-specification, of deflating tragedy into the merely bad?

Tragedies are characteristically bad for those that suffer them. But this does not mean that their badness best captures their tragic nature. Consider stubbing your toe on a coffee table. This experience is painful, but this is not a sufficient reason to think it tragic. This is because in this instance pain is operating to focus attention on bodily damage. This is a *hospitable* function. Contrast this with forms of pain lacking this function, like

¹³ Kaufmann, pg. 311.

some headaches or burns. These have a tragic aspect because they are manifestations of the world's inhospitality. This is why the fact that there is so much suffering in the world that appears to serve no purpose is a paradigm feature of the tragic perspective, from the biblical Job onwards. An instance of physical pain may be pitiful, may elicit sympathy, and may make an individual worse-off, but these factors do not make it tragic. Tragedy involves but is distinct from *bad things happening*.

Even on a grand scale, many or terribly *bad things happening* is not sufficient for tragedy. A star's supernova may destroy many things in its wake. This is disastrous for the solar system, but this is not sufficient reason for thinking the supernova is tragic. Tragedies do not befall mere systems or their functions. Tragedies involve individuals or groups of individuals like the novelist or the passengers in the plane crash. But this does not mean that anything that is bad for an individual is a tragedy. Losing a long-developed personal project in a house fire is bad for the novelist. But its tragic aspect cannot be fully explained in terms of this badness.¹⁴

Collecting these reflections helps make sense of why tragedy is distinct from the merely bad. First, this helps explain why tragedies occur only in the lives of individuals with psychologies, and not functionally organized things like computers and plants. The latter are analyzable in terms of well-being or functional success (what is *good-for* the thing given the type of thing that it is), but they are not subjects of tragedy.¹⁵ In some cases, the destruction or malfunctioning of a computer may be a tragedy, but it is not a tragedy *for the computer*. Second, there are events that are bad for individuals but which are not tragic. Stubbing a toe is bad for me. A hangover after a night out is bad for me. Neither of these are in and of themselves tragic. Each may contribute toward tragic circumstances: perhaps stubbing my toe causes prolonged foot problems. This is a tragedy, but not merely because it is so much worse than a sharp pain that quickly fades.

¹⁴ For one, for something bad-for-something to be tragic, its well-being must *matter*. I address why this is the case in more detail in Chapter 2.

¹⁵ One difference between merely functionally organized things and individuals that are subjects of tragedy is that the latter have the capacity for happiness. The world's inhospitality to an individual's happiness is closer to accounting for tragedy than well-being. However, this introduces a puzzle because happiness can be secured through the success of impermissible aims. But impermissible aims do not appear to be candidates for tragic subversion. I explore this in section 1.9.

It is tragic because the pain no longer serves a hospitable function.¹⁶ In the end, mere calculations of overall well-being are not sufficient for characterizing tragic circumstances.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that the content of an individual's well-being sometimes depends in part on the exercise of their agency: namely, the decisions they make and what they recognize as valuable. The novelist's well-being is constituted in part by the writing of their novel because they deem the project worthwhile. To characterize their tragedy in terms of a detriment to their well-being is to get the explanatory direction backward: The novelist is a subject of tragedy because the world has prevented them from realizing a valuable aim. The tragic house fire is bad for them, but only because they first had the aim of writing a novel. The recipe for tragedy involves more than merely bad things happening. It involves the exercise of agency in response to value and its failure brought on by an inhospitable world.

The key problem with explaining tragedy in terms of well-being is that it does not locate and explain what makes circumstances tragic. Recall case 4 in 1.1: The son who must decide for whom to provide care between his two ailing parents. He does not face tragic circumstances because his dilemma threatens his well-being (although it surely does). He faces tragic circumstances because his valuable aims are undermined in a manner outside of his control. If he has obligations to each of his parents, then circumstances are such that he will fail to fulfill at least one of them. Providing care for one parent entails failing to provide that same care for the other. His reasons are in conflict, torn between equally weighty values each demanding the same resources. Tragedy in this case is explained at the level of reasons and their response to values. A mere decrease in well-being is not sufficient to characterize tragedy.

1.6 The Subjects of Tragedy

In the types of tragedies discussed so far, individuals are subjects of tragedy when the world is inhospitable to a certain class of their aims. Tragedies are not merely bad for these individuals. Tragedies thwart the realization of valuable aims. This entails the

¹⁶ That pain *hurts* may itself be tragic, unless pain's characteristic phenomenology is necessary for its attention-grabbing function relative to other types of warning systems.

capacity for *rational agency* on the part of the subject of tragedy. In order to have the sort of aims that are candidates for tragic subversion, individuals must be rational agents.

By rational agent, I mean any individual with the capacity for reasons-response.¹⁷ The most fundamental psychological capacity associated with reasons-response is likely *belief*. If an individual has beliefs, then their psychological states are responsive to reasons concerning those beliefs. If a rational agent believes that it is raining outside, and then sees that it is not, in normal circumstances their belief will change accordingly. This change is appropriately labeled a causal one as the perception of a sunny day does cause the change in the belief that it is raining. But this cause occurs *normatively*, not algorithmically. The perception of a sunny day does not merely cause a change in the agent's belief as one billiard ball causes movement in another. Their belief changes in accordance with an inferential relation involving their thoughts.

Subjects of tragedy have the psychological capacities associated with rational agency because they have *aims* that can be tragically subverted by the world. Aims are psychologically rich phenomena. This is because aims represent their contents as valuable. Contrast this with mere *goals*. Merely functional systems like computers have goals. But they do not represent the contents of their goals as valuable. An individual writing a novel does not merely have a goal, they *aim* to write their novel. This means they represent the writing of the novel as valuable, and adopt the aim in response to this represented value.

In addition to representing the content of their aims as valuable, subjects of tragedy must also represent teleological functions, or processes that are goal-directed. If I have an aim to cook dinner tonight, then I represent the means (cooking) and end (cooked meal) of this process, as well as the functional relation between them (the cooking *produces* the cooked meal). Teleological representation is partly constitutive of aims, as having an aim at all requires representing functional processes in the world. Teleological

¹⁷ This terminology marks the difference between the capacity to respond to reasons and the capacity to represent reasons *as such*. For a defense of this distinction, see Tyler Burge, *Origins of Objectivity*, Chapter 6. For use of the term *reasons-response* in this register, see Jon Garthoff, "Animal Punishment and the Conditions of Responsibility" and "Decomposing Humanity."

representation, like value representation, is distinct from merely *having a goal*. Computers again have goals, as do plants and human organizations like teams. This is because computers, plants, and teams are all functionally organized things. But their having goals does not entail that they psychologically represent the teleological content of their goals. Representing this teleological content is required for subjects of tragedy because it is required for having aims.

Tragic subjects have aims, and having aims means having the capacities for reasons-response, for representing the content of these aims as valuable, and for representing teleological functions in the world. All of this means that subjects of tragedy must have psychologies and must be rational agents. This threshold likely includes some animals within the bounds of the tragic subject, namely those with the capacity for reasons-response. Consider the state of a working dog stuck inside of a high-rise apartment. This is tragic in part because the dog has, or at least would have, a valuable aim left unfulfilled. Contrast this situation with a roomba stuck in a closet. The roomba has a function it is failing to fulfill, but has no psychology and is incapable of having an aim that can be thwarted by the world. The distinct psychological capacities mark the important difference here.

The claim that only rational agency is required for subjects of tragedy may appear to underdetermine the psychological ingredients of tragedy. In many cases, tragedies appear to be *psychologically rich* events. They often involve subverted expectations, irony, moral failure, etc. These are mental events involving metapsychology, or the capacity to represent psychological states (such as *thoughts*) as such. The capacity for metapsychology is characteristic of adult humans, not of non-human animals. Does it follow that only beings with the capacity for metapsychology can be subjects of tragedy?¹⁸

First, there is a distinction between being a *subject* of a tragic event and the recognition of something *as* tragic. The latter requires more sophisticated psychological

¹⁸ For influential instances of this kind of claim, see Sidney Hook, "Pragmatism and the Tragic Sense of Life," pg. 11; and Martha Nussbaum, "The Costs of Tragedy," pg. 1014, as well as Hegel's discussion of *Antigone* in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, §469.

machinery than the former, specifically representation of aims *as such*. To recognize something as tragic, an individual must have facility with the concept *tragedy*, which entails facility with the concept *aim*. Having the concept *aim* entails the capacity for representation of psychological states as such. To know that I have an aim of earning a Ph.D. in philosophy, I must be able to represent my own aims *as aims*. If studying philosophy were outlawed in my country before I am finished, then I would be able to recognize this as a tragedy only if I am able to represent my own aims in this way.

This high-level capacity to recognize something as tragic (or representing oneself as a subject of tragedy) is not necessary for *being a subject* of tragedy. It is generally a methodological mistake to assume that representation of a capacity is a requirement for the exercise of that capacity. Some non-human animals and human children have beliefs without representing themselves as believers or their beliefs as such. They also have perceptions without representing themselves as perceivers or their perceptions as such. Only critically rational beings are able to represent cognitive or perceptual representations as such.¹⁹

If some non-human animals and human children are capable of reasons-response, then they can be subjects of tragedy. Consider a mother duck who has mistaken a rubber duck for one of her ducklings. If she spends time nurturing the rubber duck as one of her own, then her aim of nurturing her ducklings has been thwarted by the world, and she faces tragic circumstances. This is the case whether or not she is able to represent herself as a tragic subject or her circumstances as tragic. Tragedy emerges from a relation of inhospitality between a subject and their practical world. This relation requires only that an aim is capable of being thwarted by the world. The tragic subject need not represent this aim as such or represent the inhospitality relation itself. To insist otherwise is to give in to the temptation to over-intellectualize the tragic subject. Resisting this temptation is crucial for understanding the fundamental ground of tragedy: individuals enmeshed in a world inhospitable to what matters. The capacity for critical reasoning plays a significant

¹⁹ For elaboration of this claim, and a defense of human beings as the only critically rational beings on Earth, see Tyler Burge, "A Century of Deflation and a Moment About Self-Knowledge."

role in recognizing oneself as a subject of tragedy, and (as I argue in the next chapter) in understanding *moral* tragedies, but it is not the ground of tragedy proper.

1.7 Tragedy and Absurdity

This conception of the tragic subject can be helpfully clarified through comparison with tragedy's cousin concept, *absurdity*. Consider the case of Sisyphus, eternally bound to repeatedly push a large stone up a hill only for it to roll back down to the bottom. This circumstance is paradigmatically absurd because Sisyphus is aware that he has no good reason to repeat this process. Sisyphean absurdity of this type has a high-level psychological capacity criterion: metapsychology, or the capacity to represent psychological states as such. Adult human beings are characteristically capable of metapsychological representation through representation of their and others' beliefs and desires. Metapsychological representation is required for recognizing the absurdity of Sisyphus' situation since it involves his own psychological states: namely, his justifications. Sisyphean absurdity thus features a sharp tension between an individual's justifications and the conditions of their practical world.

Sisyphus is a subject of absurdity because his practical justifications have this tension with his practical world. His practical world undercuts or weakens the strength of his reasons for doing what he's doing. He has *no good reason* to continue rolling the boulder up the hill, and he knows it. This recognition of absent justification, more so than the boulder-pushing itself, is the source of his suffering. Having justifications at all requires metapsychology, since justifications in practical contexts represent aims. Therefore, Sisyphean absurdity requires metapsychology, in contrast to tragedy which I have argued does not require representation of or critical reflection on psychological states as such.

Sisyphean absurdity is not the only type of absurdity, however. Consider the following: Charles' pants fall down during an important academic ceremony in celebration of his great accomplishments.²⁰ I call this the *generic absurd*. Like tragic events, generic absurdity is experienced as absurd only by those capable of

²⁰ I take this example from Thomas Nagel's "The Absurd" in *Mortal Questions*.

metapsychological reflection. However, I have argued that there is a distinction between recognizing something as tragic and being a subject of tragedy, where the latter does not require metapsychology. Can the same distinction be applied to generic absurdity?

Recognizing something as generically absurd requires the capacity for metapsychology, but being a subject of generic absurdity does not. This is because, unlike Sisyphean absurdity, generic absurdity does not involve sharp tension between an individual's justifications and their practical world. Instead, generic absurdity involves the world's undercutting of an individual's *taking the contents of their aims seriously*. This is illustrated in the pants-falling-down scenario: It is not the subject's justifications that are undercut by their pants falling down, but the seriousness with which they take the ceremony. The pants-falling-down undermines the significance of the event, introducing a whiff of the world's indifference to our commitments. But Charles need not realize this to be a subject of the absurd moment. This difference distinguishes Sisyphean absurdity from generic absurdity. Sisyphean absurdity requires metapsychological representation of practical justifications, whereas generic absurdity merely requires taking the contents of those aims seriously.

This distinction between the two types of absurdity illuminates the conception of tragedy I have been exploring. Like both types of absurdity, tragedy involves a tension between an individual and their practical world. Like Sisyphean absurdity, tragedy involves the undercutting of an aim. However, unlike Sisyphean absurdity, tragedy does not necessarily involve the undercutting of reflective justifications for an aim. Tragedy involves the world's inhospitality to what matters more generally. Like generic absurdity, tragedies can befall individuals without the capacity for or in the exercise of metapsychological reflection. Unlike generic absurdity, however, tragedy involves the thwarting of what matters. Generic absurdity does not require this, as seen in the pants-falling-down case. The generically absurd subject need only have the seriousness with which they take the contents of their aim undermined. This is consistent with the success of the aim. In this case, the pants-falling-down is no less absurd if the ceremony

successfully continues to completion. Such practical success is *not* consistent with tragedy.²¹

1.8 Morality and Mundanity

The claim that the tragic subject must only have the broad capacity for reasons-response runs up against the fact that many of the great literary examples of tragedy prominently feature moral failing. Moreover, these moral failures appear to partly constitute the events as tragic. Consider, for instance, Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter to appease Artemis and reach Troy, or Creon's judgment that Antigone must die for daring to bury her brother in defiance of his order. Agamemnon and Creon are typically cast as moral villains for these actions, and tragedy befalls them in part as a judgment on their moral failings.

Additionally, much discussion of tragedy in popular discourse involves discussion of "damned if you do, damned if you don't" tragic dilemmas. In these dilemmas, moral failure may appear inescapable regardless of which of the dilemma's horns is taken. Recall case 4 from 1.1: The son must choose between his parents for whom to provide care, but whomever he chooses, he will fail to care for the other. It may appear as though moral failure in this case is inevitable. Recognition of these factors may lend support to the claim that tragedies are always characterized by a moral failing of some kind.²² This would undermine the claim that tragedy involves the world's inhospitality to what matters more generally, and the claim that full-throated moral agency is not required for the tragic subject.

The *moralization hypothesis* is the claim that all tragedies must involve moral agency and morally fraught situations of these kinds. There is good reason, however, for

²¹ Comparison of tragedy and absurdity prompts the question of how tragedy relates to comedy. If tragedy occurs when the world is inhospitable to what matters, then it may seem as though there is too much overlap between tragedy and comedy, as the latter often involves circumstances where individual finitude sharply contrasts with an immense and overpowering world. I don't find this to be a problem, however, as overlap between tragedy and comedy is pervasive in both the arts and life (as evidenced by the contemporary idiom *tragicomedy*). In one sense, seeing the inhospitality of the world as either tragic or comic may to some degree be a matter of perspective (consider how novels and films can portray the same events as tragic or comic merely through their form of presentation, tone, cuts, etc.). However, as I explain later in this chapter, tragedy has a value-laden *thickness* that comedy may lack.

²² This should be distinguished from the more narrow claim that all *moral* tragedies involve moral failure. I address this in greater detail in Chapters 2 and 3.

thinking that the moralization hypothesis is false. This is because tragedies befall individuals in practical life more generally. Consider the following two historical cases: the Holocaust and the destruction of Pompeii. The moralization hypothesis would claim that the Holocaust is a tragedy in virtue of the moral atrocities of the Nazis, including the moral dilemmas faced by victims of the Nazis (e.g. *Sophie's Choice*,²³ where a mother is forced to choose which of her children will be sent to the gas chamber). This characterizes a sub-type of tragedy, namely moral tragedy (the details of which I flesh out in the next chapter). It is misguided to claim that all tragedies are essentially moral in nature, however, as the other case illustrates. The destruction of Pompeii is an event that involves no moral failure but is paradigmatically tragic. The destruction caused by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius is a natural event whose tragic character does not rely on moral conflict of any kind. The moralization hypothesis fails to account for the tragic aspect of non-moral events like this. Crucially, this includes tragedies that occur for morally mature individuals but only in virtue of their more broad capacities. Consider the multitude of tragedies faced by victims of the Holocaust that are not captured by focusing solely on contexts of moral dilemma: the many personal projects, academic texts, novels, and friendships that were thwarted by imprisonment in the camps. Sophie's tragic choice between her children is a potent example of tragedy at the moral crossroads, but the practical dilemmas forced on victims of the Holocaust are just as much tragedies, if only of a different and relatively more common type.

Kaufmann argues that the trend toward the moralization of tragedies has a more sinister function: to denigrate candidate non-moral tragedies to the realm of the "philosophically uninteresting."²⁴ Tragedies are elevated in this way above the merely pathetic by involving the (oft-fatal) use of capacities unique to reflective moral agents. Shakespeare's tragedies, Kaufmann argues, do a great service in their largely amoral

²³ William Styron, *Sophie's Choice*. Styron partly based his novel on accounts from Polish refugees of their experiences in Nazi concentration camps.

²⁴ Kaufmann, pg. 314.

presentation. They expose the pervasiveness of human suffering without minimizing its intensity or connecting it necessarily to the consequences of moral error.²⁵

Kaufmann is correct to reject the moralization hypothesis for these reasons. Tragedies occur for individuals in practical life generally. To deny this domain of tragedy is to misplace the locus of tragedy: the inhospitality of the world to what matters generally. However, Kaufmann's focus on literary tragedies (namely, Shakespeare's) is worrying, because it tempts the belief that tragedies must meet a criterion of magnitude: they must be *disasters*. Tragedies are clearly not reducible to moral disasters, but they are also not necessarily disastrous at all. This is captured by the colloquialism *minor tragedy*. When we accidentally delete a cherished photo from our phone without a backup, this is unworthy of a literary adaptation. But it is a tragedy nonetheless.

The rejection of the moralization hypothesis provides a window into the potential *mundanity* of tragedies. Kaufmann rightly criticizes the moralization hypothesis for ignoring non-moral tragedies, but retains the misleading tendency to understand tragedy through grand literary examples rather than through the everyday. Reflection on tragedies encountered in everyday life illuminates the fact that tragedies can be highly mundane.²⁶ Consider an older music-lover who wishes to relive their youth by listening to an old record, only to find that it is out of print and unavailable online. The music-lover in this circumstance faces a minor tragedy.²⁷ This is not to say that some tragic circumstances are unserious, but to point out that the mundanity of minor tragedies illustrates two of the major claims of this chapter: 1) Tragedy involves the world's inhospitality to what matters generally (not just morally), and 2) Individuals are subjects of tragedy in both moral and non-moral (as well as disastrous and mundane) contexts. For this reason,

²⁵ Ibid., pg. 315.

²⁶ It is important to note that morality, and therefore moral tragedy, can be highly mundane as well. See Barbara Herman, "Morality and Everyday Life."

²⁷ A worry may arise that this overbroadens tragic circumstances. However, the key point here isn't that every circumstance featuring the inhospitality of the world ought to be foregrounded as tragic. In many minor tragedies, the tragic aspect is not its most salient feature. This is why we often laugh them off: not because they're not tragic (they are), but because this feature isn't of most relative importance. See Chapter 5 for discussion of how overestimating the relative importance of tragic circumstances can form a kind of pathology.

mundane tragedies are a helpful epistemic window into uncovering the fundamental nature of tragedy. Once these relatively mundane tragedies are understood, the great tragedies of literature and history are better illuminated.

1.9 The Thickness of Tragedy

I have maintained that tragedies involve the world's inhospitality to what matters. This often manifests when an individual's aims are thwarted by the world. This introduces a puzzle, however, as the thwarting of some aims does not appear to be tragic. Consider someone who has an aim to murder an innocent person for financial gain. If the circumstances of the world were to make the successful execution of this aim impossible, it would not be a tragedy. This is because impermissible aims do not appear to be candidates for tragedy (although, for reasons I will explain, tragedies often arise in the context of impermissible aims). This means that there is an evaluative component to tragedy: impermissible aims cannot be tragically thwarted. *Tragedy* is thus what some philosophers call an evaluatively "thick" concept. Evaluatively thick concepts are concepts that contain both non-evaluative descriptive and evaluative descriptive content.²⁸ For instance, *courage* is an evaluatively thick concept because it combines opposition to danger with an evaluative claim that such action is choiceworthy. In a similar way, *tragedy* conjoins the failure of an aim brought on by the world with the claim that the aim is choiceworthy.²⁹ Losing a novel in a house fire is a tragedy in part because the aim of writing a novel is choiceworthy. Losing blackmail materials intended to extort an innocent person is not tragic if the blackmail is impermissible.³⁰

The evaluative content of *tragedy* is helpful for determining the locus of inhospitable conditions within complex circumstances. Some cases do not have their tragic aspect *on the surface*, where the world directly undermines the execution of an individual's aim. Consider the case of a happy slave who finds themselves content with

²⁸ See Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, pg. 129.

²⁹ This is also what distinguishes *tragedy* from *bad luck*. *Luck* lacks this same evaluative thickness. You may have good luck at the slots, but this may be a tragedy if you're addicted to gambling. *Misfortune* comes closer, but things can go well for things that don't matter (I address this more fully in Chapter 2).

³⁰ Noting that tragedies occur for choiceworthy aims doesn't require being dictators about what's choiceworthy. It only means that disagreement over what's tragic will partly depend on which aims are understood to be choiceworthy.

their enslavement, and not for reasons of cold calculation of the world's hostility to their freedom. At first blush, this case may appear to undermine the given account of tragedy: the happy slave has no aim to escape enslavement but their state is clearly tragic.

The problem with this objection is that it expects the world's inhospitable conditions to manifest only in the practical conditions of the world *external* to the agent. The happy slave's tragic conditions, however, partially lie in their inability to recognize that their aim exists due to the poor conditions of the world making enslavement appear preferable to freedom.³¹ If the slave truly has no aim to be free, then such myopia concerning choiceworthiness is indeed tragic.³²

A modal argument helps make the case: If the slave had developed their aims in conditions more hospitable to the exercise of autonomy and to understanding its choiceworthiness, this would likely have resulted in an aim to be free. The happy slave's aim is akin to what Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum have called *adaptive preferences*,³³ or preferences that are warped by inhospitable practical conditions. Warped preferences of this type are characteristically tragic. Their *warpedness* speaks to this fact: such preferences are best understood as a misalignment between an individual's desires and what those desires would be under more hospitable conditions. In the case of the happy slave there is no desire to be free, but this is due to the world's inhospitality. Under more hospitable conditions, they would desire to be free. Tragedy's evaluative content illuminates how the happy slave's tragic circumstances include the conditions

³¹ We might consider a case where the reason for the slave's contentment is not because of the poor conditions of the practical world, but because the slave simply wishes not to expend the effort to make choices of their own accord. This would undermine the argument here, but is clearly not what the happy slave case wishes to capture.

³² In cases like this, there often arises a concern about paternalism. However, it is not paternalistic to disagree about what is good. Impermissible paternalism occurs when an individual overrules another's rightful exercise of autonomy. Interestingly, in the case of the happy slave, it is autonomy itself which is the value in question. This undercuts the accusation of paternalism since the latter seems to turn on the happy slave being right about autonomy's relative disvalue. Thomas Hill makes a similar argument concerning the servile person disregarding their own moral value: "The objectionable feature of the servile person, as I have described him, is his tendency to disavow his own moral rights either because he misunderstands them or because he cares little for them." See Thomas Hill, "Servility and Self-Respect," pg. 97.

³³ See Amartya Sen, "Equality of What?"; Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development*.

forming their desires. Their enslavement is tragic because in more hospitable conditions they would surely find freedom choiceworthy.³⁴

Reflection on the tragic aspect of the happy slave helpfully illuminates a famous case from literature: Macbeth. *Macbeth* is a paradigmatic tragedy in literature, but it is not immediately clear in what sense it is tragic. Macbeth aims to take the Scottish throne by nefarious means, including deception and murder. He is clearly presented as a diabolical figure. His failure to ultimately hold on to the throne cannot be tragic, although it involves the world's inhospitality to his aim. This is because his aim is vile. The tragic aspect of *Macbeth* must be found elsewhere: namely, in his warped understanding of the choiceworthiness of power for its own sake. In this sense, Macbeth is an example of tragic *character*, as it is his maldeveloped character that is tragic. The world is not tragically inhospitable to his aim to hold power, but to the flourishing of his virtuous character and to the appropriate understanding of the value of political power.³⁵ Macbeth's aims are impermissible and thus are not candidates for tragic subversion. His tragedy is found instead in the choiceworthy aims he does *not* have.

It is tragic when the world subverts choiceworthy aims, whether in their success or their adoption. But there are often tragedies that occur in the context of impermissible aims. Sometimes this is because individuals must for moral reasons give up on narrowly impermissible aims that would in normal circumstances be choiceworthy. Consider for instance a medical doctor who must give up their private practice during a medical emergency like a widespread and deadly pandemic. But some other tragedies arise in the context of impermissible aims because the aims themselves have been formed under inhospitable conditions, like in Macbeth's case. This is why it is often tragic when individuals adopt narrowly non-choiceworthy aims, especially when doing so for reasons that are rationalizable as *broadly* choiceworthy.³⁶ Philosophers speak here of *the guise of*

³⁴ It is also important here to consider persons not just modally, but *over time*. This foregrounds how non-choiceworthy aims often develop in parallel with inhospitable conditions.

³⁵ Consider the role that the Three Witches and Lady Macbeth play in constituting Macbeth's practical world.

³⁶ I distinguish here between *narrow* and *broad* choiceworthiness. Narrowly non-choiceworthy actions are wrong actions. There is an open question as to whether broadly choiceworthy actions are wrong. This is because narrow choiceworthiness involves contextual features determining the moral status of actions that

the good.³⁷ This refers to the sense in which impermissible action typically aims at something of genuine value. It is understandable that the happy slave values security. It is also understandable that Macbeth values political power. These are genuine values. The tragic aspect of these situations is found in the mismatch between these genuine values and the individuals' misguided understanding of their relative choiceworthiness in context. Their action is generally oriented toward what matters, but their aim misses the mark. If the world had been different (including the world's role in their character-formation), the choiceworthy could have been realized.

1.10 The Impossibility of Values

Tragedy's *thickness* means that narrowly non-choiceworthy aims are not candidates for tragic subversion. Broadly choiceworthy aims are the domain of the tragically thwarted. This is because choiceworthy aims are characteristically directed at values (*what matters* in practical contexts). Tragedies thus subvert not just aims, but the values toward which they are directed.

This claim may appear incompatible with a certain class of tragedies recognized in everyday life. Consider the following case: A middle-aged doctor regrettably wonders whether they should have pursued a career in athletics instead of medicine.³⁸ The doctor would be correct to describe their circumstance as tragic, although it is unclear if the world has thwarted an aim. Consider two different extrapolations of the case: 1) The doctor suffered a catastrophic accident during competition which effectively ended their athletic aspirations. In this version of the case, it is clear that the circumstances are tragic. The doctor's practical world thwarted their ambitions in a manner outside of their control. Their aim persisted but the means for realizing it were vitiated. 2) The doctor had a successful collegiate athletic career, but ultimately decided that a career in medicine would both be more financially stable and a better use of their time and energy. In this

broad choiceworthiness does not (the latter typically including an "in normal circumstances" or "all else being equal" rider).

³⁷ For more on the philosophical history of the guise of the good, see Francesco Orsi, "The Guise of the Good."

³⁸ Thanks to Jon Garthoff for pointing out a scene from the film *Fields of Dreams* (1989) that features this type of tragedy.

version of the case, it is less clear that the circumstances are tragic. This is because it is not obvious that the doctor's practical world has thwarted an aim. In fact, the doctor appears to have given up the aim entirely of their own volition. Given the account of tragedy given thus far, how can this case be maintained as a tragedy?

This tragedy can be made intelligible only under the condition that choiceworthy aims realize genuine values. The case of the regretful doctor is specifically a case of the *impossibility of values*. The impossibility of values refers to situations of value trade-off where inevitable value-loss occurs. In these situations, all relevant values cannot be compossibly realized. Not all such cases are tragic, however. Consider the choice between going to one of two beloved restaurants for dinner. In choosing one restaurant I choose against the other, though I recognize its value. This case is not tragic since I am highly unlikely to simultaneously maintain aims to dine at both restaurants *tonight*. Contrast this with a case where an immigrant desires to eat the cuisine of their native country, but no such restaurants exist in their current city. In this case, their aim is thwarted by the world, its associated values left unrealizable, and their circumstances are appropriately described as a (minor) tragedy.³⁹

When cases of the impossibility of values are tragic, it is because the world has thwarted the values toward which choiceworthy aims are directed. In the second version of the regretful doctor case, there is good reason to think that a tragedy has occurred even though the doctor has voluntarily given up their aim of becoming a professional athlete. This is because the doctor has given up their aim not due to lost interest, but because an athletic career was not as likely to provide a good life as a career in medicine. This is importantly different from giving up the aim for the reason of no longer recognizing its value. If the latter were the case, then the doctor's regretful wonderings would not be intelligible.⁴⁰ That the doctor wonders whether they should

³⁹ In addition to being a minor or mundane tragedy, this is also an example of a tragedy that does not involve a *clash* of values. Cases of tragic impossibility of values are a species of tragedy proper, which is brought on by the inhospitable conditions of the world. See Martha Nussbaum, "The Costs of Tragedy" for the overly narrow claim that all tragedies involve the clash of values.

⁴⁰ Unless of course they wonder whether they were wrong in this change of mind, which satisfies the same point.

have taken up an athletic career only makes sense if they still recognize the *value* in the unrealized path of life. Taking on a medical career necessitates the loss of value that would be realized in a career in athletics. The doctor's practical world was such that these considerations proved determinative for their choice in career. They are right to wonder, if things (i.e. *the world*) had been different, whether they could have succeeded in athletics as well.

Crucially, the doctor's circumstances remain tragic even if they conclude they were correct to choose a career in medicine over athletics for the reasons given: financial stability and a better use of their time and energy. Their practical world constructed the constrained conditions in which this decision was made, including the impossibility of the values associated with the two careers. This is what makes the case distinct from the case of deciding what to have for dinner. In the latter, I am deciding on the content of my aim in deliberating over restaurants. In the case of the regretful doctor, two aims with associated values are under consideration. The impossibility of the two aims, driven by the constrained conditions of the world, reveals the tension between individual and world characteristic of tragedy. It is *this* tension, not the clash between impossible values, that is the fundamental feature of tragedy. The clash of values sometimes found in tragic circumstances is but one modality where tragedies emerge.

1.11 Conclusion

I have argued that tragedies occur due to the inescapable conditions of an inhospitable practical world. In practical contexts, these conditions undermine the values toward which choiceworthy aims are directed. This account of tragedy binds together cases as disparate as the destruction of Pompeii and a doctor's mid-life crisis. It also illuminates cases from literature such as Macbeth and Oedipus. In each of the cases discussed, the world is inhospitable to something that matters. Tragedies are not fundamentally circumstances faced by moral agents in "damned if you do, damned if you don't" scenarios. Nor are they found solely in situations in which impossible values clash. Both of these are *types* of tragedy, but tragedy proper is grounded in a relation between what matters and the inhospitable conditions of the world.

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CHAPTER 2

THE DOMAINS OF TRAGEDY

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I make good on the claim that tragedies occur when the world is inhospitable to what matters. I do this by clarifying the distinction between what matters and the good. Mattering and goodness are both types of value. But when something matters, its value means that it warrants concern, and not all good things warrant concern. I use this distinction to illuminate the domains or types of tragedy. The domains of tragedy are distinguished in part by what matters that is lost in them. In non-moral tragedies, what matters are choiceworthy aims. In moral tragedies, what matters is lost in the context of moral obligation, warranting reparative follow-up. What I call absolute tragedies (paradigmatically, the death of persons), in distinction from the other types, involve the world's inhospitality to what matters-as-such. Something that matters-as-such has a distinctive kind of inherent value that is independent from any other value. The value of what matters in this way makes it uniquely valuable and therefore *irreplaceable*. This is what makes the death of a person a singular kind of tragedy: because it involves the loss of something with a distinctively irreplaceable value.

After demarcating the types of tragedy, I reflect on how the distinctive value of persons illustrated in absolute tragedies further illuminates tragedy's other domains. Moral tragedies often involve a sort of "fittingness gap" regarding recognition of this distinctive value. The emotions characteristic of moral tragedy represent and attend to this gap, motivating reparative action in its wake. The distinctive value of persons helps make sense of why these situations leave us feeling cold even when we've done right morally. Non-moral tragedies involve the thwarting of choiceworthy non-moral aims. The distinctive value of persons helps explain why these aims might matter such that they are potential tragedies: because the bearer of the aim matters-as-such. This type of value also aids in clarifying why the thwarting of impermissible aims is not tragic, even if there is often a tragic aspect to such situations.¹

¹ In this chapter, my aim is not to win over a skeptic to my claims about the distinctive value of persons. My aim is to explain how these ideas fit together into a larger conceptual whole which illuminates the

2.2 Goodness and Mattering

I have claimed that tragedies occur due to the world's inhospitality to what matters. This should be distinguished from the claim that tragedies involve the world's inhospitality to what is good. This is because *goodness* and *mattering* are distinct value concepts. There are some things that are good that do not matter, and there are some things that matter that do not matter in virtue of their goodness. *Mattering* additionally has a fundamental connection to practical reason that *goodness* lacks.² Practical reason functions to relate appropriately to what matters. Something's mattering means that it warrants this kind of concern. This demarcates *mattering* from *goodness* because there are good things that do not warrant this kind of concern.

Consider the various ways that *goodness* can be understood. There are things that are good-for something instrumentally, such as choosing the right tool for a particular household task. There are things that are good in virtue of their being a part of some whole that is good, such as how listening to a lecture on an interesting topic is a constitutive part of attaining knowledge. There are also things that have a kind of final goodness requiring no further justification of their value, such as happiness.

There are also goods that manifest in the form of virtues, such as competencies and excellences. This is the sense in which someone is a good basketball player or a good philosopher. Like the instrumental and constitutive goods above, these virtues are assessable relative to their function.³ The tool is a good tool because it functions to successfully complete the job. Likewise, LeBron James is a good basketball player because he has mastered the skills associated with excellence in basketball such as passing, shooting, and dribbling. What is important to recognize is that nothing said here about goodness tells us anything about whether these goods *matter*, and can thus be tragically lost. It is good for the functioning of a car for its engine to be routinely

nature of tragedy. In the next chapter, I focus more intently on rival approaches to understanding tragedy from popular moral theories.

² This is not to say that practical reason fundamentally constitutes mattering. Practical reason recognizes, responds, and relates to what matters independently of it.

³ See Joseph Raz, *The Practice of Value* for an account of how many excellence goods assessable in functional terms are non-relativistically objective even when they are dependent on social practices for their inauguration and perpetuation.

lubricated with oil. But it is not necessarily a tragedy if the world's inhospitality prevents this from happening. It is only if the car *matters* and warrants concern that this is a tragedy. For example, if the car is owned by someone who relies on it to get to work. If the car breaks down and causes its owner to miss work, then this situation has the shape of a (minor) tragedy. This is because the car matters, not merely because the car has malfunctioned. Tragedies are characteristically bad, but it is not their badness alone that makes them tragic.

This distinction between goodness and mattering is important because it helps illuminate the *domains* of tragedy. The domains of tragedy are distinguished in part by what matters in them. One domain of tragedy is the non-moral. This includes the tragedies that made up most of the discussion in the previous chapter. Non-moral tragedies are close cousins to moral tragedies, but should be distinguished by the latter's occurring in the context of moral obligation. What unites moral and non-moral tragedies is the world's inhospitality to the values associated with choiceworthy aims. But choiceworthy aims are not all that matters.

What I call *absolute tragedies* make up another domain of tragedy. Absolute tragedies are distinct from the other domains in that they involve the world's inhospitality to what matters-*as-such*. The paradigmatic example of an absolute tragedy is the death of a person. Death is paradigmatically tragic, but not merely because death results in the failure of choiceworthy aims. These failures underdetermine the tragic aspect of death. The tragedy of death is found in the loss of *the individual*, not merely their aims. This is because persons matter independently of their aims. They have a distinctive kind of inherent value: they matter-*as-such*. Importantly, the distinctive value borne by persons is not analyzable in terms of their goodness. It is not because a person is good that they have this value. Their mattering is instead a kind of status that they have. This status warrants recognition through modes like *respect* and *concern*, whereas goods typically warrant *production* or *realization*. This status makes the value of persons *irreplaceable*, unlike the functional value of instrumental goods or virtues, or the final value of happiness. This is why the appropriate response to the death of a person is so distinct from most instances of the failure to realize a goal: it is characterized by grief and

mourning, forms of recognition of the loss of something with irreplaceable value. Death is uniquely tragic because it manifests the world's inhospitality to what matters-as-such, not merely because it is especially bad.

In the rest of this chapter, I explain these domains of tragedy and provide paradigmatic examples of each. I argue that understanding tragedy as involving the world's inhospitality to what matters helps resolve problems in characterizing each domain. Finally, I explain how the distinctive value of persons illuminated in absolute tragedies helps to make sense of the distinction between the tragic and the non-tragic, among tragedy's other features.

2.3 Non-Moral Tragedies

Non-moral tragedies are one domain of tragedy. In these tragedies, the world's inhospitality thwarts choiceworthy aims. Among the paradigmatic examples of tragedy given at the beginning of Chapter 1, the novelist who loses their work in a house fire is a case of non-moral tragedy. The novelist case should be distinguished from a moral tragedy which occurs in the context of moral obligation, such as the case of the adult son with two ailing parents. These cases have in common choiceworthy aims: to complete a novel and to care for both ailing parents. They differ in that the latter plausibly occurs in the context of moral obligation and the former does not. In this section, I elaborate on the nature of non-moral tragedies. In the following section, I explore moral tragedies.

Non-moral tragedies occur when the world is inhospitable to the values directed at by choiceworthy aims in non-moral contexts. The novelist who loses their work in a house fire is the subject of a non-moral tragedy because the conditions of their environment thwart the completion of their novel. What is crucial to recognize is that this remains a tragedy despite its non-dilemmatic structure. The situation features neither a clash of values nor a moral dilemma, but is clearly tragic. This lends support to the claim that tragedy is a more broad phenomenon than value-based dilemmas or conflicts. The latter are tragic, but in virtue of the fact that such dilemmas are instances of the world's inhospitality more generally.

What remains at issue is determining what makes writing a novel the kind of thing that can be tragically subverted. For the novel's loss to be tragic, it must be something

that *matters*. Its mattering is what grounds its choiceworthiness,⁴ making its thwarting by the world a tragedy. The project's mattering is of course intimately related to its goodness. It would not make sense, after all, to consider the writing of a novel choiceworthy if it were literally *good for nothing*. But the project's goodness does not exhaustively explain its mattering. Consider what is good for a plant: access to water and light for photosynthesis. These things being good for a plant does not entail that they matter or warrant concern. This means there is an open question about whether the death of a plant from malnourishment is a tragedy. The same question can then be applied to the novel: why does it matter such that its destruction is a tragedy?

That the writing of the novel matters cannot be fully explained in terms of the project's goodness. This means that the tragedy cannot be fully explained by reference to the project's being good for its author, or because the novel would be an excellent one of its kind. It is also not a sufficient explanation that the project would contribute to the author's or others' well-being. These are all important factors for understanding why the novel matters, but for each there is an analogue for the plant: water is good for the plant, plants can be excellent instances of their kind, certain ecosystems are better or worse for the plant, etc. And yet the thwarting of these goods does not in itself make a tragedy.

The key difference between the novel and the plant is that the former involves the loss of something that *matters*. This is why the loss of the novel is tragic but the loss of the plant is not. However, we need only to amend the plant-case slightly to make it tragic. Consider if the plant were a household plant of an individual intending to care for it. Suppose their home was constructed without proper access to natural light. If the household plant dies for this reason, its death is tragic. This is not merely because something that is good for the plant was inhospitably withheld by the world, but also because the plant mattered. There remains an open question about why the plant in the first version of the case doesn't matter whereas in the second version it does. This question I leave for section 2.6, where I argue that this is due to the relation between the dependent mattering of the plant and the independent mattering of the individual owner.

⁴ *Choiceworthiness* is the property of activities that matter. Of course, more matters than just activities, as I will discuss later in this chapter.

What is established here is taxonomical: mattering is what demarcates tragic from non-tragic cases, not merely the relative goods involved.

An important issue to address before moving on concerns the relationship between choiceworthiness and goodness. Some value theories hold that these concepts are coextensive for the chooser, that whatever is choiceworthy is for that reason good for the chooser.⁵ If this were the case then the distinction I've made would become less clear. Anything that is choiceworthy would by definition be good for the chooser.

Choiceworthiness and well-being for the chooser are not so closely connected, however. Consider a parent deciding whether to move to a new city for a job they desire, but in doing so would have to move their child away from beloved family and friends. If the parent decides against the move on the grounds that it would be bad to move their child away from their loved ones, it makes sense to say that the parent has sacrificed their well-being to do what's good for their child. Personal self-sacrifice like this is reasonably understood as sacrifice of well-being. If asked, the parent would likely claim that the decision was made because the child's well-being matters more than their own, and that it would be a mistake to move their child away from loved ones even for a job they greatly desire. We would likely be confused if instead they answered that it was best for *them* in the long-run to do what's best for their child. The more choiceworthy option in this case is best understood as one that requires a sacrifice of the parent's well-being. The crucial point to recognize is that this fact is not decisive of choiceworthiness. Thinking that doing what's best for another always contributes toward the chooser's well-being more than alternatives denies this reality. It obscures precisely this kind of reasonable self-sacrifice of well-being.⁶

Choiceworthiness and the well-being of the chooser can thus come apart. But this does not mean that goodness plays no role in tragic circumstances. The parent's sacrifice of a desired job for the well-being of their child is a tragedy because both the parent's and

⁵ This is a bedrock doctrine of the ancient Stoics. For an interesting defense of this position, and that it coheres with contemporary developmental psychology, see Lawrence Becker, *A New Stoicism*.

⁶ See Kyla Ebels-Duggan, "Against Beneficence: A Normative Account of Love" for more on the relationship between choiceworthiness and well-being.

the child's well-being matter. What needs to be distinguished in these contexts are the types and instances of goods that matter from those that don't. This cannot be accomplished if choiceworthiness and the well-being of the chooser are collapsed, making their tragic differential opaque.

I have argued that tragedies cannot be fully explained by reference to goodness lost. There remains a type of goodness yet unanalyzed: final goodness, or goods that require no further justification of their goodness, such as happiness.⁷ Final goods like happiness may appear to escape this distinction between mattering and goodness. This would be because happiness, in addition to being good for whoever has it, also seems to always warrant the concern that accompanies mattering. This is supported by the basic distinction between final and instrumental goods: final goods are valued for their own sake while instrumental goods are valued only as means.⁸ If happiness is valued for its own sake, and is finally good for whoever has it, then does this mean that happiness always matters, and its thwarting is sufficient for tragedy?

Happiness is plainly distinct from the types of goodness relative to function explored so far (instrumental goods and virtues). This is because final goods require no further justification of their goodness. Happiness also appears to be the kind of thing that always warrants concern, if not overriding concern. This is because happiness is finally good for persons, and persons matter-as-such.

However, as discussed in Chapter 1, it is not the case that all instances of the subversion of happiness are tragic. Consider an assassin who is made happy by an excellent performance of their job. There are at least some occasions where the world's subversion of their happiness is non-tragic due to its impermissible grounds. But like Macbeth, this is not because the assassin's happiness doesn't matter, but because the tragic aspect of the situation is found instead in their malformed character. *That* they find happiness from something impermissible is what is tragic. This reframing allows for the maintaining of three important points: happiness is a kind of value that always matters,

⁷ Happiness is of course also a good-for the individual who has it.

⁸ See Christine Korsgaard, "Two Distinctions in Goodness" for more on final vs instrumental goods, as well as why this distinction is separate from the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic goods.

subversion of happiness by the world is not always tragic, and there is characteristically something tragic about finding happiness through impermissible means. All of these can be maintained without contradiction by locating the tragic element in happiness achieved through impermissible means not in the thwarting of the action but in the tragically malformed character of the actor.

2.4 Moral Tragedies

Moral tragedies occur when the world is inhospitable to what matters in the context of moral obligation. This should be distinguished from the claim that moral tragedies involve the world's inhospitality to *moral aims*. The latter would entail that moral tragedies prevent the fulfillment of morality's demands, characteristically through irresolvable conflicts of moral obligation. Moral tragedies in this view would guarantee moral failure by admitting of so-called *genuine moral dilemmas*, or situations where someone can only do wrong due to an irresolvable conflict of obligations.⁹ Consider the case from Chapter 1 concerning the adult son who must choose between his ailing parents for whom to provide in-person care. In this situation, it seems as though the son must fail to fulfill his obligation to at least one parent. Felt guilt would be a characteristic response we might expect from the son, and would appear to signal moral failure of some kind. If this is accurate, then it appears as though the son's moral tragedy is best described as an irresolvable conflict of obligations.

Such genuine moral dilemmas would cut against the intuition that *ought implies can*, as individuals would find themselves obligated to do something they cannot do. In this section, I explain why this view of moral tragedy is mistaken. Moral tragedies should instead be understood as inhospitality to what matters more broadly in contexts of moral obligation. This aligns moral tragedies within the broad domain of tragedy presented so far, but distinguishes it from irresolvable conflicts of moral obligation.

⁹ See W.D. Ross, *The Right and the Good* for an account rejecting the existence of genuine moral dilemmas by arguing that all such dilemmas are resolvable. See Lisa Tessman, *Moral Failure* for an account affirming genuine moral dilemmas. I explore some of Tessman's view in this section. In this and the next chapter, I explain why both of these views are at least partially misguided: the former because it does not sufficiently account for the tragic element of many moral dilemmas, and the latter because it wrongly locates the tragic element.

The main weakness of explaining moral tragedy in terms of irresolvable conflicts of moral obligation is its inability to account for a key feature of moral tragedy: how moral dilemmas can be tragic even when obligations are fulfilled. In these situations, even when moral obligations are fulfilled, there is residual moral, or better *tragic*, remainder.¹⁰ Tragic remainder refers to leftover feelings and beliefs when a moral obligation is fulfilled in a tragic context. The remainder responds to something that has gone awry, and focuses attention on what matters. These feelings often involve regret, distress, anxiety, and according to some philosophers, moralized guilt. Consider the following case: You are walking down the street and are approached by a person who appears to be in dire straits. They are wearing tattered clothes, seem undernourished, and appear to be living on the street. When you approach, the individual requests money to purchase something to eat. In this case, you are presented with the following dilemma: Refuse the request and risk allowing easily avoidable harm to come to the individual, or grant the request and possibly engage in objectionable social subordination through the provision of the means for survival as an act of generosity.¹¹

This is a paradigm case of moral tragedy for the following reasons: 1) It concerns a morally mature individual capable of reflection on the reasons for their actions, and of moral evaluation of those reasons. 2) The case includes two options for action both of which appear to have *pro tanto* reasons for rejection on moral grounds. 3) Whichever option is chosen, a morally mature individual recognizes residual tragic remainder: If the request is denied, then substantial harm may come to someone over a trifle. It would be reasonable to decide on these grounds to grant the request. However, in granting the request you may find yourself feeling uneasy. Imagine the supplicant heaping praise upon you for your generosity. This would feel wrong and out of place, and not merely in terms of proper decorum. Something of significance has gone wrong here. This is because there

¹⁰ The concept of moral remainder was first introduced by Bernard Williams in his “Ethical Consistency.” I use “tragic remainder” here to make clear that moral tragedy does not involve a highly revisionist understanding of morality, and that the feelings associated with the remainder are directed at tragic loss, not moral failure. In the next chapter, I explain this reasoning more fully.

¹¹ I take this example loosely from Kant’s *Lectures on Ethics* via Lucy Allias, “What Properly Belongs to Me.”

is something objectionable about the gifting of what ought to be a social provision.¹² Such provision is appropriate between guardians and their dependents, but not between mature adults without a special relationship. This is why granting the request is plausibly understood as an instance of social subordination: It is treating someone you have no relationship with as if you are their guardian and they are your dependent.¹³

This objectionable element does not rise to the level of a moral violation, however. This is evidenced by the fact that the objectionable element represented by uneasiness rationally coexists with the belief that granting the request is the right thing to do (or is at least permissible). *I feel bad about what just happened but it needed to be done. This situation should never have come up in the first place. Giving the money was the right thing to do, but people shouldn't have to beg others for the means for survival.* These would be appropriate thoughts to have, and they illustrate the coexistence of tragic remainder with belief in moral success.

That tragic remainder coexists with moral success is reason to believe that moral tragedies are not situations where one cannot avoid acting wrongly. The tragic element of these situations is not found in an irresolvable conflict of obligations. At the level of moral obligation, the situation is resolvable. Its moral resolution, however, does *not* entail the resolution of its tragic element. This is because the remainder, felt uneasiness, arises *alongside* the fulfillment of the obligation. This uneasiness is an emotional registering that something objectionable has occurred. But something's being objectionable need not entail the occurrence of moral violation. It need only represent something that is the case that ought not be. This is why the thought, *this situation should never have come up in the first place, but what I did needed to be done*, is an appropriate thought to have.

¹² This fact speaks to there being an important and unique social dimension to this tragedy. The social facts are such that you cannot act in a non-objectionable way. While this is true, I am focusing here only on the inter-individual aspect of the moral tragedy. I address the difference between inter-individual moral tragedies and tragedies of justice, including the kind of obligations they characteristically generate, in chapter 4 where I taxonomize the types of moral tragedy.

¹³ I think of this type of social subordination as a kind of humiliation that violates the inherent dignity of persons. Importantly, this characterization allows for humiliation to occur independently from *feelings* of humiliation, so it does not matter if these feelings arise in the individual for this situation to count as a humiliation.

Something has gone wrong that warrants repair, but not a moral wrong (on the part of the subject).

In moral tragedies like this, the remainder represents a “fittingness gap” in moral success. Normally, a moral success has no such gap. When I fulfill a promise to my friend to show up to their presentation, I do my duty and appropriately feel good about my action. This is because what I have done is fitting to the situation. Moral tragedies are different. Moral success in a tragic context introduces an element that requires reparative follow-up. If you fulfill the request of the supplicant by giving them money, you may not feel good about it. There is something unfitting about this action as it stands. The remainder exposes this unfittingness, functions to attend to what matters (the supplicant, their dignity), and illuminates and motivates appropriate follow-up.¹⁴ Once we engage in the reparative follow-up introduced by the remainder, this fittingness gap is closed, and the remainder is characteristically expunged.¹⁵

This characterization is distinct from the claim that in moral tragedies the world’s inhospitality *prevents* individuals from fulfilling their binding moral obligations. I call this the *Moral Failure View* (MFV).¹⁶ The MFV admits of *genuine moral dilemmas* where individuals are unable to avoid wrongdoing in situations of moral conflict. This is because their moral obligations remain binding even when this conflict is irresolvable. According to Tessman, there are some moral requirements that are *non-negotiable*, and their inviolable status does not change when two or more such requirements are in conflict.¹⁷ In the case of the supplicant, these moral requirements would likely consist of the obligation not to violate dignity through objectionable social subordination and the

¹⁴ Reparative follow-up in cases like this have a wide range: not lording it over the supplicant, avoiding grandstanding or taking pride in line with *noblesse oblige*, providing aid to local homeless shelters, etc. I explore these ranges in more detail in Chapter 4.

¹⁵ Of course, this is not always the case. See the discussion of *Sophie’s Choice* in Chapter 3.

¹⁶ I briefly summarize here Lisa Tessman’s view on genuine moral dilemmas in *Moral Failure: On the Impossible Demands of Morality*. Tessman has many insightful things to say about the reality of moral dilemmas, but her view ultimately denies that moral success and tragic remainder coexist in the way I’ve described.

¹⁷ Tessman, *Moral Failure*, pg. 27. One of Tessman’s paradigmatic examples of a situation where non-negotiable moral requirements conflict is *Sophie’s Choice*, where a mother is forced by a Nazi guard to decide which of her children will go to the gas chamber.

requirement not to allow substantial harm to come to someone over a minor sacrifice. The Moral Failure View, if applied to this situation, would claim that these requirements conflicting does not entail that at least one of them must release its bind. This view thus rejects the principle that *ought implies can*: moral obligations are binding (*ought*) even when they are unfulfillable (*cannot*). The reality of residual tragedy is too salient in such situations to sacrifice it for action-guiding moral clarity, so the argument goes. The feeling of moral guilt constituting the remainder is recognition of this moral violation. Even if the only available alternative is also morally wrong, this does not mean that moral success is on the table. Tragedy is understood here as inevitable moral failure.

Part of the problem with this understanding of moral tragedy is that it involves an overly broad account of the scope and function of moral obligation. This can be seen in its rejection of *ought implies can*. If moral tragedies involve unfulfillable yet binding moral obligations, then this means that the scope of moral obligation includes outcomes that are unrealizable. Morality, in this view, is not fundamentally action-guiding.¹⁸ Instead, morality's purpose is to aim at a higher good in a situation, the outcome that involves no tragic remainder. Outcomes short of this threshold sometimes involve inevitable moral failure.¹⁹

The MFV rightly connects tragedy to the failure of this kind of outcome. The dilemma with the supplicant is tragic because it involves two poor options, neither of which approaches a highest good. If a better option were available, or if the situation's conditions were escapable, then it would not be tragic. The mistake is to view morality as fundamentally aimed at realizing non-tragic outcomes, and consequently with associating tragedy with *moral* failure. Morality is if anything fundamentally action-guiding. Its function is to provide appropriate reasons to act given a situation's circumstances and the factors of moral weight involved. Moral obligations restrict certain actions as impermissible given these factors, and sometimes make certain actions impermissible *not*

¹⁸ At least in difficult moral circumstances, but this is after all when we need the guidance of morality the most.

¹⁹ Tessman is careful to distinguish moral dilemmas that involve non-negotiable moral requirements from lesser dilemmas that involve negotiable requirements. Only the former involve tragic remainder representing moral failure (Tessman, pg. 31).

to do (such as leaving someone in a wretched state who could easily be helped). We do not have to sacrifice this key feature of morality to explain and affirm the function of tragic remainder. We need only reject the claim that morality is aimed at the complete erasure of its tragic element. This is because tragic remainder exists in the tension *between* morality's fulfillable demands and what ought to be the case more generally. The conjunction of moral success and tragic remainder evidences this.

I explore this view of moral tragedy in more detail in Chapter 3 where I compare it with accounts of moral tragedy implicit in several rival moral theories. For now, I only mark the distinction between moral and non-moral tragedies and how what matters in them partially explains their demarcation. Non-moral tragedies concern the world's inhospitality to the values directed at by choiceworthy non-moral aims. Moral tragedies concern the world's inhospitality to what matters in the context of moral obligation.

2.5 Absolute Tragedies

Tragedies manifest the world's inhospitality to what matters. Some tragedies occur when choiceworthy aims are thwarted by the world. These tragedies do not exhaust the world's inhospitality, however, as there are more things that matter than choiceworthy aims. This includes what I call *absolute tragedies*. Absolute tragedies occur when something that matters-as-such is vitiated by the world. Persons are paradigmatic bearers of this type of value.²⁰ It is because persons matter-as-such that their loss in death is distinctly tragic. Reflection on the tragic nature of death illustrates the nature of this loss and why it cannot be accounted for purely in terms of the failure of the individual's aims.

Recall cases 1 and 2 from Chapter 1. In case 1, a young child dies from a preventable illness. In case 2, a plane full of passengers is struck by lightning and crashes, killing all on board. Consider a comparison between the tragic nature of the death of the young child and the death of an elderly passenger on the plane. The young child's death is plausibly more tragic given their degree of unrealized potential. This is

²⁰ I have in mind here moral notions from many different traditions that persons warrant concern solely on the basis of being persons and without regard for their other qualities or deeds. I think it is likely that this kind of mattering extends beyond persons to some other animals, although I focus here only on paradigmatic examples involving persons for the sake of simplicity.

especially potent compared to the elderly passenger on the plane. This is partially explained by the fact that the young child's death involves the loss of many more choiceworthy aims than the death of the elderly passenger. In considering the tragedy of the child's death, we would likely reflect on the adventures they would have undertaken, the vocations they would have pursued, and the many loves and passions they would have cultivated had they survived. There is less to reflect on here regarding the elderly passenger. The gulf in potential choiceworthy aims explains the tragic gap between them.

While these reflections provide some insight into the two tragedies, there remains some tragic element left unexplained. Viewing these tragedies solely through the lens of the account developed so far underdetermines their severity. When a person dies, it is *their death* that is tragic, not merely the loss of the choiceworthy aims they would or could have had (although these are additionally tragic). The tragedy of death is recognized most fundamentally in the loss of *the individual*, and only secondarily (and I will argue later *dependently*) in the loss of their potential. This helps make sense of why even though the death of the young child is more tragic than the death of the elderly passenger, both are tragic. This is because persons matter independently of their aims. This value-independence helps explain why *each* death is similarly tragic in one sense, even if some are more tragic than others in another (e.g. due to lost potential).

Furthermore, the tragedy of death is a window into the *distinctive* value of persons. The distinctive value of persons is that they matter not only independently of their aims, but also in a different way than aims: namely, *as a kind of inherent status*.²¹ Persons have an inherent status (in this case, *dignity*) fittingly recognized through modes of response such as consideration or respect.²² This is different from the fitting response

²¹ One way of thinking about the special quality of this kind of value is as *sacred*. For more on the role of sacred values in morality, see David McPherson, "Traditional Morality and Sacred Values." I share the sentiment of Elizabeth Anscombe that to deny this realm of value in morality is to show a corrupt mind (see Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," pg. 17). However, what this value inheres in, whether persons or actions or something else, is debated among moral philosophers who nevertheless affirm the category.

²² Kant, of course, is a key source for this line of thinking about the dignity of individual persons. See Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4:429. For more detailed accounts of the role of the value of persons in regulating the pursuit of other values in deliberation, see Barbara Herman, *The Practice of Moral Judgment*, especially "Leaving Deontology Behind," pg. 237. Also, see Jon Garthoff, "The Priority and Posteriority of Right," pgs. 18-24.

to other values such as happiness or well-being which are to be sought after or realized. That persons have their distinctive value as an inherent status is why *every* death is a tragedy, whatever else is true about someone or their circumstances. Unlike aims, which must be choiceworthy for their failure to be tragic, persons matter-as-such and are *inherent* candidates for tragic loss.²³ The distinctive value of persons helps explain why each and every death is a tragedy, even if some deaths are more tragic than others.

That the distinctive value of persons is the ground of this kind of tragedy is helpfully illustrated by considering the death of bad persons. For most people, the first intimate experience with death occurs when an intimate elder in their community dies, such as a grandparent. When this elder is beloved, their loss is characteristically a traumatic event. This can be partly explained by reference to the loss of the relationship between the individual and the beloved elder. However, this does not sufficiently explain the experience of loss at the death of an intimate elder who was *disdained*. Individuals who were victims of abuse, indifference, or neglect often have mixed feelings at the death of their intimate malefactors. In one sense, perhaps it is good that they are gone and cannot continue to harm. In another, something has been lost in their death.

There are of course complex psychological reasons for having mixed feelings upon the death of a disdained intimate. Their death means the final, irreversible failure of reconciliation and an end to any possibility of reform. Even absent these hopeful possibilities, mixed feelings can arise from recognition that one is scarred from lacking a good relationship with an intimate. These are among the most difficult feelings to parse in human life. I do not intend to dismiss these explanations or give a full account of their content and function. My claim is only that reflection shows that these mixed feelings can

²³ Although my claims here are in a full-throated realist frame, much of this argument is amenable to a constructivist framing where the value of persons is conferred from the value rational agency. A constructivist still allows that there is a difference in the kind of value persons have compared to the kind of value their aims have, even if they don't accept that the former is independent of the latter. For an example of a constructivist take on value of this sort, see Christine Korsgaard, "Aristotle and Kant on the Source of Value." For another take on the special value of persons that frames their value in terms of deserving awe and admiration, see Sarah Buss, "The Value of Humanity." For a critique of constructivism that supports the realist framing used in this project, see William Fitzpatrick, "The Practical Turn in Ethical Theory: Korsgaard's Constructivism, Realism, and the Nature of Normativity."

and often do persist even in the absence or weakening of these factors. This can be accounted for through recognition of some other more persistent value lost in death.

The distinctive value lost in death is neither exhausted by reference to potential choiceworthy aims the individual could have had in the future, nor by the possibility of future reconciliation. Recognition of this value, and the mixed feelings it often produces upon its bearer's death, persists even if it is believed that the elder was likely to continue to harm, and even if future reconciliation is impossible or undesirable. The fact that these mixed feelings often persist alongside these beliefs demonstrates that the recognition of loss is directed at something that matters beyond choiceworthy aims (to be reconciled, to have them repent or reform, etc.). This is how the tension between badness (of their actions) and mattering (of their person) that occasions the mixed feelings under reflection in the first place is produced. It is because even a bad person matters that we can have mixed feelings about their death even in the absence of other considerations of goodness.²⁴

A similar set of reflections helps make sense of why the death of great villains often produces a solemn quietude. If tragedies were found only in the domain of the practical, then the death of a great villain would solely be a fountain of rejoicing. Think of all of the choiceworthy aims they would have thwarted had they survived! Delight in the death of a great villain understandably occurs for this reason, of course. Recognition of the great harm done by villains must result in some degree of elation when they are finally defeated. This is partly because their death means the prevention of many future tragedies for others (in addition to concerns for justice and general well-being).

But even great villains are often granted a degree of respect in death. For instance, there are universal norms against speaking ill of the dead, even if these claims are accurate and fair. Villains are also often given proper ceremonial burials upon their death. Importantly, these norms are upheld for reasons irreducible to motivations to maintain stable social convention. Individuals, even those who have suffered at the hands of great villains, often consider it vitally important to recognize the dignity of the terrible

²⁴ Recall the point from section 2.2 that mattering and goodness are conceptually distinct in part because there are some things whose mattering is not analyzable in terms of their goodness.

person.²⁵ They do so not merely for reasons of decorum or social stability, but because it is this very recognition that reinforces the judgment of the villain's wretchedness. We recognize in them what they failed to recognize in others.

There are of course many examples of villains denied this treatment due to their disrepute. This does not undermine my argument, however, as my claim is that *both* of these reactions need to be explained. Disregard is given to villains as a reasonable response to the evil they have done. When respect is given, it is not due to their goodness, actual or potential, but in recognition of some distinctive value they have that they failed to recognize in others. This helps explain why both of these reactions make sense in combination rather than in competition.²⁶

In the death of intimates, beloved and not, and in the final demise of great villains, there is often recognition of distinctive tragic loss. This loss is not fully explained by the value of the aims they would have had if they had survived. This is evidenced by the fact that their loss is recognized as tragic even if they were unlikely to reform, and even if reconciliation is not on the table. When individuals have mixed feelings at these losses, the content of these feelings cannot always be explained in terms of goodness: for instance, sadness at the loss of their potential and delight in the gain of everyone else. This obscures the nature these mixed feelings sometimes have by understanding them as representing values on the same scale. But these feelings are often directed at *different* values: the relative goodness of the death (principally for others) and the loss of a distinctive value that cannot be spoiled by wretchedness.

The mixed feelings being directed at different values helps make sense of why these feelings cannot cancel each other out to produce an evaluative sum. Consider, by contrast, evaluating a piece of art or grading a paper. In these cases, evaluations of good and bad can reasonably form a sum because they exist on the same scale. Mixed feelings

²⁵ Consider here the biblical example of David in 2 Samuel 1. David mourns King Saul's death and grants him a funeral despite Saul attempting to kill him multiple times out of jealousy. Note that David does not reference Saul's goodness or potential as reasons for his mourning. Instead, he references a sacral status Saul had: God's anointing.

²⁶ Moreover, even if someone were to deny that a great villain has this type of distinctive value, this would partially be in service of denying that their death is a tragedy. Even though I think this is a mistake, the tragedy of death and the distinctive value of the person are still linked here in being denied in unison.

about a piece of art or a paper means there is just about as much good as bad to evaluate in them. This is not the case for the type of mixed feelings in question. These feelings can exist even if there is nothing good to recommend about someone. This is due to their not being an evaluation of the individual's goodness, but instead a recognition of their inherent value-status. These mixed feelings persist in a way that is best explained by them being directed at values which cannot be summed.²⁷ Rather than sum, we *tarry* with the loss of things that matter in the distinctive way that persons do. This is because their loss is distinctly tragic.

It is important to note that this account of death as an absolute tragedy does not entail that death is always bad, either for an individual or in general. It is rational for an individual to pursue death when the only alternative is ceaseless, debilitating suffering. Likewise, it makes sense to wish death upon a great villain when their demise means the salvation of many others. Each of these deaths remains tragic upon these considerations, however. This is a virtue of the distinction between goodness and mattering elucidated earlier. It is good for an individual to be spared ceaseless suffering in a merciful death. But a situation where the best thing for someone is to die is paradigmatically tragic. The outcome's goodness for the individual in no way erases the tragedy. Instead, it *magnifies* its tragic character.

Reflection on the death of bad persons is not the only window into absolute tragedy. The loss of things that matter-as-such in general is constitutive of absolute tragedy. The distinctive value that makes for an absolute tragedy, unlike many other values, lacks the *magnitude* that allows comparison and trade-off between other kinds of value.²⁸ In order to compare tragic magnitude, we must introduce other tragic aspects such as potential lost. In some tragedies, it makes sense to say that a situation is more tragic than another because of the greater degree of loss involved. Compare two individuals who lose their legs in early adulthood. One was pursuing a career in

²⁷ I will have more to say about tragedy and value incommensurability in subsequent chapters. I introduce this now only to point out that the persistence of some mixed feelings upon the death of others is partly explained by consideration of values that do not exist on the same scale.

²⁸ Status-values may have magnitude between individuals of different types, such as between persons and some non-human animals. This is important to consider when addressing issues of triage.

professional basketball and the other in computer programming. While both situations are tragic, the former is rightly understood as *more* tragic. This is because the would-be professional basketball player has plausibly missed out on much more than the future programmer. Some tragedies can be measured in this way.

Absolute tragedies are not measurable in terms of magnitude the way other tragedies are. This follows from the value lost in them being a *distinct status*.²⁹ A value has a distinct status when its bearer has its value without reference, reduction, or comparison to any other value. Practical reason functions to *recognize* this type of value through modes like concern and respect. This is distinct from other modes of relating to values, like *producing* or *realizing* happiness or well-being. Status-values of this type cannot be traded off with other values for this reason, and they cannot be replaced with qualitatively or functionally similar substitutes. This status-value is seen in death through recognition that the loss of each individual is distinctly tragic no matter what else is true about them or their circumstances. This is why even the death of a complete stranger can stop us in our tracks, knowing nothing of their goodness or the badness of their death. It is also why trade-offs involving death (such as in policy decisions in healthcare or war) always feature a tragic dimension that remains uncaptured by pure cost-benefit analysis.³⁰ This is because the status-value lost in death, being unmeasurable in terms of magnitude, cannot be compared or traded off with other values that are such as well-being or happiness. Bearers of this kind of value are in Kantian terms *without price*.³¹

²⁹ Here I refer to the notion that some beings have a kind of status that merits recognition or concern. Some philosophical traditions refer instead to “standing” or “considerability.” I prefer the term “status” for reasons which will become clear in this section. For an account of the issues surrounding moral status generally, see Mary-Anne Warren, *Moral Status*. I follow Jon Garthoff in his use of “status-value” in order to focus on the kind of value that grounds moral concern. See his “The Priority and Posteriority of Right,” pg. 17.

³⁰ See Nussbaum, “The Costs of Tragedy.” Nussbaum argues that CBA obscures the tragic question, “are any of my available options serious moral wrongs?” in reducing all practical reasoning to the obvious question, “what should I do?” or “which option is better?” I add to Nussbaum’s argument that the reason the tragic question has its force is because of the special values at risk in tragic situations, not merely because the tragic question is independently intelligible.

³¹ Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4:426. Kant of course claims that it is the good will that has unqualified value, not individual persons. This leads to famous problems in Kant’s moral philosophy. This stems in part, I think, from the failure to make a distinction between goodness and mattering, the latter of which contains that which matters-as-such, or is without price.

This incomparability between absolute tragedies and other tragedies is due to their not involving a value that is quantifiable or optimizable. Quantifying theories of value hold that all values are analyzable as discrete, comparable units that can be traded off via an ordinal ranking.³² Optimizing value theories usually then claim that these units ought always to be maximized in quantity.³³ But the distinctive value of persons is neither quantifiable nor optimizable in this way. Recall the tragedies of the child and the elder in the plane crash: if all reference to lost potential goodness is bracketed off, the tragic leftover is the same in each instance. This is because each individual has their value as a distinct status, without reference, reduction, or comparison to any other value. We recognize this value in each of them the same, and without regard for whatever else is true about them or their circumstances. There is tragic unison in their deaths.

There is also no optimal quantity of this type of status-value. It makes sense to seek to create happiness where it is lacking, or to continuously increase one's well-being, all else being equal. This is because these values are apt *to be produced*. This is not true of the distinctive status-value borne by persons. Seeking to maximize the amount of this value misperceives its distinctive nature as a status. The bearers of this value, things that matter-as-such, merit recognition, respect, or concern, not realization or optimization. Their value being a status means that they are marked out in this way, warranting recognition in our deliberation and treatment of them.³⁴ Contrast this with happiness, which does not warrant recognition but pursuit through realization. This value's

³² A classic example of a quantifying theory of value is Henry Sidgwick's hedonistic theory of value in *The Methods of Ethics*. See pg. 127 for the explicit claim that all values are reducible to pleasure and that this is what enables quantitative value comparison between them.

³³ Utilitarians such as Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill held that we ought to do the greatest good for the greatest number. This is an example of an optimizing theory of value. The best state of affairs is the one with the maximally greatest degree of value, and this is what ought to be realized. See Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* and Mill, *Utilitarianism*, especially Chapter 2.

³⁴ Barbara Herman explains that the morally literate/mature person has a developed "moral motive" which works in harmony with other non-moral motives by functioning as a *backstop motive* when those motivations fail. This account of the distinctive value of persons is meant to work in harmony with this understanding of the regulatory role of the moral motive. The reason why persons are "marked out" on our moral map, forcing us to stop and think about how we ought to treat them, is because they have this distinctive value. See Barbara Herman, *Moral Literacy*, pg. 102.

warranting recognition is why it is the *loss* of bearers of this status-value that makes a tragedy, not merely their *lack*.

That persons have their value as a status also means that they have this value when they exist, but this value is in itself not a reason to bring about their existence. It makes sense to build a bridge over a river because of the value it will produce. The status-value of persons is different. Their value is not something fundamentally related to by being produced. Consider the reasons to have children: some of these are other-regarding reasons, such as to have someone toward whom to direct the love and affection that is characteristic of the parent/child relationship. While this reason is directed toward the individual other and is for their sake generally, it is not for the sake of producing a quantum of their status-value. Status-values are related to through modes of recognition, not merely through being brought about or produced. This is because this type of value only functions as a reason once it exists. It is not a reason for its existence to be brought about.

Finally, the distinctive status-value of persons, in contrast with other values, is *irreplaceable*. Consider the value of an apple. Its value consists in its taste, nutritional value, and whichever other goods it provides. But this apple can easily be replaced with a functionally and qualitative similar apple without loss of value. As Christopher Gowans notes, however, this is not the case with persons: “It is one of the most important features of our practical lives that we do not regard human beings as replaceable in this way. To focus attention exclusively on similarities of value is thus to miss something of fundamental importance: the unique and hence irreplaceable value of each person.”³⁵ Anyone who reacts to the death of a person with the claim that their value can be replaced by someone functionally and qualitatively similar pathologically misperceives

³⁵ Christopher Gowans, *Innocence Lost: An Examination of Inescapable Moral Wrongdoing*, pg. 125.

the type of value they have.³⁶ This is because this value is intimately tied up in their being in a way that makes them not only inherently and independently, but *uniquely* valuable.³⁷

I have argued that absolute tragedies are a distinct kind of tragedy. This is because they involve the loss of things that have a distinctive status-value that is inherent, independent, and irreplaceable. Persons are paradigmatic examples of this type of status-value. When a person dies, more than a mere termination of choiceworthy aims has occurred. Something with a special value has been lost, recognized by the modes of recognition characteristic upon death like grief. The strength of this account is its ability to make sense of the tragedy of a person's death without reduction to concerns for individual or general well-being. Death is tragic full-stop, no matter whether it is otherwise good or desirable for an individual or in general. As I explain in the next section, this conception of the value of persons also helps explain tragic candidacy in the other domains. The distinctive value of persons thus partially ties the domains of tragedy together.

2.6 Tragedy and the Value of Persons

I have argued that some tragedies are marked by the loss of something with a value distinct from goods like happiness or well-being. The paradigmatic instances of this kind of tragic loss are the deaths of persons. These are distinct because the value lost in them does not depend on anything else for its value, its value is inherent, and its value is uniquely held, making its bearer irreplaceable. Recognition of this type of value is important for explaining what makes certain situations tragic even though they might be otherwise good or desirable. The death of a villain or someone likely to cause great harm is paradigmatic of this: their death is tragic and is appropriately accompanied by feelings of loss not because of any good they would have done, but because they bear a value

³⁶ Thomas Nagel, in his essay "Sexual Perversion," marks the distinction between desiring an omelet and desiring a person. Both are desired for their qualities. But the person is desired in a way that another qualitatively identical person can't replace, unlike an omelet (Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, pg. 42-43). Desirability here is responsive to the type of value something has. When something has irreplaceable value, it is recognized in this distinctive way.

³⁷ To help make the case that these are distinct features of a value, consider something that has irreplaceable but not independent value, like a hand-drawn comic book given as a gift from an intimate. This item has irreplaceable value since it cannot be replaced by something qualitatively identical, but its value is dependent on the value of the gift-giver.

independently of these considerations. What is crucial is not that we must on every occasion priggishly recognize the value of even the worst individuals.³⁸ It is instead that we aim to make sense of how recognition of this distinctive value is not in tension with other considerations of relative goodness and badness. The focus on bad persons is useful because it makes this case clear through the stark contrast between the values under consideration. The distinctive value of persons is not sacrificed at the altar of goodness.

The distinctive value of persons not only illuminates a distinct kind of tragedy, it also partially knits together the various domains of tragedy. In both moral and non-moral tragedies, the value of persons helps explain what makes something tragic. The value of persons also helps explain why feelings of distress and regret often accompany the successful resolution of moral dilemmas.

As argued in 2.4, in moral tragedies, individuals characteristically find that even successful moral resolution leaves them feeling cold. This feeling is a remainder attuned to the fact that something has been tragically lost in moral resolution, warranting recognition. The function of the remainder is to focus attention on what matters and motivate appropriate reparative response. This account of moral tragedy is further illuminated by the value of persons discussed in the context of absolute tragedies. In moral tragedies, what is at stake at the ground level is the value of persons. Take the example of the supplicant discussed earlier. The objectionable feature of the situation consists in the fact that the plausibly right thing to do (granting the request) creates a kind of fittingness gap that must be filled. This is because granting the request is reasonably understood as an instance of regrettable social subordination. In this context, social subordination does not rise to the level of moral violation because it ought to be done. But it does create a fittingness gap with recognition of the value of the individual, responded to with the feelings characteristic of moral tragedy.

³⁸ When this is done it is often in service of obscuring the value of the individuals who have been done great harm by the villain, as is often the case following the death of dictators or warmongers. The crucial point in combating this tendency isn't that these villains lacked this distinctive value, but that they failed to recognize it in others.

If persons did not have this distinctive value, or if their value existed on the same scale as other values, then reasonable, frictionless trade-offs between values could occur in purported tragic contexts. This would mean that the characteristic tragic feelings would be a mere vestige of ungrounded intuition, and not representative of moral reality. But moral tragedies of this type are illuminating for precisely this reason: such value trade-offs *cannot* occur since one of the values in question is irreplaceable. This value is additionally of a distinct type compared to other values: a status warranting recognition. Persons bear this value without reference, reduction, or comparison to any other value, and practical reason guides recognition of it in action and deliberation. That tragic remainder functions the way it does is evidence that the value it responds to is of a special class. It warrants recognition, and in tragic contexts this function is upended, creating a gap that must be filled. Moral tragedies are often understood to be *scarring* for precisely this reason: they leave their mark on us as a residual reminder of the distinct values found in them.³⁹

In addition to moral tragedies, non-moral tragedies are also further illuminated by the value of persons. Recall that non-moral tragedies involve the world's inhospitality to the values directed at by choiceworthy aims. These are what matters in the context of non-moral tragedies, such as the house fire that destroys the novelist's project. Such situations are tragic because the world has thwarted a choiceworthy aim. Aims that are not choiceworthy are therefore not candidates for this type of tragedy. This is the difference between losing impermissible blackmail materials in a fire and losing the novel. One is a tragedy because the aim is choiceworthy, and the other is not because the aim is not choiceworthy.

What precisely determines the choiceworthiness of aims warrants explanation, but this is not necessary in order to explain the relation between tragedy and choiceworthiness. The fact that there are some aims *at all* that are candidates for tragic failure is what ought to be explained with the tools at hand. Why are some aims the kind of thing that is subject to tragic failure?

³⁹ The most deeply tragic fact, of course, is that the function of tragic remainder is sometimes unable to be completed, such as when an individual dies in morally tragic circumstances. More on this in Chapter 3.

One route is to claim that the choiceworthiness of aims is an independent property of the aim. This view would claim that actions like helping others with their projects and developing friendships are inherently choiceworthy. This has some plausibility due to these aims usually being understood to have *final value*, or value requiring no further justification. But something's value requiring no further justification is distinct from its value warranting no further *explanation*. We should be able to explain why even things with final value have their value. Otherwise choiceworthiness simply floats in the air ungrounded. Choiceworthiness is thus best understood as a dependent property of an aim. But upon what does it depend?

Consider again the novelist's project. Why does this aim matter such that it is a potential tragedy? Plausibly, this is because of the distinctive *independent* value of the novelist. This helps explain why aims might matter dependently: because they are the aims of something that matters *independently*.⁴⁰ When a non-moral tragedy occurs, what matters is not only the choiceworthy aim left unrealized, but the individual upon whom the aim's mattering depends. Choiceworthiness here has a ground: not only the value which is the aims' object, but also the distinctive value of persons. This value not only provides *weight* to the value of choiceworthy aims, it also helps explain why tragedies often occur in the context of impermissible aims, even though the latter are not candidates for tragic subversion. This is because impermissible aims often involve occasions of tragic character where an individual has a warped perception of some value (e.g. Macbeth). That someone's character might matter such that it can be tragically warped (the tragedy of the choiceworthy aims one does *not* have) is itself grounded in the independent value of the character-bearer.

The distinctive value of persons partially knits together the domains of tragedy. In absolute tragedies, something that matters-as-such is lost. This helps make sense of why

⁴⁰ This claim is in line with a general theme of this project that things like happiness, well-being, and personal projects only matter if the individuals who have them matter. The order of explanation here is from individuals who matter-as-such to things that matter dependently. Dependent mattering arises due to its relation to what matters independently. For similar lines of thinking, see Stephen Darwall, *Welfare and Rational Care*, pg. 8; David Velleman, "A Right to Self-Termination?;" and Jon Garthoff, "Meriting Concern and Meriting Respect."

we mourn the dead whether or not they were good. In moral tragedies, we feel cold despite moral success. This is because a fittingness gap has been created between action and fitting recognition of this value, warranting reparation. In non-moral tragedies, choiceworthy non-moral aims are thwarted by the world. The value of persons here plays a partial explanatory role: it helps ground the dependent value of the aims in question, and helps illuminate how tragedies can occur in the context of impermissible aims. In each of these domains, the distinctive value of persons is the fulcrum on which tragedy pivots.

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CHAPTER 3

TRAGEDY AND MORAL THEORY

3.1 Introduction

I have argued that tragedy involves the world's inhospitality to what matters. Some tragedies occur in the context of moral obligation, where the world's inhospitality is manifest through the conflict between moral obligation and other things that matter. In these situations, the successful fulfillment of moral obligation does not guarantee an escape from tragedy. The most pronounced of these occasions involve what I described in Chapter 2 as fitting recognition of something with irreplaceable value. Persons are paradigmatic bearers of this type of value. Fitting recognition of this distinctive value means responding in a way that recognizes the special character of the value.¹ Consider the example from Chapter 2 of the supplicant requesting the means for subsistence. In this circumstance, the world's inhospitality is manifest in the fact that fulfilling the request does not expunge the tragic element from the situation. When this happens, we are left feeling cold relative to usual moral success. This is an emotional recognition that something has gone awry in our circumstances that warrants reparation.² Moral philosophers sometimes refer to this as *moral remainder*, although for reasons which will become clear in this chapter, I call this *tragic remainder*.³

I have maintained that the existence of tragic remainder is consistent with the successful fulfillment of moral obligation. Reflection on everyday moral experience

¹ The phrase "fitting recognition" may appear inappropriately impersonal for an interpersonal relation. I use this abstraction in order to indicate a common element among many different kinds of interpersonal interaction. In concrete contexts fitting recognition is always filled out with or embodied by recognition of the individual on their own terms (e.g. child, adult, etc.) and in the context of the relationship between individuals (e.g. between strangers compared to intimates). This is consistent with a general theme of this project: more abstract forms of relation between individuals (recognition, respect, fittingness) are not in explanatory competition with concrete and intimate forms driven by emotions like passion and care. These forms are best understood as integrated. I explore this in more detail in Chapter 4.

² A general theme of this chapter is that at least some emotions, especially those relevant to moral situations, are integral to rational understanding and appreciation. For more on this, see Bernard Williams, "Morality and the Emotions," *Problems of the Self*. For a general account of emotions as representations of the world outside the subject, see Ronald de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion*. For more on the role of emotions in moral judgment, see Linda Zagzebski, "Emotion and Moral Judgment"; as well as Robert C. Roberts, *Emotions in the Moral Life* and *Emotions: an Essay in Aid of Moral Psychology*.

³ The term "moral remainder" originates in Bernard Williams' paper "Ethical Consistency" in *Problems of the Self*, pg. 179.

shows this. However, not all moral philosophers agree. It may seem reasonable to argue that tragic remainder, if it exists, would be devastating to morality's categorical authority over other practical concerns. This leads some philosophers to claim that the remainder is merely a phenomenological transience ungrounded in moral reality. Such ephemera then ought to be discarded in moral deliberation and dismissed in the pursuit of moral understanding. This is the central thesis of the family of views I call the Deflationary Approach to tragic remainder. This approach deflates tragic remainder by disconnecting the characteristic feelings associated with it from their function of attending to and representing moral reality and motivating reparative action.

Philosophers concerned with vindicating widespread moral experience typically argue that the Deflationary Approach wrongly dismisses tragic remainder. They claim that the feelings associated with these conflicts are an epistemic window into moral reality. Some take the position that tragic remainder, represented through moral emotions like guilt, is a signal that moral wrongdoing has occurred. This is true even if all options for action in a situation result in this (accurate) sense of wrongdoing. These philosophers claim that the representational accuracy of these moral feelings overrules the principle that having an obligation to perform an action entails that the action is possible. Taking the accuracy of these feelings seriously would accordingly mean accepting that there may be situations where moral failure is inevitable.

Others, like Bernard Williams, reject the Deflationary Approach by taking a different track. Instead of accepting that moral failure is inevitable, they argue that tragic remainder is evidence that morality doesn't have the authority over practical concerns that the Deflationary Approach considers axiomatic. Reflection on tragic remainder should instead lead us to a more tempered view of morality's role in practical deliberation. Morality is something we take interest in for good reasons, but it lacks the special status of uniquely constraining all other practical concerns. Since morality lacks this special regulative status, it can be all-things-considered rational to pursue ends which result in moral wrongdoing. Tragic remainder functions here as recognition that the rational and the moral do not always align in the end.

I call these two views of tragic remainder together the Anti-Theoretical Approach. This is because in attempting to do justice to the feelings associated with tragic remainder, these views deny traditional principles of moral obligation: *ought implies can* on the one hand, and the categorical authority of morality over practical concerns on the other. Of crucial note is that while the Deflationary and Anti-Theoretical Approaches disagree about the function and representational accuracy of tragic remainder, they nevertheless agree on the following thesis: *If there is genuine tragic remainder in contexts of moral obligation, then this is devastating to the traditional theoretical understanding of morality*. Both views agree on the conditional, they merely disagree on whether the antecedent is true as a matter of fact.^{4 5}

My view is that this conditional is false. Tragic remainder is an epistemic window into the reality of moral tragedy. The remainder helps communicate to us what has gone wrong in situations of moral conflict, and brings to our attention what matters so that reparative action can be performed. These functions do not entail that the traditional principles of moral obligation are devastated. Tragic remainder is neither a signal of inevitable moral failure, nor is it an indicator that morality's categorical authority is misplaced. This is best understood through reflecting on situations of moral dilemma where tragic remainder arises alongside the successful fulfillment of moral obligation. By reflecting on these situations, it becomes clear that tragic remainder is not representative of moral failure or of the abdication of morality's authority, but of the world's inhospitality to other things that matter in the context of moral obligation. In these situations, our emotions function to respond to the sacrifice of things that matter in

⁴ The moral theories I discuss in this chapter are far from the only options on the table, of course. My discussion of them is not meant to imply that they are the best or most popular options in moral theory. Instead, I utilize them as ideal types and interlocutors in order to taxonomize the ways tragic remainder can be understood from the perspective of moral theory. The general aim of this strategy is to illuminate both moral tragedy and the function of good moral theory in providing an account of it.

⁵ This taxonomy bears some resemblance to Christopher Gowans distinction between the rationalist insistence that there can be no final moral dilemmas and the experientialist insistence that moral dilemmas challenge the very pursuit of a moral theory. See Gowans, "Moral Theory, Moral Dilemmas, and Moral Responsibilities." However, my analysis differs in crucial ways: most notably, I do not think this divide in moral philosophy is fundamentally grounded in the temperaments of the interlocutors as Gowans does, but instead in commitments within the moral theories themselves. I believe that these issues are tractable, and can largely be resolved in synthesizing the two approaches constructively.

service of fulfilling our obligations. It is a tragic fact of life that morality sometimes demands this of us.

That the conditional above is false does not mean that the two views under discussion are completely off course, however. The Deflationary Approach is right to secure the authority of morality. It errs only in thinking this requires the dismissal of tragic remainder. The Anti-Theoretical Approach is correct to affirm tragic remainder's responsiveness to moral reality, and right to expect that a good moral theory should be able to explain the remainder's content and function. But this neither entails the abdication of morality's categorical authority nor does it signal inevitable moral failure. A robust account of moral tragedy thus ought to be a constructive synthesis of the two views: The characteristic feelings associated with tragic remainder are an epistemic window into moral reality, and this is true even and *especially* in circumstances where moral obligations bind and moral success is possible. This is because tragic remainder need not be a signal of moral failure or the diminishing of morality's authority, but of the world's inhospitality to things that matter in the context of moral obligation. The remainder's function is to attend us toward what matters in these contexts and motivate reparative action accordingly.⁶ Tarrying with tragic remainder, then, is vital for mature moral reflection. Care must be taken that this tarrying does not facilitate moral confusion concerning guilt, but this is a risk worth taking given its role in character-based moral maintenance. The fundamental tragedy of moral life is not that we must fail, but that doing right does not necessarily make us whole.

3.2 The Deflationary Approach

The Deflationary Approach encompasses a family of views in moral theory that in some way dismiss or ignore the proper function of tragic remainder. This is accomplished by denying the representational accuracy and function of the remainder's characteristic emotions and leaving underexplained subsequent reparative obligations.

⁶ This "attending function" of tragic remainder can be understood in a similar spirit as Ronald de Sousa's claim that emotions function to resolve the "philosopher's frame problem," or the problem of how to adjust salience among objects of attention. For more, see de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotions*, Ch. 7.

One progenitor of the Deflationary Approach is Rational Choice Theory (RCT) and its application of pure cost-benefit analysis (CBA) to moral reasoning. According to RCT, rationality recognizes no tragic remainder. Utilitarianism and Intuitionist Deontology are the principal versions of the approach. These views, although commonly understood as opposing moral theories, deny key aspects of tragic remainder for much the same reason: to safeguard a narrow vision of morality's action-guiding function. In this section, I begin with RCT, explaining how its wholesale denial of tragic remainder and the function of its associated feelings is untenable in light of the pervasiveness of tragic moral dilemmas in human life. I then move on to show how key aspects of tragic remainder are deflated by Utilitarianism and Intuitionist Deontology.

Cost-Benefit Analysis is a theoretical tool for analyzing and evaluating practical deliberation. CBA is used to examine decisions to determine whether the most efficient means have been taken to achieve their given end. Some Rational Choice Theorists have seen promise in applying CBA's theoretical tools to moral reasoning. This is because they understand moral reasoning as a subset of practical reasoning, and practical reasoning as solely concerned with efficiently appropriating means to already given ends. John Harsanyi has argued, for instance, that "Rational behavior is simply behavior consistently pursuing some well defined goals, and pursuing them according to some well defined set of preferences or priorities..." and that ethics "is a theory of rational behavior in the service of the common interests of society as a whole."⁷ Here, means are evaluable solely in terms of their capacity to efficiently bring about non-evaluable, pre-given ends. These pre-established ends are analyzable only as weightings relative to the preferences of agents, either individually or collectively. Values in RCT do not exist independently of individuals. Values are given by them. Moral reasoning, then, is solely concerned with establishing a rank order and determining the most efficient means for achieving these ends.

⁷ John Harsanyi, "Morality and the Theory of Rational Behavior," pg. 42, 43.

Martha Nussbaum has argued that the deliberative use of CBA in moral contexts fails to account for what she calls the “tragic question.”⁸ The tragic question is confronted when we ask whether any of the practical options available to us involve serious moral wrongdoing. This is distinguished by Nussbaum from the question asked by CBA, what she calls the “obvious question,” or “What should I do?”⁹ CBA, attuned to analyzing issues of uncertainty and risk, may be an effective tool for addressing the obvious question. But it is insufficient for confronting the tragic question because the latter involves the recognition that even the right answer to the obvious question in tragic contexts may involve serious moral violation.

Consider the case from Chapter 1 of the adult son who must choose between providing care for one of their two ailing parents. The obvious question addresses important practical concerns like who is most likely to benefit from care and which option requires the least sacrifice of other important goals such as career pursuits. These are important concerns for deliberation, but they are not the only concerns that matter. The tragic question arises here, Nussbaum would argue, because whichever option is chosen, distressing feelings will arise about whether serious moral violation has occurred and whether reparative action is warranted.¹⁰

These features of tragic remainder cannot be accounted for by RCT because they are not reducible to the obvious question. This is because eliminating the tragic question in favor of the obvious question obscures the tragic nature of such situations.¹¹ This means that RCT fails to explain why the feelings associated with tragic situations (feeling torn, regret, taintedness, distress), and acts such as reparations, are important in these contexts. According to RCT, these are at best merely other aims one might have (to feel a certain way, or to make amends), and at worst irrational obstacles to efficient decision-

⁸ Martha Nussbaum, “The Costs of Tragedy: Some Moral Limits of Cost-Benefit Analysis,” pg. 1007.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ It is important to note here that while Nussbaum believes the tragic question is concerned with moral violation, these feelings often arise in the context of moral success as well. This will be the fulcrum of the argument in the rest of this chapter.

¹¹ Lisa Tessman makes a similar point in her construction of “non-negotiable moral requirements.” See Tessman, *Moral Failure*, Ch. 1.

making. There is in RCT no explanation for why we have these feelings, what their function might be, or why we have (let alone *ought to have*) these reparative aims. If these feelings are instead epistemic windows into moral reality, and reparations are a form of obligation that function to respond appropriately to tragic circumstances, then RCT must be rejected because it dismisses these features.¹²

By Utilitarianism I refer to the family of views that subscribe to J.J.C. Smart's definition of Act-Utilitarianism: "The view that the rightness of an action depends only on the total goodness or badness of its consequences, i.e. on the effect on the welfare of all human beings (or perhaps all sentient beings)."¹³ By this standard, actions can be sorted into strict, rank ordered classifications of right and wrong based on whether they effect an increase or decrease in the total welfare of all individuals, respectively. Like RCT above, this approach provides an effective procedure for answering Nussbaum's obvious question: what I should do is whatever most increases the total welfare. Its answer to the tragic question, however, is more complex.

Nussbaum's version of the tragic question is asked when we consider whether any of the available options for action involve serious moral violation. Utilitarianism, as defined by Smart's thesis, does at least find this version of the question intelligible. This is because Utilitarianism considers ends as morally evaluable through deliberation. If I see a car that I like, and decide to make it an end to acquire that car, then it may be the most efficient means to achieve that end for me to steal it. However, there may be utilitarian reasons for me to refrain from doing so, likely because my stealing the car does not benefit the total welfare more than purchasing it or not having it at all. This illustrates that at the very least Utilitarianism considers Nussbaum's tragic question intelligible. It is

¹² RCT is unlike the other views discussed under the deflationary heading, however, in that its motive for dismissing tragic remainder is not in order to safeguard traditionally important features of moral obligation, but to dismiss moral reasoning as an independent source of deliberation *as a whole*. In this sense, it would not make sense to refer to RCT as a moral theory at all. Hence, it is instead best understood as a progenitor of the Deflationary Approach.

¹³ J.J.C. Smart, "Defending Utilitarianism," in *Ethics: Contemporary Readings*, pg. 202. Smart advocates for a preference theory of well-being, in contrast to the hedonistic theory of well-being elaborated by classical utilitarians such as Bentham, Mill, and Sidgwick. My presentation in this section is ambiguous between these two versions of utilitarianism because this doctrine does not play a direct role in the theory's deflation of tragic remainder. It only determines which values are fundamentally in play.

possible for an action to involve serious moral wrongdoing, and this counts as an overriding reason against doing it.

An updated version of the tragic question then ought to be considered: not whether available action involves serious moral wrongdoing, but whether even morally successful action involves something morally repugnant, something that rightly makes our moral alarm bells go off. This is the version of the tragic question that is not given its full weight in this strategy. As Bernard Williams has argued, this becomes apparent in cases in which an individual is faced with a choice between a detestable action and an action that will be worse on utilitarian grounds, or that has worse consequences.¹⁴ Williams considers a case where an individual is tasked with killing one person, and if they refuse, is assured that the same individual and several more will be killed.¹⁵ The Utilitarian response to this case is clear: all else being equal, the single individual ought to be killed because this results in greater total welfare than were they and several others to be killed. If the individual responds with the tragic question, “But isn’t killing this person seriously morally repugnant?,” the utilitarian must simply answer, “No.” This is because the moral calculus is clear: wrongdoing occurs where the total welfare is decreased relative to other available options, and there is not much else to say in the course of moral deliberation. The updated tragic question is thus answered quickly and decisively. Attempts to tarry with this question after the utilitarian calculation has been completed warrant accusations of moral self-indulgence: if the tragic question retains its force, then this is likely due to the desire to appear morally virtuous, whether to oneself or others. This desire is dangerous because it threatens to trump the aim of actual moral success.^{16 17}

¹⁴ Bernard Williams, “Utilitarianism and Moral Self-Indulgence,” in *Moral Luck*, pg. 42.

¹⁵ Ibid., pg. 43.

¹⁶ Ibid., pg. 44.

¹⁷ It should be noted here the affinity of this line of argument with general themes in some of contemporary cognitive moral psychology. Jonathan Haidt, for instance, argues using his “Social Intuitionist Model” that moral reasoning typically involves quick, intuitive judgments which should then be corrected by careful rational analysis (or, to use the cognitive psychological framing: slow deliberative system 2 thinking regulating quick, intuitive system 1 thinking). A theme of this chapter is to partially upend this way of thinking, especially concerning its application to tarrying with tragic remainder. For more on Haidt’s analysis, see Jonathan Haidt, “The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to

Williams argues that the main fault with this accusation of moral self-indulgence is that it does not account for the importance of personal integrity, or the desire to act on motivations that are deeply one's own.¹⁸ He claims that the accusation of moral self-indulgence does not distinguish between the suspect motivation to merely appear virtuous to others and the desire not to be coerced to perform some detestable action. It is not self-indulgent to find it highly objectionable that a detestable action be performed through one's own agency. This is because the detestable action is deeply incongruous with the agent's most important commitments, not because they are concerned solely with how others estimate their virtue. This is a helpful distinction, but more can be said about why Utilitarianism's quick answer to the updated tragic question is deficient.

The Utilitarian answer to the tragic question is deficient because it ignores *tragic remainder*. Recall that tragic remainder refers to what is leftover when moral resolution has been achieved in tragic contexts.¹⁹ Tragic remainder in these contexts manifests in the form of the characteristic tragic emotions of feeling torn, distressed, and regretful. These feelings function to focus attention on items of moral relevance in the situation, providing content and form to obligations of reparation. In Williams' homicide example, feelings of disgust, regret, pride, shame, or distress are likely to arise depending on which course of action is taken. These feelings are sources of knowledge about the values in play. One might feel shame because they have not lived up to some social standard they consider important. They might feel pride in acting on principle and refusing to be coerced, or perhaps in sacrificing their own self-standing to do right by others. These feelings will be complex and will likely differ between individuals depending on their personal histories and constitution. It goes without saying that these feelings are not the *only* sources of moral knowledge available. But they are a lens through which what matters is attended to, recognized, and appreciated. Under Utilitarianism, the feelings that ought to be felt in

Moral Judgment." For more on the use of System 1/System 2 thinking in cognitive psychology, see Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, especially Chapter 1.

¹⁸ Williams, pg. 49.

¹⁹ This again speaks to the weakness of Nussbaum's definition of the tragic question. Moral tragedy often occurs in the context of moral success, and thus tragic remainder is not attuned to serious moral violation so much as to items of significant *moral value*.

these situations are only the ones which result in the greatest increase in total well-being. Utilitarianism thus has no room for the epistemic role of tragic remainder. It views the remainder as at best inconsequential to the utilitarian calculus of total welfare, and at worst an insurgent force aimed at undercutting moral success. If these feelings are a window in moral reality, then Utilitarianism goes wrong by dismissing their function and role in moral deliberation. This is due to its insistence that there is no deliberately credible element in these feelings.²⁰

In addition to the remainder manifest in the tragic feelings, Utilitarianism also leaves underexplained the role of the remainder in forming obligations of reparation in tragic contexts. By reparations I have in mind two sets of action: 1) Providing explanations of our actions to those harmed by them, even if the action is justified; and 2) Seeking to repair harmed relationships where appropriate. In Williams' homicide case, there is no pre-established relationship between the individual and those under threat, so only (1) applies. In this case, it makes sense for the individual to explain themselves to the victim, if possible. If they decide to kill the lone individual, it is appropriate to communicate that this is not done easily or from malice or vicious disregard. If the invitation is refused and the several are killed, then making an effort to explain that this is not done from a motive of moral self-indulgence seems the least one could do, even if this is given short shrift by those about to be killed (or their intimates). The point isn't about which of the available options is all-things-considered best, but that whichever course is taken, satisfactory explanation is warranted to those harmed.

Other cases involve both forms of reparation, including the repairing of a relationship that has been injured by justified action. Consider having made a promise to meet a friend for lunch at noon on a particular day next week, then being prompted to schedule an important medical appointment at the same time. If this is the only reasonable time available for the appointment, then it is not wrong to break your promise to your friend. However, it *would* be wrong to do so without explaining your decision to

²⁰ As mentioned, some utilitarians may claim that we ought to have the feelings that best maximize utility. This provides a context and a standard of assessment for these feelings, but does not give an account of how these feelings function outside of an overly narrow reductionist, and highly revisionist, frame.

them, clarifying that your broken promise was not done from vicious disregard, but from need. In some contexts, harm may be done to the relationship: perhaps it is your friend's birthday and you traditionally buy them lunch on the occasion, or perhaps they went out of their way to open up their schedule for you. In these circumstances, more than just an explanation of your actions may be warranted. It would make sense to offer to buy your friend lunch the next time they're available, or to do them some special favor. This is not merely in order to win their favor or be back in their good graces. They may be understanding and patient, requiring no such appeasement. Still, it makes sense to offer these things as a way of providing reassurance about your fidelity to the relationship. By making an effort to repair, you recognize, affirm, and appreciate the value of the relationship.

The crucial point is that Utilitarianism is not as able, given its deflation of tragic remainder, to account for the *character* of these actions. If reparations are important, it is only because they would produce greater marginal welfare for those involved. But this is not why we explain ourselves to others we may have harmed, or seek to repair important relationships that may have been injured. We do these things because being transparent and repairing relationships with those we care about matters independently of welfare. Tragic remainder persists in these occasions, and we continue to tarry with it after the fact, because it functions to direct us toward what matters, motivating concern for it.²¹ This distinction is best seen in cases where providing explanations and making an attempt to repair a relationship have little to no discernible effect on total welfare, such as the friend who is understanding and requires no appeasement. In these cases, increasing welfare is clearly *not* the object of concern in reparations.²²

Utilitarianism deflates the role of tragic remainder in contexts of moral dilemma, but it does have its virtues as a moral theory. For one, it is able to provide explanations

²¹ This is a point made as well by Ruth Marcus in "Moral Dilemmas and Consistency." However, as I argue later in this chapter, the motivating function of tragic remainder itself requires explanation which Marcus does not provide.

²² Again, the utilitarian may iterate the argument that this function of the remainder is generally good for producing welfare, and ought to be cultivated for this reason. The dialectic becomes exhausted. The main point is that this line of argument is highly revisionist of everyday morality, and bears a high burden of argument. This should end the dialectical carousel.

for the rightness of actions in terms of value: specifically, a value monism where only welfare matters. This is done straightforwardly by classifying an action as right if it maximizes the total welfare. This explanatory grounding allows the theory to provide strict action-guidance: the action that should be performed is the one which is most likely to produce the greatest welfare. Providing action-guidance and explaining why actions are right in terms of value are good things for a moral theory to do. However, action-guidance and explanatory grounding should not come at the irredeemable cost of dismissing tragic remainder. The goal for a moral theory should be to integrate its explanatory grounding and form of action-guidance with a robust understanding of tragic remainder's content and function in situations of moral dilemma.

Intuitionist Deontology (ID) is the moral theory that maintains that there is a plurality of foundational, but defeasible, duties that explain what is right and what is wrong. This places ID in direct contrast to Utilitarianism since the latter claims that there is only one duty, to produce the greatest welfare, so this duty cannot be overruled by any other. W.D. Ross claims that there are five foundational duties that are underived from any more fundamental duty: fidelity, reparation, gratitude, beneficence, and non-maleficence.²³ Ross calls these "prima facie duties" because they are not exceptionless, but instead refer to something's counting in favor of an action being right.²⁴ For instance, it is a prima facie duty of fidelity that we keep our promises. This means that if an act keeps a promise then this counts in favor of the act being right, but it is not necessarily decisive of rightness. An act must be weighed against the other foundational duties to see if it is all-things-considered right. If an act keeps a promise but is also certain to cause great harm to someone, then the duty of nonmaleficence may overrule the duty of fidelity to keep the promise.²⁵ According to Ross, what you all-things-considered should do is

²³ W.D. Ross, *The Right and the Good*, pg. 21.

²⁴ Ibid., pg. 20. It has been noted, especially by Shelly Kagan, that Ross ought to have used the term *pro tanto* instead of *prima facie* for these duties since they are not appearances of duty that are eventually proved illusory in the course of deliberation, but reflective of the actual moral facts on the ground concerning what matters morally. See Kagan, *The Limits of Morality*, pg. 17.

²⁵ Ross does seem to think that the prima facie duties have different weights which allows for this sort of overruling. For instance, the duty of non-maleficence is weightier than the duty of beneficence, meaning it

what follows from considering all the ways a proposed action fits with the foundational duties weighted against all the ways it does not. This allows for a strategy to deal with occasions where duties are in conflict, such as the instances of tragic conflict I have considered in this project.

Consider again the case of breaking a promise to meet a friend for lunch in order to keep an important medical appointment. ID may argue that breaking the promise breaches the *prima facie* duty of fidelity, counting against it. But missing the medical appointment could reasonably be understood as leading to a large decrease in the general welfare, as well as potentially causing great harm to oneself.²⁶ Crucially, we would expect our friend to say as much were we to neutrally place the dilemma before them, asking for advice. Important medical appointments are vital to securing individual well-being, and this plausibly makes them more important than a promise to meet for lunch. This is because crucial instances of the duties of beneficence and non-maleficence may overrule relatively light breaches of the duty of fidelity.

Aside from considerations of welfare, ID also appears to have some means for explaining why we should attempt to make up for breaking the promise to our friend. This is because there is a foundational duty of reparation, or a duty to correct previous wrongs. Unlike in Utilitarianism, this duty is not reducible to the duty of beneficence. A charitable reading of ID would allow that even if we have not done wrong all-things-considered, it is reasonable to think that having breached the *prima facie* duty of fidelity is a reason for attempting something akin to reparations. It is also reasonable to think that this attempt is of a different character than reparations for having done wrong explicitly. Overriding a promised lunch date for a vital medical appointment is markedly different from forgetting the lunch date altogether. Reparations would look different in these scenarios, and this can be partly explained by the difference between overruling a *prima facie* duty to keep a promise and violating an all-things-considered duty to do so.

is usually more important to avoid harming others than to increase their welfare, all else being equal. See *The Right and the Good*, pg. 22, 30.

²⁶ Strangely, Ross does not seem to think that there are duties to oneself that follow from the duty of non-maleficence, but this seems wrong even from an ID point of view.

Still, even given this charitable interpretation, ID does not give full weight to the kinds of obligations that are generated in tragic moral contexts, or to the function of tragic remainder in responding to them. This is because the ground of the duty of reparations in this instance is the breaching of a *prima facie* duty, and it is not clear why this would have moral significance on its own to generate obligations. Why does the breaching of a *prima facie* duty *matter at all*? Under ID, the *prima facie* duties function as defeasible reasons to do something. When a *prima facie* duty is overruled, there is a loss, but not a loss of *value*. Reasons aren't values, although values can function *as* reasons in our deliberation and decision-making. In order to explain why the loss of something generates obligations to repair we should explain why the loss matters in a way that drives the need for repair. This is the case if the thing lost has the kind of value that warrants concern. The mere loss of a reason is not likely in most cases to meet this threshold. The most clear explanation in this case is that the relationship (and the friend) is what matters. When there is cause for concern about the health of the relationship (because a promise has been broken), something must be done to remedy it. Tragic remainder attends to the value of the relationship and the friend, functioning as a lodestar guiding reparative action. ID likely provides the same moral strategy in these circumstances: a new situation has begun after the breaking of the promise, and with all *prima facie* duties taken into account, an apology is warranted. But ID is not as able to explain the responsive role of tragic remainder in this procedure. This is because it lacks the scaffolding in lodestar values that would ground a guiding explanation like the one above. The strategy of balancing *prima facie* duties may help as generalizations about what to do in difficult moral circumstances, but these duties by themselves don't aid in explaining the role and character of tragic remainder in responding to the kinds of obligations these circumstances produce.

This line of critique of Intuitionist Deontology is importantly distinct from the traditional criticism that it constitutes a kind of misguided rule-worship. The traditional criticism argues that ID compels the following of a rule even in situations where it is clear that doing so would create more harm than good. This standard critique fails to get to the heart of the problem, however, as it is precisely such cases that motivate ID's

(correct) rejection of value-optimization theories like Utilitarianism: it is clear that there *are* cases where merely causing more good than bad is not decisive of rightness. ID's misguided rule-worship is not found in its insistence that a rule ought to be followed even when it creates more harm than good, but in its implicit reliance on the breaching of rules to explain tragic remainder without reference to grounding values.²⁷ In tragic contexts this becomes evident because the remainder attends to and represents something of value lost, not merely reasons overruled in the course of deliberation. It is no tragedy to overrule a mere reason.

This case is furthered by reflection on ID's account of the feelings characteristic of tragic moral circumstances. The charitable reading goes as follows: If I break a promise to a friend, even if I do so for good reasons and have acted rightly, it may be appropriate that I feel bad about it. ID may be able to make sense of this by appealing to the *prima facie* duty of fidelity. When I feel bad about breaking the promise, this is not necessarily because I have done wrong all-things-considered, but because I have overruled a *prima facie* duty, a reason that counts in favor of keeping the promise.

While this is an improvement relative to the theories considered earlier, ID remains a deflationary approach to the feelings associated with moral tragedy. Feeling bad about breaking a promise to a friend is not fully captured by the overruling of a *prima facie* duty or reason. When we feel bad about permissibly breaking a promise to a friend, a better explanation is that our feelings attend to the loss involving the value of our relationship with them, not an abstract rule. We feel bad because our action does not in itself meet the threshold of recognizing their special status in our lives, even if we have done so all-things-considered permissibly. In normal circumstances, we would never

²⁷ Barbara Herman makes a similar point in her essay "Can Virtue be Taught? The Problem of New Moral Facts" in *Moral Literacy*. Moral rules by themselves are generally not authoritative, it is their *rationale* that is authoritative. When a context arises where a rule is disconnected from its rationale, then we may be confident in breaking the rule. In my view, a moral rule's rationale is the connective bond between the rule and its target value. The rationale *explains* the rule's point by reference to this value. A similar strategy for explaining a rule's rationale may be deployed using a constructivist formula, where the rationale bottoms out in terms of the reasons a rational agent must endorse. I consider this view revisionist of everyday moral realism, and thus it bears a high burden of argument. For criticisms of deontology in a similar spirit as the above, see Barbara Herman, "Leaving Deontology Behind" in *The Practice of Moral Judgment* and Jon Garthoff, "The Priority and Posteriority of Right" and "The Salience of Moral Character."

break a promise to them. These considerations drive the need to explain ourselves to our friend. They are owed an explanation that recognizes their status as one for whom promises should be kept all else being equal. Without redress, these feelings will persist, and typically they will fade when reconciliation is achieved. These feelings serve an important epistemic function: they tell us when something has gone wrong in moral contexts, they attend to the values in play, they motivate to repair, and their dissolution communicates successful reconciliation. It is not as clear how all of this would follow if tragic remainder represented concern for the mere breaching of a reason.²⁸

ID is unable to provide as robust an account of these phenomena. This is because the feelings characteristic of tragedy are explained as representing not a relationship injured, but a reason overruled. If these feelings were directed toward the overruling of a reason, then it is not clear why they would motivate explaining ourselves to our friend (except for prudential purposes of remaining in their good graces). Why does any action on behalf of another follow from the overruling of a reason? Or, in other words, what grounds the duty of reparation in contexts of moral success? The content and function of the tragic feelings is unclear: they may tell us that something is amiss or unusual, but they don't represent value-loss. What's unusual are the circumstances leading to the overruling of a general duty, but it is unclear why this would motivate repair or communicate success upon dissolution. The overruling of a reason may be unusual, but the characteristic feeling to have at unusual circumstances is *perplexity* or *curiosity*. These are epistemic feelings, not moral ones. ID does not provide a well-grounded explanation for why we feel the characteristic moral emotions in tragic moral situations.

Intuitionist Deontology provides an unsatisfactory account of the content and function of tragic remainder, but it has its virtues as a moral theory. Like Utilitarianism, it provides strict action-guidance, although through a system of balanced, defeasible duties. Unlike Utilitarianism, however, it posits a pluralism of duties that is more amenable to

²⁸ There is a sense in which ID gets its explanation of *pro tanto* obligations exactly backwards. We don't begin with general foundational rules of rightness and then apply them to particular situations, but generalize from particular situations to these rules about what's normally or characteristically right. This is part of why it doesn't make sense to think of tragic remainder as attending foremost to rules.

representing and adjudicating moral conflict. This pluralism is better able to explain moral tragedy than its Utilitarian counterpart, but it remains explanatorily insufficient. This is due to ID's lack of grounding of its foundational duties in value. An action is right according to ID if the reasons counting for it outweigh the reasons counting against it. But these reasons themselves are explanatorily fundamental. It is not clear why tragic remainder should persist or what its function would be in situations where nothing all-things-considered wrong has been done. All that has occurred is the overruling of a reason, and this is not in itself a tragedy. Again, the stumbling block for the Deflationary Approach to tragic remainder is the fact that the remainder persists in contexts of moral success, representing some value loss that warrants reparation. A good moral theory should be able to explain both the existence of moral conflict and how the tragic feelings function in these situations.

3.3 The Anti-Theoretical Approach

Some moral theorists have understood tragic moral circumstances to be evidence of the need for a revisionist understanding of morality. These theorists typically analyze paradigmatic examples of moral tragedy in order to show that traditional conceptions of morality fail to account for their tragic character. This is because these traditional conceptions are unable to explain the features of tragic remainder that are most perspicuous in these cases: namely, the characteristic emotions associated with moral tragedy such as feeling torn, tainted, regret, and shame. According to traditional moral theory, so the argument goes, these feelings are at best inconsequential to moral understanding and at worst irrational. Since the pervasiveness of these feelings warrants them being given a degree of epistemic privilege, then so much the worse for traditional moral theory.

Some of this strategy is in line with the arguments presented in the previous section against The Deflationary Approach to tragic remainder. Some major moral theories (Utilitarianism, Intuitionist Deontology) fail to provide robust explanations of tragic remainder for this, among other, reasons. What is striking about the Anti-Theoretical Approach is that it considers this failure a reason to jettison long-standing principles of moral obligation. These include the categorical authority of morality over

merely practical concerns and the principle of *ought implies can*. The elimination of these traditional principles, I argue, ends up undermining the tragic force of the conflicts that motivated it in the first place. This is due, in the first instance, to making morality another practical commitment we can have; and, in the second, to obscuring how tragic remainder persists in situations where moral obligations are understood as fulfilled.

Bernard Williams famously critiqued what he called the “peculiar institution” of morality.²⁹ By this, Williams referred to the various ways that systems of moral theory claim that their stated values are universal and of ultimate importance. Both Utilitarianism and Intuitionist Deontology, among others, are targets of this critique because they seek to systematize morality in such a way that action-guidance is made transparent in every instance: there is at least one right thing to do, it both *can* and *must* be done, and it can be understood as logically grounded in a general obligation provided by the moral theory.³⁰

One reason Williams finds the institution of morality inadequate is because it rejects the existence of genuine moral conflict. If morality functions to tell us what must be done, and what must be done is always something that *can* be done, then any sense that there is genuine, ineliminable conflict in morality must be illusory. There can be no two *oughts* that genuinely conflict. At most there can be only apparent obligations in tension, one of which is eliminated through the correct application of the tenets of the moral theory to the situation. Williams believed that this systemization was a fundamental fault of the morality system because it “eliminate(s) from the scene the 'ought' that is not acted upon.”³¹ By this Williams means that any moral theory that dismisses or is unable to explain the reality and intensity of moral conflict achieves action-guidance and explanatory systemization at the cost of misrepresenting practical reality. In the real world, Williams thinks, we sometimes find ourselves in situations

²⁹ Bernard Williams, “Morality, The Peculiar Institution” in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Williams here analogizes the system of morality with American slavery, referred to as “the peculiar institution” by politicians in the Antebellum South as far back as 1830. See the entry “Peculiar Institution” in the *Dictionary of American History*.

³⁰ Ibid., pg. 175.

³¹ Williams, “Ethical Consistency,” pg. 113.

where we have mutually exclusive courses of action, both of which we believe to be obligatory. In these situations, we often find ourselves struck by feelings like regret and remorse. When we decide on one action over the other, then we experience some leftover remainder directed at the action not done. But the morality system, in order to secure systemization, must claim that at least one of these demands is finally eliminable, and thus does not apply (in fact, *never really applied*).³² The remainder experienced, then, is left unaccounted for. Why feel regret or remorse about not doing something that should not be done?

Williams astutely points out that we should not confuse the general feeling of regret with the belief that all things considered we should have acted otherwise.³³ It is rationally consistent, and common in everyday life, to feel regret about things that we otherwise believe we are right to have done. Consider again the case of the individual tasked with the choice between killing one individual or allowing them and several others to be killed. In this instance, if they choose to kill the one in order to save the lives of the others, then they appropriately feel regret. They wish things had been otherwise, even if all things considered they believe they have done right. If a sympathetic bystander were to approach after witnessing the tragedy and attempt to console through reassurance that what was done was right, and that any feelings of regret should be dismissed, we would likely find this response objectionable. This is because general regret is a feeling directed at and in recognition of a lost value. This value remains lost even after the conflict has been successfully adjudicated. The morality system fails precisely because it does not allow for this remainder. Instead, it unduly legislates which moral sentiments are appropriate to have.³⁴

Williams' criticisms of the morality system stem from his anti-theoretical orientation toward morality. It is the commitment to morality as an impersonal system for discovering from outside oneself the right thing to do that leads to its dismissal of significant human experiences. In its place, Williams argues that we should understand

³² Ibid., pg. 122.

³³ Williams, *Moral Luck*, pg. 31.

³⁴ Ibid., pg x.

morality as among a set of practical considerations from which we draw our motivations.³⁵ The key is that this set of practical considerations is *ours*, and not those of an external system imposed on us from without.³⁶ This delegates morality to a status alongside our other practical commitments rather than in a regulative role above them. Williams thinks that only this sense of morality, as something that arises within us and within our communities, based on the things we care about, can make sense of the tragic moral conflicts that beset human life.

Williams is right that the major moral theories discussed in this chapter go awry when they dismiss the reality of moral conflict and obscure the function of its characteristic feelings. What is at issue here is whether this line of criticism must ultimately reject the systemization characteristic of overriding moral obligation and relegate morality to one among a set of practical commitments we take an interest in. At stake are traditional aspects of moral obligation such as its regulation of practical concerns and its capacity for action-guidance. I argue in the following that the reality of tragic moral conflict can be explained, and its characteristic feelings explicated, without denying these aspects of moral obligation.

This explanation of moral tragedy comes in part through applying the function of tragic remainder to a more robust understanding of morality's action-guidance function. Tragic remainder, I have argued, functions to attend to what matters in tragic moral circumstances. In situations of moral dilemma, this means attending to the horn of the dilemma leftover. Consider the adult son who must choose between his parents for whom to provide in-person care. The tragic feelings of regret that follow focus his moral attention on the parent for whom he chooses not to provide in-person care, motivating obligations of reparation toward them (e.g. an explanation of their actions, reassurance, regular communication, etc.). Tragic remainder here is action-guiding because it directs the individual toward what matters, focusing their attention on items of moral relevance. This action-guidance is not exhaustively decisive: it does not fill out the content of

³⁵ Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, pg. 191.

³⁶ Ibid.

obligations at the level of concrete action (*you must make this many phone calls*), but it does *guide* action in a more general sense. This is because it provides an explanation of why action taken is worthwhile: because it is appropriately responding to something of value (the relationship, the parent).³⁷

If morality guides action through explanation of an action's worth in terms of the values it responds to, then this leaves room for tragic remainder. This is because the horns of a dilemma might each have a robust explanation for their value which isn't canceled out or eliminated in the course of deliberation. These values remain even after the conflict is adjudicated. This value, left unrealized or not responded to, grounds the persistence of tragic remainder. This is because a leftover value retains potency post-adjudication in a way that a leftover rule or reason does not. Tragic remainder functions to guide action toward appropriate response to the leftover value.

This picture can help make sense of why morality's categorical authority is not threatened by tragic remainder. Williams himself is reluctant to reject the overridingness of moral obligation. In discussing his homicide case, he reluctantly agrees that Utilitarianism has the right conclusion (the one should be killed), albeit for the wrong reasons.³⁸ Williams' critique of Utilitarianism is not that it always gets the wrong answer in cases like this, but that its method of calculation pictures morality as an impersonal external system imposed from without. This picture of morality leaves no room for the importance of integrity: the appropriate relation between a person and their actions.³⁹ The difference between doing something and allowing it to happen matters, and Utilitarianism makes this distinction unintelligible. Killing the one to save the many may be the right thing to do. But if I do it, then it really does matter morally that *I* did it and not someone

³⁷ Seana Shiffrin calls moral theories in which all actions are either required or prohibited "fully directive." Utilitarianism is fully directive in this sense, but ID is not since it allows for some latitude among permissible options for action. See Seana Shiffrin, "Moral Autonomy and Agent-Centred Options." Another way of framing this terrain of morality's action-guidance is one of *sorting*. In a sorting moral theory, all actions ordinarily ranked into buckets of right and wrong. This makes decision procedures maximally clear, but at a great cost. The key is to understand how morality's action-guidance and action-explanatory functions can be divorced from this kind of maximal sorting.

³⁸ Bernard Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism," *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, pg. 91.

³⁹ Ibid.

else. This centrality of personal agency to morality is what grounds tragic remainder, according to Williams. I feel bad because of what *I* have done, even if I believe I have done rightly.

Contrast this case with a paradigmatic case of tragic remainder from literature: *Sophie's Choice*. In William Styron's World War II era novel, Sophie is a mother tasked by a Nazi concentration camp doctor with deciding which of her two children will be sent to the gas chamber and which will continue to live in the camp (if she refuses, both will be killed). This case is often introduced in the seminar room as an example of a purportedly irresolvable moral dilemma. This is because there appear to be no decisive moral reasons in favor of choosing one child over the other. If this is true, then like Buridan's ass, Sophie is unable to secure a sufficient reason for decision and is left morally paralyzed. When she overcomes paralysis to make a decision, the tragic remainder that follows is devastating. It ruins her in a way that even the "normal" death of a child would not. This is in part because the decision came through her own (albeit coerced) agency, but also because she cannot explain her decision, even to herself. Moral ambiguity appears to reign triumphant.

The important difference between Williams' homicide case and Sophie's choice is that in the former tragic remainder persists alongside an overriding moral obligation, whereas in the latter the remainder persists (allegedly) due to there being no coherent way to make sense of moral obligation at all. The former, I believe, is the key to understanding the latter. In the first case, the right thing to do may be to kill the one to save the many. This being right does not eliminate tragic remainder, however, since the remainder persists due to the action being performed through, as Williams put it, the particular person's agency (in our terms, to attend to what matters and motivate reparative follow-up). This same schema can be applied to Sophie's case: the right thing to do is to make sure that at least one of her children survives the terrible encounter.⁴⁰ She

⁴⁰ One might object that Sophie can permissibly refuse to choose, even if it means both of her children will die. According to this view, Sophie has "reasons of dignity" for refusal. The same justification may be iterated for the justified homicide case as well. I don't find this view persuasive in either case, though I agree that such reasons of dignity exist and are grounded in the duty of self-respect (see Tommie Shelby, "Justice, Deviance and the Dark Ghetto" for an argument in favor of this view applied to the immiserated

does this successfully by choosing one of her children. This is the most difficult decision a person can make, so it is no surprise that the remainder here is amplified relative to a situation involving strangers. That Sophie cannot live with herself following the decision is not due to her being unable to make moral sense of her situation. She makes moral sense of it easily, without thinking (*don't let both of my children perish*). Her devastation is due to the horrific death of her child having been effected in part through her agency as a causal mechanism. Tragic remainder here is a motor without a rudder, attending to what matters but which has been forever lost.

The Williams-type interpretation, with the addition of our reflections on the function of tragic remainder, is superior to that of the seminar room. These cases are not so different as it would seem from the way they are often presented: both involve situations where an individual is tasked with a terrible choice involving life and death. There is a plausibly right thing to do in each instance, but this in no way eliminates or diffuses tragic remainder. This is because the remainder persists *alongside* the successfully resolved moral obligation, attending to what matters in its wake. The difference between the cases is grounded in the distinct values attended to: Sophie is ruined because the remainder cannot fulfill its function.⁴¹ The remainder is not the manifestation of morality's truncated authority or lack of action-guidance.

While Williams reluctantly admits that tragic remainder and moral success are compatible in this way, he does not seem to see the consequences of this reality for his anti-theoretical approach to morality. If this compatibility obtains, then this means that tragic remainder is not necessarily evidence against morality's overridingness. The demotion of morality in denying categoricity, if anything, deflates the nature of tragic conflict like the one in the justified homicide case. In Sophie's case at least parental love can play the motivating role sufficient for grounding the intensity of the remainder. In a

denizens of American ghettos). Even if one holds this view, the point still stands, as tragic remainder would surely follow such a refusal.

⁴¹ In a sense, this constitutes a kind of *meta-tragedy*: the world's inhospitality to the functioning of tragic remainder itself. Situations like this are most resistant to a theodicy-like comprehensive reconciling explanation because they manifest the world's fundamental indifference to what matters. This helps make sense of why they can be utterly ruinous.

case involving strangers with whom one has no relationship, whence the remainder's intensity? And why does it motivate obligations of reparation? General sympathy is one answer to these charges, but while sympathy is a motivator to help others with whom one has no relationship, it is of itself not a *reason* to do so. Williams holds that the remainder is directed at the violated integrity of the agent. While this is true in part, it is not sufficient for capturing the other-regarding nature of the remainder. The intensity of the feelings of regret and the motivation to repair are not best explained by relegating morality to a diminished role. Overriding concern for others (moral and otherwise) is instead what *drives* the remainder in the first place. It is when this concern comes into conflict with moral obligation that sparks begin to fly, creating hazardous tragic embers. The tragic nature of moral conflict is too far diminished if moral obligation is just another practical commitment we can sometimes take or leave.

Lisa Tessman shares many of Williams' concerns with the major moral theories' deflation of tragic remainder. But she agrees that moral overridingness is not the locus of the problem.⁴² Instead, Tessman argues that tragic remainder exposes an obstacle created by the overemphasis on action-guidance in moral theory, specifically through the principle of *ought implies can*. She claims that it is only if we admit that there are binding moral obligations that are impossible to fulfill that we can make sense of tragic moral experience. This view allows that there are some situations of moral dilemma where moral failure is inevitable, and this is what is represented in the feelings characteristic of tragic remainder.⁴³

Tessman points to the case in *Sophie's Choice* as an example of inevitable moral failure.⁴⁴ This is because Sophie faces a dilemma involving the impossible moral requirements to protect each of her children. These requirements each bind even though they cannot both be fulfilled. This leads to Tessman's conclusion that there are occasions where moral failure is unavoidable.⁴⁵ If this is the case, then the principle of *ought*

⁴² Tessman, *Moral Failure: On the Impossible Demands of Morality*, pg. 1.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pg. 31.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 160-161.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 14.

implies can cannot stand, as there are *oughts* that bind even though they cannot be fulfilled.

Tessman is willing to sacrifice *ought implies can* because she believes it is necessary to do right by moral experience. In certain moral conflicts, there is an irresolvable dilemma between what she calls “non-negotiable moral requirements.”⁴⁶ A non-negotiable moral requirement exists when failure to meet the requirement cannot be compensated for by anything else. Some dilemmas are not like this. When we are tasked with choosing between one of two jobs, each of which is as likely to fulfill our vocational desires, then choosing one compensates for the loss of the other. This is because the options in question are *negotiable*. Some moral dilemmas, however, are notably different. A moral dilemma’s horns sometimes represent conflicting *non-negotiable* requirements. These requirements are non-negotiable because the loss of one does not compensate for the other. Paradigm examples of this type of requirement often involve moral requirements directed at persons. If I am tasked with killing one person to save several others, and I cannot save them all, then I am faced with conflicting non-negotiable moral requirements: not to kill an innocent person and to save the several. If the one person is killed, the non-negotiable requirement *not to kill* is not compensated for by the saving of the several others. The requirement remains, and is represented by a persisting remainder: appropriate feelings of distress, regret, and guilt due to the moral failure to satisfy a non-negotiable requirement. Tessman believes there is no contradiction here: sometimes morality demands what we cannot do. Admitting this harsh truth is the way to do right by the experience of tragic remainder. Sometimes we feel bad because we have (in some sense) been *made bad* by inevitable moral failure.

Tessman argues that moral theories tend to go wrong in accounting for moral dilemmas when they prioritize action-guidance at the expense of this “witnessing” of moral experience.⁴⁷ By this she means that one of the chief tasks of a moral theory is to explain significant and pervasive moral experience. Robust explanation of this kind must

⁴⁶ Ibid., pg. 31.

⁴⁷ Ibid., pg. 159.

be done without deflation or dismissal of moral experience as mere phenomenology ungrounded in moral reality. Sometimes, in Rosalind Hursthouse's words, there are tragic dilemmas in which "a virtuous agent's life will be marred or even ruined, haunted by sorrow that she had done x."⁴⁸ When a moral theory exclusively focuses on providing concrete action-guidance, it is likely to be negligent in this witnessing task because moral experience often complicates the pursuit of sure conclusions. Tessman sees in discussions of *Sophie's Choice* a paradigmatic example of this problem: theorists interested in moral dilemmas analyze Sophie's predicament searching for moral reasons for and against her given options. This pursuit is directed at securing a clear and generalizable decision procedure delivered by the principles of moral theory, or in Tessman's words, to "proving morality's triumph."⁴⁹ By privileging this method, moral theorists miss the most important feature of the situation which drives Styron's novel: whichever option Sophie chooses, she is *ruined* (morally and otherwise).⁵⁰ The emphasis on theoretical action-guidance does nothing to explain the fact of Sophie's devastation, or to direct her or others with restoration in its aftermath. Tessman advises that moral theorists instead "move beyond action-guidance and in the direction of witnessing the sort of moral experience that takes place when moral goodness is unattainable no matter which action one chooses."⁵¹ Here we see why Tessman believes that doing right by moral experience means sometimes jettisoning (or at least relegating to a less important status) the function of moral theory to provide action-guidance. The rejection of *ought implies can* is a second-order effect of this proposed sea-change in the general purpose of moral theory.

Tessman is right, I think, that robustly explaining significant and pervasive moral experience is a chief task of moral theory. This means taking on moral dilemmas not merely as decision-puzzles to be solved, but as crucial experiences in human life to which explanatory justice must be done. It is a failure for a moral theory to provide action-guidance at the expense of robustly explaining moral experience. However, it isn't clear

⁴⁸ Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, pg. 77.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pg. 162.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pg. 160-161.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 161.

why these two tasks need to be understood as in conflict. A good moral theory should be able to both provide action-guidance *and* robustly explain moral experience. Action-guidance need not entail an evasion from tarrying with tragedy, nor the pathological pursuit to prove the triumph of morality. Moral theory's goal should be to provide an account of moral life *as a whole*: it is as vital to deliberate clearly about how we ought to relate to things that matter as it is to reflect on how our experiences communicate the way in which they matter. Reflection on tragic moral circumstances is a window into this holistic view of moral life, as our deepest commitments are also the sources of the most profound tragedies. Tragic remainder functions to attend to what matters and motivate reparative follow-up. In this way, the remainder also *appreciates* what matters. Any robust account of it should feature consistent and coherent ways to think about what ought to be done in the midst of a moral life deeply interwoven with tragedy.⁵²

That action-guidance and robust explanation of moral experience are not in conflict is best seen through reflection on situations where tragic remainder exists in conjunction with moral success. Consider again the example of the supplicant: It is consistent for the petitioner to believe that helping the supplicant is a moral success in conjunction with tragic remainder. This is because the remainder represents that something is amiss with treating a stranger as a dependent.⁵³ The petitioner correctly believes they have done right by helping, but this does not ameliorate the experience of the characteristic tragic feelings of regret and distress. *I'm right to help them, it needed to be done, but it isn't the kind of thing that should happen.* These are appropriate judgments to make and they illustrate the coexistence of moral success and tragic remainder. The remainder does not denote moral failure.⁵⁴ It attends to what matters,

⁵² An account of moral tragedy ought to also provide some means for thinking about how not to be ruined by life's tragedies. Witnessing is but one oft-ignored task of moral theory, restoration is another.

⁵³ Barbara Herman argues that stranger-beneficence situations like this often involve obligations of reparation because the helper and the stranger have been relationally *entangled* in a way that generates new obligations. This is a helpful way of thinking about the form the remainder takes when the abstraction "fitting recognition of distinctive value" takes concrete form in a particular situation. See Barbara Herman, *The Moral Habitat*, pg. 162.

⁵⁴ Consider the content and function of the remainder in the same context but under recognized moral failure: moral guilt represents the failure, but still functions to attend to what matters and motivate reparative follow-up. This speaks to the fundamental unity of purpose of this class of emotions.

indicating that something has gone awry in a way that warrants recognition and follow-up.

If tragic remainder coexists with moral success, then this means that the remainder does not signal an unfulfillable requirement. Tessman agrees that there are resolvable conflicts like this, but she argues that these are moral successes only if there is no remainder, and there is no remainder only if the values in question are replaceable: the loss of one is compensated for by the other. But the suppliant case shows otherwise. The values in question are *not* replaceable: helping the stranger does not fully compensate for treating them as a dependent, as choosing an equally fulfilling job compensates the loss of another. This is why tragic remainder arises. The remainder persists in conjunction with the belief in moral success, so their contents are not in tension. This is because the remainder does not represent moral failure, but the recognition of value-loss warranting reparative follow-up.

Sophie's tragedy is not altogether different in form, although it is clearly of greater intensity relative to everyday moral tragedy. Sophie morally (and otherwise) succeeds by saving one of her children.⁵⁵ The unique character of tragic remainder in her case arises not from moral failure, but because the death of her child came in part through her own agency, a terribly accursed thing for a parent. The remainder's function is to attend to the value of the child, but this only exacerbates the tragedy as Sophie is forced to come to grips with her (morally exculpatory) role in the horror. It is a deeply tragic fact that the remainder in Sophie's case is devastating precisely by serving its normal function.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Consider how it would be morally wrong for Sophie to callously choose one child over the other for vicious reasons. Action-guidance plays an important role in ruling this out. It is demonstrative of Sophie's moral wisdom that this is done pre-reflectively.

⁵⁶ This helps make sense of how Sophie's deeply felt recognition of the horror of her family's fate is not due to moral confusion, but to moral insight. This is one of Tessman's demands of moral theory, and it can be accomplished without allowance for inevitable moral failure. For an interesting account to the contrary, that we ought to reject *ought implies can* and admit of unavoidable moral failure in order to do right by tragic moral experience, see Kristina Gehrman, "Tragedy and the constancy of norms: towards an Anscombian conception of 'ought'." Gehrman argues that individuals in tragic moral circumstances retain full practical responsibility for their actions (and this helps explain the possibility of ruin) while remaining blameless.

In the final section of this chapter, I bring together the critiques of the Deflationary and Anti-Theoretical Approaches, arguing that moral tragedy can be accounted for without denying either tragic remainder or the principles of moral obligation. Instead, these principles (overridingness, *ought implies can*) are vital for illuminating the nature of moral tragedy.

3.4 The Account of Moral Tragedy

I have argued that some major moral theories (Utilitarianism, Intuitionist Deontology) fail to sufficiently explain the tragic remainder that arises in situations of moral dilemma. This is because they are unable to provide satisfactory accounts of the feelings characteristic of tragic remainder, dismissing their function and making inexplicable their content. They are thus incapable of providing a grounding explanation of the obligations of reparation that often follow these predicaments.

What I have called the Anti-Theoretical Approach to moral tragedy seeks to rectify these faults by denying key aspects of moral obligation such as its overridingness or the principle of *ought implies can*. If overridingness is denied, the argument goes, then we can begin to view morality not as an impersonal external system weighing on our commitments from without, but as one among many practical considerations grounded in our personal and community-based concerns. The problem with this strategy, I argued, is that denying overridingness deflates the intensity of moral conflict which first produced the problem. Moral dilemmas have their intensity in part through morality's demand that we sacrifice something of genuine (but not overriding) importance. If morality is one among a set of practical commitments we bring to bear on decision making, then it is not clear why moral obligation should sometimes create its unique form of intractable tragic conflict. This is most clearly seen in circumstances involving strangers with whom one has no pre-established relationship. That tragic remainder arises in these situations speaks to both morality's overriding regulative function and to the remainder's other-regarding nature.

Lisa Tessman argues that the traditional feature of morality that should be denied in order to do right by tragic remainder is not overridingness, but *ought implies can*. Tessman's view is that by denying that anything that morally must be done can be done,

we allow for situations of unavoidable moral failure, and that these best explain tragic remainder. There are some situations where there is no right thing to do, so whatever we do, we are in some sense made morally bad. The remainder represents this tragically unavoidable taintedness.

Tessman's motivation is a good one: moral theory ought to do explanatory justice to tragic remainder. But in this view of moral tragedy, we see the underlying problem with moral-theoretic accounts of tragic remainder first discussed in 3.1. In both the Deflationary and Anti-Theoretical Approaches, there is a common theme: denial that tragic remainder coexists with belief in moral success. Tragic remainder is neither ungrounded phenomenology, nor a signal of moral failure, but recognition that something has gone wrong in the context of moral obligation requiring reparative follow-up. What has gone wrong in these contexts is grounded in the world's inhospitality to what matters. In tragic moral dilemmas, we are not doomed to morally fail, but something of special value is lost: a relationship injured, integrity violated, individual humiliated. As different as the case of the suppliant and *Sophie's Choice* are, they have this in common: tragic remainder attends to and illuminates what has been lost. This includes an unobjectionable relationship with a stranger and playing an agential role in a beloved child's demise, respectively.⁵⁷ The object of tragic remainder in each of these cases is *this* loss, not moral failure. This helps explain why the remainder takes the shape it does in each situation: in the case of the suppliant feelings of regret (*this thing should not happen*), and in Sophie's case feelings of devastation due to the loss being caused in part through her own agency. Finally, obligations of reparation are illuminated as directed toward restoration of the value lost where possible. In the suppliant case, to adopt means to resolve the remainder through social action to prevent destitution. In Sophie's case, the inability to restore the value lost in part explains her devastation. But this does not exhaust reparative content. Her devastation itself speaks to her own mattering, as her well-being only

⁵⁷ This is not to say that these are the most significant losses involved. These would obviously include the loss of the child and the consequences of poverty. My claim is only that the losses mentioned are what tragic remainder is most directly attuned to.

matters if she matters. This illuminates an obligation to seek counsel for her own sake to ensure she is not ruined by her tragic circumstances.⁵⁸

This account of moral tragedy, I believe, answers the charges brought from both the Deflationary and Anti-Theoretical Approaches. The Deflationary Approach claimed that tragic remainder should be dismissed in order to secure the authority and action-guiding function of moral obligation. To this, I have argued that the authority of morality is not under threat from tragic remainder. This is because tragic remainder and moral obligation coexist without tension, as is most clear in situations where it is the authority of morality that grounds the intensity of tragic moral conflict in the first place. Tragic remainder represents the world's inhospitality to what matters generally, not just what matters morally. Sometimes morality demands the sacrifice of things of importance, and this only makes sense as a genuine conflict if morality has the authority to demand such a sacrifice of us, and only if this is a sacrifice of something that *genuinely matters*.⁵⁹

Morality's action-guiding function is also not under threat from tragic remainder. This is because the remainder does not represent a failure of action-guidance, but a loss of what matters. The latter entails a kind of "evaluative perception" understanding of tragic remainder, where the remainder attends to the value that has been tragically lost.⁶⁰ The remainder thus functions to illuminate what matters and motivate obligations of reparation toward the bearer of value. These functions may not achieve the level of decision-procedural elegance desired by moral theories with an ordinal ranking of values

⁵⁸ It may seem overly harsh to think that Sophie has any obligations of reparation in this case, but it is instructive to imagine what a good friend would say to her upon discovering her understandable self-destructive mental state. They would likely console her and advise that she seek therapeutic help *for her own sake*, alongside the more obvious obligation on their part to love and care for her themselves.

⁵⁹ An important consequence of this point is that it provides a way to secure morality's authority without falling prey to the implicit overmoralization of the Deflationary Approach. Morality isn't the only thing that matters, nor does it ground everything that matters in a way that makes conflict resolution easy. This is why the conflict between what matters morally and what matters generally is so intense as to sometimes be ruinous.

⁶⁰ For a view in a similar spirit, see Talbot Brewer, "Acknowledging Others." Brewer says, "One cannot fully understand the badness of another's suffering unless one's apprehension of that suffering is 'quickened' by awareness of that other's irreplaceable value. After all, suffering borrows its significance in large part from the value of the life it mars, and there is nothing essentially tragic in the marring of a life if that life lacks irreplaceable value." (pg. 108)

and corresponding actions realizing those values. But it is a form of *guidance* in terms of explaining the worth of actions by reference to the values they respond to.⁶¹

The Anti-Theoretical Approach claims that moral theory must do justice to tragic remainder and that this is best accomplished by denying key tenets of moral obligation (overridingness or *ought implies can*). To this, I have argued that no such theoretical sacrifice need be made because tragic remainder is no threat to these aspects of moral obligation. This is because tragic remainder requires overridingness to ground the conflictual intensity of tragic moral dilemmas, and the denial of *ought implies can* obscures how tragic remainder persists in contexts of moral success. Tragic remainder is not a signal of either morality's dethronement or moral failure, but of the loss of what matters in contexts of moral obligation.

3.5 Whence Moral Guilt?

A proponent of the Anti-Theoretical Approach would likely object to my view by pointing out that tragic remainder appears more narrowly moral in nature than I have allowed. The feelings that arise in moral dilemmas are characteristically moral, after all: regret, remorse, taintedness, perhaps guilt. These feelings may seem to represent moral failure, especially considering that they are *negative* feelings. How is my view not just another instance of the Deflationary Approach, dismissing the moral nature of the negative feelings found in tragic remainder?

I do not think my view is deflationary of tragic remainder. For one, I do not claim that the tragic feelings are irrational or ungrounded in moral reality. Instead, these feelings are best understood as directed at the values lost in tragedy independent of the moral value of actions. This is after all why the remainder can coexist with moral success, because these values can come into conflict with an action's moral value. The Deflationary Approach wrongly dismisses tragic remainder because it ungrounds its content from moral reality, leaving underexplained how its feelings arise, what they

⁶¹ One way to accomplish this is to posit a pluralism of values with hierarchical structure where some values have a special status that warrants recognition (what I have called "irreplaceability," see Ch. 2). If this is the case, then decision procedures would become clear in cases where values on different planes of the hierarchy are in conflict.

function to represent, and why they motivate the way they do. It is true that sometimes individuals find themselves feeling morally guilty in situations where no moral wrongdoing has occurred. My view is that this is an intellectual mistake. But it is not deflationary to explain tragic remainder in a way that is partially corrective of moral experience as long as this explanation also provides good reason for the need for correction, as well as a good explanation for why the mistake occurred. An additional virtue of this view is that it helps explain why this intellectual mistake about guilt may be a *functional moral good*.

There is good reason for why we often make the mistake of thinking that tragic remainder represents moral failure, and why regret is so easily confused with moral guilt. Recall that tragic remainder represents what matters in moral contexts. This means that in moral dilemmas, *the value that typically drives tragic remainder is the same value that grounds moral concern: the distinctive value of persons*. If we must harm someone in order to save the lives of many others, we appropriately feel regret. This feeling is understandably confused with moral guilt because the value attended to by regret is the distinctive value of the person harmed. This distinctive value is a special type of value that grounds modes of moral recognition like respect and concern. Misrecognition of this value is salient as *the* paradigmatic form of moral violation. When we confuse regret with guilt, we aren't making a mistake about what matters in a situation, but only how our mode of recognition of its value ought to manifest given the context. In fact, temporary confusion between regret and guilt is a sign that we are highly attuned to what matters in the situation. This makes tragic remainder involving feelings of moral guilt in some situations a kind of *virtuous confusion*, focusing our attention on what is of greatest moral significance through the moral feelings. Ideally, any residual guilt in contexts of moral success is gently ameliorated upon careful reflection. This reflective tarrying with the remainder is just the process of teasing out the manner of appropriate response. Skill in adjudicating this procedure comes with the development of moral wisdom. This brings into frame how tarrying with tragic remainder relates to issues of character, as moral

maintenance requires regular “check-ins” concerning the status of one’s character in order to avoid moral backsliding.⁶²

This understanding of tragic remainder helps explain why situations of moral dilemma involving the value of persons is so different from conflicts involving the violation of mere rules. Consider a case where helping someone in need violates only some rule, like trespassing or violating curfew. In these situations, it would be strange for mere violation of a rule to generate emotions like regret and distress directed at the violation of the rule. Such a response would merit suspicion of rule-fetishization in line with the critique of moral self-indulgence advanced by utilitarians.⁶³ This is distinct from a dilemma where the horns involve the distinctive value of persons. In these situations, regret and distress make sense as attunements to the special value that warrants recognition. These emotions focus our attention on the special value and motivate obligations toward reparation. This is something there is no need for in the violation of a mere rule.⁶⁴ This motivating function also makes sense of why these feelings have a negative valence: because negative feelings, like fear and anger, motivate action in order to discharge them. Positive feelings do not typically function this way.

Ruth Marcus makes similar claims about the function of tragic remainder to inform and direct obligations of reparation: namely, to take sufficient action to ensure that such conflicts not arise again.⁶⁵ This is correct as far as it goes. But what Marcus’ account of the remainder lacks is this grounding explanation of tragic remainder in the

⁶² This is what distinguishes this view from Alasdair MacIntyre’s notion of *perplexes secundum quid*, which he derives from Aquinas. The Thomistic form of confusion is not a *virtuous* confusion that helps orient us toward what matters, but a confusion merely to be resolved. It is a roadblock to understanding, not a pathway to it. This leaves underexplained the epistemic function of tragic remainder. See MacIntyre, “Moral Dilemmas,” pg. 382. For more on the development of moral character in this vein, see Jon Garthoff, “The Dialectical Activity of Becoming Just.”

⁶³ Thomas Hill is partially right to point out that moral dilemmas are situations where we are distressed about not being able to do something that in normal circumstances is right. But the introduction of the distinctive value of persons is needed, I think, both to explain this fact and to make sense of the difference between conflicts involving rules and conflicts involving recognition of persons. See Thomas Hill, “Human Dignity and Tragic Choices.”

⁶⁴ Some rules, of course, may hold greater value because they are deeply interwoven with other values like community and civility. What is crucial to recognize is that rules only have this weight when supported by more fundamental, load-bearing values. Thanks to Adam Cureton for prompting this objection.

⁶⁵ Ruth Barcan Marcus, “Moral Dilemmas and Consistency,” pg. 121.

distinctive value of persons. Without this grounding explanation, we may be able to partially explain the reparative function of tragic remainder, but neither the character of its attentional function nor its easy confusion with moral guilt.

Finally, there is Tessman's charge that moral theories which privilege action-guidance over the task of witnessing moral experience are inappropriately motivated by the pathological need to establish the triumph of morality. I think Tessman is likely correct that what I have called the Deflationary Approach is at least partially motivated in this way. The seminar room approach to reading *Sophie's Choice* is paradigmatic of this. This approach attempts to deflate and dismiss significant and pervasive moral experience in order to secure an overly narrow understanding of morality's guiding authority. This appears to be grounded in a sense that morality is all that matters at the end of the day, so feelings of dissatisfaction upon moral success are delusory. The occurrence of regret and distress alongside moral success are thus an affront to morality's reign. This speaks to a kind of moral-intellectual pathology, I think, where securing through theory a morally well-ordered universe is the chief task of the philosopher.⁶⁶ Admitting this, however, does not entail jettisoning the action-guiding function of morality. It instead requires that we consider the robust explanation of moral experience an equal task of moral theory. The account of moral tragedy developed here attempts to do precisely this by reconfiguring morality's action-guidance function to better explain the distress that often accompanies tragic moral dilemmas. This pursuit is not grounded in the desire to establish a morally ordered universe. On the contrary, it is revelatory of the way in which the world is morally *disordered*: moral tragedy occurs due to the world's inhospitality to what matters, morally and otherwise. It is because the world does not function to bring us ultimate satisfaction that tragedy arises. This is the deeply tragic fact of moral life.

⁶⁶ See Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, Chapter 1 for an account of the history of modern philosophy with this aim as one of its tentpoles.

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CHAPTER 4

THE VARIATIONS OF MORAL TRAGEDY

4.1 Introduction

I have argued that tragedies occur due to the world's inhospitality to what matters. In contexts of moral obligation, the world's inhospitality can manifest in the conflict between obligations and other things that matter. Sometimes resolving this conflict is straightforward. Consider making a promise to take a close friend out for their birthday, but on that day an opportunity presents itself to go to an exclusive show you'd like to see. Keeping the promise to your friend means missing out on something that would in other circumstances be choiceworthy. This is an example of a *mere* moral tragedy since the existence of the obligation straightforwardly calls for missing out on the show. Mere moral tragedies often make us feel bad in various ways. But they lack what makes other moral tragedies particularly vexing: the persistence of *tragic remainder*, or the beliefs, feelings, and reparative obligations that are characteristically generated by morally tragic circumstances. These are the types of moral tragedies I explore in this chapter.

The paradigm examples of this kind of moral tragedy are situations where fulfilling a moral obligation means the loss of something of value that leaves such a remainder. For instance, consider failing to keep the birthday promise not for the sake of an exclusive show, but to help someone in an emergency. There exists in this situation a moral "pull" from both sides. The force of this pull is not extinguished after moral adjudication has been completed. This is why failing to keep the promise, even if justified, warrants reparative follow-up. This follow-up is warranted because what matters, the relationship with the friend, has been injured. Tragic remainder in the form of feelings of regret and distress are likely to arise, focusing attention on the relevant loss, and motivating reparation through explanation, apology, and an attempt to make-up. This characterization of moral tragedy helps explain why we experience these feelings in such situations and how obligations of reparation are generated in order to rectify them.

Moral tragedies are not a monolith, however. Consider two cases that have been discussed in previous chapters: the suppliant and the adult caretaking son. In the latter case, an adult son must decide between providing care for one of his two ailing parents.

In the suppliant case, an individual is approached by a person in distress requesting money for subsistence. In each of these situations, the characteristic features of moral tragedy are present: even after moral success, leftover feelings of regret and distress remain. These feelings have the attentional and motivational functions described above. But these feelings and the subsequent reparative obligations are likely to have different character in the two cases. For instance, *distress* is likely to be the more dominant feeling in the adult caretaker case, whereas *general regret (this kind of thing should not happen)* may be the more appropriate response to the suppliant case. This is due in part to the differing relationships between the individuals in these cases. But this difference also involves the recognition of a broader social failure in the latter case which does not exist in the former. The broader social failure that necessitates the begging of strangers for the means for subsistence creates unique inescapability conditions for the moral tragedy. Some moral tragedies feature this kind of broader social failure, while others (like the adult caretaker) are merely inter-individual.

The reparative obligations in these cases are also determined in part by their social factors. It is reasonable for the adult son to attempt to do right by the parent for whom he is unable to provide direct care. This can be done by exercising care in other ways, like phone calls and letters. In the suppliant case, this kind of response would likely be objectionably patronizing given the lack of an established relationship between the individuals. But this does not mean that other reparative responses are not called for. Importantly, these would include obligations of a more general and open-ended type than in the adult caretaker case: for instance, to help ensure that individuals in need are in general not forced to subject themselves to humiliating circumstances to survive. This is not an end likely to be accomplished by action directed at a single individual (as in the adult caretaker case). This is because reparative follow-up in this case requires understanding oneself as part of a larger social whole that has failed in its function to take care of people in need. The obligations that follow from this recognition are more diffuse and have different success conditions than in merely inter-individual cases: because they require collective action to repair, failure to realize their end does not entail failure to fulfill the obligation. In the other case, failure to make the phone calls or write the letters

(barring exceptional circumstances) is a moral failure. This difference is due to the existence of social mediation in the case of the suppliant that does not exist for the adult caretaking son. This social mediation manifests in the inescapability conditions present in the tragedy. These produce different types of tragic feelings and distinct kinds of reparative obligations with contrasting success conditions.

In this chapter, I explore the differences between these two types of moral tragedies, what I call *inter-individual moral tragedies* and *tragedies of justice*. In these cases, tragic remainder borne by individuals has different character based on the kind of inescapability present in the circumstances. Reflection on this helps explain why the reparative obligations that follow have the content they do, including obligations at different levels of generality, contrasting temporal extensions, and with different success conditions. In the context of tragedies of justice, it also provides some insight into the proper function of social institutions: in part to prevent the conditions which generate this type of socially mediated tragedy in the first place.

Analysis of these two types of moral tragedy provokes discussion of how the world is inhospitable to moral life more broadly. These conditions make up what I call *universal moral tragedies*. These inhospitable conditions may appear to undermine justification for moral pursuits generally. This includes how knowledge of our own finitude, existentially and otherwise, tragically affects moral life. For instance, human finitude means that moral perfection is unrealizable for individuals. If this is an aim of moral life, then some explanation is warranted for why it remains rational to pursue moral perfection despite its unrealizability. In the worst case, this pursuit may be charged with the accusation of *absurdity*. If an aim is absurd, then there is no reason to pursue it. Absurdity threatens an aim by breaking its bonds of commitment. I argue in response to this charge that the pursuit of moral perfection is not absurd, but *tragic*. Moral perfection is rational to pursue even though its final realization is undermined by the world.

4.2 Inter-Individual Moral Tragedies

Moral tragedies are situations where the fulfillment of moral obligations comes into conflict with other things that matter. In some of these situations, individuals confront a “fittingness gap” between available action and what would fittingly respond to

the distinctive value of persons. Consider the case of the adult son who must choose between his two ailing parents for whom to provide care. In normal circumstances, taking care of each of his parents would be appropriate. But in this circumstance, the parents' distance from each other means there is no way to take care of both of them directly. This case has the hallmarks of a tragedy because it manifests the world's inhospitality to what matters. What matters includes taking care of each of the parents, and the conditions of the world prevent this from being realized. The inhospitable conditions are locally inescapable: perhaps they could have been prevented if things had been different in the past (relationships mended, moves not made, health given greater priority, etc.), but this is the way things are now. A decision must be made given the current conditions, not conditions as they would ideally be. This constitutes the situation's tragic inescapability.

The adult caretaker case is an example of *inter-individual moral tragedy*. This is because what matters involves the distinctive value of persons on both ends of the dilemma. This makes the case different from a non-moral tragedy where a mere choiceworthy aim is thwarted by the world's inhospitality. If an individual dedicates themselves to writing a novel and this project is lost in a house fire, the values tragically lost include the novel and whatever may come of its completion. But in the adult caretaker case, more than a mere choiceworthy aim is thwarted. This is reflected by the tragic remainder produced by the situation: The adult caretaker is likely to experience feelings of distress and regret once a decision has been made in favor of one parent. These feelings are directed at the parent not chosen, and they communicate not only that something has gone wrong (in the sense that *all is not as it should be*), but also that a special kind of reparative follow-up is warranted given the distinctive value involved. This distinguishes inter-individual moral tragedy from non-moral tragedy: the latter involves no such distinctive value warranting recognition through reparation.¹

As discussed in Chapter 3, these feelings may be easily confused with moral feelings like (moral) guilt. But this is not because moral violation has occurred. It is

¹ As I argue below, it makes sense to be distressed at the loss of the novel, but it would be perplexing for this distress to function in the way tragic remainder does, toward obligatory reparative follow-up ("To whom?" is the appropriate question that makes the point).

instead due to the crucial value in question, the distinctive value of the parent not chosen, being the kind of value that grounds moral concern. To reject care for the parent in normal circumstances *would* constitute moral violation. But these are not normal circumstances. If the son believes he has committed some moral wrong in choosing one parent over the other even though he could not choose both, and there is no ill-will or otherwise suspect motive driving his choice, then this *is* a confusion. But it is a *virtuous* confusion. This is because the sense of moral violation is driven by virtuous moral concern for the parent. This concern is well-grounded in moral reality, and follows from the attentional function of tragic remainder toward what matters. The remainder then functions to prompt reflection on what makes for fitting response to the value in question, developing the content of and motivating desire toward appropriate reparative obligations.² The son is not wrong to choose one parent over the other, but he would be wrong to do so without careful and compassionate explanation, along with sufficient attempts to recognize the value of the parent through other means of care. This would likely be accomplished by explaining to the parent that they are beloved, and that the choice was not driven by malicious motives but by other reasonable practical considerations (e.g. continuing their career, spousal considerations, etc.). Additionally, talking on the phone regularly, writing letters, or video chatting may be appropriate forms of reparative follow-up. Once bridged, the fittingness gap generating tragic remainder is filled and the remainder is extinguished, its function fulfilled.

The aim of these reparative actions is not merely to balance the scales of care as much as possible (as if talking on the phone for enough time equates in value to being a direct caregiver). It is instead to express love and care for the parent through available means. In the context of moral tragedy, these actions take on the adjunctive function of communicating to the parent that their rejection does not follow from a failure to recognize their distinctive value. Reparative action instead *constitutes* fitting recognition.

² Barbara Herman would claim that the following reflections follow from the duty of “due care,” or the duty of non-negligence. This is the secondary duty that helps to identify a course of action that fits the moral circumstances when primary duties are insufficiently directive. See Herman, *The Moral Habitat*, Ch. 4.

This is made clear by recognizing that failure to follow through on any of these reparative actions *would* constitute such a failure of recognition, and would be rightly understood as an insult to the relationship.

Contrast this analysis with the individual who loses their novel in a house fire. What the cases have in common are the (locally) inescapable and inhospitable conditions that make them tragic. They also characteristically generate feelings of distress directed at the tragic loss. But these feelings of distress have radically different character. For the caretaker, distress communicates that something of distinctive value must be fittingly recognized through reparative follow-up. The nature of this obligation is explained by the value in question having a distinctive status that is apt for recognition. The values in question for the novelist include the novel itself, the activity of its writing, and whatever valuable consequences may follow. These values are not apt for recognition like the value of the ailing parent. Whether the value of the novel is in being an excellent instance of its kind, in the good it will do in the world, or in the expression of the virtues of artistic creation, these values are distinct from the value that individuals have. This is reflected by the nature of the tragic feelings in the case: the novelist is distressed at the loss of their novel, but this distress does not communicate a fittingness gap to be filled. This is true even if the novelist was careless and partly to blame for the house fire that destroyed the novel. The value of the novel is not something that warrants recognition, but that warrants *realization or production*.³ Writing a novel is an activity that is *to-be-done* for the sake of a value that is *to-be-produced*. This is why the tragic feelings in the wake of its loss do not invoke the requirement for reparative follow-up. There can be no reparative obligations to the novel or to its writing, even if it makes practical sense to respond to its loss by redoubling efforts to rewrite it. Rewriting would be done for the same kinds of reasons as the original writing, not to fill a fittingness gap in recognition of the novel. This is what demarcates inter-individual moral tragedy from non-moral tragedy: the involvement of individuals with a distinctive value that is apt for recognition.

³ Of course, novels are also *to-be-appreciated* and *to-be-learned-from*. What is crucial is that these forms of response to a value do not include recognition of the distinctive status-value borne by persons.

4.3 Tragedies of Justice

Tragedies of justice, like all moral tragedies, involve the conflict between moral obligations and other things that matter. What makes tragedies of justice distinct is the kind of social mediation present in their tragic conditions.⁴ This social mediation characteristically includes failure to realize some appropriate collective function that would alleviate the tragic burden borne by individuals within the society.⁵ This root of moral tragedy in a failure of justice does not ameliorate tragic remainder, however. The remainder continues its attentional (to what matters) and motivational (toward reparative obligations to fill the fittingness gap) functions. In tragedies of justice, reparative obligations have different character than those generated by inter-individual moral tragedies: they consist not only of obligations at the inter-individual but also at the broader social level, including individual obligations as part of the collective. This is due to tragedies of justice having their root cause in a failure of justice. Reparative obligations aim to repair not only inter-individual relations, but also the social institutions that function to prevent such circumstances from arising in the future. Where these institutions do not exist, obligations at the individual and collective level are generated to adopt ends of creating these institutions.

Consider the paradigm case of the suppliant. In the context of a wealthy society, this is a tragedy of justice because its root cause is in social policy that facilitates poverty and fosters social subordination. These social outcomes are avoidable in wealthy societies, but they remain locally inescapable for the individual confronted with the suppliant's request. This is why tragic remainder following the granting of the request has the character it does: even if granting the request is the right thing to do, it comes with the consequence of engaging in regrettable humiliation by treating an adult with whom one has no relationship like a dependent. It makes sense to feel regret and distress

⁴ This is not to say that inter-individual moral tragedies lack a social dimension. Inter-individuality is a kind of social relation after all. The latter is not a social relation rooted in a failure of justice, however.

⁵ Inter-individual moral tragedies may have social causes, but these are not fundamentally rooted in failure to realize some proper function of the social (e.g. breaking a promise to meet for lunch for a good reason may have a social cause that says nothing about the quality of social institutions). I address this in more detail in the next section.

as this is a thing that should not happen, even if all-things-considered it needed to happen in this instance.⁶

The inter-individual obligations in this case are not all that different from those of a typical inter-individual moral tragedy between strangers. They consist in refraining from indulging in the social subordinating aspect of the situation: for instance, expressing contempt to the supplicant by paternalistically deciding for them how the money should be spent, or by making the grant dependent on some submissive gesture like expressing gratitude or promising to spend the money well. What distinguishes tragedies of justice from their inter-individual cousins are the additional obligations that are generated. In tragedies of justice, obligations to individuals are paired with broader social obligations to help ensure that the failures generating the tragic conditions are repaired. These broader social obligations don't merely have different content than inter-individual obligations. They also exist at a different level of generality, greater temporal extension, and have distinct success conditions compared to inter-individual obligations.

Compare the case of the supplicant to Bernard Williams' justified homicide case from Chapter 3. In the justified homicide case, obligations of reparation exist only between the individual tasked with killing and those harmed. This is why a characteristic way to fulfill this obligation is through *explanation*: that the killing is not done from malice, but from a motive of mercy toward those who will be saved (a simple *I'm sorry* likely suffices). This explanation functions to recognize the value of the individual killed in a context where this fitting recognition is otherwise denuded. Since the individual does not belong to the social unit of the potential victims, and has no pre-existing relationship with anyone involved, no broader social obligations are generated for them. As long as the appropriate explanation is earnestly given, their reparative obligations have been fulfilled. Tragic remainder will likely persist given the severity of the act, but this does not generate additional obligations on their end.⁷

⁶ Recall from Chapter 3 the distinction between *regret* and *all-things-considered regret*.

⁷ Recall discussion from Chapter 3 on the tragedy of the world's inhospitality to the function of tragic remainder in cases where someone dies in the context of a moral tragedy (e.g. *Sophie's Choice*). The persistence of tragic remainder may itself generate obligations to self (going to therapy, etc.), but these are not obligations generated directly by the action in question.

Reparative follow-up in the case of the suppliant is different. Tragic remainder here persists not due to the severity of the act (which is relatively mundane), but to generate further obligations of a distinct type: what moral philosophers sometimes call *imperfect duties*.⁸ Imperfect duties are duties that range over ends, and which require that we adopt and work toward certain ends in some way or other. These are distinguished from perfect duties, or actions that we must do or not do (like murder, or make a lying promise). The broader social obligations that are generated by a tragedy of justice are imperfect because they involve adopting the end of creating or sustaining social institutions that function to prevent the given tragic conditions. In the suppliant case, this can be accomplished in a plurality of ways: through volunteering with charities, becoming more politically active in the local community, voting for policies that help alleviate poverty and homelessness, etc. It is characteristic of imperfect duties that, because there are multiple satisfactory ways to realize them, it makes sense to adopt means particular to one's own unique talents and capacities. For instance, it would make sense to volunteer at a soup kitchen rather than donate money to a political cause if you have more time on your hands than surplus income. Additionally, running for office is more suitable for someone with a particular interest and talent for politics than someone with many personal responsibilities.

Compare these reflections to the justified homicide case: in that case, it does not make sense to tailor reparative obligations to particular talents and interests. This is in part because the obligations in the justified homicide case are more narrow: to fill the fittingness gap in recognition of the value of the individual harmed as best one can. There are only so many ways this can be accomplished, and it makes sense to adopt the means that are best suited to the cultural context at the dilemma's origin. Assuming a culture that is not too alien from most human cultures, an explanation of motive is likely the best option. The key difference here is that the broader social obligations generated in the

⁸ This concept does not originate in Kant, but the Kantian conception of imperfect duty is its paradigmatic form. See Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4:422. For an explication of imperfect duties from the perspective of contemporary Kantian Ethics, see Thomas Hill, "Kant on Imperfect Duty and Supererogation." Also Barbara Herman, *Moral Literacy*, especially Chapter 12, "Moral Improvisation."

supplicant case are not directed toward the supplicant, but toward the creation and sustaining of broad social institutions (and perhaps indirectly toward all others in the society). They are obligations *toward* the collective as a member *of* the collective. No such obligations are generated in the justified homicide case because the individual is not a member of the collective in question.⁹

The supplicant case also differs from the justified homicide case in terms of the temporal extension of its obligations. Some of the reparative obligations generated in the supplicant case persist over a greater length of time compared to inter-individual reparative obligations. This is because these obligations are aimed at social institutions that function to alleviate the causes of tragic burden in the context of a failure of justice. In the supplicant case, this means helping to create and sustain institutions that ensure that individuals are not forced to beg for the means for subsistence. These social institutions usually cannot be created overnight. They typically require social and political deliberation that takes time to put into effect. This differs from inter-individual obligations which are usually fulfilled expeditiously. Explanation of motive begins to lose purchase the further it is removed from the initial incident, and a make-up lunch date five years from now is unlikely to repair a broken promise. These actions also begin to lose sense if repeated: apologizing again and again for a single infraction speaks to either a lack of understanding or a deficient confidence in the power of an apology.

Finally, the social obligations generated by tragedies of justice have distinct success conditions compared to inter-individual obligations. Consider the success conditions of the reparative obligations in the justified homicide case: the obligation is fulfilled as long as the reparative action itself succeeds (saying *I'm sorry*). Merely intending to follow-up is insufficient, all else being equal. In the supplicant case, however, the parallel form does not follow. This is because the obligation is not to *realize* social institutions that alleviate the causes of tragic burden, but to take up some

⁹ Even if one is a member of a collective where an inter-individual moral tragedy occurs, no broader social obligations are generated if the root cause of the tragedy does not involve a failure of justice (such as in the promised lunch-date case). Contrast this with the obligations the survivors of the incident have as members of the community in question.

reasonable means toward this end. Tragedies of justice require adopting certain ends and taking up some reasonable means toward them, but they do not mandate final success. This is because social institutions are generally realized collectively and not by single individuals (and for good reasons). Individuals cannot be obligated to do what only a collective can realize. This is why tragic remainder typically extinguishes at different thresholds in these cases: at the successful giving of the explanation and at the successful taking up of some reasonable means toward the end of alleviating objectionable social subordination from poverty, respectively. The success conditions of the reparative obligations generated by tragedies of justice are thus weaker than inter-individual reparative obligations. They aim at but do not require the realization of their ends. They demand only the ends' adoption and the taking up of some reasonable means toward them.

The demarcation between inter-individual moral tragedies and tragedies of justice hinges on the kind of social mediation and social belonging present in the latter. The differences in reparative obligations between the types include their level of generality, their characteristic temporal extension, and most fundamentally their success conditions. These differences speak to an underlying vision of the proper functioning of the social that has failed to be realized in a tragedy of justice.

4.4 The Proper Function of the Social

The broader social failure making up the inhospitable conditions found in tragedies of justice distinguish them from other moral tragedies. This is why these tragedies generate obligations for the individual as a member of a collective in addition to inter-individual obligations. These obligations involve adopting ends toward the sustaining of institutions that function to prevent these inhospitable conditions from arising, alleviating the tragic burden on individuals.¹⁰ Contrast this with a case of inter-

¹⁰ This is not to say that the proper function of the social is to alleviate *all* types of tragic burden. Such a view would be in the spirit of some forms of Luck Egalitarianism where social institutions function to equalize “the endowments of nature.” Though these views do not frame their discussion of just distributions in terms of tragic burden, it is easy to see how a focus on just distribution of welfare can be reframed in terms of just distribution of tragic burdens. For views in this spirit, see Ronald Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue*, pg. 92; and Richard Arneson, “Equality and Equal Opportunity for Welfare,” pg. 77. Contrary to these views, I do not think that the proper function of the social includes a focus on the just

individual moral tragedy like the broken promise to take a friend to lunch: this generates no broader social obligations to prevent such occurrences from arising in the future. It is the obligation of the individual to ensure that they do not make conflicting commitments. No social policy as such could (or should) realize this end. This means that it is not the function of social institutions to eradicate all forms of tragic burden (how could they?), but to alleviate the conditions that facilitate what is characteristic about tragedies of justice: the fittingness gap caused in part by the social failure to realize interpersonal relations of equality.

Framed this way, conceiving the function of social institutions in terms of ameliorating tragedies of justice may appear to beg the question. What is this social failure independent of its facilitation of a tragedy of justice? To answer this charge, it is helpful to take on a form of argument from the social contract tradition. Social contract theory has historically argued that individuals have prudential reasons for exiting the political state of nature and forming a society.¹¹ The overriding reason for leaving the political state of nature is that their practical ends are better secured through cooperation than through brute competition. Thus, social institutions properly function when they enable individuals to secure their ends through cooperative measures. A society can then be evaluated based on this criterion: if its institutions fail to facilitate cooperation among its members for reasons internal to the society,¹² then these institutions must be reformed until they succeed.

distribution of tragic burdens, at least not directly. As I argue in this section, the proper function of the social is to facilitate relations of equality between persons. This is why it is a collective failure to allow for situations like the moral tragedy of the supplicant, but not in situations like the moral tragedy of the caretaking son. If the son ought to receive social aid, it is not due to his bearing an unfair *tragic* burden. In the supplicant case, however, tragic remainder points to an inequalitarian social relation and calls for its amelioration. For views in line with Relational Egalitarianism in this spirit, see Elizabeth Anderson, “What is the Point of Equality?”; and Samuel Scheffler, “What is Egalitarianism?”

¹¹ The modern roots of this tradition go back to Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*; John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government*; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*; and Immanuel Kant, *Metaphysical Elements of Justice*.

¹² See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Chapter 8 for an account of well-ordered societies. These societies are internal dynamic systems which remain stable over time and reproduce buy-in for their institutions across generations. This does not necessarily mean they will survive extreme external shocks to the system, however, such as natural disasters or war. The key here is that the proper function of the social involves creating and sustaining institutions that win over their members through facilitating cooperation.

A similar argument to this can be constructed concerning the idealized *ethical* state of nature.¹³ When individuals attempt to fulfill their moral obligations to each other, they realize that these ends are better secured, and in some cases *only* secured, through the medium of social institutions. For example, each individual has obligations of fairness to others. But what fairness *consists in* is partially constituted by concrete social norms, rules, and practices that embody this abstract moral principle.¹⁴ Playing a game of basketball characteristically requires other people, but it also requires agreed-upon rules concerning appropriate behavior during play. These rules are mediated by social institutions, whether in the form of leagues with rulebooks and referees, or implicitly enforceable public standards of accountability. Without these determinant embodiments of fairness in shared social institutions and practices, fair relations in the game would not be possible. If these institutional norms don't exist, or if they fail to embody the abstract moral principle in question, then individuals have moral reasons to create or repair them. Without publicly agreed-upon rules for fair play, a basketball player is left to decide for themselves how to play fairly. The problem is not only that the lack of a publicly recognized set of shared rules incentivizes foul play. It also facilitates situations where individuals are unable to manifest proper respect for their competitors by playing fair and within the rules. This means it is possible in such a situation for no individual to act from malice or a desire to cheat and yet for each individual to reasonably believe that a fair game isn't being played. This possibility grounds the need for publicly affirmed norms of fairness. Without these, relations of equality cannot be realized and a fair game cannot be played.

A parallel construction illustrates the need for social institutions to prevent the tragedy of the suppliant. Here, an individual confronts a fittingness gap between all-things-considered right action and the value of the person. This gap generates tragic remainder and motivates reparative follow-up to fill the gap and extinguish the

¹³ I take inspiration for this characterization of the ethical state of nature from Kyla Ebels-Duggan, "Moral Community: Escaping the Ethical State of Nature."

¹⁴ The argument presented here can be understood in a similar spirit as Onora O'Neill, *Towards Justice and Virtue*, Chapter 5; and Jon Garthoff, "The Embodiment Thesis." The latter is concerned more narrowly with situations of indeterminacy of moral obligations due to a lack of embodying institutions.

remainder. In tragedies of justice, this gap cannot be filled, and the remainder extinguished, as directly as in inter-individual moral tragedies. This is because the remainder represents not just a fittingness gap between action and individual, but an *injustice*.¹⁵ This injustice is the objectionable social subordination caused by impoverishment that should be remedied through social policy in a wealthy country.¹⁶ Just like in the basketball game without rules, individuals do not act all-things-considered wrongly by doing their best in the situation. But when they act rightly, they appropriately experience feelings of regret and distress. These feelings represent that what is the case should not be. This judgment directs and motivates them to create or repair social institutions and practices so that they realize relations of fairness or equality. These relations function to alleviate tragic burden through the erasure of the inhospitable conditions that are its proximate cause. In the case of the basketball game, this means creating publicly agreed-upon rules of fairness so that a fair game can be played. In the case of the supplicant, this means creating or reforming institutions so that they function to alleviate poverty and its consequent social subordination. This allows individuals to relate to one another without the threat of this kind of tragic burden.

This framework for understanding the proper function of social institutions regarding tragedy makes it a threshold concept. This means that societies are subject to a standard of evaluation based on whether and how well they succeed in realizing this function. We characteristically evaluate societies as ‘good’ based on their success at facilitating the conditions for the flourishing of their members. Morality requires the capacity to recognize the value of others in our interactions with them, and relations of equality help make this possible.¹⁷ When a society fails to realize this function, it places its members in double-binds where tragedy often accompanies moral success. Tragedies of justice do not guarantee moral failure, but they do decouple moral success from a more

¹⁵ Consider someone with strict anti-egalitarian commitments. They would likely not experience tragic remainder in this instance. They may even see it positively as an opportunity for *noblesse oblige*. This is further evidence that the remainder in this instance represents an injustice.

¹⁶ This point is also made by Kant in *The Metaphysics of Morals* 6:454.

¹⁷ This is not to claim that individuals in non-egalitarian societies are unable to recognize the value of persons, but that inequalitarian social structures suffuse these attempts with tragedy.

generally meaningful and flourishing life. Individuals in unjust societies who experience this phenomenon regularly suffer tragic remainder in the form I call *ethical alienation*. These individuals come to believe that their society is incapable of facilitating their flourishing in combination with the fulfillment of their moral obligations. This is because they reasonably believe that they will be regularly forced to suffer tragic remainder in circumstances of moral success. If ethical alienation is pervasive enough in a society, it is reasonable to think this would stunt moral development and create social instability, as commitment to moral life and to justice may prove too burdensome for individuals to bear.¹⁸ Subjects of persistent and predictable tragedies of justice are right to wonder whether their society is capable of facilitating their flourishing.

Ethical alienation is structurally similar to the great tragedy in *Sophie's Choice* discussed in Chapter 3. Sophie's tragedy is unique because the death of her child means that tragic remainder cannot function to facilitate repair. The remainder has nowhere to go, it cannot be extinguished. This was her ruin. Similarly, morally committed individuals in deeply unjust societies suffer from their social world's inhospitality to tragic remainder. They are at least partly committed to justice as represented by their experience of the remainder, but there's nowhere for the remainder to go to be extinguished. It thus becomes a tragic burden, and potentially ruinous for their commitment to justice.¹⁹

Consider the example of Sophocles' heroine in *Antigone*. Antigone is motivated by her religious obligation to bury her brother, but the king of Thebes, Creon, forbids his burial on grounds of political treachery. Antigone is caught between the *pro tanto* duties to bury her brother and to follow the law. Contrary to much commentary on the play, Antigone is not a single-minded rebel intent on overruling man's law with the authority

¹⁸ John Rawls speaks of the strains of commitment in Chapter 3 of *A Theory of Justice* in reference to the need for principles of justice governing a society to facilitate commitment once the veil of ignorance is lifted. I introduce a spin on this idea here, as the strains of commitment also include congruence between our moral success and a more general meaningful and flourishing life. Unjust societies don't just make moral monsters, they also often make us choose between moral success and other things that matter.

¹⁹ Rawls, in "The Sense of Justice," extends this thought to explain that without the sense of justice, individuals would be without ties of friendship and mutual trust. This means the ruinous consequences of ethical alienation extend beyond concerns for morality into all areas of human life.

of moral intuition derived from the gods.²⁰ She instead considers both duties to be worthy of recognition, if all else were equal. This is what explains her distress: her dilemma is not merely between a clear sense of obligation and a dictatorial ruler, in which case her decision to bury her brother would be a fully righteous act of justified civil disobedience. Instead, she understands herself to be bound up in a dilemma between two impossible *pro tanto* obligations: one to her brother (to honorably bury him) and one to her society (to obey laws in fairness to others). Antigone must bury her brother, but she realizes that this will make her a lawbreaker and potential traitor to her city. Her moral heroism is not fully accounted for in the depiction of her as an ancient political rebel. Her heroism is also internal, consisting in her felt recognition of the tragic loss involved in even justified civil disobedience. This internal conflict is what grounds the implicit critique of her society.²¹ This is what makes the *pathos* of Sophocles' play so potent. We imagine ourselves in Antigone's place, alienated from society because it does not facilitate the congruence of moral success with general flourishing. When we reflect on Antigone's demise, we may vicariously experience her tragic remainder. This remainder directs us back to consider the function of social institutions: to realize the conditions which prevent tragedies of justice and alleviate the tragic burden of ethical alienation.

4.5 Universal Moral Tragedies

Tragedies are marked by the inhospitality of the world to what matters. The world's inhospitable conditions are inescapable for the subject of tragedy. Inter-individual moral tragedies and tragedies of justice foreground what I have called *local inescapability*. This means that although these conditions are contingent, their tragic-making features cannot be altered in the moment. An individual tasked with killing one to

²⁰ This is considered the "orthodox view" of Antigone. Its origins are found in Schlegel, and persisted in commentaries from Jebb and Müller. See Oudemans & Lardinois, "Existing Interpretation of Sophocles' Antigone" in *Tragic Ambiguity*, Brill's Studies in Intellectual History, Volume: 4.

²¹ Hegel notes in his analysis of the tragedy that Antigone's situation is in microcosm the internal tension that undoes the culture of Greek life as a whole: the strain between moral duty to family and political duty to the state. In other words, Antigone's ethical alienation arises from this tearing of the connective tissue binding her moral ends with the proper function of the social. See Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §469. For accounts of Hegel's interpretation of *Antigone* as a tragic collision between two irreconcilable goods in this vein, see Frederic Jameson, *The Hegel Variations: On the Phenomenology of Spirit*, pg. 79; and Walter Kaufmann, *Tragedy and Philosophy*, pg. 201-202.

save several others must choose. Such a tragedy cannot be escaped even if it was not written in the stars. Likewise, an individual confronted by a distressed supplicant cannot extricate themselves even if their predicament should have been prevented through social policy. In the context of tragedies of justice, it is this recognition of local inescapability that informs and motivates individuals to adopt the appropriate ends so that these inescapable conditions no longer predictably arise.

Not all moral tragedies are locally inescapable, however. The world's inhospitality to what matters in the moral domain is not exhausted by inter-individual and justice-oriented cases. Some moral tragedies are *globally* inescapable. Recall from Chapter 1 that global inescapability refers to inhospitable conditions that cannot be altered over time. A tragedy with this kind of inescapability I call a *universal moral tragedy*.²² Consider the pursuit of moral perfection, or the aim of perfectly aligning one's character, motivations, and dispositions with moral virtue. It is reasonable to think that if anything is a choiceworthy aim in moral life, moral perfection is.²³ This is not to say that moral perfection is the only or even the primary goal in life. Many philosophers, chief among them Bernard Williams and Susan Wolf, have argued that an overemphasis on moral pursuits results in a shallow and one-sided life, devoid of the other virtues such as beauty and the other non-moral excellences.²⁴ A general theme of this project resonates with this critique of overmoralization. For instance, I argued that moral theories that deflate tragic remainder in order to safeguard the authority of morality create an overmoralized vision of life that denigrates other things that matter. Admitting this does

²² Here I focus on what I call *moral finitude* as an instance of universal moral tragedy. Other examples may include the disharmony of the virtues, the fragmentation of values relative to the singularity of decision, the disconnection between virtue and happiness, the tendency toward *akrasia* or weak-willedness in human nature, and certain instances of moral luck that are globally inescapable (e.g. circumstantial moral luck concerning one's parentage).

²³ There may be a worry that moral perfection isn't a reasonable aim, but mere moral improvement is. I think this is off base for two complementary reasons: 1) It doesn't seem rational to have only moral improvement as an aim since this would allow for dropping the aim once this threshold is met. 2) Human moral nature is such that not continually seeking improvement towards perfection encourages backsliding. Mere moral improvement ends up self-defeating. What is in view in this section is what Kant called the "crooked timber of humanity" (*Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose*, Thesis Six). Continual moral maintenance given this state is of paramount importance.

²⁴ See Bernard Williams, "Morality, The Peculiar Institution" in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* and Susan Wolf, "Moral Saints."

not entail that the pursuit of moral perfection is either unintelligible or to be rejected. All that needs to be allowed is that the pursuit of moral perfection is a characteristic aim of flourishing human life, even if it is not the only aim that matters.

What needs to be reconciled is that the pursuit of moral perfection is undercut by the simple fact that all individuals die well before it can be accomplished. Human life is such that many of our small-scale aims are generally realizable: for example, visiting a friend or reading a piece of literature. Other aims are more exclusive, such as writing a book or winning a tournament. Both of these sets of aims are subject to tragic subversion given the world's relative inhospitality toward their realization. What distinguishes moral perfection from these aims is that it does not appear to be realizable *for anyone*. Part of this is the brute fact of mortality: all individuals die before the aim can be achieved. But this is true for many realizable aims as well: some die before finishing their book or visiting their friends. What makes moral perfection different isn't the mere fact of death, but the character of *finitude* that afflicts moral life. Given our moral natures, we are generally capable of incremental improvement in moral virtue, but the gulf between our current moral selves at any point and moral perfection always remains vast.²⁵ The obvious response to this predicament is to lessen our ambitions. This would make sense if our aim was of a different type: perhaps to become a professional basketball player but we were unable to make a high school team. Likewise, it appears delusional to expect that moral perfection is on the table for moral Lilliputians like ourselves. Why have this aim at all if its realization is an impossibility?

Kant, in the first and second *Critiques*, understood this fact of moral finitude to be a threat to moral motivation. He proposed that we are justified in holding to the practical postulate that human beings live on indefinitely after death in order to continue the pursuit of moral perfection (as well as to secure the just distribution of happiness found in the highest good).²⁶ Like the later Kant, I find this argument wanting.²⁷ What good is the

²⁵ There is a reason why literary figures meant to illustrate moral perfection often come off as ridiculous or almost inhuman (e.g. Dostoyevsky's Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot*).

²⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A812/B840 and *Critique of Practical Reason*, AK 5:122-124.

²⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, AK 5:450.

pursuit of moral perfection in life if it cannot be achieved until everything is transformed in the divine presence, including ourselves? We should have reasons available to continue the pursuit of moral perfection in this life without regard for the hereafter. At the same time, it would be better for this aim to be achievable even if this is not possible for human beings. This conjunction constitutes moral finitude's tragic character.

This fact of moral finitude is clearly *globally inescapable*. Unlike the moral tragedies discussed in the rest of this chapter, the fundamental conditions of moral finitude cannot be changed through individual or collective action. It is a fact of human life that if we have an aim to morally perfect ourselves, this aim will not be achieved. As with all tragedies, recognition generates the characteristic tragic feelings. Unlike the regret motivating obligations of reparation in other moral tragedies, however, the tragic feelings conjured by universal moral tragedy are not typically motivating toward immediate response. This is partially due to their globally inescapable character, as action-ready feelings in moral tragedy often attune us to change locally inescapable conditions.²⁸ But it is also due to the relevant relations involved being individual-world rather than directly individual-individual. There can be no obligations to the world as such, so none are generated in response to its tragic character.²⁹ Nevertheless, these feelings do share with feelings of tragic regret the representation of things as should-be-otherwise. If it would not be better for us to continue in pursuit of moral perfection indefinitely, then it would be no tragedy that this pursuit is cut off prematurely.

A characteristic worry is that merely attenuating our moral ambitions in response to moral finitude is not enough. This is because the pursuit of moral perfection is not tragic, but *absurd*. Adopting an aim knowing full well that it *cannot* be realized seems paradigmatically absurd. Humans have long dreamt of having the capacity to fly by their own power. But an individual who dedicates themselves to flight is either delusional or

²⁸ For more on the concept of the "action tendencies" of emotions in moral psychology, see Nico Frijda, *The Emotions*. This idea is rooted as far back as Aristotle, who argued that anger "must always be attended by a certain pleasure, that which arises from the expectation of revenge." (*Rhetoric*, Book 2, Ch. 2).

²⁹ The impossibility of having obligations to the world-as-such, combined with the to-be-extinguished feature of tragic remainder, may help explain why human beings often pursue creative activities (e.g. art, philosophy) in response to these types of tragedies.

absurd. The delusional individual at least escapes absurdity by believing they can accomplish their aim. What does the absurd individual have but their relative sobriety? What needs to be explained is how this alleged absurdity can be overcome such that the pursuit of moral perfection is not akin to the sober-minded Icarus. If moral perfection is an absurd aim, then there is no good reason to adopt it. Its justification would be thwarted. The pursuit of moral perfection would with good reason become an object of ridicule on par with the pursuit of self-powered flight.

Reflection on the tragic nature of the pursuit of moral perfection helps make sense of why it is not absurd. This is aided by reclassifying moral perfection from a moral end-in-itself to an *inclusive end*, or a composite end that is made up of other ends-in-themselves.³⁰ Understood this way, moral perfection remains unrealizable for human beings, but its constituent ends can be achieved. Consider an individual whose major spheres of life include their family, friendships, career, and political action in their larger community. Within each of these spheres are moral obligations of various kinds to many individuals. Suppose this individual is morally minded, sincerely desiring to be virtuous in all areas of life. At the end of life, perhaps on their deathbed, they may reflect on their decisions and determine that they have not lived up to this aim. They have made grave moral mistakes. They have widely missed their target of perfection.

Something seems wrong about this last point, about the target itself being perfection. This deathbed realization is not best understood at this level of abstraction. It is better instead to explain this realization in more concrete terms related to each moral sphere: they have not lived up to their obligations to family, perhaps due in part to over-indexing the demands of their career. They were not aiming at moral perfection *directly*, but its constituent ends: moral success in their concrete relationships and commitments. Success in the sum total of all of these would constitute moral perfection, but this is not what the deathbed realization has in mind. It has in mind each of moral perfection's constituents.

³⁰ W.F.R. Hardie is credited with introducing the concept of an inclusive end, in contrast with a dominant end which is singular and more important than all other ends. See Hardie, "The Final Good in Aristotle's Ethics."

When we aim for moral perfection, what we are really aiming for is moral success in each of our concrete spheres of life. Moral perfection thus functions as an *ideal* to be strived after, and not the kind of aim that it is irrational to pursue in the face of inevitable failure. A key virtue of this explanation is that it helps explain the way in which moral perfection is not an isolated aim cut off from the rest of practical life (as some overmoralized pictures of virtue sometimes imply). To adopt the ideal of moral perfection is not to separate ourselves from things that matter, but to be better integrated *with* them. Pursuing moral perfection directly sounds like an isolated and isolating enterprise, like a hermit pursuing enlightenment on a mountaintop. But if moral perfection is an inclusive end, then its constituents are what we aim at. These constituents involve all the things that matter in our concrete spheres of life. Moral life in this frame is integrated into the world, depending on appropriate relations with what matters for its success.

This understanding of moral perfection escapes the sober-minded Icarus charge. Unlike the dream of flight, moral perfection is an inclusive end. Pursuing moral perfection is not absurd as long as we aim at moral success in its realizable constituents. These constituent ends do come into conflict in many cases (e.g. career vs family), and no one will accomplish complete moral success in any one sphere, let alone all of them. Again, the solution can be iterated: moral perfection in the sphere of family life is itself an inclusive end made up of more concrete ends that can usually be achieved. That complete moral success in all spheres of human life is unrealizable is a description of our moral finitude. This is a tragic fact of a moral life conditioned by the world's inhospitality to moral success. This does not however make moral life absurd.

4.6 Tragedy and the Limits of Philosophy

I have argued that it is a universal moral tragedy that we die. This is because death puts a premature end to the pursuit of moral perfection. This tragedy does not make it absurd to pursue moral perfection because this is an inclusive end whose constituents are generally achievable. There is a parallel truth about practical life more generally, as all meaningful activities involving appropriate relations with what matters are subject to tragic subversion, most notably in death. All of our most treasured relationships and

projects will someday *not be*. This tragic picture of life frames human finitude as structured by *interdependence* with what matters. That we seek meaningful relations with the world outside ourselves helps explain why we are subject to tragedy. That we are subject to tragedy also entails that what is lost *matters*. A world without things that matter would be a world devoid of tragic loss.

The relationship between tragedy and absurdity is worth tarrying with for a moment. The character of this relationship is evident in response to the following question: Why do we sometimes suffer bouts of absurdity if it is true upon reflection that meaningful connection with what matters is available to us? This is because meaningfulness is achieved through relating to what matters in appropriate ways: building relationships with others, creating and appreciating art, forming social associations, developing our talents, etc. These are all activities that can be tragically subverted, or which can tragically break down due to circumstances outside our control. When this happens, especially if we lack other sources of meaning to fall back on, we can come into confrontation with the absurd. This is due to a kind of *value disorientation*. What provided stable meaning in our lives no longer serves this orienting function. We are stranded in a tempest of practical confusion, lacking not just knowledge of what to do, but of who we in some sense are. This is because our practical identities are bound up with the sources of meaning in our lives. We are brothers, sisters, friends, partners, authors, colleagues, teachers, artists. When loved ones die, significant relationships end, or important projects fail, it is intelligible why we might question the availability of meaningfulness in life generally. This questioning is not necessarily impulsive wallowing, evidence of emotional instability, or childishness. It is the result of having become unmoored from what matters and the consequent realization that the tempestuous seas are stronger than our oars can handle. The depths of despair after severe tragic loss are like an individual raised in an illuminated environment suddenly deprived of light: disorienting and unnavigable without the structure normally relied on.

Philosophical reflection on the meaningfulness of life is not likely to do much to alleviate this tragic burden. This is in part because philosophical activity is not what initiates the burden in the first place. It is the breakdown of significant relationships, the

death of loved ones, and severe illness and suffering that tend to produce the burden, not abstract contemplation. Philosophical activity is likewise not characteristically what functions to restabilize us in overcoming this burden.³¹ Philosophy's purpose is to help us understand the world: in this case, to see its tragic aspect where we are tempted to perceive wholesale absurdity. This may provide some aid in resolving feelings of absurdity, but it is not the primary remedy. Practical involvement with things that matter: individuals, projects, associations; these are the things that function to reestablish connection with meaningful life.³² The best philosophy can usually do is to remind us that there is a path and get us facing the right direction. Perhaps it also provides some candidates for what might be found along the way. Once oriented, it is practical involvement with what matters that constitutes the path's walking.

³¹ This is not to say that philosophical activity cannot be something that contributes toward life's meaningfulness for some. It only means that this is not characteristic for most people, let alone some kind of highest human good (e.g. Aristotle's vision of intellectual contemplation in Book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics*).

³² It is yet another deeply tragic fact of life that the psychological conditions associated with bouts of absurdity (e.g. depression) often function to make this kind of involvement intensely difficult.

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CHAPTER 5

THE BEAUTY OF TRAGEDY

“The supreme beauty is that of tragedy. The consciousness that everything passes away... fills us with anguish, and this anguish itself reveals to us the consolation of that which does not pass away, of the eternal, of the beautiful.”

- Miguel de Unamuno

5.1 Introduction

I have argued that tragedy involves the world’s inhospitality to what matters. What is unique about tragedy is the form in which what matters is presented. Characteristically, this is through the lens of *loss*. It is tragic when we lose someone we love. Grief is the appropriate response to such loss, and it is in part a recognition of the loss. But more importantly grief is a form of *appreciation* of the beloved in response to their loss. *Loss* is the mode of presentation of the value of the individual who has died, and grief is its counterpart mode of appreciation. This distinction between mere recognition and appreciation is parallel to Susan Sontag’s claim that melancholy has a “charm” that depression lacks.¹ The appreciation constitutive of grief has a charm that mere recognition of loss lacks. This charm is due to the background value appreciated through the prism of tragedy. This phenomenon is evident in the appreciation of tragic literature as well. In Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus flees Corinth to avoid the Oracle’s prophecy that he will kill his father and marry his mother. This act itself infamously sets the fulfillment of the prophecy in motion. We root for Oedipus and are dismayed at his downfall. Through this dismay, we appreciate the nobility of his intentions.

My claim in this chapter is that tragedies have a kind of beauty for this reason. Tragedies involve the loss of things that matter. This value, lost in tragedy, is apt for appreciation through various modes: grief, pity, compassion, sorrow. When we experience these characteristic emotional responses to tragedy, one thing we may recognize is that there is a peculiar aesthetic quality that arises. Consider an individual sacrificing themselves to save the lives of others. We call this action beautiful because it

¹ Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, pg. 50. Sontag contrasts depression and melancholy here, claiming that melancholy (associated with tuberculosis) has a charm that depression (associated with TB’s modern equivalent in terms of pervasiveness, cancer) lacks.

has a particular kind of aesthetic value in addition to its more grounded moral and character values. This aesthetic value consists in the unique frame given to the presentation of the sacrificer's virtue. The beauty of the act of self-sacrifice arises due to the contrast between the tragic frame of the event and the non-aesthetic value of the individual's virtuous character. This contrast makes the underlying non-aesthetic value shine out in a way that's apt for aesthetic appreciation, in addition to more general admiration.

This phenomenon is pervasive in tragic art. Consider Sally Rooney's 2018 novel, *Normal People*.² The lead characters in the novel, Connell and Marianne, are doomed young lovers. Their intimate relationship binds them together and transforms them, drawing out parts of themselves that otherwise would remain dormant.³ But it is clear from the beginning that their romantic bond is destructive. The recognition that a love story is doomed to a tragic fate is beautiful in part because the tragic frame contrasts so starkly with the underlying value of the relationship. This contrast illuminates the value of the relationship, making clear that its value transcends simple calculations of well-being: it may well be worth it even if it is doomed to misery and failure. Tragic beauty here is an epistemic window in the nature of the non-aesthetic value grounding it. If tragedies involve the loss of things that matter, then experience of them is a lens through which we can understand and appreciate what matters. Tragedy's uniqueness is that this frame, in virtue of the sharp contrast with what it represents, can become an object of aesthetic appreciation.⁴

Beginning with Aristotle, the function of tragedy has been understood somewhat differently, as a cathartic *purgings*.⁵ The experience of the negative emotions associated with representations of tragedy (distress, compassion, fear, pity) are due to vicarious

² Sally Rooney, *Normal People*.

³ This articulation of their relationship rhymes with Talbot Brewer's characterization of the dialectical activity of Aristotelian "character friendship." See Brewer, *The Retrieval of Ethics*, Ch. 7.

⁴ This is the grain of truth in Nietzsche's remark: "There is no such thing as pessimistic art. Art affirms. Job affirms." See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, pg. 435.

⁵ The following pertains to a narrowly functionalist conception of catharsis. For an account of Aristotle's view of catharsis as involving a *clarification* of the values in play in tragedy much more in line with my argument in this chapter, see Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, pg. 388.

identification with the tragic hero.⁶ This identification functions to facilitate the expression (or *release*) of these emotions absent their usual causes. This purging is typically framed as having virtuous effects. We might, in the spirit of ancient Greek tragedy, be humbled before the power of the gods. In contemporary contexts, we might take moral lessons from tragedy. A narrative depiction of the loss of a loved one might strike a compassionate chord in us. Once provoked, compassion may lead us to redouble our commitment to those we love before they're gone.

All of this rings true in part. A major theme of this project, however, is that formal or narrowly functionalist conceptions are often misguided if they purport to be exhaustive accounts of tragedy. Tragedy involves the world's inhospitality to what matters. It is not merely a literary form, nor must its recognition function in a specific way for it to be tragic. Rather, tragedy warrants certain types of recognition and appreciation due to its nature. One feature the catharsis account obscures is how tragedy is *a presentation of value*. This is what it means to claim that tragedy gives unique form to what matters. When we recognize something as tragic, we indirectly recognize the value of what is lost. This recognition of loss is not typically an indifferent judgment, however. It also involves a kind of *appreciation*. In many cases, we do not merely recognize what matters in tragic loss, we appreciate its value in a unique way. This distinction between mere recognition and appreciation is analogous to the difference between knowing that something tastes good and tasting its goodness. Appreciation has an experiential or phenomenological component that gives it its character. This is because appreciation is a subjective mode of presentation of value to an individual. When we feel compassion for Oedipus, we not only know that his fate is tragic. Its tragic character and the nobility of Oedipus' intentions are presented to us *through* our feeling it.

That at least some emotions are representational is not philosophical news.⁷ I do not stake a claim here on whether emotions are in fact perception-like representations, or

⁶ Aristotle, *Poetics*, Book XIII.

⁷ See Ronald de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion* for an account of the representational nature of emotions. For an account of emotions as perceptual experiences of value, see Christine Tappolet, *Emotions, Value, and Agency*.

whether in every case they are *evaluative* representations.⁸ My claim is that the representational nature of emotions at least sometimes facilitates appreciation of the emotion's target object value. For instance, we might experience excitement as a way of appreciating some desired future event. Or we might feel gratitude as an appreciation of a kind act a friend has done for us. Less discussed is how negative emotions function as forms of appreciation.⁹ When someone insults us, we might feel angry. It is not as obvious how anger is a form of appreciation as, say, when we have affection for someone we love. This is because anger's form of appreciation is indirect. When we're angry about being insulted, we indirectly appreciate the value of our honor or reputation. This process is clearer in cases of another negative emotion: envy. When we envy someone, we appreciate the value of something that's theirs, like their new job or new relationship. Compassion and pity are similar: When we have compassion for someone, we not only recognize that things have gone badly for them. We also indirectly appreciate their value, and the value of their well-being, through the *disvalue* of their circumstances. It only matters that things have gone badly for them because they matter.¹⁰

⁸ For a review of this debate, see Laura Schroeter, François Schroeter and Karen Jones, "Do Emotions Represent Values?"

⁹ That negative emotions can function as forms of appreciation is indebted to, but should ultimately be distinguished from, accounts of the practical value of negative emotions. For examples of these, see Krista Thomason, *Dancing with the Devil: Why Bad Feelings Make Life Good* and Mariana Alessandri, *Night Vision: Seeing Ourselves Through Dark Moods*. The genesis of these thoughts is found in William James' reflections on what he calls "the sick soul." The sick soul, more sensitive to the sources of melancholy and grief than the "healthy-minded," are rewarded with greater insight into life: "What are we to say of this quarrel? It seems to me that we are bound to say that morbid-mindedness ranges over the wider scale of experience, and that its survey is the one that overlaps. The method of averting one's attention from evil, and living simply in the light of good is splendid as long as it will work. It will work with many persons; it will work far more generally than most of us are ready to suppose; and within the sphere of its successful operation there is nothing to be said against it as a religious solution. But it breaks down impotently as soon as melancholy comes; and even though one be quite free from melancholy one's self, there is no doubt that healthy-mindedness is inadequate as a philosophical doctrine, because the evil facts which it refuses positively to account for are a genuine portion of reality; and they may after all be the best key to life's significance, and possibly the only openers of our eyes to the deepest levels of truth." (*The Varieties of Religious Experience*, pg. 130)

¹⁰ This can be heard as a partial inverse of David Velleman's maxim: "[W]hat's good for a person is worth caring about... only insofar as he is worth caring about." What's bad for a person is worth caring about (*is a tragedy*) only insofar as they are worth caring about. See David Velleman, "A Right to Self-Termination?," pg. 611.

This appreciation of value through negative emotions is one component of appreciating tragedy. Tragedies don't merely make us feel bad. They make us feel bad *for* and *about* something that matters. These feelings function to both represent and appreciate. Consider an athlete who suffers a devastating injury shortly before competing in a prestigious tournament. When we have compassion for the athlete, we don't merely feel bad. Compassion both represents and appreciates that what they've lost, the chance to compete at a high level, matters. Compare this to an individual who enjoys some pathological activity we are unlikely to think matters, like counting blades of grass for its own sake. If a drought kills the grass, we are unlikely to feel compassion for this loss if we don't recognize grass-counting as mattering. Instead, we might feel pity, but this would be directed at their misguided understanding of what matters.¹¹

There are several beneficial consequences of this view of the appreciative aspect of the tragic emotions. Some of these are relevant to the appreciation of artistic representations of tragedy. This includes how indirect value-appreciation helps explain why we find tragic art beautiful despite its disfavorable content. Another is how it fits harmoniously with the traditional account of cathartic purging, supplementing its explanatory weaknesses. I explore each of these in section 5.2 before turning to the main subject of this chapter: the consequences relevant to real-life tragedy. These include two main points of discussion: 1) Why real-life tragedies have a kind of beauty, even if this is importantly different from the formal aesthetic features of tragic art, and 2) How the beauty of tragedy can help make sense of why some individuals and communities get "stuck" in tragic narratives or self-conceptions, and how the theory of tragedy developed in this project provides some insight into how tragic narratives can be best resolved.

5.2 Artistic Representations of Tragedy

In this section, I argue that tragic art involves representation of what matters. This evaluative representation may be implied by the traditional functionalist accounts of tragedy deriving from Hume, Aristotle, and others, but it is not central to their

¹¹ In other words, this point should be distinguished from feeling compassion for them due to their pathological desires. This is a compassion that is directed at the value of the individual, not the loss of a valuable activity. The example of grass-counting comes from John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, pg. 379.

explanations of tragedy's function. I briefly elaborate on the role of evaluative representation in tragic art, and how it helps explain one way we find tragedy to be beautiful: namely, because the tragic frame functions as a sharp contrast which illuminates its subject value.

David Hume, in his short essay *Of Tragedy*, asks why it is that we derive pleasure from tragedy depicted in art when, were the same events to occur in real life, they would excite only negative emotions.¹² Hume's answer is that the negative emotions roused by tragedy are *converted* into pleasure through: 1) Recognition that the artistic object is a fiction, softening the negative emotions, and 2) Pleasure derived from the aesthetic properties of the tragic form (oratory, verse, etc.). These aesthetic pleasures overpower and transform the negative emotions into positive ones.¹³ This is what distinguishes tragic sorrow from real sorrow: real sorrow cannot be transformed into pleasure, it can only wane over time. Tragic sorrow is transformed into pleasure because the events depicted are imitations with aesthetic properties that real events do not have.

Aristotle's explanation of tragic pleasure derives from his understanding of the function of the tragic form. Aristotle claims that tragedies must have a specific narrative form: a change of fortune from good to bad of a relatively noble individual through frailty or errors of judgment. This is because this narrative form elicits pity and fear in the audience. The downfall of a villain stokes the moral sense, but neither pity nor fear. Fear is registered only if the hero is someone we can imagine ourselves to be. Pity is generated only if the hero is someone with whom we sympathize. The hero's downfall must be due not to vice, but to some inner flaw or unforeseen mistake. This is to ensure that we maintain our sympathetic stance toward their plight.

Tragic pleasure is derived, according to Aristotle, from a *purging* of pity and fear that takes place in the audience. When we witness the unmerited misfortune of the hero, our negative emotions undergo *catharsis*: they are released or expunged in the safe domain of the theater. This purging of negative emotions allows us to leave the theater

¹² David Hume, "Of Tragedy," *Four Essays*, pg. 1.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pg. 3.

feeling renewed, knowing that the events witnessed have not actually taken place. Some interpretations of catharsis argue that this sense of renewal is moral in nature, as we take from the downfall of the tragic hero moral lessons not to tempt fate or the gods.¹⁴

These explanations of tragic pleasure focus on tragedy's function: to elicit negative emotions like pity and fear and to in some way transform them into pleasure. What these explanations obscure, however, are the representational capacities that allow this function to take place. One capacity implied by both Hume and Aristotle is the cognitive representation of value. According to Hume, tragic pleasure is only possible because of the representation of the aesthetic value of the artistic form. In Aristotle's view, the tragic hero must be represented as at least more virtuous than vicious. In both, disfavorable events are contrasted sharply with the favorable events preceding them. Each of these requires the spectator to engage in some form of evaluative representation: whether of events, individual character, or artistic form.

Evaluative representation is thus one of the mechanisms that generates tragic pleasure. This exercise of evaluative representation leaves open a complementary explanation for tragic pleasure: when we feel pleasure about a tragedy, this is in part because the tragedy provides a unique frame for recognizing and appreciating the values involved. What is unique about tragedy is that these values are presented indirectly or through mediation. It is through the prism of their loss that we appreciate the values presented in a tragedy. This is in contrast with the beauty of the tragic form itself (rhyme, meter, plot), which is directly appreciated. When we experience the tragic emotions at the end of a novel, play, or film, this is in part a recognition and appreciation of value mediated through vicarious experience of its loss.

One strength of this view is that it is complementary, and not in competition, with the traditional functionalist explanations of tragic pleasure. Aristotle is likely wrong that tragedies need to have heroes with tragic flaws, as is clear from the examples of Antigone and many of Shakespeare's tragedies discussed in Chapter 1. But the general thrust of his account, that spectators must sympathize with the plight of the tragic hero and that this

¹⁴ This is G.E. Lessing's view. See his 1756-57 Correspondence on Tragedy with Mendelssohn and Nicolai, known as *Briefwechsel über das Trauerspiel*.

requires their aims to be relatively virtuous, can be maintained. Aristotle's explanation for this is that the downfall of only a virtuous hero elicits the tragic feelings of pity and fear. But why think this?

Pity is evoked in us at the downfall of the tragic hero because we recognize that their pursuits matter. When the world's inhospitality subverts what matters, this elicits compassion because compassion represents loss of value. This is what distinguishes compassion from mere distress. Antigone's anguish at Creon's mandate not to bury her brother stokes these feelings not merely because we would feel pain were we in her place. It provokes compassion because we know her mission is virtuous and her disastrous plight is unmerited. In feeling compassion, we indirectly represent these values within tragedy's unique frame of reference.

A second virtue of this view is that it helps explain why we find tragedies beautiful despite their disfavorable content. Hume argued that the beauty of tragedy consists in its formal aesthetic features. These features, rousing oratory or graceful and elegant tone, provoke pleasure in us, and this pleasure is what overpowers and transforms the pain of tragic events. There is no reason to deny that tragedy's aesthetic features play something like this role. But the explanation of tragic beauty goes deeper than aesthetic form. Tragic beauty has its roots also in the values it represents.

Consider Michel Gondry and Charlie Kaufmann's great American tragedy *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. In the denouement of the film, Joel and Clementine's romance is revealed to iterate a doomed cycle of infatuation leading to immiseration. This reveal is beautiful on purely formal grounds: it shocks and surprises us while simultaneously making sense of everything that came before (Aristotle's summation of a good drama¹⁵). But this is entirely too formal to be an exhaustive account of the film's beauty.¹⁶ In addition to its formal aesthetic features, the climax of the film puts a unique frame on the special value its world centers around: intimate romantic love. The film asks its audience to consider the significance of this kind of love, and whether it

¹⁵ See Aristotle, *Poetics*, Book X.

¹⁶ It is a testament to the film's greatness that it is beloved by film critics and regular moviegoers alike. This is unlikely to be explained entirely by the features only film critics specialize in evaluating.

is worth pursuing even if it is ultimately doomed. That this value shines through within the frame of inevitable doom illustrates the unique power of the tragic representation of value. The contrast between disfavorable frame and favorable subject creates a unique mode for appreciating the latter. It does this by allowing the subject value to be appreciated through the vicarious experience of its loss. The tragic beauty of *Eternal Sunshine* is not entirely due to its formal features, but also to its distinctive representation of the value of intimate romantic love. This aspect of its value, that it may be worth pursuing even amidst great suffering, is something that can only be presented in a context where it is framed by severe misfortune. What matters shines like a jewel, becoming ever more illuminated when its setting is sharply incongruous, like the vibrancy of highly contrasting colors.¹⁷

I have argued that artistic representations of tragedy involve evaluative representation of what matters. This representation helps explain why the traditional functions of tragic art (evoking pity, providing moral guidance) work the way they do, and additionally provides new insight into the beauty of tragedy. Tragic art is beautiful in part because it provides a sharply contrasting but illuminative frame for its central values. This is neither a transformation of pain into pleasure, nor a combination of distinct pleasures. It is instead a singular presentation of value illuminated through a sharply contrasting frame.¹⁸ In the next section, I explore the implications of this view for understanding real-life tragedies.

5.3 Real-Life Tragedy

¹⁷ Similar reflections are warranted, I think, about popular music made under the cloud of tragedy. Consider albums released posthumously or in the lead up to a musician's death, such as David Bowie's *Blackstar*, Elliott Smith's *From a Basement on the Hill*, or Nick Drake's *Pink Moon*. Each of these albums takes on new significance when the listener learns of the events surrounding its making. These events provide a kind of *tragic prism* through which to experience the art, a frame which allows the underlying values present in the music to be newly illuminated. We don't merely "top-up" sadness at a beloved figure's death with the emotions generated by the music. These elements interact in a way that changes the nature of the aesthetic experience altogether.

¹⁸ Richard Eldridge argues against a mechanistic view of art, where it is understood as consisting in mere appearances of pleasure and pain, thusly: "When we seek to reach some understanding of the mind and its place in culture and nature, then tragic representations have some claim to being regarded as the most illusion-free representations of reality." See "How Can Tragedy Matter for Us?", pg. 164.

I have argued that artistic representations of tragedy can be appreciated through the novel presentation of their constituent values. It might initially seem strange to think that this claim has any bearing on real-life tragedies. This is because real-life tragedies aren't the kind of thing we think of as objects of appreciation. Tragic literature and theater, by contrast, are apt for appreciation. They are meant to be evaluated as artistic objects, as good or bad according to the aesthetic norms of their given artistic domain. Imagine someone who approaches a real-life tragedy in this manner, elevating its aesthetic features to attention over its real-life impact on individuals: we would likely consider this individual to have at best made a category mistake, and at worst be seriously deranged.¹⁹

The sense in which appreciation of artistic representations of tragedy provides insight into real-life tragedy is not like this, however. We don't appreciate real-life tragedies like artistic objects because they aren't intentional creations apt for appreciation according to aesthetic norms. But there is something about the way we appreciate artistic tragedies that overlaps with how we understand and experience tragedy in real life. This has to do with the fact that real-life tragedies are, like tragic art, windows into what matters.²⁰ When something in real life is tragically lost, we experience the characteristic emotions of distress, pity, fear, and regret. These emotions have representational content. In tragic contexts, this representational content is also *evaluative*: it registers the content as valuable, as mattering.

Consider a long-married couple whose happy union is ruined by sudden illness and death. When the widower feels anguish and distress at this tragedy, these emotions represent the value of the marriage and the beloved. This is why these emotions are likely to spur and be spurred on by reflection on the marriage's many happy occasions. These reflections are not artistic appreciations. They are unlikely to involve the formal aesthetic

¹⁹ There is a connection here to Walter Benjamin's claim that fascism engages in the "aestheticization of politics." Part of what is so grotesque about fascism is its elevation of aesthetics over the more grounded values of well-being, equality, etc. For more, see Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*.

²⁰ This is related to but distinct from the sense in which values like compassion and perseverance can only be fully understood through their tragic conditions. The latter is a species of the general claim that all tragedies are windows into their constituent values lost.

features of the marriage. But they are appreciations of a different sort: They not only represent the marriage as valuable, but appreciate this value *through* the tragic emotions. Recall that appreciations have an experiential component in addition to their representational and evaluative functions. They are, again, analogous to tasting the goodness of a dish in contrast to merely knowing that it tastes good. This is because appreciation is a subjective mode of presentation of value to an individual. What is unique about tragedy is the way its form of appreciation is mediated: we appreciate the value of what is lost through experiencing negative emotions like distress, regret, and pity.

A characteristic emotion associated with tragedy is *grief*. When a loved one dies, we grieve their loss. Grief has many culturally specific forms, but it often consists of ritualized public gatherings, reflection on shared memories, and the public display of emotions, in addition to the individual experience of intense sadness. One obvious benefit of the grieving process is that it helps us normalize after tragic loss. Normalization occurs in part through reinforcing existing social bonds through public ritual. It also occurs through the purging of emotion that occurs during an episode of despair. Think of references to a “good cry.” Its goodness is relative to the normalization function, not a reflection of how it feels in the moment.

Reflection on the normalization function makes it clear that grief has representational and evaluative elements. When we grieve the loss of a loved one, we represent them, things about them, events in their lives, and how they made us feel.²¹ These representations are also characteristically evaluative. We grieve losses because the ones lost matter. This does not mean that grief only occurs for those we unreservedly love. Recall the argument from Chapter 2 that grief at the loss of unbeloved intimates makes sense in part because persons matter-as-such. When we grieve, we are not making

²¹ Jonathan Lear explains that this form of remembering functions to “turn mere change into loss.” Lear’s focus is on how grief begins with the imagination being activated, and how the imagination acts to make meaning from mere change. I take this reflection in a slightly different direction: mere change becomes loss when the evaluative and appreciative functions of grief are activated. For more, see Jonathan Lear, *Imagining the End*, Chapter 1, especially pg. 12.

absolute evaluative judgments in the positive register. Grief registers that the thing lost matters, even if its loss is good or beneficial in some other way.

Like tragic art, then, grief has representational and evaluative content. Akin to tragic art's purging function, grief functions to normalize: it involves going through the ritual form of the process, making the representations and evaluations, and experiencing the characteristic negative emotions. But parallel to the argument above concerning tragic art, this does not provide the full picture of grief. This is because the normalization function is not exhaustive of grief. Grief is additionally a form of *appreciation* of its object. When we grieve someone's loss, we do not merely represent them as mattering. This can be done disinterestedly. Grief involves commitment. Grief does not merely represent that something matters, it registers that something matters *to us*. This difference between mattering and mattering-to is what grounds the appreciative element of grief. Engaging in public ritual and sharing memories of the beloved don't just help us normalize in the wake of loss. They function as forms of appreciation of what has been lost that *take up the slack* for the normal forms of appreciation no longer available. Crucially, this appreciative element helps explain why the normalization function works in the first place: it is because public rituals and sharing memories are forms of appreciation that they help us process our emotions and reestablish our social bonds. This is why funerals can fail to help us normalize if they don't function as forms of appreciation. Think of the cinematic trope of the funeral attended only by a protagonist and disinterested functionaries: the ritual fails insofar as it fails to realize its appreciative function.²²

To help make this case, consider a thought experiment. Imagine a pharmaceutical method is developed that precisely mimics the neurochemical process underlying the experience of grief. This pill performs its function entirely unconsciously during a single night while the individual is asleep. When they awaken the next morning, they will feel

²² It might be countered that professional mourners exist in many cultures and that this speaks against the claim that funerals must meet a threshold of appreciation to be successful. However, it should be noted that professional mourners function to model public displays of grief for actual grievers, releasing them from some of the burden of grief's social responsibility. Professional mourners do not characteristically replace actual grievers.

exactly as if they had undergone whichever ritual processes are dominant for processing grief in their culture. The normalization process of grief is achieved without the pain and distress that comes with actual grieving.

If such a pill were available, it need not be irrational to want to take it. Grief is hard, and it is often difficult to see the way out when caught in its hold. The question is not whether taking the pill is rational, but whether it is possible to mimic grief in this way. If grief consists only of its normalization function, then this might be possible. This is because the normalization function can be understood algorithmically as an operation on an input to produce an output. When we wake up feeling refreshed after an unconscious dark night of the soul, we might be led to think this has been accomplished. But this is absurd. Grief cannot be approximated this way. This is due to grief's appreciative element. Appreciations have an experiential element in addition to their cognitive-representational content. Perhaps the latter can be approximated neurochemically (although the philosophical jury is still out on that), but the experiential element of grief cannot. We must *feel* the sadness, the dullness, whichever emotional form grief takes. These experiential episodes must occur because it is these episodes that realize grief's appreciative element. Without some version of these experiences, we cannot be said to have *grieved* at all. This is why we consider ritual practices like funerals to be so important as culturally specific realizations of grief. They provide a concrete form and context for these appreciations to take and in which to take place. Funerals are often said to be more for the living than for the dead. But they are also known to be a way of honoring the dead: a body unburied is often thought to be disrespectful *to* the dead person. These senses in which funerals are both for the living and the dead can be reconciled through these reflections on grief: We do it for them as much as we do it for ourselves. The sense in which we do it for them is *how* we do it for ourselves: appreciation honors the dead and gives form to grief.

Real-life tragedy does not share with tragic art its formal aesthetic features. But it does share with tragic art an appreciative element. This is the sense in which real-life tragedies are opportunities for appreciation. If something is tragically lost, then it matters. This means that recognizing tragedy entails acknowledging what matters. Something that

matters has a value that can be appreciated. When something is appreciated, its value is subjectively presented to an individual, usually through an emotional register. In tragedy, these emotions are characteristically sadness, regret, pity, and fear. When we experience these feelings, part of their function is to appreciate the value of what has been lost. Real-life tragedies are not beautiful in all of the ways that tragic art can be. But part of what makes tragic art beautiful, its novel presentation of its constituent values, exists in a parallel way in real-life tragedy. In both, we appreciate what matters through the prism of its loss. In this way, real-life tragedy can be beautiful by providing a contrasting frame that allows what matters to shine through triumphantly. This beauty is not its core feature, and it rarely rises to attention over more salient features in contexts of great loss. But if we step back and squint our eyes at our own experience, the tragic frame comes into view. In the next section, I explore how this conception of tragic appreciation helps make sense of why some individuals find themselves stuck on tragic narratives or self-conceptions.

5.4 The Problem of Tragic Narratives in Real Life

A tragic narrative is a form or order given to a set of real-life events of an individual or a community. This form foregrounds the tragic aspects of individual or community life, the sense in which external forces govern their fate and drive them toward demise. In this sense, tragic narratives attempt to place the narrative form of classical tragic figures like Oedipus, Sisyphus, or Antigone onto real-life individuals. The aim of this importation of form is usually to reveal the role external forces have played in producing tragic outcomes.

This function can have the benefit of redirecting blame from individuals suffering tragedy onto the external forces causing it. Consider, for instance, the American film *Fruitvale Station*. The film depicts a day in the life of Oscar Grant, a 22 year-old African-American man living in Oakland, CA in 2009. Grant's day is largely unremarkable until he decides to take the train in the evening to see fireworks with some friends. While on the train, a fight breaks out between Grant and someone he used to know while in prison. The fight spills out into the station and Grant and others are detained by police. While restrained, Grant is shot in the back and killed by the police.

The film accurately represents the real-life events that occurred on January 1, 2009. But the decision of director Ryan Coogler to spend most of the film following Grant's mundane activities before the fatal incident creates a sharp contrast with the heightened suspense of its final few minutes. The film could just as easily have begun with Grant's death and followed the individuals who witnessed it and spoke out about police misconduct. Instead, Coogler decided to focus the audience's attention on the mundane activities of Grant's life, his everyman status. He tries to get a job, argues with his girlfriend, and attends a birthday party. These events in no way lead us to believe that he would die later that night. Although the audience is not surprised at the film's conclusion, there is a kind of narrative surprise at the lack of logical connection between Grant's death and the events preceding it. This element of surprise focuses our attention on Grant's blamelessness, and by consequence on the injustice of his murder. In this way, *Fruitvale Station* gives tragic form to Oscar Grant's life and exposes the injustice of his death.

While tragic narratives can have this virtuous function, there exists a danger in importing the tragic narrative form onto the real lives of individuals. Consider David Treuer's book *The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee: Native America from 1890 to the Present*. Treuer, whose father was an Austrian Jewish survivor of the Holocaust and whose mother was Ojibwe, argues that popular accounts of Native American history give it an inappropriately tragic form. For instance, Dee Brown's seminal *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West* frames Native American history as one long series of tragedies brought upon by American expansion. In the tragic account, Native American tribes are displaced, separated, relocated, re-educated, and massacred throughout the 19th century. Brown's book was celebrated at its time of release in part because of the tragic form's capacity to redirect blame away from victims of tragedy and onto external forces.²³ But this function, Treuer argues, has the vicious

²³ From a Time Magazine review in 1971: "Dee Brown, Western historian and head librarian at the University of Illinois, now attempts to balance the account. With the zeal of an IRS investigator, he audits U.S. history's forgotten set of books. Compiled from old but rarely exploited sources plus a fresh look at dusty Government documents. *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* tallies the broken promises and treaties, the provocations, massacres, discriminatory policies and condescending diplomacy."

consequence of deflating the agency of tragic subjects and diminishing other vital aspects of their lives. It is worth quoting Treuer at length:

“It pains me to think about Wounded Knee. It also pains me, for different reasons, to read about it in books like Dee Brown’s. What hurts is not just that 150 people were cruelly and viciously killed. It is that their sense of life—and our sense of their lives—died with them. We know next to nothing about them. Who among them was funny? Who kicked his dog? Were they unfaithful, or vain, or fond of sweets? The tiny, fretful, intricate details are what make us who we are. And they are lost again and again when we paint over them with the tragedy of “the Indian.” In this sense, the victims of Wounded Knee died twice—once at the end of a gun, and again at the end of a pen. We die, too, in our own minds. And this is perhaps the saddest death of all. We are so used to telling the stories of our lives, and those of our tribes, as a tragedy, as a necessarily diminishing line—once we were great, once we ruled everything, and now we rule nothing, now we are merely ghosts that haunt the American mind—that we deprive ourselves of the very life we yearn for. I cannot shake the belief that the ways in which we tell the story of our reality shapes that reality: the manner of telling makes the world. And I worry that if we tell the story of the past as a tragedy, we consign ourselves to a tragic future. If we insist on raging against our dependency on the United States and modernity itself, we miss something vital: as much as our past was shaped by the whims and violence of an evolving America, America, in turn, has been shaped by us.”²⁴

Treuer worries that the tragic form, while able to expose important truths and help to direct moral responsibility in appropriate ways, can also conceal the more intricate details of an individual or community’s life. The obscuring of these details has a *paralytic effect*: it prevents individuals subject to tragedy from understanding themselves as anything other than victims. This simultaneous revealing-and-concealing functions as a kind of symbolic second murder. In its attempt to do right by those treated unjustly, it wrongs them again by framing their lives primarily as victims of tragedy. Treuer’s concern is not only that this heaps injustice upon injustice, but that it confines individuals in historically mistreated communities to regard their own histories as inevitable tragedies. If internalized, the tragic narrative consigns individuals to the belief that their futures are fated for doom, paralyzing them in its panorama.²⁵ It is as if the Fates that governed the world for Oedipus continue to exist in the form of powerful federal

²⁴ David Treuer, *The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee: Native America from 1890 to the Present*, pgs. 451-452.

²⁵ The Chief of the Crow Nation, Plenty Coups, famously said: “When the buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened.” See Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope*, pg. 2.

governments and oppressive ethnic majorities. The tragic form achieves its aim of redirecting blame and pronouncing innocence with the ironic consequence of tying tragic victims to the mast of their tragedy: they can only go where the tragic winds blow.

This phenomenon, what I'm calling *the problem of tragic narratives*, is not isolated to Native American history.²⁶ It often arises for individuals belonging to social groups that have been historically mistreated. Consider the plight of transgender individuals in much of contemporary American society. Talia Bettcher, a philosopher and transwoman, argues in "Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers: On Transphobic Violence and the Politics of Illusion" that transgender individuals are subject to a socially binding communicative system that she calls "The Natural Attitude (about sex)."²⁷ The Natural Attitude says that an individual's sex status is determined entirely by their genitals, is given at birth, and is invariant over time.²⁸ Given these factors, the only way to determine someone's sex status in normal circumstances is to "read" it from their gender presentation: their clothes, hair, mannerisms, etc. This means that whether someone wants to communicate their sex status or not, they communicate it through their manner of presentation. Bettcher argues that this communicative system is what lies behind accusations of deception against transgender persons, even when they haven't engaged in verbal communication concerning their sex status.²⁹

Bettcher claims that the communicative system of the Natural Attitude places transgender individuals in a double-bind. If they keep their sex status hidden, they risk

²⁶ Another obvious but complicated example from American history is treatment of African-Americans under institutionalized slavery, Jim Crow, and contemporary de facto segregation. Interestingly, an acceptance of the tragic narrative can be found on both the right (Clarence Thomas' charge to the graduating class at Savannah State College in 1985, "I am here to say that discrimination, racism and bigotry have gone no place and probably never will," is emblematic of his tragic pessimism about race relations) and the left (consider the words of Afro-pessimist Frank B. Wilderson III: "The spectacle of Black death is essential to the mental health of the world"). This speaks to the political function of tragic narratives as being more general than a linear theory of the spectrum of political ideologies would allow.

²⁷ Talia Bettcher, "Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers: On Transphobic Violence and the Politics of Illusion," pg. 48.

²⁸ Ibid., pg. 49.

²⁹ Ibid., pg. 50. Bettcher cites the case of Gwen Arajuo, a 17 year-old trans woman who was killed in California in 2002 by a group of men who believed she was a cis woman. Arajuo's killers argued that she had deceived them into beliefs about her sex status even though she had made no verbal claims about her body.

accusations of being a “deceiver,” having already non-verbally communicated their sex status through their manner of presentation. If they out themselves as trans, they risk being labeled a “make-believer,” someone who lives a fictitious life apt for ridicule and condescension. Both deceivers and make-believers can be subject to violence, and both are often held responsible for the violence and humiliation done to them. This is because they communicate their sex status to others whether they intend to or not. Merely *being trans* violates the norms of this communicative system, either by misaligning representation with underlying reality, or by engaging in outward communicative subversion.

While Bettcher does not frame the double-bind in terms of a tragic narrative, it has tragedy’s formal components. It is understandable that transgender individuals in unsympathetic communities sometimes internalize these tropes, framing their lives as tragically afflicted with the fate of being a viciously motivated and deceitful troublemaker or the unfortunate victim of mental illness.³⁰ Like Treuer’s worry about the tragic narrative of Native American history, it is reasonable to think that the tragic form functions here as a kind of second murder: not only must transgender individuals navigate difficult social terrain, they must also *fail* in this navigation regardless of their intentions. This failure is inevitable because all action taken is interpreted through the tragic frame. The paralytic effect follows from this belief that the only options available involve a kind of self-destruction. Deceiver or make-believer: pick your poison pill.

These examples illustrate the danger of the tragic narrative. Tragic narratives encourage self-understanding as a tragic subject afflicted by dominant external forces. This self-understanding has a paralyzing effect on agency by foreclosing the possibility of a non-doomed fate. It relegates individuals subject to tragedy to the role of enduring victims. It would be understandable for these reasons to reject tragic narratives outright.

³⁰ Another example of the problem of tragic narratives arises for some disabled individuals. Severe disability can sometimes lead individuals to think of themselves as doomed to fail as persons, whether in their role as parents, friends, fellow citizens, or romantic partners. Interestingly, this tragic framing can sometimes lead to disabled persons being fetishized as tragic victims, pitied for Fate’s capricious adjudications and celebrated only for their endurance.

In fact, rejecting a given tragic script for one's life may be a helpful therapeutic strategy for individuals "stuck" on a paralyzing self-conception.³¹

Ultimately rejecting a tragic narrative, however, does not entail rejecting that one is a victim of tragic circumstances. This is because the tragic narrative form is not the same thing as a tragedy. In what follows, I argue that this distinction, between narrative form and reality, is key to understanding two important points: 1) Why individuals sometimes get "stuck" on these narratives despite their obstructive function, and 2) How a synthesis can be reached that recognizes the persistence of tragedy in people's lives without relegating them to perpetual victimhood status.

5.5 Tarrying with Tragedy

The worry I've articulated about tragic narratives stems from a worry about all narrative forms when applied to real life: that they function to encourage confabulation about one's life in order to fit the narrative form.³² In some scenarios, narrativity can be good for an individual in the same way a theory can be good for understanding some domain in the world. This is by providing a ready-to-hand and more-or-less comprehensive explanation of the relations between the various components and circumstances of one's life. A narrative has a *setting* that tells us what exists and what has significance. This allows the individual to better understand who they are (their social identity in relation to others) and what they ought to do with their lives (because of what has significance). Like theories, however, narratives sometimes fulfill this function by sacrificing truth at the altar of explanatory comprehensiveness. A life is always more complex than its biographical form.

While narrativity's truth-obscuring tendency is rightly understood as a problem, this does not deflate its setting-providing function. Even a largely false narrative may provide the needed context for an individual to make sense of their place in the world.³³ However, in tragic narratives, even this function is under attack. In cases where narratives

³¹ Thanks to Claire Darteis for pointing out this issue to me, inspiring the idea for this chapter.

³² Galen Strawson makes this point in "Against Narrativity," pg. 443.

³³ Consider the way large-scale conspiracy theories provide a sense of clarity about the world and one's place in it. For more, see C. Thi Nguyen, "The Seductions of Clarity."

produce Treuer's stultification or Bettcher's double-bind, the tragic form not only obscures the non-doomed path, but paralyzes the individual before their tragic fate. In aiming to redirect blame and prove moral innocence, the comprehensive tragic narrative counteracts its own purported agency-enhancing function. Providing a setting to better understand the world and the individual's place in it instead becomes a self-imposed straightjacket. The subject of a tragic narrative is barred in the prison of the tragic form, doomed to fruitlessly search for escape like Oedipus and other classical tragic figures.

In the worst case, acceptance of the tragic narrative can appear as an instance of the Freudian death drive.³⁴ If the function of narrativity is to provide clear guidelines and markers for reflective practical agency, then a tragic narrative may appear fundamentally irrational. It takes on a narrative form that severely constricts agential opportunities, guarantees practical failure, and is not revisable from the inside. If tragic narratives function in this way, then isn't embracing them an act of self-destruction?

I do not doubt that some tragic narratives pathologically function in this way and should be overcome. What I doubt is that tragic narratives are, as a class, fundamentally irrational. What the death-drive accusation misses is the way in which tragic narratives communicate what matters in tragic circumstances. Following the general thesis of this project, tragedies involve the world's inhospitality to what matters. This means that recognizing something as a tragic loss entails recognizing that it matters. A tragic narrative of one's life, therefore, communicates to the individual *that they matter*. Its widespread adoption in society means a widespread adoption of the belief that the victims of tragedy matter. For tragic victims, this can be a revelation. Consider the paradigmatic tragic victims already discussed: Native Americans and transgender persons. Revelation of these individuals as tragic victims is a significant moment in recognition of their moral status, as those who have been (and therefore *can be*) wronged. Individuals without this status cannot be tragic victims. Recognition of tragedy can thus function to pick out who has moral status among those who have previously been morally ignored. The tragic

³⁴ Freud first conceptualizes the death drive in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in order to understand why victims of atrocity in war would repeatedly return to their trauma (what Freud calls "war neuroses"). See especially Chapter 2.

narrative places a morally evaluative form on what would otherwise be merely descriptive: *displacements* become *atrocities*. It is again what transforms a mere change into a *loss*.

That the tragic form functions to pick out what matters is key to understanding its other features: its redirecting of blame and its non-formal aesthetic beauty. The reason why the tragic form functions to redirect blame, as in the case of Native Americans as depicted in Dee Brown's book, is because it elevates the tragic victim to a recognized moral status they otherwise would lack. The tragic narrative of Native American life in the 19th century doesn't merely present new historical facts, it presents them within a frame where the victims are undeserving of their fate. This claim of desert is a moral claim. It entails that victims have a moral status that can be and has been violated, and that some form of redress is due. The declaration that the tragic victim matters is an important step toward affirming their moral status in contexts where it has been ignored.

In tragic situations, individuals can be overwhelmed by negative feelings. These feelings sometimes facilitate a sense that one lacks inherent value or worth. Focusing attention on the tragic form of the situation can be a way of reinforcing that one matters. It is only because someone matters that they can be a victim of tragedy. This is one way tragedy can be beautiful: not in virtue of formal aesthetic elements like rhyme or meter, but the way it utilizes terrible circumstances to uniquely reveal what matters. Real-life tragedies do not have excellent uses of meter or surprising third-act reveals, but they do have a beauty that captures attention and that it is appropriate to appreciate. This is parallel to the beauty of an act of self-sacrifice discussed in section 5.1. That act is beautiful because it reveals a character virtue through a starkly contrasting frame. Tragic beauty consists in this utilization of the tragic frame to reveal what matters.

This beauty in the revelation of what matters is sometimes what causes individuals to get "stuck" on tragic narratives of their own lives. When overwhelmed by terrible circumstances, framing them as a tragedy reaffirms to those suffering that they matter. This is not characteristically the embrace of a drive toward self-destruction. Instead, it is a framing of available materials in a way that reveals and affirms fundamental worth. When telling the story of a life as a tragedy evokes sympathy in

others, this is partly due to a recognition of the worth of the tragic subject. Affirming fundamental worth and seeking recognition from others are reasonable responses to tragic suffering. These responses can become pathological in some circumstances: for instance, by obscuring ways to escape suffering, seeking pity for its own sake, or overemphasizing one social position (as tragic victim) over others.³⁵ Individuals get stuck on tragic narratives when they over-embrace them in these ways. Appropriate appreciation of tragic beauty becomes unmoored, as the locus of attention strays from the values it frames. Genuine appreciation becomes mere indulgence as tragedy's superficial features are mistaken for its underlying ground. What is important to recognize is that these are *pathologizations* of an underlying rational phenomenon to affirm worth and seek warranted recognition. Individuals may get stuck on a tragic narrative because of some pathological satisfaction it delivers, but the narrative's *stickiness* is due to its also being apt for non-pathological appreciation.³⁶

An important consequence of this view is that it helps explain why it is vital to “tarry” with tragedy. Consider a paradigmatic stoic hero, unmoved by a grand injustice done to them. Perhaps they have been accused of a vicious crime they did not commit, and the levers of justice have failed to perform their function to deliver them.³⁷ The stoic hero remains emotionless in this scenario, accepting their fate as if delivered by the gods. “It is what it is” and “What can be done about it?” are characteristic stoic responses to a doomed fate.

³⁵ An everyday example of this kind of pathological tragic narrative is an individual who sabotages a loving relationship due to a lack of belief in their own self-worth (often but not always resulting from previous relationship trauma). Individuals sometimes do this in order to protect themselves from future rejection, but also at times to protect the beloved from settling for something “beneath” them. The tragic narrative that they are unworthy of the love another has freely given obscures the fact that this freely given love is itself an affirmation of their worth. For a rich literary example of such a character, see Nastasya Filipovna from Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*.

³⁶ In addition, the stickiness of the tragic narrative is also in part due to the fact that beauty is something we tend to value for its own sake.

³⁷ A possible example is the trial of Michael Peterson, as depicted in the television series *The Staircase*. Peterson's first trial ended in a guilty verdict despite plenty of room for reasonable doubt. Peterson's strangely unmoved reaction to the verdict evoked declarations from audience members that he was clearly guilty, else he would have been more outraged by the jury's decision. While this is not a good argument for his guilt, the perplexity at Peterson's stoicism is reasonable. Peterson seems to have not appropriately tarried with the tragedy of his circumstances before coming to stoic acceptance of his fate. Thanks to Jon Garthoff for directing me to this example.

It is reasonable to believe that there is something genuinely wrong with this kind of immediate response to tragedy. This is because the stoic response skips the step of appreciating the tragic aspect of the situation. Appreciating tragedy occurs through the characteristic tragic emotions: sadness, despair, pity (or recognition that pity is warranted), anger (if dealt with unjustly). These emotions are rational responses to the world's inhospitality. They function to focus our attention on items of significance in a situation. Tragic beauty functions in the same way, attracting attention through its frame toward its underlying subject value. Tarrying with these is the appropriate response to recognizing what matters in tragic circumstances. If someone in a tragic situation were entirely devoid of these responses, we would rightly question whether they understood their situation at all. We might ask, "You do understand that you're being unjustly punished, right?" If they do understand their situation but do not feel the characteristic emotions, this would not be sage wisdom, but possible evidence of an affective disorder. Someone who does not tarry with tragedy is the flipside of the individual stuck on a tragic narrative: they under-appreciate what the latter over-appreciates. The latter do this by divorcing the signal from the source, the former by not receiving the signal at all. Working through tragic circumstances by processing their characteristic emotions functions to help us normalize in its wake, and this process begins with tragic appreciation.³⁸ That we can get stuck in this process is not a reason to think the process has no telic function. It only means there are better and worse ways to work through it. The only way out (of tragedy) is through (tarrying with its characteristic emotions).

The golden mean between the problematic tragic narrative and stoic indifference to tragedy involves recognition of what real-world tragedy is, and how it differs from its representation in art. In tragic art, especially classical tragedy, individuals are *doomed*. Oedipus is doomed by the Fates, and Antigone by Creon's edicts. Escape from tragedy is impossible for them, even resulting in tragic irony for Oedipus. Artistic tragedies are

³⁸ Though he does not frame it in these terms, I believe this captures the essence of Miguel de Unamuno's argument in *The Tragic Sense of Life*. He explains that after the death of his child, he and his wife entered a period of intense suffering, an "embrace of despair" that generated between them "true spiritual love." (pg. 72) This embrace of despair de Unamuno later calls a "tragic consolation" and a "supreme beauty." (pg. 101) This is the process of tragic appreciation.

generally *exhaustive* in this sense: whatever Oedipus and Antigone do, they are doomed. But this is not typically true of real-life tragedies. David Treuer argues that the tragic narrative of Native American history obscures the real triumphs of Indigenous American cultures, including the ways they've shaped larger American culture. Focusing attention on these achievements not only tells a more accurate story, it also has the benefit of stoking the imagination of present-day Indigenous people to create new forms of life that are consistent with their social identity.³⁹ The problem with the tragic narrative is not its recognition of tragedy, but its determination that tragedy be *exhaustive*, numbing attentional sensitivity to any other value. This leaves the tragic subject with no way out.⁴⁰

Likewise, Talia Bettcher argues that the double-bind faced by transgender individuals is *not* exhaustive of their social identity. Bettcher points to trans communities where individuals opt-out of the communicative system of the Natural Attitude. In these communities, individuals present themselves to others through "intelligibility-conferring narratives."⁴¹ These are stories trans individuals tell each other about who they are. These stories are the social utility that takes the place of the Natural Attitude in communicating who one is to others. By giving individuals power over how they are understood by others, trans communities respect individual autonomy in a way that the Natural Attitude violates. They show that the double-bind is not exhaustive of trans identity. You are not either a deceiver or a make-believer. There is a way out.

Crucially, this overcoming of the tragic narrative is partly accomplished not by rejecting narrativity, but by *pluralizing* it.⁴² Treuer points to narratives of Native

³⁹ For instance, Treuer explains how reeducation programs run by the Office of Indian Affairs had the purpose of eliminating Native American identity, but actually functioned to bring together individuals from different Indigenous groups who otherwise would never meet. This created solidarity between them and formed bonds that survived after leaving the schools. This in itself helped create a more unified Native American identity than had previously existed. See Treuer, pg. 174.

⁴⁰ There is a connection here with Freud's distinction between "mourning" and "melancholia." Mourning recognizes the lost object, but melancholia pathologically extends this feeling to the past and future: things were never any better, and they will never get any better. This is what happens when a tragic narrative becomes exhaustive. See Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia."

⁴¹ Bettcher, pg. 59.

⁴² Galen Strawson argues that there are good reasons to reject narrativity outright (see Strawson, "Against Narrativity"). I am less sanguine that this is either desirable or possible. There are, I believe, reasons for thinking that one's life ought to have some narrative structure, if not an exhaustively narrow, genre-fitting

American triumph in the face of adversity. Bettcher points to trans communities' centering of autonomy in narrativizing the self. What is consistent between these two examples is that tragedy can be recognized and tarried with for what it is without understanding it as exhaustive or all-encompassing.⁴³ It is a tragedy that the vibrant Native American cultures that pre-existed American expansion were largely destroyed. It is a tragedy that transgender individuals are often understood as either deceivers or make-believers in much of the dominant culture. Recognizing the tragic aspect of these situations, even being drawn in by their strange beauty, is vital for tarrying with them appropriately. Getting stuck on their tragic form is an understandable if regrettable consequence of this function.

Somewhat counterintuitively, the escape from the paralyzing tragic narrative need not only include the various triumphs of tragic victims, but also the universally shared tragic narrative: that one will die. While recognizing the inevitability of death can be paralyzing in its own way, relative to the more narrow and particular tragic narratives discussed so far, it can be both liberating and solidaristic. Recognition of death can be liberating because it frames the particular tragedies we all experience under the single great tragedy of human life. This does not defuse the power of more narrow tragedies, but

one. For instance, Joseph Raz describes autonomy thusly: "The autonomous person is a (part) author of his own life." See Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, pg. 369.

⁴³ Another important example of this synthesis is found in W.E.B. Du Bois' concepts of "The Veil" and "double consciousness" from *The Souls of Black Folk*. Du Bois argues that the veil that African-Americans are left with in the wake of the injustices of slavery and Jim Crow is both a blessing and a curse. The curse is the fragmented identity that results from having to view the world through the racist logic that culturally dominates. The blessing is that the veil allows individuals to develop a "second-sight." This second-sight allows individuals to perceive the world through others' perspectives, creating a richer understanding of the world than is possible for those occupying cultural dominance. Du Bois reflects on the impact this capacity had on the cultural legacy of African-Americans when he says: "There are today no truer exponents of the pure human spirit of the Declaration of Independence than the American Negroes; there is no true American music but the wild sweet melodies of the Negro slave; the American fairy tales and folklore are Indian and African; and all in all, we black men seem the sole oasis of simple faith and reverence in a dusty desert of dollars and smartness." (*The Souls of Black Folk*, pg. 13-14) Du Bois argued that African Americans ought to transcend the veil in a way that preserves both of its conflicting identities. This means acknowledging that slavery and Jim Crow have ineluctably situated the identities of African Americans, and that this should not be dismissed. However, it also means that this situation is not forever fixed, but only operates as a starting point from which individuals must venture forth. This is tarrying with tragedy, the acknowledgement that the only way out is through.

it does sober us in consideration of their relative significance.⁴⁴ Perhaps more importantly, recognition of the tragedy of death can also encourage much-needed solidarity: as necessary as recognition of tragic victim status is, it can sometimes function in the short-term to divide individuals and groups from each other. Such alienation is necessary, both intra and inter-individual, but reconciliation remains its end goal. Knowing that we all share the same tragic fate can direct our attention away from the particular tragedies that afflict us and toward the realization that we're all we've got.

Escaping pathologization then does not entail denying tragedy. It only means recognizing tragedy for what it is: the world's inhospitality to what matters. That this inhospitality is not typically exhaustive means that it need not exhaustively define a life, and that its paralyzing effect can usually be overcome. There are tragic narratives, but a life isn't a tragedy. Lives merely contain tragedies. This distinction is grounded in the original claim of this project that tragedies are real-world phenomena independent of the literary genre. Here we see how this distinction grounds not only the proper understanding of tragedy in everyday life, but the grounds for hope in its overcoming.⁴⁵ Appreciation of tragedy's beauty is concomitant with recognition of this hope. In this way, periodic recognition of the beauty of tragedy is part of a well-rounded life: appreciation for the world given to us in all its facets, good and bad. A life devoid of this recognition, focused solely on direct appreciation of what matters, is unlikely to nobly suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. It will sometimes face the same paralyzing fate as one who gazes directly at the sun. The reflective light of the moon may not be its own, but its beauty is singular.

⁴⁴ This is in one sense the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence seen through a different lens.

⁴⁵ Broadly following Kant in the first *Critique* (A805/B833), I consider *hope* to function to bridge the gap between worthy ends and what is in our power to control. Many of these valuable ends would never be realized if we didn't take the risks hope grounds. This can be manipulated in some contexts, but we shouldn't conclude from this that hope is fundamentally problematic. Tragedy is a threat to hope, the concern that that which is outside of our control will ensure that things do not go well for us. Focus on tragedy is an important counterbalance to the permission structure that can stem from an overreliance on hope. But it is important not to create the inverse problem of fixation on tragedy. This is where tragic narratives go wrong.

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VITA

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