

Schopenhauer on the Meaning of Tragedy: Vision and Blindness

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Of all of the major philosophers of the nineteenth century, Arthur Schopenhauer probably had the bleakest vision of man and the universe. His view of the world as the arena of the remorseless and pitiless Will, the blind and purposeless foundation of all Being, was one without any gleam of hope or comfort for the suffering, struggling creatures trapped in its coils. Without a God to look to for salvation, and without even the kind of belief in the nobility of man's suffering which provided some sense of solace in the philosophy of Nietzsche, Schopenhauer was a theoretician of despair, a lonely apostle of Thanatos proclaiming a gospel of the renunciation of life itself. Hence, he can truly be regarded as a "tragic" philosopher, one whose metaphysics paralleled, at least to a degree, the fundamentally dark and somber vision of life expressed in the artistic genre of tragedy.

Schopenhauer himself understood the parallels between his philosophical ideas and the perspective of the major tragic dramatists of both the ancient and modern worlds. He wrote extensively about them, and was a perceptive and penetrating critic of tragic drama in all its incarnations. Yet at the same time, his critique of tragedy was idiosyncratic, a reflection of his unrelievedly bleak perspective on the nature of the universe. His vision was penetrating, but skewed. He saw with extraordinary clarity those aspects of tragedy that conformed to his general perspective on life, yet at the same time there were aspects that he appeared to miss, or indeed to misunderstand, when he directed his gaze toward elements that failed to match his preconceptions. Yet this paradox, of insight combined with blindness, casts an illuminating light upon the way that he understood both the nature of man, and his place in the larger world.

When we contrast the various interpretations of tragedy by Schopenhauer's contemporaries with that of Schopenhauer himself, the distinctiveness of the latter's perspective becomes readily apparent. If one may make a broad generalization, one could say that, apart from Schopenhauer, tragedy had for the most part been considered to be an exercise in affirming the significance and value of life itself, even in the face of the destruction of the individual. For Hegel, the philosopher whose theory of the significance of tragedy has had perhaps the

most enduring influence, human action and human history constitute a long dialectical struggle in which partial truths are adopted, analyzed, found wanting, and then synthesized with those elements of reality which they had previously excluded. The result of this process is an ever higher and more comprehensive understanding of the true nature of the world as a whole. This slow, laborious march toward the Absolute, the totality of Being, is, according to Hegel, reflected in art. In tragedy in particular, we see the conflict of partial truths, the suffering brought about by a reality not fully integrated. Hegel regarded the protagonists depicted in the tragic drama less as individuals, but rather as archetypes of the various general principles which manifest themselves in the world, and which come into conflict because of their limited and incomplete nature.¹

According to Hegel, in the denouement of the drama, a new and higher synthesis of truth is achieved. He asserts that:

In tragedy the eternal substance of things emerges victorious in a reconciling way, because it strips away from the conflicting individuals only their false one-sidedness, while the positive elements in what they willed it displays as what is to be retained, without discord but affirmatively harmonized.²

He also says: “Above mere fear and tragic sympathy there therefore stands that sense of reconciliation which the tragedy affords by the glimpse of eternal justice.”³ For Nietzsche, on the other hand, the meaning of tragedy as a dramatic form lies in the complex and contradictory response of the ancient Greeks to the joy and horror of life. Nietzsche, in his highly influential essay “The Birth of Tragedy,” declared that the Greeks were torn between two conflicting perspectives, two different and deeply opposed responses to the challenges of human existence. On the one hand, according to Nietzsche, was the Apollonian perspective, modeled upon the characteristics of the god of the sun. As the deity of light, knowledge, moderation, self-control, harmony and proportion, Apollo represented, for the Greeks, the ideal of order in a *chaotic* and frightening world – a light to illuminate the darkness in which men live and die.⁴

Set against this vision, Nietzsche argues, was another perspective, one in which the pain and joy of primordial nature, unencumbered by false individuality or the detachment of intellect, reign supreme. This was the Dionysian perspective, the expression of the instinctual energies of nature itself, in all their urgency and irrationality. They are everything that the Apollonian ideal is meant to guard against. Nietzsche describes this Dionysian antagonist to Apollonian rationality

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- 1 Hegel, G. W. F.: *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Arts*. Translated by T. M. Knox. 2 Vol. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975. Vol. 2, 1194–1195.
 - 2 Ibid., 1198.
 - 3 Ibid., 1198.
 - 4 Nietzsche, Friedrich: *The Birth of Tragedy*. In: *The Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wagner*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Press, 1967, 42.

as the original paradigm of the hero of Greek tragedy, who struggles against his own individuality and toward a reunification with the living heart of the world.⁵

Nietzsche made the claim that the power and meaning of ancient tragedy arose from its capacity to force the individual to shed his sense of individuality – the independent, autonomous, Apollonian mind – and submit to the power of an all-encompassing nature, whose symbolic deity, the god Dionysus, was the original object of worship in the tragic festivals.⁶ In Nietzsche's view, tragedy, the tragic effect, involves the dissolution of man's artificial individuality, and his reunification with a nature that is vital and alive. Thus, in what has been described as the quintessentially Nietzschean tragedy (Euripides' *Bacchae*)⁷ it is Pentheus, the stubbornly rationalistic Apollonian protagonist, who is destroyed, while the community as a whole embraces the worship of Dionysus, the god of ecstatic union with a nature that is irrational, and yet divine.

The contrast between these two different, yet both fundamentally "optimistic" interpretations of tragedy on the one hand, and that of Schopenhauer on the other, is absolutely striking. For Schopenhauer, the crux of the tragic drama is the fate of the individual, not some larger cosmic order. Indeed, he regarded the very notion of a rational, benevolent world order as an illusion, a pathetic misrepresentation of the true nature of reality. The essence of the world, the "*Ding an Sich*" or "Thing-in-Itself," is the Will, a blind, brutish, and fundamentally irrational "force," which revolves endlessly and pointlessly in a wheel of desire and suffering.⁸ It conceals no latent or hidden "order," it manifests no purpose or design (Schopenhauer was emphatic in his atheism, rejecting any notion of a deity, however abstractly conceived); rather, it is a purely "blind" and irrational (indeed, self tormenting) entity. Neither is it the kind of wild, savage, yet ultimately benevolent "life force" suggested by Nietzsche, with which man can en-

5 Ibid., 73–74.

6 Ibid., 76. See also: Cartledge, Paul: *Deep Plays: Theatre as Process in Greek Civil Life*. In: *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*. Edited by P. E. Easterling. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, 6–7.

7 Benardete, Seth: *On Greek Tragedy*. In: *The Argument of the Action: Essays on Greek Poetry and Philosophy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000, 135. It is true that Nietzsche was highly critical of Euripides in *The Birth of Tragedy*, condemning him as the exponent of a destructive (indeed Socratic) rationalism that was antithetical to the original spirit of Greek Tragedy. However, in section 12 of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche notes that, at the end of his life, Euripides, in *The Bacchae*, demonstrated that he had finally understood, and come to terms with, the power and necessity of the Dionysian impulse. He says that, in writing *The Bacchae*, Euripides "ended his career with a glorification of his adversary". Indeed, it is certainly arguable that no work by either Aeschylus, Sophocles so fully exemplifies the power of the forces symbolized by the god of the Maenads. Therefore, Professor Benardete is far from wrong in his characterization of *The Bacchae* as the "paradigmatic" Nietzschean tragedy.

8 Schopenhauer, Arthur. *The World as Will and Representation*. Translated by E. F. J. Payne. 2 Vol. New York: Dover Books, 1969 [= WWR]. Vol. I, 196.

ter into some form of blissful communion. Indeed, according to Schopenhauer, the world of our ordinary experience, the phenomenal world, is a purely subjective and mind-dependent entity, a kind of epiphenomena of the Will's ceaseless longing. It is a figment of the Will's own desires, a tormenting mirage perpetually dangling before the longing eyes of the transient beings that arise out of the Will's own activity.⁹ In Schopenhauer's eyes, the world is a spiritual wasteland, a ceaseless vortex of suffering, pain and illusion, with nothing to offer solace or consolation to the wretched beings caught in its coils. As a vision of stark emptiness, Schopenhauer's metaphysics stands quite close to supreme, matching anything that the twentieth century could have set beside it.

For Schopenhauer, tragedy is the highest guide that art can offer to the self's deliverance from this wasteland, in the only way that such a deliverance can be conceived, that is, by the abandonment of the drive for life and happiness through the deliberate and purposeful annihilation of the self.¹⁰ According to Schopenhauer, while the Will, as the very essence of the world, cannot be destroyed, yet the human self can achieve a kind of auto-annihilation, a renunciation of life and the will to live.¹¹ This is the objective to which Schopenhauer's philosophy points. Man cannot escape from the suffering that is universal in this benighted world, but he can escape from the world itself, and so end his participation in this circle of endless pain. He can achieve this, not through mere bodily death (since Schopenhauer believed in a kind of reincarnation or, more accurately, palingenesis) but through a deliberate and conscious process of renunciation of the self that is the instrument of the Will's activity in man. For Schopenhauer, as for the followers of Buddhism (a religion which he greatly admired) the self is an illusion that can be overcome, freeing man from the suffering that it inevitably produces. The final goal of man, for Schopenhauer as well as for Buddhism, is the deliberate abandonment of this world of suffering and illusion though the destruction of that ultimate illusion, the self.¹² The purpose of tragedy is the facilitation of this process by demonstrating that the self is incapable of achieving any meaningful or enduring respite from suffering within this world.¹³ As Schopenhauer states:

9 Ibid., 30.

10 Ibid., 253.

11 Ibid., 30.

12 Ibid., 252–253. John Atwell, in his essay “Art as Liberation: A Central Theme of Schopenhauer's Philosophy,” states: “[In tragedy] the *principium individuationis* as seen through egoism expires (*ersterben*), the normally so powerful motives of action lose their force, and ‘instead of them the complete knowledge of the essence of the world, acting as a *quieter* of the will, produces resignation, the giving up not merely of life, but of the whole will to live itself.’” (Atwell, John: Art as Liberation: A Central Theme of Schopenhauer's Philosophy. In: *Schopenhauer. The Arts and Philosophy*. Edited by Dale Jacquette. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 101).

13 WWR II, 630.

The purpose of this highest poetical achievement [tragedy] is the description of the terrible side of life [...]. Here [in tragedy] is to be found a significant hint as to the nature of the world and of existence. It is the antagonism of the will with itself which is here most completely unfolded at the highest grade of its objectivity, and which comes into fearful prominence [...]. Here and there it reaches thoughtfulness and is softened more or less by the light of knowledge, until at last in the individual case this knowledge is purified and enhanced by suffering itself. It then reaches the point where the phenomenon, the veil of Maya, no longer deceives it. It sees through the form of the phenomenon, the *principium individuationis*; the egoism resting on this expires with it [...] the complete knowledge of the real nature of the world, acting as a *quieter* of the will, produces resignation, the giving up not merely of life, but of the whole will-to-live itself.¹⁴

For Schopenhauer, the destruction of the individual self, far from a terrible catastrophe, is instead the desirable and necessary response to the unbearable nature of existence in a phenomenal world driven by the insatiable Will. The destruction of the individual depicted in tragic drama becomes, for Schopenhauer, the salvation (*Erlösung*) of the soul from the web of illusion and suffering, and a blessing rather than a curse. As he describes the fall of the tragic hero:

Thus we see in tragedy the noblest men, after a long conflict and suffering, finally renounce forever all the pleasures of life and the aims till then pursued so keenly, or cheerfully and willingly give up life itself. Thus the steadfast prince of Calderon, Gretchen in *Faust*, Hamlet whom his friend Horatio would gladly follow, but who enjoins him to remain for a while in this harsh world and to breathe in pain in order to throw light on Hamlet's fate and clear his memory; also the *Maid of Orleans*, the *Bride of Messina*. They all die purified by suffering, in other words after the will-to-live has already expired in them.¹⁵

Schopenhauer believed, correctly, that tragedy reflects a disbelief in the capacity of the individual to achieve any kind of meaningful happiness within the world. He astutely saw the fundamental pessimism of the originators of the genre (the Athenian tragic playwrights) with respect to the fate of the individual, and he also understood that this pessimism was an expression of a general attitude that permeated the culture in which that genre arose. He perceived that the combination in Greek culture of attachment to life, along with the recognition of the ultimate and inevitable victory of death over the individual, necessarily produced a kind of despair, a sense of the futility of human striving. What tragedy accomplished for the Greeks, according to Schopenhauer, was a shift from naïve optimism to a rejection of life's illusory promises, and an embrace of death as the only refuge from pain. Tragedy releases us from our fear of death, and trans-

14 WWR I, 253.

15 Ibid., 253.

forms it from a foe to a friend. In doing so, it allows us to rise above our animal nature, rooted in the Will, and become uniquely human. As Schopenhauer says:

Now the boundless attachment to life which appears here [in Nature] cannot have sprung from knowledge and reflection. To these, on the contrary, it appears foolish, for the objective value of life is very uncertain, and it remains at least doubtful whether existence is to be preferred to non-existence.; in fact, if experience and reflection have their say, non-existence must certainly win. If we knocked on the graves and asked the dead whether they would like to rise again, they would shake their heads [...].¹⁶

One must concede that Schopenhauer accurately identified an important aspect of the Greek conception of man's fate, one that was indeed dominant before the rise to full flower (with Socrates, Plato and, later, Aristotle) of philosophy in the late fifth century B. C. E. (excluding only the relatively esoteric and limited phenomena of the various mystery cults). It is the perspective which has been described as "Archaic Pessimism"¹⁷ the conviction that life is inevitably linked with unbearable suffering, and that only an absolute escape from individual existence can secure a release from this state. The tragedians of fifth century Athens took this primitive pessimism and gave it unparalleled dramatic expression. To take perhaps the most famous example: Oedipus may be said to represent the supreme example of the Greek understanding of man's fate, and his destiny a reminder to all men of the futility of human existence. The chorus of Sophocles' drama makes this very plain. Oedipus is not an especially cursed, or unusually unlucky individual. He is the individual man *par excellence*,¹⁸ and his fate is the fate of all men. In a passage which Schopenhauer himself quotes, Sophocles' chorus asks:

What man, what man on earth wins more of happiness than a seeming and after that turning away? Oedipus, you are my pattern of this; Oedipus, you and your fate! Luckless Oedipus, whom of all men I envy not at all.¹⁹

Such sentiments permeate Greek literature from its earliest expressions right through to the end of the Periclean era. Herodotus, in his *Histories*, tells the story, as narrated by Solon, the Athenian lawgiver, of Cleobis and Biton, as an object lesson on the human condition.²⁰ These were two young men who had performed an outstanding act of piety to the goddess Hera. Their mother then

16 WWR II, 465.

17 Mayerson, Philip: *Classical Mythology in Literature, Art and Music*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1971, 122.

18 Benardete: *On Greek Tragedy*, 126.

19 Sophocles: *Oedipus the King*. In: *Greek Tragedies*. Edited by David Grene and Richard Lattimore, Vol. 1. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960, 1190–1193.

20 As Mayerson notes "Solon cites this tale as evidence of an enviable death, and divine proof of how much better death is for mortal men than life," (Mayerson, 123).

prayed to the goddess that she bestow upon her sons “whatever it is best for a human being to have.”²¹ The goddess promptly granted the mother’s request by causing them to die in their sleep that very night, thus confirming, according to the narrator of the story, “that it is better for a person to be dead than to be alive.”²² In a similar vein Sophocles, in his *Oedipus the King*, has the chorus exclaim: “count no mortal happy till he has passed the final limit of his life secure from.”²³ And it is Sophocles, in the drama *Oedipus at Colonus*, who most perfectly summed up the essential pessimism of Greek thought, in a manner which cannot help but bring Schopenhauer’s own philosophy of pessimism, and understanding of tragedy, to mind:

Though he has watched a decent age pass by, a man will sometimes still desire the world. I swear I see no wisdom in that man [...]. *Not to be born surpasses thought and speech*. The second best is to have seen the light, and then go back quickly whence we came.²⁴ [italics added]

There may, of course, seem to be a contradiction between the fact that the Greeks bewailed death as a loss of something desirable, as in the Homeric epics where the heroes struggled with all of their might for life, and bewailed death as the loss of a great good (as, for instance, in the famous speech by the shade of Achilles to Odysseus in *The Odyssey*) and the subsequent notion, expressed as early as Herodotus, and culminating in Athenian tragedy, that, on the contrary, it is life, not death, that is to be bewailed. The answer to this seeming paradox lies in the fact that Greek thought remained, throughout its evolution, resolutely realist in its orientation. The Greeks could not help but observe the misery and pain that necessarily accompanies existence in this world, but they did not (at least until almost the very end of the Hellenic era, with Plato) think to question the absolute and exclusive reality of the phenomenal world. In this sense, the Greeks retained their strictly occidental perspective, as did the Hebrews as well

21 Herodotus: *Histories*. Translated by Robin Waterfield. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, 1.31, 14.

22 Ibid., 15. See also Benardete: *On Greek Tragedy*, 102.

23 Sophocles: *Oedipus the King*, 1529–1530.

24 Sophocles: *Oedipus at Colonus*. In: *Greek Tragedies*. Edited by David Grene and Richard Lattimore. Vol. 3. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960, 1210–1230. Note: Interestingly, P. E. Easterling, in his essay “A Show for Dionysus,” cites an almost exact paraphrase of these lines, but not from Sophocles. Rather, he attributes them to a Greek folktale regarding a conversation between King Midas and the satyr Silenus. I regard this as further confirmation of the deep cultural roots of this attitude toward life and death. As Easterling says, “The most radical way to escape mortality and the cycle of change is never to be born; Death never ceased to be a defining feature of tragedy as understood in Greek tradition: it is perhaps not an accident that the presiding deity of the festivals which included tragedy should have had a strong connection with the world of the dead.” (Easterling, P. E.: *A Show for Dionysus*. In: *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, 53).

(to which both cultures added a bleak and depressing conception of the nature of the hereafter). For the Greeks, including the tragic playwrights, life ultimately crushes the individual's hopes for enduring happiness ("What man on earth wins more of happiness than a seeming, and after that a turning away"); yet, at the same time, the idea that the life of the individual can be viewed as somehow based upon an illusion, and that individuality can be *renounced* (as opposed to simply *lost*, in death) is not one that was ever seriously considered. The idea of the world as *Maya*, the Buddhist mind-dependent illusion, and the self as both a source of that illusion, as well as an entity trapped within it, was foreign to Greek realism, as it was to most European and Near Eastern thought. What they were left with, then, was an attachment to life, coupled with an acute awareness of its ultimate futility.

Schopenhauer asserted that this circumscribed perspective on the part of the ancient Greeks created equal limitations on the degree of enlightenment which ancient Greek tragedy was capable of producing. For him, tragedy was the epitome of artistic expression, the genre that came closest to a complete reflection of the truth about man and his place in the world. Yet, for Schopenhauer as well as for Plato, even tragedy fell short of the truths attained by philosophy and religious mysticism. Tragedy expressed the most profound comprehension of man's fate that western, pre-Christian culture was capable of attaining, yet such wisdom was compromised by its rigid and naive realism with respect to the phenomenal world. Even in the absence of a sense of the transcendent, tragedy expressed the Greek's recognition of the futility of the quest for happiness on a purely natural and human level. Schopenhauer describes their basic perspective in this way:

[...] remote as the Greeks were from the Christian and lofty Asiatic world view, and although they were decidedly at the standpoint of the affirmation of the will, they were nevertheless deeply affected by the wretchedness of existence. The invention of tragedy, which belongs to them, is already evidence of this.²⁵

Thus Schopenhauer regarded tragedy as the highest artistic manifestation of the truth that the individual is doomed to suffering and destruction, while nevertheless maintaining a fundamental attitude of attachment to life. The notion of the voluntary denial of the Will, the renunciation of the life force itself, was wholly alien to the ancient Greek mentality. Their entire approach was one of engagement with life, embracing physical action and intellectual investigation in a way that perhaps no other culture in human history ever has.²⁶ Indeed, not only did they embrace the world of everyday existence, they exalted the notion of individual autonomy in a way that set them dramatically apart from the more collec-

25 WWR II, 585.

26 Kitto, H. D. F.: *The Greeks*. Middlesex: Penguin Pelican, 1951, 58.

tivist ethos of their neighbors to the east.²⁷ Given this perspective, the Greeks could not make the leap from the perception of the fundamental futility of human existence with its intrinsic connection to unbearable pain and suffering, to any notion of a renunciation of the Will itself. They remained committed to an affirmation of life, in spite of its pain, rather than embrace any kind of turning away from the world.²⁸ Hence, according to Schopenhauer, while Greek thought achieved the highest degree of insight possible for a culture that retained its belief in the essential reality of the phenomenal world, and in the desirability of life within its confines, it did not rise to the level of those traditions which valued the overcoming of human individuality. This is why, while admiring the tragic sensibility of the Greeks, he nevertheless compared it unfavorably with both Christianity and Eastern religious thought.²⁹ While the Greeks clearly appreciated the fundamental cruelty of the world, and the futility of the quest for individual happiness, they nevertheless would not, or could not, take the next logical step – that of an active *renunciation* of both life and the principle of individuality. Therefore, the dominant tenor of classical Greek thought, as expressed in the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, is one of sorrow verging on despair, a reflection of both their intense attachment to life, and their understanding of the inevitable destruction of the individual.³⁰

Of course, this sense of sorrow and disappointment is counterbalanced, in Greek tragedy, by the achievement of a state of ultimate *acquiescence*. This state of acceptance is the catharsis of which Aristotle speaks in his *Poetics*, the recognition, by the end of the drama, that the horrors depicted upon the stage are not chance accidental misfortunes visited upon the unlucky individual (of a kind that a member of the audience might hope to avoid in his or her real life), but rather

27 Ibid.

28 Martha Nussbaum, in her essay “Nietzsche, Schopenhauer and Dionysus,” remarks: “In short, the achievement of Greek tragedy, according to Nietzsche, was, first of all, to confront its spectator directly with the fact that there is just one world, the world we live in, the chancy, arbitrary, but also rich and beautiful world of nature. It is not redeemed by any ‘beyond’; nor is it given even the sort of *negative* meaning, in relation to a beyond, that it is given in Christian tragedy. Nietzsche throughout his life finds it amazing that the Greeks should have been able to confront so truthfully the nature of life without taking flight into religion of the world-denigrating, resignationist sort.” (Nussbaum, Martha: Nietzsche, Schopenhauer and Dionysus. In: *The Cambridge Guide to Schopenhauer*. Edited by Christopher Janaway. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 368).

29 WWR II, 585.

30 Of course, this sentiment is expressed, not merely in Greek tragedy, but in almost all tragic drama throughout its historical evolution. One has only to recall William Shakespeare’s words from *King Lear*, “As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; they crush us for their sport” to see the continuity of perspective. (Shakespeare, William: *King Lear*. In: *The Yale Shakespeare: The Complete Works*. Edited by Wilbur L. Cross and Tucker Brooke. New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1993, 4.1, 38–39).

the manifestation of unavoidable Fate (*Moirai*), predestined to occur by the very nature of the human condition, and thus to be accepted as man's inevitable, if still unenviable, lot. This was, in fact, the meaning of the famous inscription over the sanctuary of the oracle at Delphi ("*Gnothi Seauton*" – "Know Thyself"). It was not an exhortation to some kind of introspective understanding of the contents of one's individual, idiosyncratic character, but rather an admonition to remember *what* one is – that is, mortal, and subject to all of the woes which are the inevitable corollary of that state.³¹

Moreover, to this sense of acquiescence brought about by the acceptance of the inevitability of the destruction of the individual, Greek tragedy added another component – the implication that, beyond the fate of the individual, there exists an overarching moral and spiritual order in the universe, which the events of the drama reaffirm and validate. When the chorus of elders in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* exclaim, "Sing sorrow, sorrow, but good win out in the end,"³² they are expressing a confidence in something good and true in the universe beyond the fate of the individual. Even Oedipus himself, the quintessential outcast, abhorrent to both gods and men, is ultimately reconciled and reintegrated into the divine order in his epiphany (whether to the heavens or the underworld is left deliberately ambiguous) at Colonus.³³ For the tragic playwrights, the world remains a Cosmos, rather than a Chaos, a realm of ultimate order and rational law.

This instinct to "vindicate the ways of God to men" manifests itself in Shakespearean tragedy as well. Hamlet may die, or Lear suffer bereavement, but the tyrannies which destroy them are themselves undone, and order is restored, both in human society and in the larger universe. Man is destroyed, but the divine order endures. Schopenhauer preferred "modern" tragedy to its ancient predecessors, because he contended that the heroes of modern tragedies exhibit a greater spirit of renunciation of the will to live, whereas the heroes of ancient tragedy died still lamenting their fate.³⁴ However valid such an observation may be (and I believe that, in the end, it is spurious) the fact remains that, Schopenhauer notwithstanding, "modern" (certainly Shakespearean) tragedy, in common with its ancient predecessors, manifests a belief in the existence of an overarch-

31 Professor Mayerson writes: "Apparently Delphi was also responsible for propagating a philosophy of life that is sometimes called 'archaic pessimism.' The nature of deity is enigmatic, and no mortal can expect to know for sure how the god will act. 'Know thyself' did not mean self-examination, but rather the recognition of how limited man was, how insignificant he was with respect to deity." (Mayerson, 122).

32 Aeschylus: *Agamemnon*. In: *Greek Tragedies*. Edited by David Grene and Richard Lattimore. Vol. 1. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960, 121.

33 Sophocles: *Oedipus at Colonus*, 1655–1665. See also: Benardete's *Sophocles' Oedipus Tyrannus*, in: *The Argument of the Action: Essays on Greek Poetry and Philosophy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000, 82.

34 WWR II, 434–435.

ing moral and spiritual order to the universe, which the tragedy of the individual merely confirms.

Yet this is precisely the aspect of tragedy that Schopenhauer, unsurprisingly, cannot see. If one believes in a world ruled by a fundamentally malevolent and irrational “force,” then of course one cannot credit tragedy with the affirmation of a divine order and harmony. Hence, Schopenhauer was blind to those aspects of tragedy, both ancient and modern, which affirm the coherence and moral order of the universe. He not only rejected such a perspective, he completely failed to see its presence in tragic drama. As acute and perceptive an observer as he was, he nevertheless could see only that aspect of the genre that conformed to his own view of the world.

Yet when it came to the fate of the individual, Schopenhauer was able to see with utmost clarity the inter-generational continuity of moral cause and effect which tragedy illuminates. As we have seen, for Schopenhauer the individual self is in fact not fully real; it is a temporary entity, produced by the Will in the endless game of hide and seek with itself that creates the subject-object divide, and with it, the phenomenal world. What is real, what endures, is the Will itself. Yet in a strange way, Schopenhauer suggests that the Will’s instantiation of itself as individuals in the phenomenal world does, actually, manifest a kind of continuity through time, and even through sequential generations. Schopenhauer seems to imply that, although the conscious, intellectual self awareness of the given individual perishes at death,³⁵ the nexus of moral and spiritual energy associated with him (that which constitutes the deepest and most fundamental core of all sentient beings within the world) endures through successive incarnations, rising or falling in the hierarchy of phenomenal existence, until at last it voluntarily embraces its own extinction, and at last ceases to re-emerge into the phenomenal world of suffering and pain.³⁶ He notes that the idea of metempsychosis, and its attendant doctrine of a moral responsibility that endures even through death, is an almost universal human belief, thus testifying to its foundation in truth, saying:

Thus we find the doctrine of metempsychosis, springing from the very earliest and noblest ages of the human race, always world wide, as the belief of the great majority of mankind, in fact really the doctrine of all religions, with the exception of Judaism and the two religions that have arisen from it.³⁷

35 Schopenhauer writes: “Consciousness is the life of the subject of knowing, or of the brain, and death is its end. Therefore, consciousness is finite, is always new, beginning each time at the beginning.” (WWR II, 500).

36 Schopenhauer, Arthur: *Transcendental Speculation*. In: *Parerga and Paralipomena*. Translated by E. F. J. Payne. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974, 207.

37 WWR II, 504.

He notes, moreover, that even Christianity, which superficially appears to reject such a doctrine, in fact retains it in a modified form, remarking that:

However, in Christianity, the doctrine of original sin, in other words of atonement for the sin of another individual, has taken the place of the transmigration of souls, and of the expiation by means thereof of all the sins committed in a previous life.³⁸

This notion, of a continuity of moral energy over the course of different individual instantiations (so Eastern in its perspective), in fact contains an echo of the moral and religious ideas at the core of Greek tragedy. One of the fundamental elements of the tragic drama was the idea of enduring moral responsibility over the course of several generations. For the Greeks, the concept expressed itself in the notion of familial guilt, the idea that the sins of one generation are inherited by the offspring of the original malefactors. As E. R. Dodd put it, in his book *The Greeks and the Irrational*:

In the archaic age [which Dodd defines as the interval between the composition of the Homeric epics and the Persian wars, though remarking that certain later thinkers, such as Sophocles, belong intellectually, if not chronologically, to this era] the mills of God ground so slowly that their movement was practically imperceptible, save to the eye of faith. In order to sustain the belief that they moved at all, it was necessary to get rid of the natural time-limit set by death. If you looked beyond that limit, you could say one (or both) of two things: you could say that the successful sinner would be punished in his descendents, or you could say that he would pay his debts personally in another life.³⁹

He goes on to add that the first of these possibilities:

[...] is the characteristic archaic doctrine, it is the teaching of Hesiod, of Solon and Theognis, of Aeschylus and Herodotus [...]. That these men [...] accepted the idea of inherited guilt and deferred punishment is due to that belief in family solidarity which Archaic Greece shared with other early societies and with many primitive cultures today. Unfair it might be, but to them it appeared as a law of nature, which must be accepted: for the family was a moral unit, the son's life was a prolongation of the father's, and he inherited his father's moral debts exactly as he inherited his commercial ones. Sooner or later the debt *exacted its own payment*: as the Pythia told Croesus, the causal nexus of crime and punishment was *moira*, something that even a god could not break.⁴⁰

Moreover, it is worth noting that for the Greeks, the specific sin, the pebble which starts the avalanche of tragic destruction rolling over the course of multiple generations, is often either a begetting (in other words, the production of an inde-

38 Ibid., 506.

39 Dodd, E. R.: *The Greeks and the Irrational*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951, 33.

40 Ibid., 33–34.

pendent self out of the undifferentiated source of all being) or else a patricidal or matricidal attempt to destroy the parent from which the protagonist emerged into full and separate individuality, thus symbolically cutting off the “hero’s” essence from the wellspring of his existence in an assertion of separate individuality.⁴¹ The primordial crime in each of these dramas can be understood as the protagonist’s attempt to affirm the primacy of his own individuality, rather than to acknowledge the moral and spiritual continuity between the individual and that from which he emerged. This parallels Schopenhauer’s own conviction that the “original sin” of man is his adoption, by virtue of his very nature, of the *principium individuationis*, the sense of himself as a distinct and unique entity.

Finally, with respect to Schopenhauer’s distinction between ancient and modern tragedy, one may speculate that there is another, and equally potent (if less clearly expressed) reason for Schopenhauer’s preference for modern, especially Shakespearean, tragedy, one that goes beyond the supposedly greater degree of resignation of the modern tragic hero. This, I would suggest, is Shakespeare’s apparent inclination to view life as dreamlike, a phenomenon so transient and ephemeral that it barely qualifies as real. We have, as an example of this tendency, the famous verse from *The Tempest*, which Schopenhauer quotes in *The World as Will and Representation*:

We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep⁴²

We may see it again in the equally well-known quote from *Macbeth*:

Out, out, brief candle!
Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing⁴³

It is not that Shakespeare was a formal idealist, or indeed a systematic philosopher of any kind, but rather that he had a poet’s intuition of the peculiar unreality of the world, a playwright’s sense of life as somehow an artificial construct. As he writes in *As You Like It*: “All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players.”⁴⁴

41 Benardete notes that “Oedipus, in killing his father and marrying his mother, points to a deeper sameness in generation itself. He is not different from his origins. He is the same as that from which he came.” (Benardete, *Sophocles’ Oedipus Tyrannus*, 81).

42 Shakespeare: *The Tempest*, 4.1, 147–150.

43 Shakespeare: *Macbeth*, 5.5, 25–30.

44 Shakespeare: *As You Like It*, 2.7, 143–144.

Such a perspective was profoundly in accord with Schopenhauer's own understanding of life and the world, as transient, and as subjectively determined phenomena. Schopenhauer's conception of the nature of the subject/object relationship had deeply convinced him that the phenomenal world of our everyday experience is in fact a form of dreaming, simply an illusion – the “Veil of Maya” (the phrase from the Vedas of which he was so fond) that seduces the mind and enmeshes it in the tangled web of ordinary life. Schopenhauer, in fact, had adopted a rather extreme variant of early nineteenth century German idealism, and firmly believed in the impossibility of any sort of “subject independent” reality. The “world” of ordinary human experience exists only insofar as it is perceived by a sentient being. The phenomena of ordinary consciousness are merely the “dream” of the true “Thing-in-Itself,” the Will. According to Schopenhauer, the most incisive and profound poets and dramatists possess an intuitive grasp of this fundamental truth.

Indeed, in the very first chapter of *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer embarks upon an extended discussion of the dreamlike nature of human life. He says: “The only certain criteria for distinguishing dream from reality is in fact none other than the wholly empirical one of waking.”⁴⁵ However, he notes that this criterion is in fact unreliable, and that the chain of connections between phenomena is uncertain both in waking life and in the dreaming state, remarking:

If subsequently, as is often the case, the causal connexion with the present, or the absence of such connexion, cannot possibly be ascertained, then it must remain forever undecided whether an event was dreamt or whether it really occurred. Here indeed the close relationship between life and the dream is brought out for us very clearly [...].⁴⁶

And he goes on to add:

Thus, although individual dreams are marked off from real life by the fact that they do not fit into the continuity of experience that runs constantly through life, and waking up indicates this difference, yet that very continuity of experience belongs to real life as its form, and the dream can likewise point to a continuity in itself. Now if we assume a standpoint of judgment external to both, we find no distinct difference in their nature, and are forced to concede to the poets that life is a long dream.⁴⁷

45 WWR I, 17.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid., 18. Note: Martha Nussbaum, in “Nietzsche, Schopenhauer and Dionysus,” remarks: “From his readings in Indian philosophy, Schopenhauer borrows the metaphor of thinking as dreaming, and of its contents as a ‘web of *maya*’ or illusion (WI 17, 365/H. 2, 20, 431). Our whole cognizing of the world, he insists, is like looking at a dream that we ourselves have made

For Schopenhauer, the question of the true nature of our existence takes us beyond tragedy. Greek tragedy can bring us to the point where we fully comprehend the futility of our striving for happiness, and the inevitability of the destruction of the individual. Modern tragedy, according to him, takes us further, to the point where we may glimpse, as if through a glass darkly, not merely the futility of life, but its fundamentally illusory nature. We are thus prepared for the final step, which must be achieved philosophically rather than by means of similes and metaphors of art. As John Atwell, in his essay “Art as Liberation: A Central Theme of Schopenhauer’s Philosophy,” demonstrates, Schopenhauer understood art in general, and tragedy in particular, as propaedeutic – that is as paving the way for the ultimate transcendent knowledge which only philosophy can impart. It points beyond itself, to that which it cannot name. Specifically, Atwell makes the point that, for Schopenhauer, tragedy induces a sense of the sublime that is different from that of other forms of art. It leads to a higher state of awareness, not that of mere peaceful contemplation, but of full and total renunciation of the Will itself. As Atwell remarks:

[...] the feeling of the sublime regarding nature reaches only a state of contemplation and indeed one in which consciousness of the human will is not lost, but the feeling of the sublime regarding tragedy [...] reaches a state, beyond contemplation, in which full resignation comes about.⁴⁸

Atwell notes that, for Schopenhauer, any art, including tragedy, can take man only so far along the path to his ultimate salvation. What lies beyond is not susceptible to any form of dramatization, or indeed conceptualization, of any kind. It is beyond the realm of communicable experience. Atwell puts it this way:

We shall have to say that he or she [the saint who has achieved Will-lessness] “knows” that ‘life as we know it is ‘a bad dream, from which we have to awake’, and that he or she has come to ‘will something better.’ Aesthetic contemplation, and particularly a sensitive reaction to tragedy, can serve as a means to this Buddha-like awakening-but thereof we must be silent.⁴⁹

But tragedy can bring man to the penultimate stage of his ascent to freedom. Through the realization that life in all its cruelty and futility must be abandoned in favor of “something else” – some indefinable but ever beckoning state beyond all Will (be it mere oblivion or something more) – tragedy prepares the ground for man’s final escape from the world of suffering. The catharsis provided by tragedy, the fear and pity which leads to a general revulsion at the cruelty of life, must be supplemented by the slowly dawning comprehension of the contin-

(WI 365; cf. 98/H. 2, 431–432; cf. 117). We are dimly aware that we are dreaming, and we dream on.” (Nussbaum: Nietzsche, Schopenhauer and Dionysus, 346).

48 Atwell, 102.

49 Ibid., 103.

gency of both the phenomenal world, and the subject which always accompanies it. When this final enlightenment is achieved, then man understands that the dream of life can be awakened from; it is then that the pain of tragedy is replaced by the benign indifference of salvation from both the world and the self.

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What we see in tragedy, Schopenhauer insists, is the unspeakable pain, the wail of humanity, the triumph of evil, the scornful mastery of chance, the irretrievable fall of the just and innocent. Thus we can see the greatest misfortune, not as an exception, not as something occasioned by rare circumstances or monstrous characters, but as arising easily and of itself out of the actions and characters of men, indeed almost as essential to them, and this brings it terribly near to us. Tragedy, that is to say, in Nietzsche's view, dramatises a tension which it resolves in a higher unity. There is a structural reminiscence of Hegel in this, but the terms are entirely altered. Tragedy is "an Apollonian embodiment of Dionysiac insights and powers." Schopenhauer's main gripe with religion is with the distinction they make between meaning in sensu proprio versus in sensu allegorico. "Sensu proprio" is the Latin term he uses which basically means "in a literal sense." Sensu allegorico, of course, means "in an allegorical sense." What happens with religion, is they present some kind of dogma, which might be true in an allegorical sense, but they have to pretend to mean it in a literal sense. Religion cannot pretend its main tenets are merely allegorical because doing so would mean to undermine their own credibility. Buddhism and Hinduism, on the other hand, score well on both fronts. For this reason, Schopenhauer ranks the Eastern religions as the most perfect expressions of truth to be found in religion. Hence Schopenhauer sees his philosophical worldview as aligned with the Christian New Testament and its "pessimism" about the world, whereas other philosophers are inherently more consistent with the "optimistic" view of Judaism and the Old Testament: My ethics is related to all the ethical systems of European philosophy as the New Testament to the Old, according to the ecclesiastical conception of this relation. Thus the Old Testament puts man under the authority of the Law [of Moses] which, however, does not lead to salvation. The New Testament, on the other hand, declares the Law to be inadequate, in fact repudiates it. Schopenhauer believed the role of philosophy to be to "lay bare the true nature of the world" (The World as Will and Representation), so as to shed a ray of light on the darkness of this miserable existence, and in doing so provide consolation for the fragile and finite human animal. All those who preceded him had failed at this project, according to Schopenhauer, and he believed that he alone had uncovered the true nature of the world. In doing so, he saw his philosophy as a great gift to mankind, an oasis of peace in the tragic and wretched desert of life: "Subject to the limitation of human knowledge, my philosophy is the real solution of the enigma of the world." Arthur Schopenhauer (22 February 1788 – 21 September 1860) was a German philosopher, most famous for his work *The World as Will and Representation* (1819). It is the courage to make a clean breast of it in the face of every question that makes the philosopher. He must be like Sophocles' Oedipus, who, seeking enlightenment concerning his terrible fate, pursues his indefatigable inquiry even though he divines that appalling horror awaits him in the answer. But most of us carry with us the Jocasta in our...