THE TRAGIC AS AN ETHICAL CATEGORY

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I. Introduction

This paper aims to explain Nietzsche’s understanding of tragedy, and in particular his self-characterization as the “tragic philosopher.” What I shall claim is that, according to Nietzsche, to recognize the self-determining or self-creating character of our agency is to reveal it as tragic. Tragedy accordingly illuminates the most fundamental issue in Nietzsche’s mature philosophy: the possibility of affirmation.

Tragedy is at the center of Nietzsche’s early philosophic position. Athenian tragic representation took on an existential dimension in *The Birth of Tragedy*, as exhibiting the illusion of individuation in its estrangement from primal being. The existential importance assigned to tragedy in that work was echoed with respect to contemporary culture in *Richard Wagner in Bayreuth* and, more subtly, with respect to human self-understanding in the idea of the “philosopher of tragic knowledge” that appears in the notebooks: He restrains the unbridled knowledge-drive, not through a new metaphysics. He propounds no new faith [Glaube]. He experiences the withdrawn ground of metaphysics tragically and can never satisfy himself with the motley whirling game of the sciences. But, certainly by 1886, all this had been repudiated. The “Attempt at a Self-Criticism” rejected the very idea of a metaphysical solution (or troubling lack of a metaphysical solution) to the problem of existence; Wagner was a figure of ridicule; and tragic “knowledge” had been replaced by tragic “wisdom,” something ineffably but profoundly different.

Remarkably, at the end of his career, Nietzsche returned to explaining the distinctiveness of his philosophic position and its opposition to the moral outlook in terms of tragedy. His claims about the significance of tragedy appear more sparsely than they...
once had, but are unequivocal all the same. One section of *Ecce Homo* provides a particularly emphatic formulation:

The extent to which I had thereby discovered the concept “tragic,” the ultimate knowledge of what the psychology of tragedy is, I have most recently expressed on page 139 of *Twilight of the Idols*. “Saying yes to life itself even in its strangest and hardest problems; the will to life celebrating its own inexhaustibility in the *sacrifice* of its highest types—that is what I called Dionysian, that is what I understood as the bridge to the psychology of the *tragic* poet. *Not* to get rid of terror and pity, *not* to purify oneself of a dangerous affect through its vehement discharge—this is how Aristotle misunderstood it—but in order to be *oneself* the eternal joy [*Lust*] of becoming, beyond terror and pity, such a joy as also includes the *joy in annihilating.*” On this accord I have the right to understand myself as the first *tragic philosopher*—meaning the most extreme antithesis and antipodes of pessimistic philosopher. Before me there was no translation [*Umsetzung*] of the Dionysian into a philosophic pathos: *tragic wisdom* was lacking. —I have sought in vain for signs of it among the *great* Greeks of philosophy, those of the two centuries *before* Socrates. Doubt remains with me in the case of Heraclitus, in whose proximity I feel altogether warmer and higher-spirited than anywhere else. The affirmation of passing away *and annihilating*, the decisive mark of a Dionysian philosophy, the yes-saying to opposition and war, *becoming*, with a radical rejection of the very concept “being”—here, at all events, I must recognize closest relative to me among all that has been thought up to now. The teaching of the “eternal return,” that is, of the unconditional and infinitely repeated circular course of all things—this teaching of Zarathustra’s *could have*, in the end, been already taught by Heraclitus. At least the Stoa, which inherited almost all of its fundamental ideas from Heraclitus, has traces of it. (*EH BT 3 entire*)

Note that tragic representation is no longer the issue, except derivatively. The tragic itself stands apart from any particular cultural manifestation, and informs approaches to psychology, philosophy, and above all, affirmation; it is connected to the teaching of eternal recurrence and, apart from that of Nietzsche himself, to the names of Heraclitus, Dionysus, and Zarathustra. Tragedy is therefore a central part of Nietzsche’s response to his most basic practical concern: what it means to engage with one’s commitments and activities in such a way as to constitute saying Yes to life.

**II. Tragic representation and tragedy.**
So in reviewing his accomplishments, Nietzsche chose to identify himself as the tragic philosopher and rest his claim for originality on the attainment of tragic wisdom. Unfortunately, however, he offered few indications as to what all this amounts to. Tragic wisdom, as categorically distinct from any other philosophic accomplishment, is difficult to gauge, apart from its connection to this matter of not merely theoretical import: what it is to be Dionysian and thereby to affirm life. Even an appeal to what is familiar to us, tragic representation, does not necessarily make the issues clear. As the comment about Aristotle suggests, one must understand the prior category of the tragic, one must perhaps even be Dionysian, in order to understand the meaning of tragic representation.

But even though the issue here is not, as it was in *The Birth of Tragedy*, the performance of tragedy, tragic representation may nevertheless offer us a point of access to the tragic itself. There are three respects in which tragic representation can reveal the issues at stake in what the tragic itself is. First, tragic representation, like tragedy itself, can constitute a kind of self-knowledge. The representation of tragedy is also a representation of humanity, so in representing tragedy to ourselves we also furnish ourselves with a self-representation:

Only artists, and especially those of the theater, have instilled into persons eyes and ears to see and to hear with some pleasure what each person himself is, what he himself experiences, what he himself wants; only they have taught us to esteem the hero who is hidden in each and every ordinary person, only they have taught the art of looking at oneself, from a distance and as it were transfigured, as a hero—the art of staging oneself for oneself…. Without such an art we would be nothing but foreground and live entirely within the confines of that optics which makes what is closest and crudest seem immense and reality itself. (*GS 78*; compare *RWB 4*)

Drama portrays human action abstracted from the particulars that typically monopolize our attention: the “foreground” of accidental impulses and incentives that can seem to
encompass all of life. The shape of tragedy clarifies the meaningful pattern of a sequence of events. This not only has the potential to reveal a heroic structure of purpose and effect behind our distracted activity, but also imparts a new ability, that of “staging ourselves” in meaningful ways. So dramatic representation in general provides us with the self-distance necessary to display and examine ourselves; and tragedy’s portrayal of the heroic confers upon us the ability to aspire to a wisdom that transcends momentary appearances.

The second issue that tragic representation brings to light is that of enactment. Just as it is a mundane truth that many persons are not genuinely leading a life, but merely playing a role, with tragic representation comes the question of just what point such a performance has. And since tragedy presents a kind of fate or doom, one may wonder why the tragedy cannot be nothing but the conclusion, why the characters bother to trace out their doom, and why the actors bother to perform the play over and over again. Nietzsche suggested an answer in a famous passage:

What ultimate meaning lies at the bottom of the Trojan War and similar tragic terrors? There can be no doubt: they were intended as festival plays for the gods, and, insofar as the poet of such plays has a more ‘divine’ constitution than most others do, also as festival plays for the poets … (GM 1.7; compare WS 58, HL 6)

What tragedy and tragic representation share, according to Nietzsche, is that their sense is not provided by means of an outcome or a lesson to be learned, but by a horizon of purposiveness structured as a narrative. This is one way in which Aristotle misunderstood tragedy. He understood its significance to reside in a negative, extrinsic production: ridding us of something that we already had. But the significance of tragedy as festival play is self-contained. The point of tragedy and its festivals does not lie in a goal outside of
its celebrated experience that is to be attained by means of its terrors, but in its very enactment.

The third respect in which tragic representation offers us access to the tragic itself is through a matter that might be called “anti-priestly-realism” or possibly “idealism.” As Nietzsche claimed in another context, “we ourselves, we free spirits, are nothing less than a ‘revaluation of all values,’ an incarnate declaration of war and triumph over all the ancient \[\text{alten}\] conceptions of ‘true’ and ‘untrue.’” (A 13; some emphasis added). According to Nietzsche, the outlook that contrasts with his own, the outlook associated with the type of the priest, relies for its authority on appeals to what he called the “true world” (EH “destiny” 8; also see TI “world,” A 10, EH HH 1)—some kind of existence ontologically superior to anything to which we have access. Priestly realism would thus be the position that, although the object of our words and experience is always mere “appearance,” there exists a more fully real world beyond appearance that is in some way “obligating” (TI “world” 4–5). But if tragedy does concern the practical self-knowledge that emerges in an enacted or lived life, then we ourselves can embody a kind of heroism that triumphs over the priestly conceptions of truth and falsehood.

Tragic representation depicts a self-contained world in which agency is bounded but nevertheless efficacious. In tragedy, human self-governance confronts unavoidable, unrevisable challenges that undermine its integrity. But tragedy does not depict us as subject to forces that render all action nugatory; the integrity of the drama depends on the ability of the protagonist to achieve something even while subject to immense, impersonal powers. The shortcomings of agency are at least bounded by the agent’s recognition of her limitations. And analogously, insofar as we repudiate the empty obligatingness of the true
world, we avoid subjecting ourselves to standards that would be impossible to acknowledge.\textsuperscript{7} And Nietzsche insists that the lack of practice-transcendent standards does not to skepticism, but to a kind of idealism: “\textit{With the true world we have also abolished the apparent one!}”\textsuperscript{8} What remains without the “true world” is not mere appearance, but a world that is ideal, in that it is the same as the objects of our words and thoughts, but is nevertheless real. Both the reality of tragedy, and the reality of our agency, then, would not be something given to us by the cosmos, but something that arises from the force of our commitments to this life. In this case, tragic representation and tragedy itself are on the same footing.\textsuperscript{9} Neither derives its authority from an ancient conception of truth, but they both put forward a clear-sightedness that is based on the conditions under which we represent ourselves to ourselves in play and in agency.

\textbf{III. The distinctiveness of the tragic.}

Tragic representation, then, leads us back to tragedy itself, and this leads us back to Nietzsche’s understanding of both the distinctiveness of tragedy and its centrality to his own self-conception. The appreciation imparted by tragedy, of the conditioned character of any commitment to this existence, does not depend on a metaphysics of suffering or an inherently educational aspect of pain. Tragedy offers a different kind of realism\textsuperscript{10} about the meaningfulness of our purposes and endeavors: that it is not supplied by anything exterior to our practices, but is always provisional and contingent on “destruction, decomposition, and negation”\textsuperscript{11}\textsuperscript{(NCW “We Antipodes”=GS 370). And this overcoming of priestly realism in the tragic leads to a more—perhaps the most—fundamental issue:

That the artist esteems appearance higher than reality is no objection to this proposition [that “distinguishing between a ‘true’ world and an ‘apparent’ one … is only a suggestion
of decadence”). For “appearance” here means reality once more, only in a selection, amplification, and correction … The tragic artist is no pessimist—he says just Yes to everything questionable and even terrible, he is Dionysian … (TI “reason” 6)

Tragic realism, unlike priestly realism, is affirmative. This point, according to Nietzsche, is little appreciated: Schopenhauer and others have gotten it exactly wrong. Tragedy’s recognition of the terrible is not resignation, but a triumphant celebration of human integrity in the face of destruction; any other triumphalism, suggests Nietzsche, would be an empty fantasy about a kind of existence different from ours. So Nietzsche can identify his thought as the transposition of the Dionysian into a philosophical pathos because, “in the Dionysian symbol the ultimate limit of affirmation is attained” (EH BT 1.)

Not only does tragic realism offer the possibility of affirmation; it is the only outlook that offers a basis for genuine affirmation. Nietzsche came to identify himself as the “tragic philosopher” in part because of his quest for a rival to the “most widespread and enduring of all facts” (GM 3.11): the ascetic ideal, which, in the forms of Platonism, Christian morality, and the scientific conscience, had robbed us of the inheritance of tragedy. The ascetic ideal, according to Nietzsche, has come to an end. For millennia it manufactured a sense of purposiveness, but it finally turned against itself, and culminated in nihilism. Tragedy is thus fundamental to Nietzsche’s thought as the only possible alternative to nihilism.

There are two main respects in which the tragic outlook differs from the moral-ascetic one, and clarifying these will help to illuminate the connection between tragedy and affirmation. So before I try to offer a substantive account of what tragedy is and what sort of necessity a tragic self-understanding carries, I shall elaborate on those two points of contrast. The “realism” of the tragic outlook, unlike the moral-ascetic one, incorporates a
recognition of what Nietzsche called “the innocence of becoming” (*TI* “errors” 7–8) and what Nietzsche called “Dionysian pessimism” (*GS* 370). The innocence of becoming implies that “No one is responsible for man’s being there at all, for being so-and-so constituted, or for being in these circumstances or in this environment” (*TI* “errors” 8; see *A* 25). Note that Nietzsche’s claim is not that there is no such thing as responsibility, but only that a certain way of imputing responsibility, and specifically a comprehensive kind of responsibility, is not “innocent.” What Nietzsche seems to find objectionable is the particular employment of narrative in rendering persons guilty:

And we have been stuck with the sight of this new invalid, “the sinner,” for a couple millennia now—will we ever be free of it? —wherever one looks there is the hypnotic gaze of the sinner, which always fixes in the same one direction (on “guilt” as the *single* causality of suffering); everywhere the bad conscience, this “abominable beast” in Luther’s words; everywhere the past regurgitated, the action distorted, the “green eye” for all acting; everywhere the will to the misunderstanding of suffering made the content of life…. (*GM* 3.20)

In order to make everyone comprehensively responsible, there must be a particularly bad practice of storytelling: the past must be “regurgitated,” the details arranged so as to render all action guilty, and the misnarration turned into the very point of the story. The structure of events must be arranged according to a “false causality” (*TI* “errors” 3) in order to impute fault. And imputing fault contributes to shaping a “moral world order” (*A* 25–6), which tries to make sense of life by giving a rational—or at least volitional—explanation for and eventual resolution of *everything*, in particular suffering. Tragedy stands against this moralized form of narration; it has a different temporal arc, a different organization, a different purposiveness.
Dionysian pessimism is the tragic outlook’s other mark of distinction. “Pessimism” acknowledges the existence of that which is “evil, senseless, and ugly,” but in the face of the transformative powers of the Dionysian economy of life, all this can be written off:

I took tragic insight [Erkenntnis] as the most beautiful luxury of our culture, as its most precious, noblest, most dangerous kind of squandering, but all the same, on account of its abundancy, as its permissible luxury…. Wagner responds to this double need just as Schopenhauer does—they negate life, they slander it, and therefore they are my antipodes. The one richest in the fullness of life, the Dionysian god and human, can allow himself not only the sight of the terrible and the questionable, but even the terrible deed and every luxury of destruction, decomposition, and negation—in his case what is evil, senseless, and ugly appears as it were permissible, just as it appears permissible in nature, as a consequence of an excess of procreating, restoring powers which are yet capable of making every desert into a lush fertile land. (NCW “We Antipodes” = GS 370)

Tragic insight does not, as Wagner, Schopenhauer, and others have done, confront the terrible wastefulness of nature with a negation or slander of life: demeaning any existence that contains suffering in favor of one without it. Tragic insight matches the wastefulness of nature with its own squandering, continually leaving aside its experience of the terrible in favor of a novel, luxurious future. Tragedy, for Nietzsche, indicates a wealth of human creative powers that can withstand anything and look ahead to its own continued existence.

IV. Tragedy and agency.

Tragedy is at the center of Nietzsche’s self-conception as the only alternative to the ascetic ideal, and thus as the only avenue for affirmation. It is not merely an aesthetic category, but one that encompasses the very character of self-determining (or “self-creating”) agency. The tragic character of self-determining agency, I shall claim, stems from the conflict between the local, practice-dependent character of our normative commitments and their transcendent purport. My argument will run as such. Becoming
what one is, according to Nietzsche, is a matter of taking a particular place in a narrative of self-creation. Such narratives are teleological: they are structured by a kind of directionality (or, more broadly, by “ideals”) that cannot, practically, be taken as arbitrary. But these narratives are inevitably incomplete, and so therefore are the norms and selves that depend on them.

The very project of a genealogy of morals supports my first claim, that becoming what one is is a matter of taking a particular place in a narrative of self-creation. The *Genealogy of Morals* begins with the declaration that we are unknown to ourselves, and the explanation it provides of this shortcoming, that we have never sought ourselves, is expanded by means of a temporal metaphor: the bell-strokes of our life that we do not think to reckon until after they have passed. What we have failed to accomplish, and what the genealogy attempts to recover, is a diachronic account of who we are. This missing story covers the singular as well as the collective “we.” The end of the story, Nietzsche claims, is the “sovereign individual” (*GM* 2.2), and this notion is presumably governed by his general claim: “all concepts in which an entire process is semiotically drawn together elude definition; only that which has no history is definable” (*GM* 2.13). Of course it does not follow from this that everything indefinable has a history, but the special elusiveness of modern individuality seems due to the complexity of its narrative source. And not only individuality in general, but also the particular individual, seems to have a narrative basis.

In the book subtitled “How one becomes what one is,” in the section that promises the “real answer to the question, *how one becomes what one is*” (*EH* “clever” 9), Nietzsche offers this account of personal development:
One must keep the entire surface of consciousness—consciousness is a surface—clean of any great imperatives. Beware even of every great word, every great posture! Sheer danger, that the instinct comes to “understand itself” too soon—meanwhile the organizing “idea” with a calling to rule grows and grows deep down—it begins to command, it slowly heads back from detours and wrong ways, it prepares single qualities and competencies that will one day prove to be indispensable as means to a whole—it in turn trains all subservient faculties before giving any hint of the dominating task, “goal,” “end,” “meaning.”

The individual, Nietzsche suggests, cannot be understood in terms of anything available to her consciousness, and not even in terms of any “great imperative” or “great word.” Instead Nietzsche accounts for individuality, and in fact his own individuality, in terms of a meaningfulness available in terms of the familiar tropes of journeys and roads, and growing and commanding.

This passage from Ecce Homo suggests not merely a narrative, but one with a teleology, even if only a retrospectively apparent one. Narratives of self cannot be random or arbitrary; their meaningfulness depends on the structure provided by some kind of directionality: in Nietzsche’s words, a dominant “task” or “goal.” This directionality is invoked by Nietzsche, for example, with the “teachers of the purpose of existence” of The Gay Science’s opening section and with the famous “formula of our happiness” of The Antichrist’s opening section: “a Yes, a No, a straight line, a goal.” The Genealogy of Morals provides a general account of this directionality in terms of a “progressus”:

I would like to say that even partial becoming useless, atrophying and degenerating, loss of meaning and purposiveness, in short, death, belongs to the conditions of a genuine progressus, which always appears in the shape of a will and a way to greater power and is always carried through at the expense of numerous smaller powers. The extent of an “advance” can even be measured by the mass of what must be sacrificed to it … (GM 2.12)

Nietzsche’s account here suggests that all teleology is retrospective, since the progressus is governed by the most recent power-relation rather than the original one. And the appeal to the “way to greater power” suggests a further condition on the directionality of narratives.
The directionality must be governed by something that transcends any particular incident or feature internal to the narrative, all of which are “sacrificed.” In the context of the individual, a normative commitment that must seem compelling and unrevisable—a kind of “fatum” (AOM pref, BGE 231, CW 2, TI “morality” 6, EH “wise” 6, A 1)—plays this role. “The individual,” says Nietzsche, “should be consecrated to something suprapersonal—that is what tragedy demands” (RWB 4; compare GS 346). Ideals with transcendent purport furnish the horizon of meaning upon which the narrative whole depends. One’s life can only make sense in terms of commitments that transcend the individual person.

My third claim, that narratives of self are inevitably incomplete, is supported by Nietzsche’s frequent claims that he is not erecting any new idols or creating a new morality.16 The narrative structure relies, for its integrity, on its governing normative commitments. But those commitments do not derive from anything beyond their provisional status as determining the structure of the narrative. In this case, these commitments can never be fully redeemed. They function as wagers about what will effectively structure our personal narratives, but the outcome of such wagers must be perpetually deferred; some greater power might yet arise and usurp the teleology. Thus, in the absence of idols, the status of our narratives and accordingly our selves is always provisional. This is perhaps what Nietzsche had in mind when, in the first passage I quoted from Ecce Homo, he said that the tragic pathos involves “Yes-saying to opposition and war, becoming, with a radical rejection of the very concept ‘being’” (EH BT 3). There is no stable human telos; against time, nothing stands firm. Human existence is fundamentally “an imperfect tense that can never become a perfect one” (HL 1).17 A past which is not wholly ours, a present which is not a conclusion, and a future which is yet to be determined
contribute to making our narratives unstable and incomplete. The integrity of the individual and her agency is thus an aspiration that can never be fully realized.\textsuperscript{18}

V. Contingency and freedom.

Nietzsche therefore insisted that any possible affirmation will be “tragic” in character: it will provoke unavoidable conflicts which undermine self-understanding and thus cause a failure to “become what one is.” The meanings of our lives depend on many factors outside of our control—the past, the future, the contingencies of the public realm—and these suffuse any self-understanding with a plurality of irreconcilable narratives that render a stable and coherent identity impossible. Tragedy is accordingly not merely a mode of emplotment or an allegorical imposition on the genealogy of values.\textsuperscript{19} Rather, just as tragedies “have to do with precisely what is incurable, unavoidable, inescapable in human character and destiny”(\textit{AOM} 23), the tragic in life is inextricable from distinctively human aspiration. The issue is a practical one, rather than a metaphysical one; the belief in an “moral world order”(\textit{A} 25–6) is just, what, according to Nietzsche, fails to ground any meaningfulness. But making sense of one’s life, giving it a direction, shaping it for oneself, are all conditioned by the ultimate destruction of whatever order can temporarily be established.

The tragic destruction of individual integrity manifests itself, on an “ideal” level, in all the familiar torments of a rarefied consciousness: perplexity, disappointment, lacunae in one’s self-image, anomie, despair. But there is a more basic experience of what Blondel has called “the contradictions of becoming,”\textsuperscript{20} namely \textit{pain}:

In the mystery teachings, \textit{pain} is pronounced holy: the “labor pains of the woman” sanctify all pain—all becoming and growing, everything that guarantees a future requires pain …
So that there may be the eternal joy of creating, so that the will to life may eternally affirm itself, there must also be the eternal “labor agony” … All this is what the word “Dionysus” means: I know of no symbolism higher than this Greek symbolism of the Dionysian. In it the deepest instinct of life, that toward the future of life, the eternity of life, is experience religiously—the very way to life, procreation, as the holy way … (TI “ancients” 4)

Pain has no intrinsic value, and it is not inevitable. But it is inextricable from creation: making a life for oneself involves pain, so when life is hallowed, pain must be hallowed, too. An ethical outlook that promises the potential eliminability of pain takes away the resources to make sense of the future. And this is precisely the problem with the moral outlook: in producing its meanings it destroys the conditions for future meaningfulness. So the point of a tragic philosophy is neither to embrace pain as meaningful, nor to seek true worth in a life apart from pain. The point of a tragic philosophy is that the very experience of profound lack and loss can also be the erotic promise of future life.

That pain is inextricable from becoming and growing is not, for Nietzsche, some sort of unfortunate physiological fact, but part of the conditions of what it means for us to grow:

The most spiritual persons, given that they are also the most courageous, also experience by far the most painful tragedies: but just for that reason they honor life, because it sets the greatest opposition against them. (TI “skirmishes” 17; emphasis added)

We who have made ourselves “spiritual” are thereby more susceptible to pain. The commitments that we hold leave us caring about matters that would otherwise not affect us; modern personality is accordingly “very easily hurt” and “tender”(TI “skirmishes” 37). But this susceptibility grants us the resources to distinguish what is worth our honor: only against the background of opposition are accomplishments meaningful as such, and only against the “greatest opposition” is life meaningful as such. Tragedy is thus the condition
in which we may suffer, but we may also triumph, and indeed triumph in the mere availability of triumph:

Bravery and freedom of feeling before a powerful enemy, before a sublime disaster, before a problem that arouses horror—this triumphant state is what the tragic artist chooses, what he glorifies. Before tragedy, what is warlike in our soul celebrates its Saturnalia; whoever is used to suffering, whoever calls on suffering, the heroic person praises his being with tragedy . . . (TI “skirmishes” 24)

One comes to one’s own first-personhood by standing up against opposition, and the sublimity of that opposition is more important than any conclusive victory. “The free person is a warrior” (TI “skirmishes” 38), according to Nietzsche, and tragedy provides the battlefield on which to find oneself. We thus gain ourselves by confronting our tragic conditions.

VI. Midnight eros.

The contingency and open-endedness of our narratives allow for dangerously unpredictable but meaningful transformations; in the words of Zarathustra, “midnight too is noon” (Z 4.19.10): the inevitable darkness is what conditions possibility. Our attachments and our agency take their shape under conditions which lie menacingly beyond our control. Much of what we are is the unchosen determination of fate—necessity, whether natural or otherwise. This forms a limitation, but without such limitation there would be no such thing as a want, no such thing as a desire, and nothing held dear. These only emerge as possibilities in an intractable world. And as much as we manage to satisfy our desires, there is always something left to want, and therefore some direction to give to our activity. But if we were relieved from contingency, we would not want anything; there would be nothing to move us, and nothing could turn on our successes and failures.
This is why Nietzsche’s model of tragedy is an erotic one. Life is attractive, ultimately, because of an erotic attachment to it. Eros sometimes finds satisfaction, sometimes is responsible for immense, painful longing, and is sometimes simply destructive. Tragic wisdom incorporates the recognition that this situation is inevitable: there is no stable equilibrium between desire and satisfaction. Eros cannot be satisfied once and for all: satisfaction only leads to new cravings; any quest for a complete and permanent satisfaction that does not look past itself is bound to fail. There is no end to desire, no way to contain the destructive power of eros. Or if there were, it would at the least make us shallow and uninteresting in succeeding; conclusive success there would produce the “last men” of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*,²⁶ for whom desire is a question mark, and who without desire quite literally have no future. So more fundamental to any tragic ethics than achievement or satisfaction would be an account of the purposiveness of future “self-overcoming” (*BGE* 257).²⁷

**VII. Conclusion.**

Tragedy is Nietzsche’s response to a problematic that arises out of two realizations. One of these realizations is that the ideals by which we lead our lives are human, all-too-human:²⁸ they have no more exalted origin than our passions and needs. The other realization is that the human being is a piece of “fatality”:

The fatality of his essence is not to be unraveled from the fatality of all that has been and all that will be. A person is not the result of a particular intention, of a will, of an end; he is not part of an attempt to attain an “ideal of humanity” or an “ideal of happiness” or an “ideal of morality”… (*TI* errors 8)

Our esteem and our self-direction depend on us, and we are part of the immense, mechanical stupidity of nature. In becoming someone, one is confronted by the inescapable
and unrevisable; these unchosen determinations make one many things, even beyond what one could come to realize. Fate does not merely affect what happens to us, but constitutes what we are. And the various provisions of fate may be multiple and unmanageable.

There are three possible ways to confront this challenge to our ideals. One is asceticism: to believe in something wholly outside our lives and their fatality that can impart meaning; a second is tragedy: to maintain the tension between ideal and fatality and in that very tension find the fruitfulness and meaning of our lives; the last is Humean skepticism: to believe that the determinist account is all that there is, and that our ideals are therefore nothing but fatality. The first approach, according to Nietzsche, turns out to have failed. And the last approach, according to Nietzsche, turns out to be nothing more than a radicalized version of the first: the uncanny will to burn in ourselves the self-mortifying belief that we are frogs, that we belong in a swamp.

Only tragedy remains. Indeed, if, as I have argued elsewhere, the genealogy of who we are is that of one long enterprise of arriving at self-determination, then there is a tragic necessity to tragedy itself. In assuming control over the meanings of one’s life, one is bound to fail. There are inevitable shortcomings in becoming what one is; the contingencies of this existence and the boundlessness of desire guarantee that there can be no satisfactory conclusion to the process. There are two conclusions to draw from this. One is that ethical hopes grounded on an eventual redemption are misguided; tragedy implies that there is no possibility of a culmination, no final reassurance about the status of our ideals. This not only rules out the overcoming of tragedy in a complete self-consciousness; the impossibility of a finale also rules out any post-finale, or any passing beyond tragic conditions. The other conclusion is that the integrity of the individual
remains. Our ability to stand apart from our own fatality and nevertheless endure, if only for a while, only confirms the integrity of this existence and its ideals. We may be destroyed, ultimately, but we are the ones who are destroyed, and who can recognize our destruction. Tragedy is affirmative: it confirms the integrity of our agency and the value of this existence.\textsuperscript{34}

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\item F. Nietzsche, \textit{Kritische Studienausgabe}, Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari eds. (New York: de Gruyter, 1980), volume 7, fragment 19[35], translation mine. Works by Nietzsche are hereafter cited in the text by fragment or section number; translations are mine and emphasis is original unless otherwise noted. Works are identified by the standard North American Nietzsche Society abbreviations, namely: \textit{A} (\textit{Der Antichrist}), \textit{AOM} (\textit{Vermischte Meinungen und Sprüche}), \textit{BGE} (\textit{Jenseits von Gut und Böse}), \textit{BT} (\textit{Die Geburt der Tragödie}), \textit{CW} (\textit{Der Fall Wagner}), \textit{D} (\textit{Morgenröte}), \textit{EH} (\textit{Ecce Homo}), \textit{GM} (\textit{Zur Genealogie der Moral}), \textit{GS} (\textit{Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft}), \textit{HH} (\textit{Menschliches, Allzumenschliches}), \textit{HL} (\textit{Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben}), \textit{KSA} (\textit{Kritische Studienausgabe}), \textit{NCW} (\textit{Nietzsche Contra Wagner}), \textit{PTA} (\textit{Die Philosophie im tragischen Zeitalter der Griechen}), \textit{RWB} (\textit{Richard Wagner in Bayreuth}), \textit{TI} (\textit{Die Götzendämmerung}), \textit{WS} (\textit{Der Wanderer und sein Schatten}), and \textit{Z} (\textit{Also Sprach Zarathustra}). On tragic knowledge, see also \textit{BT} 7: “Both [Dionysian human and Hamlet] have had one true glimpse into the essence of things, they have gained knowledge, and it nauseates them to act since their action can change nothing in the eternal essence of things.”

\item The main elements of \textit{The Birth of Tragedy}'s argument were repudiated almost as soon as they were proposed: Nietzsche condemns the “hypertrophy of the aesthetic viewpoint”(\textit{KSA} 7.30[18]) and announces the “impossibility of metaphysics”(\textit{KSA} 7.23[7]) in the notebooks of 1873.

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4 See GS 356: “the care to make a living still compels almost all male Europeans to adopt a particular role, their so-called occupation”; see also the “Second question of conscience” of TI “Maxims” 38: “Are you genuine, or only an actor?”

5 See HL 6: “If the value of a drama were to lie solely in its conclusion [Schluss- und Hauptgedanken], then the drama itself would be the most indirect and tedious path to a goal”; see also my “Tragic Ambiguity,” forthcoming.

6 See HH 212, TI “ancients” 5, and A 7.

7 See TI “reason” 6: “the ‘true world’ has been constructed out of the contradiction to the actual one.”

8 “Idealism,” that is, not in Nietzsche’s common pejorative sense (for example, A 8 or EH HH 5), in which it is equivalent to priestly realism, but in the sense, for example, of the “ideal and imaginative phenomena” (GM 2.18) that are nevertheless real. P. Poellner, Nietzsche and Metaphysics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 110, comments on TI “world” 6 and notes the idealist character of Nietzsche’s arguments. Poellner, however, identifies idealism as the position that “reality an sich is consciousness,” which for Nietzsche, as Poellner notes, would be another kind of essentialist realism.

9 For an excellent discussion of the relation between the intelligibility of agency and the standards internal to the exercise of agency with respect to Nietzsche’s view of art, see Aaron Ridley’s “Nietzsche on Art and Freedom,” forthcoming.

10 As Brian Leiter argues concerning Nietzsche’s arguments against a “true world,” “the repudiation of the noumenal world does not leave us with a world of mere appearance” (Nietzsche on Morality (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 16). But note that Nietzsche’s position is even stronger than the repudiation of a contrast with the apparent; Nietzsche’s realism, rather, is grounded in the character of the apparent: “The very reasons for which ‘this’ world has been designated as ‘apparent’ instead ground its reality” (TI “reason” 6).

11 See GS 370=NCW “We antipodes”; TI “skirmishes” 21, 24; TI “ancients” 5, EH BT 1

12 Nietzsche occasionally also associates tragedy with romantic pessimism, the “pessimism of the renunciators, the failed, and the defeated” (AOM pref 7), which is diametrically opposed to tragedy’s
“overfulness of life” or “pessimism of strength”. For such ambiguities see D 502, GS 370, BT “Attempt at a Self-Criticism” 1, GM 3.3, and GM 3.20.


14 See TI “skirmishes” 14, 37, 44; GS 349.

15 For support of a similar claim, see A. Nehamas, Nietzsche: Life as Literature (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), chapter 6.

16 See, for example, EH pref 2.

17 See V. Gerhardt, Friedrich Nietzsche (München: Beck, 1995), p. 96: “Tragedy results merely from the fact that the human being has a history and must further make history.”

18 Contrast G. Deleuze, Nietzsche and Philosophy, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 17, for whom “the essence of the tragic” is “joy of multiplicity.” Identifying the tragic with joy seems one-sided by neglecting, ironically, the Dionysian sparagmos for Dionysian rebirth or Oedipus as scapegoat for Oedipus as hero. And any one-sidedness, if the main point concerns “multiplicity,” would be a substantial flaw: “joy” at “anguish and disgust” probably obliterates rather than mediates multiplicity.

19 See H. White, Metahistory (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), and Paul de Man, Allegories of Reading (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).


24 Compare BGE 257: “calamitous simultaneity of spring and fall”

Z pref 5; compare the commentary on “destroying the passions” in *TI* “morality” I.

Compare the ideal of “great health,” as expressed in *GS* 382=*EH* TSZ 2: “such a health that one does not merely have but also continually acquires, and must acquire, because one always relinquishes it again, and must relinquish it!”

See *EH* HH 1.

See *PTA* 8, where Nietzsche claims that “the teaching of law in becoming and of play in necessity … raised the curtain on this greatest drama.”


See *GM* 1.1


See *GS* pref 2: “every metaphysics and physics that knows some finale, some final state of some sort, every predominant aesthetic or religious craving for some Apart, Beyond, Outside, Above, permits the question whether it was not sickness that inspired the philosopher”; compare *HH* 638, A 31.

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