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An Enlarged Way of Thinking:
Tragedy, Philosophy and Kant’s
Critique of Judgment

ANDREW JAMES COOPER
SID: 306194112

Supervisors: John Grumley &
Vrasidas Karalis

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School of Philosophy
The University of Sydney
Australia

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Abstract

This thesis examines the problematic of tragedy with the aim of identifying its significance in contemporary philosophy. Whilst there is a renewed interest in tragedy in contemporary philosophy, it has focused mostly on the ‘tragic idea’ or on the tragedies themselves, which not only relegates the contemporary discourse on tragedy to the history of ideas, but, more significantly, occludes the possibility of new forms of tragedy. In contrast, this thesis employs the paradigm of the ‘enlarged way of thinking’ (erweiterten Denkungsart) from Kant’s Critique of Judgment to consider tragedy as a major contribution to the goal of expanding the scope of philosophy.

In Part I, this thesis argues that Kant’s call for an enlarged way of thinking represents a response to the failure of philosophy to reconcile nature and freedom, transforming the task of philosophy from outlining the conditions for objective knowledge to the task of mutual communicability. In Part II it examines the role of tragedy in the work of G. W. F. Hegel, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger and Cornelius Castoriadis. It is argued that, apart from Nietzsche’s bifurcation of philosophy and tragedy, the philosophical discourse on tragedy does not so much depart from Kant as build from his example of responding to the failure of philosophy.

This approach gives us reason to consider the growing interest in tragedy in contemporary philosophy not simply as a new instalment in the history of ideas but as the expression of a present crisis. The recent turn to tragedy will be surveyed in the final chapter to conclude that Kant’s enlarged way of thinking provides an exemplary procedure for both exploring this crisis and navigating a way through it, redirecting the goal of philosophy away from an exclusive focus on knowledge towards mutual communicability.
nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world,
the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken,
the world is open and free,
everything is still in the future and will always be in the future.

– Mikhail Bakhtin
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Note on Citations

Citations to Kant’s Critique of Practical Reason and the Critique of Judgment are to Volume 5 of Kants gesammelte Schriften, Akadanie Ausgabe. Citations to the Critique of Pure Reason are to the customary A/B page numbers from the first and second editions. Translations quoted are from the Cambridge University Press editions.

Citations of the Greek tragedies are from The Complete Greek Drama (2 vol.) edited by Whitney Oates and Eugene O’Neil unless otherwise stated, and use the standard line numbering system. Citations to Aristotle are taken from The Complete Works of Aristotle (2 vol.) edited by Jonathan Barnes, and use the standard marginal key from Immanuel Bekker’s 1831 edition of the Greek text. Citations to other texts are by page number. Modifications made to translations are noted in footnotes in the text.

Abbreviations of frequently cited works are as follows. For abbreviated texts, page numbers will be cited in-text. Bibliographical details are given in the Bibliography.

Kant

CJ Critique of Judgment
CPrR Critique of Practical Reason
CPR Critique of Pure Reason

Hegel

LA Lectures on Aesthetics
EL Encyclopaedia Logic
PS Phenomenology of Spirit
FK ‘Faith and Knowledge’

Schopenhauer

WR I, WR II The World as Will and Representation, vols. I and II

Nietzsche

TI Twilight of the Idols
BT  The Birth of Tragedy

Rosenzweig
SR  The Star of Redemption

Benjamin
GT  The Origin of German Tragic Drama

Heidegger
HH  Hölderlin’s Hymn ‘The Ister’
OWA  ‘Origin of the Work of Art’
RA  ‘The Self-Assertion of the German University’ (The ‘Rector’s Address)
IM  Introduction to Metaphysics
B&T  Being and Time

Jaspers
TNE  Tragedy is Not Enough

Castoriadis
FC  Fenêtre Sur Le Chaos
ISR  ‘Institution of Society and Religion’
CL  Crossroads in the Labyrinth
IIS  The Imaginary Institution of Society
Introduction

Throughout philosophical history, philosophers have employed the notion of ‘tragedy’ in order to question the limits of their practice. At times tragedy is called upon to raise themes that philosophy tends to overlook, such as suffering, loss, and death. At other times tragedy is used more radically; to identify the tendency of philosophy to transgress the limits of the knowable. Some philosophers employ tragedy as a non-cognitive ‘idea’ (if such a thing is possible) with which to disrupt the conceptual boundaries between individual autonomy and the shared dimensions of ethical life. Others evoke tragedy in order to explore the creativity of artistic genius and the capacity of human thought to bring new form into being.

In recent years, tragedy has again become a prominent theme in philosophy. From the philosophy of literature, to political theory, ethics, epistemology, feminist philosophy, and the history of philosophy, the contemporary use of tragedy as a philosophical theme is not unique to any one part of philosophy but spans across its diverse terrain. Broadly speaking, the recent interest in tragedy turns on a shared suspicion that philosophy has failed to provide the resources with which to navigate life as a whole. More specifically, it turns on the suspicion that tragedy can assist us to reorient the way that philosophy deals with problems of life, though there is little agreement on how this reorientation might occur.

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Yet what philosophers mean when they refer to ‘tragedy’ is not immediately obvious. For some, tragedy refers to the institution of ancient Greek drama that arose to prominence in Athens during the fifth century BCE. There is something compelling about this definition, for the ancient Greeks where the first to use the word ‘tragedy’ (tragōidia) in order to describe a genre of theatre that was known for its depiction of serious themes. The tragedies first took shape as a part of the ‘City Dionysia’, an annual festival of the wine-god Dionysus. During this festival, the city’s best poets would each stage a tetralogy of tragedies to be performed before the Athenian citizens. Scholars speculate that ‘tragedy’ probably meant something like ‘goat-song’, indicating the close ties between the ancient theatre and rituals of animal sacrifice. From what we can tell, the tragedies presented serious events that involve suffering, and a key part of a tragedy’s success at the City Dionysia lay in its ability to evoke an emotional response in the spectators. More specifically, the suffering presented by the tragedies results from the collision between the normative demands of a society, represented by the ancient myths of Athens, and human ambitions, represented by the tragic heroes. Yet providing any definitive account of tragedy is a problematic task. Only thirty-three of potentially thousands of tragedies performed at the City Dionysia remain today, meaning that much of what constituted tragic art is unknown to us.

Other philosophers define tragedy as a distinctly philosophical idea that is distilled from the dramatic genre. As an idea, tragedy is said to have taken its most crystalline definition in the post-Kantian philosophers – and in Friedrich Schelling’s work in particular – as a means of expressing the failure of the philosophy of the ‘Idea’ understood as timeless form. The ‘idea of tragedy’ becomes the supreme oxymoron, or perhaps more accurately, as a ‘catachresis beyond oxymoron’, pushing conceptual thought to its limit. As the first articulation of tragedy in Ancient Greece preceded philosophy, the idea of tragedy announces the end of philosophy understood as the pursuit of exhaustive knowledge and the beginning of a mode of thinking more closely modelled in the poetic thought of the tragedians than on the philosophical tradition. The philosophy of the early nineteenth century thus provides a lasting definition of tragedy in the philosophical sphere that, as one thinker put it, ‘rises like an island’ over ancient tragedy.

Given the multiple levels of meaning caught up in the notion of ‘tragedy’, we face several interpretive difficulties in our present analysis. Contemporary philosophers who turn

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to tragedy tend to take one of the two approaches outlined above: some return to the original tragedies, while others consider the way that tragedy has been understood as a philosophical concept. While this thesis is indebted to the way that contemporary philosophers have understood tragedy, it argues that both of these approaches to tragedy distract us from the matter of contemporary tragedy. While philosophers are again recognising the significance of tragedy for expanding the boundaries of philosophical analysis, they operate under the shared assumption that tragedy is a thing of the past; that tragedy is, for all intents and purposes, dead. In what follows I argue that by beginning with the assumed death of tragedy, the contemporary interest in tragedy distracts us from a greater issue: that philosophy, the task we are now undertaking, is liable to its own kind of tragedy. The way I will explore tragedy in this thesis is not to limit its meaning to the original context of Athenian tragedy or to any one philosophical approach, but to see it as a living problematic that captured the imagination of philosophers past and continues to open new theoretical possibilities today.

The intention of this thesis is thus to problematise the interpretation of tragedy within contemporary philosophical discourse with the aim of revealing the living nature of the tragic form. This approach draws from what Michel Meyer called ‘problematology’ – that is, ‘the questioning of questioning’ – a process which involves both the articulation and interrogation of the discourse that underpins philosophical inquiry. By applying this approach to the interpretation of tragedy within philosophy, this thesis will trace diachronically an ongoing dialogue that has involved different thinkers operating in diverse historical circumstances. It will question both the semantic fields and the social spaces in which the problematic of tragedy was produced, while at the same time suggesting a new critical approach that pertains to our current cultural debates. This critical approach frames the philosophical problematic of tragedy as a way of challenging established patterns of thought that have become impervious to the living nature of social and linguistic form, thereby opening such patterns of thought to new possibilities.

Approaching tragedy as an ongoing problematic involves the recognition that, as Mikhail Bakhtin said of language, tragedy is ‘populated – overpopulated – with the intentions of others’. As Bakhtin notes, the attempt to expropriate a ‘living form’, such as a word, genre or problematic, is a ‘complicated process’, for there are no enduring treatments or fixed

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reference points to draw upon. The task requires a reflective stance toward such a living form through elucidating the multiplicity of voices that have contributed to its use. Crucial to this method is Bakhtin’s notion of dialogue, which examines living forms in terms of an ongoing conversation that is at once limited to the historical locality and particular experience of those who contribute to it, and, as a shared and enduring form, is independent of any contributor:

There is neither a first nor a last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context (it extends into the boundless past and boundless future). Even past meanings, that is those born in the dialogue of past centuries, can never be stable (finalized, ended once and for all) – they will always change (be renewed) in the process of subsequent, future development of the dialogue. At any moment in the development of the dialogue there are immense, boundless masses of forgotten contextual meanings, but at certain moments of the dialogue’s subsequent development along the way they are recalled and invigorated in renewed form (in a new context).

Bakhtin’s dialogical method calls into question any attempt to finalise an idea of ‘the tragic’ or a definitive account of ‘ancient Greek tragedy’. Following his approach, this thesis will bring to the fore some of the significant voices that ‘populate’ the problematic of tragedy; in particular, G. W. F. Hegel, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, and Cornelius Castoriadis. The purpose is ultimately to identify the significance of the renewed interest in tragedy in contemporary philosophy and to invigorate this form in a new context.

Two other figures underpin this dialogue and will be central to our analysis, one ancient and one modern. The first is Aristotle, whose famous definition in Poetics identified tragedy as the most ‘philosophic’ of the arts. The philosophical nature of tragedy, for Aristotle, lies in the distinction he draws between its content and form. The content of tragedy, he states, is action: ‘A tragedy, then, is the imitation (mimesis) of an action (praxeos) that is serious (spoudaias) and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself (teleias)’. More specifically, Aristotle identifies that the content of tragedy (the action) is drawn from the myths and stories that populate the inherited imaginative landscape of the Athenians; that is, the same content we find in epic. What sets tragedy apart from epic, Aristotle states, is the dramatic form that brings actors on stage to accompany the lone chorus. While the skill (techne) of the tragic poets is to imitate an action, their creative use of form transfigures the

12 ibid.
14 In Book IX of Poetics, Aristotle distinguishes poetry from history by stating that history attends to the singular, while poetry to the universal. Or in other words, history tells, poetry shows. Thus ‘poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history’. Aristotle, Poetics, 1451b5-6.
15 Aristotle, Poetics, 1449b24ff.
orientation of the spectators to the content presented. In this respect, the difference between tragedy and other genres is not so much a matter of content (such as unhappy events) as it is a matter of form (how those events are presented).

Identifying the importance of Aristotle’s voice in the ongoing dialogue on tragedy as a philosophical problematic is essential for our analysis, for his distinction between the content and form of tragedy establishes the framework for the renewed interest in tragedy in modern philosophy. Aristotle’s understanding of tragedy provides for modern philosophers what we might call a ‘descriptive phenomenology’ of tragedy. This phenomenological account refrains from making ontological claims about the content of tragedy, and instead identifies the form that is expressed in the parts of Greek drama. Thus he provides an alternative to Plato’s understanding of genre, wherein the techne of the poets is ontologically inferior to that of the philosophers. The modern problematic of tragedy, I will suggest, transcribes Aristotle’s formal interpretation onto the philosophical sphere through presenting traditional content in a new form, thereby transforming their relation to that tradition. Presented aesthetically, traditional philosophy is seen to be guilty of an intellectual kind of tragedy that is analogous to the tragic heroes, for its desire to approach the contingent sphere of practical reason according to predefined rules is seen to place it before inevitable failure. In this view, to recognise the tragedy of philosophy is to open space for non-cognitive – or aesthetic – dimensions of philosophical thinking.

Identifying the importance of Aristotle’s formal understanding of genre draws the attention of this study to an unexpected contributor to the problematic of tragedy: Immanuel Kant. While the extensive attention Kant gave to the fixity of form in his theoretical work renders him an unlikely voice to populate the problematic of tragedy – indeed, he is the enemy of tragedy for Nietzsche and Heidegger – this thesis will argue that the philosophical dialogue regarding the problematic of tragedy is best understood as an ongoing conversation with the goal of expanding the scope of philosophy in the paradigm of the ‘enlarged way of thinking’ (erweiterten Denkungsart) Kant develops in Critique of Judgment (CJ). Given that Kant’s theoretical philosophy is often understood as a bulwark against tragedy, this argument will take some work. Part I of this thesis is dedicated to presenting this case. To anticipate the

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16 In Book X of The Republic (602c-d), Plato discusses the techne of the poet in terms of imitation (mimesis). The poet is deemed not to imitate things as they are, but appearances, meaning that his work is thrice removed from the truth: ‘[He] knows little or nothing about the subjects he imitates and that the art of imitation is something that has no serious value; and that this applies above all to all tragic poetry, epic or dramatic’. Plato, The Republic, trans. C. Reeve, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004.
importance of Kant’s enlarged way of thinking for the argument of this thesis, a few introductory remarks on Kant are necessary.

0.1 Tragedy and Kant’s enlarged way of thinking

To understand Kant’s relation to the problematic of tragedy, it is vital to note that in the decades preceding Kant’s *CJ*, tragedy came to be seen as the exemplary form of poetry. The growing significance of tragedy during this time does not only indicate a sense that philosophy had failed to encompass the whole of life, but also a return to Aristotle’s reflections on art in his practical writings. For poets, playwrights and philosophers alike, tragedy was not seen as a mere artistic genre, but as the expression of a mode of thought that operates in the failure of philosophy to navigate questions regarding life as a whole. The *Schulphilosophie* of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Christian Wolff limited itself to a narrow set of problems that could be answered only with clear and distinct ideas; ideas that are, by necessity, divorced from practical life in order to maintain their universal status. Such ideas, on their own, are unable to navigate the new understanding of life in the biological sciences and the question of ethics in the collapse of a common sense of morality; that is, it is unable to navigate situations for which there is no end in view. Those concerned with the failure of philosophy to navigate such situations found resources in tragedy to reimagine the contingent singularity of the living sphere not as a threat to the philosophical project but as the basis of philosophical energy. The natural sphere, in this view, is transformed from being *unfortunately* contingent, and thus deficient to a greater ontological order, but as *necessarily* contingent, and thus not fully actual. Nature is thereby understood as an open-ended project in which humanity takes a creative role. Understanding exactly how tragedy is important to the task of reimagining the sensuous sphere as an open project will be a core part of this study. Generally speaking, the importance of tragedy in this task lies in the mode of thought of the poet who navigates the crisis of life, thus reconciling the ideas of reason with the sensory world, suffering, and contingency. The superiority of the poet over the philosopher in contexts of creative instability, however, raises a central problem to this thesis. This problem, simply stated, is that the claim that poetry is able to go beyond philosophy is self-defeating. If philosophy is the practice of thinking that is concerned with the truth, and a position arises that is critical of the activity that is concerned with the truth, we do not encounter the end of philosophy. Rather, we encounter the need for an enlarged kind of philosophy.
The relevance of tragedy to Kant’s project is more structural than direct, and the full extent of this relevance will not become apparent until Part II when we consider the importance of Kant’s enlarged way of thinking to tragedy as an ongoing philosophical problematic. While *Critique of Pure Reason* (*CPR*) and *Critique of Practical Reason* (*CPrR*) were concerned with determining objects and the will according to pre-given form, in *CJ* Kant gives extensive attention to the fluidity of form that was becoming increasingly apparent during his lifetime, particularly in the arts and sciences, leading him to outline an enlarged way of thinking that does not aspire toward objective knowledge but to making sense in common. The former aspiration requires a pre-defined end in view, while the latter is seen as an end in itself; it is an open-ended project of making ends. While it is a subject of much debate whether Kant actually allows for the possibility of new form, it is not Kant’s work as a whole but his response to the limitations of philosophy that interests us in this thesis. I will argue that it makes an exemplary, albeit implicit, contribution to the philosophical problematic of tragedy.\(^{17}\)

What is significant about Kant’s enlarged way of thinking for this study is that it outlines a non-cognitive procedure by which the thinker gains a reflective stance toward their immediate experience and opens their view to their neighbour and their neighbour’s best possibilities. In Kant’s words, enlarged thinking is a process by which the thinker ‘sets himself apart from the subjective private conditions of the judgment, within which so many others are as if bracketed, and reflects on his own judgment from a universal standpoint’ (5:295). The key to universal judgment, for Kant, is not ‘the healthy understanding’, that is, the faculty of concepts that conditions the possibility of knowledge. Rather, it is ‘taste’, for ‘the aesthetic power of judgment rather than the intellectual can bear the name of a communal sense’ (ibid.). Aesthetic judgments are the exemplary practice of enlarged thought, for they

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\(^{17}\) This tension is exemplified in Hannah Arendt’s work on Kant. In a speech given in 1960, Arendt argues that in Kant’s moral and political philosophy everything is already given, and, thus, that it is ‘inhuman’ (see Hannah Arendt, ‘On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts About Lessing’, in *Men in Dark Times*, New York: Harvest Books, 1968, pp. 3-32, p. 26). However, ten years after this speech Arendt turns to Kant’s *CJ* in a series of lectures given at the New School for Social Research in order to outline a political theory that is sensitive to human creativity. In these lectures, she argues that *CJ* is Kant’s key political text, for it provides a way of thinking about the political as the realm in which new form is created (See Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992). This development suggests that Arendt came to see that Kant, if not providing a philosophy of human creativity, outlines a framework for a new kind of philosophy oriented toward the political as an indeterminate sphere of action. The tension between Kant as theoretical philosopher and philosopher of creativity will continue throughout the thesis. For thinkers such as Nietzsche and Heidegger, while Kant provides vitally important developments to the project of philosophy, he remains unable to accommodate human creativity in his moral and political thought. In contrast to this approach, this thesis argues that Kant’s response to the tragedy of philosophy in *CJ* entails that nature and freedom can only be reconciled by human *praxis*, and that this proposal does, at least partially, open philosophy’s attention to the ungiven.
are premised on the recognition of the subjective nature of their outcome and yet claim agreement from a community of judges. Thus they do not subsume a particular under a pre-defined universal, leading to an end other than itself; that is, to knowledge. Instead, aesthetic judgments aspire toward universality, meaning that they contain a rational a priori. This a priori is applied to judgment itself, meaning that the intuitive content of the judgment remains undetermined while the judgment itself – its claim to universality – is its own end.

The importance of enlarged thinking is that Kant’s presentation of the content of traditional philosophy in the new form of critical philosophy provides a philosophical analogue to Aristotle’s understanding of tragedy in terms of form and content. Nietzsche’s interpretation of tragedy is helpful here, for it suggests that the Apollinian impulse to search for the foundation of logic leads thought to stumble across its limits, leading to a situation in which ‘logic coils up … and finally bites its own tail’ (BT 98). For Nietzsche, the pulsating trajectory of the Apollinian impulse expresses an intellectual kind of tragedy, for it is precisely the attempt to exhaust the world in knowledge that unveils the impossibility of this task. For Kant, enlarged thought is essentially the transformed way of thinking that emerges from discovering the limits of thought, for it is developed through the experience of the failure of understanding to yield knowledge in matters of living form. Kant’s acknowledgement of this failure, I will suggest, occurs in two cases: the failure of our concept of nature to legislate the dynamism of organic life and the failure of moral concepts to guide action in the contingency of ethical life. The drive of reason to produce systematic knowledge entails that the experience of these failures is not a new fact that can be calmly subsumed into the pre-established system, but an intellectual crisis that pushes thought beyond the limits of the understanding to a new sphere of sense-making. Yet to operate beyond the limits of the understanding, thought must operate on its own. This does not entail that it has no framework to navigate this new sphere. Rather, through a holistic use of cognition thought is able to operate according to the example given to it by the understanding, searching for empirical laws in aesthetic diversity; searching for universality from a subjective standpoint.

What is significant about reasoning by the example of the understanding – or reasoning by analogy – is that it begins from within life and proceeds via a sensuous kind of thought that uses the material of nature to create ‘another nature’ in order to navigate the crisis of knowledge with ideas of its own creation (CJ 5:314). It is Kant’s identification of this embodied, creative mode of thinking that interests us in this study. Poetry is the exemplar of enlarged thinking, Kant states, for it ‘strengthens the mind by letting it feel its capacity to consider and judge of nature, as appearance, freely, self-actively, and independently of
determination by nature’ (5:326). The poet dwells within life and begins from a feeling of unity with the natural world, using nature as the material for the expression of ideas. Yet the poet is not determined by nature, for she operates free from the rational determinations of the mind by reasoning analogically. Poetry is a break with heteronomous thinking, meaning that poetic thought is able to go beyond the formal limits of reason to create new aesthetic form with the material of sensuous life. In short, through poetry we give form to ourselves.

As poetry became a central matter of philosophical concern during the mid-eighteenth century, many philosophers and art critics saw tragedy as the height of poetic achievement. Kant himself recognises tragedy as one of the few instances where the sublime can be presented in the poetic arts (CJ 5:325). When I turn to this period of thought in Chapter 1, I will suggest that the renewed awareness of tragedy’s philosophical importance does not leave philosophy unaltered, for the kind of knowledge poetic thought produces does not take the form of timeless truth or clear and distinct ideas. Rather, the knowledge gained from tragedy is not a matter of content but of the form of thinking, or in Kant’s words, the ‘way of thinking’ (Denkungsart). In other words, tragedy is transformative, altering our orientation to thinking at the same time it alters the object being thought: one’s own thinking. Writing from a time of historical transition different to that experienced by Kant, Karl Jaspers draws from Kant’s understanding of transformation to argue that our interest in tragedy cannot be ‘a matter for the unconcerned spectator, interested only in cognition’. Rather, it involves the gaining of knowledge ‘wherein I grow in selfhood by the very manner in which I think I am achieving understanding, by the way in which I see and feel’. The content of Jaspers’ ‘tragic knowledge’ is not the failure of theoretical philosophy in matters of biology and ethics, as it was during Kant’s time, but the failure of modern philosophy to navigate the new conditions of post-WWII Germany. The form of tragic knowledge, however, is the same, for it frames an experience in such a way that transforms the established relation to inherited content. The ‘whole content of tragedy is lost,’ argues Jaspers, if we think ourselves safe or look upon tragedy as something alien to ourselves, that is, something historical, abstract and dead. The ‘content’ of tragedy that is ‘lost’, for Jaspers, is not an idea of tragedy but a way of thinking.

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18 Chapter 1 is concerned with identifying why tragedy arose to a place of philosophical importance in the eighteenth century. It argues that tragedy expresses a reaction against the determination of all knowledge according to techne in order to return to the way of thinking Aristotle outlines in terms of phronesis in his practical and poetic texts.


20 ibid.

21 ibid., p. 88.
To maintain this way of thinking, Jaspers argues that philosophy in every epoch must grasp tragedy ‘anew and bring this truth to life for itself’.  

0.2 Tragedy in contemporary philosophy

While this thesis is indebted to the renewed interest in tragedy in contemporary philosophy, it argues that the main approaches to tragedy in this emerging field ultimately distract us from a deeper problem: that philosophy, the task we are now undertaking, is liable to intellectual tragedy. The term ‘intellectual tragedy’ is drawn from Stanley Cavell. In *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell identifies an intellectual kind of tragedy that ‘is not a matter of saying something false’, but the ‘inability to acknowledge, I mean accept, the human conditions of knowing’. Cavell employs the language of tragedy to confront a particular blindness that he sees in modern philosophy. Modern philosophy, in his portrayal, desperately attempts to overcome scepticism by converting all problems into ‘problems of knowledge’. For Cavell, by doing so philosophy misunderstands the relation of knowledge to acknowledgment, thus investigating problems that have a non-epistemic basis (i.e. an aesthetic basis) in epistemic terms. Such thinking, Cavell informs us, is destined to fail, for it seeks to solidify that which is, by its essence, fluid and underdetermined.

Throughout this thesis I will call the kind of philosophy that aims to convert all problems into problems of knowledge ‘technical philosophy’ or ‘technical thinking’. My understanding of the ‘technical’ nature of such thinking draws from Aristotle. For Aristotle, *techne* constitutes a form of practical knowledge, which is sharply distinguished from theoretical knowledge (*episteme*). While *episteme* deals with ‘things that cannot be other than they are’, that is, with timeless objects such as mathematics and geometry, practical knowledge deals with ‘things that admit of being other than they are’. Once Aristotle has separated theoretical from practical knowledge, he makes a finer distinction between two modes of practical knowing. *Techne*, he informs us, is interested. It is subservient to a pre-given end, for it navigates the contingent order according to a set of rules appropriate to achieving a particular end. While *techne* is an appropriate form of thinking/doing when the object being acted upon is rule-governed and pliable to such a pre-established end, Aristotle informs us that another form of activity is required for singular cases that are not amenable to

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22 ibid., p. 28.
pre-given rules. He terms this form of creativity *phronesis*, which is often translated as ‘prudence’ or ‘practical judgment’. *Phronesis* does not create with a given end in view. Rather, it is an end in itself; the exercise of good judgment *is its own end.* Thus it is attuned to situations that are singular in nature, situations that have no available precedent. This entails that it is the kind of judgment appropriate for living things, such as the *polis.*

‘Technical’ considerations are thus opposed to ‘political’ considerations, just as artistic technique (as being able to play the piano) is opposed to expression and interpretation (being able to improvise or interpret). Aristotle’s separation of *techne* from *phronesis* lies behind my idea of ‘technical thinking’ to the extent that technical thinking *fails* to make this distinction. Technical thinking, in my understanding, is the kind of thinking that fails to distinguish between *techne* and *phronesis*; it approaches ‘political’ considerations as ‘technical’ considerations by employing pre-established rules.

For Cavell, the kind of thinking that approaches all problems as problems of knowledge – that is, technical thinking – is liable to an intellectual kind tragedy, for the very attempt to do so ineluctably places it before catastrophe. To mix my own terms with Cavell’s, technical thinking is subject to intellectual tragedy to the extent that it fails to accept the human conditions of knowing; it attempts to solidify indeterminate situations through the application of pre-established criteria. Yet evoking the language of tragedy is not to resign technical thinking to a closed fate. As Hölderlin’s famously stated in *Patmos*, ‘where danger looms / Salvation grows there too’: it is through being confronted with its own failure that technical thinking is able to acknowledge a world that incessantly escapes its grasp. As we see in Cavell’s equivocation between acknowledgement and acceptance, the task presented to us by intellectual tragedy is not simply to acknowledge the human conditions of knowing, though acknowledgement is basic to situations for which no rule can be found. The task is to *accept* these conditions, to allow the acknowledgement of finitude to transform the task of thinking.

The contemporary interest in tragedy distracts us from the problem of intellectual tragedy by focusing on one of two lines of inquiry. The first line of inquiry limits its understanding of tragedy to the Greek tragedies themselves, suggesting that they contain lessons from which contemporary philosophy must learn. The second is primarily concerned with the philosophy of tragedy in post-Kantian philosophy with the aim of locating a ‘tragic

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25 ibid.
26 Castoriadis makes a similar distinction in *CL* (235).
Idea’ or ‘tragic absolute’. While each line of inquiry provokes insight into the limitations of contemporary philosophy’s practice, both, I suggest in the following two sections, fail to grasp the deeper problem of intellectual tragedy. Without acknowledging the tragedy of philosophy – the proximity of tragedy to every philosophical endeavour – the contemporary turn to tragedy risks falling into a dehistorisised form of essentialism, fixing the problematic of tragedy into a graspable form and thereby keeping what Jaspers calls ‘tragic knowledge’ at arm’s length.

a. The Nietzschean View

We can identify these two lines of inquiry by tracing key moments of their development to two texts published in the 1960s and 70s: Peter Szondi’s An Essay on the Tragic (1961) and Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet’s Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece (1972). Vernant and Vidal-Naquet reject the philosophical tradition in favour of the mode of thinking expressed in the tragedies, arguing that ‘[t]ragedy succeeded epic and lyric and faded away as philosophy experienced its moment of triumph’.28 ‘Each play’, they argue, ‘constitutes a message, enclosed within a text and inscribed within the structures of a discourse that must be analysed at every level from the appropriate philological, stylistic, and literary points of view’.29 The message of tragedy has little to do with philosophy, for Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, for tragedy ‘can only be fully understood when account is taken of its particular context’.

For those who draw from Vernant and Videl-Naquet, philosophy is seen as a way of thinking that aims to remove the ambiguity of meaning. In this view, philosophy must move aside for a mode of thinking that has learned from the tragedies if we are to grasp the dimensions of experience outside philosophy’s narrow view.31 I will call this the ‘Nietzschean view’, for it echoes Nietzsche’s story of tragedy’s death in antiquity outlined in The Birth of Tragedy. From this view, even those philosophers who take hold of tragedy, such as Schelling and Hegel, retain the drive to ease the ambiguity of life by constructing a system of understanding that deems the tragic order as a falsehood. The problem with philosophy’s limited vision is not simply the abstract nature of the understanding, but also reason’s drive to

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29 ibid., pp. 29-30.
30 ibid., p. 30.
31 Proponents of this view are generally within the fields of political philosophy, feminist philosophy or the philosophy of international relations. See, for example, Martha Nussbaum, Peter Euben, Richard Lebow and Bonnie Honig.
systematic knowledge. Reason’s drive to systematicity, in this view, occludes the ambiguity of social life, meaning that philosophy, seen as the institutionalisation of the will to knowledge, is part of the problem.

Martha Nussbaum makes this case in *The Fragility of Goodness*. She begins by arguing that Plato, through Socrates, makes a ‘systematic assault’ on tragic knowledge. Aristotle does little to correct this error, she informs us, but merely develops ‘a complicated attempt to preserve some elements of the tragic picture while doing justice to Socrates’ position’. For Nussbaum, the tragedians uncover something that was obscured by an exhaustive religious comprehension of the world: the fact that the ‘ability to function as a citizen, the activities involved in various types of love and friendship, and even those activities associated with the major ethical virtues (courage, justice and so on) require external conditions that the agent’s goodness cannot by itself secure’. The tragic poets provide us with an alternative that precedes the abstract anthropology of Kantian philosophy and Hegel’s attempt to ‘eliminate’ the conflict between the various spheres of society, revealing that ‘powerful emotions, prominently including pity and fear, were sources of insight about human life’. While this is indeed true, the problem with Nussbaum’s argument, and with others who take the Nietzschean view, is that her interpretation of ‘philosophy’, and ‘Kantian’ philosophy in particular, tends to give a caricature of the western tradition. The problem of caricaturing the tradition is not simply that it reifies philosophy as an analytic mode of thinking impermeable to the fragility and disorder of tragedy, but that it is unable to explain the role of reasoned thought in the task of thinking in a disordered world.

In this thesis it will be argued that the Nietzschean view is weakened by its refusal to take seriously the philosophical voices that populate the problematic of tragedy – voices that could strengthen its approach. In my analysis of Kant’s *CJ*, I will argue that Kant identifies two essential points that Nussbaum seeks to advance in *The Fragility of Goodness*: the importance of feeling in moral deliberation and the recognition of contingency in ethical life. In *CJ*, Kant suggests that without an aesthetic feeling of unity with the natural world, reason must conclude that it is irrational to act morally. Thus it finds itself divided from its moral ideals. Yet works of art, Kant argues, can hurl a bridge over a divided consciousness in order to draw us into an integrated experience of life that goes beyond reason’s moral ideals. The

33 ibid.
34 ibid., p. xiv.
35 ibid., p. 68.
36 ibid., p. xv.
significance of Kant’s response to the tragedy of philosophy is that it gives the option of new form, and it is this element of Kant’s thought that this thesis aims to extend. By neglecting Kant’s identification of the creativity of imagination to create new form, Nussbaum returns our attention to the possibilities of human agency expressed in the tragedies without opening the present constellation of thought to new possibilities. The example that Kant sets in responding to the failure of philosophy is not simply to identify alternatives from outside our present framework of thought, but to present contemporary forms of tragedy in such a way that cleaves open the given to the possibility of new form.

b. The Idealist view

The second line of thinking in the contemporary interest in tragedy does not aim to abandon the philosophical tradition, as does the Nietzschean view, but to argue that philosophy is dramatically transformed after Kant though the destruction of metaphysics. In this view, tragedy marks a transition from a speculative understanding of metaphysics that buffered the subject from the finite conditions of experience to a mode of philosophy that is sensitive to the fallibility and fluidity of the human condition. This view builds from Peter Szondi’s *An Essay on the Tragic* (whether in agreement or not) by returning to philosophy’s engagement with tragic art in the early nineteenth century.\(^{37}\) For Szondi, the philosophy of the tragic was ‘[b]egun by Schelling’ and ‘runs through the Idealist and post-Idealist periods’, meaning that it is ‘proper to German philosophy’.\(^{38}\) In this view, Schelling’s *Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism* (1795–6) begins the philosophy of the tragic by arguing that tragedy (in the shape of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*) reconciles freedom and nature by presenting the equilibrium between the ‘superior strength’ (*Übermacht*) of the objective world and the self-affirmation of the ‘I’ in its absolute freedom (*Selbstmacht*).\(^{39}\) Building from Szondi, Terry Eagleton argues that in the wake of the limits Kant placed on thought, the philosophy of tragedy reminds us that we are ‘amphibious animals’ who inhabit the natural and intelligible

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\(^{37}\) Philosophers who take this approach do not necessarily agree with Szondi’s understanding of the tragic, but adopt the narrative he tells of tragedy’s development: that tragedy is properly understood in the paradigm of Schelling’s tragic absolute with the aim or reconciling the Kantian dualism.

\(^{38}\) ibid., pp. 1-3.

realms, never quite at home in either.⁴⁰ For Dennis Schmidt, the philosophy of tragedy
confronts the impoverished scope of contemporary philosophy that is unable to respond to the
manifold questions that humans have asked throughout history. The ‘turn to the work of art by
philosophers since Kant [in the work of] Hegel, Hölderlin, Nietzsche and Heidegger’ and the
‘move to reaffirm the integrity of the work of art for the project of self-understanding is
clearly evident in contemporary works such as one finds by Derrida, Gadamer, Deleuze,
Foucault, and others’.⁴¹ For Schmidt, tragedy speaks to us today through the voice of these
thinkers.

The approach taken by Eagleton and Schmidt diagnoses the narrow vision of
mainstream contemporary philosophy through turning to a legacy beginning at the dawn of
the nineteenth century. I will call this understanding the ‘Idealist view’ of the philosophy of
tragedy, for it takes the German Idealist treatment of ‘the tragic’ – the attempt to overcome
the theoretical-practical dualism left by Kant’s philosophy – as the deepest philosophical
articulation of tragedy. For Eagleton, ‘it is tragedy, rather than Kant, which supplies the
solution’.⁴² In Eagleton’s framework, the idea of tragedy acts as a kind of historical
protagonist, ‘bridg[ing] the gap between pure and practical reason which the critical
philosophy itself could never span’.⁴³ Simon Critchley grants more agency to the philosophers
than to the idea by noting the ‘massive privileging of the tragic … in the nineteenth century’,
yet again limits tragedy to a means for Kant’s successors to diagnose and sublate the
‘amphibious character’ of Kantian modernity.⁴⁴ For Schmidt, ‘Schelling opens the door for
what will prove to be an escalation of the importance of the question posed by tragedy’, for it
is Schelling who identifies the experience whereby the spectator feels the unity of nature and
freedom in a medium that philosophy cannot provide.⁴⁵ Martin Thibodeau concurs,
suggesting that the philosophical ‘preoccupation with Greek tragedy … manifests itself for

⁴⁰ Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, p. 287. See also p. 41, where Eagleton seems to accept Szondi’s treatment of
tragedy in terms of Hegel’s dialectic that is both tragic and the means of overcoming tragedy.
⁴¹ Schmidt, *On Germans and Other Greeks*, p. 2-3. Schmidt (p. 77) states that ‘Szondi is quite right when he
writes that “after Aristotle there is a poetics of tragedy, only after Schelling is there a philosophy of the tragic.”’
The reappearance of the topic of tragedy, he states, now posed as a matter of the tragic, ‘is contemporaneous
with the arrival of the end of metaphysics as a possibility’.
⁴³ Ibid.
⁴⁵ Schmidt, *On Germans and Other Greeks*, p. 276. Schmidt argues that Schelling’s *Philosophy of Art*
establishes the framework for philosophy’s renewed interest in tragedy, particularly Schelling’s view of tragedy
as the presentation of ‘necessity genuinely caught in a struggle with freedom, yet such that a balance obtains
between the two … both, necessity and freedom, emerge from this struggle simultaneously as victorious and
vanquished, and accordingly equal in every respect’. See Friedrich Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, trans. D.
the first time in the writings of the young Schelling’.46 Miguel Beistegui and Simon Sparks put forward the following hypothesis regarding philosophy’s concern with tragedy, which identifies Schelling as the first philosopher of tragedy:

if such a passage to tragedy was able to take place, then it was only because tragedy was itself envisaged as passage, as a bridge thrown over the abyss opened by the critical philosophy; it is because, in other words, tragedy was envisaged as a ‘solution’ to the problem inherited from Kant, and in the wake of a path opened by him.47

This hypothesis leads Beistegui and Sparks to argue that the Idealist notion of tragedy unveils an immanent metaphysics that could hurl a bridge over the split nature of the critical enterprise by presenting the theoretical appearance of freedom in the empirical realm of experience. David Farrell Krell builds from Beistegui and Sparks in The Tragic Absolute, stating that the ‘generation that came after Kant and read Kant’s third Critique’ found it ‘impossible … to pursue aesthetics and metaphysics along separate routes’.48 Thus, according to Krell, they were forced to break with Kant’s CJ, a text in which Kant had ‘no genuine interest or competence in the realm of aesthetics as such’.49

While the present study is indebted to these thinkers, it will argue that the Idealist view contains three significant problems. The first is that Schelling was not the first philosopher in the so-called ‘preoccupation with Greek tragedy’. As I will identify in Chapter 1, the fascination with recreating the tragedies on stage exploded in France during the seventeenth century, causing philosophers and art critics such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Jean-Baptiste Dubos to explore the merits and dangers of tragic theatre for national modesty and others such as David Hume and James Moor to grapple with the paradox posed to our understanding of moral sentiment by the ‘tragic effect’. The influence of these thinkers in Germany and the extensive popularity of German translations of Shakespeare’s tragedies led to a host of philosophical work on tragedy in German philosophy in the mid- to late-eighteenth century, the most significant being the work of Johann Gottfried von Herder. In the 1770s Herder developed a theory of taste from his reflections on tragedy, building a system that aimed to unite reason and feeling in sensuous cognition in a manner that influences Schelling’s treatment of Kant. For the original readers of Schelling’s interpretation of tragedy in Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism, the appeal to Herder and the desire to read Kant through the lens of the Sturm und Drang movement would have been clear. It is only possible

46 Thibodeau, Hegel and Greek Tragedy, p. 2.
48 Krell, The Tragic Absolute, p. 2.
49 ibid.
to conclude that the philosophy of tragedy was ‘begun by Schelling’ if Schelling’s treatment of tragic art is taken to be decisive in such a way that renders previous treatments mere poetics and the contemporary philosophy of tragedy as mere commentary.50

The second problem with the Idealist narrative is that it relies on a conception of Kant’s critical philosophy that was not accepted by Kant’s immediate successors (see Chapter 4) and is no longer accepted in Kant scholarship (see Chapters 2 and 3). Proponents of this narrative undermine Kant’s own attempt to construct a bridge between the theoretical and the practical through his critique of the faculty of pleasure and displeasure and the expansion of his concept of nature. Thus they are unable to see that for Kant’s successors the tragic is not simply an artistic genre but a way of understanding Kant’s notion of teleology and nature’s self-organisation. This reading reflects an ongoing bias within Kantian scholarship to read CJ in terms of Part I (Critique of Aesthetic Judgment), undermining the importance of Part II (Critique of Teleological Judgment); a bias that has only been questioned during the last two decades.51

The third problem with this narrative is that it aims to identify a particular ‘tragic idea’ (Szondi) or a ‘tragic absolute’ (Lacoue-Labarthe, Krell) that is free from the constraints of history and culture.52 For Szondi, the tragic idea is a ‘dialectical phenomenon’ that is not concerned with historically specific subject matter but with ‘freedom itself, which, now at

50 This is precisely Szondi’s argument (See Szondi, An Essay on the Tragic, p. 2). By building on Szondi’s work, thinkers such as Eagleton, Critchley and Schmidt ultimately undermine the significance of their own work, for the upshot of Szondi’s framework is that any present work done on tragedy can only be a matter of the history of ideas and not of philosophy. The aim of this thesis is to argue that their work, when understood through the right historical method, extends tragedy into the present, outlining the shape of a present intellectual tragedy.

51 The argument put forward by Beistegui and Sparks, Schmidt, Critchley and Eagleton that undermines Kant’s efforts to reconcile the tensions of his critical project in the CJ draws from the reception of CJ in French thought, particularly through Jean-François Lyotard’s Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime and Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy’s The Literary Absolute. For Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, for example, CJ elucidates the abyss between the two realms of critical philosophy only to leave philosophy in a state of ‘crisis’, leaving a ‘gaping hole’ that Idealism takes as its starting point (Lacoue-Labarthe & Nancy, The Literary Absolute, p. 30). While Lacoue-Lebarthe and Nancy are correct in noting that those who followed Kant’s lead felt compelled to bring his critical move to a more satisfying completion, they neglect the fact that Kant went a long way toward providing a solution himself: This oversight is not unique to Lacoue-Lebarthe and Nancy, but reflects a broader misunderstanding of CJ that will be criticised in Chapters 2 and 3. Until recent developments in Kant scholarship, scholars have devoted relatively little attention to the systematic place of CJ in Kant’s critical corpus and have instead compartmentalised the themes of the work for the sake of a few currently interesting arguments about beauty and sublimity. This interpretation takes the mechanical conception of nature Kant advances in CPR as his definitive view on the matter, relegating his theory of aesthetic judgment to a chapter in the history of aesthetics and his theory of teleology as an unusual moment in the history and philosophy of natural science.

52 This problem is not strictly true of all thinkers that have been identified with the Idealist view. Schmidt, for example, pays significant attention to tragedy as an ongoing philosophical discourse for articulating the finitude of the human condition. While he shares Szondi’s narrative regarding the development of the philosophy of tragedy in Schelling, Schmidt takes seriously the development of the philosophy of tragedy through Nietzsche and into Heidegger’s work. Nevertheless, his interpretation of the philosophy of tragedy concerns tragedy as a German conversation that is present to us only in the legacy left to us by these thinkers; tragedy itself remains a thing of the past.
odds with itself, becomes its own adversary’.53 For Lacoue-Labarthe and Krell, ‘[t]ragedy is the absolute organon … because tragedy is itself presentation of the tragedy of the absolute’.54 In this conception, tragedy presents the failure of the Kantian dualism, fusing freedom and necessity into a single experience and thereby ironing out pure and practical reason into an aesthetic task. Szondi sets the framework for this view by defining the task as one of ‘mak[ing] the various definitions of the tragic comprehensible by revealing a more or less concealed structural element that is common to all’.55 The task is not to consider their theories of tragedy ‘in view of their specific philosophies’, states Szondi, but ‘in the hope of securing a general concept of the tragic’.56

The problem with Szondi’s method, as Julian Young notes in The Philosophy of Tragedy, is that the conditions that ‘made tragedy an important phenomenon in the nineteenth century cannot be elevated into an account of what makes tragedy an important phenomenon tout court’, since in other times the genre of tragedy is called upon to confront different content.57 Young is sensitive to the dialogical character of tragedy, suggesting that if we take the meaning that nineteenth century philosophers found in tragedy as the key to understanding the philosophical importance of tragedy as a whole, we limit the power of tragic art to a particular moment in philosophical history that is, for all intents and purposes, finished.58

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54 Lacoue-Labarthe, cited in Krell, The Tragic Absolute, p. 425. In a footnote (p. 2), Krell states that ‘[b]y referring to the literary absolute, I wish to salute the ground-breaking work by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, L’Absolu littéraire’.
56 ibid., p. 2-3.
57 Young, The Philosophy of Tragedy, p. 266.
58 Szondi argues that it is Schelling, Hegel and Hölderlin who properly identify the ‘tragic Idea’, implying that those who follow in this tradition merely invoke the tragic to signal their commitment to Idealist themes. For Szondi, the original tragedies themselves fade away under the Idea of the tragic that ‘rises like an island’ over Aristotle’s reflection on matters of plot and characterisation, leading his survey of tragedy as a philosophical idea to end with Max Scheller’s ‘On the Phenomenon of the Tragic’ (1915). He fails to note the significant contributions made by Benjamin, Jaspers, and Heidegger, assumedly because they reject the Idealist conception of the tragic and thus misunderstand the tragic essence, meaning that his Essay paints a static picture of philosophy that dismisses any philosophical attempt to think the tragic anew. Furthermore, Szondi limits the philosophy of tragedy to German philosophy: ‘Until this day,’ Szondi writes, ‘the concept of the tragic has remained a German one’. While it certainly true that tragedy is a significant problematic in German philosophy, Szondi dismisses the philosophical importance of the ‘ancient debate’ and overlooks the broader reflections on tragic art during the eighteenth century. Szondi’s Essay has been eclipsed by the significant return not only to the Idea of the tragic but also to philosophical reflections on the tragedies themselves. Szondi, An Essay on the tragic, pp. 1-2.
0.3 The question of method in the history of philosophy

The Nietzschean and Idealist views are essentially concerned with identifying the proper content of tragedy. For the Nietzschean view, tragedy is concerned with the collision between ancient myth and new forms of law, for such was the experience of the ancient Athenians. This view is concerned with reconstructing the environment of ancient Greece in such a way that unveils the lessons contained within the tragedies that can inform contemporary thought. For the Idealist view, tragedy is concerned with the collision between agency and the objective world, for this problematic is the foundation of the modern experience of tragedy. It is concerned with defining the modern experience of tragedy, and how this experience transformed the landscape of modern philosophy in such a way that opens us, as contemporary philosophers, to themes of finitude, death and fallibility. Implicit to both of these views is the impossibility of contemporary tragedy; for Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, tragedy is a thing of the past, for ‘tragic man’ is a product of the polarity between ethos and daimon that is unique to ancient Athens; for Guy Debord, tragedy is impossible in the contemporary society of the spectacle which ‘arrogates to itself everything that in human activity exists’, meaning that scenes of demise, death and mistaken intentions are all sublated into our penchant for voyeurism; for George Steiner, tragedy today is ‘dead’, because the mythical construction of the contemporary world occludes the depiction of blind necessity that is basic to tragic drama. While it may well be true that tragedy is more difficult for us to see today than ever, the arguments of the Idealist and Nietzschean views preclude us from considering whether contemporary forms of tragedy are possible. It is the aim of this thesis to open our vision to the possibility of contemporary tragedy by employing a method that is focused not on the content but the form of tragedy; not what is thought but the way in which it is thought.

59 Vernant & Vidal-Naquet, Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece, p. 37.
61 George Steiner, The Death of Tragedy, London: Faber and Faber, 1961, p. 5. Christoph Menke’s work stands as an exception to the contemporary acceptance of the death of tragedy, yet his Idealist historical method fails to identify how tragedy might be employed in contemporary philosophy. Menke argues that tragedy remains ‘present’ in modernity despite Hegel’s attempt to render it a thing of the past, for our experience of ethical irresolvability remains. While reflection, for Hegel, is aimed at dissolving pre-given determinations, thereby making tragic conflicts essentially impossible, Menke argues that the factual constraint of reflection, that is, the impossibility of resolving the ethical and the aesthetic, makes tragedy both necessary and possible in modernity. Yet tragedy remains an epochal experience rather than a creative genre in Menke’s interpretation, undermining the view of tragedy as a way of thinking that frames the given in such a way that opens the possibility of the ungiven. The formal approach to tragedy in this thesis aims to extend Menke’s important work into a practical mode of transforming our perception of the present. Christoph Menke, ‘The Presence of Tragedy’, in Critical Horizons, vol. 5, no. 1, 2010, pp. 201-225.
To do so, it is important to clarify the method of this thesis in relation to the Idealist and Nietzschean views. The problems raised by the Idealist and Nietzschean views are underpinned by a deeper question of philosophical method in the history of ideas.62 Proponents of the Nietzschean view, on the one hand, use the language of ‘Greek tragedy’63 or ‘tragic man’64 as if an authentic understanding of the ancient Greek tragedy can be found, undermining the fact that tragedy was a creative and unfolding form of presentation that developed over a one hundred year period and that there are only thirty two remaining tragedies out of an estimated one thousand written during the fifth century BCE.65 While proponents of the Idealist view do not search for an authentic Greek notion of tragedy, they often express a different problem concerning historical method. In the work of those who express the Idealist view, philosophy’s interest in tragedy is often described through the use of language appropriate to a machine, suggesting that tragedy is ‘programmed by the horizon opened by the critical philosophy’.66 At other times their work employs de-subjectified language appropriate to an organic process outside of human control, stating that tragedy ‘emerged in Greece at the end of the sixth century’67 and that it ‘appears’ again in the ‘wake of Kant’.68 The language of ‘program’ suggests that the idea of tragedy was set in motion by a force external to the philosophers who bare the idea, while the language of ‘appearance’ connotes an organic process whereby a particular arises as an expression of a greater whole. In both analogies, the whole is both the necessary and sufficient condition of the particular, implying that the particular (in this case, the philosophy of tragedy) is fated by a historical force outside of the agents (i.e. philosophers such as Schelling) who bring them into being.

This thesis will approach the history of ideas by an alternative method to both views, drawing from Quentin Skinner’s ‘Cambridge School’ methodology that begins by historicising philosophical problems. The mechanical and organic analogies used by the

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62 It is the hope of this thesis not simply to clarify the philosophical importance of tragedy, but to use this particular case in order to clarify the philosophical value of the history of ideas more generally.
63 ‘Greek tragedy shows good people being ruined because of things that just happen to them, things that they do not control’. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, p. 25.
64 ‘Tragic man is constituted within the space encompassed by this pair, éthos and daimón’. Vernant & Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, p. 37.
65 Scholars have estimated that Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides alone composed between two and three hundred tragedies. The reasons why the specific tragedies that remain today have survived the tumult of history are unknown, meaning that to speculate on what ‘authentic’ Greek tragedy is will remain always incomplete. It is the method of this thesis to view this fact not as a limit to our inquiry, but as a reminder of the limits of grasp of history. See Hall, *Greek Tragedy: Suffering Under the Sun*, p. 1.
66 Beistegui & Sparks, *Tragedy and Philosophy*, p. 7.
Idealist view present history as a tragic drama in which, to use Skinner’s words, ‘ideas get up and do battle on their own behalf’. 69 Skinner argues that the tendency of historians of philosophy to search for an ‘ideal type’ leads to a kind of ‘non-history’ in which philosophers are mere occasions for their ideas. Such reflection aims to point out earlier ‘anticipations’ of later doctrines, crediting each writer in terms of their ability to predict the subject matter to which the historian attends. 70 According to Skinner, ‘philosophers have perhaps been rather slow’ to question the model of history implicit to this method, failing to note the serious implications it has ‘for the analysis of meaning and understanding, as well as for the discussion of the relations between belief and action, and in general over the whole question of the sociology of knowledge’. 71 In this view, if we reject the particularity and creativity of past philosophers, then our inquiry risks falling into a dehistoricised, essentialist conception of philosophy. John Dewey describes this dehistoricised approach as the method of the ‘contemporary philosopher’ of history, the philosopher who comes to his work protected and perhaps muffled by an immense intervening apparatus. He carries in his head a vast body of distinctions previously made, of problems already formulated, of solutions formulated ready to hand. … The two variables, himself as a thinker and the cultural material thought about, are insofar technalized, if I may venture the word, for him in advance. The mind is removed from contact with the vital traditions and movement of the time and place, and the material thought about is not the existent scene but ideas and doctrines previously distilled from a great variety of other such scenes. 72

Dewey’s use of the word ‘technalised’ has close parallels with my understanding of ‘technical thinking’. He suggests that the ‘technalised’ imagination manifests a form of intellectual tragedy insofar as it removes ideas from the locale of the philosopher and creates a dualism between life and idea. This is evident in Szondi’s method that aims to look past the specific philosophies of each thinker of tragedy with the aim of securing ‘a general concept of the tragic’. Szondi’s method fails to benefit from Kant’s maxim of the enlarged way of thinking, for it is unable to reconcile ideas with material life; with the subjective locale of the thinker. For Dewey, we can avoid the intellectual tragedy of the technalised imagination if we take care to identify the ideas which were ‘alive and active in forming the mind of the philosopher’, meaning that we must ‘reconstruct the environment sufficiently to know what

70 ibid.
71 ibid, p. 50.
problems its needs imposed upon the thinker, and what direction it gave to the imaginings it invoked’.

However, Dewey and Skinner’s historicised method tends toward the danger of assuming that the correct approach to history can overcome what Cavell describes in terms of intellectual tragedy, understood as the inability to accept the human conditions of knowing. For example, in the attempt to correct the limitations of the Idealist view, Skinner aims to stabilise historical meaning by limiting the philosophical content of philosophy to its historical locale. While this is an important corrective, Skinner fails to recognise that, as we noted in Bakhtin’s dialogical method, that even ‘past meanings … can never be stable (finalized, ended once and for all) – they will always change (be renewed) in the process of subsequent, future development of the dialogue’. The significance of Bakhtin’s method for this thesis is that, while accepting the importance of attending to the material conditions in which ideas are creatively produced, it establishes that the task of engaging with dialogical ideas is not to overcome intellectual tragedy, but to recognise the danger involved in any intellectual endeavour and to identify a procedure for thinking that is aware of the risk of mistaking our own subjective private conditions as external reality. This is to say that if philosophy is to take account of tragedy it must come with a proper historical approach to philosophy more generally. Or to put it in other words, a proper historical method and taking account of tragedy are linked; they each teach us a similar lesson. If we proceed via Szondi’s method, for example, then we occlude both our own agency as thinkers and the agency of the philosophers posing the ideas that concern us. We are, to use Dewey’s words, ‘protected’ and ‘muffled’ from the content of our analysis by technalising the two variables involved: ourselves as thinkers and the cultural material involved. A historical method that takes account of intellectual tragedy, on the other hand, proceeds in a similar fashion to the tragic poet who is aware of the dangers of bracketing the ideas from the agent. Like tragedy, it presents history as the product of conscious agents who are simultaneously free and bound by the ideas that shape their action. Thus it refuses to eliminate the risk involved in its practice, for it is aware that it, too, is subject to the same conditions.

Kant’s enlarged way of thinking provides a way by which to advance a counter-narrative to the Nietzschean and Idealist views. As I will identify in my discussion of Kant’s CJ, enlarged thinking does not attempt to ‘explain’ the appearance of a phenomenon, for explanation is the modus operandi of the understanding. For the understanding, ideas have

73 ibid.
necessary and sufficient conditions, and hence can be discussed independently of an agent. Enlarged thought, on the other hand, aims to ‘elucidate’, to allow the phenomenon to appear in such a way that schematises our conception of it, for it refuses to separate the idea from the appearance.74 Kant’s notion of elucidation allows for the language of creation in discussing the history of ideas. Creation connotes a break with the past, the rupture of something new into the sensory manifold. In the paradigm of creation, the whole from which a particular appears is necessary but not sufficient for its origination. There is a kinship with what came before, but something else is required in order for the new to appear. This ‘something else’ is the creativity of a living being.

Because enlarged thought aspires to operate without the conceptual ‘buffering’ of Dewey’s contemporary philosopher, we are vulnerable to alteration as we undertake our inquiry. This does not mean that we operate without concepts or that we come with no prejudices of our own. Rather, it means that we aspire to remove the buffering that would hold those subjective private conditions as reality, meaning that we ready ourselves to stumble across our own forms of intellectual tragedy. A historical method that takes account of tragedy recognises the risk involved in its practice. It does not aspire to objective knowledge but to common human understanding, recognising that fallibility is basic to philosophical practice.

By elucidating the problematic of tragedy – that is, the ongoing dialogue in philosophy concerned with problematising patterns of thought that have become impervious to living form – through this method, it will be argued that the turn to tragedy in contemporary philosophy is not a new instalment in the history of ideas, but an expression of a deeper crisis in the landscape of philosophical inquiry. In other words, it is a new, creative attempt to cleave open the given in the hope of elucidating the possibility of new form in a way that is no less significant than the ancients or moderns who employ the problematic of tragedy. For Raymond Williams, the philosophical importance of tragedy lies in its transformative character, for through presenting our own experience in tragic form, ‘new connections are

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74 Kant clarifies the difference between explanation and elucidation in terms of two different concepts of nature: one of mechanism and the other of organism: ‘Now since we can have no concept of this except the undetermined concept of a ground that makes the judging of nature in accordance with empirical laws possible, but cannot determine this more precisely by any predicate, it follows that the unification of the two principles cannot rest on a ground for the explanation of the possibility of a product in accordance with given laws for the determining power of judgment, but only on a ground for the elucidation of this for the reflecting power of judgment’ (CJ 5:412, emphases mine). For Kant, because aesthetic experience of matters such as living beings and history does not yield knowledge of the necessary and sufficient reasons of what appears, such matters cannot be explained by must be elucidated according to enlarged, reflective thought.
made, and the familiar world shifts, as the new relations are seen’.75 If we think that the philosophy of tragedy is ‘a single and permanent kind of fact’, Williams argues, ‘we can end only with the metaphysical conclusions that are built into any such assumption’.76 If we reject this assumption, however, the problem is necessarily transformed: ‘Tragedy is then not a permanent kind of fact, but a series of experiences and conventions and institutions’.77 Thus we ‘are not looking for a new universal meaning of tragedy’, but for the ‘structure of tragedy’ in our own times.78 Williams argues that to discern the intellectual tragedies in a given epoch is not a kind of fatalism whereby destiny is said to be inevitable. Rather, recognising what has ‘fatefully’ come into being through a community’s own action is to enlarge one’s view in order to understand what one is doing. As soon as one understands what one is doing, Williams observes, ‘other directions seem open’.79 Our task is thus one of identifying in the contemporary turn to tragedy the possibility of new philosophical directions.

0.4 Chapter outline

The present study is divided into two parts. Part I, ‘Kant’s Critique of Judgment’, questions the Idealist view of the philosophy of tragedy by reassessing Kant’s relation to the philosophy of tragedy. Chapter 1 examines the conversation occurring during the eighteenth century regarding the authority of the natural sciences and the role of aesthetics in navigating between natural science and philosophy. This experience expresses a collision of epochs wherein the traditional order of value is confronted with new demands. Within this collision we find that philosophers such as Hume, Moor, and Herder raise the problematic of tragedy well before Kant in order to navigate the dilemma concerning the relationship of taste and morality.

Chapter 2 considers Kant’s CJ in light of this conversation, arguing that his critique of taste can be understood as a response to the tragedy of philosophy understood as the inevitable failure of what I call ‘technalised thinking’; that is, the failure of the kind of thinking that remains ‘protected … by an immense intervening apparatus’, to use Dewey’s words. Acknowledging this failure enables Kant to identify a procedure for philosophy capable of reconciling the contradiction between the orders of biologically mediated sense

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76 ibid.
77 ibid., p. 46.
78 ibid., p. 62.
79 ibid.
impressions and theoretical (\textit{a priori}) ideas by identifying the ground of judgment in mutual communicability. This procedure is seen in his introduction of a reflective kind of judgment that possesses its own \textit{a priori} that does not guarantee the \textit{content} of its activity but regulates the \textit{way} it proceeds.

Chapter 3 suggests that Kant’s introduction of the notions of genius, the sublime and \textit{sensus communis} in the final drafts of \textit{CJ} serves to ground the procedure of reflective judgment in the ethical practice of a community. While theoretical reason cannot reconcile a collision between two contradictory parts of experience, Kant suggests that the writer of a poem is unrestrained from theoretical limits and can represent experience in such a way that allows us to \textit{feel} the unity of the biological and the rational. The work of beautiful art becomes the exemplary product of the imagination, orientating a community toward the realisation of their moral calling by uniting them according to a common mode of judgment. Yet we conclude by noting that while Kant reconfigures the critical project as a \textit{historical} project, outlining a way in which the moral project of the first two \textit{Critiques} can be realised in sensuous life, he effectively places the transcendental legislation of the will subordinate to the community’s aesthetic culture.

Part II, ‘Tragedy after Kant’, builds from the argument of Part I by identifying an ongoing dialogue in philosophy regarding tragedy as a means to navigate the tension between nature and freedom through the lens of Kant’s \textit{CJ}. We turn to four philosophers from key moments during this conversation, namely Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Castoriadis. This study does not claim to be comprehensive – indeed, many key voices who populate the problematic of tragedy are largely overlooked, such as Friedrich Schelling, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Søren Kierkegaard, Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault, to name just a few. Rather, it intends to re-examine philosophy’s relation to Greek tragedy construed as a dialogue that is ongoing throughout philosophical history. Thus, this study includes thinkers who are canonical to the Idealist view (Hegel and Nietzsche), who are significant to the Nietzschean view (Nietzsche and Heidegger), and, additionally, one thinker who fits neither view and assists us to call them both into question (Castoriadis). However, my approach will attempt to broaden this analysis, where possible, by including other significant voices to show how the philosophies of Hegel, Nietzsche and Heidegger were received outside of their own times. This will lead us to consider the voices of Friedrich Hölderlin, Arthur Schopenhauer, Walter Benjamin, Franz Rosenzweig, and Karl Jaspers, among others.

We begin Part II in Chapter 4 with Hegel, whose philosophical treatment of tragedy has gained significant attention in contemporary scholarship. While Nietzsche, Heidegger,
Benjamin and Adorno reconceive of tragedy as a means to usurp Hegel’s attempt to sublate tragedy into a philosophy of history, recent scholarship contends that it is precisely by returning to his attention to the tragic nature of human experience that Hegel’s thought can be reclaimed as a non-metaphysical project of self-understanding. This chapter argues that Hegel’s philosophy of art gives more attention to Kant’s *CJ* than is often credited. For Hegel, by cleaving open a symbolic sphere of becoming that is separated ‘by an abyss’ from the impassable theoretical sphere of limit and fixity, Kant enlarged philosophy’s perception of alteration and becoming while limiting the theoretical sphere of ends and morality to a static ontology of the eternal infinite. In Hegel’s account, tragedy dethrones the fixity of the concepts of the understanding and places us before a process of becoming within the one sphere of being, reconciling us to a concept of nature that reverses the hierarchy of being over becoming, alerting us to an enlarged concept of *life*. We find, however, that Hegel’s reading of tragedy is problematic for other thinkers who experience the ‘underside’ of Spirit. Through exploring one such thinker, namely Walter Benjamin, we find that reading history in terms of tragedy entails a notion of philosophy that undermines the singularity of the work of art. In short, Hegel notes the vitality of Kant’s enlarged thought only to reduce it to a shape that is defined philosophically, thus occluding the tragedy of philosophy.

In this light we turn to Nietzsche in Chapter 5, giving particular attention to his most extensive engagement with tragedy: *The Birth of Tragedy (BT)*. Nietzsche argued that Hegel’s attempt to ground the superiority of philosophy over tragedy merely continues the traditional attempt to bring the dynamism of becoming into the fold of metaphysics by absorbing time and history into the ‘Divine Tragedy’ of the Idea. In Nietzsche’s view, philosophy does not heal the experience of tragedy but occludes it, compelling experience ‘to cling close to the trunk of dialectic’ while consciousness ‘withdraws into the cocoon of logical schematism’ (*BT* 91). Philosophy is a veneer of a self-deception while art draws us into the deeper truth where violence, strife and conflict are imagined as inextricable from Being. The question I pose to the Nietzsche of *BT* is whether his purely aesthetic understanding of reality achieves the end he desires: to reconcile us to the world and thereby open us to an aesthetic redemption. By turning to Nietzsche’s understanding of Kant’s *CJ*, which, I suggest, is largely refracted in *BT* through a thinly-veiled appropriation of Schopenhauer, we find that Nietzsche merely inverts the so-called ‘Kantian dualism’ and thus occludes the opening toward new form that Kant cleaves in philosophical history. To outline the consequences of Nietzsche’s argument we turn to another historical moment in which tragedy arises as a central theme to philosophical reflection in Rosenzweig’s *The Star of Redemption*. Rosenzweig assists us to
see that by attempting to equate reality and aesthetics Nietzsche destroys philosophy’s ability to perceive the ethical dimension of experience, and thus can only achieve aesthetic redemption at an unacceptable cost.

In Chapter 6 we find that Heidegger begins his critique of Nietzsche in similar terms to both Benjamin and Rosenzweig, declaring that Nietzsche stands as the last metaphysician who fails to overcome the problematic dualism he inherits from Kant. In a letter to Karl Jaspers written after WWII, Heidegger claims that the lectures he gave after his resignation from the Rectorate of Freiburg University – lectures in which he considers Nietzsche, Hölderlin and Greek tragedy – constitute a ‘confrontation’ with National Socialism. To assess whether this self-defence is valid, this chapter examines two of these lecture series, *Introduction to Metaphysics* and *Hölderlin’s Hymn ‘The Ister’*, in which Heidegger critiques the technical thinking he saw in National Socialism through reference to tragedy. Through exploring Jaspers’ response to Heidegger’s interpretation of tragedy in *Tragedy is Not Enough*, it is argued that Heidegger’s reading of the tragedies ultimately serves to unveil the *philosophical* origin of the political sphere. But by collapsing the distinction between the philosophic and the political, Heidegger conceives of history not as the result of human action but as the recognition of an existing meaning. This understanding of the work of tragedy, I argue, entails that Heidegger’s critique of technical thinking is unable to constitute a meaningful confrontation with the prevailing political order. Heidegger’s reading of tragedy, we conclude, unveils the *polis* as a site of interpersonal engagement only to undermine its significance.

Chapter 7 considers Castoriadis’ interpretation of tragedy as a critique of the Idealist and Nietzschean views. The significance of Castoriadis’ interpretation, I argue, is that he turns precisely to Kant’s *CJ* to critique these views, suggesting that Kant’s reflective procedure not only recognises the tragedy of philosophy but also provides a profound solution. He draws from Hegel, Nietzsche and Heidegger in order to elucidate the implications of Kant’s *CJ* for contemporary philosophy, turning this conversation into a path to overcome determinacy in various guises – such as Marxism, structuralism, and Heideggerian phenomenology – in order to elucidate the organic freedom of human cognition. Castoriadis’ interpretation of tragedy enables us to see that Kant’s *CJ* begins to enlarge our vision in a way that is analogous to the tragedies, reframing human dependency as the condition of the possibility of creativity and casting freedom as a collective project.

The final chapter of this thesis, Chapter 8, concludes this study by identifying three dimensions of an enlarged way of thinking that are developed in philosophy’s contemporary
turn to tragedy: the expansion of the imagination, the recognition of ethical complexity, and the search for a new understanding of universality. These themes express the ongoing significance of Kant’s enlarged way of thinking for navigating the failure of philosophy to respond to human problems that lie outside the limits of our understanding, and point us toward the contemporary significance of the problematic of tragedy.
PART I

KANT’S CRITIQUE OF JUDGMENT
CHAPTER 1

The Eighteenth Century Background to the Tragedy of Philosophy

*Human reason has [a] peculiar fate ... [It] falls into this embarrassment through no fault of its own (CPR Aviii).*

The aim of Part I of this thesis is to outline an alternative to the Idealist and the Nietzschean views by reconsidering the role of Kant’s *CJ* in philosophy’s ongoing dialogue regarding the significance of tragedy. Before I turn to Kant, it is necessary to examine the background to philosophy’s renewed interest in tragedy, a task that requires us to begin well before Kant’s critical work. In this chapter I argue that tragedy returned to philosophy’s attention in the midst of the social, scientific, and political change occurring during the eighteenth century in the work of thinkers who argued that traditional philosophy was unable to navigate the new demands of their time. In the work of these thinkers we find a search for a new procedure by which to reconcile the empirical sciences and traditional philosophy in the midst of a rapidly changing world, and, I will suggest, tragedy was central to this task.

Before I begin, it is necessary to situate this renewed interest in tragedy in the context of a broader reconsideration of Aristotle’s practical and rhetorical texts such as *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Rhetoric*, and, most importantly, the text in which Aristotle considers Greek tragedy as the most philosophic of the arts: *Poetics*. Philosophers concerned with the dramatic social change of the eighteenth century found Aristotle’s distinction between the two modes of practical knowledge we identified in the Introduction, *techne* and *phronesis*, as an alternative to rationalism’s exclusive focus on technical thinking. Identifying the way that these philosophers appropriated Aristotle is not a matter of judging whether their interpretation of his work was correct or misleading. Rather, it is a matter of identifying the significance which parts of Aristotle’s writings they chose to prioritise. One of the questions I will consider is why Aristotle’s practical and rhetorical texts become a particular matter of importance during the eighteenth century.

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1 I have modified Guyer and Wood’s translation of *Verlegenheit* from ‘perplexity’ to ‘embarrassment’ in order to highlight the continuity of Kant’s observation with his recognition of another embarrassment of reason in *CJ* (5:169). See Chapter 2.
To examine what philosophers searching for an alternative to rationalism during the eighteenth century found useful in Aristotle’s practical philosophy, it is vital to look closer at Aristotle’s distinction between the two kinds of practical knowledge, *techne* and *phronesis*. Here it is important to note that Aristotle’s typology of practical knowledge deviates sharply from Plato. For Plato, *techne* exhausts the whole of practical knowledge, and involves the application of knowledge according to predefined rules. What *techne* brings into being is an imitation or reworking of a pre-defined, natural model. The natural model is the highest form of reality, and the task of *techne* is to make the real actual.

Aristotle employs the basic form of Plato’s *techne*, but makes two important adjustments. The first is to problematise the strict distinction between the actual and the real. While in some instances *techne* imitates nature, in other instances *techne* ‘completes what nature cannot bring to a full finish’.² This seems to imply that *techne* does not imitate a natural model, but is somehow involved in the completion of nature itself. Aristotle makes a second adjustment to Plato’s conception of *techne* by separating it from a second kind of practical knowledge: *phronesis*. In Book IV of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle separates technical creativity from practical action in terms of *poiesis* (art or production) and *phronesis* (practical judgment). Both *poiesis* and *phronesis* constitute actions that deal with ‘things that admit of being other than they are’, that is, with things that are contingent and singular in character. To this extent they are the same, for they both deal with practical matters. This difference lies in the way that each proceeds according to a distinctive understanding of end. *Poiesis* is technical, because it produces according to rules. It has ‘an end other than itself’, such as the application of rules to produce a work of art or a product of determinant knowledge. *Phronesis*, on the other hand, is not technical but a mode of *praxis*, meaning that it ‘is itself an end’, namely ‘good action’. It is ‘concerned with the ultimate particular fact, since the thing to be done is of this nature [i.e. particular]’.³ As we explored in the Introduction, ‘technical’ considerations are opposed to ‘political’ considerations as artistic technique (knowing how to play the piano) is opposed to expression and interpretation (the creative extension of a piece into the present).

In this chapter I argue that the significance of Aristotle’s separation of *poiesis* and *phronesis* for philosophers searching for an alternative to the technical understanding of practical reason is that it identifies an alternative to the exclusive focus on *techne* by recognising some instances where the technical application of knowledge is appropriate (i.e.

where there is an end in view) and others for which no rules can be found. What was attractive in Aristotle’s notion of *phronesis* is that it identifies mode of thinking that does not operate according to pre-established rules and yet is not subject to chaos. In other words, it provides a model for a reasoned way of thinking in singular cases for which no rules are available. When practical knowledge is understood solely within the paradigm of *techne*, as we find in Plato’s account, it is limited to that which is rule-governed and adheres to pre-established form. This is appropriate for settings in which the end can be held in view – in cases that are universal – but ceases to be effective when the end is unknown – in cases that are singular. Separating technical knowledge from the creativity of *phronesis*, on the other hand, provides an alternative mode of practical thinking that is attuned to singular appearances.

The renewed significance of Aristotle’s practical philosophy during the eighteenth century reflects a broader shift occurring in aesthetics between a technical, rule-governed understanding of art and an understanding of artistic creativity that emphasised the transgressive ability of genius to produce new form: to create works of art that are ends in themselves. In his interpretation of tragedy in *Poetics*, Aristotle was seen to be identifying creativity expressed in the work of art (*techne*) with the creativity of *phronesis*; the *techne* of the tragedians does not so much follow rules as give rule, bringing a new artistic genre into being. By focusing on the reception of Aristotle’s work in eighteenth century thought, this chapter argues that tragedy did not return to philosophical discourse in post-Kantian philosophy during the early nineteenth century, as the Idealist view suggests. Rather, it argues that tragedy returns during the mid-eighteenth century in the work of poets, biologists, and philosophers as a way of navigating the growing divide between traditional philosophy and the experience of nature as a domain of radical singularity, open to transformation at the hands of human creativity.

### 1.1 Rationalism and the problem of life

In order to understand the failure of traditional philosophy to navigate problems specific to the mid-eighteenth century, I begin by identifying the challenge posed to rationalism by the rapidly increasing influence of the empirical sciences. To elucidate this challenge, a brief excursus to Medieval philosophy is necessary, for the tension in modern thought between the theoretical understanding of nature and empirical science is ultimately a
collision of a traditional constellation of thinking and novel demands, or, in the terms of tragedy, of the old gods and the new.

In Medieval philosophy, reflections on the empirical dimension of experience, such as science and art, draw from neo-Platonic resources, particularly from the transcendental principle of beauty. An important text of neo-Platonism, Plato’s *Timaeus*, articulates a rational cosmology in terms of mathematics. By upholding mathematics as the foundational principle of order, neo-Platonism gives an image of the world as, to use Umberto Eco’s words, something ‘endowed with artistic order and resplendent with beauty’. The creative act of the demiurge is not creation *ex nihilo* but a kind of production through which the demiurge imitates the eternal world of form in order to shape the material world. Thus our sensory knowledge and our experience of beauty are complete only when they recognise the higher form in which they participate. Thomas Aquinas, for example, defines beauty as ‘a participation in the first cause, which makes all things beautiful. So that the beauty of creatures is simply a likeness of the divine beauty in which things participate’. For Aquinas, beautiful things do not establish new form but are produced according to pre-defined laws that allow it to participate in a beauty that is identified with Being itself. Such beauty is produced by nature according to necessary and sufficient principles, meaning that beauty in works produced by human skill is merely the representation of pre-established form. The beautiful is a First Principle, an original harmony from which all things derive. Thus Aquinas can state that ‘[e]verything that exists comes from beauty and goodness (from God) as an effective principle. And things have their being in beauty and goodness as if in a principle that preserves and maintains’.

Aquinas’ understanding of beauty as an effective principle builds not only from neo-Platonic sources, but also from the speculative systems of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* and *Physics*. Carol Poster describes Aquinas’ understanding of Aristotle as the ‘scientific-technical’ reading of his work; a reading that was common in medieval thought. This reading is reflected in the fact that Aristotle’s rhetorical and practical texts did not feature in Medieval handbooks of the arts curriculum, and neither were *Rhetoric* nor *Poetics* printed in the original five-volume Aldine Aristotle (1495-1498). The absence of Greek tragedy in the Latin west meant that Aristotle’s *Poetics* had little purchase on the Medieval imagination, while the

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6 ibid.
8 See ibid., p. 379.
poetics of Islamic philosopher Averroës, which outline a writing pedagogy that addressed poetry and prose together, were more easily assimilated into Medieval cultural life.  

The role of Aquinas’ scientific-technical reading of Aristotle in establishing the priority of technical thinking in modern philosophy is that it collapses the distinction between poiesis and praxis, establishing thinking in the paradigm of poiesis as philosophical orthodoxy. The mode of practical knowledge appropriate in a world that comes into being according to an efficient principle, that is, a pre-established rule, is one that operates according to such rules. The inability to distinguish poiesis and praxis is evident in Medieval Latin. As Bernard Lonergan notes, ‘both poiesis and praxis might be rendered as actio’ in Medieval Latin. Aquinas does distinguish two kinds of action, one that is proper to production and one to action, but this distinction was between ‘the actio of moral conduct, which is a perfection of the agent, and the actio, more properly factio, which transforms external matter’. Aquinas’ translation of praxis as factio ascribes ‘actions done’ to the same framework as ‘things made’, that is, it ascribes to praxis the same movement though which a thing is produced. In his technical definition, there is no political realm in which ends are created, but only a realm applying pre-established ends in the shape of moral principles. Aquinas states that ‘action implies nothing more than order of origin, in so far as action proceeds from some cause or principle to what is from that principle’. Action is not conceived of as the result of a process of deliberation but as techne, which means that it originates from a cause or principle which provides the necessary and sufficient conditions for its being. Understanding action in terms of techne expresses what Dewey called the technalised imagination in which ideas can be separated from the agent without deliberative contingency of praxis. For the technalised imagination, action is pure, stemming from a single intention located in the agent. It is not an end itself, but works toward realising a pre-given end. Thus the temporality of action is thus a problem, for the coexistence of cause, action, and effect in the moment of deliberation in Aristotle’s praxis must be replaced with a model where action takes place after the cause (i.e. as a result of some rule), but before the presence of the effect.

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9 For a discussion of Averroës’ influence on the reception of Poetics and tragedy in general in the thirteenth century, see Henry Kelly, Ideas and Forms of Tragedy from Aristotle to the Middle Ages, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, especially Chapter 1.
11 ibid.
More than four centuries after Aquinas, Descartes presents a scientific-technical reading of Aristotle in *The Principles of Philosophy* (1644). Echoing Aquinas’ argument in the *Summa Theologica* that ‘[i]n the natural order, perfection comes before imperfection’,\(^{14}\) Descartes argues that the natural order is grounded in original perfection:

> I do not doubt that the world was created in the beginning with all the perfection which it now possesses; so that the Sun, the Earth, the Moon, and the Stars existed in it, and so that the Earth did not only contain the seeds of plants but was covered by actual plants; and that Adam and Eve were not born as children but created as adults. The Christian faith teaches us this, and natural reason convinces us that this is true; because, taking into account the omnipotence of God, we must believe that everything He created was perfect in every way.\(^{15}\)

Descartes’ natural theology seems to reproduce Aquinas’ notion of original perfection. He gives a purely mechanistic explanation for the entire universe, including living beings, from material elements, and gives no reference to any form or to any teleology. However, he continues:

> nevertheless, just as for an understanding of the nature of plants or men it is better by far to consider how they can gradually grow from seeds than how they were created [entire] by God in the very beginning of the world; so, if we can devise some principles which are very simple and easy to know and by which we can demonstrate that the stars and the Earth, and indeed everything which we perceive in this visible world, could have sprung forth as if from certain seeds (even though we know that things did not happen that way); we shall in that way explain their nature much better than if we were merely to describe them as they are now.\(^{16}\)

It appears that Descartes provides two different explanations of the same facts: one that is purely mechanical and one that is organic, and maintains them both. The former turns on the belief of how the world was created, while the latter involves the description of how it is. The tension between these two views is between a mechanical and an organic understanding of nature, or between Descartes’ inherited Thomism and a modern scientific explanation.\(^{17}\) These two views correspond to the degrees of knowledge Descartes identifies, the highest of which is based on clear and distinct concepts, and the second degree encompassing all that is learned from the senses.\(^{18}\)

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\(^{14}\) Aquinas states that ‘[i]n the natural order, perfection comes before imperfection, as act preceds potentiality; for whatever is in potentiality is made actual only by something actual. Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, 94:3, p. 730.


\(^{16}\) ibid., pp. 105-106.

\(^{17}\) This is not to say that Thomism and modern science are antithetical, but that Descartes’ rationalist theology is at odds with modern science.

Yet there is no tension between ‘organism’ and ‘mechanism’ for Descartes, for he understands both in terms of the First Principle. To consider nature as the causal result of a First Principle assumes a model of creation much like Aristotle’s *techne*, which operates according to pre-given rules. Knowledge gained by the senses is lower than the clarity and distinctness of conceptual knowledge, for appearances do not disclose original perfection but constitute an imperfect expression of the First Principle. Thus the task of natural philosophy, as Descartes notes, is to find ‘several principles which are quite intelligible and quite simple’ that might explain how an original seed or First Principle causes the appearances gathered by the senses. It is precisely these principles that Isaac Newton attempts to lay down in *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* (1687); principles that outline the mathematics of causality in order to explain the development of natural phenomena without reference to teleology.

For Leibniz, however, Descartes’ causal conception of nature and ends restricts God’s gracious care for the creation by casting God as a divine watchmaker, a problem that is manifest in Descartes’ mind-body problem. By rendering mind as *res cogitans* and body as *res extensa*, Descartes requires a mechanical explanation of how the two substances can interact. For mind to interact with matter, it must somehow enter the realm of causation, becoming causally determined. Thus God’s gracious care for God’s creation must submit to the order determined by mechanical philosophy, meaning that the kingdom of grace is subordinated to the kingdom of law for the sake of scientific knowledge. Leibniz’ solution is to posit the pre-established harmony of mind and body, separating spirit and flesh so that the two modes of explanation – nature and grace – can dwell harmoniously together. As he states in §79 of *Monadology* (1714),

> Souls act according to the laws of final causes, through appetitions, ends, and means. Bodies act according to the laws of efficient causes or of motions. And these two kingdoms, that of efficient causes and that of final causes, are in harmony with each other.\(^{19}\)

For Leibniz, the mind or soul operates according to particular ends that are explainable in terms of final causation, while the actions of the body, instances of matter in motion according to the claims of mechanical philosophy, are explained in terms of efficient causation. ‘[T]hough this is impossible’, he states, souls act as if there were no bodies and bodies as if there were no souls, and yet ‘both act as if each influenced each other’.\(^{20}\)

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\(^{20}\) ibid., p. 80 (§81).
In order to seal the primacy of God’s grace over the threat posed by the empirical sciences, Leibniz separates the soul and body into two realms that are necessarily inseparable, which allows natural philosophy to use both efficient and final causation as harmonious, albeit contradictory, forms of explanation. Thus the construction of a metaphysical system such as that put forward in the *Monadology* is the first task of science if its empirical observation of the mechanical order is to harmonise with final causation. The great foundation for such a system, Leibniz states, is mathematics, which gives us the principle of identity: ‘that a proposition cannot be true and false at the same time’.21 This single principle, according to Leibniz, ‘is sufficient to demonstrate every part of arithmetic and geometry, that is, all mathematical principles’.22 Yet in order to proceed from mathematics to natural philosophy, ‘another principle is required’: ‘the principle of sufficient reason, namely, that nothing happens without a reason why it should be so rather than otherwise’.23 The principle of sufficient reason reproduces Aquinas’ rejection of the distinction between *poiesis* and *praxis*, for it entails a world in which every action and event can be explained according to a given rule. It guarantees the rational structure of nature, allowing the transition of mathematical principles from the theoretical order to our inquiry into nature. In Christian Wolff’s terms, the principle of sufficient reason entails that our sensory input cannot yield knowledge of natural order, ‘but when understanding is added, the same ideas become distinct’, for now the causes are known.24 He explains this hierarchy of knowledge as follows:

Because of that which one knows only by experience, one knows only that it is but does not see how it is connected with other truths, in knowledge from experience there is no reason. Hence experience is opposed to reason… . We have, then, two ways by which we can reach the knowledge of truth: experience and reason. The former is based on the senses, and the latter on the understanding.25

In order to accommodate the empirical sciences in philosophy’s conception of knowledge, Wolff outlines a system of metaphysics in which there are two modes of knowledge, one consisting of passively received sense impressions, the other of understanding. Both constitute ways by which we can reach knowledge of the truth, yet because reason is opposed to experience, they remain separate, one higher than the other.

22 ibid.
23 ibid.
25 ibid., §370.
1.2 Epigenesis: life and final causation

While the rationalist method of Leibniz and Wolff sealed the clarity of the rational conception of nature over the confusion of the empirical conception, both perspectives came into a dramatic tension in the developing field of biological science in the mid-eighteenth century. This tension is particularly evident in the debate occurring in the development of biology between defendants of the traditional, preformationist concept of nature in which nature operates according to the principles of mechanical philosophy, and advocates of a new, epigenetic concept that is only explainable by empirical judgments of final causation. The significance of the epigenetic view, I will suggest, is that it posed a fundamental challenge to the primacy of metaphysics over empirical observation, effacing the impassable boundary between the Leibnizian spheres of nature and grace.\(^{26}\)

On one side of the debate, the preformationists held that the form of a living thing exists prior to its development and has existed since the beginning of the creation. It postulates an original organisation that, as Peter McLaughlin describes, ‘explained why only those of the physically possible particle combinations that actually exist were chosen by the Creator in the beginning’.\(^{27}\) God’s original creative act establishes a First Principle, determining all possible form, thus presuming a mechanical view of the world that unfolds according to an efficient principle. On the other side of the debate, advocates of epigenesis argued that the form of a living thing comes into existence in its birth. The parts do not determine the whole but rather the whole gives the proper form for the generation of the parts. In an epigenetic universe, new form is created wherever there is life, meaning that the world is infused with creation and spontaneity as each living thing expresses its own form. This idea

\(^{26}\) This debate, I will show in the following chapters, had a significant impact on Kant’s argument in C.J. In §81, for example, Kant observes that we can consider ‘each organic being generated from its own kind as either the educt or the product of the latter. The system of generatings as mere educts is called that of individual preformation or the theory of evolution; the system of generatings as products is called the system of epigenesis’.\(^{27}\) Peter McLaughlin, ‘Newtonian Biology and Kant’s Mechanistic Concept of Causality,’ in Paul Guyer, Kant’s Critique of the Power of Judgment: Critical Essays, USA: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003, pp. 209-217, p. 210.
poses a radical challenge to the pre-established form of the preformationist view, for in such a framework contingency and novelty are basic to life. In *Histoire Naturelle* (1749), French botanist Conte de Buffon made a decisive argument in favour of the epigenetic view, arguing that epigenesis required a new procedure for thinking about the concepts we use to categorise nature that allows for contingency, a procedure he called ‘natural history’. Buffon argues that while the natural world appears to us as ‘Cosmos’, an ordered whole where all that might possibly exist does exist, schematic order is a subjective result of the workings of the human mind rather than a reflection of objectively existing reality. This argument problematises the primacy of metaphysics in natural philosophy, for it suggests that if we begin from concepts then our empirical analysis merely conforms to the concepts we use. For example, if we presume that nature organises itself according to the concepts of genus and species, then the existence of genus and species is precisely what we find in our empirical analysis. For Buffon, the schematising activity of cognition problematises the method of botanists such as Carl Linnaeus, for their attempts to provide an encyclopaedic taxonomy of plant life fails to question the mental schema that makes such an attempt possible. To overcome the narrow focus assumed by the preformationists, Buffon calls for a ‘quality of spirit’ that ‘makes us capable of grasping distant relationships, bringing them together, and making out of them a body of reasoned

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28 The theory of epigenesis opens the door for the notion of a living principle – what Blumenbach called the *Bildungstrieb* (formative impulse) – which infuses the natural order and gives life to matter (See *CJ* 5:424). In Blumenbach’s terms, ‘the word Bildungstrieb just like the words attraction, gravity, etc., serves no other purpose than to designate a force whose constant effect is known from experience, but whose cause just like the cause of the above mentioned so universally recognized natural forces is for us a *qualitas occulta*’. Blumenbach’s anthropology had a significant impact on Kant, and the ‘Critique of Teleological Judgment’ can be read as a sustained reflection on the difficulties encountered in Blumenbach’s understanding of nature. Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, *Uber den Bildungstrieb*, in McLaughlin, ‘Newtonian Biology and Kant’s Mechanistic Concept of Causality’, p. 209.

29 Kant first grappled with Buffon’s work in the lectures he gave on physical geography in 1775. What was of particular interest to Kant was Buffon’s redefinition of the term ‘natural history’ that refigured the study of history according to a scientific method. Kant adopts Buffon’s new definition of natural history, arguing that it would ‘transform the currently so diffuse system of academic natural description into a physical system for the understanding [i.e. a science]’. Kant, ‘Von den verschiedenen Racen der Mensch,’ in John Zammito, *The Genesis of Kant’s Critique of Judgment*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 200. Kant reconsiders Buffon’s ideas again in *CJ*, though without referring to him explicitly. See § 80.

30 In a marginal note to the First Introduction to *CJ*, Kant criticises Linnaeus for presuming that his taxonomy (the western taxonomy of genus and species) corresponds to real similarities and difference in the inner nature of things: ‘Could Linnaeus have hoped to outline a system of nature if he had had to worry that if he found a stone that he called granite, this might differ in its internal constitution from every other stone which nevertheless looked just like it, and all he could hope to find were always individual things, as it were isolated for the understanding and never a class of them that could be brought under concepts of genus and species[?]’. What Kant finds in Buffon is the self-regulating power of judgment; to draw disparate parts of experience into concepts that it holds to be regulative, not constitutive, of experience (*CJ* 20:216n).
ideas’.\textsuperscript{31} The new procedure he outlines does not begin from the categories we already possess in order to explain nature. Rather, it begins from phenomena; that is, it begins without a concept and aims to bring the chaotic appearances together in order to create ideas for the interests of human cognition. Such a procedure would be both empirical and rational, for it begins with phenomena and then searches for a concept.

Buffon realised the radical challenge this view posed to rationalist philosophy. If research into organic processes revealed natural agency, then natural history would have to commit itself to the principle that nature is susceptible to change. Yet if we consider nature in terms of change, then the tension between Descartes’ two explanations becomes an irresolvable antinomy. We can set out the antinomy by using Descartes’ tree example. If a tree in its final state is different from its initial state as a seed, then there will be some features of a tree that are different from the seed. The question is what relationship those features of the tree bear to the seed: are these novel features of the tree already present implicitly, but not apparently, in the seed? If so, then they are not actually new but are derived from an original order. However, if the novel features are not to be found in the seed, then they must be contingent, and thus unexplained. In this formulation it seems that the tree is either inexplicable in relation to the seed, or it is not really a development from the seed at all.

To suggest that organic life is subject to change is to radically alter the goal of describing nature. Change produces variation, which, if true, means that the task of natural history is not simply taxonomy but genealogy.\textsuperscript{32} Categories such as genus and species would be the ideas that humans have found useful in order to bring order to the chaotic mass of natural phenomena, meaning that ‘natural history’ would not be merely a study of objects but a self-reflective inquiry into our own faculty of categorisation. From the view of natural history, categories such as genus and species would be self-created ideas, allowing us to see more than there actually is in the information delivered by our senses. For Buffon, to say that our categories are contingent does not entail that nature is chaos, for the fact that we have categories at all suggests that nature is highly amenable to systematisation. Rather, Buffon argues that in order to recognise the contingency of our understanding of nature without collapsing into chaos, we cannot think of nature in terms of Aristotle’s notion of efficient causation. Instead, we must think of nature as an organic whole that organises itself according to Aristotle’s notion of final causation. In this paradigm, the form of nature (such as genus


\textsuperscript{32} Jennifer Mensch, Kant’s Organicism, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2013, p. 4.
and species) does not dwell in nature, as does the soul of Leibnizian monads. In Leibniz’s conception of the monad, soul and body dwell harmoniously together in impassable spheres. Rather, the form of nature is expressed by what appears as nature unfolds according to its own inner purpose. Thus sensation and reason would be required to discern this purpose. This view is much closer to Aristotle’s form/matter distinction than Leibnizian metaphysics, for it entails that when matter is in motion, the cause of its coming-to-be (its form) is expressed in the movement of its parts.33

As scientists such as Buffon became increasingly aware of the creative dimensions of cognition, the realm of art – and Aristotle’s theory of art in particular – gained a new significance in the task of exploring the nature of experience. If thought is free from natural constraints and gives order to experience according to categories of its own devising, such as genus and species, then we might say that it has an ‘artistic’ dimension, crafting an image of nature that extends beyond the data given by the senses. It does not operate according to rules in the framework of techne – indeed it cannot, for the end of nature is emergent rather than pre-given. Rather, it creatively deliberates in a situation in which no rules are sufficient to navigate the dynamism of life in the paradigm of praxis.

The importance of Buffon’s argument in *Histoire Naturalle* is that calls for a new procedure by which to navigate the contingency of sensory experience. Because natural history begins from nature’s self-expression, a new spirit of inquiry is required that does not seek to imitate a stable foundation but begins from the products of nature in order to discern their inner purpose. When science is no longer understood as the imitation of nature but as a creative project that must actively come to nature in order to be taught by it, a new conception of the agency of both the scientist and nature is required. The following two sections examine the attempts to build such a new conception of agency by rationalist and empiricist philosophers. While rationalists such as Baumgarten elucidate the importance of a sensuous kind of cognition, I will suggest that it is empiricists such as Hume and Moor who understand this new kind of cognition in terms of reason. It is this move, I will argue, that brought the problematic of tragedy to their attention. In the final section I explore a third alternative that draws from both rationalism and empiricism in the work of Herder. Herder, I will show, outlines the use of reason in sensuous life in a way that is drawn from Greek tragedy.

1.3 The rationalist response: aesthetics

The growing acceptance of the theory of epigenesis during the mid-eighteenth century threatened to undermine the authority of theoretical philosophy’s clear and distinct reasoning, for it entails a concept of nature that resists the conceptual determination of rationalism. In the mechanical conception of nature, emergent features can be explained according to a First Principle. However, no amount of speculation can result in a clear and distinct idea of a living being, for its form can only be judged through empirical observation. In the theory of epigenesis, the emergent features of living beings are singular and contingent, and hence cannot be explained by a rationalist concept of nature. In this context it seemed to many philosophers that the hegemony of philosophy over the sciences was coming to an end, and that a new way of thinking about the natural world was required.

Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, a student of Wolff, attempted to re-establish the primacy of philosophy by calling for a systematic study of the means by which we acquire and express sensory knowledge. In this study, Baumgarten sought to find an objective validity for sensuous thought and a claim to truth that was equal to cognition.34 While he retained Descartes and Wolff’s distinction between the higher and lower faculties, he explored the faculty of sensuous knowledge to provide a rational foundation for empirical science. In paradigmatic terms, Baumgarten termed this science ‘aesthetics’, defining its parameters in the opening paragraph of the *Aesthetica* (1750) as follows:

Aesthetics (the theory of the liberal arts, the lesser theory of knowledge, the art of thinking beautifully, the art of reason by analogy) is the science of sensuous cognition.35

Just as logic is concerned with the operations of reason and the understanding, Baumgarten suggests that the new discipline of aesthetics ought to be concerned with what we apprehend through the senses.36 Through giving attention to individual appearances, he argues that Wolff’s distinct idea comes at a significant cost. By subsuming an individual appearance under a concept or by enumerating its attributes, anything that exceeds our capacity of understanding is occluded. In Baumgarten’s terms,

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the specific formal perfection contained in cognition and logical truth had to be bought dearly by a great and significant loss of material perfection. For what else is abstraction than a loss?37

While logic arrives at clear and distinct concepts though abstraction and simplification, Baumgarten suggests that by privileging logical form over sensuous appearance, Wolff’s theoretical knowledge could provide only a partial and impoverished perspective of the world. Epistemology cannot ‘reach the knowledge of the truth’, for Baumgarten, which is the very task it was meant to complete.38 Opposed to Wolff’s constrained picture of reason, aesthetics is an exercise in our capacity to grasp reality in its particularity and complexity, drawing what exceeds our logical systematisation into view.

According to Baumgarten, art provides an alternative kind of synthesis to the marriage of concepts and appearances in the mind, for it does not work with abstractions (i.e. it does not proceed from concept to appearance) but with the totality of an organism. An artwork is produced by the collaboration of the sensuous, imaginative and intellectual faculties, meaning that it is both an interaction with the world we experience and the synthesis of this material with intellectual ideas. The synthesis afforded in art cannot be understood in the Platonic terms of mimesis, for it is utterly new and unprecedented in every case. Yet as an operation of understanding it is a mode of knowledge – of truth – for through sensuous cognition we come to learn about the world in its complexity. In this framework truth does not pre-exist cognition, but is a cognitive activity of the subject. If art is truly such a synthesis, then, as Aristotle claims in Poetics, the study of art will shed light on the complexities of human nature and experience to the fullest degree. Moreover, art history will be the locus for a new philosophical study in anthropology (just as natural history becomes a kind of genealogy for Buffon), for sensuous cognition is temporal, expressing a particular experience that is not limited to timeless being. If artworks have rules, they are not objective necessities or natural regularities but the products of human freedom. Thus artworks give an immanent revelation of the unbounded freedom of human agency.

While Baumgarten attempts to seal the philosophical legitimacy of sensuous experience, he remains unable to ground an independent science of human sensibility. His notion of truth remains monopolised by the higher cognitive faculty, thus failing to break with the rationalist mind/body split of Wolffian philosophy. As Angelica Nuzzo notes, Baumgarten

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38 As Andrew Bowie notes, after Baumgarten aesthetics becomes ‘the location in which what has been repressed by a limited conception of reason can be articulated’. Andrew Bowie, Aesthetics and Subjectivity from Kant to Nietzsche, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990, p. 4.
leaves no path for empirical observation to connect to the ‘history, anthropology, and moral philosophy in a way that can positively defy the charge of materialism and the attacks of skepticism’.\(^3\)\(^9\) By remaining committed to rationalist metaphysics, his philosophy entails an account of aesthetic judgment that is exempt from the constraints of cognition. The problem that remains after Baumgarten’s aesthetics is how sense and reason might be linked.

1.4 The empiricist response: taste

In ‘Of the Standard of Taste’ (1757), David Hume outlines an alternative solution to the problem of sense and reason to that put forward by Baumgarten. To do so, he confronts a certain ‘species of philosophy’ that Baumgarten remains committed to; one that separates experience from reason, thereby destroying the possibility of aesthetic agreement. This species, of course, is rationalism. In such a species of philosophy, Hume explains,

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\text{[a]ll sentiment is right; because sentiment has a reference to nothing beyond itself, and is always real, wherever a man is conscious of it. But all determinations of the understanding are not right; because they have a reference to something beyond themselves, to wit, real matter of fact; and are not always conformable to that standard.}^{40}
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Hume criticises the rationalist juxtaposition of the contingency of sentiment with the determinacy of the understanding. To provide an alternative, he reconsiders the concept of taste.

Taste, for Hume, is a sensuous measure that operates in accord with reason. It is not reason itself, which, in his account, is the calculative exercise of human thought that draws ideas into logical relation, but a mode of thinking appropriate to sensation. In this view, the rational boundaries of morality are no longer cast as opposite to the subjectivism of sentiment, for both are understood to operate according to empirical (\textit{a posteriori}) rules. Sentiment, for Hume, turns on a productive kind of cognition that is rule bound – rules that are not ‘\textit{a priori}’, ‘eternal’ or ‘immutable’, but that share a foundation with the ‘natural sciences’.\(^4\)\(^1\) This foundation, he states, is ‘experience’. Poetry, for example, is confined by ‘rules of art’, rules that are discovered by the author ‘either by genius or observation’.\(^4\)\(^2\) The development of taste turns on the experience of artworks, whereby one’s mind is furnished with the rules

\(^4\)\(^1\) ibid., p. 138.
\(^4\)\(^2\) ibid.
appropriate to a given genre. Thus ‘beauty and deformity’ are not cognitive, that is, they ‘are not qualities of objects’, but ‘belong entirely to … sentiment’.43

Hume first outlined this argument in *Treatise On Human Nature* (1739-40), where he stated that ‘feeling constitutes our praise or admiration’.44 This is to say that feeling or sentiment is the beauty of the artwork, meaning that sentiment is the source of value, not the artwork itself. In Hume’s terms, the experience of pleasure is singular in every case, depending not on thought but on the subjective experience of the perceiver. Thus taste signals an autonomous domain that outstrips reason in its ability to set value into motion:

> [Reason] conveys the knowledge of truth and falsehood; [taste] gives the sentiment of beauty and deformity, vice and virtue. The one discovers objects, as they really stand in nature … the other has a productive faculty [giving rise to] a new creation.45

While reason is concerned with knowledge, meaning that it is limited to nature, taste is concerned with aesthetics and virtue, meaning that it is productive. The products of taste are new creations, going beyond the material given by nature.

However, by separating aesthetics from reason and equating taste and virtue, Hume is unable to explain the pleasure found in artworks that are not agreeable to the observer. This problem becomes evident in his essay ‘Of Tragedy’. In this essay, Hume attempts to explain the pleasure that ‘a well-written tragedy’ affords by producing ‘sorrow, terror and anxiety’ and other naturally disagreeable emotions.46 To answer this he must outline how our disagreeable sentiment at the transgression of order can be converted into agreeable ones if sentiment is disconnected from thought. He builds on the thought of French playwright Jean-Baptiste Dubos, who attempted to defend tragedy as an important part of moral development. For Dubos, ‘tragedy excites and cherishes the good passions, but raises abhorrence at the vicious and wicked passions’.47 Yet Dubos’ defence of tragedy does not ultimately assist Hume’s case, for it raises the question of how tragedy can excite the good passions if it presents scenes that ought to occasion a negative response, such as the demise of the good. Hume argues that any emotion that ‘attends a passion, is easily converted into it, though in their natures they be originally different from, and even contrary to, each other’.48

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43 ibid., p. 135.
47 Jean-Baptiste Dubos, in James Moor, *The End of Tragedy According to Aristotle*, Robert and Andrew Foulis, Glasgow, 1763, p. 11.
the passions are not caused by the experience of order or disorder but are ‘new creations’, or
eelings, tragedy manifests the ability of art to ‘convert’ one passion (such as displeasure) into
another (pleasure).

By separating the passions or sentiments from ideas – from thought – it is unclear how
or why such a conversion from a disagreeable to an agreeable sentiment occurs. If sentiment
and thought are radically separated, one a spontaneous creation and the other a constrained,
calculative procedure, the process of taking pleasure in the suffering of another on stage is no
different from taking pleasure in another’s actual suffering. This would mean that it reveals a
deficiency in moral taste. As Hume states in ‘On the Standard of Taste’, writers who present
the collapse of order ‘have not pleased by their transgressions of rule or order, but in spite of
these transgressions: they have possessed other beauties, which were conformable to just
criticism’. Thus for Hume the standard for judging a tragedy relies on its ability to condemn
vice without presenting action that is ‘too bloody and atrocious’.

In The End of Tragedy According to Aristotle (1763), James Moor argues that both
Dubos and Hume are unable to explain the ‘chief difficulty vis how Tragedy purifies any
passion by means of exciting that very passion’, for neither understand the significance of
Aristotle’s notion of *katharsis*. He attributes this misunderstanding to their failure to ‘attend
to the propriety of the [Greek] language’, arguing that they render Aristotle’s *pathē* and
*pathēmata* as ‘Sufferings, or Calamities’ – that is, to unfortunate *external* events – rather than
to emotions occurring within the character. Moor argues that the purpose of tragedy for
Aristotle was to persuade people to remove (*katharein*) calamities (*pathēmata*) from the world
‘by exciting the Pity and Terrour of the audience at the representation of them’. The end of
tragedy is thus moral and political reform by means of educating taste according to reason.
The pleasure found in tragedy does not come from enjoying another’s suffering, for Moor, but
in the moral clarification undergone when we come to understand the nature and causes of
suffering. In other words, the pleasure Aristotle locates in tragedy is intrinsically linked to
*reason*, igniting our passion so as to affect a moral transformation in the spectator. If the
French playwrights could capture this reading of Aristotle, Moor argues, ‘the places of public

50 Hume, ‘Of Tragedy’, p. 132.
51 James Moor, The End of Tragedy According to Aristotle, Glasgow: Robert and Andrew Foulis, 1763, p. 11
52 Moor, The End of Tragedy According to Aristotle, p. 13-14.
53 ibid., p. 17.
resort and amusement might become some of the most agreeable and useful schools of education’.  

Moor’s reading of Aristotle transforms the scientific-technical reading into what Poster calls a ‘rhetorical-humanistic’ view. Like Dubos and the French playwrights who attempted to restage tragedies in the modern age, Moor was frustrated with the scholastic focus on Aristotle’s speculative texts and placed greater emphasis on the Politics, Poetics, Rhetoric, and ethical treaties. Yet writing against the playwrights who attempted to use Poetics as a textbook, Moor reinterprets Aristotle as a practical philosopher; that is, a philosopher concerned with ‘the productive arts and those matters about which knowledge is probable rather than certain’.  

The rhetorical-humanistic reading of Aristotle draws our attention to the impossibility of designing a science about the particularities of living beings. For events and expressions that are singular, proponents of this reading of Aristotle argue that the exclusive focus on technical knowledge implicit to traditional philosophy must make room for phronesis. The search for universal truths – the goal of science – involves reasoning guided by principles, while phronesis, practical judgment, is a mode of reasoning guided by experience. For Aristotle, only phronesis is properly called judgment, for it is not predetermined by available principles or guided by an end other than itself. As we saw earlier in Aristotle’s definition of techne in Physics, art is not concerned with actualising nature through the application of a natural standard, as it is for Plato, but with participating in the formation of nature as a shared project.  

Ultimately, Moor’s reading of Aristotle focuses on Aristotle’s efforts to separate poiesis and praxis, where poiesis directs itself to the world according to the rules of art (techne) and praxis directs itself to the life of the polis (phronesis). While techne operates according to rules, phronesis involves the creativity of thought to act apart from rules in the framework of reflection and deliberation. For the philosophers who turn to Aristotle’s practical and rhetorical works for resources to overcome the scholastic reading, a particular

54 James Moor, Essays Read to a Literary Society, Glasgow: Robert and Andrew Foulis, 1759, p. 2.  
56 ibid.  
57 In the opening line of Chapter 4 of Poetics Aristotle gives three reasons for making art, each of which springs from human nature (while Aristotle states that there are only two reasons, he also identifies a third reason for making art, noting the way that art teaches us, namely imitation): ‘It is clear that the general origin of poetry was due to two causes, each of them part of human nature. Imitation is natural to man from childhood, one of his advantages over the lower animals being this, that he is the most imitative creature in the world, and learns first by imitation’. Aristotle, Poetics, 1448b5-7.
mode of action – what they came to describe in terms of genius – cannot be explained according to the rules of techne, for it brings new rules into being.

1.5 Embodied mind: genius

Hume’s separation of taste from reason removes the universality of morality and places it at the mercy of social and cultural developments. His subjectivist understanding of aesthetic experience – that the experience of beauty, for example, is not determined by the artwork’s representation of nature but is produced in the perceiver as a ‘new creation’ – reconfigures taste from being a determination from a First Principle to a subjective, productive experience. The problem raised by Hume’s work is how to explain the subjectivist experience of art while maintaining aesthetic experience in relation to reason. Aesthetics is contingent, for it involves the production of form that is free from the ideas of reason. Reason is necessary, for it is bound by rules. The question facing aesthetics is whether taste and reason can harmonise, and in this section we find that the solution, for Herder, lies in the concept of genius. This will prove significant for our reading of Kant, for Herder’s understanding of genius allows Kant to identify a way of thinking adequate to the demands of sensuous life.

Before turning to Herder, however, we begin with Englishman Edward Young who attempted to build a new theory of creativity that could expand the direction of aesthetics beyond the ‘disembodied soul’ assumed by rationalist philosophy. Young attacked the neoclassical attempt to reproduce classical art as an infantile relinquishment of responsibility, which, ‘like Crutches, are a needful aid to the lame, tho’ an impediment to the strong’. The self-reflective preface he wrote to his most influential work, Night Thoughts (1742), captures his novel understanding of poetry and the moral implications of experiences of sensuous experience:

As the occasion of this Poem was real, not fictitious; so the method pursued in it was rather imposed by what spontaneously arose in the Author’s mind on that occasion, than meditated or designed. Which will appear very probable from the nature of it. For it differs from the common mode of poetry, which is, from long narrations to draw short morals. Here, on the contrary, the narrative is short, and the morality arising from it makes the bulk of the Poem. The reason of it is, that the facts mentioned did naturally pour these moral reflections on the thought of the Writer.  

58 Edward Young, Conjectures on Original Composition, London: A. Miller, 1759, p. 28.
Young’s poem had a significant impact on philosophy’s understanding of artistic creation, most notably on Edmund Burke who found in it the impetus for his reflections on the beautiful and the sublime in *Night Thoughts*. Young does not portray a rule-governed morality, yet neither does he equate morality and taste. Rather, he presents a sensuous experience that gives rise to significant moral implications: an experience of nature that pours moral reflections into thought.

Young’s *Night Thoughts* crafts the poet as a genius, as a second Creator, a promethean figure who imitates neither the ancients nor others but only his own *experience* of nature. Genius operates as a mode of shifting the disembodied soul of Baumgarten’s aesthetics toward the direction of what we might call, following Nuzzo, an ‘embodied mind’, developing an anthropology in which sensuous cognition and reason can be seen as part of the same science. ⁶⁰ As Young suggests in the preface to *Night Thoughts*, the experience of nature prompts a sensuous morality that occupies the bulk of the poem. As he draws out in his critical work *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759), the genius creates intuitively and cannot explain his or her work through reference to antecedents. Thus the work of the genius is not mechanical but organic:

> An Original may said to be of a vegetable nature; it rises spontaneously from the vital root of Genius; it grows, it is not made. ⁶¹

Genius is not organic because it unfolds according a First Principle, as it is for Descartes, but because it creates new form. Because it is the work of nature in the subject, the notion of genius destroys the Wolffian dualism of sense and intellect, for it is at once natural (theoretical) and creative (aesthetic). Nature is not constrained by mathematical principles, and yet neither is it chaotic. Rather, it is like a work of art in that it expresses indeterminate form; it is not produced according to rules but *gives* rules, it does not unfold from pre-established form but *creates* form.

Young’s *Conjectures* was published in two separate German translations in 1760, and had a significant impact on Schelling, Schiller, Herder, and the *Sturm und Drang* movement. Significantly, Young modelled his account of genius on Shakespeare, bringing Shakespeare’s work to the attention of German aesthetics. Herder’s essay ‘Shakespeare’ (1773) grapples with Young’s poetry and critical work, focusing on the difference between Shakespearean tragedy and Greek tragedy in order to highlight the historical significance of genius. Herder’s

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⁶⁰ Nuzzo, ‘Kant and Herder on Baumgarten’s *Aesthetica*’, p. 578.
⁶¹ Young, *Conjectures on Original Composition*, p. 12.
notion of genius provides a significant contribution to Young’s, for he introduces a culturally bound element to the genius of poetic creation. According to Herder, while poetic genius is universal, for it is true to the atemporality of nature, the manner in which it expresses itself must be understood in terms of the history and context in which it emerges. This gives a new meaning to the notion of artistic genre, for genre is not subject to timeless form, but is created by a transgressive work that brings a new form into being. Thus for Herder, Greek and Shakespearian tragedy are not the same genre, for they were created under vastly different conditions which means that they are guided by and establish different rules. In this view, the French playwrights who attempted to write modern tragedies with Poetics as their textbook misunderstood the temporal character of genre.

The significance of Young’s account of artistic genius for Herder is that it provides a way of thinking that does not equate taste and reason, thus destroying the theoretical sphere, but reconciles them, identifying the theoretical in the aesthetic. The creativity expressed in the tragedies, in his view, provides a way of understanding this reconciliation, for the development of tragic poetry is a creative achievement of genius:

Greek tragedy developed, as it were, out of a single scene, out of the impromptu dithyramb, the mimed dance, the chorus. This was enlarged, recast: Aeschylus put two actors on to the stage instead of one, invented the concept of the protagonist, and reduced the choral part. Sophocles added a third actor and introduced scene painting. From such origins, though belatedly, Greek tragedy rose to greatness, became a masterpiece of the human spirit, the summit of poetry, which Aristotle esteems so highly and we, in Sophocles and Euripides, cannot admire deeply enough.62

Building from the organic account of tragedy’s religious origins Aristotle gives in Poetics, Herder argues that tragedy arose from the impromptu worship of Dionysus to become the greatest example of human spirit.63 Herder does not use the language of ‘emergence’ but states that Aeschylus ‘invented’ the concept of the protagonist, suggesting that tragedy is created through a series of ruptures, each expressing a new rule that governs artistic practice. The organic language of ‘genius’ does not refer to a mechanical process whereby that which ‘emerges’ comes forth from a First Principle. Rather, it portrays the activity of the organism as a radical break with the given, a spontaneous act of creation that can only come from the incarnation of theoretical freedom in sensuous life. Because Greek and Shakespearean tragedy are two different expressions of artistic genius, Herder argues that we cannot judge according

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63 Herder’s description of the development of tragedy closely follows Aristotle’s account in Book IV of Poetics. Aristotle describes tragedy’s development as both an organic process and the work of human innovations. See Aristotle, Poetics, 1449a10-31.
to a universal set of rules, nor can we establish a criterion from Greek tragedy or Shakespearean drama. Both establish the rule by which those of their immediate context were to use to judge other artworks.

Herder harmonises Hume’s notion of taste with contemporary discussions of genius, arguing that genius is the expression of nature – of reason – in the sensuous domain. Because genius is a creative expression that has meaning in the context of the community from which it breaks, it can be understood to give an orientation, a sense of taste, to a people:

Taste is at last nothing but truth and goodness in a beautiful and sensuous form, understanding and virtue in an immaculate garb fit for humanity.64

Taste, in other words, is the incarnation of the transcendentals, reconciling reason with sensuous life.65 The transcendentals are no longer eternal forms that are forever separated from sensuous life, but products of nature, of genius, that schematise cognition. If taste is the supreme organising principle, then art displaces (rationalist) philosophy as the activity that is most adequate for generating an understanding of life, for it is able to grasp life as a whole – including what goes beyond the understanding – by means of analogy.66 If every appearance in nature and history is singular, meaning that such appearances cannot be explained as deriving from a First Principle, then only poetry, myth, story, and analogical thinking can do justice to life.

Herder’s work highlights the ability of analogical thinking to do that which Buffon called for, that is, to express the quality of spirit that looks at the phenomena of life and gathers it together without requiring it to conform to pre-established criteria. Analogical thinking provides a new procedure for thinking that is capable of attaining a greater

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65 Herder’s understanding of taste confronts Rousseau’s Discours sur les sciences et les arts (1750), in which Rousseau attacks the idea that the cultivation of taste might enhance rationality. Rousseau begins with the question of ‘Whether the Restoration of the arts and sciences has had the effect of purifying or corrupting morals’. He argues that ‘the progress of the arts and sciences has added nothing to our real happiness … it has corrupted our morals … the arts and sciences are responsible for the moral degeneration of mankind,’ which, according to Rousseau, is basically good by nature. See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 1-28.

66 During the early 1780s, Kant wrote several hostile reviews of Herder’s work, especially his Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind (1784), arguing that he fails to give genuine explanation of organic development. While Kant’s argument was partly motivated by his personal resentment towards Herder, his former student, whom he blamed for the poor reception of CPR, it raises a serious problem. In particular, it suggests that Herder’s analogical reasoning transgress the limits of reason by articulating things in themselves. Herder, according to Kant, argues from knowledge of the world as phenomena in order to gain knowledge of the world as noumena. See also Frederick Beiser, The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte, New Haven: Harvard University Press, 1993, especially Chapter 5. Here Beiser argues that Kant’s attack on Herder can be seen as a break with his own pre-critical work.
systematic understanding of ourselves as physical and intellectual beings than technalised philosophy was able to provide, because it draws the whole of our experience together without the logical requirements of clarity and distinctness. Moreover, it allows us to conduct the task of understanding nature not from the abstraction of theoretical philosophy, but from within nature itself, for it refuses to subject phenomenological experience to theoretical explanation. If we conceptualise the coexistence of mind and world as machine and spirit, for example, then we render the subject incoherent from the very start. If we begin from our feeling of the unity of life, as does the author of a novel or the writer of a play, we are able to judge body and mind as parts of a living organism, where an organising power integrates the physical powers it possesses. This judgment is not made possible by speculative philosophy, however, but by experience. Without a feeling of the unity of sense and reason, Herder argues,

reason is but an idle spectator, and if these are opposed to it, then discord ensues and taste will never reach maturity. The influence of reason is obscured, deceived, outweighed; it calls out in vain.\(^67\)

In the following chapter we find that, for Kant, the significance of Herder’s defence of analogical thinking is that it shows that rationalist philosophy expresses a kind of intellectual tragedy, for its technical method entails that, form the outset, rationalism is destined to fail in its attempt to harmonise reason with sensuous life. Moreover, it shows that taste, by contrast, provides a way of reconciling reason and sense, for it regulates the function of the sense organs and drives, allowing reason to enter the practical sphere as a guide for cognition. In Kant’s CJ, I will suggest, the task of navigating the failure of philosophy to integrate reason in sensory life is an aesthetic task, requiring the cultivation of taste.\(^68\)

### 1.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I have made the claim that tragedy begins to feature in the writings of philosophers who argued that traditional philosophy failed to provide a procedure of thinking adequate to the contingency of aesthetic experience, prompting a return to Aristotle’s practical

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\(^68\) This new procedure, however, can provide no guarantee that reason will become instrumental in society, for it turns on the recognition of the tragedy of philosophy that aims to secure the rational legislation of all social doing. Herder rejects the enlightenment understanding as the unfolding of a First Principle in which ‘all preceding generations [should have been made] properly for the last alone, which is to be enthroned on the ruined scaffolding of the happiness of the rest’. Johann Gottfried Herder, Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind (1784-91), trans. W. Churchill, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1968, p. 75.
and ethical writings in order to elucidate a way of thinking whereby reason could be operative in aesthetic judgment. The renewed interest in tragedy turns on the transformation of the scientific-technical reading of Aristotle to a rhetorical-humanistic view that privileges *Poetics* and the ethical texts of Aristotle’s corpus. The rhetorical-humanistic view of Aristotle entails a conception of human agency and the production of art in response to the failure of rationalist philosophy to navigate the emerging problems of aesthetics, in the biological sciences, and in art theory. Tragedy features as a way of reconciling taste and morality within the limitations of theoretical reason to encompass culture as a whole, requiring the exercise of the creative, analogical use of reason.

The priority given to aesthetics by philosophers such as Herder means that taste assumes the role of orientating us toward truth, goodness, and beauty: the ideas of reason. Yet if taste orients us toward the ideas of reason, it appears that the practical freedom of the theoretical sphere is subject to the contingency of culture. Thus the problem undergirding the threat that aesthetics poses to theoretical philosophy concerns the authority of what Baumgarten calls ‘sensuous cognition’ in relation to theoretical knowledge. For Wolff, experience is merely sense perception, meaning that it must be reconstructed by the mind before it can be intelligible or meaningful. For Baumgarten, however, and for those who build on his notion of aesthetics, experience becomes far more than ‘confused’ representations that require organisation, but the very means by which to find species, universals, and laws that are adequate to life. In the following chapters I identify Kant’s response to the failure of traditional philosophy to provide a way of thinking adequate to the aesthetic sphere. His answer, I will suggest, turns on the development of an ‘enlarged way of thinking’.
CHAPTER 2

Reflective Judgment

This embarrassment about a principle ... is found chiefly in those judgings that are called aesthetic (CJ 5:169).

Having contextualised Kant’s CJ in terms of the wider conversation occurring during the eighteenth century that was concerned with the problem that emerging forms of empirical knowledge posed to rationalist philosophy, it is now important to examine Kant’s particular confrontation of this dilemma. From the outset of CJ, Kant acknowledges the failure of technalised thinking in empirical contexts, observing that when judgment is confronted with an experience for which no concept can be found, reason finds itself ‘embarrassed’, for it is unable to achieve its task of subsuming objects under rules (5:169). While Kant does not express this failure of technical thinking in terms of tragedy, this comparison was not uncommon for the eighteenth century interpretations of Aristotle given by Moor and Herder, and nor was it difficult for Kant’s successors such as Schelling, Hölderlin, and Hegel to find resources within CJ with which to explore the failure of technical philosophy in terms of Greek tragedy. In what follows I will argue that Kant’s CJ does, at least implicitly, conceive of philosophy in terms of tragedy, thought of as the inevitable failure of technalised thinking.

What is significant about Kant’s method in CJ for philosophers concerned with tragedy is that Kant does not suggest that the embarrassment of judgment requires philosophy to overcome its failure by providing a more powerful account of technical judgment. And neither does it require philosophy to buffer itself from tragedy by limiting its reach to the conditions of the possibility of knowledge, as did reason’s first embarrassment in the opening lines of CPR.1 Rather, what philosophers concerned with the tragedy of philosophy found to

1 If we recall the opening lines of CPR cited in the epigraph of the previous chapter, the embarrassment of reason gave the initial need of a critique of pure reason: ‘Human reason has the peculiar fate in one species of its cognitions that it is burdened with questions which it cannot dismiss, since they are given to it as problems about the nature of reason itself, but which it also cannot answer, since they transcend every capacity of human reason. Reason falls into this embarrassment (Verlegenheit) through no fault of its own’ (CPR Avii, translation modified). In CJ, reason finds a new embarrassment ‘chiefly in those judgings that are called aesthetic, which concern the beautiful and the sublime in nature and in art’ (5:169).
be significant about *CJ* is that, at its most radical moments, it provides the outlines for a new philosophical procedure that authentically engages with the contingency of nature without giving up on reason’s demand for a systematic project.

In this chapter I put forward an interpretation of *CJ* that suggests that Kant does not simply acknowledge the tragedy of the kind of philosophy that seeks to legislate the appearance of nature according to technical knowledge, but that he proposes a method of philosophy that aims to accommodate the contingent elements of life that were necessarily excluded by philosophy’s technical approach. What is significant about Kant’s proposal is that it does not conclude by denying that the conditions of nature that bind the unity of reason cannot be known; it advances the positive thesis that such conditions can be felt in reflective judgments and thus thought by reason. The tragedy of technical philosophy sets the mind in motion on a procedure that, if we acknowledge it, leads philosophy to think the unity of nature and reason through the analogous, poetic use of judgment. Kant’s introduction of reasoning by analogy marks a concession to Herder’s thought that, I claim, significantly alters the parameters of the critical project.

This chapter begins by identifying the place of *CJ* in Kant’s critical project, highlighting Kant’s understanding of the transformation philosophy must undergo in the context of the failure of his first two *Critiques* to provide a way of thinking the unity of nature and freedom. It then examines Kant’s account of reflective judgment, giving close attention to the transcendental deduction of taste he conducts on judgments of beauty; a deduction that identifies the basis of reflective judgment in the form of purposiveness. In the final sections, this chapter considers the antinomy that arises for reflective judgment between nature as mechanism and nature as purposive. Kant acknowledge that the vitality that the antinomy bestows on our thinking ‘forces’ us, despite our critical intentions, to posit the unity of reason in a supersensible substrate that judgment cannot know but reflection can feel and reason can think. Thus the critical system can only be completed once the failure of technical judgment has set the mind in motion to develop an analogous, poetic use of judgment.

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2 I use the word ‘procedure’ not as a technical, rule-governed operation of thought, but as a synonym for a ‘way of thinking’. The strength of Kant’s approach in *CJ*, I argue in this chapter, is that it outlines a new procedure – a new way of thinking – that is neither technical nor merely chaotic, but that gives rule to itself, meaning that it is sensitive to the creation of form.
2.1 The tragedy of philosophy: the origin of the third *Critique*

The importance of *CJ* can only be understood in the context of Kant’s recognition of the limitation of his earlier critical works. Contrary to the Idealist narrative of the philosophy of tragedy, it is not Kant’s critical work that establishes the impassable dualism that the philosophy of tragedy must breach, but the third *Critique* that forms the cornerstone to the project of reconciling the theoretical and practical orders of philosophy.³

In his first two *Critiques*, Kant set a rigid distinction between the theoretical and the practical domains by building a mechanistic concept of nature and a metaphysical concept of freedom (*CPR*), which he then clarifies in terms of practical philosophy (*CPrR*). The mechanistic concept of nature outlines the necessary conditions by which nature is represented in cognition. As a concept of the understanding, it is not concerned with nature as thing-in-itself, but as an ordered appearance whereby everything that occurs is the result of a necessary, effective cause. The metaphysical concept of freedom, on the other hand, outlines the necessary conditions for practical, moral judgment that is not subject to cause and effect but is freely determined by reason. In the third antinomy of *CPR*, Kant argues that ‘nature and transcendental freedom are as different as lawfulness and lawlessness,’ meaning that the antinomy is only solved by removing practical reason from the causal domain, from the very domain where it should be operative (A446/B474-A447/B475).

The division articulated in his first two *Critiques* came under significant attack during the late 1780s, for it renders theoretical knowledge unable to interact with practical reason. Karl Leonhard Reinhold’s criticisms of Kant’s critical philosophy are particularly important to Kant’s future development, for they establish the objections to the critical enterprise that led Kant to begin a third *Critique* and became the foundation for an Idealist program of philosophy at Jena.⁴ Moreover, Reinhold’s criticisms do so by explicating the intellectual tragedy of Kant’s thinking as it can be seen in the first and second *Critiques*. With the intention of building a more comprehensive and systematic ground to the critical system,

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³ The Idealist view put forward by Beistegui and Sparks, for example, identified the task of the philosophy of the tragic as the construction of a ‘passage’ or ‘transition’ (*Übergang*) from the order of nature to the order of freedom, from pure theoretical reason to pure practical reason (Beistegui & Sparks, *Philosophy and Tragedy*, p. 3). In what follows, we see that Kant’s ‘Critique of Taste’ begins by identifying the need for such a passage as the basis of his new project.

⁴ As Karl Ameriks argues, while Reinhold initially fashioned himself as an expositor and disseminator of Kant’s work, he quickly became its critic and reviser after receiving a professorship of philosophy at Jena. In his Introduction to Reinhold’s *Letters on the Kantian Philosophy*, Ameriks argues that Reinhold’s *Letters* is ‘arguably the most influential work ever written concerning Kant’, for it gained Reinhold his professorship established Jena as the ‘center of the next generation of German thought and the first professional home of the German Idealists: Fichte, Schelling and Hegel’. Karl Reinhold, *Letters on the Kantian Philosophy*, ed. K. Ameriks, trans. J. Habbeler, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. ix.
Reinhold argued that Kant’s philosophy failed to live up to its two central ideals of criticism and science. Criticism demands that thinking should be autonomous and self-authorising, while the ideal of science, as Kant outlined in CPR, requires that our ‘cognitions cannot at all constitute a rhapsody but must constitute a system, which alone can support and advance its essential ends’ (A831/B860). The legislation of human reason (philosophy) must encompass both the spheres of practical judgment and theoretical necessity in a ‘single philosophical system’, drawing together nature and freedom, ‘everything that is’ and ‘that which should be’ (A840/B868). For Reinhold, Kant’s first two Critiques failed on both fronts because his account of freedom remains unable to ground itself in sensible nature, while his division between the theoretical and practical domains resists the systematic ideal that science demands. His critique illuminates Kant’s limitation of knowledge to judgment’s legislation of nature according to the ideas of reason as a tragedy of philosophical thinking, suggesting that it remains unable to reconcile two necessary concepts of philosophy in an account of human experience.

Traditionally, these criticisms have shaped the reception of Kant’s work, which focuses on the failures of the first two Critiques. Yet the third Critique can be understood to provide an answer. Only a few weeks after the publication of CPrR, Kant suddenly announced to Reinhold in a letter that a third critique was being written in order to remedy the shortcomings of his earlier work. He states that the process of looking back over his critical project led him ‘to discover elucidations [he] had not expected’. Kant elaborates on these discoveries:

I am now at work on the critique of taste, and I have discovered a kind of a priori principle different from those hitherto observed. For there are three faculties of the mind: the faculty of cognition, the faculty of feeling pleasure and displeasure, and the faculty of desire.

Kant’s language portrays his new endeavour as both a creative search and a scientific discovery of a principle that would draw his fractured system into a whole, suggesting that he not only became aware of the need to identify a creative, poetic modality of reason in order to unify the critical system, but that he discovered the operation of this searching, creative modality in the movement of his own thinking. In this creative search he notes that CPR located a priori principles of the first faculty, cognition, while CPrR located principles for the third faculty, desire. Kant states that the process of reflecting on the apparently unmediated

5 Beiser, The Fate of Reason, p. 240.
7 ibid.
relation between the two principles ‘allowed [him] to discover something systematic’ that could draw the scope of knowledge together under the banners of theoretical philosophy, teleology, and practical philosophy. The second, teleology, is ‘the least rich in a priori grounds of determination’, but was to unify the critical project in a systematic whole under the title of the ‘Critique of Taste’.

The transformative nature of Kant’s new critique is shown in the Second Introduction he wrote for the final, 1790 edition of CJ:

Now although there is an incalculable gulf fixed between the domain of the concept of nature, as the sensible, and the domain of the concept of freedom, as the supersensible, so that from the former to the latter (thus by means of the theoretical use of reason) no transition is possible … yet the latter should have an influence on the former, namely the concept of freedom should make the end that is imposed by its laws real in the sensible world; and nature must consequently also be able to be conceived in such a way that the lawfulness of its form is at least in agreement with the possibility of the ends that are to be realized in it in accordance with the laws of freedom. – Thus there must still be a ground of the unity of the supersensible that grounds nature with that which the concept of freedom contains practically, the concept of which … makes possible the transition from the manner of thinking in accordance with the principles of the one to that in accordance with the principles of the other. (5:175-176)

While an ‘incalculable gulf’ lies between the sensible domain and the domain of the concept of freedom, meaning that ‘no transition is possible’, Kant recognises that ‘the latter should have an influence on the former’ so that the concept of freedom can impose its own law on the sensible world. Kant recognised this tension in CPR, yet he deemed it necessary to keep each domain separate so as to seal the purity of reason against movements in philosophy such as that put forward by Herder that privilege aesthetic taste over theoretical reason. In CJ, however, Kant seems to have discovered an asymptotic relationship between the ‘is’ and ‘ought’, meaning that if morality is to become operative in the sensible realm another way of thinking about the problem must be found. The aim of Kant’s critique of taste is thus to identify a passage that would allow one to move across the gulf that his own critical

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8 ibid.
9 ibid., p. 128. The ‘Critique of Taste’ took on several forms over the following years and expanded to become CJ, published in 1790. Recent scholarship on CJ goes to great lengths to identify the development of Kant’s argument by attempting to date the various section of the final text, ranging from the initial ‘Critique of Taste’, which was written in the later summer of 1787 to the publication of the final form in Easter 1790. This chapter builds from Zammito’s suggestion that giving attention to the ‘genetic development’ of CJ opens us to a greater understanding of ‘the major impact of the work on its epoch’. According to Zammito, Kant’s revisions ‘left vestigial traces in the final product which aroused the speculative interest of his Idealist successors, who would follow out the trail of these neglected possibilities’. Zammito, The Genesis of Kant’s Critique of Judgment, p. 2.
10 See, for example, A811/B839ff. In this section Kant is highly aware of the problematic way that his framework separates the ideal world from the sensuous world. He identifies his project as the attempt to reconcile these two orders which he explains in terms of Leibniz’ notion of the kingdom of grace and the kingdom of nature. While for Leibniz these kingdoms dwell together without tension according to God’s pre-established harmony, for Kant their unity must be established by the activity of reason.
philosophy had deemed necessary. Kant aims to achieve this passage by reconciling nature and morality through reference to the supersensible (das Übersinnliche).

The supersensible provides a more expansive basis to the critical project than Kant had previously allowed for, drawing the lawgiving activity of reason and the purposiveness of nature into a systematic harmony. Yet a problem arises given the limits of critical philosophy, for ‘the idea [of the supersensible] itself can never be raised up and expanded into a cognition’ (5:175). Given the Copernican Revolution in the domain of knowledge – the idea that we cannot have a God’s-eye view of the world but are limited to our own perspective – the occurrence of the supersensible must be a schematism, a finite production of the imagination.11 While in terms of epistemology the supersensible remains outside the bounds of cognition, Kant argues that we enjoy its presence not in a kind of knowing but in aesthetic feeling, and in particular, in the feeling of pleasure we experience in judgments of the beautiful.

Kant’s search for the a priori of taste does not, as Jürgen Habermas contends, unify epistemology, moral culture and aesthetic culture as three separate domains, each containing its own a priori.12 For Habermas, Kant’s project in CJ is to strengthen the critical enterprise against the critique made by Reinhold in order to seal the authority of critical philosophy over the Sturm und Drang movement, and over Herder’s historical understanding of taste in particular. In this view, Kant’s project aims to place philosophy ‘as the highest court of appeal vis-à-vis the sciences and culture as a whole’.13 This interpretation characterises Kant’s argument in CJ as the epitome of intellectual tragedy, for it suggests that instead of acknowledging the failure of the technical project, Kant attempts to give further buffering to the critical enterprise from the threat posed by the contingency of nature. In Habermas’ terms, Kant’s efforts in CJ is not to provide a new procedure for philosophy that prioritises human action, but ‘superimposes … the ahistoricity of the conceptual system … on culture, which

11 In CPR (A138/B177) Kant identifies a schema as a ‘third thing, which must stand in homogeneity with the category on the one hand and the appearance on the other, and makes possible the application of the former to the latter’. Schemata form a bridge between the sensible and ideal orders, providing a direct presentation of a concept.
12 In his essay ‘Philosophy as Stand-In and Interpreter’, Habermas states that Kant ‘sets up practical reason, judgment, and theoretical cognition in isolation from each other, giving each a foundation unto itself, with the result that philosophy is cast in the role of the highest arbiter for all matters, including culture as a whole’. See Jürgen Habermas, ‘Philosophy as Stand-In and Interpreter’, in Baynes, Bohman & McCarthy (eds.), After Philosophy: End or Transformation, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1987, pp. 296-315, p. 297.
13 ibid., p. 298.
Habermas’ interpretation of Kant is unwilling to concede that Kant’s effort to unify the concepts of nature and freedom by identifying a ‘shared ground’ transforms the direction of the critical enterprise, for it holds that Kant merely superimposes a fixed foundation onto both spheres. In what follows it will be argued that by linking aesthetic concepts to the theoretical order, Kant, as John Zammito claims, ‘completely transfigured the significance of these conventional connections’. I will suggest that in CJ, Kant responds to Reinhold’s two criticisms in the following ways: he responds to the charge of failing the demands of criticism by arguing that freedom is manifest not simply in practical reason but in nature’s self-organisation, meaning that nature is not a threat to autonomy but that we are able to judge nature to be complicit in the enlightenment project. He responds to the charge that his critical project fails the demand of science for a system by developing a framework that would reconcile freedom and nature through his critique of the faculty of feeling pleasure and displeasure. Kant proposes a procedure for philosophy that, through acknowledging the tragedy of philosophy, engages with the contingency of nature without giving up on the scientific demand for a system. This solution, I will argue, introduces a speculative, constructive dimension to his philosophy in which we feel the unity of reason in the supersensible substrate.

2.2 The power of judgment

Kant’s solution to the problem of accommodating the supersensible in his critical project is to expand his conception of judgment so that it can operate outside the limits of the understanding. To do this, he must first free the imagination from the constraints he imposed on it in CPR. In CPR, one of Kant’s basic moves is to identify two faculties of knowledge: the faculty of presentation and the faculty of concepts, the imagination (Einbildungskraft) and the understanding (Verstand). Both are at work in the relation of a knowing subject to an object;

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14 ibid.
the imagination places the object before the mind, and the understanding applies conceptual schemata to the presentation.\footnote{Kant identifies two powers of the imagination: reproduction and production. Reproductive imagination is ‘the faculty of representing in intuition an object that is not itself present’ (B151). The obvious example of this is the recollection of a visual image that we recall to the mind’s eye. This kind of imagination is necessary not only for knowledge but for the continuity and coherence of experience generally, for ‘experience as such necessarily presupposes the reproducibility of appearances’ (A101). The productive imagination, on the other hand, is the very happening of the transcendental synthesis, spontaneously giving itself the image (Bild) that it receives. The representations of the imagination do not emerge according to a cause outside of the imagination, but are creatively brought into being according to the rules of the understanding. Kant goes as far in CPR to describe the imagination as ‘a blind but indispensable power of the soul, without which we should have no knowledge whatsoever, but of which we are scarcely ever conscious’ (CPR A78/B103). The imagination does not purposefully intuit this or that object or image, but forms the field of ‘manifestness’ in which every experience is brought together for the imagination via presentation (Darstellung; literally ‘placing before’).}

CPR ultimately provides a technical conception of the imagination. The imagination is characterised by its production of images that are determined by \textit{a priori} ideas of the understanding, meaning that the imagination is not subject to fancy but provides the foundation for objective knowledge. Technical judgment requires that nature adhere to the rational concepts of the understanding, allowing the clear and distinct ideas of rationalist philosophy to become instrumental in sensuous life. The understanding’s concept of nature adheres to the strictures of mathematics, requiring that every appearance have a rational, and hence knowable, cause. The primary implication of Kant’s CPR is that it is only when the chaos of sense impressions are brought under such a concept can our thinking about nature claim the objective status of knowledge.

Yet in \textit{CJ}, Kant notes the importance of situations in which the substantive or technical operation of judgment fails to find a rule under which to subsume an object, such as the failure of established scientific principles to explain new discoveries or the failure of metaphysics to determine the dynamic nature of living beings. The importance of such situations lies in the fact that when the substantive efforts of judgment fail to determine an object under a rule, judgment does not give up in failure but finds itself confronted with a new task: the task of reflection. The distinction Kant introduces between two kind of judgment identifies that the tragedy of philosophy is not the end of the philosophical enterprise, but simply the recognition of the failure of rule-governed thinking in contexts that contain contingency. It is through acknowledging and accepting this tragedy that the procedure of philosophical thinking can be transformed.

The consequence of Kant’s introduction of reflection is shown in his new emphasis on the capacity of judgment to refrain from determining an object – to refrain from operating in a cognitive context – and to explore creatively the sensory manifold in search for unity. While
reflection does not involve the subsumption of an object under a concept, neither is it to accept the sheer contingency of nature. Rather, to reflect, Kant states, is ‘to compare and combine a given representation either with other representations or with one’s cognitive faculties, with respect to a concept thereby made possible’ (5:179). Because a concept cannot be found for a given manifold, the reflective use of the imagination is free to compare and combine a representation with other representations. It operates analogously to the understanding in that it compares representations in a way that is procedurally rational whilst not rational in its content (5:180). In other words, reasoning by analogy allows the rational confirmation of a relation, but not the confirmation of its determinate content.17 The rational principle of judgment is thus transcendental, for it conditions the possibility of our attempts to find order amongst natural diversity. And yet because it cannot be applied to objects, it is subjective. It is applied to judgment itself, meaning that it pertains to a way of judging that is attuned to singular, contingent appearances. Thus the universal claim made by reflective judgments cannot pertain to knowledge but to communal agreement; it is the claim that others should make the same, rational connections if they were judging the same appearances.

The cogency of Kant’s introduction of judgment’s reflective capacity is shown in his acknowledgment of the failure of technical judgment. More specifically, it is shown in the fact that, by acknowledging this failure, Kant does not then seek to limit the reach of judgment per se, but the reach of technical judgment. The failure of technical judgment, Kant notes, sets the imagination on a process that reaches beyond its substantive practice with the example given by reason’s search for unity as its guide. While imagination was bound to the activity of the understanding in the first two Critiques, processing the material of sensation into the products of experience, Kant argues that it is capable of operating free of the understanding by reflecting upon the sensory manifold without determining an object.18 The freedom of the imagination does not mean that it is subject to fancy, but that it follows the example given to it by reason in the search for unity in aesthetic diversity.

Kant clarifies the two activities of judgment as ‘determinant’ and ‘reflective’ judgment. ‘If the universal (the rule, principle, or law) is given,’ he states, ‘then the judgment which subsumes the particular under it is determining’ (5:179). Determinant judgment is similar to Aristotle’s conception of techne, which considers ‘the kind of thing whose

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17 An analogy, for Kant, is ‘the identity of the relation between grounds and consequences (causes and effects), insofar as the identity obtains in spite of the specific difference between the things or those of their properties that contain in themselves the ground for similar consequences’ (5:464n).
principles cannot be otherwise'. The universal exists prior to the individual case and simply needs to be applied. The problem, however, is that no amount of applying the universal will demonstrate that the multiplicity to which it applies has any kind of unity. Determinant judgment cannot, for example, derive any meaning from Darwin’s observations of the genetic mutations in animals, for it cannot form a total system such as evolution. The process of subsuming objects under categories cannot reach a higher principle that would demonstrate their unity, for it is limited to the concepts it already possesses. The question Kant considers is how we can understand the parts of nature for which we have no laws at all.

The answer lies in reflective judgment, which will not yield the kind of knowledge toward which determinative judgment aspires, but is able to operate within the contingency of sensuous life. It is modelled on Aristotle’s conception of *phronesis* (practical judgment), the faculty of the mind that, for Aristotle, is refined in our participation in tragic theatre. *Phronesis*, Aristotle explains, contemplates ‘variable things’. While *techne* involves the application of pre-established rules, *phronesis* operates where no rules can be found, meaning that it is attuned to environments that are singular. What is important for Kant about Aristotle’s identification of two modes of practical knowledge, both of which require a way of thinking that contains reason, is that it identifies the failure of determinative judgment to subsume the sensory manifold under a rational concept as a confusion about the kind of judgment that is appropriate to sensuous life. Such a failure does not entail that the task is futile, but that we require a new procedure that is more adequate to its subject matter.

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20 An example Kant employs in *CJ* to highlight the limits of technical judgment and the importance of reflective judgment is Abraham Trembley’s famous discovery of the freshwater polyp in 1741 (5:419). The significance of Tembley’s discovery, for Kant, lies in the fact that the polyp’s reproductive activity could not be explained in terms of the established concept of animal genesis, namely preformationism, but pushes the scientific imagination to search creatively for a new idea: epigenesis. When Trembley discovered the polyp, a moss-like organism that lives in freshwater streams, he concluded that due to the polyp’s ability to contract when stimulated and to ‘walk’ by successively attaching its ends to a surface that it was an animal. Yet when cut in half, the polyp did not die but formed two new and complete organisms. The challenge that this experiment posed to preformationism is that the self-formation of the two halves of the polyp cannot be explained by rational principles. It does not express a ‘motive power’ that would adhere to the concepts of the understanding, but a ‘formative power’ that lies beyond our concepts, for it is a power that ‘communicates to the matter, which does not have it (it organizes the latter)’ (5:374). The formative power of the polyp entails that judgment cannot explain the appearance in purely causal terms, but is forced to judge it as having a ‘self-propagating … power, which cannot be explained through the capacity for movement alone (that is, mechanism)’ (ibid.). The task of judgment, then, is not to determine the polyp’s inner cause but to discern the final cause by drawing the sensory manifold into a unity.
21 ibid.
2.3 Beauty and purposiveness

In Part One of *CJ*, ‘The Critique of Aesthetic Judgment’, Kant provides an extensive elaboration of reflective judgment by focusing on judgments of taste, and, in particular, judgments of beauty. Such judgments display the ability of reflective judgment to compare and combine a representation with one’s faculties, meaning that judgments of beauty are well suited for the transcendental deduction of taste – the reflective examination of the inner workings of our own faculties.

The transcendental idea underpinning judgments of beauty is displayed in the rational structure of such judgments. In the process of conducting a transcendental deduction on judgments of beauty, however, Kant discovers that such judgments do not entail the transcendental application of a concept to an object, but an application of a concept to itself. The use of a concept in such a way cannot yield knowledge in the paradigm of *techne*, but gives regulation to the procedure of judgment in contexts for which no rule can be found. In judging an object to be beautiful, Kant explains, we do not determine an object to be beautiful. Rather, we go beyond the evidence given by a subjective feeling of pleasure to impute the same judgment to the rest of humankind as the potential audience of that object.\(^{22}\)

In Kant’s terms, the aesthetic universality that is ascribed to a judgment is ‘of a special kind, since the predicate of beauty is not connected with the concept of the object considered in its entire logical sphere, and yet it extends it over the whole sphere of those who judge (über die ganze Sphäre der Urteilenden)’ (5:215). In other words, the basis for our claim to universality is not epistemic (connected with the concept of an object) but is based on the feeling (*Gefühl*) of pleasure produced in the process of judging the beautiful. Yet this feeling of pleasure is not linked to the subjective faculty of desire as Kant outlined in *CPrR* (5:9n), where pleasure was linked to the ‘causality of the representation with respect to the existence of its object’. Rather, Kant defines the feeling of pleasure experienced in judgments of beauty as *Lebensgefühl*, the ‘feeling of life’, which is not caused by the faculty of desire obtaining its

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\(^{22}\) It is important to note that by appealing to the beautiful as a means to locate an *a priori*, Kant moves beyond his understanding of aesthetics in *CPR*. According to Guyer, ‘in the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant had completely dismissed the possibility of an *a priori* theory of taste (A21), a position which he only barely moderated in the second edition of the work’. At the section entitled the ‘Transcendental Aesthetic’, Kant adds a footnote in the second edition (B36) about Baumgarten’s use of the word ‘aesthetics’ to refer to a ‘critique of taste’. He suggests that the attempt to bring judgments of beauty into philosophy is futile because such judgments are based on empirical rules that cannot have the binding force of *a priori* rules. Kant asserts that Baumgarten obscures the original meaning of aesthetics as the ‘science of all principles of sensuousness’ (B35/A21). See Paul Guyer, *Kant and the Experience of Freedom: Essays on Aesthetics and Morality*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 4-5, and Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity from Kant to Nietzsche*, p. 17.
object (i.e. by cognition), but is produced by a certain vitality that comes from feeling part of life itself (5:204).  

When an object is given and no concept can be found for it, as in judgments of beauty, the imagination (which composes the manifold of intuition) and the understanding (which provides the example of searching of laws) come into an expansive, free play that produces Lebensgefühl (5:217). Because Lebensgefühl is not caused by the subjective interest of desire but the vitality produced by feeling a part of life, we judge that the ‘subjective relation’ of imagination and understanding in apprehending the beautiful object ‘must be valid for everyone and consequently mutually communicable’ (5:218). Thus the ground we have to attribute the predicate ‘ought to agree with my judgment’ is, as Béatrice Longuenesse explains, ‘the capacity I attribute to all of those who judge, to experience the very same feeling I presently experience. And my only ground for attributing to them this capacity is the feeling itself, as I experience it’. Such a judgment, Kant deduces, must be based on an a priori assumption of similarity between our own responses and those of others:

it is the universal communicability of the state of mind in the given representation which, as a subjective condition of the judgment of taste, must serve as its ground and have the pleasure in the object as a consequence. (5:217)

Kant’s view seems to be that if the pleasure we take in the object were the ground of our aesthetic judgment, then to claim that such a judgment is universal would be self-contradictory. It would mistake the subjective, reflective character of aesthetic judgments for the technical, determinative use of judgment. Such judgments are not judgments of beauty but of ‘agreeableness’ (5:212).

If we take the universal communicability of the state of mind of judging the object as the source of the pleasure, we discover that the pleasure is not occasioned by the object but is a result of the judger’s own activity, meaning that it is ‘disinterested’ (5:204). Because the pleasure experienced in judgments of beauty is disinterested, that is, the object is merely an occasion for the pleasure we experience, Kant concludes that the pleasure we experience must come from our mental activity in determining the object. The ground of the judgment ‘this

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23 Unlike Hume’s subjective account of aesthetic feeling, Kant argues that Lebensgefühl, the feeling of life, has an ethical dimension, for it heightens our awareness of our empirical freedom and harmonises our purpose as moral beings with our bodily emotions. If we understand ‘life’ as the property of an intentional will, then the ‘feeling of life’ pertains to an affirmation of our nature as practically purposeful in the material world of sensation.

24 ibid., p. 283.


rose is beautiful’, for example, is the intuited object’s disposition to produce the enlivening play of imagination and understanding in apprehending this form (5:218).

Because the free play of imagination and understanding is not simply pleasurable, but enhances both faculties (understanding gives the rational example so that imagination can operate analogously) and enlivens the mind (in the feeling of life), the occasion of such free play – the object judged to be beautiful – is deemed to satisfy a subjective purpose. In other words, we are able to judge that the object is an expression of nature for the purpose of enlivening our cognition. Thus Kant concludes the transcendental deduction by arguing that ‘the judgment of taste has nothing but the form of the purposiveness (Zweckmässigkeit) of an object (or of the way of representing it) as its ground’ (5:221). It is not our knowledge of an object’s purpose but the form of purposiveness that grounds judgments of beauty, for we do not determine nature to be purposeful but are able to judge nature ‘as if’ it expressed a purpose, that is, the purpose of enlivening our cognition. Purposiveness turns out to be the \textit{a priori} principle of judgment that governs, justifies and makes possible reflective judgment, from our aspirations to empirical knowledge to our aesthetic judgments.

The significance of judgments of beauty, then, lies in their expression of the form of purposiveness that releases judgment from its technical, determinant practice and empowers it to judge in a way that is analogous to reason in that it searches for unity in aesthetic diversity. While technical judgment fails to determine all of nature according to a rational concept of nature, the resources for a kind of judgment attuned to the contingency of nature do not require thought to transgress the limits of the possibility of experience by claiming objective knowledge of underdetermined objects, such as living beings or objects that occasion judgments of beauty. Rather, judgments of beauty turn on the form of purposiveness that allows us to compare the relations between the parts of an organism without determining its content.

Kant uses the idea of the ‘form of purposiveness’ to unite teleological judgments and judgments of beauty under the same \textit{a priori}, and to show that both modalities of reflective judgment unite the practical and theoretical domains in the supersensible substrate. In the second Introduction to \textit{CJ}, Kant argues that nature must ‘be able to be conceived in such a way that the lawfulness of its form is at least in agreement with the possibility of the ends that are to be realised in it in accordance with the laws of freedom’ (5:176). This way of thinking would make ‘possible the transition from the manner of thinking in accordance with the principles of the one to that in accordance with the principles of the other’ (5:175-176), thus uniting the critical system in a speculative feeling. Purposiveness is the key to this transition,
for it binds the supersensible substrate of nature with the supersensible freedom of the moral subject, providing a solution that allows us to recognise the order (lawfulness) of nature and yet confirm our own freedom.27

Despite the fact that we have no concept of the purpose of the object we are judging, Kant suggests that we find it as purposeful because of the feeling we experience. Kant describes this notion of purposiveness as ‘purposiveness without a purpose’ (Zweckmässigkeit ohne Zweck), for the idea of purpose it gives rise to is not a concept of purpose, but the idea that the form of the object expresses an inner purpose that goes beyond a merely mechanistic view to an end or telos that does not exist in nature but is necessary for cognition. Thus Kant transforms the concept of teleology by limiting its extension, for the concept of purposiveness without a purpose is teleology ‘not in the sense of serving a previously identified good’, as Rachel Zuckert explains, but of ‘aiming towards an indeterminate future end, and this new form of teleology characterizes only and specifically human, judging subjects’.28 Purposiveness without a purpose does not characterise the purpose in nature or the rational intelligence of God, but simply functions as a principle of human knowledge; of knowledge that is finite and sensibly dependent.29

2.4 The antinomy of teleological judgment

Essentially, Kant’s reflective judgment not only provides a passage between the theoretical and natural domains but fundamentally challenges the project of critical philosophy. While CPR acknowledges the intellectual tragedy of technical thinking that fails to recognise its limits, it refrains from proposing a method that can navigate the tragedy of philosophy. Reflective judgment provides a way of accommodating the tragedy of technical judgment, for it does not simply limit what judgment can do but outlines a way that judgment can operate without the technical practice of subsuming objects under rules in order to search

27 While proposing a solution in terms of the supersensible, Kant does not see himself as departing from transcendental philosophy’s denial of any cognitive access to noumena. Rather, he argues that the notion of the supersensible is transcendently necessary for consciousness in general. In order to reconcile the lawlessness of nature with the lawfulness of the will, Kant identifies our capacity to feel their unity in judgments of beauty and ends. The solution can be neither theoretical nor practical but only a manner of thinking; to use John Zammito’s words, it is ‘subjective, but nevertheless indispensable’. Zammito, The Genesis of Kant’s Critique of Judgment, p. 266.


29 ibid.
for universal communicability where no knowledge can be found. The result of this kind of judgment, however, is the transformation of the aspirations of the critical enterprise.

The radical implications of reflective judgment are shown in the antinomy of teleological judgment that arises between the form of purposiveness, or teleology, and the determinant concept of nature as a mechanism. Like a work of art, Kant’s presentation of the antinomy of reflective judgment puts the experience of the tragedy of philosophy – the inability of technical thinking to unify the realms of freedom and nature – into a work. By acknowledging the failure of technical thinking to reconcile the critical project, Kant suggests that a new procedure of thinking can be found. While commentators such as John McFarland attempt to undermine the speculative implications of this antinomy, suggesting that the antinomy is not a real antinomy at all, in what follows it will be argued that the antinomy reflects a contradiction far more demanding than the antinomies of the first two Critiques. The antinomy of teleological judgment, I will argue, does not simply lead Kant to search for a positive ground, tipping his critical project in the direction of a speculative system, but also reveals the subjective interest of determinative, technical judgment.

Let us begin by clarifying the two maxims of the antinomy. The idea of purposiveness stands opposed to the concept of nature Kant built in his earlier work. In his pre-critical ‘Essay on the constitution and the mechanical origin of the whole universe according to Newtonian principles’ (1755), for example, he explores mechanical necessity and beauty in the same framework: ‘Matter, which is the original material of all things, is thus bound by certain laws, and if it is left freely to these laws, it must necessarily bring forth beautiful combinations’. In this determination of nature there can be neither self-organisation nor contingency, and beauty is the expression of mathematical order. In CPR, Kant recognises that this technical formulation forced nature to adhere to the strictures of a subjective concept, and no longer explores nature ‘in itself’ but as the ‘sum of appearances in so far as they stand, in virtue of an inner principle of causality, in thoroughgoing interconnection’ (B446). He separates nature as thing-in-itself and our concept of nature, stressing the formal organisation of cognition that signifies the connections between appearances in terms of an inner principle of causality.

The developing character of Kant’s understanding of nature continues in CJ as the antinomy of teleological judgment pushes thought beyond the concept of nature that is limited

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to the understanding in order to experience nature in itself. The antinomy lies between the two ways that nature appears to us, as mechanism and as purposive, both of which have a rational basis. The first, the thesis, is that ‘all generation of material things and their forms must be judged as possible in accordance with merely mechanical laws’ (5:387). The second is that ‘some products of material nature cannot be judged as possible according to merely mechanical laws’ (ibid.).

In his efforts to identify the continuity of Kant’s argument in *CJ* with the concept of nature developed in *CPR*, McFarland undermines the speculative implications of the antinomy of teleological judgment by arguing that there is no antinomy at all. He notes that this antinomy takes a different form to the antinomies of *CPR*, where Kant states that an antinomy is a contradiction between two concepts in a context that reason ‘demands an absolute totality’. Taking this definition, McFarland argues that there cannot be an antinomy of teleological judgment, for judgment is teleological only if it works without concepts. Thus there is no real problem raised by the so-called antinomy if the principles are taken to be regulative rather than constitutive. And Kant recognises this point himself. After first stating the antinomy in the form of determinative judgment, he observes that the antinomy does not lie in nature, but in the way we judge nature:

All appearance of an antinomy between the maxims of that kind of explanation which is genuinely physical (mechanical) and that which is teleological (technical [i.e. artistic]) therefore rests on confusing a fundamental principle of the reflecting with that of the determining power of judgment, and on confusing the autonomy of the former … with the heteronomy of the latter, which has to conform to the laws given by the understanding. (5:389)

McFarland’s reading fits well with Kant’s suggestion that the antinomy of judgment results from an error of ‘confusing’ a regulative principle for a constitutive one. McFarland argues that Kant’s ultimate intention in recognising the contradiction between the concepts of mechanism and teleology is to show that ‘the mechanical system is regulative as a

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33 In §70 of *CJ*, Kant gives two different formulations of the antinomy, giving rise to much debate regarding which is the real antinomy. The first relates to reflective judgment, where we have cause to both (1) judge material things in accordance with mechanical laws and to (2) judge some things by a different law of causality. The second entails the two maxims in the terms of determinative judgment: (1) All generation of material things is possible in accordance with merely mechanical laws and (2) some generation of such things is not possible in accordance with merely mechanical laws.

34 Such a contradiction arises, argues Kant, ‘when for a given conditioned reason demands an absolute totality on the side of the conditions (under which the understanding subjects all appearances to synthetic unity), thereby making the category into a transcendental idea, in order to give absolute completeness to the empirical synthesis through its progress toward the unconditioned’ (*CPR*, A409/B436).

35 John McFarland, *Kant’s Concept of Teleology*, p. 120.
methodological principle, and that when occasion arises we may use teleological concepts without contradiction’.  

McFarland interprets Kant’s project in CJ as a task of overcoming the tragedy of philosophy by limiting judgments of purpose to their regulative form while maintaining the determinative concept of nature as mechanism. Nature remains subject to laws that cannot be known, and thinking takes the form of an intellectual tragedy only when it judges purpose determinatively. Yet McFarland fails to note that while Kant’s formulation of the antinomy does not meet the critical conditions of CPR that requires us to think of one in terms of noumena and the other in terms of phenomena, for it is formulated speculatively, urging us to think the unity of reason with reference to the supersensible substrate. Thus he dissolves the antinomy without confronting the deeper problem that purposiveness poses to Kant’s critical system. To suggest that Kant merely demotes the contradictory principles from constitutive principles of determinative judgment to regulative principles of reflective judgment is, as Henry Allison aptly states, ‘ultimately untenable’. For Allison, the former, determinative formulation of the antinomy is the one that demands our attention, for while it is not an antinomy in the form of CPR, it provides a ‘threat of an even greater contradiction’. This ‘even greater contradiction’ lies in our speculative thinking, for mechanism puts forward a conception of nature in which all appearances are causally necessary, while teleology requires that we think of appearances as contingent. The consequence of this contradiction lies in the fact that we are required, as Werner Pluhar states, to judge ‘as both necessary and contingent “one and the same product” (5:413), indeed, even the same causal connections within that product (5:373, and cf. 372-73). Hence we are contradicting ourselves (5:396) unless we can reconcile the two principles (5:414)’.  

Allison and Pluhar’s interpretation shows that Kant’s solution does not lie in dissolving the antinomy in the reflective formulation of both laws, which would simply ignore the problem and settle for judgment to operate in a contradictory manner, but in a speculative kind of thinking that unites the two in some third principle. Reading the antinomy in this manner reveals, as Gary Banham states, that the ‘need for this third principle is what the Dialectic as a whole is written both to demonstrate and to provide’. Kant himself states that

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36 ibid.
38 ibid.
the antinomy leads us to search for a ‘ground outside ourselves’ (5:246) that reconciles the two. This ground cannot be theoretically objective, for that would require an infinite cognition, an intellectus archetypus, but neither can it be only practically necessary, like the negative, grounding noumena in CPR. Kant makes it clear that he is reluctant to identify a positive ground to the system, he does this all the same, stating that despite our recognition of the limits of cognition such a ground is ‘forced’ upon us in the antinomy of teleological judgment, an antinomy by which ‘one is compelled, against one’s will, to look beyond the sensible and to seek the unifying point of all our faculties a priori in the supersensible: because no other way remains to make reason self-consistent’ (5:341).

That Kant goes beyond the critical philosophy of CPR is seen in his argument that the antinomy is solved in a supersensible substrate that can only be experienced in aesthetic feeling and, because of the capacity of judgment to reflect on this feeling, thought by reason.41 In the feeling of pleasure we feel in the experience of beauty the contradictory maxims of the antinomy are unified in what Kant calls ‘a mutual and unknown way’:

On account of the outer possibility of a nature that corresponds to it, as related to something in the subject itself and outside of it, which is neither nature nor freedom, but which is connected with the ground of the latter, namely the supersensible, in which the theoretical faculty is combined with the practical, in a mutual and unknown way, to form a unity. (5:353)

The antinomy of the theoretical and the practical pushes us beyond the tragedy of technical philosophy. In its inability to resolve the antinomy ‘for us’ or ‘in a known way’ as Kant did in CPR, technical judgment is forced to recognise that the resolution cannot be known but that it can be felt in judgments of reflection. And if the resolution can be felt then it can be thought, not in a technical kind of thinking that produces knowledge, but in a poetic kind of thinking that is capable of reflecting on its inner experience and operating outside of the limits of the understanding. The hope of reconciling the antinomy in poetic thinking is, for Kant, the very hope of CJ, for it provides a way in which we can think of nature and freedom in sensuous life. Thus it is by acknowledging the failure of technical thinking to reconcile the critical project that Kant is able to propose a method of philosophy that accommodates the contingency of nature by identifying a solution in the heightened experience of pleasure we feel in the exercise of reflective judgment whereby reflection is pointed toward the ultimate meaning of nature that determinate judgment can never attain.

41 As Zammito states, Kant’s solution entails that what ‘understanding could not prove, reason could think, reflection could feel’. Zammito, The Genesis of Kant’s Critique of Judgment, p. 271.
The significance of Kant’s solution to the antinomy of teleological judgment is that it enlarges our concept of nature, which ultimately enlarges our concept of what an object is. In order to reconcile the antinomy in the supersensible substrate, Kant argues that we must first acknowledge that nature is beyond our concept of it, not by virtue of being a thing-in-itself, but by virtue of being contingent, that is, resistant to totalising concepts. We might say that nature, for reflective judgment, expresses immanent-transcendence. Reflective judgment cannot resolve the antinomy unless it can recognise and move beyond the failure of concepts to exhaust reality, thus ‘expand[ing] … our concept of nature, namely as a mere mechanism, into the concept of nature as art’ (5:246). Expanding our concept of nature from mechanism to art entails a view of nature, as Henry Allison states, that is ‘far broader than reason’s concept of systematicity’ we find in the CPR, for it requires a view of nature that is larger than our knowledge of it. To use Dennis Schmidt’s apt words, the result is ‘a sense of nature so generous that it shatters the economy of the concept’.43

Elsewhere, Kant identifies the immanent-transcendence of nature by describing the beauty in nature as ‘an analogue of art’ (5:375), an analogy that allows us to think of beauty as nature’s self-expression in the same way that we understand the beauty in art to be an expression of the artwork. Thus understood, beauty is ascribed to objects ‘only in relation to reflection on their outer intuition, thus only to the form of their surfaces’ (ibid.) and not according to a rational artist or efficient principle. While the outer surface of nature can be understood to be analogous to our experience, because it deals with appearances (i.e. in terms of the form of purposiveness and not purposiveness in itself),

inner natural perfection, as is possessed by those things that are possible only as natural ends and hence as organized beings, is not thinkable and explicable in accordance with any analogy to any … natural capacity that is known to us; indeed, since we ourselves belong to nature in the widest sense, it is not thinkable and explicable even through an exact analogy with human art. (5:375)

Kant makes the remarkable observation that analogy can help us to think of beauty as nature’s self-expression rather than determining nature’s inner natural perfection because human beings belong to nature. Kant concludes that if human beings belong to nature, then nature must be reimagined as ‘an analogue of life’ (5:375, emphasis mine), as an autonomous, self-expressive power that resists conceptual totalisation and can only be judged reflectively.

While the enlarged, organic conception of nature might be impossible for deterministic judgment, it is possible for reflective judgment, for reflective judgment does not prescribe law ‘to nature (which would be autonomy), but to itself (which is heautonomy) for reflection on nature’ (5:185-6). Heautonomy is a principle of reflective judgment that is not ‘cognized a priori’ but is ‘the law of the specification of nature’, and is thus a principle used by judgment in order to facilitate its investigations of nature; to find ‘the universal for the particular presented to it by perception’ (5:186). While the determinant judgment of CPR legislates nature according to its concept of system (autonomy), reflective judgment allows one to judge nature as a self-organising entity (heautonomy).

2.5 Autonomy and heautonomoy

The transformative nature of Kant’s insistence on an enlarged, underdetermined concept of nature as the resolution of the antinomy is shown in the fact that it undermines the delineation between determinant and reflective judgment, thus undermining his delineation between the autonomy of the former and the heautonomy of the latter. When we consider whether the capacity for bringing contingent manifolds into unity without concepts in a conscious manner is presupposed by the capacity for determinative cognitive judgments, we recognise that reflective and determinant judgment are not, as Kant might suppose, two distinct operations of judgment. Kant assumes that the capacity of judgment to operate reflectively is learned by the example given to it by the autonomous use of judgment that gives law to nature (determinant judgment), which is constantly and spontaneously uniting manifolds under concepts. In this formulation, reflective judgment discovers its own freedom by operating in a domain that is distinct from the epistemic domain of determinant judgment, and rather than operating in the ‘interested’, instrumental procedure of determinant judgment, it is ‘disinterested’, for it is no longer concerned for the acquisition of knowledge but with enjoying the presence of the object. It is not autonomous, for it does not give rule to nature. Rather, it is heautonomous, for it gives rule to itself; not a law of reason but a law that it has found, a law of its own creation.

44 In The Fate of Art, Bernstein argues that Kant’s recognition of a mode of judgment without knowledge does not simply provide a secondary, subordinate exercise of judgment to its determinative operation, but identifies the ground of all judgments. This recognition, Bernstein argues, ‘almost certainly entail[s] modifications to the central arguments of the first Critique’. Jay Bernstein, The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992, p. 20.
Yet as Kant recognises, the application of a determinate concept is not causally determined by the object but is the result of judgment scanning a sensory manifold in order to arrange a match between the manifold and a concept. A judgment is determinant not in contexts where no searching is necessary, but in contexts where the discerning work is done under the governance of a legislating faculty other than judgment itself; namely, the understanding. Given that reflective judgment operates without this legislating faculty, we might conclude that it is, in fact, the operation of judgment itself that is freed of its technical role. This would imply that, as Bernstein argues, reflective judgment, ‘in the moment that it (historically) becomes autonomous, which is the moment of Kant’s unearthing of the logical grammar of the aesthetic, reveals the subjective interests of truth-only cognition’. The subjective interest of truth-only cognition – or we might say the subjective interest of technalised thinking – is so deeply entrenched into our established conceptual scheme and life practice that ‘heretofore they have appeared objective’. They are only discovered at the moment that judgment becomes autonomous – not autonomous in the sense of giving law to nature, but in the paradigm of heutonomy whereby judgment gives law to itself.

Ultimately, this interpretation of CJ views the notion of aesthetic judgment as a historical discovery; a discovery found within the conversation occurring the eighteenth century regarding the relation between sense and reason. Such a discovery returns philosophy to a more basic understanding of thinking that is not determined by the subjective interests of technalised thinking that demands all truth to fit the paradigm of techne, but that is open to a more original comportment to nature. Thus Kant’s proposal for a new method of philosophy in CJ can be understood as an exploration of judgment when it is freed from its submerged role in its technical practice and freed to operate autonomously, that is, by giving itself rule.

2.6 Conclusion

In contrast to the Idealist narrative of the philosophy of tragedy, CJ establishes a system for reconciling the dualism presented in his first two Critiques between the theoretical and natural orders. Kant proposes to identify a passage between the two orders by acknowledging the failure of technical philosophy to determine the rational structure of living beings, and thus proposing an alternative method to philosophy that accommodates the contingency of nature whilst maintaining the rational search for systematic understanding.

45 ibid., p. 49. The italicisation of this sentence has been removed from Bernstein’s original text.
46 ibid., p. 50.
This system, however, is not accomplished by the critical use of reason, but in the feeling of unity we experience in judgments of beauty. Kant’s project proposes a procedure for philosophy that acknowledges the tragedy of philosophy in a move that allows the failure of the understanding to grasp nature as a whole to transform our concept of what nature is. Nature is able to come into appearance at the moment we cease to regard our inner, subjective conditions as reality and submit to the contingent appearance of nature.

This resolution has important implications for philosophical inquiry, for nature no longer provides an objective condition for the agreement of knowledge. Indeed, our reflective judgments of nature make no knowledge claims at all. For reflective judgment, agreement cannot be guaranteed but becomes the aspiration of a community united around a collective mode of judging, one that does not use reason to give law to nature but one that gives law to itself. Kant’s *CJ* transforms the task of philosophy from limiting the use of reason to the strictures of objective knowledge to a collective task of mutual communicability, of making sense in common.
CHAPTER 3

The Ethical Turn

... with this I bring my entire critical enterprise to an end (CJ 5:170).

In the previous chapter I put forward an interpretation of Kant’s CJ as the development of a procedure that could navigate the failure of philosophy to unite the theoretical and the practical spheres. While Kant’s letter to Reinhold in 1787 indicates that this procedure was intended to identify the systematic completion of the critical system, during the time between the penning of this letter and the completion of CJ in 1790 Kant’s project takes a significant turn. Specifically, his project expands from a matter of reconciling morality and nature to a matter of reconciling moral development and world history. As John Zammito notes, the latest ideas to appear in CJ, such as genius, sensus communis and the sublime, all spring from Kant’s developing understanding of history as a sphere that is ‘not spontaneously moral but could be changed by human praxis’. Zammito describes Kant’s new attempt to reconcile the critical project in history as Kant’s ‘ethical turn’, a turn that was ‘stimulated no doubt by the French Revolution’. The revolutionary demand for a new political order in France seems to have led Kant to view the tragedy of philosophy not simply in terms of philosophy’s failure to reconcile reason and nature, but in terms of philosophy’s

48 ibid., p. 333, 268. Because morality always held the primary position in Kant’s critical philosophy, Zammito does not describe this shift as a ‘moral’ but as an ‘ethical’ turn. The ethical nature of his turn encompasses Kant’s increasing concern for the realisation of humanity’s moral calling in the natural order, showing a greater emphasis on morality as the ethical or shared life of a community rather than purely transcendental morality. In Zammito’s terms, Kant’s emphasis is on the ‘viability of man’s moral purpose in the world of sense’. ibid., p. 323.
failure to reconcile reason and history; to assist humanity in realising its vocation for moral freedom.\textsuperscript{49}

Kant’s new understanding of the tragedy of philosophy in \textit{CJ} – the failure of philosophy to reconcile reason and history – can be understood as a response to the failure of the moral project that Kant had already noted in \textit{CPR}. Far from outlining a practically viable moral philosophy, Kant recognised that his attempt to reconcile the Leibnizian realms of grace and nature revealed that the idea of a ‘moral world’ is only ‘a mere, yet practical, idea, which really can and should have its influence on the sensible world, in order to make it agree as far as possible with this idea’ (A808/B836). Because the first maxim of pure reason is that one must ‘[d]o that through which you will become worthy to be happy’ (\textit{CPR} A809/B837), the moral agent requires the ‘hope for happiness’ in order to realise the moral world, that is, the hope that happiness will be merited ‘in the same measure as he has made himself worthy of it’ (ibid.).\textsuperscript{50} Yet Kant notes a significant problem that the moral agent faces, for such hope ‘cannot … be known through reason’, for it ‘may be hoped for only if it is at the same time grounded on a highest reason’ (A810/B838). The ‘highest reason’ is nothing other than God’s knowledge, meaning that it is necessarily unattainable. The only way that the ‘hope for happiness’ can be known through reason is if the kingdom of ends were to become an empirical reality, for the moral project ‘rests on the condition that everyone do what he should’ (ibid.).

This dilemma places the moral vocation of humanity in a double bind. The actualisation of the moral good depends on the existence of the kingdom of ends, and yet the

\textsuperscript{49} Kant anticipated the inability of revolution to change the way of thinking of the public in his 1784 essay ‘An Answer to the Question “What is Enlightenment?”’, yet seeing the reality of the French Revolution seems to have challenged his thinking. In this essay he states that a ‘revolution may perhaps bring about the fall of an autocratic despotism and of an avaricious or overbearing oppression, but it can never bring about the true reform of a way of thinking [Denkungsart]. Rather, prejudices will serve, like the old, as the leading strings of the thoughtless masses’ (p. 61). Instead, Kant argues that the way of thinking of a people can only be changed if the head of a state allows ‘his subjects to make public use of their reason and to lay publicly before the world their thoughts about the better formulation of this legislation as well as a candid criticism of laws already given’ (p. 63). In \textit{CJ}, however, Kant writes from within the tumultuous years of the French Revolution, and suggests that something more basic is required if the public is to be oriented to the public use of reason. He argues that the key to universal judgment is not ‘the healthy understanding’, that is, the ability to think without the tutelage of others, but ‘taste’, for ‘the aesthetic power of judgment rather than the intellectual can bear the name of a communal sense’ (5:295). The task of enlightenment, in this framework, is an aesthetic task, requiring the creative unification of reason and nature in works that opens the public to the creative use of their intellectual faculties. Immanuel Kant, ‘An Answer to the Question “What is Enlightenment?”’, in James Schmidt (ed.), \textit{What is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions}, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, pp. 58-64.

\textsuperscript{50} This depends on the first question of pure reason that concerns practical interest: ‘Do that through which you will become worthy to be happy’ (\textit{CPR} A809/B837).
existence of the kingdom of ends depends on moral agents actualising the moral good.\textsuperscript{51}

While reason can give us cause to postulate the immortality of the soul and the existence of a supreme being capable of seeing to it that the same measure of happiness is doled out according to the worth of one’s conduct (see \textit{CPrR} 5:122-124), it cannot transform the way we think of this world.\textsuperscript{52} Thus reason – the very power that ought to ground the moral project – either leads the moral agent to despair at the hopelessness of the situation or to acts of revolutionary zeal in the attempt to force a new set of values onto history. For Kant, neither despair nor revolution can overcome the tragedy of philosophy, for neither is able to provide a procedure through which morality and nature might be reconciled.

In this chapter I build from Zammito’s recognition of an ‘ethical turn’ in the final versions of Kant’s critique of taste in order to argue that \textit{CJ} can be read as an insightful response to this double bind. Kant’s response is to ground his new procedure in a historical project, one that requires neither a revolution nor a conservative backlash, but that is already in action. This response transforms the task of philosophy from one of outlining a moral philosophy that ought to be instituted in society to one of outlining a procedure through which society might develop toward a kingdom of ends. Thus we can conclude that Kant’s response to the tragedy of philosophy is to undermine the hegemony that philosophy had traditionally held over politics, displacing philosophy from its pedestal and locating it as an institution within historical life.\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{51} This dilemma is the same as that faced by Rousseau’s famous Lawgiver, who must recognise (1) that he cannot give just laws to unjust people, for they will not follow them, and (2) that the people cannot become just without just laws. In \textit{On the Social Contract}, Rousseau stated the question as follows: ‘The one who dares to endeavour to institute a people must feel himself capable of changing, so to speak, human nature’ (39). Rousseau recognises that in order to give new institutions to a people, one must change the very way of being of the people. Given this double bind, Rousseau states that ‘Gods would be required to give men laws’ (39). Yet he finds a solution in bestowing this divine task onto the lawgiver, suggesting that by laying down the laws, the legislator must not posit laws that are good in themselves, but laws that are amenable to the ethical mores of the people (41), for ‘there is a time of maturity that must be awaited before subjecting them to the laws’ (42). For Kant, the kingdom of ends in which moral action is met with happy ends only gives hope to the question of practical interest if it is more than an idea but a practical reality. Without the realisation of such a kingdom, reason is unable to empower the agent to act morally. See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, \textit{On the Social Contract}, trans. D. Cress, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987.

\textsuperscript{52} Jane Kneller suggests that adopting a belief in God or immortality does not really allow Kant to solve the problem. The moral law demands that we, as mortals, bring about the highest good, and our hope to achieve this end depends our belief on our ability to do so. And yet the notion of a God who will complete this task for us, and that we have infinite time to complete it, is ‘an admission of the hopelessness of the quest as mere mortals’, thus nullifying reason’s command. This is probably why Kant turned away from this argument in \textit{CJ} and came up with a new approach. See Kneller, ‘Imaginative Freedom and the German Enlightenment’, p. 188-9.

\textsuperscript{53} This formulation of the result of Kant’s \textit{CJ} is drawn from Dennis Schmidt’s \textit{Ethical and Lyrical Subjects}. Schmidt argues that, in a way not dissimilar to Kant’s ethical turn, Heidegger’s work announces the fact that ‘the hegemony of the philosophic over the political has lost its legitimacy’. Schmidt, \textit{Lyrical and Ethical Subjects}, p. 177.
To advance this interpretation of *CJ*, I will argue that central to Kant’s response to philosophy’s double bind is his acknowledgment that while philosophy proved unable to reconcile reason and the sensuous order, humanity is constantly at work at this task by creating a symbolic realm that expresses the shared destiny of material nature and practical freedom. Kant identifies a shared realm of works of human creation that anticipates a *sensus communis*, a community that is united by the reflective use of judgment. In the symbolic sphere, beautiful art dethrones a particular constellation and provides a new rule, orientating a people toward the procedure of reflective judgment examined in the previous chapter. Thus Kant fashions our moral vocation as a project whereby we must elevate our purpose in the midst of the double tension between material determinacy and the transcendence of freedom. This proposal, I will suggest, grants art history a radical importance that prioritises aesthetic creativity over the transcendental legislation of the will in the task of realising our moral vocation. This argument places Kant much closer to Herder, Schelling, Hölderlin, and Hegel’s understanding of history in terms of tragedy than is often recognised.

### 3.1 Genius and the sublime: the spiritual character of art

In order to consider Kant’s confrontation with the failure of philosophy in terms of his ethical turn, it is important to note the late appearance of the concept of genius in the final versions of the critique of taste. In 1768, Kant wrote a letter to his student, Herder, in which he warned him against the excesses of ‘genius’, contrasting the ‘youthful feeling’ of genius to the ‘sensitive tranquillity’ of philosophy. Yet by the later drafts of *CJ*, Kant employs the idea of genius as the origin of beautiful art. Genius is that which finds an ‘aesthetic idea’ for a work of art, giving a sensuous demonstration of a rational idea and providing an image of inexhaustible wealth for the empowerment of the audience of the work. The significance of the concept of genius is that it enlarges Kant’s procedure for thinking about nature so that art and morality are united in the same aesthetic project. The concept of genius provides a way to identify the creative ability of human agents to realise the ideas of reason in sensuous life, orientating a community of which those agents are a part to the collective use of his proposed procedure for confronting the tragedy of philosophy: enlarged, reflective judgment.

While Kant had remained critical of the spontaneous creativity of genius in the work of Young, Baumgarten, Herder, Mendelssohn, Hume and others, in *CJ* he retracts this critique.

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in order to explore the notion of genius as the exemplary use of the productive imagination. While Baumgarten identified genius as the harmonious use of the faculties, which results from significant training, Kant stresses that genius is ‘the talent (natural gift) that gives the rule to art, … an inborn productive faculty of the artist’ (5:307). Because genius is not an act of reason but is given, it ‘belongs to nature’, meaning that the artist is not limited to the categorical determination of the mind but operates in the domain of nature, of freedom (ibid.). Yet the freedom of the artist is not unfettered or chaotic, for the artist ‘ventures to make sensible rational ideas … beyond the limits of experience’ (5:314). The ‘making sensible’ of rational ideas cannot be achieved by reason but must be achieved by a poetic kind of thinking unique to genius. Kant acknowledges that it is the work of nature in the subject that makes the sensuous expression of rational ideas possible, thus opening a way for nature to express its freedom in the sensuous order through human *praxis*.

In order to explain how nature could act in the artist in such a way that allows her to move beyond the limits of experience, Kant requires a new aesthetic category capable of displacing her from these limits though an encounter with something greater: the sublime. While the beautiful provides the possibility of the conception of nature as art, allowing us to reconcile the theoretical and practical in an enlarged concept of nature, it shows us nothing of the purposiveness that lies in ourselves. By introducing the sublime in the 1789 manuscripts of his critique of taste, Kant identifies an aesthetic judgment that can expand our concept of nature, not one that indicates a ‘purpose in nature itself’, but one that occasions ‘the possible
use of its intuitions to make palpable in ourselves a purposiveness that is entirely independent of nature’ (5:246).\(^{55}\)

The significance of the sublime for Kant’s ethical turn is that it occasions the possible use of intuitions – non-conceptualised representations in the imagination – to encounter that which is beyond nature, reason itself, thus alerting us to an inner purposiveness in ourselves that is independent of nature. The sublime, Kant states, is an encounter with the ‘absolutely great’ (5:248), either in the vastness of the ‘mathematical sublime’ or the power of the ‘dynamical sublime’ (5:247). Rather than resulting in the ‘calm contemplation’ of judgments of beauty, the ‘mind finds itself moved’ (5:257). Such an encounter, whether in the limitless sky, a lofty mountain or the chaotic sea, makes us feel ‘the inadequacy of our capacity for the attainment of an idea’, for no idea can be found that is adequate to the formlessness of the absolutely great (5:257). What is absolutely great, Kant explains, is that which causes us to consider all things as small when they are drawn into comparison. Yet no mere thing, no object of nature, can have this characteristic. The absolutely great is not found outside of us but refers to what is inside: the ideas of reason.

What is important about Kant’s new account of the imagination’s encounter with the ideas of reason is that it enlarges the capacity of the imagination to go beyond its sensible limits. In the determinative operation of judgment, imagination is limited to sensibility, for it combines intuitions of nature with the concepts that nature has born in the understanding. In judgments of the sublime, the harmony of judgment is momentarily disrupted, which, given cognition’s desire for unity, produces the feeling of displeasure. Unlike the beautiful, the sublime does not provide an arena for the imagination and sensibility to play freely in mutual

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\(^{55}\) Kant made no mention of the sublime in the initial proposal for a ‘critique of taste’ in the letter to Reinhold in 1787, and neither do we find it in the editions of *CJ* prior to Kant’s final drafts in 1789. For Paul Guyer, the late inclusion of the sublime entails that it is ‘something of an afterthought’ in Kant’s work, not adding anything significant to his argument, but, unawares, providing a ‘fundamental challenge to it’ (Guyer, *Kant and the Claims of Taste*, p. 399). Yet for Michel Souriau, Giorgio Tonelli and Zammito, while the concept of the sublime was not original to Kant’s critique of taste, it appears at an important moment in his ‘cognitive turn’, marking a vital development in his thinking (in the spring of 1789). Souriau argues that while the sublime does not appear until ‘the very latest exposition of Kant’s aesthetic thought,’ it was no afterthought but the most mature idea of *CJ*, one that alters the entire landscape of the text (Souriau, *Le jugement refléchissant*, in Zammito, *The Genesis of Kant’s Critique of Judgment*, p. 276). Zammito concurs with Souriau, arguing that it is precisely Kant’s notion of the sublime that leads him to his final ‘ethical turn’ of 1790 in which he attempts to seal the realisation of freedom in the realm of nature in his understanding of the symbolic, aesthetic sphere of human culture (Zammito, *The Genesis of Kant’s Critique of Judgment*, p. 276). After receiving extensive criticism for marginalising the importance of the sublime, Guyer corrected his view in the Introduction to *Kant and the Experience of Freedom*: ‘In my earlier work I was rash enough to suggest that Kant’s discussions of such topics as the sublime and genius, which appear to be tied only loosely to the architectonic structure of the *Critique of Judgment*, were mere concessions to the literary fashion of his day, thus not essential to his fundamental argument about the conditions under which it is epistemologically justifiable to claim the universal validity of one’s pleasurable response to a work of nature or art, the claim that is inherent in a judgment of taste’. Guyer, *Kant and the Experience of Freedom*, pp. 2-3.
harmony. Rather, the feelings we experience in the sublime alert us to the fact that it is ‘not play but something serious in the activity of the imagination’ that is occurring (5:245). Through coming into contact with the ideas of reason, the sublime involves an intuition (i.e. an empirical perception) of the indeterminate. The sublime thus has a paradoxical effect, for it is in the inhibition of the power of judgment to determine an object that enlarges the imagination to form a schema of the infinite, and to use this empirically derived infinite in practical life.56 While the sublime manifests itself through the experience of nature, judgments of sublimity lie in the mind, which discovers its own essential superiority over nature.57

Through coming into contact with reason, the imagination, the faculty that is limited to sensibility, is expanded by the law of reason so that is able to make present the negative idea of the unattainability of nature. Reason expands the imagination, pushing it toward its limits and opening it to the field of the infinite. Thus imagination discovers in its possession an infinite power that is greater than any realm of representation or dogmatic code of ethics. In Kant’s words,

One can describe the sublime thus: it is an object (of nature) the representation of which determines the mind to think of the unattainability of nature as a presentation of ideas. (5:268)

The representation of that which is unrepresentable determines the mind to think of something negative – the unattainability of nature – as a presentation of the infinite domain of ideas. In particular, in the judgment of the sublime, the moral law claims its validity and is released into the sensory world as a guiding principle, alerting us to ‘a finality quite independent of nature’ (5:246). Thus the sublime affords a kind of passage from the realm of the theoretical (nature) to the realm of the practical (morality), for the excess of nature alerts us to the practical task of judgment: our moral vocation. This realisation of our moral vocation is not achieved by giving laws to the mind, but by leaving the subject to his or her own devices as

56 Basic to judgments of the sublime ‘is a pleasure that arises only indirectly, being generated, namely, by the feeling of a momentary inhibition of the vital powers and the immediately following and all the more powerful outpouring of them; hence as an emotion it seems to be not play but something serious in the activity of the imagination’ (5:245).

57 Kant describes this as follows: ‘The astonishment bordering on terror, the horror and the awesome shudder, which grip the spectator in viewing mountain ranges towering to the heavens, deep ravines and the raging torrents in them, deeply shadowed wastelands inducing melancholy reflection, etc., is, in view of the safety in which he knows himself to be, not actual fear, but only an attempt to involve ourselves in it by means of the imagination, in order to feel the power of that very faculty, to combine the movement of the mind thereby aroused with its calmness, and so to be superior to nature within us, and thus also that outside us, insofar as it can have an influence on our feeling of well-being’ (5:269).
the beautiful form crumbles at freedom’s expense.\textsuperscript{58} In this sense, nature, which occasions the sublime, pushes us toward our moral calling ‘in order to enlarge [the imagination] in a way suitable for its own proper domain (the practical) and to allow it to look out upon the infinite, which for sensibility is an abyss \textit{[Abgrund]}’ (5:265). The abyss, however, does not threaten to swallow the ideas of reason in its voiding presence, but occasions a creative, transubstantiating experience. The abyss transforms us, awaking the imagination to reason’s infinite grasp and the practical possibilities revealed within the disruption of causal necessity. The alarming indeterminacy of the abyss, however, means that the sublime itself is not a passage, but opens up the possibility of a passage being built by human creativity.

Kant’s understanding of genius is the ability to turn this experience of the sublime into a work that sets an example for how others might experience nature in the same way by presenting the unattainability of nature. We think of Caspar Friedrich’s \textit{Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog} or J.M.W. Turner’s \textit{A Disaster at Sea}; works of art that invite the spectator to join in the artist’s own experience of the sublime. Such works do not imitate nature, but use nature as a schema for presenting the supersensible: the negative feeling that alerts us to our moral vocation. Romantic poet John Keats describes the power released in the sublime as a ‘Negative Capability’ of the mind, clarifying the Romantic connection between sublimity and autonomy.\textsuperscript{59} According to Keats, the negativity of the mind’s capability lies in its ability to dwell ‘in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason’ .\textsuperscript{60} In a similar way to Kant, Keats identifies the capacity of the sublime to place us before the practical task of making laws for ourselves in the space that emerges within the collision of the traditional order and the creative emergence of the new, revealing that it is

\textsuperscript{58} Kant describes this as a sacrifice (\textit{Aufopferung}) in the realm of the aesthetic, wherein reason catches a glimpse of its supersensible freedom and its power to judge with rational concepts such as totality and freedom that exceed representation’s scope: ‘It thereby acquires an enlargement and power which is greater than that which it sacrifices, but whose ground is hidden from it, whereas it feels the sacrifice or deprivation and at the same time the cause to which it is subjected’ (5:269). At this moment, practical reason enters the theoretical under the event of representation’s failure and reason’s triumph. At the very moment when imagination is ruptured and all appears to be lost, reason discovers itself to be infinite, at home with itself and above all things. Kant’s treatment of the sublime depicts the triumph of reason, reconfirming the self’s ultimate transcendence over nature, a power that is threatened by the awful and monstrous experience it faces.


\textsuperscript{60} ibid.
nature that originally moves us toward our moral calling. It is the work of the poet, the genius, to make this experience intelligible.

Kant’s identification of a sensible appearance of rational ideas is remarkable given that it unifies two ideas that have been strictly kept apart in Kant’s theory of knowledge: sensation and reason, signalling his attempt to realise his project in collective, ethical life. The communicative power of the artist is expressed when their imaginative material takes on form that combines genius with taste: ‘Taste, like judgment in general, is the discipline (or training) of genius’ (5:319). Genius without taste is incommunicable, because it is a break with convention and has no determinate content. Donald Crawford describes Kant’s understanding of artistic creativity as a process through which ‘taste guides the creative imagination of the artist as to how far the imagination may extend itself and still be able to be communicated’. Crawford is correct, but it is important to note that the combination of taste and genius marks a particular development from his early critique of taste. Kant identifies taste as ‘the judging of beautiful objects’ and genius as ‘the producing of such objects’ (5:311). While Kant’s transcendental deduction of taste provides a new procedure for judging with mutual communicability as its ground, his inclusion of the concepts of genius and the sublime in the final editions identifies the capacity of human praxis to produce works of art that orient a community toward good taste, to the collective use of the procedure Kant’s analysis of taste produced. The concept of genius, it can be said, is Kant’s strategy for housing his proposal to navigate the tragedy of philosophy in shared, ethical life.

By combining genius and taste, Kant puts forward an expressivist account of aesthetics, suggesting that art is not limited to form but communicates (expresses) something that goes beyond appearance. In the first two Critiques Kant argued that we give rule to nature in knowledge (objects must conform to our knowledge) and to ourselves in ethical determination (the categorical imperative). In CJ, the aesthetic law emerges as a consequence of nature acting in the subject. In genius, that is, we find ‘the inborn predisposition of the mind (ingenium) through which nature’ manifests its freedom (5:307). In works of art, the

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61 Keats’ words express the reconfiguration of the connection between aesthetics and morality occurring in modernity. In this sense, Enlightenment and Romanticism are not polar opposites but mutually inform each other, a theme we find in Kant’s tract ‘What is Enlightenment’ (1784). In this tract Kant states that ‘Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. … “Have the courage to use your own understanding,” is therefore the motto of the enlightenment’. Immanuel Kant, Kant: Political Writings, trans. H. Nisbet, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 54.

ideas of reason become intelligible in sensuous form; the practical becomes incarnate in the
domain of nature through the power of human creativity.

Kant’s notion of genius draws from the enlarged concept of nature he discovered
through the antinomy of teleological judgment. By arguing that the antinomy of teleological
judgment is only solved when we understand nature as ‘an analogue of life’ (5:375), Kant
suggests that nature is a formative, self-organising power that communicates itself through
products. In the beautiful we find that nature expresses itself, and, by identifying the work of
genius as the work of nature, Kant now identifies the self-expression of nature in the domain
of culture, identifying the self-organising growth of nature in the heart of ethical life. Kant’s
argument is not that nature is spontaneously moral, that it is on a trajectory toward ever-
growing moral progress. Rather, it is that nature can be changed by human praxis, meaning
that Kant’s project becomes one of outlining a procedure for the enhancement of nature by
human activity. Kant recognises that to confront the tragedy of philosophy, the failure of
philosophy to unify moral culture and history, the task of philosophy is not to unify morality
and nature but to provide a procedure for thinking about nature and morality that allows us to
see human culture as a moral project; to engage in the ethical life of a community through art
and other creative endeavours.

Kant’s understanding of the cooperation of the self-organising dimension of nature
and human creativity places CJ much closer to Herder and the Sturm und Drang movement
than his former critical work. Building from Zammito’s suggestion that this shift toward
historical thinking is best understood as a response to ‘the events taking place simultaneously
in France’, it seems that Kant engaged with the rapidly changing world of the late-1780s by
moving away from ‘his harshly Hobbesian orientation and closer, if not to Herder, then to that
generation which inherited Herder’s agenda’.63 While the Idealist view of the philosophy of
tragedy claims that it is Schelling who draws Kant’s project together in in his notion of
tragedy in Philosophy of Art, Schelling himself identifies Kant’s notion of art in his System of
Transcendental Idealism (1800) as the means by which the critical project is brought together
into a whole. In Schelling’s words, the work of art is the ‘synthesis of nature and freedom,’
meaning that ‘in every task that art has discharged, an infinite contradiction is reconciled’.64
Schelling saw that Kant’s engagement with teleology led to a new form of critical philosophy.
Such a production cannot be explained by what precedes it, either historically or

64 Friedrich Schelling, System of Transcendental Idealism, trans. P. Heath, Charlottesville: University Press of
psychologically, for the genius cannot explain from whence his or her inspiration came or give a coherent account of the creation.65 Beautiful art is only possible if it results from an activity for which no determinate rule can be given, meaning that the work of art necessarily expands our concept of what nature is.

3.2 Beautiful art: the synthesis of nature and freedom

Thus far I have argued that the significance of Kant’s account of genius is shown in the connection it draws between art and the human vocation for freedom; a freedom that is not simply presumed by but is manifest in the creation of works of art. This freedom is not expressed through a conception of artistic skill modelled on Aristotle’s techne, which gives form to unformed matter according to rules. Rather, it is expressed through the ability of genius to create rules. The freedom of art is a transgressive freedom, for it interrupts previous art history in order for that history to begin anew. In this section we consider Kant’s notion of beautiful art as a way to navigate the tragic, double bind of philosophy – that is, the inability of philosophy to reconcile the ideas of reason and history.

In §44 Kant describes the kind of art that manifests transgressive creativity as schönen Kunst, literally translated by Guyer as ‘beautiful art’. Yet schönen Kunst is not merely art that is beautiful, for it idiomatically refers to the ‘fine arts’, that is, art that is some sense canonical or part of art history. Guyer preserves Kant’s play on the word ‘beautiful’ in order to show the continuity between the transgressive freedom manifest in the beautiful and the historical dimension of the fine arts. To clarify the distinction between what is merely beautiful and the transgressive freedom of beautiful art, Bernstein translates schönen Kunst as ‘great art’, for Kant is referring to artefacts of fine art that have epochal significance.66 Kant identifies the

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65 Kant argues that the inability of the genius to give an account of their creation is precisely what separates an aesthetic idea from a schema; the creative process of an artist from that of a mathematician: ‘Thus we can readily learn all that Newton has set forth in his immortal work on the Principles of Natural Philosophy, however great a mind was required to discover it, but we cannot learn to write spirited poetry, however express may be the precepts of the art and however excellent its models. The reason is that Newton could make all his steps, from the first elements of geometry to his own great and profound discoveries, intuitively plain and definite as regards consequence, not only to himself but to everyone else. But a Homer or a Wieland cannot show how his ideas, so rich in fancy and yet so full of thought, come together in his head, simply because he does not know and therefore cannot teach others’ (CJ 5:108-9). However, Kant seems to draw an unequal analogy here, confusing the discovery of the mathematician with the teaching or systematic exposition of truths. Mathematicians cannot tell us how they know to begin an unobvious proof any better than Homer could have told us how their ideas came together. As Crawford suggests, in the above passage Kant has not ‘successfully distinguished between discovery procedures in mathematics and in art’. See Donald Crawford, ‘Kant’s Theory of Creative Imagination,’ p. 156f.

66 Bernstein, The Fate of Art, p. 90.
definitive feature of schönen Kunst in terms of its autonomy, holding that works of art must not be determined by a human end (buildings, columns etc.) but must be final and without an end:

Beautiful art … is a kind of representation that is purposive in itself and, though without an end, nevertheless promotes the cultivation of the mental powers for sociable communication. (5:306)

By insisting that beautiful art is without end, Kant argues that it does not only presuppose freedom but that it manifests freedom. Bernstein helpfully draws out the expressive dimension of beautiful art by describing it as the ‘production of freedom through freedom’.67 Because beautiful art is expressive of human freedom, Kant argues that it is spiritual; it is different to natural beauty because it is a product of human creativity. According to Kant, art that merely imitates nature (mimetic art) in an ‘accurate and well organized’ manner is ‘without spirit’, for it fails to set ‘the mental powers into motion’ (5:313). In beautiful art, on the other hand, ‘spirit (Geist) is the animating [i.e. natural] principle’ (ibid.), meaning that the causality of the artwork lies in the unlimited domain of nature.

Kant’s identification of the spiritual dimension of beautiful art serves to fuse the work of nature and human praxis into the same creative act. As the work of genius, spiritual art expands the minds of those who experience it, containing the ability to make universally communicable ‘the ineffable element in the state of mind’ (5:317). This implies that such art, as the work of genius, is able to use aesthetic ideas not merely to entertain but to symbolise rational ideas that form our moral destiny. As Lambert Zuidervaart explains, spirit is thus ‘the talent for finding aesthetic ideas to symbolize rational ideas as well as the artistic means to communicate the mental state accompanying both kinds of ideas’.68 The capacity of spirit to symbolise rational ideas entails, as Giorgio Tonelli observes, that spirit and genius can be used interchangeably, referring to the locus of nature in humanity that is ‘spontaneous, free, cannot be accounted for, it is the power enabling man to reach some otherwise unattainable analogue to God’s ideas’.69 Kant’s notion of spirit refuges the subject as a part of nature, meaning that genius is both nature and subject; it is the freedom of nature expressing itself though the subject and the subject expressing itself through freedom.

67 ibid., p. 91.
The importance of Kant’s notion of beautiful art for his attempt to confront the tragedy of philosophy lies firstly in his recognition that reason alone cannot reconcile the natural and moral orders, and secondly in his suggestion that we must create a moral world. Kant’s recognition of the failure of philosophy suggests that philosophy’s traditional project has reached its limit and that art must take over its role of searching for a ‘fundamental principle’ to guide the realisation of our moral ends. Thus he proposes that this task is the responsibility of the productive imagination, which we see expressed in the example given by genius:

The imagination (as a productive cognitive faculty) is, namely, very powerful in creating, as it were, another nature, out of the material which the real one gives it. We entertain ourselves with it when experience seems to mundane to us; we transform the latter, no doubt always in accordance with analogous laws, but also … in accordance with which material can certainly be lent to us by nature, but the latter can be transformed by us into something entirely different, namely into that which steps beyond nature. (5:314)

Kant’s enlarged conception of the imagination does not imitate nature, but contains a ‘mighty’ power to ‘create’ another nature out of the material given to it. Due to their ability to ‘transform’ natural material into another nature entails that the ideas crafted by judgment restructure experience. The imagination is ‘world-making’, to use Nelson Goodman’s terms, meaning that our perspectives on the world have the nature of a creative work themselves, and the shared symbolic world is a product of our aesthetic endeavour.70

What is significant about Kant’s understanding of beautiful art for his project of reconciling moral culture and history is that it entails that freedom does not manifest itself in a vacuum of ideal thought, but through sensuous expression in material life. Kant seems to be arguing that the French Revolutionaries, whilst they recognised the need for transgression in the project of freedom, misunderstood the importance of the established field of reference. Freedom cannot come from rejecting one’s culture and attempting to legislate the world according to transcultural, rational principles, for such an approach fails to overcome the tragic divide between reason and culture, between philosophy and practice. Rather, freedom is expressed by using the established symbolic field of reference in order to go beyond them, meaning that it is the very things that limit the subject that make the ‘going beyond’ of freedom possible. As Brigitte Sassen describes, the task of creative action is not to ‘conjure up novel ideas by following some rule or other; the ideas are novel precisely because they break

out of the realm of established rules’. By detaching the artwork from the limitations of the subject, the being of the work cannot be traced causally. If it is not the individual subject but freedom in nature that expresses itself in beautiful art, then we find both a sensuous expression of nature (an enlarged conception of nature that is expressive) and a consilience between the end of nature and the end of humanity.

The consilience of the end of nature and the end of humanity is best seen in Kant’s concept of the aesthetic idea. In Kant’s clearest description of aesthetic ideas he describes them in terms of the expression that ignites the curiosity of the imagination by uniting the particular, emotional dimensions of spirit with the objective, corporate dimension of language:

In a word, the aesthetic idea is a representation of the imagination, associated with a given concept, which is combined with such a manifold of partial representations in the free use of the imagination that no expression designating a determinate concept can be found for it, which therefore allows the addition to a concept of much that is un-nameable, the feeling of which animates the cognitive faculties and combines spirit with the mere letter of language. (5:316)

Aesthetic ideas are analogous to the ideas of reason in that they gather disparate phenomena under the unity of an idea that is aesthetic, or sensuously derived. They are expansive rather than determinative, meaning that they ‘go beyond the bounds of experience’ (5:314). Thus they are inexhaustible in our contemplation of them, for they do not exhaust what they represent but combine a ‘manifold of partial representations’. Aesthetic ideas ‘strive toward something lying beyond the bounds of experience [thus seeking] to approximate a presentation of concepts of reason’ (5:314). In other words, they are the building blocks of ‘another nature’, for they give incarnate form to the transcendent idea.

Kant identifies the greatest example of an aesthetic idea in the work of poetry. In ‘the art of poetry’, he states, ‘the faculty of aesthetic ideas can reveal itself in its full measure’ (5:314):


72 It is important to note that Kant’s notion of ‘aesthetic ideas’ shows a radical break from his understanding of ideas in CPR. As Andrew Bowie notes, in CPR, ‘aesthetic’ provided the ‘rules for sensuousness’, giving intuitions for the understanding in the form of schemata (CPR B36n). ‘Ideas’ are the basis of reason and are not available for intuition because they would have to become subordinate to the understanding. Bowie, Aesthetics and Subjectivity from Kant to Nietzsche, p. 29.

73 Elsewhere Kant elucidates the nature of aesthetic ideas by drawing them into direct comparison with schemata: ‘Intuitions are always required to establish the reality of our concepts. If the concepts are empirical, the intuitions are called examples. If they are pure concepts of the understanding, the intuitions are called schemata’ (5:351).
The poet ventures to make sensible rational ideas of invisible beings, the kingdom of the blessed, the kingdom of hell, eternity, creation etc., as well as to make that of which there are examples in experience, e.g., death, envy, and all sorts of vices, as well as love, fame, etc., sensible beyond the limits of experience, with a completeness that goes beyond anything of which there is an example in nature, by means of an imagination that emulates the precedent of reason in attaining to a maximum. (ibid.)

Just as the productive imagination schematises the categories of the understanding so that the ideas of reason are applied in the sensible world, poetry ‘ventures to make sensible rational ideas of invisible beings’. Poets produce symbols: indirect, figurative presentations of concepts that are not determinate but that ‘strain toward something lying beyond the bounds of experience … because no concept can be fully adequate to them, as inner intuitions’ (ibid.). Their work is expressive, not formalist or mimetic, because it ‘judges’ nature by giving expression to ideas for which nature can provide no adequate form. Moreover, the symbols are beautiful and, as rational ideas, are expressive of our moral vocation. Thus Kant moves from his earlier insistence that moral action is dispassionate by identifying that, as Zuidervaart states, ‘by functioning as symbols of morality, aesthetic ideas can attractively indicate the morally good to be something desirable and not merely obligatory’. 74 While the ideas of reason, such as those laid down by Newton in Principles of Natural Philosophy, can be communicated to everyone and ‘readily learnt’, the poet ‘cannot show how his ideas … come together in his head’, meaning that they cannot be learnt (5:108-9). Rather, poetic ideas are exemplary, empowering the reader to join in the poet’s creative endeavour.

The ability of the poet to consider and judge nature, to see nature as more than mechanism and to put it to creative work, is important for Kant’s attempt to find a thematic basis that could reconcile the theoretical and the practical. While the supersensible basis to the theoretical and practical orders ‘can never be elevated and expanded into a cognition’ (5:175), poetic language manifests the ability to use nature as a schema in order to govern the application of supersensibility:

The art of poetry (which owes its origin almost entirely to genius, and will be guided least by precept or example) claims the highest rank of all. It expands the mind by setting the imagination free and presenting, within the limits of a given concept and among the unbounded manifold of forms possibly agreeing with it, the one that connects its presentation with a fullness of thought to which no linguistic expression is fully adequate, and thus elevates itself aesthetically to the level of ideas. It strengthens the mind by letting it feel its capacity [Vermögen] to consider and judge of [zu beurtheilen] nature, as appearance, freely, self-actively, and independently of determination by nature, in accordance with points of view that nature does not present by itself in experience either for sense or for the understanding, and thus to use it for the sake of and as it were as the schema of the supersensible. (5:326)

74 Zuidervaart, ‘“Aesthetic Ideas” and the Role of Art in Kant’s Ethical Hermeneutics,’ p. 206.
Poetry expresses the imagination’s formative capacity to schematise what resists presentation, using nature to express what goes beyond nature. In CPR, Kant introduced the concept of the schema as a bridge between the heterogeneous poles of thought and sensation, making ‘possible the application of the former to the latter’ (CPR A138/B177). The possibility of schematising the supersensible, then, contains the solution to Kant’s intention to reconcile the critical system under a common, supersensible ground. This solution is not a product of philosophy, but one that can be experienced in our encounter with beautiful art.

Thus we can see that Kant’s solution to the tragedy of philosophy, understood as the failure of philosophy to reconcile morality and nature, is to outline a way of thinking that recognises the symbolic sphere at the heart of collective life as a historical project that reconciles morality and nature. The task of the philosopher is not to unify the theoretical and the practical in conceptual thought, but to identify the symbolic realm in which such a unity appears and to identify the ground of reason that underpins our experience of it: mutual communicability. The failure of philosophy to reconcile nature and reason is mirrored by the failure of what Kant calls ‘mechanical art’, which is ‘a mere art of diligence and learning’ (5:310). Yet art that is purely genius also fails at this task, for genius ‘can only provide the material for products of art; its elaboration and form require a talent that has academically trained’ (ibid.). For Kant, those who claim to operate outside of the rules and produce works of art without form are as comical as the members of the public who claim to understand it. The task of the philosopher, then, is to elucidate the nature of the symbolic sphere in such a way that trains the public to recognise beautiful art that combines genius and training. We might say that such a task is therapeutic, aimed at cleansing our drive toward objective knowledge and pointing us toward the interpersonal realm of creative praxis. In the wake of the immense progress occurring in the aesthetic sphere during his lifetime, Kant outlines the task of philosophy as one of unearthing the project underpinning the creativity of the artist to reconcile the moral and natural parts of our being. His acknowledgment of the tragedy of philosophy understood as the inevitable failure of an exclusive focus on technical thinking

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75 In Kant’s words, ‘the image is a product of the empirical faculty of the productive imagination, the schema of sensible concepts (such as figures in space) is a product and as it were a monogram of pure a priori imagination’ (A141-142/B181). Schemata are best understood as procedural rules for the imagination for providing a concept with its image. They provide a kind of ‘know-how’ of applying concepts. For example, we might have the concept of an orange, but if we are unable to go into a fruit store and select an orange to purchase then we have no schema of the orange, meaning that we effectively have no knowledge about oranges at all. Kant’s notion of schemata links the theoretical with the practical, just as Aristotle’s notion of practical judgment requires wisdom and deliberation: ‘if a man knew that light meats are digestible and wholesome, but did not know which sorts of meat are light, he would not produce health, but the man who knows that chicken is wholesome is more likely to produce health’. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1141b19-20.
undermines the hegemony that philosophy traditionally held over the aesthetic sphere, thus transforming the task of philosophy from one of legislating a society according to philosophically defined ends to one of outlining the procedure by which society can give law to itself.

3.3  *Sensus communis: an enlarged way of thinking*

In the previous sections I identified that by introducing the transgressive creativity of genius that generates aesthetic ideas, Kant not only outlines a new way of thinking about nature in terms of self-expression, but a new way of thinking about historical modes of figuring nature; the tradition of art history. In this section I argue that Kant’s identification of the creativity of imagination places the concept of history, the shared sphere of aesthetic ideas, at the centre of collective life. This will allow us to see that Kant’s intention in identifying this historical dimension to his project is to couch the procedure of enlarged judgment in the ethical life of a community. Kant identifies that the task of enlarged thinking, of confronting the failure of philosophy to reconcile moral culture and history, is not the individual task of one who practices philosophy. Rather, it is a collective project spurred on by acts of transgressive creativity. This move, I suggest, displaces philosophy from the position of providing moral guidance and identifies the moral project as a collective, creative endeavour.

Kant’s understanding of beautiful art entails a domain of art history in which artworks give new rules and destroy old ones. The work of art, the highest of which is poetry, gives rule to art by using nature to schematise what is beyond nature, giving us an example of the kind of creativity it takes to realise our moral calling in sensuous life:

> The product of a genius … is an example … for emulation by another genius, who is thereby awakened to the feeling of his own originality, to exercise freedom from coercion in his art in such a way that the latter thereby itself acquires a new rule, by which the talent shows itself as exemplary. (5:318)

Beautiful art gives a new rule, one that draws its audience into an experience of imaginative expansion. Because this new rule is given by an act of transgressive creativity, the sphere of art history manifests a ‘lawfulness without law’ (*Gesetzmässigkeit ohne Gesetz*) that is counterpart to nature’s purposiveness without purpose. It is lawful to the extent that gives an example to other artists and to the observing public, and yet it is lawless to the extent that it lies outside the transcendental constitution of the mind; there is no law that is necessary and
sufficient to explain the forms that emerge. In Bernstein’s terms, the artwork is, paradoxically, ‘empirically transcendental’, because it serves as a ‘standard or rule for estimating’.  

Kant’s notion of the rule-giving nature of beautiful art provides a solution to the double bind that reason gets itself into, a solution that is seen in what he calls a sensus communis. The sensus communis anticipates a community that is bound by a common mode of judgment. It is not an objective reality, such as an existing community of judges who share common taste. Rather it is an ‘indeterminate norm [that is] presupposed by us: our presumption in making judgments of taste proves that’ (5:239-40). Sensus communis operates as a regulative a priori for judgment, affording a critical distance from current modes of taste and allowing us to judge with the standard of mutual communicability as our ground. It is ‘the necessary condition of the universal communicability of our cognition, which is assumed in every logic and every principle of cognitions that is not skeptical’ (5:239), meaning that it is not simply an abstract concept of community to which we aspire, but the ground of every judgment of taste. Thus sensus communis has a quasi-moral character wherein one claims for oneself and demands of the other that the aesthetic claims that pass between them, like practical claims, are not determined by their own narrow interests but aspire to universality. In short, sensus communis grounds Kant’s enlarged procedure of judgment in the ethical life of a community.

In §40 Kant explains the normative dimension of sensus communis by distinguishing it from the notion of common sense posited by the British philosophers. For the British philosophers, common sense indicated an established sense that was held in common. We might say that this notion of common sense embodies the tragedy of philosophy, for it detaches taste from reason, thereby condemning the established common sense to remain ever separated from a rational standard. On the other hand, Kant informs us that sensus communis is

the idea of a communal sense (gemeinschaftlicher Sinn), i.e., a faculty for judging that in its reflection takes account (a priori) of everyone else’s way of representing in thought, in order as it were to hold its judgment up to human reason as a whole and thereby avoid the illusion which, from subjective private conditions that could easily be held to be objective, would have a detrimental influence on the judgment. (5:293)

A community bound by a communal sense uses reflective judgment to abstract from the particular vantage of immediate subjective representation to generate an intersubjective perspective, turning on the a priori expressed in judgments of taste: the assumption of the

76 Bernstein, The Fate of Art, p. 92.
intersubjective similarity of the faculties of judgment. Thus the concept of *sensus communis* empowers one to recognise the subjective nature of one’s judgment, and yet to make a claim to universality. While vulgar common sense designates beliefs that are immediately held in a community that binds it together in a sense of commonality, the *sensus communis* is an *a priori* sense that relates us to *all* of humanity. As Béatrice Longuenesse argues, the mere possibility of agreement we feel in judgments of beauty becomes for us a ‘*normative necessity*, an obligation made to all human beings to take their part in the common effort to constitute humanity as a community of judging subjects, beyond the particular limitations of each historically and biographically determined sensing, feeling, emotional access to the world of sensory objects’.78 It is the fact that the notion of taste assumes community that *sensus communis* is necessary for aesthetic judgment.

The significance of Kant’s notion of *sensus communis* is that it ties the realisation of our moral project together with aesthetic creativity. Just as the imagination ‘orientates’ us spatially by representing the world in reference to our sensory experience, figuring left and right, up and down not in terms of an intuition but a feeling, Kant argues that the *sensus communis* orients us to our community in such a way that mutual communicability becomes the ground of judgment.79 If it is mutual communicability that grounds reflective judgment, and if reflective judgment reconciles morality and nature through aesthetic creativity, then it seems that the notion of the *sensus communis* opens the possibility of connecting morality and aesthetics. As Jane Kneller suggests, *sensus communis* entails that ‘political and moral progress may be intimately connected with our ability to make universally valid aesthetic judgments’.80 In other words, despite the fact that morality and aesthetics are separated by an abyss, morality is increasingly caught up in the aesthetic sense of the community. Lambert Zuidervaart describes this turn in terms of Kant’s development of ‘ethical hermeneutics’, a holistic understanding of the human being in which ‘knowing and acting can coincide in

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79 In his essay ‘What does it mean to orientate ourselves in thinking?’, Kant explores the manner by which we are orientated toward the world via feeling: ‘In the proper meaning of the word, to *orient* oneself means to use a given direction … in order to find the others – literally, to find the *sunrise*. Now if I see the sun in the sky and know that it is now midday, then I know how to find south, west, north and east. For this, however, I also need the feeling of a difference in my own subject. I call this a *feeling* because these two sides [right and left] outwardly display no designatable difference in intuition’. Immanuel Kant, ‘What does it mean to orientate ourselves in thinking?’, in *Kant: Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, trans. A. Wood & G. Di Giovanni, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 3-30, p. 4.

respect to truth’. In other words, art takes on a distinctive role in providing a medium in which we can see ourselves reflected, and the *sensus communis* becomes a context in which ‘an overriding concern for the process of interpretation through which rational morality can be enacted and not merely conceptualized’. In short, *sensus communis* outlines a procedure through which the heteronomous use of reason can be overcome, allowing morality to become instrumental in collective life through human *praxis*.

The connection between the moral project and aesthetics is seen in the procedure identified in the previous chapter that ensures that the use of reason does not become heteronomous: heautonomy. Resisting the heteronomy of reason is not, for Kant, a matter of thinking according to the autonomy of reason, that is, the legislation of the understanding according to the principles of reason. Rather, the key to resisting heteronomy is the heautonomous use of reason, the operation of reflective judgment whereby the judgment gives a law ‘not to nature (as autonomy), but to itself (as heautonomy), to guide its reflection upon nature’ (5:185). The significance of the heautonomous use of reason is shown in Kant’s identification of a third maxim of the autonomous use of reason: an ‘enlarged way of thinking’ (5:239). The maxim of the enlarged way of thinking echoes the expansion of the imagination undergone in the experience of the sublime, for it presupposes our supersession of vulgar common sense for the *sensus communis*. Enlarged thinking refrains from legislating according to subjective principles and instead undertakes the procedure of ‘comparing our judgment with the possible rather than the actual judgment of others’ (5:294). In other words, enlarged thinking is a possibility of human thought opened by the acknowledgment of the tragedy of philosophy, the failure of philosophy to unify the ideas of reason with sensuous life, and yet retains a rational standard. Thus the enlarged way of thinking embodies a procedure that is adequate to the conditions of interpersonal life whereby no appeal can be made to a theoretical standard.

By identifying the enlarged way of thinking as the product of a community united by the reflective use of judging, Kant ties the fate of the autonomous use of reason to the aesthetic, symbolic sphere of collective representation. Judgment, genius and the *sensus communis* all serve to harmonise aesthetic and moral culture, making the rule-giving activity of nature through the expansion of the sublime and the schematising work of art regulative over aesthetics. Yet in another sense, the aesthetic sphere becomes the means by which a community is set on the path to autonomy, meaning that the exercise of reason becomes

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81 Zuidervaart, ‘“Aesthetic Ideas” and the Role of Art in Kant’s Ethical Hermeneutics,’ p. 199.
82 ibid., p. 200.
subject to the creative praxis of a community.83 By refusing to ground judgment in either cognition or morality Kant’s harmonisation of aesthetic and moral culture through the historical dimension of sensus communis is not simply a harmonisation, but the recognition of the primacy of the aesthetic sphere in regulating our orientation to morality, even if moral culture ‘ought’ to govern the aesthetic. Thus the task of philosophy, in its efforts to realise the moral calling of humanity, is not to legislate the moral project, but to alert the community to the aesthetic sphere in which the moral project is already being realised in their midst.84

Interpreting CJ as the outlining of an enlarged procedure for thinking highlights Kant’s understanding of history as the domain in which the dualism between nature and reason is reconciled through creative human praxis. Kant’s conception of history recognises two aspects of nature; that nature can be changed through human praxis, and that nature acts in ways that stimulate human praxis in the direction of moral transformation.85 Or to put it differently, nature is purposive to the extent that all its parts work toward its ultimate end: the realisation of moral freedom. As Zammito aptly states, throughout CJ ‘history [becomes] a realm between nature and freedom: the record of the interventions of freedom in the world of mechanical causality and the sting of their consequences’.86 The significance of Kant’s understanding of history as a realm between nature and freedom is that it does not advance the idea that history progresses according to some mechanical or natural law. Rather, it advances an idea of history as a human project with the aim of reconciling morality and nature. Thus Kant overcomes the tragic double bind of moral philosophy by recognising the radical

83 Kant’s sensus communis designates a community of enlarged thought that is able to recognise what is mere prejudice or superstition and not a basis for universal understanding. To borrow from Gadamer, the sensus communis signals the ‘abstraction of the part-whole relation of the object to its horizon’, that is, it allows us to become aware of the contingent character of our aesthetic ideas, thus opening them to the possibility of critique and transformation. Gadamer’s notion of the ‘horizon’ plays on Kant’s Copernican move, indicating the ‘range of vision that can be seen from a particular vantage point’. Rather we are orientated to our horizon through the sensus communis. The sensus communis allows us to discern between what is essentially communal in our community and what has only survived due to traditional authority, meaning that it is the critical, historical space that opens which allows us to assent or dissent from what is commonly held. Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, London: Continuum, 2004, p. 301.

84 This interpretation of CJ resonates with Ernst Cassirer’s reading of Kant. Cassirer stresses the transformative character of CJ, arguing that because of his attempt to reconcile the aesthetic and moral dimensions of experience in CJ, Kant ‘touched the nerve of the entire spiritual and intellectual culture of his time more than any other of his works’ (Ernst Cassirer, Kant’s Life and Thought, trans. J. Haden, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981, p. 273). This is because it combines symbolic thinking with theoretical philosophy in such a way that reconciles the natural sciences with developments in modern logic. In this attempt, ‘the critique of reason becomes the critique of culture,’ for the critical method ‘seeks to understand and to show how every content of culture, in so far as it is more than a mere isolated content, in so far as it is grounded in a universal principle of form, presupposes an original act of the human spirit’. Ernst Cassirer, The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, vol. 3, trans. R. Manheim, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957, p. 80.

85 In §83, Kant’s words sound remarkably similar to those of Herder. In this section he attributes to nature a person-like agency, arguing that nature places humankind before constant danger and calamity in order to push them toward recognising themselves as ultimate ends.

86 Zammito, Genesis of Kant’s Critique of Judgment, p. 332.
creativity by which human action transfigures the world from the determinism of the natural order into an order of freedom.

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter has argued that in the final versions of *CJ* Kant develops his project into the outlines of a procedure though which to navigate the failure of philosophy to take an instrumental role in reconciling morality and history. His understanding of genius, beautiful art, and *sensus communis* are instrumental in outlining how his enlarged procedure of philosophy can overcome the double bind of philosophy and realise humanity’s moral calling in history as a collective project. Kant knew well that as moral agents we are constantly faced with evidence that the natural world is not well adjusted for our moral realisation. He recognises that we are regularly faced with the sight of moral virtue going unrewarded, even thwarted by forces indifferent to moral concerns. In his efforts to outline a procedure for philosophy that would allow us to reconcile the moral project with history, *CJ* can be understood as a sustained reflection on how we are to find hope in a world that seems inhospitable to our moral vocation. While society remains less than the civil society of ends in which moral and aesthetic culture are one, while we find there to be no guarantee that moral action will result in happy ends, Kant ties our ability to feel ‘at home’ in the world to our production of aesthetic ideas that give us the feeling that the world is morally inhabitable.

Beautiful art, art that allows us to experience ourselves as fully rational and natural beings, opens us to ‘the possibility that nature and freedom may harmonize, that reconciliation may be achieved’. That harmonisation, however, will be the results of our own creative labour.

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87 In the final pages of *CJ* Kant makes a curious observation about a righteous man (such as Spinoza) who seeks to act in conformity to freedom and yet is unable to reach the subjective position in which he can judge nature as a fitting place for the realisation of his moral destiny. Such a man is fundamentally split and cannot find aesthetic unity in his experience: ‘[H]e does not demand any advantage for himself from his conformity to this law, whether in this or in another world; rather, he would merely unselfishly establish the good to which that holy law directs all his powers. … from nature he can, to be sure, expect some contingent assistance here and there, but never a lawlike agreement in accordance with constant rules (like his internal maxims are and must be) with the ends to act in behalf of which he still feels himself bound and impelled. Deceit, violence, and envy will always surround him, even though he is himself honest, peaceable, and benevolent’ (5:452). This man sounds surprisingly like Schelling’s tragic hero, Schopenhauer in his moral anxiety or Benjamin’s silent sufferer. Unless we can grasp the ‘final end’ of the world in terms of morality, unless we can find a way to judge nature ‘as if’ it were adjusted to fit our moral ends, Kant suggests that we find ourselves in the position of the tragic hero, constantly surrounded by deceit, violence and envy rather than occurrences that are rendered intelligible to our moral vocation.

88 Zuidervaart, ‘“Aesthetic Ideas” and the Role of Art in Kant’s Ethical Hermeneutics,’ p. 207.
The task left to those after Kant’s *CJ* is to search for a language, a form of art, that would be adequate to this calling. In §52, Kant notes a form of art that might be up to the task, stating that ‘the presentation of the sublime, so far as it belongs to beautiful art, can be united with beauty in a verse tragedy’ (5:325).\(^{89}\) He does not develop this observation, however, for in his view the task of reconciling morality and history is not the task of the philosopher but the genius. The task of philosophy, for Kant, is to outline a procedure that allows this reconciliation to appear.

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\(^{89}\) In this section, entitled ‘On the combination of the beautiful arts in one and the same product’, Kant refers to tragedy as a kind of art that combines music, drama, song and dance, anticipating many of the themes of Wagner’s ‘total work of art’ (*Gesamtkunstwerk*). See Richard Wagner, *The Art-Work of the Future, and other works*, trans. W. Ellis, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993.
PART II

TRAGEDY AFTER KANT
CHAPTER 4

Hegel: The Philosophy of Tragedy

They are gripped and shattered by something intrinsic to their own actual being (LA 1217-8).

Part I of this thesis put forward an interpretation of CJ that identifies Kant’s perception of the tragedy of philosophy as the key to his discovery of a new task for philosophical thinking. This task builds from the creative potential of the imagination to operate according to an enlarged procedure that is grounded on the a priori of mutual communicability. The discovery of a rational principle in aesthetic judgment is based on acknowledging the unknowability of aesthetic matters, for such a principle is based on the recognition of the contingency of the aesthetic realm. The principle of aesthetic judgment enables us to judge matters of nature and ethical life ‘as if’ they were unfolding according to a purpose consonant with our moral destiny, thereby reconciling nature and moral ends in a subjective judgment. For Hegel, however, while Kant’s understanding of aesthetic judgment made a significant step in the development of critical philosophy, it entailed two implications he deemed to be highly problematic: that the end of nature and ethical life cannot be known but only felt, and that by grounding a society’s orientation to its moral calling in a context outside the agent’s rationality, that is, in history, Kant’s ‘ethical turn’ subjects the realisation of humanity’s moral vocation to a historical trajectory that is beyond the control of an autonomous will.

This chapter argues that Hegel’s interpretation of tragedy can be understood as an attempt to bring Kant’s project to its fitting conclusion by extending Kant’s enlarged way of thinking. The significance of Hegel’s theory of tragedy, I will claim, is that it does not address tragedy as a mere artistic genre, but as a way of reconciling the Kantian dualism between nature and freedom. The task of bringing Kantian philosophy to this fitting conclusion, for Hegel, lies in overcoming the two implications of Kant’s argument; in overcoming the ‘as if’ of regulative judgment so as to provide a substantive way to think of history’s rational
trajectory. While Kant responded to the tragedy of philosophy in terms of a new procedure for philosophy that begins with self-regulation, Hegel argues that Greek tragedy itself – a temporally specific artistic genre – provides a solution. While the understanding fails to reconcile our moral ideals with the chaos of nature, Hegel argues that tragedy raises up nature and morality in a work that reconciles us to ‘the necessity of what happens’ in the historical domain by revealing that it unfolds according to ‘absolute rationality’ (LA 1215). To complete the Kantian project Hegel finds it necessary to enlarge thinking beyond that proposed by Kant, rejecting Kant’s insistence that poetry can enlarge the mind to judge nature as if it were fitted for our moral end in order to argue that poetry, and tragedy in particular, enlarges the mind to constitute the historical sphere as a progressive domain, allowing us to be ‘morally at peace’ with history (ibid.). To do this, Hegel develops Kant’s understanding of the intellectus archetypus to describe the self-positing nature of human cognition, radicalising Kant’s antinomy of teleological judgment in order to show the development of reason according to antinomies arising in a community’s ethical practice. Reading Hegel’s understanding of tragedy as part of his attempt to complete the critical project will prove significant to our overall thesis, for identifying Hegel’s use of Kant’s poetic response to the failure of philosophy further establishes the significance of Kant’s enlarged way of thinking for the philosophical problematic of tragedy.

Before we begin our analysis of Hegel’s theory of tragedy, however, it is important to acknowledge the polar reception it has received. On one side, philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche, A. C. Bradley, Walter Benjamin, Theodore Adorno, Martha Nussbaum, and Sebastian Gardner argue that Hegel’s theory of tragedy removes the insights of Kant’s critical philosophy and returns to a pre-critical metaphysics. We shall call the view shared by these thinkers the ‘Kantian’s view’, for its proponents are more inspired by Kant and early Romanticism than by Hegel. In the Kantian’s view, Hegel’s theory of tragedy does not heal Kant’s divided philosophy but occludes the critical insights of Kant’s critique of substantial metaphysics. Hegel’s philosophy is thus anti-tragic, for it covers the contingency of Kant’s aesthetic sphere with a trajectory that cannot do other but progress toward greater rationality.

In recent years, however, another view has gained significant attention. Philosophers such as William Dudley, Stephen Houlgate, Theodore George, Robert Stern, Robert Williams,
and Martin Thibodeau have proposed that Hegel does not break faith with tragic experience but allows philosophy to be transformed by tragic art.² We shall call this the ‘metaphysical realist view’, for it suggests that Hegel restores content to Kant’s attempt to limit metaphysics to thought, refiguring philosophy through Kant’s reflections on art. Proponents of the metaphysical realist view argue that Hegel does not depart from the critical paradigm. Rather, he corrects it, revealing Kant’s inability to break from traditional philosophy and thereby outlining a properly tragic philosophy; that is, one that is unencumbered by external constraints.

By examining Hegel’s theory of tragedy in light of the two main interpretations, in this chapter I will make the following claims: that the metaphysical realist view allows us to see Hegel’s insightful critique of Kant’s refusal to reconcile nature and freedom philosophically, but that the Kantian’s view is able to show us, despite its weaknesses, that Hegel problematically undermines Kant’s separation of the philosophic from the aesthetic sphere. The first claim will assist us to see that Hegel does not undermine Kant’s separation of the philosophical from the aesthetic by returning to the metaphysical project of philosophy Kant rejected, as the Kantian’s view suggests. The second claim will show that Hegel does, however, undermine the import of Kant’s separation, and that he achieves this by subsuming Kant’s recognition of the tragedy of philosophy into an enlarged understanding of what philosophy is about. The upshot of the second claim, I suggest, is that Hegel does not outline a procedure for engaging with the contingency of the aesthetic sphere, but a system of philosophy that claims to be consonant with the final cause emerging in the aesthetic sphere.

4.1 Hegel’s aesthetics

In order to examine Hegel’s theory of tragedy, it is first necessary to outline his understanding of aesthetics. Hegel’s understanding of aesthetics can be viewed as an attempt to reconcile the aesthetic and moral spheres that Kant recognised to be in tension in CJ. From as early as his essay Faith and Knowledge (1802) (FK), Hegel recognised that CJ draws these spheres together subjectively in its idea of a historical sphere that is defined by the notion of

‘lawfulness without law’ (*Gesetzmässigkeit ohne Gesetz*). While rationalists such as Wolff and Baumgarten saw the aesthetic sphere in terms of personal sentiment, Kant’s notion of the productive ability of imagination to create aesthetic ideas generates a symbolic sphere of ideas that are lawful to the extent that they regulate judgment but lawless to the extent that they are not determined by the theoretical order. In Kant’s view, the lawfulness of the aesthetic sphere constitutes a kind of ‘inner purposiveness’ of the community, a fate to which all the members of the community are bound. This purposiveness, however, can only ever be known subjectively, meaning that it remains an ‘as if’ of reflective judgment; an analogy between our own purposefulness and what we find unfolding in the aesthetic sphere.

In Hegel’s view, Kant’s recognition of the aesthetic, historical sphere that is autonomous from the theoretical domain made a crucial contribution to the progress of philosophy. The significance of this move, he explains, is that it ‘resuscitated the Idea in general and especially the Idea of life’ (*EL* 280), the idea of life as process, becoming, and alteration. In Hegel’s view, Kant restores dignity to the human ability to judge the purposiveness of the phenomenal world and opens our perception to development unfolding within collective life. The idea of life was not ‘discovered’ but ‘resuscitated’, he suggests, because it was originally in Aristotle. In *Physics*, Aristotle determines nature as internal finality, describing it as *arche kineseos kai staseos*, the ‘principle of change and rest immanent in all natural beings’. This determination of nature, for Hegel, ‘already contains this internal purposiveness; hence, it stands infinitely far above the concept of modern teleology which had only finite, or external, purposiveness in view’ (280). Aristotle’s determination of life was occluded by the ontological commitments of traditional philosophy, which holds Being as timeless, impassable power. The strength of Kant’s attention to the tragedy of philosophy, for Hegel, is that it reopens philosophy’s perception of life.

Despite the strength of Kant’s insight, however, Hegel argues that Kant failed to grasp the ultimate truth that our judgments about nature’s purpose and the reality to which Kant always contrasted it are in fact one and the same. As he states in his discussion of Kant in *Encyclopaedia Logic* (*EL*):

> the objectivity of thinking in Kant’s sense is itself again only subject in its form, because, according to Kant, thoughts, although they are universal and necessary determinations, are still *only our* thoughts, and are cut off from what the thing is *in-itself* by an impassable gulf. On the

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3 Aristotle, *Physics*, 192b21. The full citation is as follows: ‘nature is a principle or cause of being moved and of being at rest in that to which it belongs primarily, in virtue of itself and not accidentally’.

contrary, the true objectivity of thinking consists in this: that thoughts are not merely our thoughts, but at the same time the In-itself as thought-product, the significance of what is there, as distinct from what is only thought by us, and hence still distinct from the matter itself, or from the matter in-itself. (83)

Hegel treats Kant’s subjective reconciliation of reason and aesthetics – his insistence on an incalculable gulf between thought and objects – as an inability to break from the restrictive dogma of traditional metaphysics that occludes the full power of his discoveries. Thus Hegel sets out to show knowledge of an absolute realm of being in which the opposed poles of thought and object have an underlying identity that Kant argued we could feel but not know.

To reconcile the Kantian dualism and extend critical philosophy, Hegel requires a way to show that Kant’s regulative ‘as if’ is in fact a constitutive principle, thereby uniting the theoretical and the aesthetic spheres in the domain of history.

For Hegel, Kant’s notion of intuitive understanding provides the key to this task; that is, the key to reconciling the critical project. In his discussion of the antinomy of teleological judgment, Kant makes it clear that the distinguishing feature of natural purpose concerns the ‘peculiarity’ of human judgment: ‘that in cognition … the particular is not determined by the universal, and the latter therefore cannot be derived from the former alone’ (CJ 5:406-407). In other words, Kant acknowledges that aesthetic judgment cannot derive a rational universal from a particular, but merely a regulative, aesthetic universal: an aesthetic idea. But if natural purpose is only a reflective principle, an analogy derived from comparing the products of nature to our own moral purpose, then it must be based on the idea of a possible understanding other than the human one … so that one could say that certain products of nature, as far as their possibility is concerned, must, given the particular constitution of our understanding, be considered by us as intentional and generated as ends. (5:406)

Here Kant observes that we are only aware of the contingency of human understanding by placing it in contrast to ‘other possible ones’, and one other possible one in particular: the divine, intuitive intellect, or intellectus archetypus. In contrast to the discursive nature of human understanding that can only experience the reconciliation of the antinomy in the feeling of the supersensible, intuitive understanding ‘goes from the synthetically universal (of the intuition of a whole as such) to the particular, i.e., from the whole to the parts’ (5:407). As Paul Redding notes, the operation of intuitive intellect is similar to the way that we proceed from the whole to the parts in our determination of space.⁵ We do not think of time and space,

⁵ Redding, Continental Idealism, p. 100.
but time and space are the forms of intuition that condition the possibility of what can be sensibly experienced. Unlike the understanding, which must proceed from the parts to the whole, in the divine, intuitive intellect the representation of the whole contains ‘no contingency in the combination of the parts’ (ibid.). For intuitive intellect there is no distinction between the theoretical and practical spheres, for all the ideas thought by such an understanding would exist by virtue of having been thought. Or in other words, there would be no distinction between form and content, for the singular thing and the universal are united. In this framework, Kant’s account of intellectual intuition suggests that we become conscious of the limitations of our judgment of purpose if we are able to contrast it with a divine intellect.

For Hegel, understanding human thought through the framework of what Kant described as intellectual intuition is the key to reconciling the critical system. Rather than determining the world in itself to be unknowable, reason in the sense that Kant limited to intellectual intuition is that which posits it as beyond the limits of sensible reason. By attempting to reconfigure Kant’s regulative understanding of the intuitive intellect as, to some extent, the basis of human cognition, Hegel ultimately attempts to enlarge the critical project according to a regulative procedure outlined by Kant himself. It might be said that Hegel reads Kant’s CJ as a philosophical tragedy; that is, as the philosophical presentation of two one-sided maxims that arose within the intellectual life of eighteenth century Europe: the maxim of the world as unknowable to human cognition, and the maxim of the world as knowable for the divine intellect. Such maxims cannot be reconciled by a discursive conception of reason that posits each maxim in a different realm, but by a poetic kind of reason capable of going beyond the limits of the theoretical order. Thus Hegel is not saying that we must discard the limits Kant established for thought and replace it with divine intellect that produces the world intuitively, but that both positions must be reconciled in a larger

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6 While I suggest that Hegel employs the framework of Kant’s regulative understanding of intellectual intuition in his understanding of human thought, it is important to note that, against Fichte, Hegel was reticent to use the Kantian terminology of “intellectual intuition”. In his Wissenschaftslehre, Fichte’s account of intellectual intuition begins with proposition that the “I posits itself”. In the act of intuiting oneself, the philosopher performs the act whereby the self arises for him. ‘To posit’ (setzen) means ‘to be aware of’, or “to be conscious of”, implying that the essence of I-hood lies in the assertion of one’s own self-identity. Johann Gottlieb Fichte, The Science of Knowledge, P. Heath & J. Lachs (ed. & trans), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982, p. 94. For Hegel, Fichte’s appraisal of the Kantian notion of intellectual intuition bestows critical philosophy with an overly cognitive foundation, undermining the inter-subjective dimension of consciousness. In FK (156ff.), Hegel criticizes Fichte’s account of the Ego as intellectual intuition for remaining without content.

7 As Paul Guyer explains, Hegel’s understanding of human cognition in terms of Kant’s intuitive intellect does not make an ‘internal criticism’ of Kant’s theoretical philosophy, such as arguing that certain premises are unsound or that his conclusions are invalid, but an ‘external criticism’. The significance of Guyer’s explanation is that it draws our attention to the continuity between Kant and Hegel. See Guyer, ‘Thought and Being: Hegel’s Critique of Kant’s Theoretical Philosophy’, p. 171.
understanding of thought. It is through the enlargement of thought – the radicalisation of the intuitive component of Kant’s reflective judgment – that a solution can be found.

While the significance of tragedy for Hegel’s reading of Kant will become clearer in the following section when we turn directly to Hegel’s theory of tragedy, what is important to note is that Hegel views Kant’s notion of the intuitive intellect as pushing beyond the limits of the transcendental structure of the mind. While Kant maintains that we cannot think of the world ‘in itself’, the way the world is independent of our way of seeing, it is by considering the world as it really is that makes human teleology a merely reflective principle. Yet in Hegel’s view, if the world as it really is – the world as it is in the mind of God – is unknowable, then this must be because, as Redding explains, ‘reason constitutes the mind of God in this way as unknowable, not because that mind is “in itself” unknowable’. Kant’s recognition of the antinomy leads him to identify the notion of intellectual intuition, the intellect for which form and content are one, not only providing a way the world might be considered as a whole, but also giving a vital account of what the positing of the world would be like for such an understanding. Hegel argues that by recognising this limit, human understanding can no longer constitute the world as unknowable. Rather, it recognises its constitutive role in positing the world through reason – even the realm that is unknowable. In Hegel’s view, the intellectual tragedy of Kantian thinking is overcome in this recognition.

The importance of Kant’s intuitive understanding for Hegel’s aesthetics is that it provides a model of thinking that reconciles understanding and intuition, returning life to the

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9 According to Redding, by modelling human understanding on Kant’s intuitive understanding, Hegel can be understood as responding to Jacobi’s critique of the Enlightenment in terms of nihilismus. For Jacobi, the Enlightenment move from faith to a conceptually articulated world view is nihilistic to the extent that it removes the sense of immediacy from our commitment to moral principles, not only opening the justification of morality to an infinite regress, for there is no immediate certainty that might provide self-justification to moral principles, but also disempowering the moral agent from instinctual moral behaviour. In response to Enlightenment philosophy’s supposed nihilism, Kant’s intuitive intellect not only serves Hegel with an account of morality in terms of immediate moral commitments, but also with a way of reconciling aesthetic ideas and the ideas of reason in the attempt to reconcile the Kantian dualism once and for all. See ibid.
10 Hegel also notes the significance of Kant’s intellectual intuition for completing the critical system in LA. Focusing on Kant’s aesthetic categories, Hegel argues that Kant’s concept of the beautiful ‘comes nearer to the concept organic and living,’ and yet he also notes that Kant treats the concept of organism ‘only from the point of view of reflection which judges them subjectively’ (LA 57). Because Kant’s aesthetic judgment does not come from the understanding, the faculty of concepts, Kant makes ‘this dissolution and reconciliation itself into a purely subjective one again, not one absolutely true and actual’ (58). Thus in Hegel’s view, Kant opens us to the hope of a unified system at the very moment he establishes an absolute hierarchy of reality over appearance, noumena over phenomena, being over becoming. Hegel concludes that in CJ Kant develops the ‘starting point for the true comprehension of the beauty of art, yet only by overcoming Kant’s deficiencies could this comprehension assert itself as the higher grasp of the true unity of necessity and freedom, particular and universal, sense and reason’ (60-61). This starting point, Hegel explains, begins when we recognise that Kant brings ‘the reconciled contradiction [of reason and sense] before our minds’, notably in the unity of ‘the intuitive understanding’ (57).
Ideas. Kant’s aesthetic sphere, in Hegel’s view, becomes the sphere of the Ideas of reason, for in it appearances are grasped according to the idea that is expressed through the arrangement of their parts. Thus Hegel argues that Kant’s ‘distinction of the purpose as final cause from the merely efficient cause (i.e. from what is usually called “cause”) is of the highest importance’ (EL 280), for it opens the possibility of ideas being seen as creatively unfolding in lived experience. While external purposiveness provides the concept of a complex system as the work of an intelligent designer (nexus effectivus), meaning that both ideas and forces must be imposed on matter if cognition or movement is to arise, internal purposiveness gives the concept of a system not in virtue of an external design but of its own inner nature (nexus finalis). Here the parts would be means to a system’s own inner ends or purpose, meaning that matter is itself alive and capable of its own development without external guidance. If humans are purposive in the paradigm of final causation, then they are alive in the fullest sense of the term. A world of final causation, for Hegel, contains the possibility of tragedy, for it has no external constraints.

While Hegel interprets Kant’s aesthetic sphere in terms of the Ideas of reason, Kant himself argued that the Ideas of reason are necessarily beyond experience. In order to show how this is possible, Hegel requires a new understanding of the sensuous presentation of Ideas in order to show how Kant’s theoretical and aesthetic spheres converge. Hegel finds this understanding in Aristotle’s nexus finalis and Kant’s inner purposiveness, using the term ‘inner necessity’ to elucidate the sensuous appearance of the Idea in the parts of an object. Yet unlike Kant’s understanding of reflective judgment’s search for a concept, Hegel argues that the appearance of the Idea is nothing like cognitive awareness, that is, representation (Vorstellung), but is the intuitive and immediate presentation (Darstellung) of the Idea in the experience of beauty, the presentation of an artwork’s inner necessity (what Hegel terms an artwork’s Selbstzweck). It is ‘pure’ appearance because nothing is represented; Darstellung entails that nothing remains beyond what presents itself. Just as the living being exhibits a perfect confluence of matter and form, so the work of art manifests its Idea in its sensuous

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11 Kant’s conception of the Idea builds from Plato. Plato, Kant states, used ‘the expression idea in such a way that we can readily see that he understood by it something that not only could never be borrowed from the senses, but that even goes far beyond the concepts of the understanding (with which Aristotle occupied himself), since nothing encountered in experience could ever be congruent to it’ (CPR A313/B370, emphasis mine). Yet unlike Plato, Kant argues that the Ideas of reason do not pertain to objects, but are the metaphysical analogues of physical forces: we do not borrow them from experience, but postulate them in order to explain something about experience, such as our demand for unity or our feeling of moral freedom.
content. Hegel’s understanding of beauty as the sensuous appearance of the Idea assists us to understand his understanding of the ‘Idea’. The Idea, for Hegel, is the self-identity of the Concept (Begriff) in which the singular thing and the universal are united. This is important to note, for the critique made by the Kantian’s view takes off from this point, suggesting that Hegel does not respect singularity, but reduces it to universality. For Hegel, the indeterminacy of Kant’s symbol is replaced with the Idea, for there is no ‘inner’ or ‘true’ meaning, for nothing remains veiled. To see this Idea fully manifest in sensuous form raises our spirits; it is beautiful, for in it the Idea appears in sensuous form. Thus Hegel makes his famous statement in LA that the ‘beautiful is characterized as the pure appearance (Schein) of the Idea to sense’ (111).

By understanding beauty as the appearance of the Idea, Hegel identifies both the importance of art for the history of cognition but also the limitations of art as the bearer of truth. Hegel illustrates this point in relation to the speculative development of Greek art. When the Idea of Greek sculpture makes its sensuous appearance, it compels the artists to represent the divinely inanimate figures with dimensions of interiority and subjectivity, giving birth to drama. In drama, and in tragic drama in particular, the beautiful individualities become incarnate in living individualities. Unlike works of sculpture, tragic heroes have families and social roles. They possess judgment that is subject to error. They display the struggles and conflicts that make up the Greek world, and in the performance of the tragedies

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12 See Aristotle, *De Anima*, 412a1ff. For Aristotle, there is no inner/outer contrast between form and matter. Rather, the form is causally responsible for the organisation of the outer parts, meaning that it is fully expressed in the matter: ‘matter is potentiality, form actuality’ (412a10).

13 The verb begreifen comes from greifen, which means ‘to grasp’ or ‘to seize’, and means ‘to comprehend’. The noun Begriff means both ‘concept’ and ‘conception’ in the sense of ‘ability to conceive’. According to Michael Inwood, a Begrief for Hegel is neither exclusively universal nor a representation, and nor does it refer to the characteristics that objects have in common. Rather, it entails that conceptual thought can capture empirical, emotional and religious experience, thus transforming the regular notion of concept. See Michael Inwood, *A Hegel Dictionary*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1992, p. 58f.

14 Because Hegel understands beauty in terms of Ideas, and Ideas as detached from nature, natural beauty does not play a role in Hegel’s aesthetics as it does for Kant. For Kant, in judgments of the beautiful nature leaves ‘traces’ that speak of an undergirding unity of the theoretical and practical domains, a supersensible realm that is external to human cognition. For Hegel, on the other hand, nature is spiritless (geistlos) and natural beauty has no philosophical significance: ‘What is higher about the spirit and its artistic beauty is not something merely relative in comparison to nature. On the contrary, spirit is alone the true, comprehending everything in itself, so that everything beautiful is truly beautiful only as sharing in this higher sphere and generated by it. In this sense the beauty of nature appears only as a refraction of the beauty that belongs to spirit, as an imperfect incomplete mode, a mode which in its substance is contained in the spirit itself’ (LA 2). Thus art is not an imitation of nature, for the beauty of nature is a mere refraction of the beauty that belongs to Spirit. While artworks might contain an aspect of nature to the extent that they are composed of sensible material such as stone and sounds, what makes them works of art is that their materiality is spiritualised in a composition produced by human consciousness to express the Idea.
the spectators become conscious of these struggles.\textsuperscript{15} Greek tragedy provides the transformation whereby the inner life of the Greeks, the ‘mores’ of Greek ethical life, becomes a matter of thought, meaning that \textit{art} as the presentation of the Idea is displaced by \textit{thought}. When beauty and the Idea are united in the work of art, Hegel argues that ‘art now transcends itself, in that it forsakes the element of a reconciled embodiment of spirit in sensuous form and passes over from the poetry of the imagination to the prose of thought’ (89).

Hegel’s thesis is often referred to as the ‘death of art’ thesis. It does not mean that artworks cease to be created, but that after tragedy art no longer satisfies:

\begin{quote}
The philosophy of art is … a greater need in our day than it was in days when art by itself as art yielded full satisfaction. Art invites us to intellectual consideration, and that not for the purpose of creating art again, but for knowing philosophically what art is. (\textit{LA} 11)
\end{quote}

When the medium of the Idea alters, Spirit takes a new shape: the form of religion, the immediate presence of the absolute. Hegel’s triad of Spiritual shapes – art, religion and philosophy – refer to those activities that in any given historical period define the norm on the basis of which the inhabitants of that world find their way and orientate themselves to it.\textsuperscript{16} They are, for Hegel, immanent ‘transcendental’ categories in the sense that they provide the condition of the possibility of the sense and significance of a world. Like art, religion is also a limited shape of Spirit, for those immersed in religious consciousness without the benefit of philosophy cannot grasp the limit of the absolute. It is only in the medium of philosophy, which comes after art and religion – that is, after \textit{life} – that thought can understand itself conceptually.\textsuperscript{17}

The upshot of Hegel’s aesthetics, his understanding of beautiful art as the manifestation of its idea, is that it contains no account of aesthetic judgment. As Robert Pippin notes, Hegel ‘largely ignores the question of the logical peculiarities of aesthetic judgments and their possible validity’, for he views art, as the bearer of truth, as a thing of the past.\textsuperscript{18} For the original spectators of art in the time of the Greeks, for example, Hegel suggests

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\item[15] Yet as Julian Young argues, tragic heroes are similar to sculpture in that they represent only one emotion or ethical power. See Young, \textit{The Philosophy of Tragedy}, p. 116.
\item[16] Thibodeau, \textit{Hegel and Greek Tragedy}, p. 147.
\end{footnotes}
that the Idea of the artwork would have been immediately apparent. However, when art ceases to be tied to the ethical mores of a community and becomes autonomous, the higher forms of representation, that is, religion and philosophy, displace its spiritual role of reflecting a community’s truth to itself. Art can no longer satisfy our desire for truth, for we are capable of reflecting on the true character of the infinite. In Hegel’s view, modern art is no longer linked intuitively to the ethical life of a community. It is art ‘transcending itself as art’, a manifestation of the dissatisfied life of art as a continuous tradition.\(^\text{19}\) Yet tragedy still has an important role for the speculative audience – for *us* – for it is a work that expresses the inner rationality of thought’s own development, a development that becomes lost by the fixity that the understanding attempts to bring to the dynamic Ideas of reason. While tragic art, as I will show in the following section, disrupts an inherited framework of ethical life that was held to be absolute, the *philosophy* of tragedy disrupts the fixed Ideas of traditional philosophy, opening philosophy to a new task, one that is large enough to encompass the movement of Ideas.

**4.2 Hegel’s theory of tragedy**

Now I have outlined Hegel’s understanding of aesthetics as an attempt to reconcile the critical project, I am able to examine his interpretation of tragedy. As I have already noted, two aspects of Hegel’s theory of tragedy must be separated: the original experience of tragedy for the ancient Greeks, and the philosophical implications for the speculative audience for whom ‘art invites us to intellectual consideration, and that not for the purpose of creating art again, but for knowing philosophically what art is’. The significance of the speculative implications of tragedy, I will suggest, lies in the fact that tragedy provides an alternative to the moral vision of the world posed by traditional philosophy in which an abstract universal makes reconciliation between agent and sensuous life impossible. While Kant’s theoretical philosophy ‘makes the identity of the opposites into the absolute terminus … the pure boundary which is nothing but the negation of philosophy’ (*FK* 67), tragedy, for Hegel, manifests an alternate understanding of philosophy, one that situates the so-called ‘theoretical’ nature of morality in the domain of society and history.

To outline Hegel’s theory of tragedy, it is vital to note his use of Aristotle’s understanding of tragedy in *Poetics* as a way to explain the development of a community’s

rational consciousness entirely within the bounds of experience. The significance of *Poetics*, for Hegel, lies in Aristotle’s understanding of the essence of tragedy as a process of learning wherein the hero gains an enlarged perspective from a process that occurs entirely within her experience. This process consists of three moments: reversal, recognition and catharsis. The importance of Aristotle’s understanding of these three moments, for Hegel, is that while the ‘best’ tragedies present the tragic effect occurring in the hero, the true tragic effect occurs in the spectators. Aristotle explains that in a tragic drama the spectators watch an ‘imitation (*mimēsis*) of an action (*praxeos*) that is serious (*spoudaias*) and perfect (*teleias*)’. While the action of tragedy is ‘perfect’, or better still, ‘complete’, *teleias* also has the meaning of a ‘goal’, opening us to Aristotle’s teleology. For Aristotle, *telos* is final causation, the goal that is imminent to something when it comes to completion, a goal that is necessary given its component parts. Aristotle’s teleology provides Hegel with a way to think of the hero’s action as both free and necessary. While the hero is free from external constraints, for the spectators there is no feeling that things could have been otherwise; they are aware that the course of action is necessitated by some fallibility (*harmartia*) that lay within the hero from the very beginning of the drama. While the natural order might be blind to human concerns, the spiritual order of human thought entails that the outcome of the play is determined by the hero’s way of thinking.

The key element to Aristotle’s understanding of the experience of the spectators, an element that becomes vital for Hegel’s theory of tragedy, is his notion of *katharsis*. Through participating in the necessary downfall of the hero, Aristotle tells us that the spectators are led ‘to the end of pity and fear by the *katharsis* of such emotions (*pathēmata*)’. The meaning of *katharsis*, the ‘cleansing’ of these *pathēmata*, is uncertain in Aristotle’s usage here. It appears only twice in Aristotle’s writings, and it is not clear whether it has a biological

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20 Aristotle argues that ‘the structure of the best tragedy should be not simple but complex and one that represents incidents arousing fear and pity—for that is peculiar to this form of art’. He states that in such tragedies the hero’s suffering is instrumental in the process reversal and recognition. The pity and fear, however, is ultimately a subjective response in the *spectators* through the same ‘structure and incidents of the play’. Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1452b-1453b.

21 ibid., 1449b24-28.

22 ibid.
meaning, as in a kind of relief, or a religious function, a kind of purification.\textsuperscript{23} Hegel interprets Aristotle as saying that tragedy satisfies us not though giving an explanation of why something is, but by imitating reality in such a way that reconciles us to it, calming our spirits and reorienting us to the demands and challenges of practical life. This is because imitation, \textit{mimesis}, is not a speculative practice of imitating reality as it is in Plato, but a process of learning about the world. Imitation, Aristotle explains, ‘is natural to man from childhood … he is the most imitative creature in the world, and learns first by imitation’.\textsuperscript{24} What is important about Aristotle’s mimetic account of tragedy, for Hegel, is that it portrays tragedy as a form of presentation whereby a poet naturally (or, in Hegel’s terms, immediately) raises up a community’s mode of action by presenting it in a sensuous, mediating form of presentation. In this sense, tragedy provides a way of externalising our own activity in a form in which we see ourselves reflected, giving the spectators a critical distance from what they see presented: their own ethical commitments.

For both Aristotle and Hegel, the task of theorising tragedy is not one of encompassing all the tragedies, but of outlining the ‘proper pleasure’ of tragic drama, a kind of ‘tragic idea’ that does not, like the tragedies of lesser value, pander to the whims of the public but satisfies us due to a process of learning.\textsuperscript{25} For Hegel, Aristotle’s notion of educative \textit{mimesis}, internal goal (\textit{telos}), and reconciliation (\textit{katharsis}) opens an understanding of tragedy that does not locate the suffering of the hero in an unfortunate sequence of events outside the hero’s control (an efficient cause), but as a result of the hero’s own inner state (a final cause). In this way the

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\textsuperscript{23} Apart from \textit{Poetics}, Aristotle uses \textit{katharsis} only once. In this context it is employed to describe a medical purgation. Yet reading \textit{Poetics} with this definition in mind is problematic, according to Gerald Else, for it ‘presupposes that we come to the tragic drama (unconsciously, if you will) as patients to be cured, relieved, restored to psychic health. But there is not a word to support this in the \textit{Poetics}, not a hint that the end of drama is to cure or alleviate pathological states. On the contrary it is evident in every line of the work that Aristotle is presupposing “normal” auditors, normal states of mind and feeling, normal emotional and aesthetic experience’. Else argues that Aristotle’s usage of \textit{katharsis} gives us very little to go on, meaning that we must explore the use of the word in its context in order to derive its meaning. See Gerald Else, \textit{Aristotle’s Poetics: The Argument}, London: Oxford University Press, 1957, pp. 225-6, 440.
\textsuperscript{24} Aristotle, \textit{Poetics}, 1448b5-7.
\textsuperscript{25} Aristotle’s aim in \textit{Poetics} is to identify the ‘proper pleasure’ of tragedy so that higher tragedies can be distinguished from those that are not written instruct but to entertain. Poets who aim to entertain, Aristotle explains, ‘merely follow their public, writing as its wishes dictate. But the pleasure here is not that of tragedy’. This critique is significant for Hegel, for it provides him with a way of identifying the ‘highest’ tragedies without appealing to a tragic ‘essence’. See Aristotle, \textit{Poetics}, 1453a30f.
\end{flushright}
spectators are reconciled to the suffering of the hero because they discover that her suffering is not the arbitrary result of blind fate but is due to a *telos* that is internal to her form of life.26

Building from Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Hegel begins his theory of tragedy by insisting that the tragedies do not present the collision of right and wrong where suffering is divinely justified, and neither do they present a world of irrational contingency where suffering is purely arbitrary. Rather, tragedy presents the unthinkable collision between right and right. Tragic heroes act on the conviction that the causality of their action is pure, determined by their unfettered will. Their thinking is technical to the extent that the outcome of their thinking is deemed to be consonant with reality. In presenting the activity of these heroes, Hegel argues that tragedy presents the inevitability of suffering when individuals understand the universal in a technalised way:

> The heroes of Greek classical tragedy are confronted by circumstances in which, after firmly identifying themselves with the one ethical ‘pathos’ which alone corresponds to their own already established nature, they necessarily come into conflict with the opposite but equally justified ethical power. (*LA* 1226)

Each hero identifies him or herself with an ethical power and cannot accept the legitimacy of the opposed view. Thus by acting out their commitments they come into collision with what contradicts them. Moreover, by unreflectively acting according to an ethical power, it is not simply the two agents that come into collision, but the institutions that contribute to their immediate view, such as the family and the state. Hegel calls this order of ethical commitments *Sittlichkeit*, which is usually translated as ‘ethical life’. *Sittlichkeit* shares an etymological origin with *Sitten*, which refers to the ‘mores’ or ‘customs’ of a people, encompassing the sharable forms of life that lie in the language and mores of the individuals that make up a community.27 In Hegel’s terms, ethical life is the ‘immediate truth’ of spirit, the relationship of the citizens to their world without the mediation of subjective reflection (*PS* 271). Our ethical life paradoxically drives the agent to bring about what is, for fulfilling their obligations is what sustains them in being.

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26 This definition of tragedy seems to be limited to tragedies such as Sophocles’ *Antigone* and Aeschylus’ *Eumenides*. Some scholars have pointed out that Hegel notes a second kind of tragedy that broadens his view to encompass a wider range of the tragedies such as *Oedipus Rex*. Such tragedies involve a conflict between (a) the right of the protagonist to own what it knows he has done and (b) the course of actions that have been ordained by the gods that have been unknowingly carried out. These tragedies dramatise the irreconcilable collision between the monstrous forces at play on human lives and the spontaneous freedom of the human will. This chapter focuses on Hegel’s first theory of tragedy, as the second theory does not emerge until his *LA* and is not integrated into his philosophy in the same way as the first theory. See Houlgate, *Hegel, Nietzsche and the Criticism of Metaphysics*, p. 182 ff.
It is worth noting the recent metaphysical realist reading of Hegel for assisting us to understand the importance of Sittlichkeit for Hegel’s theory of tragedy. While the Kantian’s view charges Hegel with transporting a pre-critical notion of reason into Kant’s critical philosophy, the metaphysical realist view assists us to see that Sittlichkeit provides a way for Hegel to locate the ontological structure of thought in substantial life, thus identifying an imminent conception of reason at the same time as restoring substance to Kant’s abstract metaphysics. For Robert Williams, Hegel’s notion of Sittlichkeit is aimed to reconcile the dualism Kant set between morality and aesthetics, for in ethical life there is no gap between what ought to be and what is.  

Moralität, on the other hand, refers to an abstract conception of morality that is separate from aesthetic culture, for it sets an obligation to realise what does not yet exist. Building from Houlgate and Dudley, Williams’ reading of Hegel’s Sittlichkeit suggests that Hegel’s major issue with the Kantian infinite is that it creates a dualism between the theoretical and practical, meaning that morality never becomes substantial but continually condemns the social order of its finitude. For Kant, while the aesthetic sphere might be free from the fixed, transcendental categories, the moral sphere is fixed and separated from substantial life by an abyss. Thus Kantian subjectivity finds itself ‘burdened with an absolute barrier that cannot be crossed’, becoming the locus of an irreconcilable antinomy.

The metaphysical realist view shows that Hegel’s notion of Sittlichkeit confronts Kant’s theoretical conception of morality. If we understand tragedy in terms of ethical life, the heroes do not ‘choose’ a course of action as autonomous individuals, or to put it in Kantian terms, practical reason does not legislate to their material impulses. Indeed, an antinomy between two Kantian moral agents is unthinkable. On the contrary, Hegel’s theory of agency rejects the ‘inner-outer’ distinction where an inner state causes an outer bodily reaction. The heroes act according to an immediate ethical commitment, meaning that each has justification, and yet each is one-sided:

The original essence of tragedy consists … in the fact that within such a conflict each of the opposed sides, if taken by itself, has justification; while each can establish the true and

28 Williams, Tragedy, Recognition, and the Death of God, p. 128.
29 ibid., p. 11.
30 In CPR Kant argues that it is necessary to preserve the separation of the theoretical from the practical order in order to maintain the purity of freedom. Freedom requires that individuals are genuinely responsible for the choices they make, meaning that their choices must be spontaneous: an ‘act of itself, without requiring to be determined to action by an antecedent cause’ (A533/B561). Freedom depends on the will, ‘a power of self-determination, independently of any coercion through sensuous impulses’ (A534/B562). Thus, as William Dudley informs us, Kantian freedom is ‘metaphysical’, for it requires both a noumenal locus of causality outside experience and a theoretical order of moral law, both of which must be autonomous from the established code of ethics in a given society if it is to be truly free. Dudley, Hegel, Nietzsche and Philosophy, p. 5.
positive content of its own aim and character only by denying and infringing the equally justified power of the other. The consequence is that in its ethical life, and because of it, each is nevertheless involved in guilt [Schuld]. (LA 1196)

It is ‘because of’ ethical life – the fate that throws them into action – that the heroes become guilty. In this sense, tragic guilt does not come from doing what is wrong but from doing what is right. Moreover, it comes from doing what is right and therefore infringing on an opposed right. While Kantian Moralität stresses the inner will and intention of the agent, meaning that the agent is guilty to the extent that they violate a moral law, the tragic agent is deemed guilty regardless of his knowledge or intentions. The Kantian moral universe is devoid of struggle and opposition other than with one’s own inclinations. The tragic universe, on the other hand, is one in which the deep ethical commitments of those who make up the society can lead them to be both right and wrong at the same moment. Building from Aristotle’s conception of tragedy that we noted earlier, Hegel argues that the collision of ethical powers is fated from the outset; not by an external fate but through a fate that is internal to the form of life that draws them into conflict. What appears as ‘blind fate’ or ‘dreadful fate’ for the hero is, from the vantage of the spectators, a ‘rational fate’ that unfolds according to a proper principle (PS 278). The spectators can see the impending collision from the opening of the play, meaning that the resulting suffering is not contingent but had to be so; it is necessary. Thus the true effect of tragedy, for Hegel, lies in the spectators. Rather than concluding that the moral order is full of irreconcilable powers, thus searching for another world in which the dualism can be reconciled, by grasping the necessity of the suffering the spectators are reconciled to it.

Like Aristotle, Hegel identifies the ‘best tragedies’ as those in which the (original) spectators join in the reversal-recognition of the hero. In this framework, the greatest example of tragedy for Hegel is Sophocles’ Antigone. In Antigone, the tragic collision arises because

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32 In Hegel’s early essay ‘Natural Law’, the primary example of tragedy is not Antigone but Eumenides, the final tragedy of the Oresteia Trilogy. The final scene of the Eumenides presents the litigation between the Eumenides (the ancient, brutish powers the law, standing for the dead Clytemnestra) and Apollo (the god of light and justice, standing for Orestes) before the people of Athens. The Athenians put equal votes in each side, meaning that Athene must step in to arbitrate. Athens restores Orestes and reconciles the people to the Eumenides, and she is enthroned above the acropolis and the people are pacified. After discussing the significance of this scene, Hegel concludes with the following: ‘Tragedy consists in this, that ethical nature segregates its inorganic nature (in order not to become embroiled in it), as a fate, and places it outside of itself; and by acknowledging this fate in the struggle against it, ethical nature is reconciled with the Divine being as the unity of both’. In PS, however, Hegel ceases to refer to the Eumenides and draws extensively from Antigone. This change is important, for while the Eumenides refers to the reconciliation of ethical life as ‘Divine being’ that occurs in the drama itself, requiring a Deus ex machina in the form of Athene’s arbitration, in Antigone the reconciliation occurs in the spectators as the bearers of ethical life. Moreover, the reconciliation in Antigone, for Hegel, is rational, for the spectators come to see the suffering of Antigone and Creon was necessary given the fracture of ethical life. See G. W. F. Hegel, Natural Law: The Scientific Ways of Treating Natural Law, Its Place in Moral Philosophy, and Its Relation to the Positive Sciences of Law, trans. T. Knox, USA: University of Pennsylvania State Press, 1975, pp. 104-5.
Creon and Antigone both act according to their social roles and commitments: Antigone has the absolute duty to perform the burial procedure for her brother, and Creon has the absolute duty to protect the city from traitors. While they are individual actors they also express the general conditions of Greek ethical life in their behaviour. In particular, both Antigone and Creon are bound to their ethical commitments on what the Greeks thought to be a ‘natural’ basis, allowing Hegel to explain the splitting of ethical substance in a way that renders Spirit’s development as a confluence of necessity (as a natural endowment) and contingency (as dependent upon a will). He states that

Nature, not the accident of circumstances or choice, assigns one sex to one law, the other to the other law; or conversely, the two ethical powers themselves give themselves an individual existence and actualise themselves in the two sexes. (PS 280)

The female side of the collision represents the family, life and death: the particular elements of life that are prior to the social participation that the polis entails. Thus construed, the ethical action of women represents the citizens’ existential features encompassed in their particularity. On the other hand, the male citizen represents the political and public sphere of ethical life. This involves the laws created by humans, or the universal elements of life that male citizens enter by participating in the life of the polis.

Because ethical life is made actual in the action of those individuals who have internalised general patterns of behaviour, it is by acting that they draw the contradictions that lie implicit within their orientation to ethical life into appearance. They act freely, but in doing so they become guilty and draw the conflict between ethical powers into presence, a conflict that must be found to be necessary if ethical life is to achieve ‘a stable equilibrium of all the parts’ if Spirit is to be ‘at home in this whole’ (277). Through the development of ethical life, Hegel informs us that we find that Spirit does not develop arbitrarily or on the paradigm of ‘might is right’. Rather, Spirit is ‘consciousness that has Reason’; it is a ‘shape’ of consciousness that is ‘determined by Reason’ (265). It is not simply a shape of Spirit where reason comes to be used instrumentally as in Kant’s moral subject, but where the ethical life, the immediate commitments to which each subject is bound, are shaped and determined by a rational process.

Thus it seems reasonable to conclude that the significance of tragedy for Hegel’s reading of ethical life is that it provides a framework through which to understand the rational

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development of consciousness. In this account, consciousness becomes aware of its inner tensions through the rational shape of the reversal/recognition process, thereby reconciling these tensions in an enlarged form of consciousness. When the ethical commitments of Greek life appear in tragic art, right collides with right. The spectators are thrown into a state of sublime discomfort, finding themselves out of their state of homeliness. The tragic resolution occurs in the thought of the spectators who, like Aristotle’s audience, come to grasp the necessity of the collision and enlarge their one-sided understanding of ethical commitment:

The true development of the action [of tragedy] consists solely in the cancellation of conflicts as conflicts; in the reconciliation of the powers animating action which struggled to destroy one another in their mutual conflict. Only in that case does finality lie not in misfortune but in the satisfaction of spirit, because only in such a conclusion can the necessity of what happens to the individuals appear as absolute rationality, and only then can our hearts be morally at peace: shattered by the fate of the heroes but reconciled fundamentally. Only by adherence to this view can Greek tragedy be understood. (LA 1215)

The development of tragedy does not eliminate conflict, but removes the one-sided character of conflicts that render them un-reconcilable. To return to the example of Antigone, neither Antigone nor Creon can accept the justification provided by the other, and both must reinforce to themselves the sanctity of their own view by expelling the other. Through the suffering that entails, Antigone in her death sentence and Creon in the destruction of his household, the spectators come to see that both ethical commitments are one-sided. Acknowledging one-sidedness allows both commitments to come to a stable equilibrium wherein the conflict between them disappears as each ethical power mutually recognises the legitimacy of the other. For reconciliation to occur, the spectators must recognise the justification of both points of view and gain an enlarged perspective that maintains the demands of the family and the state within a greater whole. This is not a mediated task where they must ‘search for’ a new idea in which to capture both ethical powers. Rather, to question the validity of their own ethical power is to deny its unshakability. Once the heroes or the spectators recognise that each ethical power has justification, they are transformed; their previous understanding of ethical life is superseded by a new ‘shape’ of consciousness.

Because the tragic collision like that between Antigone and Creon is not contingent or divinely adjudicated but is due to a rational fate, the reconciliation, for Hegel, is satisfying:

In Greek tragedy [the reconciliation] is eternal justice which, as the absolute power of fate, saves and maintains the harmony of the substance of the ethical order against the particular powers which were becoming independent and therefore colliding, and because of the inner rationality of its sway we are satisfied when we see individuals coming to ruin. (LA 1230)
Reconciliation marks the end of tragic art, for the spectators no longer have an immediate relation to ethical life but a reflective, mediated relation. What was disharmonious is brought into harmony through the ‘inner rationality’ exhibited in the tragic effect. Hegel claims to lay bare what is satisfying about the tragic effect by understanding it in terms of the satisfaction of reason.

4.3 Interpreting Hegel

Thus far it has been established that Hegel’s theory of tragedy provides a framework through which to understand the speculative power of thought to reconcile reason and ethical life. This involves a twofold task of recognising the ability of Greek tragedy to overcome the shape of Spirit that is bound to an immediate attachment to ethical life, and the ability of the philosophy of tragedy to overcome the Kantian dualism of sense and reason in an enlarged, constitutive account of thought. Having established the implications of Hegel’s theory of tragedy, we are able to evaluate his theory in light of the Kantian and metaphysical realist interpretations. In this section I will argue that while the metaphysical realist view allows us to see Hegel’s insightful critique of Kant’s refusal to reconcile nature and freedom philosophically, the Kantian’s view, despite its failings, reveals Hegel’s inability to see the significance of Kant’s insistence of the unknowability of the aesthetic sphere. The task of examining the success of Hegel’s rejection of the unknowability of the aesthetic sphere, from this view, is to find whether his theory is capable of resisting alternative narratives of history. In the following section I will consider one such narrative in Walter Benjamin’s account of tragedy’s origin.

Before examining the success of the Kantian and metaphysical realist views, it is important to first identify the their main issues of concern. The Kantian’s view argues that the notion of tragic reconciliation as ‘eternal justice’ renders Hegel as an anti-tragic philosopher who attempts to remove the contingency from ethical life. Proponents of this view take up Kant’s scepticism about metaphysics and oppose the metaphysical pretentions they see in Hegel. Bradley puts forward such a view in his essay ‘Hegel’s Theory of Tragedy’ (1909), attacking Hegel’s notion of reconciliation. In Bradley’s view, ‘even if we felt that the catastrophe was by a rational necessity involved in the divine and accomplished purpose of the world’, we should be morally outraged at it.\textsuperscript{34} Hegel’s notion of reconciliation displays a

\textsuperscript{34} Bradley, ‘Hegel’s Theory of Tragedy’, p. 379.
naive ‘enthusiasm for the affirmative’, Bradley argues, rushing over the tragic conflict in order to find a transcendent meaning that could render tragic suffering meaningful. Bradley’s argument insists that Hegel oversteps the limits of critical philosophy by positing a totalising metaphysics that claims to reveal a trajectory within ethical life that moves toward greater unity. The agents of history, like Antigone, are unfortunate casualties in the development of Spirit toward greater synthesis, and while she might suffer, and multitudes with her, the ‘wounds of the Spirit heal, and leave no scars behind’ (PS 407, emphasis mine). Similarly, Sebastian Gardner argues that Hegel can only maintain the connection between tragedy and ethical development by stepping outside the experience of tragic art so as to view the perspective of tragedy as merely partial, [which] is to break faith with the experience of tragedy, to fail to give it its due.36

Gardner argues that by holding the ‘finality’ of tragedy as reconciliation, something that lies beyond tragic presentation, Hegel occludes the singularity of tragic suffering. For Gardner and Bradley, tragedy is dysteleological, a monstrous, particular moment of pain that confronts any attempt to find a telos or necessity that would render it meaningful. For Kant, the monstrous is a magnitude of experience that surpasses the sublime, for its greatness ‘annihilates the end (Zweck) which its concept constitutes’ (5:253), thus destroying any return to teleological sensibility. The Kantian’s view concludes that Hegel dismisses Kant’s critical move and returns to a dogmatic kind of metaphysics that justifies the necessity of suffering in the development of a rational whole, rendering suffering as mere appearance and the development of Spirit as reality.

The metaphysical realist view begins by defending Hegel against the attacks made by the Kantian’s view. The portrayal of Hegel theory of tragedy as a return to pre-critical metaphysics, for the metaphysical realist, is ultimately a caricature of his system. In particular, proponents of metaphysical realist view aim to show the failure of the Kantian’s view to recognise that Hegel does not depart from Kant’s critical project but aims to correct it. In Williams’ view, for example, Hegel’s notion of reconciliation is only a return to dogmatic metaphysics if we read him through ‘the Kantian frame’.37 By remaining committed to Kant’s critique of metaphysics, Williams argues that thinkers such as Bradley and Gardner fail to see

35 ibid., p. 374. More recently, Nussbaum argues that Hegel’s reading of tragedy in terms of the reconciliation of opposing forces within an ethical order is the ultimate progressive fantasy of modernity, turning on the belief that ‘the very possibility of conflict or tension between different spheres of value will be altogether eliminated’. Nussbaum, The Fragility of Goodness, p. 68.
37 Williams, Tragedy, Recognition and the Death of God, p. 174.
that Hegel aims to move Kant’s philosophy beyond the problematic borders of theoretical philosophy. Bradley, for example, can only argue that Hegel oversteps critical philosophy by remaining committed to the Kantian dualism, leaving the ‘prejudices of ordinary modes of cognition totally uncontested’.³⁸ For Williams, Bradley fails to identify exactly what kind of reason he uses to call Hegel to account. By interpreting tragic suffering as morally outrageous, Bradley relies on an unacknowledged system of Moralität that is autonomous from ethical life, thus, albeit unwillingly, reproducing a moral dualism. He ignores Hegel’s understanding of reason as an inner purpose and accuses him of transposing an infinite notion of rationality onto the dynamics of history, presuming a view of tragedy as the presentation of irresolvable contradiction. In this sense, Williams is correct, for if Hegel’s philosophy departs from Kant, it cannot be a return to a pre-critical understanding of reason as impassable, theoretical power. As we have seen, it puts forward a view of reason as something that is manifest within the alteration of history.

The importance of Williams’ metaphysical realist reading is that it assists us to see that Hegel seeks to advance Kant’s revolution against (traditional) metaphysics. Kant denies that we can have the kinds of knowledge to which pre-critical metaphysics aspires, and Hegel agrees. Kant advances a conception of freedom in terms of self-determination, and Hegel agrees. Yet Williams argues that Hegel then goes beyond Kant, for he found it necessary to alter the frame of Kant’s critical project in order to advance to critique of metaphysics. Houlgate concurs with Williams, arguing that it is Hegel’s attempt to advance Kant’s critique of metaphysics that leads him to provide a new ontology that provides an ‘alternative to Kant’s “Metaphysical Deduction” in the Critique of Pure Reason’, restoring content to metaphysical claims in the face of Kant’s critique.³⁹ In the metaphysical deduction, Kant identifies the concepts of the understanding from the logical forms of judgment, arguing that these concepts are ‘pure’ (i.e. without content), thereby rendering them separate from the content that is judged. Houlgate argues that for Hegel, Kant’s metaphysical deduction holds the concepts of the understanding on the opposite side of an impassable chasm from our experience of nature, thus preserving the metaphysical dualism between concept and object. Thus Hegel can only advance the critique of metaphysics, Houlgate argues, by establishing that ‘concept,’ ‘judgment,’ and ‘syllogism’ do not simply name logical structures, as they do for Kant, but ‘structures in nature, and so in being itself, not just forms of human

³⁸ ibid., p. 168.
understanding and reason’. It is only by restoring content to the concepts, in this view, that the critical project can overcome traditional metaphysics.

The metaphysical realist view diagnoses Kant’s separation of abstract morality and material life in terms of a tragic dualism, identifying the only solution to this dualism as Hegel’s speculative reading of history in terms of ontology. Speculative thinking considers world history as a tragic drama that transposes Kant’s theoretical court of reason to the practical court of world judgment:

World history is this divine tragedy, where spirit rises up above pity, ethical life, and everything that in other spheres is sacred to it. … But what has been laid low, has been laid low and had to be laid low. World spirit is unsparing and pitiless. … Nothing profounder can be said than Schiller’s words, ‘World history is a court of world judgment’. No people ever suffered wrong; what it suffered, it had merited. The court of world judgement is not to be viewed as the mere might of spirit … World history, on the other hand, is always on the advance to something higher.41

Because art is not free but expressive of the ethical mores of a community, Hegel argues that tragedy is an art form that is akin to life in the Aristotelian sense; to the telos expressed in human history. Tragedy displaces the fixity of moral absolutes that furnish the Kantian court of reason and frames spiritual life in such a way that enables us to reconcile what has been ‘laid low’ into criteria that can be used for judgment. Philosophy, following the intuitive medium of tragic presentation, turns to historical events as aesthetic phenomena. Historical events are seen to manifest beautiful form; that is, give a presentation of the Idea. In the same way that tragedy reconciles us to the suffering of the heroes, philosophy reconciles us to historical suffering so that we might be ‘morally at peace’ with what unfolds.

For Robert Bernasconi, the identity Hegel claims between philosophy and history does not heal the Kantian dualism, but produces a new intellectual tragedy. Bernasconi draws our attention to Hegel’s words that follow from the above passage, where Hegel argues that the peoples who do not bear the work of Spirit are rightly trampled under foot, that the atrocities of the Roman empire were justified because ‘it was the right of world spirit’, and that ‘the absolute idea of spirit has absolute right against anything else’. For Bernasconi, to claim that ‘no people ever suffered wrong’ and that suffering is ‘deserved’ expresses an intellectual tragedy, for it reveals Hegel’s commitment to a moral view of the world where the good (in

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40 ibid., p. 116.
41 Hegel, Lectures on Natural Right and Political Science (1917-18), pp. 306-307.
42 ibid., pp. 307-308.
the form of the rational) is rewarded and the bad (in the form of the irrational) is punished.\textsuperscript{43} Thus Hegel can say that ‘as grievous as it may be to watch [Spirit] trample [the rights of non-Spirit bearing peoples] under foot’, we can be reconciled to this fate because it is rational.\textsuperscript{44} Bernasconi concludes that his theory is ‘anti-tragic’, for it suggests that all suffering comes from a rational error. It claims that Spirit, the shape of consciousness that has reason, can heal the human condition from suffering.

For Williams, Bernasconi’s critique fails to consider Hegel’s theory of tragedy on its own terms. Bernasconi’s charge only has force, he argues, ‘if one presupposes the moral vision of the world’; that is, if one is already committed to the tragic dualism between abstract morality and material life.\textsuperscript{45} What Bernasconi fails to note, according to Williams, is that the tragedies do not present suffering that is irrational. Rather, they present situations that could have been otherwise had the hero recognised her fallibility, yielded and recognised the legitimacy of the opposed ethical power. Williams corrects the tendency of the Kantian reading of Hegel to deny the Aristotelian element of tragedy whereby the heroes come to discover, through suffering, an error that lay in their understanding. In his view, Hegel’s theory of tragedy powerfully illuminates many of the tragedies that present suffering as the result of human error, as well as many events in history that can be understood through the reversal/recognition dynamic. Williams aims to defend Hegel by appealing to ‘Hegel’s tragic view of world history that is plainly evident in the text’.\textsuperscript{46} The rise of Spirit to a higher stage is not only an advance, he states, but is also tragic. Thus for Williams, Hegel’s reading of history does not endorse the cynical view that might makes right, that is, that whatever prevails is right. For Hegel, he argues, the ‘judgment of history is rational to the extent that it preserves and upholds right’.\textsuperscript{47}

However, while Williams is correct to note that many of the tragedies do present suffering that is rational to the extent that the hero’s fall is internal to their own being, he fails to note that Bernasconi’s attack is not so much against Hegel’s reading of tragedy as it is about the identity he posits between philosophy and history. While Bernasconi aims his critique at Hegel’s reading of tragedy, he ultimately questions whether we can move from aesthetic theory to history in order to claim that all suffering is deserved without merely

\textsuperscript{44} Hegel, \textit{Lectures on Natural Right and Political Science} (1917-18), p. 308.
\textsuperscript{45} Williams, \textit{Tragedy, Recognition, and the Death of God}, p. 364.
\textsuperscript{46} ibid.
\textsuperscript{47} ibid., p. 366.
transposing a theory of tragedy onto historical events. Claiming that some events in history are analogous to tragedy might have some validity, for Bernasconi, but to claim that all suffering is deserved is to claim that the philosophy of tragedy is adequate to history. Hegel’s system requires that we accept his theory as adequate not only to tragedy but also to history, because ‘only in such a conclusion can the necessity of what happens to the individuals appear as absolute rationality, and only then can our hearts be morally at peace: shattered by the fate of the heroes but reconciled fundamentally’ (LA 1215). By grasping the absolute rationality of world history, Hegel argues that philosophy can turn everything from the fall of Greece to the failure of the French Revolution into an aesthetic phenomenon that constitutes a moment in the development of Spirit toward greater self-awareness. The task of philosophy is to survey history in such a way as to reconcile us to the suffering we find, thus allowing our hearts to be morally at peace.  

The problem for Williams’ reading of Hegel is that if some suffering proves to be irrational, if some historical events resist his theory and frustrate our desire for moral peace, then his system cannot ultimately claim to exhaust reality or be adequate to its Idea. For Williams, examples of dysteleological suffering are not a problem for Hegel because his ‘metaphor of the slaughterhouse expresses the irrationality of radical evil’.  

Hegel’s argument is that in the irrational slaughterhouse of history, Spirit emerges as consciousness that has reason, that is, consciousness that can call slaughter to account. Yet Williams’ concession faces a difficulty he fails to recognise. If Hegel’s theory of tragedy were to admit the irrationality of some suffering, then our hearts would not be restored to moral peace; that is, not unless we were to calculate suffering to be worth the rational benefits. If some events cannot be contained by Hegel’s systematic attempt to describe the rationality of history, then we cannot say that his theory of tragedy is adequate to its object. Instead, his theory would describe some moments wherein historical development mirrored the logic of tragic art, just as his theory of tragedy might be said to describe only those tragedies that manifest the reversal-recognition structure. If Hegel’s theory cannot exhaust all cases it would not stand the resistance that alternate conceptions of historical development might pose to his own hypothesis.

48 In the PS (277) Hegel develops the image of being ‘at home in the world’ in the section on ‘Spirit’. Being at home in the world signals a position in which spirit ‘does not seek its satisfaction outside of itself but finds it within itself, because it is itself in this equilibrium with the whole’. It signals spirit’s both being satisfied and its being able to give account for why it is satisfied.

49 One of Williams’ key motifs in his defence of Hegel’s theory of tragedy is Hegel’s reference to history as a ‘slaughterhouse’ (G. W. F. Hegel, Lectures on the Philosophy of History, trans. J. Sibree New York: Dover, 1956, § 24). For Williams, Hegel is vastly aware of irrational suffering, holding that history is rational insofar as right is preserved. This argument, in my opinion, turns on a presumed notion of right that cannot be defended by Hegel’s theory of tragedy. Williams, Tragedy, Recognition, and the Death of God, p. 372.
narrative. In the following section I consider one such narrative in the work of Walter Benjamin. If Hegel’s theory proves unable to resist alternative narratives of history, such as that put forward by Benjamin, then the identity Hegel claims between his system and history would fail to acquire the absolute status it demands.

4.4 Walter Benjamin’s *Ursprung*

Thus far it has been argued that the Kantian’s view fails to note that Hegel’s conditioned, immanent notion of reason does not return to a pre-critical metaphysics, but aims to extend critical philosophy into new territory. However, it has also been argued, contrary to the metaphysical realist view, that by conjoining philosophy and history, Hegel displaces the subjective task of judgment that must, according to Kant, remain primary to the speculative exercise of reason if we are to save thought from mistaking its private conditions with reality. In this final section I consider Walter Benjamin’s *Origin of German Tragic Drama* (*GT*), which provides an interpretation of Kant’s *CJ* that is not amenable to Hegel’s project but poses a fundamental challenge to it. The significance of Benjamin’s *GT*, I will suggest, is that it provides an alternative post-Kantian tradition to Hegel’s dialectic, showing that Hegel’s desire to escape the representational paradigm of aesthetics – a desire I will also identify in Nietzsche and Heidegger’s understanding of tragedy – renders his philosophical project subject to intellectual tragedy. Benjamin’s interpretation of tragedy recognises the legitimacy of Hegel’s critique of Kant’s false infinite and yet retains Kant’s representational understanding of cognition. In this regard, his understanding of Hegel’s theory of tragedy fits neither the Kantian nor the metaphysical realist view. His reflections on tragedy reveal that Hegel’s understanding of aesthetics fails to exhaust the tragedies, calling us to reconsider the representational paradigm of aesthetics rejected by his system.50

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50 By reconsidering the notion of representation that is rejected by Hegel (and, I will suggest, by Nietzsche and Heidegger), this thesis embarks on a controversial project. Yet as I will claim in my discussion of Nietzsche and Heidegger, and in Castoriadis appraisal of a representational aesthetics, to reconsider representation does not require that we return to a Cartesian standpoint that considers the veracity of the mind’s representations as a judge considers a legal argument. In the introductory essay to *Beyond Representation*, entitled ‘From Representation to Poiesis’, Richard Eldridge calls for a similar reconsideration of representation, and yet concludes that representation must be replaced with poiesis. When considered in light of Aristotle’s poiesis, Eldridge states that representations (such as artworks) ‘both represent subjects and their interests, and yet also fail to do so: as products of imaginative power calling to ways of cultural life not yet in being, they lead to an ongoing and unmasterable historicity of human life’. While Eldridge suggests that understanding cognition as poiesis ought to lead us beyond representation, for it destroys the Cartesian question of the correspondence of representation and reality, this thesis suggests that it leads us to reconsider the original intention of Kant’s appraisal of representation, and, in particular, how Kant’s representational aesthetics provided a way to respond to the tragedy of philosophy. As Eldridge himself notes, for both Aristotle and Kant, representation cannot be
Benjamin’s narrative of history explicitly confronts Hegel’s view, for it begins with the assumption that art cannot be understood as the presentation of an Idea in sensuous form. Hegel’s attempt to identify a pure concept of tragedy, for Benjamin, reveals an artificial, rule-based theory of genre that misunderstands the nature of genre categories. In Benjamin’s view, tragedy is neither prescriptive nor empirically comprehensive. Rather, like any genre, it is introduced by a ‘significant work’ that violates the limits of a previous mode of presentation.

To explain this concept of violation Benjamin introduces the notion of origin (Ur sprung), describing the work of a transgressive piece of art that becomes a norm:

Origin [Ursprung], although an entirely historical category, has, nevertheless nothing to do with genesis [Entstehung]. The term origin is not intended to describe the process by which the existent came into being, but rather to describe that which emerges from the process of becoming and disappearance. Origin is an eddy in the stream of becoming, and in its current it swallows the material involved in the process of genesis. That which is original is never revealed in the naked and manifest existence of the factual; its rhythm is apparent only to a dual insight. On the one hand it needs to be recognised as a process of restoration and reestablishment, but, on the other hand, and precisely because of this, as something imperfect and incomplete. There takes place in every original phenomenon a determination of the form in which an idea will constantly confront the historical world, until it is revealed fulfilled, in the totality of its history. (GT 45-46)

Despite Hegel’s speculative attempt to grasp the meaning of art, Benjamin argues that the artwork remains what it was: pure individuality. To argue that philosophy is able to uncover historical laws that govern genre exhibits a form of intellectual tragedy, he suggests, for it constructs a model of history as a dichromic continuum rather than recognising that all accounts of history, due to the radical singularity of all that appears, are the object of construction.51

Considering the artwork as pure individuality retains a totality that resists synthesis into a greater movement of history, thus preserving its ability to ‘constantly confront the historical world’. Benjamin does not reject Hegel’s notion of the Idea of tragedy in order to return to Kant’s notion of the symbol, however, which might be employed as an underdetermined alternative to the Hegelian Idea. For Benjamin, the uptake of Kant’s notion of symbol by the romantic philosophers ultimately proved to overshadow his immensely important notion of the aesthetic idea. Kant’s notion of the symbol, Benjamin argues, proved unable to resist the romantic ‘notion of the symbol that has nothing more than the name in common with the genuine notion’ (159). The romantic notion of symbol ‘insists on an

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invisible unity of form and content’ (160), which is far from Kant’s meaning of the term. While understanding the symbol as the unity of form and content provides the romantic with an ‘immeasurably comforting effect’, it ends up serving as ‘the philosophical extenuation of that impotence which … fails to do justice to content in formal analysis and to form in the aesthetics of content’ (ibid.). Benjamin’s scepticism of the notion of symbol confronts Hegel’s notion of beauty as the sensuous appearance of the Idea. The concept of the symbol is ‘abused’, he argues, ‘whenever in the work of art the “manifestation” of an “idea” is declared a symbol’ (ibid.). Rather than unsettling us by alerting us to the abyss between sign and signified, enlarging our vision to transgressive creativity, the symbol is posited as the anticipation of freedom, for it contains a *telos* of semiotic identity with its sign. Benjamin argues that when such a relation is declared, the unity of the material and transcendental object is ‘distorted into a relationship between appearance and essence’, for nothing remains beyond the particularity of the artwork (ibid.).

Benjamin puts forward an alternative to the notion of symbol in his notion of ‘the speculative counterpart’ of symbol: allegory (161). He gives attention to modern forms of tragedy, arguing that the seventeenth-century form of tragedy (*Trauerspiel*) confronts the nineteenth century romantic understanding of symbol with, to use Eagleton’s words, a ‘profound gulf between materiality and meaning’, a gulf across which a connection between the two persists in an underdetermined fashion. The seventeenth-century was preoccupied with allegory, a profoundly visual form, and yet what comes to appearance in the allegory is nothing visual but the materiality of allegory itself. In Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, for example, we find a break between nature and meaning, for the plot of history is reduced to signs and fragments in need of deciphering. The breach between nature and meaning, between sign and signifier, is due to God’s withdrawal. Milton’s attempt to justify God’s dealings with humankind requires an awkward and discursive style in order to bridge the abyss. From God’s point of view, God’s acts in creation are purely symbolic and have an immediacy of meaning, while from the point of view of the fallen creation those acts must be decoded and reassembled in a narrative form such as poetry that must lay bare its own devices.

The significance of allegory, for Benjamin, is that it retains the representational character of art, thus confronting Hegel’s ‘romantic’ attempt to remove the abyss between sign and signifier without reproducing Kant’s practical-theoretical dualism. Allegory, he argues, first developed in classicism as a ‘dark background against which the symbol might

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While symbol relates to ‘being’, acting as a ‘sign for ideas, which is self-contained, concentrated’, allegory relates to ‘sign’, acting as a ‘successively progressing, dramatically mobile, dynamic representation of ideas which has acquired the very fluidity of time’ (ibid.). In other words, when we understand the artwork in terms of Being, it is limited to a determinate meaning that we must recognise. The notion of allegory, on the other hand, opens an underdetermined meaning, thereby rendering the meaning-making process as historical praxis itself. This is to say that what appears in the form of pain and destruction is, in the symbol, idealised, meaning that ‘the transfigured face of nature is fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption’ (ibid.). In ‘the context of allegory’, alternatively, ‘the image is only a signature, only the monogram of essence, not the essence itself in a mask’ (ibid.).

Benjamin’s insistence on the ability of allegory to retain the suffering and pain of history confronts the tendency of symbol to occlude the underside of history beneath the idea of rational progress. While symbol transfigures the ‘face of nature’ in idealised form, allegory confronts us with a very different face: ‘the facies hippocratica of history as a petrified, primordial landscape’ (166). The facies hippocratica, the ‘Hippocratic face’, is the change produced in the face by impending death. Thus allegory is facies hippocratica because it ‘corresponds to the ancient gods in the deadness of its concrete materiality’ (224). It is the “vaporisation” … of theological essences’, ‘an appreciation of the transience of things’, a mode of thinking that establishes itself where ‘transitoriness and eternity confronted each other most closely’ (223-4). Allegory emerges in the in-between space left after the gods have departed but their presence remains a distinct memory corresponding ‘to the ancient gods in the deadness of its concrete tangibility’ (226). It is thus a sign that throws us back onto the materiality of signification, both ‘convention and expression’, maintaining the transgressive dimension of Kant’s aesthetic ideas that ruptures a previous configuration of meaning and confronts its audience with the task of thinking more than exists in the sign (175). Allegory and Trauerspiel manifest a negative kind of dialectic that confronts Hegelian rational development, entailing that philosophy does not lead to a higher form of presentation but regresses to a new form of myth.

What is important about Benjamin’s understanding of Trauerspiel is that it refigures the notion of representation from symbol to allegory, thereby refiguring the notion of Greek

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53 Hippocrates describes the facies hippocratica as follows ‘the nose sharp, the eyes sunken, the temples fallen in, the ears cold and drawn in and their lobes distorted, the skin of the face hard, stretched and dry, and the colour of the face pale or dusky…and if there is no improvement within [a prescribed period of time], it must be realized that this sign portends death’. See G. Lloyd and J. Chadwick (ed. & trans.), Hippocratic writings, Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1978, pp. 170–171.
tragedy. Tragedy does not give ‘an immeasurably comforting effect’, for Benjamin, but
confronts us with a ‘dramatically mobile’ idea that transforms our understanding of history
(109). Indeed, Benjamin rejects the notion that tragedy turns on a specific ‘idea’ at all.
Tragedy confronts symbol with the allegorical in the presentation of tragic silence. The hero’s
silence is the defining characteristic feature of tragedy, he argues, for in remaining silent the
hero refuses to turn to metaphysical guarantees in order to defend the rightness of her action.
We think of Antigone locked in her cave of death or Prometheus’ eternal punishment for
attempting to claim *techne* from the gods. The hero ‘does not look for justification and
therefore throws suspicion back on his persecutors’ (ibid.), and her silence transforms Creon
into a tyrant and Zeus into a monster. If the hero were to defend herself against the logic of
her oppressor, she would merely bluster the legitimacy of the oppressor’s claim to power,
rendering her suffering as a necessary component in the development of some inner
rationality. The hero knows that her suffering is unjust and is thus struck dumb. She is, like
Prometheus, *pro-manthano*, ‘knowing in advance’, seeing the nullity of the established moral
order and thus has no available language to express her knowledge.54 The lack of a language
capable of expressing her innocence means that her defence remains unarticulated. She finds
herself ethically in advance of the new gods who ground the political order, but also beyond
the gods of the ancient, ethical order.

By locating the significance of tragedy in its singular character, Benjamin suggests
that it is not the reversal-recognition structure but ‘the paradox of the birth of genius and
moral speechlessness’ that constitutes the ‘sublime’ element of tragedy.55 Unlike the Kantian
sublime, however, after the suffering of the hero ‘there is no question of the reinstitution of
the moralised universe’ (109). In other words, our hearts are not restored to moral peace, for
we find ourselves in a moment of clarity between two kinds of myth that would occlude the
innocence of the hero by ascribing to her some form of rational or metaphysical guilt. We are
confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of the gods, and history is transformed from having an
eschatological movement toward greater freedom into a ‘petrified, primordial landscape’,
strewn with the bodies of untold victims. Beautiful art is not the presentation of the idea, thus
giving expression to the movement toward freedom. Rather, allegory ‘declares itself to be
beyond beauty. Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things’
(178).

55 ibid.
Ultimately, Benjamin’s *GT* confronts Hegel’s argument that all suffering is deserved with an alternative reading of both tragedy and history. Unlike the Kantian’s view, he does not reject Hegel’s reading of tragedy in terms of history, but redefines history as the ‘integral truth of tragedy’ (105). Yet Benjamin’s understanding of history as the truth of tragedy is nothing like Hegel’s narrative of historical progression. Rather, while epic poetry constitutes the unmediated presentation of tradition (symbol), tragedy entails ‘a tremendous re-shaping of tradition’ (allegory), opening tradition to the possibility of creative transformation (106). This transition does not anticipate a higher, conceptual grasp of traditional ideas, but a clearing between two forms of myth: the daimonic and the philosophical.56 Philosophy in Hegelian form, argues Benjamin, ‘assume[s] the form of doctrine’ (27), for it is closed to counter readings of history. The ideal of theoretical necessity demonstrates that ‘the total elimination of representation – which is boasted by every proper didactic system – is the sign of genuine knowledge’, thereby renouncing ‘that area of truth towards which language is directed’ (ibid.). Hegel’s system does not illuminate the world, for Benjamin, but rather encloses it in a reductive myth in which everything inarticulate can be exhausted by language. In such a system, representation is a digression that must be surpassed for being itself, and the method of philosophy must take on an ‘uninterrupted purposeful structure’ (28).

The importance of Benjamin’s argument for this thesis is that it re-establishes the representational character of art. Tragedy cannot be considered as a presentation of the Idea that *anticipates* the representational activities of religion and philosophy, Benjamin argues, for tragedy *is* representational. It is an interruption to seamless reasoning, illuminating the world by representing a language that is unpresentable. For Benjamin, Hegel failed to see that Kant retained a representational conception of thought for a significant reason. Specifically, representation maintained a language with which to describe the human tendency to confuse the subjective conditions of thought with reality. Benjamin’s solution, however, is not return to Kant’s dualist metaphysics, for he recognises that one need not hold onto the Kantian dualism to maintain Kant’s emphasis on representation. As representation, art has a synthetic dimension, but not the kind of absolute synthesis we find in Hegel’s work. As an intermediate stage between the daimonic and the philosophic, art does not anticipate the systematicity of philosophy but maintains the open-endedness of Kant’s aesthetic ideas. The task of philosophy that recognises the representational character of art is to outline a procedure that

56 Benjamin responds to the overbearing comprehensiveness of Hegel’s philosophical discourse by arguing that tragedy is instrumental to the transition from daemonic to philosophical thinking: ‘the tragic relates to the daimonic as does paradox to ambiguity. In all the paradoxes of tragedy … ambiguity, the hallmark of the daimons, is dying away’ (*GT* 109).
does not regress to the ‘diamonic’ or transform into ‘philosophy’, but authentically engages
with the singularity of sensuous life. In this sense Benjamin does not provide an alternative
‘narrative’ to Hegel at all, but an alternative ‘poetics’ of history; a problematisation of the
attempt to narrate history, thus cleaving open the present to uncharted possibilities.

Benjamin’s emphasis on the representational character of tragedy undermines the
metaphysical realist view of Hegel’s theory by providing an alternative conception of history.
For Williams and Houlgate, for example, Hegel’s critique of the Kantian dualism is the only
direction critical philosophy can go. In their view, we have either a spurious, Kantian infinite
that assumes a supersensible order, or a critical, Hegelian infinite that understands human
cognition as intellectual intuition. Benjamin, however, aims to instigate ‘the rescue of
phenomena’ and the ‘representation of Ideas’ without turning to Hegel’s notion of the infinite
as the unity of concept and object, of thought and Being. The ‘Idea’ is the moment in the
substance and being of a word in which the word becomes and performs as a symbol. It is this
capacity of words to symbolise Ideas that allows a kind of philosophical discourse to uncover
‘Ideas’. However, because the words yielded by philosophy are themselves symbolic, such a
discourse can never become adequate to them.57

Given that the metaphysical realist view has spent a great deal of energy defending
Hegel against naive attacks made by proponents of the Kantian’s view, it is important to note
that Benjamin’s critique of Hegel does not aim to be systematic, but to expose the danger of
Hegel’s position. The metaphysical realist view has a response to the charge that Hegel
dismisses singularity in favour of the Ideal. In Science of Logic, for example, while Hegel
states that the singular thing and the universal are united in the Idea, he also insists that they
maintain their independence form one another.58 In the most advanced kind of judgments,
judgments of the concept, the singular thing is external to the universal, but not external to the
Idea. Such judgments, according to Paul Redding, ‘can be thought of as somehow being
directed to some object as having the degree of independence from the universal characteristic
of the singular: qua singular, the thing is not just an exemplification of its kind’.59 Redding
suggests that it is precisely because of Hegel’s insistence of the independence of the singular

57 Benjamin’s critique claims that Hegel’s primary motivation in arguing that beauty signals the sensuous
presentation of the Idea is to overcome the indeterminacy of Kant’s representation of the Idea. In Benjamin’s
account, despite the alteration Hegel makes to the task of philosophy, his system maintains the dogmatic,
philosophical trust in the capacity of language to image, elucidate and preserve reality. Language realism in this
form (and thus metaphysical realism) occludes the singular and indeterminate character of tragic silence, the
inarticulate expression of the Idea that constitutes the Ursprung of language.


59 Paul Redding, Analytic Philosophy and the Return of Hegelian Thought, Cambridge: Cambridge University
that the universal can be said to be adequate to the singular thing, while the singular thing can be said to be external and contingent. This would mean that while one telling of history might be adequate to the events, it is always the case that, due to the singular nature of these events, another proposed history of these events is possible. Singularity, in this reading, would be preserved – and with the added advantage of not creating an impassable gulf between thought and world.60

However, while this defence shows that Hegel gives room for the independence of the singular, for it makes room for alterative narratives, it does not address Benjamin’s critique of narrating history. Benjamin does not simply propose an alternate narrative of history to that put forward by Hegel, but an alternate conception of history that recognises the irreducibility of historical events to narratives as such. Hegel’s response to the tragedy of philosophy, understood as the inevitable failure of forms of judgment that neglect the singular, is to heal the impassable gulf between thought and world, meaning that the singular must be brought together with the universal under the Idea. While there might be room for the independence of the singular (such as a historical event), it remains inseparable from the Idea until an alternative Idea is found. For Benjamin, this approach is highly dangerous, for it is premised on a view of singularity as subject to thought. This entails a conservative understanding of philosophy that is concerned with the coherence of the singular in regards to its historical relation to other singulars, albeit in a way that respects the independence of singularity. This understanding of philosophy, for Benjamin, lacks a robust notion of creativity where the singularity of a historical event or a work of art exhausts the thinkable and remains an underdetermined representation. For Benjamin, responding to the tragedy of philosophy does not involve a way of thinking that overcomes the abyss between thought and world, but one that recognises the danger involved in systematic thought. Singularity is to be privileged at the expense of the Idea, providing an ineliminable rupture in all systematic thinking in such a way that cleaves open historical narratives to reveal an uncharted future.

The advantage of Benjamin’s proposal – an advantage that renders his work important to this thesis – is that it frames the task of responding to the tragedy of philosophy not as a matter of healing the philosophical project, which would cast the solution to the problematic of tragedy in terms of philosophy, but of providing a way of thinking that cleaves open the historical realm to the creation of meaning. In Benjamin’s view, all language, and all art,

60 In this move Hegel departs sharply from Kant, for, as Redding notes, Hegel’s emphasis on singularity entering the judgment of the concept reveals how ‘the evaluative judgment can be thought of as establishing a genuine cognitive relation to an independent object’. ibid.
remains representation. The task of representation is not, as it is often thought, to refer to some primordial object that solidifies the impassable gulf between sign and symbolised, but to return us ‘in a roundabout way to its original object’, that is, ‘the sacred image and the truth itself’ (28-9):

Truth, bodied forth in the dance of represented ideas, resists being projected, by whatever means, into the realm of knowledge [which is] possession. (29)

Benjamin agrees with Hegel to the extent that art represents truth. However, he does not hold that truth can be projected into knowledge, that is, into a theoretical kind of knowledge where a theory is adequate to its object. Rather, he grounds language on allegory rather than rational process, posing an alternative reading of Kant’s philosophy of art history to that developed by Hegel. The problematic of tragedy, for Benjamin, displaces us from the possession of truth by revealing the allegorical nature of representation, opening philosophy to a new task. Kant’s aesthetic judgment provides an alternative conception of this task to Hegel’s speculative reason, for it treats the singular as an end in itself. The artwork is a singular locus of meaning that is not reducible to a concept. The task of philosophy, then, is to outline a procedure of thinking that is capable of attending to the singular as a unique happening, something that is not reducible to universals that would situate the particularity of the event within a larger vision of a historical process. While tragedy might sometimes alert us to a process that operates behind the backs of those who suffer, Hegel, by arguing that all suffering manifests rationality when understood as divine tragedy, renders the world fitting for the realisation of human ends only if we occlude the allegorical abyss between the artwork and the Idea.

4.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that the metaphysical realist view of Hegel’s theory of tragedy assists our understanding of his critique of Kant and the attention he gives to suffering and loss. It reveals that Hegel’s philosophy does not seek to explain suffering in terms a rationalist conception of the best of all possible worlds, but to identify the ability of art to raise the suffering of a community into a work that allows thought to reconcile its unresolved conflict. However, through examining Benjamin’s critique of Hegel, I argued that Hegel’s philosophy, in the end, occludes the challenge that tragic art poses to philosophy. Ultimately, Benjamin’s attack on Hegel’s theory of tragedy reveals that by attempting to overcome the representational character of art, philosophy is ultimately attempting to reclaim its hegemony
over the aesthetic sphere. The task of such philosophy is to undermine the contingency of aesthetics. Benjamin’s critique of Hegel shows that, by claiming that the system is adequate to its object, Hegel creates a new form of immediacy that enlists the victims on which the social world is built in service of its historical narrative.

The importance of Benjamin’s return to Kant’s representational account of art for this thesis is that it elucidates the risk inherent to the aesthetic domain wherein our thought cannot be understood as identical to being. In the following sections I will suggest that Benjamin’s critique of Hegel assists us to diagnose a similar attempt in Nietzsche and Heidegger to overcome the representational paradigm of aesthetics. Rather than overcoming representation, the task of philosophy, for Benjamin, is to recognise the risk involved in philosophical thinking. The task of such an understanding of philosophy is not to reconcile the philosopher to the suffering of history, but to learn from the tragedy of thinking by outlining a new procedure for thought. Such a procedure has no guarantee of success, no protection from future tragedy, and no capacity to redeem past moments of cultural shipwreck. Rather, it acknowledges the task of thinking and acting in a world that resists total understanding.
CHAPTER 5

Nietzsche: Tragic Philosophy

Saying yes to life even in its strangest and harshest problems ... that is ... the key to the concept of tragic feeling (TI 228).

In *The Birth of Tragedy* (*BT*), Nietzsche argues that Kant’s ‘monstrous courage and wisdom’ unveiled the subjective interest ‘concealed at the essence of logic’, opening the doors to a new age (112). While traditional philosophy privileged the transcendental over the aesthetic, the fixed and eternal over alteration and becoming, Nietzsche argues that Kant sealed the limits of thought once and for all by revealing the transcendental order to be beyond human reach. He defines the Kantian settlement in epochal terms, suggesting that after Kant, ‘a culture is inaugurated that I venture to call a tragic culture’ (ibid.). Nietzsche’s announcement of a tragic culture identifies something essential to tragedy that transcends the drama of the ancient Greeks that is reborn in Kant’s discovery of the limits of philosophy. For Nietzsche, however, Kant’s desire to maintain the moral intelligibility of human life led him to preserve the existence of a moral order of value as a postulate of reason, which means that he cannot provide a figure around which a tragic age can rally. Nietzsche identifies another figure who could lead the people beyond Kant, one who is able to see through the vacuity of moral value to an aesthetic kind of value: Richard Wagner.

Nietzsche proposes the rebirth of tragic culture in response to the failure of philosophy to acknowledge and affirm life without retreating behind the veil of māyā; that is, without positing a principle of sufficient reason that deems every event meaningful as a part of a total system. While his proposal has resonances with the problematic of the tragedy we find in Kant and Hegel, in Nietzsche we see the bifurcation of this problematic in his identification of tragedy as an epochal moment wherein the dissonant forces of human life eclipse philosophy, thus challenging the conception of tragedy put forward in this thesis; the attempt to expand

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1 I have altered Kaufmann’s translation of ‘*Der ungeheure Tapferkeit und Weisheit*’ from ‘extraordinary courage and wisdom’ to ‘monstrous courage and wisdom’ in order to highlight the link between *ungeheure* and the orders of magnitude in Kant’s *CJ*.
the scope of philosophy in the paradigm of Kant’s enlarged way of thinking. Opposed to Kant, Nietzsche’s response to the tragedy of philosophy is not concerned with providing a rational way of thinking that is capable of navigating the fluidity of the aesthetic sphere, but with outlining a *tragic philosophy*, a philosophy that announces the triumph of the aesthetic sphere over the rational. While such a proposal resonates with Hegel’s critique of Kant’s moral philosophy, Nietzsche rejects Hegel’s interpretation of tragedy by arguing that art is not tied to the ethos of a community but is free; that it is unfettered from ethical concerns. In the preface to the second edition of *BT* entitled ‘Attempt at a Self-Criticism’, Nietzsche states that *BT* was the first time that he put forward a position that went ‘beyond good and evil’, a philosophy that ‘dares to move, to demote, morality into the realm of appearance’ (22). He claims that it diagnoses morality as ‘a will to negate life’, a ‘secret instinct of annihilation’ that must banish the ugly and painful parts of existence (23). The power of tragedy, Nietzsche argues, lies in its ability to issue a purely aesthetic redemption, teaching us ‘the art of *this-worldly* comfort’ (26).

In this chapter I examine the theory of tragedy Nietzsche outlines in *BT* in order to identify the challenge his understanding of the tragic poses to the interpretation of tragedy put forward in this thesis. While I will draw from other parts of Nietzsche’s philosophy that develop the themes of *BT*, I limit my analysis to this text for two reasons. The first is that it is Nietzsche’s most sustained treatment of tragedy. While tragedy remains a theme throughout his entire intellectual development, nowhere else does he give such a prolonged reflection on the implications of tragic art. The second is that Nietzsche continually returns to it throughout his intellectual development. Even when he reflects on *BT* fifteen years later in ‘Attempt at a Self-Criticism’, describing it as an ‘impossible’, ‘badly written’ and ‘embarrassing’ text, he declares it to be a ‘proven book’ that satisfied ‘the best minds of the time’.

Nietzsche’s reflections in ‘Attempt at a Self-Criticism’ raise a particular question that will be the focus of this chapter. While he informs us that *BT* rejects Schopenhauer’s ‘resignationism’ (24) and proposes the affirmation of life as a whole we find in his later work, it is not clear whether his arguments in the original text live up to this later claim. Thus the question to be considered in this chapter is whether *BT* truly enables us to affirm life as a whole, or whether it is in fact a covert denial of life. This question is significant to the present thesis, for both Nietzsche’s proposal of a tragic philosophy and Kant’s enlarged way of

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2 Nietzsche, ‘Attempt at Self-Criticism’, in *BT*, p. 19. Perhaps *BT*’s controversial popularity is exactly why Nietzsche attempts to trace the connections between his first book and his later work in the 1886 preface. He was to publish *Beyond Good and Evil* in the same year, 1886, which might explain his attempt to identify the argument of *BT* as his first attempt to move beyond the traditional morality, that is, ‘beyond good and evil’.
thinking claim to affirm the dimensions of life excluded from the scope of any form of philosophy that determines all knowledge in the paradigm of techne. If Nietzsche’s tragic philosophy successfully embraces life, then it would seem that Kant’s response to the philosophy of tragedy covertly reenergises the life-denying morality of traditional philosophy. If his philosophy fails, however, it may be the case that Kant’s proposal advances a superior response. The importance of this question extends beyond our assessment of Nietzsche’s work, for the success of his understanding of the tragic as the eclipse of the rational by the aesthetic effects not only our assessment of BT, but also the success of the contemporary Nietzschean view to provide an alternative to life-denying philosophy.

The answer to the question of whether Nietzsche’s interpretation of tragedy is capable of affirming life turns on his relation to Schopenhauer’s philosophy of art.3 For Walter Kaufman, Nietzsche’s denial of pessimism is the centrepiece of BT: ‘Instead of proving himself in his first book as an unswerving follower of Schopenhauer … Nietzsche discovers in Greek art a bulwark against Schopenhauer’s pessimism. … Schopenhauer’s negativistic pessimism is rejected. … one can face the terrors of history and nature with unbroken courage and say Yes to life’.4 Kaufmann argues that it is precisely Nietzsche’s novel view of art that allows him to reject Schopenhauer’s conclusion and affirm life as a whole. For others such as Julian Young, while Nietzsche offers a ‘solution’ to Schopenhauer’s pessimism and a way of ‘overcoming’ it, these solutions ultimately ‘represent, like Schopenhauer’s, a flight from, a “denial” of human life’.5 Young argues that Nietzsche’s philosophy not only reproduces Schopenhauer’s philosophy of art but that it fails to learn from Schopenhauer’s greatest insight: that if the tragic view is correct, then moral repulsion is the truly human response.

In this chapter I argue that the primary aim of BT is in line with Schopenhauer’s philosophy: to aestheticise reality. To begin, I will briefly consider Schopenhauer’s reading of Kant on the beautiful and the sublime, turning to his proposal of tragic art as the form of art that links artistic creativity and the sublime. In light of Schopenhauer’s philosophy of art, in sections two and three I examine the argument of BT in order to suggest that while Nietzsche offers significant insights in the idea of the tragic, his interpretation of tragedy does not refute

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3 While it is widely accepted that Schopenhauer’s philosophy is Nietzsche’s greatest influence in BT, there is much debate over the extent to which Nietzsche affirms Schopenhauer’s philosophy of art. For scholars such as Walter Kaufmann (1975) and Béatrice Han-Pile (2006), BT employs the basic concepts of Schopenhauer’s philosophy of art in order to go beyond his inability to break from Kantian morality. For others such as Julian Young (1992) and Nuno Nabais (2006), Nietzsche fashions a veneer of criticism over an account of metaphysics that is essentially borrowed from Schopenhauer.


the ethical reading of tragedy but merely ignores it, thus reproducing Schopenhauer’s
metaphysics of art. To establish the consequences of this neglect, in section four I consider
Franz Rosenzweig’s reception of Nietzsche.

The significance of Rosenzweig’s critique of Nietzsche for my argument in this
chapter is that it gives us a vantage on Nietzsche’s philosophy from a moment in history in
which the ethical demands of modern Europe came to a particular climax. For Rosenzweig,
who lived during the time of disintegration anticipated by Nietzsche’s philosophy,
Nietzsche’s critique of moral value is essential for any attempt to think in the collapse of
philosophy, and yet his aesthetic affirmation of life proved to be incapable of making sense of
the demands of an age beyond philosophical optimism, for it does not overcome the demand
that human suffering places on us but merely ignores it. Rosenzweig’s argument will prove to
be significant for the following chapters, for it shows that while Nietzsche’s aesthetic
redemption ultimately fails, the path to a new understanding of ethics cannot ignore his
philosophy but must go beyond it. The task of going beyond Nietzsche’s critique of value, as
we find in Heidegger and Castoriadis, will entail the development of Kant’s enlarged way of
thinking.

5.1 Schopenhauer’s metaphysics

This section outlines Schopenhauer’s metaphysics of art so that we can assess the
legitimacy of Nietzsche’s claim in ‘Attempt at a Self-Criticism’ that BT provides an
alternative to Schopenhauer’s resignationism. In order to understand Nietzsche’s relation to
Schopenhauer, we must begin with Schopenhauer’s reading of Kant’s sublime. The
significance of Schopenhauer’s reading of Kant, I will suggest, is that he moves away from
critical metaphysics in order to propose a positive metaphysics of art.

In §39 of WR I, Schopenhauer explores the difference between the beautiful and the
sublime, echoing Kant’s understanding of the beautiful as that which pleases on its own, for it
is free from determinate judgment (201-2). In his view, the beautiful affords an experience of
pleasure disconnected from the interests of the will, meaning that it is universal. Yet the
objects that draw us into aesthetic contemplation ‘may have a hostile relation to the human
will in general, as manifested in its objectivity, the human body. They may be opposed to it;
they may threaten it by their might that eliminates all resistance, or their immeasurable
greatness may reduce it to naught’ (201). These objects Schopenhauer deems sublime.
While Schopenhauer’s understanding of the beautiful and sublime builds from Kant’s *CJ*, Schopenhauer grants aesthetics an ontological meaning. Like Kant, Schopenhauer argues that every subject knows the world only as representation. Yet, departing from Kant, he suggests that there is one object of which the subject has ‘immediate’ perception: the subject’s own body. Thus Schopenhauer reproduces the Kantian dualism between phenomena and thing in itself, yet the thing in itself is not of an abstract, theoretical order, but the will. While the subject requires the principle of sufficient reason in order to guarantee her knowledge of phenomena because of the representational character of cognition, that is, the metaphysical principle that every appearance has a reason, he has immediate access to his own body, thus requiring no metaphysical principle. Any affective state the body undergoes is not devoid of theoretical content and limited to mere feeling, but pertains to the thing in itself.

Kant argued that an ontological doctrine of the beautiful or the sublime is impossible, for neither are real determinations of the object but pertain either to relations such as harmony (the beautiful) or to ideas that go beyond the object such as grandiosity (the sublime). Yet if we consider the will as thing in itself, Schopenhauer argues that it is possible, through feeling, to achieve a *positive* aesthetics that can achieve the objective characteristics of the sublime:

Nevertheless, the beholder may not direct his attention to this relation to his will which is so pressing and hostile, but, although he perceives and acknowledges it, he may consciously turn away from it, forcibly tear himself from his will and its relations, and, giving himself up entirely to knowledge, may quietly contemplate, as pure, will-less subject of knowing, those very objects so terrible to the will. He may comprehend only their Idea that is foreign to all relation, gladly linger over its contemplation, and consequently be elevated precisely in this way above himself, his person, his willing, and all willing. In that case, he is then filled with the feeling of the sublime [Erhaben]; he is in the state of exaltation [Erhebung], and therefore the object that causes such a state is called sublime. (WR I 202)

Through identifying a kind of ‘knowledge’ unique to the sublime, Schopenhauer re-establishes a metaphysics of art. The sublime arouses terror in the spectator, transporting her into the realm of infinitude where another existence beyond the representable makes itself felt. Nuno Nabais draws our attention to the paradoxical nature of this beyond, observing that the negation of life is actually an affirmation and a demand for another form of existence, one which occurs intuitively and only allows itself to be represented as a negative representation.⁶ The pleasure experienced is negative, for it does not seduce us but forces us to admire and respect it. While the beautiful leads us to a positive intuition of the Idea in beautiful form, the sublime leads us to the negative intuition of the actual thing in itself. In Schopenhauer’s

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creative reading of Kant, this is the knowledge of the will of the world itself in its unrepresentability; not one’s own will, but the eternal will, the Er-Ein.\(^7\)

The importance of a metaphysics of art, for Schopenhauer, is that it is not a return to a pre-critical metaphysics but enables the transcendental overcoming of metaphysical realism, extending the deepest insight of Kant’s philosophy. Yet Schopenhauer struggles to maintain this position. Kant’s aim was to give an intersubjective account of judgment based on his understanding of the transcendental realm that is presumed in any judgment made by any person. From the view of Schopenhauer’s subjective understanding of will as thing in itself, however, this is impossible. His great problem with \(CJ\) is that Kant

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\text{does not start from the beautiful itself, from the direct, beautiful object of perception, but from the judgment concerning the beautiful, the so-called, and very badly so-called, judgment of taste. This is the problem for him. His attention is specially aroused by the circumstance that such a judgment is obviously the expression of something occurring in the subject, but is nevertheless as universally valid as if it concerned a quality of the object. It is this that struck him, not the beautiful itself. (WR I 530-1)}
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Here Schopenhauer turns against Kant’s transcendental philosophy, accusing Kant of ignoring beauty as a property of the object. Where Kant saw the universal validity of judgments of taste, Schopenhauer saw a merely heteronomous account of taste (which is why Kant’s notion of taste is badly named – it is not taste at all). Schopenhauer dismisses Kant’s transcendental account of intersubjectivity and charges Kant guilty of a realist subjectivism in which judgments of the beautiful are not truly made by the subject but by another. Schopenhauer proposes an alternative in which the beautiful, as a property of an object, affects one’s faculty for aesthetic emotion.

In Schopenhauer’s metaphysics of art, the sublime plays a particularly important role. The transformative nature of the sublime becomes the feeling whereby the individual is raised out of the limitations of their individuality – retreating behind what Schopenhauer calls the ‘veil of \(māyā\)’ (i.e. an illusion) – and into the condition of pure subject, abstracted from the threat faced to his own body by the object. The danger does not disappear, but the experience lifts one momentarily from the danger. The terrifying character of the experience does not lead to ‘moral reflection’ (98), but, as Nabais informs us, annuls the individual will, transforming him into one who contemplates nature ecstatically.\(^8\) Yet because, in the sublime, the aesthetic observer feels crushed by the grandeur of what is contemplated, he is reduced to

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\(^7\) ibid., p. 21.

\(^8\) ibid., p. 15.
a state of absolute fragility and insignificance. Despite the initial escape from the veil of māyā, the only meaning he can give to this annihilation of the self is that of illusion.

In order to understand Nietzsche’s relation to Schopenhauer we must piece Schopenhauer’s relation of the sublime together with his reading of tragedy. Schopenhauer himself does not make this link explicit in the original 1819 manuscript, and it is not until the 1844 edition that he includes a section entitled ‘Aesthetics of Poetry’ where tragedy is recognised as belonging to the sublime. In the 1819 manuscript, the sublime is limited to music, which is ‘by no means like the other arts, namely a copy of the Ideas, but a copy of the Will itself’ (WR I 257). By elevating music above what he calls the ‘representational arts’, Schopenhauer displaces the subjectivist understanding of art we find in Kant where artworks serve as occasions for the exercise of judgment.9 In the 1844 manuscript, however, Schopenhauer links the sublimity of music with one kind of representational art, namely tragedy:

Our pleasure in the tragedy belongs not to the feeling of the beautiful, but to that of the sublime; it is, in fact, the highest degree of this feeling. For, just as at the sight of the sublime in nature we turn away from the interest of the will, in order to behave in a purely perceptive way, so in the tragic catastrophe we turn away from the will-to-live itself. (WR II 433)

Schopenhauer does not deny that tragedy is pleasurable. Rather, he argues that, as in judgments of sublimity, tragedy crushes the will to live, leaving us as disinterested observers before the monstrous suffering enclosed within the very fabric of life. In its ability to occasion the sublime, ‘[t]ragedy is to be regarded, and is recognized, as the summit of poetic art, both as regards the greatness of the effect and the difficulty of the achievement’ (WR I 252). This is because the Idea represented by art is not just any Idea, but the Idea of nature:

[the] purpose of this highest poetical achievement is the description of the terrible side of life. The unspeakable pain, the wretchedness and misery of mankind, the triumph of wickedness, the scornful mastery of chance, and the irretrievable fall of the just and the innocent are all here presented to us; and here is to be found a significant hint as to the nature of the world and existence. (WR I 252-3)

9 Kant had an extremely low view of music, counting it not among the beautiful arts but among the agreeable, arguing that it is concerned not with cognition but with the emotions: ‘If one estimates the value of the beautiful arts in terms of the culture that they provide for the mind and takes as one’s standard the enlargement of the faculties that must join together in the power of judgment for the sake of cognition, then to that extent music occupies the lowest place among the beautiful arts (just as it occupies perhaps the highest place among those that are estimated according to their agreeableness), because it merely plays with sensations’ (CJ 5:329). Kant’s objection seems to be that music affects before it can be judged. Elsewhere he complains about music being played at dinner parties because it is ‘supposed to sustain the mood of joyfulness merely as an agreeable noise, and to encourage the free conversation of one neighbor with another without anyone paying the least attention to its composition’ (305). On another occasion he compares music to jokes, suggesting that neither concerns cognition but are merely sentimental (332).
The idea of nature leaves us recoiling, thereby transforming us to view it ecstatically. It is not a deliverance from pain but a deliverance through pain. The spectator discovers that nature is nothing more than a representation, a dramatic illusion. He does not feel pity or empathy for the heroes – indeed, he is ‘foreign to all relation’ – but, opposed to Hegel’s spectator who is reconciled to their suffering, suspends his interest in their destiny, raising himself to the serenity of a pure aesthetic observer of the work of art, of nature itself. It is from the elevated vantage of the aesthetic observer who calmly surveys nature that the spectator discovers ‘that the world, that life, can never give real satisfaction and hence is not worthy of our affection: this constitutes the tragic spirit – it leads to resignation’ (*WR II* 495).

While it is often recognised that Schopenhauer’s reading of tragedy entails a spirit of resignation, it is less often noted that it also involves a feeling of measured euphoria that allows the observer to rise above the world and survey its terrain as a disinterested spectator. In Béatrice Han-Pile’s analysis, for example, the pleasure released in the sublimity of tragic experience is what separates Nietzsche’s philosophy from Schopenhauer. While Nietzsche’s aesthetics entails an affirmative view of life, the ‘Schopenhauerian view would rather be that pain just begets more pain’. Yet Han-Pile’s reading of Schopenhauer is only true in terms of Schopenhauer’s ontology. While Schopenhauer asserts that the will is eternal lack endlessly striving for more, his reading of the Kantian sublime aims to provide a momentary overcoming of eternal pain: one that anticipates Nietzsche’s account of aesthetic justification. Han-Pile overlooks Schopenhauer’s reading of the sublime, finding Nietzsche’s aesthetic redemption as ‘radically un-Schopenhauerian’. In the following examination of *BT*, however, I will suggest that by understanding Schopenhauer’s view of tragedy in light of his reading of the sublime, Nietzsche’s understanding of aesthetic redemption is not so far from his view as Han-Pile suggests. By reproducing Schopenhauer’s understanding of the sublime, Nietzsche’s aesthetic redemption is not only unable to affirm life as a whole, but also proves to be an inferior response to the tragedy of philosophy – the failure of philosophy to encompass life – than Kant’s enlarged way of thinking.

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12 ibid.
5.2 The argument of *The Birth of Tragedy*: the Apollinian and the Dionysian

Now I have outlined Schopenhauer’s interpretation of tragedy in terms of moral resignation, I am able to examine whether Nietzsche’s claim in ‘Attempt at Self-Criticism’ – that his interpretation of tragedy in *BT* departs from Schopenhauer’s resignationism – is true to the original text. In ‘Attempt at a Self-Criticism’, Nietzsche suggests that the book’s main content was an inquiry into ‘the Greek’s relation to pain’ (*BT* 21). While the romantic conception of the Greeks we find in Hegel views ancient Greece as an innocent childhood of the mature spirit of western culture, Nietzsche’s reading of the Greeks builds from Jacob Burckhardt, a colleague of the young Nietzsche at Basel, who proposed a darker image of Greece. Burckhardt argued that the brilliance of the Greeks turned on two, interdependent elements; their capacity to suffer and, despite their suffering, their ability to act without the fetters of traditional life:

What the Greeks did and endured they did and endured differently from all other peoples before them. Where others lived and acted from dull compulsion, they were free, spontaneous, original, and aware. Hence in their activities and capacities they appear to be essentially the gifted race of men, subject to all the mistakes and sufferings of such a people. For Burckhardt, Greece was the locus of a play of forces, destructive and constructive, dark and light, providing an alternative vision of the world to the moralism of his own times. What interested him the most, however, is the sensitivity of the Greeks to an area of art to which ‘the Occident, even in the southern parts, today remains dull; … the periodically recurring Dionysian frenzy’. Nietzsche’s understanding of Greece builds from and extends Burckhardt’s view, attributing to the Greeks a distinctive sensibility to pain that we find expressed by Dionysus’ teacher Silenus: ‘What is best of all is utterly beyond your reach: not to be born, not to be, to be nothing. But the second best for you is – to die soon’ (42). To consider the question of

15 ibid., p. 207.
16 Even in Nietzsche’s later writings he pays tribute to Burckhardt as ‘the most profound student of Hellenism alive today’ (*TI* 227).
17 See also *BT* 60. The god Silenus is said to have taught that life is not worth living, and his teaching is often cited as the paradigm of pessimism. It is reiterated in several forms in the tragedies, most notably in Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus* (ll. 1224-6): ‘Never to have been born is best, / But if he must see the light, the next best / Is quickly returning whence he came’. In *WR I*, Schopenhauer regularly echoes Silenus’ wisdom in statements such as follows: ‘as regards the life of the individual, every life-history is a history of suffering, for, as a rule, every life is a continual series of mishaps great and small, concealed as much as possible by everyone … But perhaps at the end of life, no man, if he were sincere and at the same time in possession of all his faculties, will ever wish to go through it again’ (324).
the relation of the Greeks to pain, Nietzsche begins his exploration of tragic art with the climactic moment in which pleasure and pain are intimately bound together: the so-called ‘tragic effect’. By beginning with the tragic effect, Nietzsche builds from Schopenhauer’s reading of tragedy in terms of the sublime, meaning that he is less concerned with the content of the original tragedies than the subjective experience undergone by any audience when faced with tragic art. Starting with the tragic effect, for Nietzsche, means that the question of the Greeks’ relation to pain becomes one of making sense of the twin desires that coexist in the tragic effect, that is, our ‘wish to see tragedy and at the same time to long to get beyond all seeing’ (141). The first desire to ‘see tragedy’ is the pleasure we take in appearances and representations of life, while the second compels us to go ‘beyond all seeing’, to be transported to a reality that goes beyond mere appearance. In Kantian terms, we might relate one desire to the world of phenomena and the other to things in themselves. Both forces make their appearance in the very opening lines of *BT*:

> We shall have gained much for the science of aesthetics, once we perceive not merely by logical inference, but with immediate certainty of vision, that the continuous development of art is bound up with the *Apollinian* and *Dionysian* duality – just as procreation depends on the battle of the sexes, involving perpetual strife with only periodically intervening reconciliations. (33)

From the outset it is clear that Nietzsche aims to subvert the logical procedure of aesthetics by proceeding from the immediacy of vision, to a way that is not dissimilar to Hegel’s depiction of the original reception of tragedy. This immediate certainty pertains to the metaphysical solace of the tragic effect that, counter to Aristotle’s *Poetics* and Hegel’s notion of reconciliation, cannot be understood logically. As I will demonstrate in Rosenzweig’s critique of Nietzsche, prioritising the metaphysical solace of tragedy places the ethical dimensions of tragedy – suffering, loss, the tension of law and the demands of family etc. – as a mere occasion for the tragic effect, meaning that there is no question of a reenergised understanding of ethics after the tragedy of philosophy. Yet prioritising immediacy, for Nietzsche, does not mean that the logical inference has no place in aesthetics, but that to perceive only by logical perception would give a partial picture of art. Here Nietzsche builds on Wagner’s work, which states that ‘the impulse of art is … stilled by philosophy,’ meaning that ‘tragedy dies when the community divides into egos,’ into self-sure monads that cannot experience the duality of tragic play.  

\[18\] For both Wagner and Nietzsche, art does not anticipate higher forms of representation, but is a ‘continuous’ development involving ‘perpetual strife’ of the

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Apollinian and the Dionysian duality. Like male and female the Apollinian and the Dionysian have an erotic relation, meaning that they desire to be fused together despite their radical difference. Their moments of procreation, that is, their ‘periodically intervening reconciliation’, bear new offspring, new forms of art that give witness to their dissonant interplay.

The significance of the Apollinian and Dionysian in Nietzsche’s aesthetics is that they do not simply underpin the world of art, but ‘burst forth from nature herself, without mediation of the artist’ (38). Nietzsche’s aesthetics turn on a radical conception of nature wherein the material world is not governed by Spirit or divine intellect, but is infused with the dissonant energies of music. The dissonant energies of music can be thought of in terms of dream and intoxication. Apollinian art, on the one hand, is the art of the image-maker. Its hero is the god Apollo, the god of all representational energies, and relates to dreams to the extent that it pertains to the inner world of fantasy. Like the dream, Apollinian art individuates us, driving us toward the recesses of inner life. Yet even while the dream is most alive, even when the philosopher is most introspective, ‘we still have, glimmering through it, the sensation that it is mere appearance’ (34). It is the Apollinian that drives us to look beyond appearances to the heart of things in the frame of individual reflection. The Apollinian individuates to the extent that it calls the philosopher toward doubt about the external world, giving them the drive toward inner certainty. Like Schopenhauer’s image of individual man wrapped in the veil of māyā, Nietzsche describes the Apollinian as the drive that traps human beings behind a veil like a boatman on a raging sea of suffering and misery who sits calmly, supported by and trusting in the principle of individuation. Our retreat into our own interior drives us to find a principle of sufficient reason in order to render the whole cosmos rationally understandable. The principle of sufficient reason, as Leibniz defined it, is ‘that nothing happens without a reason why it should be rather than otherwise’.19 Given this principle, we have reason to assume that there is a sufficient reason for every event that is expressive of God’s underlying goodness. The purpose of this principle, for Nietzsche, is ultimately to show us ‘how necessary is the entire world of suffering’ (34), a fact that is clear in Leibniz’s Theodicy. In this ‘redeeming vision’, Apollo allows one to ‘sit quietly in his tossing bark, amid the waves’ (35-6), content that all the suffering in the world is justified.

Opposed to the Apollinian drive, the Dionysian stirrings become manifest in the terror one experiences when one realises that the ‘principle of sufficient reason, in some other of its

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manifestations, seems to suffer an exception’ (36). When our logical systems fail, everything ‘subjective vanishes into complete self-forgetfulness’. The Dionysian pertains to the drive that longs to extend beyond the borders of the self and to fuse with the collective, a drive we feel in collective intoxication and to the heightened feeling of life we gain in the approach of spring. In such experiences the veil of māyā is torn apart to reveal the primordial will, Schopenhauer’s Er-Ein, and each becomes ‘one with his neighbour’, each ‘feels himself to be a god’ (37). In the Dionysian we find that truth is not found in the principle of sufficient reason, but in excess. From the intoxicated vantage of primal Oneness, contradiction is not something that requires healing but is ‘the bliss born of pain’, a metaphysical solace in the face of the terrifying realities of life (47). The Dionysian not only discloses the heart of the Greeks, for it draws us into the pleasure found in the painful vision of life itself, but it also anticipates Wagner’s manifesto that ‘in the Art-work we shall all be one’.20

Nietzsche’s understanding of the antinomy between the Dionysian and the Apollinian confronts Hegel’s dialectic, for it is not a resolvable contradiction between unintegrated parts of ethical life, but two conflicting ways of resolving the problem of pain by transforming it into a kind of pleasure. As Gilles Deleuze explains, ‘Dionysus and Apollo are … not opposed as the terms of a contradiction but rather as two antithetical ways of resolving it; Apollo mediately, in the contemplation of the plastic image, Dionysus immediately in the reproduction, in the musical symbol of the will’.21 The Apollinian constructs a beautiful image that ‘overcomes the suffering of the individual by the radiant glorification of the eternity of the phenomenon’ (104). The Dionysian returns to primordial unity by shattering the individual and dragging him ‘into the great shipwreck and absorbs into original being’.22 In other words, Apollo obliterates pain while Dionysus makes us participate in the abundance of being. Tragedy reconciles this antithesis, for in tragic art ‘Apollo, finally, speaks the language of Dionysus’. Nietzsche concludes that ‘we must understand Greek tragedy as the Dionysian which ever anew discharges itself in an Apollinian world of images’ (64-65).

For Béatrice Han-Pile, Nietzsche’s understanding of Dionysian pleasure is counter to Schopenhauer’s notion of the will as eternal pain. Although the will’s suffering remains primary in that it is the motivating drive for the production of pleasure, Han-Pile argues that ‘Nietzsche departs doubly from the Schopenhauerian model: firstly, he sees pleasure as a positive force, not only the cessation of pain; secondly, he also asserts the possibility of

pleasure overcoming pain (“an excess of pleasure”). Yet is Nietzsche’s pleasure an
overcoming of pain, or is it an aesthetic removal from the pain and its replacement by a
momentary feeling of ecstasy, much in the same way as Schopenhauer’s sublime? It is often
unclear in BT whether it is the Dionysian itself that finds pleasure in the terrifying realities of
life, or whether the Dionysian, when coupled with the Apollinian, is that artistic drive that can
look into the terrifying heart of reality and yet find solace in art. If Dionysian experience is
the source of aesthetic pleasure, then Han-Pile’s reading gains more credence, for the
Dionysian would allow the will itself – what Schopenhauer condemned to eternal
disappointment – to be lifted from its sorrows in the experience of pleasure. If pleasure
properly comes from experiencing the artwork that couples the Dionysian and the Apollinian,
then Nabais’ connection of Schopenhauer’s sublime and Nietzsche’s aesthetic catharsis would
prove to be correct. Aesthetic pleasure would not be the will’s ecstasy but the pleasure we
find when we are, for the fleeting moment of aesthetic sentiment, lifted above the concerns of
the will, enabled to survey the world from the vantage of ecstatic spectator.

Nietzsche provides statements that could support both views, meaning that we must
turn to his broader relation to Schopenhauer in order to find whether his aesthetic redemption
is an illusion or whether it redeems reality itself. For Schopenhauer, the proper domain of
music is not art but metaphysics. It is distinguished from all other arts and representational
activities, including language, ‘by the fact that it is not a copy of the phenomenon … but an
immediate copy of the will itself’ (WR I 309). To this Nietzsche agrees. The world itself is
a representation of a more basic reality: it is ‘embodied music’ or ‘embodied will’ (BT 102).
Yet given Nietzsche’s intention to build an affirmation of life from his reading of tragedy, a
representational form of art that is metaphysically inferior to music, Schopenhauer seems a
strange ally. If the world is ‘embodied music’, then music has an ontological significance (it
pertains to reality), while tragedy, a form of poetry, has a merely aesthetic significance (it is
merely a representational activity).

23 Han-Pile, ‘Nietzsche’s Metaphysics in The Birth of Tragedy’, p. 379.
24 Nietzsche cites this passage in BT 102.
25 Despite the disagreement in scholarship over Nietzsche’s relation to Schopenhauer, most scholars agree that
Nietzsche reproduces Schopenhauer’s metaphysics of music. An exception to this, however, is Michel Haar.
Haar argues that ‘Contrary to what [Nietzsche] sometimes seem to say, or what he would have the reader
believe,’ he is ‘radically opposed’ to Schopenhauer’s doctrine of music. Haar seeks to draw our attention to the
fact that while Schopenhauer views music as a copy of a deeper reality, namely the will, for Nietzsche music ‘is
being itself, not its first reproduction’. Haar’s argument is problematic on two fronts. Firstly, it flies against
Nietzsche’s explicit references to music as a ‘copy of the will itself … representing what is metaphysical, the
thing in itself’ (BT 100). Secondly, it attempts to graft Nietzsche’s argument in BT into his greater corpus, failing
to recognise that Nietzsche’s views on the topic are not uniform throughout his intellectual development. See
Here we find a fundamental tension in *BT*. In writing this text Nietzsche aims to achieve two things: to write a philosophy of art, and to graft Wagner’s total theatre into a narrative of the rebirth of tragedy. On one side Nietzsche claims that ‘the history of the rise of Greek tragedy now tells us with luminous precision how the tragic art of the Greeks was really born out of the spirit of music’ (105). Nietzsche is writing a philosophy of art in which the spirit of music strives ‘toward visual and mythical objectification’ (106) in tragic poetry, suggesting that music demands words in order to bring to feeling what only words and actions can: ‘The structure of the scene and the visual images reveal a deeper wisdom than the poet himself can put into words and concepts’ (105). Thus tragedy brings us to a certain climax of the metaphysical reality of music. Yet on the other side, it is not the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides who take us to the summit of art, but the musician who uses tragic myth as a ruse to draw his audience into the metaphysical reality of music: ‘what the word-poet did not succeed in doing, namely, attain the highest spiritualization and identity of the myth, he might well succeed in doing every moment as creative musician!’ (105). Music, Nietzsche informs us, in its ‘absolute sovereignty does not need the image and the concept, but merely endures them as accompaniments’ (55). It seems that it is not the tragedians as much as it is Wagner who truly understands the essence of the tragic.\(^{26}\) The essence is not words, poetry, or anything particular to Greek culture, but is, in fact, *music*. When I turn to Rosenzweig’s theory of tragedy I will suggest that this move is problematic, for it entails that the content expressed in the words of the tragedians is a mere occasion for the spirit of music to manifest itself. For Rosenzweig, this does not assist Nietzsche in his attempt to escape Platonic metaphysics, for it effectively inverts Plato’s hierarchy of reality over appearance rather than providing an alternative. The ethical, historical and cultural gap between antiquity and the modern age becomes appearance while reality – that is, the spirit of music – unites them in a common experience.\(^{27}\)

If music is sovereign, and if words and images do not truly enhance music, then it is necessary to clarify the relationship between music and tragedy in order to decide whether

\(^{26}\) Julian Young argues that Nietzsche’s basic motive in writing *BT* was to contribute to ‘Wagner’s seemingly quixotic but ultimately successful project of raising enough money to build his own, custom-designed opera house in Bayreuth’. Thus his argument is that tragedy ‘is being “reborn” in the shape of Wagner’s music-dramas’. See Young, *The Philosophy of Tragedy*, p. 169.

\(^{27}\) In identifying the essence of tragedy as the spirit of music, Nietzsche departs from his understanding of tragedy in *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*. In this fragmented text Nietzsche explores tragedy not in the art of the tragedians but in the shared experience of Athenian cultural life in the 5th century BC wherein the former myths that couched collective life in meaning ceased to be immediately compelling, opening the Greek world to the need to philosophise in order to elucidate the meaning of experience. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, trans. M. Cowan, Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1962.
Nietzsche’s philosophy of art truly overcomes Schopenhauer’s pessimism. Poetry, Nietzsche suggests, can ‘express nothing that did not already lie hidden in the vast universality and absoluteness in the music … Language can never adequately render the cosmic symbolism of music’ (55). This view of the deficiency of words and the absoluteness of music displaces tragedy as the highest art, reflecting not only a Schopenhauerian view that music can take us to a deeper reality than words, but also an attempt to promote Wagner’s complete music-drama as the manifestation of Greek spirit in the present age. This tension suggests that Nietzsche intends to affirm Schopenhauer’s metaphysics but with an added caveat: that while music unveils the terrible, dissonant heart of reality, art – and tragic art in particular – can provide something on the level of representation, a ‘splendid illusion’, that can move even the darkest Hamlet to embrace life as a whole and act within it (143). Art does not reconcile us to reality or make us at home in the world. Rather, it occasions a fleeting moment of aesthetic catharsis in the face of the dissonant heart of reality. If this is the case, then Nietzsche’s philosophy does not depart from Schopenhauer’s on an ontological level, but merely emphasises Schopenhauer’s recognition of an aesthetic moment of escape.

If art merely occasions a fleeting moment of aesthetic catharsis, then the main thrust of Nietzsche’s argument supports Nabais’ view; that the Dionysian pleases through a kind of illusion. Art, for Nietzsche, ‘is not merely imitation of the reality of nature’ but also ‘a metaphysical supplement to the reality of nature, placed beside it for its overcoming’ (140). Even Dionysian art provides a kind of illusion, albeit one that is different to Apollinian art: ‘every artist is an “imitator”: either an Apollinian artist in dreams, or a Dionysian artist in ecstasies’ (38). This resonates with a remark Nietzsche made in his early notebooks where he argues that the fact that we cannot handle reality, that we need illusion to bear with reality, is exactly ‘what is tragic’.28

Nietzsche’s understanding of Dionysian comfort seems contradictory. At the same moment it is both a confrontation with reality yet also a blissful illusion. The contradiction dissolves, however, when we see the Dionysian in light of Schopenhauer’s sublime. As we have seen, the sublime, for Schopenhauer, turns on a confrontation with the terrible realities of life whereby we are raised out of the limitations of our individuality and into the condition of pure subject, the Er-Ein, where we are abstracted from the threat faced to our own bodies by the terrible. By annulling the will, this experience allows us to contemplate the terrible heart of reality ecstatically. What Nietzsche adds to Schopenhauer, suggests Nabais, is the

Apollinian desire for appearances that finds comfort in an artistic representation of reality:

‘For Nietzsche, the mystery of Greek tragedy consisted precisely in the fact that at the heart of the drama there was this tension, between the One of mystical fusion with the universe in Dionysian delirium and the Multiple of the characters of Apollonian drama as they struggled to affirm the hero’s individuality’.  

Here we find a clue to the question of the Greek’s relation to pain. Tragic art is made possible by a people who have borne great pain, who have ‘looked boldly right into the terrible destructiveness of so-called world history as well as the cruelty of nature,’ and instead of being overcome by it or taking on a ‘Buddhistic negation of the will,’ find ‘metaphysical comfort’ in the fact that ‘life is at the bottom of things, despite all the changes of appearances, indestructibly powerful and pleasurable’ (59). On face value, Nietzsche seems to endorse Han-Pile’s reading – indeed, Han-Pile cites this assertion as a key part of her defence of his redemptive metaphysics – for he suggests that the Dionysian affirms that life is ultimately pleasurable. However, while Nietzsche uses ontological language, that life at the bottom of things is pleasurable, this insight does not come from looking into the heart of nature but from ‘the chorus of satyrs’, that is, from tragic art, the coupling of the Dionysian and Apollinian. It is only in aesthetic experience that life is pleasurable, and we find ourselves again close to Schopenhauer’s metaphysics of art. Nietzsche compares Dionysian man to Hamlet, for ‘both have once looked truly into the essence of things, they have gained knowledge, and nausea inhibits action; for their action could not change anything in the eternal nature of things… Knowledge kills action; action requires the veils of illusion’ (60). What is sublime about the Greeks, what takes them beyond the wisdom of Hamlet, is that they could look into the terrible with open eyes and yet create an illusion that enabled them to act; an illusion that enabled them to engage in politics and to generate a rich cultural life. For Nietzsche, to look into the painful depths of reality and to find art as a healing power is the very essence of tragedy. In this way, ‘[a]rt saves … and through art – life’ (59). Even Han-Pile recognises that it is art that redeems, stating that the ‘Apollonian relieves us of suffering by showing a heroic vision of individuation which makes human existence seem more beautiful than it really is’. 

29 Nabais, Nietzsche and the Metaphysics of the Tragic, p. 42.
30 Han-Pile asserts that Nietzsche ‘teaches us that far from being “horrific”, “life is at the bottom of things, despite all the changes of appearances, indestructibly powerful and pleasurable” (BT: §7, 59)’. Han-Pile, ‘Nietzsche’s Metaphysics in The Birth of Tragedy’, p. 392.
31 ibid., p. 382. She later describes the Dionysian as illusion and links it the sublime, unknowingly paralleling Nietzsche to Schopenhauer’s metaphysics of art: ‘Therefore, it is essential to the definition of the Dionysian that it should be illusory. The illusion does not come from the sublime glorification of individuation, as in the case of the Apollonian, but from another form of sublime, the symbolic annihilation of the individual, which allows the Dionysian actor to metaphorically re-live the God’s agony and bliss’ (p. 384).
The Dionysian illusion is nothing like the optimistic illusion in which the essence of reality is logical. Rather, it turns on the ‘sublime as artistic taming of the horrible’ (60). Reality is only pleasurable once it has been tamed in sublime, aesthetic experience. The redemption is found in art, in an artistic taming of the terrors of this life.

5.3 The argument of *The Birth of Tragedy*: the death and rebirth of tragedy

Thus far I have identified a tension in Nietzsche’s argument. On the one hand, art confronts us with the terrors of reality and yet occasions a blissful illusion. On the other hand, however, the illusion turns out to be reality while the terrors of life turn out to be the means by which the spirit of music comes into appearance. In order to discern whether this blissful illusion can constitute a justification of existence, an experience that is ultimately life affirming, it is necessary to consider Nietzsche’s attempt to ground the birth of tragedy in a historical narrative that outlines the conditions for a rebirth of tragic art. When conscious life ceases to experience tragedy with the immediate certainty of vision and subsumes tragedy in its conceptual grasp, tragedy is effectively dead. In Nietzsche’s view this is no accident, for tragedy contains within it the logic of its own demise. While other forms of art ‘died the most beautiful and peaceful deaths’ as they faded away with great ages, tragedy ‘died by suicide’, that is to say, it died ‘tragically’ (76). Yet the Apollinian drive to encompass all of life through conceptual thought also contains the seeds for the rebirth of tragedy, I will suggest, for it is the insatiable search for order that causes the Apollinian to stumble across the groundlessness of logic.

In Nietzsche’s account, death is contained in the nature of tragic art in the following way. The heroes of Aeschylus and Sophocles embody the confluence of the Apollinian and the Dionysian, for in them there is no inner/outer distinction but simply the raw presentation of the natural forces at work in the human being. Aeschylus is famed for placing multiple actors on stage, thus breaking the atomised individuality of Homeric, Apollinian art and allowing the Dionysian element to enter through revealing the fragility of the boundaries between individuals. Yet as the tragedians come to a greater awareness of their art, they begin to fill their characters with a rich inner life. The Dionysian and Apollinian elements become autonomous and the tendency of the tragic heroes to fatefully collide is removed.

This occurs in the dramas of Euripides as the characters take on a greater interior reality. Euripides brings the spectator on stage, an everyday character capable of judging,
placing him into the midst of the tragic collision. The Euripidean hero is not fused with the action on stage but stands back as judge of it. Reflective pathos replaces the immediacy of action, meaning that Euripides cannot be understood so much as a poet but as a thinker. The name of Euripides’ spectator is not the god Apollo or Dionysus, but an ‘altogether newborn daemon, called Socrates’ (82). Socrates gives birth to an anti-mythical drive to render all things intelligible, to banish contingency, mystery, contradiction and intuition and to replace it with necessity, knowledge, reconciliation and concepts. It is in alliance with Socrates that ‘Euripides dared to be the herald of a new art’ (86). As the Apollinian is dismembered and made to be the primary power without opposition, the Apollinian and the Dionysian dissonance is replaced with a new, unproductive opposition between the Socratic and the Dionysian. When the Socratic replaces the Apollinian, consciousness replaces the dream and the immediate certainty is replaced with the logical inference. The erotic relation between Apollinian and Dionysian is removed as they become ‘cool, paradoxical thoughts’ (83).

Socrates serves as a historical marker for a fundamental shift in the figuration of artistic forces that echo throughout history into the present world. He is ‘the vortex and turning-point of so-called world history’, for his ‘influence has spread out across all posterity to this very day, and indeed into the whole future, like a shadow growing ever longer in the evening sun’ (96). Socrates is not some kind of scientist to emerge from the murky territory of myth. Rather, he is the ‘mystagogue of science’ (ibid.), peddling a new mythology in which nature itself can be understood and harnessed for the ends of humankind. With Socrates’ love for systematic knowledge comes a new archetype: theoretical man. It brings a new age of the Greeks that is no longer characterised by tragic bliss but cheerfulness:

It combats Dionysian wisdom and art, it seeks to dissolve myth, it substitutes for a metaphysical comfort and earthly consonance, in fact, a deus ex machina of its own … it believes that it can correct the world by knowledge, guide life by science, and actually confine the individual within a limited sphere of solvable problems, from which he can cheerfully say to life: ‘I desire you: you are worth knowing’. (109)

Greek cheerfulness is nothing like the bliss born in pain that we find in the tragic Greeks. It turns on a theorisation of life, to the construction of an inhabitable, logical cosmos in which the mind can find stability and solace, where the wounds of knowledge are healed and theoretical man finds himself buffered from the forces that play around him. The supreme law of aesthetic Socratism is thus revealed in the maxim ‘[t]o be beautiful everything must be intelligible’ (83-84), and beauty becomes figured as the confirmation of the morally good.
When Plato’s great Socratic eye turns to tragedy in *The Republic* it is deemed not to ‘tell the truth’ (90), for it represents what is pleasant but not what is useful. Plato’s doctrine of *mimesis* deems that music ‘becomes a wretched copy of the phenomenon, and therefore infinitely poorer than the phenomenon itself’ (107). It gives birth to a new kind of music that either imitates the sounds of the phenomenal world like cannon-shots and marching armies, or attempts to ‘save the eye from gazing into the horrors of night and to deliver the subject by the healing balm of illusion from the spasms of the agitations of the will’ (118). Nietzsche’s critique, however, is less concerned with Greek comedy as it is with the opera of his own day. ‘The features of opera,’ he argues, ‘do not by any means exhibit the elegiac sorrow of an eternal loss, but rather the cheerfulness of eternal rediscovery, the comfortable delight in an idyllic reality which one can at least always imagine as real’ (118). Like the Socratic art of antiquity, the optimism of modern opera ‘drives music out of tragedy under the lash of its syllogisms’ (ibid.). Schopenhauer makes a similar point in response to Hegel, arguing that optimism is a ‘really wicked way of thinking’, for it ‘makes a mockery of the unspeakable suffering of humankind’ (*WR I* 326). For Schopenhauer, it is tragedy that ‘sanctifies’ us from this mode of thinking and places us on ‘the road of salvation’, for the ‘peculiar effect of the tragedy rests ultimately on the fact that it shakes that inborn error [to think that the end of life is happiness], since it furnishes a vivid illustration of the frustration of the human effort and of the vanity of this whole existence in a great and striking example, and thereby reveals life’s deepest meaning: for this reason, tragedy is recognised as the sublimest form of poetry’ (*WR II* 334, 335, 336). Yet by ‘sanctifying’ us in such a way, the tragic effect does not redeem existence, for Schopenhauer, but purifies our way of thinking so that we can acknowledge the suffering of humanity. As I will suggest when I turn to Rosenzweig’s critique of Nietzsche, it is on this point that Nietzsche and Schopenhauer truly depart.

Following Schopenhauer critique of ‘wicked’ thinking, the greatest charge Nietzsche levels against Socratic optimism is that it obscures our primordial relation to pain, a relation that was characteristic of the Greek imagination. While he gives several accounts of the transition between tragic and Socratic art, his primary argument is that Socratic art does not comfort us intuitively but appeals to our logical faculties: ‘the deus ex machina took the place of metaphysical comfort’ (*BT* 109). Theodicy replaces tragedy and the cheerfulness that would render everything explainable forces the Dionysian to mystery cults on the margins of society and culture. Thus the ‘un-Dionysian spirit … reveals itself most plainly in the dénouements of the new dramas’ (108). The dénouements of the new dramas are intellectual, while tragedy occasions ‘metaphysical comfort’ in the face of the pain born of life.
The significance of the birth and death of tragedy for Nietzsche is that it gives a clue to how a rebirth of tragedy might come about, a clue that links tragedy with the scientific impulse. Because reason seeks for perfection, Nietzsche observes, it leads to the image of an infinite God in which there is no becoming, no life. Yet in its quest for perfection, the theoretical system constructed by reason searches for ever-greater understanding until it stumbles across its own limits and is reopened to the terrifying dimensions of reality it obscured through logical optimism. The theoretical certainty that all of nature is intelligible ‘leads science again and again to its limits at which it must turn into art – which is really the aim of this mechanism’ (95-96). Art and science are not so much opposed in their goal as they are in their method, for both are concerned with the truth. When science fails and art takes its place, science does not die but is reoriented to its original goal. The logician is thus perfectly located to bring a rebirth in tragic art, for ‘[w]hen they see to their horror how logic coils up at these boundaries and finally bites its own tail – suddenly the new form of insight breaks through, tragic insight which, merely to be endured, needs art as a protection and a remedy’ (98). Thus it is Kant, and Schopenhauer who follows his lead, who reveals the darker elements of life through his ‘monstrous courage and wisdom’ (112).32

What unites the intellectual courage of Kant and Schopenhauer with the ancient Greeks, Nietzsche argues, is that by pushing logic to its limit they stumbled upon logic’s failure, the inability of the Apollinian to exhaust reality. What sets the Greeks apart from Kant, however, is that in the acknowledgment of the monstrous they discovered art as a healing power: they were able to uncover ‘the sublime as the artistic taming of the horrible’ (60). For Nietzsche, Greek art is different to Kant’s moralised sublime that released the powers of reason in the practical sphere of moral judgment. It is different to Hegel’s rational progress that led to the demise of tragic art; the triumph of thought over our natural conditions through religion and philosophy. The attention the Greeks gave to pain, for Nietzsche, gave

32 Nietzsche’s use of ‘monstrous’ (ungeheure) here is important. In §26 of CJ Kant distinguishes between the sublime (Erhaben) and the monstrous (Ungeheure) as two orders of magnitude. Left without the aid of concepts, aesthetic estimation of magnitude aims to comprehend that which exceeds the capacity of the imagination to comprehend. That which is ‘great beyond any standard of sense’ but remains subject to the estimation of the mind is judged to be sublime (CJ 5:256). It is the almost too great, thus expanding the imagination beyond the limits of the understanding and heightening its awareness of its ability to estimate or judge analogously to the infinitude of reason. However, that which by its magnitude ‘annihilates the end (Zweck) which its concept constitutes’ is judged to be monstrous (5:253). It is too great, and thus destroys any return to ethical or teleological sensibility. Its greatness is so vast that any ‘end’ or ‘purpose’ is utterly destroyed by the excess of raw nature that is encountered. While something that is almost too great gives us the illusion of danger, we judge it to be sublime for we find it to be an occasion for the more forceful release of reason. When something is too great, on the other hand, we are thrown into terror at the hands of real danger, and all hope of salvation is destroyed by what cannot be tamed by reason.
birth to tragic art, and the death of tragedy turned on a failure of courage in those philosophers who posited the optimism of abstract logic in the place of the alteration and cruelty of nature.

Thus to reopen the possibility of tragedy, an opening that has already begun in Kant’s recognition of the limits of thought, Nietzsche argues that we must ‘seek the pleasure that is peculiar to [tragic art] in the purely aesthetic sphere, without transgressing into the region of pity, fear, or the morally sublime’ (141). It is in this way that we can find a renewal of the tragic spirit: ‘only after the spirit of science has been pursued to its limits and its claim to universal validity destroyed by the evidence of these limits may we hope for a rebirth of tragedy’ (106). The overcoming of scientific optimism does not require a denial of everything that has occurred in modernity, but rather ‘a form of culture for which we should have to use the symbol of the music-practicing Socrates’ (ibid.). Exactly what a music-practicing Socrates would look like remains unclear (though possibly a lot like Wagner). The problem to be solved is that after the monstrous discovery of the limits of thought ‘no comfort avails anymore’. In such a context, ‘man now sees everywhere only the horror or absurdity of existence’ and is ‘nauseated’ (60). Modern man cannot retreat from science but requires art as a healing power, and the music-practicing Socrates gives a provocative image of a scientific culture that does not cease from exploring the depths of nature and yet, through its art, affirms life as a whole, life in all its contradiction, cruelty and pleasure.

From this analysis it is clear that at the heart of Nietzsche’s project is the attempt to elucidate the ‘metaphysical comfort without which the delight in tragedy cannot be explained at all’ (108) in such a way that reveals the necessity of a new age of tragic art in the nihilistic context of modernity. It is for the aim of ushering in this new world that he makes his repeated claim that ‘it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified’ (see 22). To assess the validity of Nietzsche’s claim, we must consider his argument as a whole. Throughout BT, Nietzsche urges the reader that before one can feel the desire and joy for existence, one must free oneself from the delusion that one can heal the wound of existence through Socratic passion for knowledge. This freedom, however, uncovers the abyssal reality of things that can only be endured with art as a remedy:

this dissonance, to be able to live, would need a splendid illusion that would cover dissonance with a veil of beauty. This is the trustiest aim of Apollo in whose name we comprehend all those countless illusions of the beauty of mere appearance that at every moment make life worth living at all and prompt the desire to live on in order to experience the next moment. (143)
He we find again a point that many commentators overlook: that the Dionysian and the Apollinian are not exclusive in Nietzsche’s understanding of tragic art, but that they must be united if art is to reach its summit; Dionysian in that they look beyond appearances into the terrifying heart of reality, Apollinian in the sense that they provide a ‘splendid illusion’ that makes life worth living in order to experience the next moment. The moments of terror are thus necessary for redemption to be a possibility, for

when the danger to his will is greatest, art approaches as a saving sorceress, expert at healing. She alone knows how to turn these nauseous thoughts about the horror or absurdity of existence into notions with which one can live. (60)

The impulse to exist is the same impulse which calls art into being, meaning that the philosophy of art, aesthetics, breaks faith with life itself. In Nietzsche’s understanding, a culture of tragedy would entail a denunciation of the desire for intellectual satisfaction and substantial being, suggesting that philosophies in search of healing do not take the terror of existence seriously, occluding it by anthropomorphising reality as something that meets our desire for harmonious knowledge. Opposed to such philosophies, it is pain and sorrow that lead us to the creation of great art that alone can justify the alteration, process and suffering of life. Such art, argues Nietzsche, ‘transfigure[s] a region in whose joyous chords dissonance as well as the terrible image of the world fade away charmingly’. It allows the Greeks to find life as something beautiful without having to censor the ugly or the bad, playing ‘with the sting of displeasure, … and by the means of this play [it justifies] the existence of even the “worst world”’ (143).

Nietzsche’s aesthetic justification of even the worst world parallels Schopenhauer’s sublime illusion. The world cannot be justified in moral terms, for a moral system must posit the existence of another world of peace and order to maintain its logical cohesion. Nietzsche compares us to soldiers painted on the canvas of a battle scene; our protest that the world should be kinder is as ridiculous as their protest would be (52). Rather, it can only be justified aesthetically, for in art ‘the struggle, the pain, the destruction of phenomena, now all appear necessary to us … in view of the exuberant fertility of the eternal will’ (104). This justification is ‘eternal’ because it transports us to ‘the eternal life beyond all phenomena, and despite all annihilation’ (ibid.); it empowers us to see the annihilation as part of life as a whole. In the same movement of Schopenhauer’s sublime transportation the spectator is lifted out of his individuation, his moral self that is repulsed by the spectacle of life, and participates in the life of the primordial One (das Er-Ein). In this experience the spectator feels crushed by the grandeur of what is contemplated and is reduced to a state of absolute insignificance, and
the only meaning one can give to this annihilation of the self is that of illusion. Unlike moral sublimity or traditional theodicies, Nietzsche claims that in a purely aesthetic justification nothing is negated (that is, except the self). The whole, with all its horror, is contemplated with serene pleasure.

While Nietzsche’s aesthetic justification might warrant greater pleasure than Schopenhauer’s ecstatic perusing of nature as a whole, they both share the vantage of the aesthetic observer who finds, only for a moment, a solution to the so-called wisdom of Silenus. Redemption is brought by art, and on this point, as John Sallis argues, ‘there is complete solidarity between Schopenhauer and Nietzsche’. The point at which they diverge is a matter of where they place value. As I will suggest in the following section, the point at which Nietzsche departs from Schopenhauer on the question of value has significant consequences for the kind of ‘life’ that his aesthetic theory is capable of justifying. For Nietzsche, the ecstatic illusion justifies the whole: ‘art is … a metaphysical supplement to the reality of nature, placed beside it for its overcoming’ (140). By identifying art as a supplement to the reality of nature Nietzsche locates value entirely in the realm of appearance, meaning that ‘life becomes the copy and art the reality’ (107). For Schopenhauer, on the other hand, sublime ecstasy is devoid of value:

For at the moment, when, torn from the will, we have given ourselves up to pure, will-less knowing, we have stepped into another world, so to speak, where everything that moves our will, and thus violently agitates us, no longer exists. This liberation of knowledge lifts us wholly and completely above all this as do sleep and dreams. (*WR I* 197)

While Schopenhauer identifies the realm of happiness in ‘another world’, it is a world devoid of value. The aesthetic illusion cannot provide justification for the terrors of nature, for it is simply a momentary transplantation from it. In the Schopenhauian paradigm we conclude that reality is not ‘worth our attachment’ and thus resign in aesthetic contemplation (*WR II* 434).

5.4 **Tragedy and ethics: Franz Rosenzweig**

Thus far I have argued that Nietzsche does not significantly depart from Schopenhauer’s metaphysics of art, meaning that he fails to provide a positive account of art capable of overcoming pessimism. As both thinkers grappled with the task of philosophy in environments dominated by Hegel’s work, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche sought to divorce

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aesthetics and ethics, for both found the decline of world culture to announce the failure of Kant’s moral philosophy and the teleology of Hegelian dialectics.34 However, as Czech poet Czeslaw Milosz suggests, while the cultural shifts of Nietzsche’s lifetime were significant, Nietzsche ‘did not experience the rapid and violent changes of the next century, whose only possible analogy may be the time of the Peloponnesian war, as we know it from Thucydides’.35 In the twentieth century, especially in the tumultuous years following the First World War, not only was Hegelian Idealism called into question, but thinkers such as Franz Rosenzweig came to argue that Nietzsche’s philosophy was also unable to provide a way of confronting new ethical demands. In response to Nietzsche, Rosenzweig struggled to create a new kind of philosophy he called ‘the new thinking’ (das neue Denken), a way of thinking that, as Peter Gordon explains, aims to recognise ‘the philosophical merits of modernity since Nietzsche while continuing to draw nourishment from the resources of Judaism’.36 In this section I argue that Rosenzweig’s proposal for a new way of thinking in The Star of Redemption (1921) (SR) provides an important response to Nietzsche’s interpretation of tragedy for the argument of this thesis. While Rosenzweig’s central focus is to critique Hegelian thought from a Jewish perspective, he proposes to do this by going beyond Nietzsche: by reading Nietzsche as an epochal voice in world history.37 The importance of Rosenzweig’s argument for this thesis, I suggest, is that it calls Hegel’s understanding of tragedy into question by proposing a reading of Nietzsche that builds the framework in which Heidegger and Castoriadis operate in the search for a way to go beyond Nietzsche through reference to tragedy, and to do so by returning to certain elements of Kant’s enlarged way of thinking.

From the famous opening lines of SR it is clear that Rosenzweig understands his new thinking in continuity with Nietzsche’s philosophy:

34 Walter Benjamin distinguishes Nietzsche’s reading of tragedy from the Aristotelian and Hegelian tradition because it asserts ‘the independence of the tragic from the ethos’ (GT 102).
35 See Czeslaw Milosz, The Witness of Poetry, USA: Harvard University Press, 1983, p. 81. The disintegration to which Milosz refers ‘had already taken place in the nineteenth century, though it was under the surface and only observed by a few’.
36 Peter Gordon, Rosenzweig and Heidegger: Between Judaism and German Philosophy, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003, p. xix. While Rosenzweig draws from Jewish sources, and it is clear that his experience of being a ‘Jewish German’ shapes his argument in the text, he states that SR is ‘not a “Jewish book” … for while it deals with Judaism, it deals with it no more comprehensively than it deals with Christianity, and barely more comprehensively than it deals with Islam. Nor does it claim to be a philosophy of religion. … Rather it is merely a system of philosophy’. Franz Rosenzweig, ‘The New Thinking’ [1925], in Philosophical and Theological Writings, trans. & ed. P. Franks & M. Morgan, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000, pp. 109-139, p. 110.
37 Along with Rosenzweig, Walter Benjamin, Herman Hesse, Paul Celan and Martin Heidegger can also be understood in this way: finding Nietzsche to be the ineliminable starting point of grappling with the aesthetic origin of value, and yet insufficient to outline a new way of thinking about value.
From death, it is from the fear of death that all cognition of the All begins. To cast off the fear of the earthly, to remove from death its poisonous sting, from Hades its pestilential breath, in this Philosophy deceives itself [des vermißt sich die Philosophie]. (SR 9)38

According to Rosenzweig, the dream of metaphysics to fly free from death through speculation is nothing less than a philosophical fantasy. The self-deception of philosophy becomes apparent when the individual is confronted with death as a real possibility. Like Nietzsche, Rosenzweig’s proposal will be a new concept of redemption that accords with the post-metaphysical desire to remain in the world. Yet unlike Nietzsche, this redemption does not require reality to be understood in terms of a valueless aesthetics.39 Rather, Rosenzweig argues that this-worldly redemption is only possible if understood in relation to an aesthetic kind of value that renders victimisation ethically meaningful.40

The focus of Rosenzweig’s critique of Nietzsche is that by rendering the images, words and content of the tragedies as peripheral to tragedy’s true essence, Nietzsche renders tragic guilt and hubris as mere occasions through which the tragic essence can shine forth. Following Schopenhauer, Nietzsche argues that aesthetic redemption requires that we are removed from the pity and fear that comes from our ethical relation to the world, meaning that he does not develop a serious theory of the themes and content of tragic art. The content of the tragedies is mere appearance, for music – the animating principle of tragedy – ‘does not need the image and the concept, but merely endures them as accompaniments’ (BT 55).

‘Language’, Nietzsche states, ‘can never adequately render the cosmic symbolism of music’ (ibid.), meaning that the content of tragic drama is secondary to the absolute, unrepresentable reality to which it takes us. For Rosenzweig, Nietzsche’s philosophy provides no language to make sense of the experience of Jewish people throughout the history of Europe. From this perspective, Nietzsche’s rejection of the ethical content of tragedy ultimately undermines his attempt affirm life.

While Nietzsche’s affirmation of the creative energies of life was attractive to many who felt the destructive power of life and the futility of human efforts, Rosenzweig saw that Nietzsche’s solution could only justify life to the spectator by occluding the inarticulate demands of the victims who suffer at the hands of an unjust ethical order. Rather than elevating the spectator above the endless striving of the will, thus allowing him to survey the

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38 I have modified Galli’s translation of des vermißt sich die Philosophie from ‘philosophy has the audacity…’ to "philosophy deceives itself" in order to capture the crucial sense of vermißt sich, which implies self-deception.  
39 Gordon, Rosenzweig and Heidegger, p. 149.  
40 While Rosenzweig provides an important corrective to Nietzsche’s aesthetic redemption, in what follows we give focus to his proposal only to the extent that it elucidates his critique of Nietzsche.
world with the rapacious ecstasy of the artesian god, Rosenzweig suggests that Greek tragedy gives a unique opening into a community's understanding of the relation between the self and the ethical order. The attention the Greeks gave to the human as the ‘measure of all things’ gave a particular insight into the greatness and the weakness of the self (SR 65, 82). Every relational category or self-distinction (such as being a friend, family, nation etc.) is revealed as a moral presupposition in the heroic silence of the hero who appears in the locale that strips the immediacy of all ethical categories:

in the phenomenon of the polis, without being limited by counter-forces, precisely there, too, the figure of the Self, freeing itself from all the rights of the genus, takes possession of its throne in a defiant isolation; it was certainly present, too, in the Sophists’ claims which made of the Self the measure of things, but above all, with all the face of visibility, in the great contemporaries of those theories, the heroes of Attic tragedy. (82)

In Rosenzweig’s account, Greek tragedy reveals that the distinctive sign of the self, the sign of its greatness, is simultaneously ‘the mark of its weakness: it is silent. The tragic hero has only one language that is in perfect accordance with him: precisely, silence’ (85). Far from appraising Schopenhauer’s moral resignation, Rosenzweig argues that the hero loves life, and her act of defiance, as it is for Benjamin, is a personal claim to ethical justice. Thus tragic silence is far more than tragic pathos. Tragic pathos, the metaphysical comfort of tragic art, is not the sublime taming of the terrible for Rosenzweig, for such comfort only comes at the exclusion of linguistic expression. Rather, tragic silence utters an unrepresentable kind of value that is discovered by the spectator with their ears and eyes wide open. By suffering in silence the hero is not reconciled to a fate scripted by the gods. Rather, their silent suffering unveils the injustice of the gods, thereby transforming the relation of the spectators to the passing daemonic order and standing as a witness to a new age.

Rosenzweig’s understanding of tragedy comes to a particular climax in his understanding of Nietzsche’s philosophy as an epochal voice in world history. He argues that in the nineteenth century, the silence of the hero and Nietzsche’s silence on ethics converge, rendering Nietzsche himself a kind of modern tragic hero. By negating God though the silence of tragic spectatorship, ‘[b]oth the tragic hero and Nietzsche figure the emergence of meaning from absolute immanence as a speaking silence in which sacrificial embodiment reverses into spiteful self-destruction’ (82). Nietzsche provides no moral justification of the terrors of life, revealing the life-denying force underpinning Leibnizian theodicies, and yet he does not have
a moral contempt for life. Faced with a society that held a life-denying system of morality, Nietzsche saw that no moral assertion could justify the injustice of the world. In baring this injustice in moral silence he thus becomes our ‘metaethical self’, an image of our raw selfhood stripped of all ethical categories, issuing in a new kind of ethics in the abyss left after the failure of the moral worldview. Thus despite the fact that Nietzsche is incapable of guiding us into a new age, he cannot be ignored. He is the one ‘whom none who must philosophize can henceforth bypass’, meaning that his philosophy forms a passage through which any contemporary theory of tragedy must venture.

Rosenzweig confronts Nietzsche’s conception of the freedom of aesthetics by grounding the artwork in the ethical life of the community in a way that mirrors Kant’s notion of the aesthetic idea. In Kant’s understanding of the singularity the artwork, every idea violates a previous mode of presentation and yet establishes new norm. Nietzsche’s refusal to recognize the singularity of art entails that he retains the metaphysical ideal of original concepts by his very attempt to argue that there are no such concepts, creating an inverse metaphysics in which conceptual life is idolatry and aesthetic flux reality. Thus to respond to philosophy’s failure to encompass the fluidity of life, Nietzsche, assuming that morality can only take the form of traditional philosophy, rejects morality. In Rosenzweig’s view, this rejection of morality fails to overcome the moral system it aims to subvert. It remains unable to call the theoretical paradigm of morality into question, meaning that it ultimately fails to depart from pre-critical metaphysics. Kant’s response to the tragedy of philosophy, on the other hand, entails a reassessment of the kind of value available in aesthetics, situating an immanent kind of value in the aesthetic sphere that, while it is not rational, is reasoned. For Rosenzweig, by rejecting Kant’s attention to the singularity of the artwork, Nietzsche’s metaphysics of art opens the abyss of aestheticism, for the reality underneath art is so central that neither the content of the art nor the artist has any significance. By re-separating aesthetics and ethics, it creates a new intellectual tragedy of its own. Rosenzweig concludes that Nietzsche’s philosophy cannot provide a way beyond Platonic metaphysics, for it merely inverts Plato’s mimetic account of art, holding the spectator as a mere image and reproducing the hierarchical dualism between appearance and reality wherein consciousness becomes the fiction from which art must liberate us.

41 Benjamin agrees with Rosenzweig’s assessment of Nietzsche as a tragic hero, arguing that Nietzsche remains ethically silent, attempting ‘to raise himself up amid the agitation of that painful world’ (GT 110). It seems that Rosenzweig’s account of Nietzsche enabled Benjamin to argue in GT that Nietzsche is ‘offered up as the first fruits of a new humanity’ (107). This new humanity, Benjamin argues, must search for a new ethical paradigm out of the ashes of the tragic hero who defied the previous system of ethics and was destroyed by it.
Ultimately, Rosenzweig shows that it is only by presuming that we are merely artistic images, soldiers painted on the canvas of a battlefield, that it is possible to conclude that existence can only be justified aesthetically. This presumption reveals exactly to whom existence is justified in Nietzsche’s account. It is not justified to the soldiers on the battlefields, for they are mere playthings of the true subject. Rather, it is to the ‘sole author and spectator of this comedy of art’ to whom the world is justified, for he creates it for the purposes of preparing ‘a perpetual entertainment for itself’ (*BT* 52). As a solution to suffering, humans are offered a transcendence of their humanity, a flight from individuality in order to fuse with the Primal One and participate in its self-justification. By focusing entirely on the reality behind the conflict, the structural conditions of the world presented on stage are left unchallenged, leaving Nietzsche unable to see tragedy as an implied critique of *hubris*, excess and stubborn fixity.\(^{42}\)

In Rosenzweig’s reading of Nietzsche we see that the self-justification of the Primal One does nothing to refute the wisdom of Silenus. While Han-Pile goes to great lengths to argue that Nietzsche ‘departs doubly’ from Silenus’ wisdom, Rosenzweig assists us to see that Nietzsche does not even try.\(^{43}\) All aesthetic justification can do is cover the consciousness of what it is like to be human in an illusion, a reverse illusion that renders conscious life as the problem. Nietzsche’s solution ends up being a simple value judgment, inverting the truth-appearance hierarchy and rescuing the individual from the abyss of truth by maintaining the sphere of illusion as the place of the aesthetic justification of existence. Rosenzweig, on the other hand, wants nothing of illusions. Nietzsche’s aestheticism obscures historical actuality, the reality of human suffering, choosing aesthetic catharsis over what is real. The task of interpreting tragedy, for Rosenzweig, is to remove this illusion for the sake of historical actuality; for the sake of truth.

This can only be done by refuting Nietzsche’s anti-subjectivist reading of art as the creation of an external author and recognising the creativity of the artist. When the dissonance within the human artist has created both the manifestations of the human world and man himself, philosophy collapses into nihilism and tragedy is dissolved into mere dreams of the chorus and the spectators. While this raises the release one might find in aesthetic feeling of the tragic effect over the ethical dimension of the drama itself, the fundamental elements of tragedy become mere representations of a greater reality. The hero, her suffering, the reversal and recognition, fate, guilt and mourning are all fleeting appearances that afford a feeling of

\(^{42}\) See Williams, *Tragedy, Recognition and the Death of God*, p. 156.
\(^{43}\) Han-Pile, ‘Nietzsche’s Metaphysics in *The Birth of Tragedy*’, p. 379.
elevation in the spectator. All philosophical reflection is at an end, because Nietzsche’s
metaphysics of art could not refute the argument that BT is yet another illusion.44

5.5 Conclusion

Nietzsche’s provocative description of the pleasure borne in art in BT provides a
fundamental challenge to philosophy, suggesting that philosophical language, language that is
conceptual and propositional, cannot grasp or do justice to the excess that is revealed in tragic
art. His turn to Greek tragedy attempts to unveil a form of philosophy that is destroyed by
Socratic philosophy, a form of philosophy that does not shrink from the monstrous realities of
life but finds its origins in the undergirding forces of life that are primary to conceptual
thought. It is only this form of philosophy, he argues, that can truly embrace life as a whole.

Yet Nietzsche’s commitment to Schopenhauer’s metaphysics of art in BT entails that
his solution to the pain of human suffering does not succeed in overcoming pessimism. While
he criticises Schopenhauer’s subjectivism for holding a moral position that would judge the
dissonant energies of music with repulsion, he reproduces Schopenhauer’s notion of the tragic
sublime: that in the experience of tragic art we are confronted with the terrible heart of reality
itself, an experience that hurls us from our entrapment in our individual self and carries us to
the eternal will. We are left in a serene ecstasy before what formerly terrified us, no longer
afraid but now participating in the creative and destructive activity of the ‘reckless and amoral
artist-god who wants to experience, whether he is building or bullying, … his own joy and
glory’ (BT 22). The suffering of the characters on stage – and the suffering of people in our

44 In the 1886 preface Nietzsche recognises the difficulty he faced in his original attempt to unveil the vacuity of
language through language. Upon reflection he states that ‘[i]t should have been sung, this “new soul” – and not
spoken!’ (BT 20). The limitations of BT to enact its own truth became apparent, significantly undermining the
entire project of the text. Nietzsche had argued in the original edition that ‘[l]anguage, as the organ and symbol
of appearance, can never and in no case disclose the deepest interiority of music’ (55). This is to say that what
needs to be known in the work of art cannot be told but must be displayed and enacted. Thus from the outset of
the book Nietzsche alerts us to the fact that something new is needed if the book is to live up to its observations –
a move that radically distances him from Hegelian dialectics. See Schmidt, On Germans and Other Greeks, pp.
195-198.
own world – cease to be ethically demanding. The perspective on Nietzsche’s theory of tragedy we gain from Rosenzweig reveals that while a purely aesthetic view of reality is appealing to the extent that it diagnoses the life-denying tendency of traditional patterns of thought, by attempting to aestheticise reality Nietzsche merely denies life in an alternative manner; life itself becomes the manifestation of an aesthetic struggle between Apollo and Dionysus. Yet while Rosenzweig assists us to see that Nietzsche’s aesthetic justification cannot redeem life, he also shows that it cannot be ignored. As I will suggest in the following chapter, Rosenzweig’s argument proves significant for Heidegger, who builds from Rosenzweig in order to argue that taking this world seriously requires philosophy to pass through Nietzsche’s critique of moral philosophy in the effort to outline a new understanding of value.

45 Ultimately, the difference between Nietzsche and Schopenhauer’s solution to suffering, as Young points out, is that Schopenhauer’s spectator makes a ‘double denial’. While Nietzsche’s Dionysian spectator identifies with the world-will and finds aesthetic solace, the Schopenhauerian spectator finds this stance ultimately repulsive. His spectator denies both the Apollinian and the Dionysian reality in favour of identifying with something beyond the will, something that refuses to be representable. Schopenhauer condemns the creator for failing to be constrained by moral ideals, while Nietzsche chooses only to judge the creator by aesthetic standards, calling the spectator to see that humans are merely the means to the artist-god’s production of a cosmic epic. For Young, his philosophy rejects what humanises us in order to embrace the creative activity of an amoral artist-god. See Young, Nietzsche’s Philosophy of Art, p. 54.
Chapter 6

Heidegger: Poetising and Thinking

Entering into being-there, its instant and its place: how does this occur in Greek tragedy?¹

In the previous chapter I argued that while Nietzsche’s interpretation of tragedy provided a powerful critique of the inherited moral system of nineteenth century Europe, it ultimately inverted the system it aimed to overcome. For Rosenzweig, Nietzsche’s silence on ethics can be understood as a tragic silence, the stubborn refusal of a tragic hero to utter words of self-justification to a moral order that is unable to acknowledge its own mortality. In this view, Nietzsche’s silence reveals that technalised philosophy is ultimately aimed at removing the possibility of its own death. Because philosophy must exclude death if it is to find eternal truth, Rosenzweig argues that philosophy must face the reality of death that is announced ‘in the victim’s [silent] cry that cannot be stifled’ (SR 11) if it is to prove capable of navigating the new problems of its time.

While Heidegger never admitted a conceptual debt to Rosenzweig – indeed, he was overtly hostile to the so-called ‘Judaization’ of the university and went to great lengths to separate his own thinking from Jewish influences² – Rosenzweig claims that the ‘new thinking’ he advanced in SR assisted Heidegger to make vital steps toward a new way of

² See Gordon, Rosenzweig and Heidegger, p. xxi. Scholars have been tentative to draw connections between Heidegger and Rosenzweig due to Heidegger’s controversial engagement with his Jewish colleagues. For example, see Karl Löwith, ‘M. Heidegger and F. Rosenzweig, or, Temporality and Eternity’, in Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, no. 3, vol. 1, 1942, pp. 53-77. Löwith, who was himself forced to leave Germany because of his Jewish heritage, denies any real engagement between the two. Gordon, on the other hand, argues that we must be tentative to take Löwith’s view due to a desire to criticise Heidegger’s political involvement with National Socialism. Gordon’s work is part of an increasing body of literature aimed at elucidating the influence of Rosenzweig’s new thinking on Heidegger’s fundamental ontology. See also Jules Simon, Art and Responsibility: A Phenomenology of the Diverging Paths of Rosenzweig and Heidegger, New York: Continuum, 2011.
philosophy that is able to acknowledge its own finitude.³ Both Heidegger and Rosenzweig diagnosed metaphysics as a world-historical error, and both envisaged a response to this problem in the language of tragedy. However, in the years that followed Rosenzweig’s reflections on the proximity of his own work to that of Heidegger, each thinker pursued a radically different direction in response to this error: Rosenzweig left the academy to found the House of Jewish Learning (Jüdisches Lehrhaus) in order to focus on dialogue as the means of transformation, while Heidegger came to argue that philosophy must become politically instrumental if it is to confront the problems of its time. During this transition, Heidegger saw metaphysics as a ‘planetary movement’ of technology, arguing the error of metaphysical thinking extends into the twentieth century through the power of technology to determine all human knowing in the paradigm of techne.⁴ In his view, Kant’s proposal for the organic development of an enlarged way of thinking had failed to overcome the power of technalised thinking. A new way of thinking is only possible if it becomes a political task, Heidegger argues, effacing the separation of politics from philosophy.

Recognising that Heidegger’s interpretation of tragedy is intimately connected with his attempt to render philosophy politically instrumental leads our study to his involvement with National Socialism. While much has been written on this topic, my approach in this chapter will be limited to considering Heidegger’s lectures on tragedy in light of the comments he made on his relation to National Socialism in a letter to Karl Jaspers in 1950.⁵ The importance of these comments for the present study lies in the way that they capture Heidegger’s attempt to justify his actions according to his philosophy. Heidegger distances himself from the direction that National Socialism took after his brief time as the Rector of Freiburg University, stating that his lectures given between 1933 and 1942 constituted a ‘confrontation’ with the party that was evident to ‘everyone who could hear clearly’.⁶ While

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⁴ In his final interview with Der Spiegel, Heidegger states that what he had learned since giving his IM lectures in 1935 is that ‘the planetary movement of modern technology is a power whose history-determining magnitude can hardly be overestimated’. Martin Heidegger, ‘Only a God Can Save Us’ [1966], in Richard Wolin (ed.), The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader, USA: MIT Press, 1993, pp. 91-116.


on first glance this defence seems ungrounded, for these lectures deal primarily with Greek tragedy, Hölderlin’s poetry, and Nietzsche’s critique of metaphysics, Heidegger explains that his intent was to contest the National Socialist appropriations of Hölderlin and Nietzsche, to criticise Nazism’s understanding of its historical destiny, and to question the technical thinking that became central to the National Socialist movement. In other words, Heidegger claims that his confrontation with National Socialism consisted in reconsidering its basic sources in order to reveal that it had fallen prey to the planetary ‘abandonment of Being’ it ought, in his view, to counteract.

In this chapter I examine Heidegger’s interpretation of tragedy in two lecture series in which he undertakes the alleged ‘confrontation’ with National Socialism, namely Introduction to Metaphysics (IM) and Hölderlin’s Hymn ‘The Ister’ (HH). Between the two courses, one given in 1935 and the other in 1942, Heidegger’s interpretation of tragedy changes along with his understanding of his task as a philosopher. Throughout this development, I suggest, he comes to see his own philosophical work as instructing the National Socialist movement according to philosophically defined ends. By examining Heidegger’s interpretation of tragedy in these courses in light of Jaspers’ own view of tragedy, I will argue that while Heidegger’s interpretation of tragedy begins to unveil the problem of technalised thinking, the alternative it provides is incapable of providing a ‘confronting’ with National Socialism as he later claims in his letter. By effacing the difference between philosophy and politics, Heidegger not only occludes the suffering of real people in history from the scope of tragic concern, but also becomes complicit with totalitarianism. I conclude this chapter by arguing that while Heidegger re-animates the problematic of tragedy as the search for a way of thinking capable of navigating the fluidity of collective life, his interpretation of tragedy is unable to recognise the dangers of identifying philosophy and politics. The challenge left by Heidegger’s work, I suggest, is to outline a way of thinking that neither assumes the traditional hegemony of the philosophical over the political nor collapses the two entirely.

8 In his letter to Jaspers, Heidegger argues that with Nazi spies in his lectures and constant monitoring of his work he did everything possible to confront the regime, claiming that ‘no one dared to do what I did’. Biemel & Saner (eds), The Heidegger-Jaspers Correspondence 1920-1963, p. 189.
6.1 Overcoming aesthetics

Before I turn to Heidegger’s lectures on tragedy, it is necessary to clarify his understanding of the ‘abandonment of Being’ and how tragedy might assist in Being’s retrieval. In *Being and Time (B&T)*, his first major work published in 1927, Heidegger raises what he calls the ‘question of the meaning of Being’. This question, he states in the opening line of the book, ‘has today been forgotten’ (*B&T* 21), meaning that we are absorbed in the beings that constitute our everyday lives while remaining oblivious to the conditions through which they arise for us. Because traditional philosophy has overlooked the question by dismissing it either as ‘obvious’ or as ‘undefinable’ (22-23), the task is to ‘work out’ the meaning of Being through discerning the structure of experience.9 To conduct this working out, Heidegger separates the ‘meaning of Being’ from any specific beings, a separation he later calls the ‘ontological difference’.

The significance of Heidegger’s notion of the question of the meaning of Being is that it identifies a strata of experience that is ontologically distinct from beings, for it precedes any notion of how and in what manner a particular being might exist. A question of this nature is pre-scientific, for it ‘determines beings as beings, that on the basis of which beings are already understood’ (25-26).10 Failing to ask the question of the meaning of Being means that we are limited to the possibilities ascribed to us within an inherited way of thinking, for we confuse the way that beings appear with Being itself. If we presume that a human being is a rational animal, for example, then we consider all irrational acts as somehow ‘unnatural’, requiring moral or medical correction. Actions that are deemed irrational appear as problems that require a solution. Such thinking, for Heidegger, is ‘technical’, for it legislates nature according to prescribed rules.

One aspect of Heidegger’s question of Being that will become important for his interpretation of tragedy is that it interprets historical and political problems in terms of ontology. For Heidegger, the primary problems that we face in philosophy and in society are not the kind of problems that require solutions. Rather, they are the result of an ontological condition that requires our understanding of Being to be transformed. To search for a solution to the social problems that we face entirely in terms of new laws, policies, strategies and

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9 Heidegger’s words echo Hölderlin’s reflections on Greek tragedy in his *Essays and Letters*, where Hölderlin argues that because the Greeks ‘forgot’ the original questions raised by the tragic poets, our task is the ‘reverse’: the task of remembering. However, Heidegger makes no reference to Greek tragedy in *B&T*. Friedrich Hölderlin, *Essays and Letters on Theory*, trans. T. Pfau, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988, p. 150.

10 I have modified Macquarrie and Robinson’s translation of *Seiendes* as ‘entities’ to ‘beings’ in order to clarify the distinction Heidegger makes between Being (*Sein*) and beings (*Seindes*).
technologies is to assume that all the pieces of the puzzle are available for the solution; all we require is the application of the correct technique. For Heidegger, this technical way of thinking occludes a more basic problem at hand. His ontological formulation of problems is important to note, for it will frame his ‘confrontation’ with political problems in his lectures: political problems are not problems that require a solution, but are expressions of an ontological condition that must be transformed though a reconsideration of Being, that is, though philosophy. In B&T, it is this framing of the problem that begins to efface the difference between politics and philosophy.

Heidegger’s ontological understanding of philosophical and social problems takes on a historical dimension in the years following B&T. During the early 1930s, Heidegger moved away from an ahistorical, transcultural analysis of experience and began to emphasise the social and historical dimensions of Being’s forgetting. He identifies a technalised mode of thinking that is a result of the history of western metaphysics, a mode of thinking that limits what can appear according to a prescribed understanding of Being. Technalised thinking is not simply a subjective error made by individuals who are absorbed in beings, but a planetary, global movement that is unable to see the difference between Being and beings. In Heidegger’s historical framework, technology is the metaphysics of our times. It is not limited to the development and production of machines, he argues, but a way of framing the world as a whole.

The problem that technological framing poses to philosophy is that it occludes the question of Being by requiring objects to conform to the requirement of mathematics. In Jacques Taminaux’s apt description, technological framing ‘offers nothing to thought other than the way of calculus, for which whatever is gets exhausted in its availability for all kinds of manipulations, forms of planning and renewed evaluations’. Heidegger links Plato’s mathematical understanding of creation, Aquinas’ notion of efficient causation, Descartes’ calculative reason, Newton’s causal understanding of nature and Kant’s theoretical reason with modern technology, arguing that these developments constitute a history of metaphysics that limits knowledge to what thought can produce. If the forgetting of Being is a planetary movement of technalised thinking, then the retrieval of Being (a philosophical task) must become a historical task that encompasses every domain of collective life (a political task). In the hope that the German nation might be the site of an ontological retrieval, Heidegger turns to politics – to National Socialism – as the medium of spiritual renewal.

At his inaugural address as the National Socialist rector of Freiburg University in 1933 (RA), Heidegger outlines a procedure by which to confront the problem posed by technalised thinking. The technological framing of the world can only be overcome, he argues, if the German people ‘submit to the command of the beginning’, for only in this way can they avoid falling into ‘the settled comfort of a safe occupation’ (RA 474). This ‘beginning’, he states, is ushered in with Aeschylus’ poetic voice in *Prometheus Bound* and is extended in the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle. While the issue of *techne* remained secondary in Heidegger’s early project in *B&T*, it comes to prominence in Heidegger’s work beginning with RA. In this address he characterises Germany’s ‘destinal mission’ in terms of *techne*, outlining *techne* as a form of creativity that allows the collective knowing of a people to unveil the ‘very historicality of truth’.

Listening to the command of the first beginning entails that science must take up the task of Greek *techne*, ‘becom[ing] the fundamental happening of our spiritual being as part of a people’ (ibid.). Science, he explains, is not the study of timeless forms for the unlimited instrumental application of human knowledge onto the world, but the task of ‘questioning’, of ‘holding one’s ground’ in the chaos of the modern world by participating in the first questioning inaugurated by the Greeks. Science, Heidegger argues, is the ‘spiritual mission’ unique to the ‘German essence’ (477), meaning that the university must take a political role in the National Socialist movement.

Despite the bold conviction of RA, Heidegger suddenly resigned from the rectorate in February 1934, and his attempt at a political career ended not even a year after accepting the position. While this was by no means a break with National Socialism, it seems that Heidegger became discontent with the party’s philosophical direction, perhaps even personally affronted, as John Caputo suggests, that ‘the party was inclined to pass up the opportunity to have the greatest German philosopher since Nietzsche as its spiritual leader’. The double-failure of his attempt to raise the question of the meaning of Being as a philosopher and his attempt to sway the direction of National Socialism as a politician seems to have affected the way he understood his role as a thinker. Radical questioning did not fit with the direction of the Nazi party, the Nuremberg rallies did not gather the German people around the question of Being but expressed a display of omnipotent power, and Alfred

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Baeumler’s interpretation of Nietzsche reinforced the legitimacy of Nazi politics rather than exposing the groundlessness of metaphysics.

Heidegger’s disenchantment led him to enlist the help of Nietzsche and Hölderlin in order to confront the global movement of technalised thinking of which National Socialism had become a part. By making this move, Heidegger rejects Plato and Aristotle as protagonists of the first beginning, arguing that they devise a conception of *techne* that identifies the eternal character of the *eidos*, narrowing the conception of our relationship to nature that makes way for the instrumental application of human knowledge on the world, thus beginning the historical forgetting of the difference between Being and beings. In this historical trajectory, aesthetics is not a modern development but belongs to the history of metaphysics. It concerns the political art of correctness, of controlling what can and cannot appear and invariably discerning what is right and wrong, what is beautiful and ugly. In Heidegger’s view, it can only be overcome by an alternative, ontological understanding of politics; that is, by a new way of thinking.

In the years following his resignation from the rectorate, Heidegger attempted to identify a way of thinking that could overcome the technalised thinking of western metaphysics by an engagement with art, and with tragedy in particular. Tragedy, for Heidegger, is characterised by the ability to allow the differential character of human life to appear, revealing the world in such a way that resists totalisation. In the context of this thesis, we can see that Heidegger both develops and transforms the ongoing problematic of tragedy. He builds on the notion of tragedy as a poetic kind of thinking that gives an alternative to the determination of knowledge as *techne*, and yet he removes Aristotle’s formal understanding of the tragic genre by suggesting that tragedy does not present the content of ethical life in a new form, but that it brings forth the differential character of *Being*. For Heidegger, in the time when tragic theatre soared to the summit of Greek cultural life, poets, philosophers and statesman undertook a radical questioning of Being. In their work we are confronted with a political realm that is not the domain of rationality, of right and wrong, of policy and practice – that is, of actualities in general – but a primordial realm of possibilities around which the poet gathers a people through a shared attention to Being. In his lectures given in the years after his resignation from the rectorate, Heidegger argues that the separation of philosophy
and politics is an expression of the technalised thinking of the modern era. His solution, I will suggest, is to reenergise the radical questioning we find in the ancient Greeks. In the following sections I turn to two lecture series Heidegger gave during this period in order to find if his proposal can be said to constitute a ‘confrontation’ with National Socialism.

6.2 Introduction to Metaphysics

Having identified the key points to Heidegger’s understanding of the abandonment of Being and his development toward a historical understanding of this abandonment, I now turn to his interpretation of tragedy in IM. In this lecture series, Heidegger turns to Greek tragedy in order to outline a philosophical procedure aimed at assisting the state to overcome the metaphysical project of aesthetics. He argues that if aesthetics is the working of metaphysics in regards to beauty and art, then the overcoming of metaphysics involves locating moments in history where thinking about art exceeds aesthetics and throws us, as spectators in the present, into the original experience of artistic truth. The form of art that is up to this task, he suggests, is tragedy.

From the outset of IM, Heidegger fashions his project as a search for the origin of thinking that predates Plato and Aristotle’s separation of techne from poiesis. Plato and Aristotle are deemed inadequate to the project of overcoming metaphysics, for by separating techne from poiesis they construct a notion of techne that removes the bringing-forth of poiesis, framing the natural strata as an amalgamation of raw materials waiting for technical transformation. For Heidegger, the damage of this separation comes to a climax in Kant’s technical understanding of judgment in CPR, wherein reason is ‘occupied with nothing but itself’; it ‘commands’ and ‘legislates’ nature, ‘framing for itself with perfect spontaneity an order of its own according to ideas, to which it adapts the empirical conditions’ (CPR

14 Heidegger’s understanding of history is essentially Hegelian. In the Epilogue to OWA he situates his work in relation to Hegel’s claim that ‘[a]rt no longer counts for us as the highest manner in which truth obtains existence for itself’ (OWA 78). For Heidegger, Hegel assists us to see that the social world is composed of a diverse range of interrelated activities: political, economic, moral, religious, scientific etc. At different historical moments the forms of activity that take the position of normative and cognitive authority push others to the periphery, which, in terms of their historicity, effects a change in their meaning. When a form of activity is pushed to the periphery it involves a change in the essence of that activity. In this sense Heidegger accepts Hegel’s ‘end of art’ thesis; the notion that in modernity art has been dislodged from the authoritative position it held in the Greek world to be replaced by other normative and cognitive meaning-giving activities. Yet rather than reading this as a historical progression, Heidegger suggests that the current activity that governs our thinking, namely technology, occludes the insights that could be found when art held a position of authority in forming the ethical life of a community.

The distinction between what is given and what is constituted is rendered absolute, meaning that only what is constituted can be known.

Yet building from Nietzsche’s reading of Kant as the thinker whose monstrous courage enabled him to unveil the subjective interest concealed within logic, Heidegger suggests that by making the distinction between what is constituted and what is given absolute, Kant drew the tragedy of philosophy into a climatic entanglement. By allowing the tragedy of philosophy to emerge in his own work, Kant uncovered a reflective kind of judgment in *CJ*, a way of thinking that isolates the intuitive content of perception, thus opening a kind of knowledge that does not involve constitution. This shift in philosophy’s approach is so radical, for Heidegger, that despite the fact that Kant kept this intuitive kind of knowledge subordinate to determinate content, his response to the tragedy of philosophy serves as a lasting example *despite* Heidegger’s aim to move beyond the determinant content Kant seems to maintain. We might say that while Heidegger reacts to what he sees as Kant’s failure to fully understand the tragedy of philosophy – as did Nietzsche – he accepts that Kant sets forth a particular problematic to which he directly responds. In order to build from Kant’s example of allowing the dissonant appearance of nature to arise as a matter of philosophical concern, Heidegger seeks to prioritise the intuitive dimension of Kant’s insight, turning to the work of thinkers who precede the initial error of separating *techne* and *poiesis* – that is, who precede Plato’s metaphysics – in order to find a display of the power of *techne* to form a historical people. For Heidegger, the primordial understanding of *techne* found in pre-Platonic thinkers indicates that, if the original relation to Being is to be uncovered, the direction of German politics lies not in its politicians but in its poets. Yet Heidegger realises that there is a gap between the poet and the politician, for the poet can only present a new historical configuration that requires a revolution to become a lived reality. The task of drawing the work of the poets to the attention of the politicians, he identifies, lies with the thinker.

Heidegger begins his self-appointed role of the thinker by placing metaphysics in historical context, stating that Europe ‘lies in the pincers between Russia and America, which are metaphysically the same in regard to their world-character and relation to the spirit’ (47-48). They are metaphysically the same, Heidegger argues, for both show ‘the same hopeless frenzy of unchained technology and of the rootless organization of the average man’. Rather than ‘listening to spirit’, they relate to spirit via a ‘technological assault’ (52). In order ‘to recapture, to repeat’ a time in which technology did not hinder the task of listening to spirit, Heidegger proposes a violent response.
Before we consider Heidegger’s proposal for a violent response, it is necessary to identify what he means by ‘listening to spirit’ and how violence might assist this task. Firstly, Heidegger explains what listening to spirit does not look like through criticising Nietzsche as the ‘last metaphysician’, departing sharply from Baeumler’s depiction of Nietzsche as a proto-National Socialist. In similar terms to Rosenzweig, Heidegger argues that Nietzsche announced the death of the ‘highest concepts’, revealing them to be ‘the final wisp of evaporating reality’ through arguing that ‘nothing up to now has been more naively persuasive than the error of Being …’ (TI 80, IM 38). However, while Nietzsche criticised the vacuity of Being, Heidegger is attentive to his failure to search for a more primary meaning of Being, recognising that he simply rejects it all together. Thus, Heidegger argues, Nietzsche remains locked in the paradigm of traditional philosophy he aims to overcome. Echoing Rosenzweig, he states that Nietzsche becomes ‘the unrecognised witness to a new necessity’ (39). To reconsider that to which Nietzsche witnesses, that is, the history of metaphysics, Heidegger argues that it is necessary to reject the ‘hero worship’ of the ‘clumsy and trifling importunities of the horde of scribblers that is becoming ever more numerous around him today’. Opposed to this horde, the question we must begin with is ‘[h]ow does it stand with Being?’ (41), or, as he states elsewhere, ‘[w]hat is the meaning of Being?’ (44). This question does not involve the analytic Heidegger undertook in B&T, but a historical task whereby we ‘repeat and retrieve’ the inception of our historical-spiritual’ being so that it might be ‘transformed’ (41). This being established, Heidegger concludes that listening to spirit entails ‘an originally attuned, knowing resolution to the essence of Being’ (52).

Once Heidegger has identified listening to spirit as the knowing resolution to Being, he outlines a procedure for how this spiritual-historical relation might be retrieved. He begins this task by searching for an alternate account of techne to the western tradition in Parmenides’ third fragment, which reads to gar auto noein estin te kai einai.16 The technalised thinking of western metaphysics, he notes, renders this fragment as ‘because thinking and being are the same’, conjoining the knowledge of the thinker with Being itself. This picture of thinking renders the world as ready made for thought to intuit its structure (154), entailing that thinking is a faculty of the human being who is already defined as a rational animal (189). In contrast to this assumption, Heidegger posits what he believes to be a more accurate translation of Parmenides: that ‘belonging-together reciprocally are apprehension and Being’ (155). In this rendering, Parmenides does not posit the unity of

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Being and thinking but uncovers the mutual relationship between thought and Being, where Being is a ‘happening’, a temporal event in which humanity itself happens (6). For Heidegger, Parmenides’ understanding of techne is a poetic mode of thought that ‘brings forth what is present out of unconcealment’.

This rendering of Parmenides’ third fragment, Heidegger argues, transforms the way we think about nature. Our modern, technical framing of the world begins with the translation of phusis as ‘nature’, which derives from the Latin natura (‘to be born’, ‘birth’) (14). Heidegger argues that the Latin translation ‘thrusts aside’ the originary content of the word, becoming definitive for the philosophy of the Christian Middle Ages. It posits nature as the determining ground of beings, ascribing a sufficient reason for every appearance on the model of Aristotle’s efficient causation. Nature becomes the stable essence of beings, meaning that poiesis must be understood in terms of mimesis, imitation.17 For Heidegger, by subordinating poiesis to phusis, Medieval philosophy removed the concealing/disclosing event from the ‘nature’ of beings, thus constructing a metaphysics of presence that structures the very process of thought according to set rules before it even begins.

Yet, following Hegel, Heidegger also recognises ‘an echo of knowledge about the originary meaning’ of nature in Aristotle’s work (17). Aristotle’s concept of final causation grants an artistic dimension to phusis as that which ‘emerges from itself (for example, the emergence, the blossoming, of a rose)’ (15). In the paradigm of final causation, phusis is ‘the unfolding that opens itself up, the coming-into-appearance in such unfolding’. It is experienced everywhere, in the rising of the sun, the surging of the sea, in the growth of plants and in the coming forth of human beings from the womb. Yet phusis, Heidegger informs us, ‘is not synonymous with these processes, which we still today count as part of “nature”’. In other words, phusis does not name one process among others that we observe in beings. Rather, ‘[p]husis is Being itself, by virtue of which beings first become and remain observable’ (ibid.).

Heidegger’s aim is to reverse the priority in experience, suggesting that it was not by a natural process that the Greeks first experienced what phusis is, but it was by phusis that they experienced natural processes. In this framework, it was on the basis of an experience of

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Being in poetry and thought that ‘what they had to call phusis disclosed itself to them’ (16).\(^{18}\)

It is evident that Heidegger’s notion of phusis confronts Kant’s CPR conception of nature that is known technically and yet builds from Kant’s enlarged conception of nature in CJ. Like Kant, Heidegger came to recognise that to question the creativity of thought is to question the technical legislation of nature. If nature appears to us as art, then the desire of technical thinking (determinative judgment) to frame the world according to predetermined rules remains oblivious to the primordial self-appearance of beings. For Heidegger, as for the Kant of CJ, human existence is the unavoidable starting point for any attempt to think about nature, displacing phusis from the tradition of western thought that has understood nature as a determining ground and replacing it with a dynamic sense of happening and unconcealing.

Under the temporal conditions of techne, phusis is uncovered through poetic engagement with the world.\(^{19}\)

To allow his primordial meaning of phusis to appear, Heidegger searches for a connection between thinking (noein) and poetry (poiesis) that is pre-Platonic. In his view, this connection stands prior to Kant’s theoretical conception of nature and can be found in tragedy, and in Sophocles’ famous choral ode in Antigone in particular. In the choral ode, the chorus sing of a world dominated by technical knowledge and its terrible consequences. In a word that opens the ambiguity of human creativity, the chorus describe human beings (anthropos) as deinos (awe-inspiring, wondrous, terrifying). Heidegger translates deinos according to Hölderlin’s Unheimlich:

Manifold is the uncanny (deinos), yet nothing uncannier than man bestirs itself, rising up beyond him. (IM 156-158)

What is important to note in Sophocles’ poetising of anthropos, for Heidegger, is that he does not describe the human being in the terms of the established references of his time: the gods, social status, Homer’s poetry etc. Neither are his words intelligible according to the

\(^{18}\) As Mark Sinclair notes, Heidegger draws our attention to the connection between phusis and phaos (light): ‘as light, phusis is presence, the event of presence which allows each and every being to show itself in its own particular shape and figure’. Mark Sinclair, Heidegger, Aristotle and the Work of Art: Poiesis in Being, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 145.

\(^{19}\) Heidegger argues that Aristotle established one of the basic misunderstandings of nature in western philosophy by contrasting phusis with art. In the western tradition nature is not just one of two equal terms (nature and freedom, nature and spirit nature and law etc.) but ‘holds the position of priority’. In this view, freedom, spirit, law and all potentialities of human being that are held to be ‘non-natural’ are, in fact, determined by nature, finding their existence in relation to a ground that defines their parameters. Alternatively, Heidegger attempts to locate a notion of phusis that does not determine the beingness (ousia) of beings, but that provides a space for beings to emerge. Martin Heidegger, ‘On the Essence and Concept of Phusis in Aristotle’s Physics’, translated by Thomas Sheehan in Pathmarks ed. William McNeill, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 228-229, p. 241.
established references of our own time: Aristotle’s rational animal, the reversal/recognition structure of Poetics, Descartes’ thinking thing or Kant’s unity of apperception. Rather, Heidegger suggests that the power of tragedy, and the choral ode in particular, lies in its ability to transport us to an understanding of human beings that precedes western ontology. In Heidegger’s view, despite recognising the philosophical importance of the problematic of tragedy, both Hegel and Nietzsche remained locked within the metaphysical system they aimed to overcome. Thus they stand as witnesses to a new necessity. For Heidegger, it is only by attending to pre-Socratic ontology – the pre-Socratic notion of techne as bringing-forth – that metaphysics can be truly overcome.

Heidegger aims to draw out this transportation by exploring the word deinon. To do so he interprets the ode as an exploration of three different spheres in which the nature of the deinos is displayed: the conquering of inanimate nature, the domestication of animals and the ordering of cities. In the inanimate world, anthropos ‘wears away’ (apotruetai) three characteristics of the earth: the eldest (hupertatan), the immortal (aphthitos) and the unwearied (akamatos).20 They destroy both age and place (hupertatan) in order to create something new; they disrupt the resistance of the earth to decay (aphthitos), beginning the degeneration of the earth; they upset the rest of the earth (akamatos) by constantly working it. Secondly, the chorus depict anthropos as the conqueror (kratei) of animals, mastering the art of capturing animals and harnessing them for human service. And finally, anthropos teaches itself speech and has the temperament to build and rule cities. This is not some natural skill, but is necessitated by anthropos’ vulnerability to the frost of winter and the lashing of rain. Anthropos does not realise its nature through creating cities, as Aristotle states, but simply delays its death.

The significance of the three ‘scenes of disclosure’ is that each presents the ‘overpowering’, that is, something in nature that resists determination by techne. Importantly, Heidegger does not view the constitution of boats, spears and cities as acts of human creativity, but as things that were formed in order to commune with nature. This is somewhat strange, for Heidegger also sees these products of techne in their initial articulation as violence against nature.21 Violence and communing are not contradictory in Heidegger’s account of techne, and to this extent he no longer translates techne simply as ‘knowing’ as he did in RA (472), but as ‘transgressive knowledge’ (IM 170), emphasising techne’s violent

21 ibid., p. 95.
quality. Heidegger’s poet is akin to Kant’s genius, for he not only has an intimate communion with nature, but is ‘the one who is violence-doing, the creative one, who sets out into the unsaid, who breaks into the unthought, who compels what has never happened, and makes appear what is unseen’ (172). While I will suggest that in Heidegger’s ‘Ister’ lectures the genius is Sophocles, and hence Hölderlin, here it seems to be Nietzsche who’s silence on morality renders him a witness to a new age. It is important to note that the genius, for Heidegger, does not create new form, but brings forth what is unseen, namely Being itself. Authentic human knowing, in his view, looks out beyond that which is directly present-at-hand in order to set Being into work as something that is in such and such a way (174). What he means seems to be that the violence of techne, such as in the building of a boat, is countered by the return of the movement of nature, for the products of techne become swept away by the elements they attempted to harness. They are ‘scenes of disclosure’ because, through their destruction, human beings come to recognise the temporality of things and begin to question the truth of Being.

The disclosive nature of techne becomes evident when we consider Heidegger’s interpretation of the ode in relation to Hölderlin’s understanding of tragedy. Hölderlin identifies the power of tragedy in its ability to present humans as a paradox: as that through which nature appears and as nature’s servant. He states that

[the significance of tragedies can be understood most easily by way of paradox. Since all potential is divided justly and equally, everything that is original appears not in its original strength, but rather, properly, in its weakness. … Properly speaking, the original can only appear in its weakness; but insofar as the sign in itself is posited as insignificant = 0, the original, the hidden ground of every nature, can also present itself. If nature properly presents itself in its weakest talent, then, when it shows itself in its strongest talent, the sign = 0.]

Only when we allow the nothingness of human beings to appear is this paradox drawn into the open. In the tragic hero’s demise, when the sign = 0, nature is shown to be the conqueror. Tragedy is a sacrifice that humans make to nature in order to allow it to come into appearance. In other words, human beings are essentially tragic because they can only serve nature in death, which brings them finally to significance. Through sacrifice humans show nature to = 0; that nature does not provide a principle of sufficient reason to justify the necessity of events, thus finally rendering themselves free from necessity.

22 In CJ, Kant describes the genius as follows: ‘Genius can only provide rich material for products of art; its elaboration and form require a talent that has been academically trained, in order to make a use of it that can stand up to the power of judgment’ (5:310).
24 Hölderlin, Essays and Letters on Theory, p. 89.
For both Hölderlin and Heidegger, the conception of techne expressed in the choral ode is far from Aristotle’s understanding of techne as a uniquely human virtue whereby the agent produces something according to a rule. Rather, the choral ode depicts techne as a form of knowledge that is not necessarily under human control. It can produce either bad or good, destruction or greatness. It is associated with escape, and yet while anthropos can escape from most of nature – even at the expense of becoming apolis, without a city, or aporos, losing his way – he cannot escape his own death. In death anthropos encounters the limits of his skillfulness. Thus the better humanity becomes at conquering the land through agriculture, at domesticating animals for the production of food, and at governing cities, the more it will come to think that techne might be able to totally control the tumult of nature. By escaping the natural elements and banishing death from our midst, the more the tragic movement of the appearance of nature vanishes.

The significance of Heidegger’s emphasis on this primordial disclosure of the human being in Sophocles’ Antigone is that his account of philosophy’s encounter with tragedy does not involve a procedure that attempts to navigate the tragic movement of techne. Rather, philosophy’s response to this disclosure of human being in the experience of tragedy is to accelerate its arrival. For Heidegger, the present times do not constitute what Nietzsche called a ‘tragic culture’, and this is precisely the problem. If the finitude of beings only comes to light when nature pushes back against human techne, then the solution is to engage in creative, violent techne in such a way as to draw the uncanny nature of human being into appearance.

In this sense Oedipus is the paradigmatic tragic hero, representing the movement of poros that is basic to human being-there. His relentless search for truth – his ‘one eye too many’ (112) – means that he cannot be at home. However, his passion for truth is ‘the fundamental condition for all great questioning and knowing’ (ibid.). Thus Oedipus’s flaw is not moral in nature but comes from his insatiable desire for conceptual knowledge. He seeks total power through total knowing, thus anticipating the destiny of the west: the new ‘sight’ he gains in blindness is the sight afforded when the blindness of metaphysics is exposed. Like Oedipus, human beings use violence against the overpowering by attempting to understand and domesticate the world, meaning that it is precisely the search for total understanding leads

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26 Heidegger describes the movement of Oedipus as follows: ‘Step by step he must put himself into unconcealment, which in the end he can only endure by putting out his own eyes, i.e. by removing himself from all light, and letting the protective cloak of night fall around him, and, by crying out, as a blind man, for all the doors to be opened so that such a one could be manifest to the people as that which he is’ (IM 107).
to their discovery of the truth. The task is not so much to learn from Oedipus’ error as it is to give audition to spirit in the tragedy of contemporary knowledge.

The significance of ‘great art’ (schoenen Kunst) such as Sophocles’ Oedipus, for Heidegger, is that it draws the original essence of techne – the essence that has been occluded by technological framing – into appearance. IM is the only place in which Heidegger refers to ‘great art’, suggesting not simply that he feels a close proximity to Kant’s CJ but that he thinks that CJ brings the original essence of techne into appearance. Because the poet articulates the unsaid, his words are unintelligible to the people. Thus the task of the philosopher is to make use of the material given by the genius, communicating to the people that which looks like ‘the charlatan’, the poet who operates outside all frames of reference, is really the herald of a new era (CJ 5:310). Just as Kant recognised in a different way before him, Heidegger argues that technical thinking occludes the truth of art, meaning that it takes an enlarged awareness to listen to spirit.

Heidegger no longer considers his own task as a political confrontation, as he did in RA, but identifies his calling as being the central link in a threefold chain. In his lectures on Hölderlin’s Germanian (1934-5) given in the same year as IM, Heidegger argues that while ‘the truth of the existence of a people, is originally founded by the poet,’ it must be ‘grasped and ordered, and so first opened up as being by the thinker’. Yet to become the ‘definite historical truth’ so that the hearers might become a ‘people’ we require a further link, ‘the creation of the state by ... the state-creator’. The poet ruptures the established field of meaning, the philosopher carefully explains the profundity of the work, and the politician institutes the new epoch. Heidegger’s goal is no longer to organise the self-assertion of a nation against a configuration of political meaning, but to transform the ‘problem of politics’ into a task of unveiling the origin of the political as such: a philosophical task of techne, of transgressive knowing. Setting the work of the poet as the origin of political change is, in one sense, a radically anti-Platonic move, not only returning the poet from exile but also placing him at the centre of the polis in the role of the philosopher-king. Yet in another sense it replicates Plato’s logic, for Heidegger effectively argues that in a phenomenal (tragic)

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28 ibid.
29 Jules Simon argues that Heidegger’s introduction of the threefold means that his ‘turn’ is not simply a ‘turn to’ art and aesthetics, but, following his resignation from the position of Rector, a ‘turn from’ political engagement. The aim of Heidegger’s new task of thinking, according to Simon, is ‘the setting into motion of an aesthetic process of political change made possible by the gift of the poet, Hölderlin, translated by the philosopher, Heidegger, and which could be taught to the politician, Hitler’. Simon, Art and Responsibility, p. 14-15.
30 Young, The Philosophy of Tragedy, p. 209.
world Plato’s philosopher-king must be a poet – just not an ‘unknowing’ poet who, like Ion, is not attuned to the essence of Being but merely replicates the great art of times past in order to impress an audience. By identifying the poet as the founder of the state, Heidegger displaces the hegemony of philosophy over politics with the hegemony of aesthetics over politics. This move frames the polis not in terms of praxis, that is, action aimed toward the good of the polis, but in terms of poetry, of poiesis. Poiesis is not a form of activity but of production; it is concerned with the bringing-forth of Being into appearance. Thus Heidegger aims to complete the aestheticisation of politics, collapsing the political order that, for Plato, must be governed by the philosophic, and the aesthetic sphere, which is free from the philosophic, into one and the same order. The only form of politics authentic to such an order lies in the transformative leadership of the state-creator at the instruction of the poet.31

Heidegger’s aesthetic understanding of political change is evident in his understanding of the polis. In his view, it is not action as such but ‘great art’ that opens a space that is the condition of the possibility of objects coming into the open, a ‘site’ that is expressed in the Greek word polis. Thus the polis is not the site of political action, but a work that opens our attention to the movement of history. In relation to Kant’s notion of great art, the movement of history, for Heidegger, is achieved by works:

Unconcealment happens only in so far as it is brought about by the work: the work of the word as poetry, the work of stone in temple and statue, the work of polis as the site of history that grounds and preserves all this. (IM 204)32

The activity proper to the polis is not praxis, the mode of activity that Aristotle describes as that which directs itself to the life of the polis according to phronesis.33 Rather, it is poiesis, bringing-forth through the creation of works. The work does not orient the people to practical activity with the ground of mutual communicability, as it does for Kant, but to a shared attention to Being. Heidegger’s notion of poiesis connotes an epistemological access to a pre-given meaning rather than something that is a communicative action. The original moment of language, the opening of the temple and the creation of the polis are poetic ‘works’ that schematise an outlook for humans to understand themselves and the world: language

31 Heidegger’s aestheticisation of the political sphere in RA and IM opens the way for Carl Schmitt’s political theory, which views the form of action appropriate to the political as the decision. For Heidegger, the task of the leader is to bring a new constellation of beings into existence though decisive action. While Schmitt views the decision as a political act, for Heidegger it is aesthetic, for it does not bring new form into being, as it does for Schmitt, but allows the violence of techne to come into appearance. See Carl Schmitt, The Concept of the Political, trans. G. Schwab, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.
32 Here Heidegger seems to be attempting to complete his proposal in §74 of B&T (435-436) to realise the destiny of the people (Volk) though realising their ‘impotence’ and taking a stance of resolute ‘passivity’.
33 Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1140a.
schematises thought; the temple is a schema of transcendence; the *polis* is a schema of appearance. *Techne*, he states, is ‘the setting-into-work of Being, a setting-into-work which is itself knowing. This is History’ (*IM* 130). Heidegger’s notion of history departs from Kant’s art history in which aesthetic ideas appear as works of communicative action, for it is simply the recognition of an existing meaning.

Thus the power of tragedy, in Heidegger’s view, lies in the fact that if we listen to the movement of spirit depicted therein, such as in Sophocles’ choral ode, we find ourselves cast out of the familiar and thrown into the radical questioning of everything that appears in the *polis*. In this understanding of the audition of spirit, the ‘authentic task’ bequeathed to us by tragedy does not lie in a philosophically defined procedure that might help us to navigate the tragic movement of Being. Rather, as Heidegger states in the concluding lines of *IM*, it lies in

> what we do not know; and insofar as we know this *genuinely* – namely, as a given task – we always know it only in *questioning*. Being able to question means being able to wait, even for a lifetime. … what is essential is … the right endurance. (*IM* 221)

Poetic knowing involves the knowledge of the failure of technalised thinking, and is expressed in questioning, in waiting. This knowing is nothing like Kant’s transgressive art that brings a new idea of mutual communication into the heart of a community, for it simply anticipates the appearance of a pre-given meaning.

Heidegger’s proposal of waiting and questioning as an authentic response to the counterturning essence of the *deinon* leads to the question of whether this can be seen as a confrontation with National Socialism. For Jaspers, I will suggest, Heidegger’s aesthetic understanding of the *polis* wilfully collapses the distinction between politics and philosophy, thus rendering the task of action and interpersonal communication as a secondary matter of political concern. In such a context, no confrontation is possible, for the call to audition the essence of being is the only ‘political’ response. For Heidegger, however, the final lines of the choral ode elucidate the fitting response to tragedy: the praise of the one who ‘weaves in the laws of the land, and the justice of the gods that binds his oaths together he and his city rise high — but the city casts out that man who weds himself to inhumanity thanks to reckless daring’. This line, in Heidegger’s view, articulates the choice that faces the destiny of a people: will they, like the chorus, attempt to banish the reckless, daring state-creator from their midst, or will they allow the daring one to be their own? The one who weaves together the justice of the gods and the city, the one who practices *phroneo*, is, for Heidegger, the one who is un-attuned to the hearth of being, and thus attempts to banish the state-creator from
their midst. A city in which such a man is valued is destined to be lost in beings and unable to allow the uncanny essence of human being to come into appearance.

Before we come to our discussion of Heidegger’s lectures on Hölderlin, it is important to note that Heidegger’s reading of the choral ode has two characteristics that will prove significant to Jasper’s critique. Firstly, it does not read the drama as a whole. This is a strange limitation, for the chorus is clearly condemning the trajectory of technical knowledge on which Creon had already embarked by making the unshakable law to execute anyone who might attempt to honour the gods by burying Polyneices. In the attempt to read Antigone without the aid of Aristotle’ recognition-reversal account of tragedy, Heidegger reads the drama as an appraisal of the one who ‘weds himself to inhumanity thanks to reckless daring’, which, given the setting in which Heidegger wrote the IM, can be read as nothing less than an appraisal of Hitler. From an Aristotelian point of view, there is nothing ‘tragic’ about this view of tragedy, for tragedy is seen as something undesirable: an unfortunate play of forces beyond one’s control or a self-induced fate based on one’s naivety. Secondly, Heidegger’s reading of the choral ode does not attempt to learn from the failure of technalised knowledge. By identifying the ability of tragedy to bring the essence of the deinos into appearance, Heidegger identifies tragedy with the manifestation of Being. Thus it is the very failure of technalised knowledge that draws Being into appearance. Heidegger does not seek to navigate this failure, for it is through this failure that the tragedy of Being is overcome. In other words, by advocating a patient, silent questioning as the authentic response to the tragedy of Being, Heidegger does not so much attempt to navigate the tragedy of techne as seek a kind of deliverance from the tragic movement of Being. Such waiting allows us to see through the tragedy of techne to the unutterable depths of life, allowing the one attuned to the tragedy of Being to feel himself above the mere preoccupation with beings.

Heidegger’s reading of Sophocles’ choral ode clearly contains its own interests. One in particular stands out: an implicit condolence of Hitler as a transgressive leader, advocating a silent audition as the fitting mode of being of the people. Thus it can be argued that Heidegger opens our attention to the political realm only to occlude its practical character, thus rendering critical and active engagement with the prevailing order as a mere extension of the abandonment of Being. The task confronting the prevailing order, for Heidegger, cannot be a political task requiring praxis, but only one of poiesis, of thinking, of philosophy. For Heidegger, the lack of praxis is precisely that which reinvigorates and recreates politics. This, I will suggest, leaves him with no other option than to argue that Being is tragic; that tragedy
is not something to be avoided or to confront heterodox forms of thinking, but to be affirmed, to be drawn into appearance.

6.3 Hölderlin’s Hymn ‘The Ister’

While Greek tragedy featured as a Promethean challenge to the existing ontological order in *IM*, leading Heidegger to attempt to redirect the revolutionary violence of National Socialism toward the inner truth and greatness of the movement, Heidegger’s 1942 lecture series on Hölderlin’s hymn ‘The Ister’ examines tragedy as the original moment that gives rise to the onto-historical destiny of a people. In these lectures, Heidegger expands on the account of tragedy he gave in *IM* and provides his most sustained treatment of Greek tragedy. His interpretation, however, is by no means the same. What distinguishes these lectures from *IM* is, as Robert Bernasconi notes, that Heidegger speaks from a position of ‘political isolation’.

For Bernasconi, in *HH* ‘a space open[s] up between the thinker and the people’ as Heidegger recognised that he was unable to determine ‘the direction of the Nazi Party’. Building from Bernasconi’s observation, in what follows I will argue that while Heidegger perceives several problems with the National Socialist movement, by rendering these problems entirely in terms of the abandonment of Being he fails to provide an adequate way to counteract them.

Central to *HH* is Heidegger’s diagnosis of the National Socialist party and its supporters. The crux of his diagnosis is that the National Socialist party, as it stands in 1942, is unable to overcome the technical thinking that it set out to combat. This failure to overcome technical thinking, Heidegger argues, is manifest in the ‘research’ of German academics in which ‘the Greeks appear as the pure National Socialists’ (80). The ‘overenthusiasm’ on the part of these academics does ‘National Socialism and its historical uniqueness no service at all’. Their technical thinking ‘is intent on being unconditionally certain of itself and thereby of the things that can be experienced’, refusing to submit to the uncertainty of Being by finding its measure in the ‘surveyability and indubitability of everything that can be calculated and planned’ (94). The drive for certainty leads beings to be ‘experienced in a “technical” manner’, failing to give audition to Being (ibid.). While it is clear in *HH* that Heidegger

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35 ibid.
remains committed to National Socialism, his critique of the current trajectory of the movement is far more explicit than it was in *IM*.

Heidegger’s criticism of the attempt made by German academics to posit the unity of the Greeks and National Socialism, and to use Nietzsche for this task, proceeds via an attack on their inability to think the unity of space and time. The intention of this attack is to show that they are unable to escape from the tradition of metaphysics, a tradition that thinks of ‘the essence of space and time in terms of their own fundamental positions’ (53). By isolating space and time as unique dimensions, metaphysics cannot think of space and time ‘in terms of their relation to history or to human beings as historical, but rather are thought with respect to mere process of movement in general’ (ibid.). For those intent on claiming Nietzsche as justification for their own agenda, the places and sequence of events in human history fall into ‘dimensions’, into ‘those realms in which space and time can be measured numerically’. This understanding of history flattens out the abyssal difference between the Greek and the modern imagination in such a way that renders the Greeks present to the contemporary world, made possible through the research of Nazi academics (ibid.).

Heidegger argues that the failure of metaphysics to be of any ‘direct assistance to us in illuminating locality and journeying and their unity’ (53), and thus the failure of the Nazi academics, is premised on the conviction that ‘thinking only needed to be liberated from the “poetic”’ (111-112) if it is to discern the truth. Such a conviction assumes that thinking, like our relation to space and time, does not have a historical origin but simply exists, establishing a dualism between the technique of thinking and the confusion of poetising. The inability of metaphysics to unify space and time can be overcome, he argues, if we recognise the historical basis of thinking. If thinking has a historical dimension and is not separated from the localised nature of poetising, then we cannot simply recreate a time that precedes metaphysics. Rather, we must allow our basic conception of thinking to be transformed by reflecting ‘on the essence of history’ (54). This task, a task that becomes the primary thrust of the lecture series, can be undertaken in relation to Hölderlin’s poetising of the rivers of Germany.

What is important about Hölderlin’s hymnal poetising for this task, for Heidegger, is that it falls ‘outside of all metaphysics’ because ‘its poetising of the rivers necessarily poetises the historicality of human beings, and thus locale and time’ (53). ‘The Ister’, a poem that describes the journeying of the Danube river (Ister is the Greco-Roman name for the Danube), depicts a locale that it describes in terms of a ‘place’ (*Ort*) of dwelling, a homeland (*Heimat*), ‘one’s own’ (*das Eigene*), or in Hölderlin’s language, a ‘Fatherland’ (*Vaterland*), exploring
the flow of the river that connects Germany to the ‘oriental vitality’ of ancient Greece (2-6).\textsuperscript{36}

It is about the building of a home within the vital land of the river, from which the ‘care’ of the poet is to ‘make arable / the land’ (4). Thus the significance of Hölderlin’s metaphor of the river, for Heidegger, is that it depicts a journeying that ‘tears humans out of the habitual midst of their lives, so that they may be in a centre outside of themselves’ (28).

While it is Hölderlin’s ‘The Ister’ that is to assist us to overcome metaphysics, for it expresses the poetic founding of the German people, only part way into the discussion of this poem the lecture course is interrupted by a sustained reflection on Sophocles’ choral ode which proceeds to take up a third of the entire series. Heidegger argues that Hölderlin is only able to ‘poetise the essence of human beings’ because he relates to the Greeks in a manner that does not reproduce the technical thinking of modernity, but enters a ‘poetic dialogue’ with the commencement of Greek poetising; that is, with Sophocles’ choral ode (55). The choral ode refers to a region that given ethical terms cannot grasp, meaning that to attempt to grasp it through academic research will merely bolster our own self-understanding. Instead, philosophy must allow its own vision to be transformed by this region if it is to remain faithful to its origin.

In his discussion of the choral ode, Heidegger no longer turns to Hellenist sources because of an affinity between the Germans and the Greeks as he did in IM, but because the Greek world is foreign to the Germans (124). For Hölderlin, the essence of history is concealed in human beings ‘becoming homely’, a becoming homely that is ‘a passage through and encounter with the foreign’ (54). Thus Heidegger argues that it is through encountering the foreignness of the Greeks and journeying through it that a home can be found – not the ‘Same’ home as the Greeks, but one that is singular in character, one that must be found though a people’s own journeying. In contrast to the Nietzsche’s depiction of the Greeks, Heidegger argues that because the ‘Greek world is what is foreign with respect to the historical humankind of the Germans’, it cannot provide a ‘measure or model for the perfection of humankind’ (ibid.). Hölderlin’s hymn provides a way of listening to the Greek world that is ‘more intimate’ (inniger) than Nietzsche’s philosophy, for, rather than positing an immediate relation though the shared unveiling of the nullity of logic, it is ‘only when the foreign is known and acknowledged in its essential oppositional character does there exist the possibility of a genuine relationship … a uniting that is not a confused mixing but a conjoining in distinction’ (ibid.). Thus to understand Hölderlin’s hymnal poetry we must turn

\textsuperscript{36} Young, 1999, p. 395.
to his relation to the ‘choral song from the Antigone of Sophocles’ which spoke ‘ever anew’ to him in his hymnal poetising (55).

The task facing the German people, then, is not to assume an immediate relation to the Greeks, but to journey with Hölderlin though the foreign (the Greek world) so that they might become homely within what is foreign. And to undertake this journey, Heidegger argues, they must encounter the choral ode as a kind of poetising that draws us into the experience of what it is like to live in a world that is bigger than we can understand, an experience that cannot appear if we remain in our techanalised mode thinking. Yet we face a problem, Heidegger identifies, for ‘[o]ur modern thought is much too “intellectual,”’ that is, much too calculative and technical in its planning, to penetrate immediately into those realms of being as told here, let alone to be entirely “at home” there in’ (ibid.).

To penetrate into these regions, Heidegger reflects on three different determinations of human being poetised by Sophocles in the choral ode. The first determination, that which constitutes ‘the essential ground of this tragedy’ (60), is the determination of human beings as deinon. Heidegger begins with a definition of denion that is similar to that in his IM: deinon names the uncanny: ‘that which is not at home, not homely in that which is homely’ (71). However, Heidegger then qualifies this definition:

Uncanniness does not first arise as a consequence of humankind; rather, humankind emerges from uncanniness and remains within it – looms out of it and stirs within it. (72)

In IM, the uncanny was a profound description of the creature who, in search of a home, uses transgressive creativity which renders itself unhomely. In HH, however, Heidegger identifies the uncanny as a ‘fundamental kind of essence’ (72) that belongs to human beings. While the powers of nature can be ‘sublime’ in that they ‘demand awe’ and ‘compel our astonishment’ (76), the uncanniness that gives sublimity its power lies solely in the human being and leads us back to wonderment at what kind of being the human is. The uncanny is ‘that which presences and at the same time absences’ (ibid.), determining human beings to have a counterturning essence. While Being allows beings to appear for humans, Being is not a being and is lost in human activity. Thus it can be said that Being determines human beings to forget Being, meaning that it is natural for human beings to be outside Being, lost and without a way.

While technical thinking would lead us to a dictionary in order to find available translations for deinon, Heidegger proposes to see translation as a ‘dialogue’, meaning that the act of translating brings forth something ‘singular’ (66). In a dialogue we become vulnerable
to what will emerge, meaning that we are ready to be altered by the foreignness of the other with whom we encounter. This dialogue, the attempt to ‘translate’ deinon, proceeds with the second determination of human being Heidegger explores in the choral ode is the middle part of the second strophe (l. 360), pantoporos aporos, which he translates as ‘venturing forth in all directions – without experience’ (74). According to Heidegger, this determination captures the nature of human creativity whereby in trying to make our world our home we become unhomely. Poros, he informs us, connotes an ‘irruption of autonomous power’ (75) expressed in the profound ability of human beings to build shelters for themselves and to domesticate wild animals. Yet it is this very power that leaves them aporos, without experience, for they cannot transform their experience into self-understanding. All the things that human beings attain merely incite and drive them to go further in each pursuit, but none of these skills manifest the propensity for bringing human beings into what is by essence their own.

In similar terms to IM, Heidegger argues that the supreme example of this determination of human beings is their inability to come to terms with their own finitude. No ‘skilfulness’, ‘acts of violence’ or ‘artfulness’ can ‘stave off death’ (75), Heidegger states, for there is no techne that is adequate to domesticating our essence. Death is not some state of affairs that can be circumvented, nor does it ‘come to’ human beings from without. The great danger that faces human beings is not a problem that needs a solution, a fact that death shows us this in the starkest way. Rather, the danger is an ontological condition that requires our understanding of Being to be transformed. In ‘What Are Poets For?’, Heidegger explains this danger as follows:

What threatens man in his very nature is the willed view that man, by the peaceful release, transformation, storage, and channeling of the energies of physical nature, could render the human condition, man’s being, tolerable for everybody and happy in all respects.

The fundamental threat to humanity is not the fact that we will die. Rather, it is our tendency to fool ourselves into thinking that some kind of skill can stave off death. If the problem is technically framed, then all is hopeless, for death cannot be conquered. Yet if our understanding of Being is transformed by the tragic work of art – by the choral ode in particular – we discover that death is not something to be escaped for pure Being, but that the ‘being of humans in itself proceeds towards its death’ (HH 76). To find a home in our

essence, death must be embraced as our ownmost possibility. Echoing Hölderlin’s famous words, Heidegger states that ‘The selfsame danger is, when it is as the danger, the saving power’ (QCT 39).

Thus Heidegger claims that what is ‘tragic’ about the ancient Greek world is that the Greeks attained ‘the pinnacle of its essence at that very point where it preserves and brings to appear the counterturning in being itself’ (HH 77). In other words, it was the propensity of the Greeks to allow the deinon in its counterturning essence to come into appearance that constitutes the greatness of the Greek world. To depict human beings in this movement is the ‘poetic determination’ of human being, requiring a mode of expression large enough to allow death, the counterturning essence and the uncanny nature of all human endeavours to take a central role in collective life (77). The essence of the deinon is ‘enunciated in its completeness by Sophocles for the first time – but also for the last time – thus extends back into the realms that, in a concealed manner, sustain our own history’ (ibid.). Heidegger seems to restrict the manifold dialogue partners we might find in history – let alone our contemporary society – to Sophocles, for he assets that in no other place can we find the essence of human being ‘completely’ poetised. The metaphysics that begins with Plato is ‘not up to the essence of the “negative”’, for it seeks to make the essence of humankind as rational beings fully present to philosophical analysis. In the following section we find that this move, for Jaspers, is highly problematic, for by arguing that we inherit this inability to grasp the negative dimensions of our being, Heidegger denies any saving potential in politics, or even in a conversation with a fellow human being, for we are all tied to the same fate. It is in becoming attuned to the counterturning essence of Being that salvation lies.

The third determination of human being Heidegger notes is the middle part of the second antistrophe (ll. 370-371), hupsipolis apolis, which he translates as ‘towering high above the site – forfeiting the site’ (79). Heidegger frames the technical understanding of the polis as the error of National Socialism, suggesting that National Socialism had become victim to the same technical thinking as modernity. This third determination poetises the movement that humans undergo whereby their aspirations to political greatness – the creation of laws and cities that Sophocles’ praises in the ode – inevitably throws us out of the city, making us apolis, without a site. This determination cannot be articulated in terms of good and evil or even in some kind of error of judgment, for it precedes any ethical determination. Rather, it shows that evil does not mean that something is ‘merely bad’ but that something is ‘essential to being itself’ (78). Heidegger no longer considers the polis as a work of human transgressive creation, but argues that it is ‘the essence of the polis to thrust one into excess
and to tear one into downfall’ (86). Evil is essential to being, seen in the fact that the essence of the *polis* is to make us *apolis*. The Nazi politicians fail the essence of National Socialism by attempting to render ‘the political realm calculable and indubitable so that it can “plan and act”’ (94). Under their rule, the political becomes that which is without question, thus occluding the possibility of the evil appearing in their own action. In contrast, the Greeks considered the *polis* as that which is worthy of question, meaning that the beings that appear within were of secondary concern.

These three determinations of human being, Heidegger argues, are poetised in the character of Antigone. Heidegger no longer understands the one whom ‘weds himself to inhumanity thanks to reckless daring’ as Creon, and hence as Hitler, the violent state-creator, but as Antigone, as Being itself. Antigone takes the path that appears before her as destiny, something that no one knows has arisen except herself (103). She accommodates herself to this destiny and finds herself in direct conflict over the site of all beings. By being removed from all human possibilities, she is within the unhomey. She looms over the site of all beings, and steps out of this site becoming the supreme example of the uncanny, for ‘the most uncanny being is *intrinsically unhomey*’ (104). Yet at the same time Antigone preserves the most intimate belonging to the homely. Antigone’s death, Heidegger informs us, marks her becoming homely, a homecoming out of being unhomey. Thus it is she who is referred to in the closing words of the chorus, the one who is excluded from the hearth:

> In the Greek sense, Antigone names being itself. This is the ground of being homely, the hearth. It is the counterplay (not between state and religion but) between being unhomey in the sense of being driven about amid beings without any way out, and being unhomey as becoming homely from out of a belonging to being. What is poetised is a becoming homely in being unhomey. (118)

Antigone’s heroic dwelling within the uncanny, finding the hearth in her cave of death, provides the basis for a new conception of the poet in Heidegger’s reading of tragedy. The poet is the one who turns the countermoving experience of Being into a work, thus allowing Being to emerge meaningfully in her community. Like Hölderlin and Sophocles, the poet dwells within the river, the flowing, unfolding of Being, and gives voice to the historical turning, calling the people to a new orientation toward beings so that they might enter into the

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39 Julian Young suggests that Heidegger not only sees Antigone as the reckless daring one, but *himself* as the daring one, projecting his own resistance to the National Socialist movement onto Antigone: ‘In contrast to the discussion in the *Introduction to Metaphysics*, the Ister discussion would seem to bear this out, for Creon is, surely, Hitler, and Antigone is, *inter alios*, Heidegger himself’. While Young is probably, to some degree, correct, his reading detracts some of the potency of Heidegger’s reading of Antigone as the portrayal of *Being*. If Young is right – and there is certainly evidence in the text to support his claim – *HH* would be a self-justifying text bordering on narcissism; a supreme act of *hubris*. Young, *The Philosophy of Tragedy*, p. 228.
opening made by Being. Our metaphysical, inherited assumptions ‘have such difficulty in bringing the right kind of hearing to encounter the word of this poetry’ (165).

The significance of Antigone, then, is that she provides a representative of the true path of humanity that does not remain entangled in subjectivity but understands her own being as uncanny, taking it upon herself to become homely within her essence (117). In this sense she ‘is the poem of becoming homely in being unhomely’ (121), and our task is to listen to her speak. Heidegger’s translation of her final words before her death attempts to draw out this connection: ‘To take up into my own essence the uncanny that here and now appears’ (99). While Heidegger’s translation of Antigone’s realisation that she must pathein to deimon is dubious at best, he is correct in linking her words to the choral ode that uncovered the essential nature of human beings as the beings who, in searching for a home, are thrown into the unhomely.40 However, the unhomely is not the world of apparent meanings created by human beings as it was in IM. Rather, Heidegger states that the unhomely is ‘nothing that human beings themselves make but rather the converse: something that makes them into what they are and who they can be’ (103). There is something within the homely that speaks to humans, calling them forth toward the opening of Being. This is where humans must make their home: within their counterturning essence, within the arable land of the river.

What is important about Heidegger’s interpretation of Antigone in HH for our assessment of his work in light of Jaspers’ critique is that the creative struggle that he found in the choral ode of Antigone in IM between transgressive knowledge and nature is replaced by the ontological struggle between being and appearance. In IM, the artist was seen as the creative agent exemplified by Parmenides and Sophocles who took a transgressive stance toward the metaphysics that held inherited meaning in place in order to give a new rule to art. The task of the philosopher (Heidegger) was to direct the political leader in the same creative exercise of techne in order to allow the true nature of techne to rupture the falsehood of technology. In HH, it is not the poet who confronts a historical epoch, but the artwork that presents the confrontation, orientating the spectators toward the polis as the site of

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40 Heidegger’s translation is dubious because pathein to deimon simply means ‘to suffer the uncanny’. By rendering pathein to deimon as ‘to take up into my own essence the uncanny that here and now appears’, Heidegger quite deliberately reads his own understanding of Antigone as the hero of tragedy, the one who finds a home in being unhomely, into the text.
appearance. Sophocles’ *Antigone* is not an example of thought confronting the flux of history, but depicts what it looks like to act in a manner that fits with our historical endowment. The task of the German people, Heidegger argues, is not to confront political problems through conventional forms of politics, but to journey through the foreign in order to allow the counterturning nature of the political to appear.

The implication of Heidegger’s lectures on Hölderlin’s poetry is that the tragedies bring-forth the truth of our nature as tragic. Tragedy has nothing to do with an error or a grand mistake, for such a definition, in Heidegger’s view, implies that correcting this mistake could solve the problems of humanity. Rather, Heidegger views tragedy as the essence of human life. Finding a home within our own nature involves a kind of knowledge that we can suffer but cannot cognise, meaning that the task of finding a home within the uncanny belongs to the poetic, while poetising, as we see paradigmatically in the choral ode, is ‘a telling finding of being’ (119). The key modification to Heidegger’s view on tragedy in *HH* is that being uncanny is our nature: we can never achieve homeliness in this life, meaning that to live is to question. What is poetised in the choral ode is the becoming homely in being unhomely, and it is Hölderlin’s task – the becoming homely by passing though the foreign – that is poetised in the choral ode. Modern technology cannot be overcome by finding an identity with the Greeks, for the technical nature of such an attempt entails that it cannot hold the unity of space and time together. Rather, it must be transformed by journeying thought the foreign, through the uncanny essence of human being we find poetised by Sophocles.

6.4 Tragedy is not enough

Thus far I have outlined Heidegger’s interpretation of tragedy in two of his lectures in which he undertakes his so-called ‘confrontation’ with National Socialism. In order to assess the validity of this claim, in this section I turn to Jaspers’ response to Heidegger’s

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41 This anticipates the understanding of art Heidegger develops in the late 1940s. In OWA, for example, Heidegger argues that the significance of Greek tragedy lies in its ability to unveil an alternative medium of presentation to technalised representation. Tragedy, Heidegger informs us, puts the old gods of inherited values and the new gods of emerging linguistic practices into battle in order to transform a peoples’ thinking. The people are unhabituated from a homely fitting-together of beings in such a way that what is ‘holy and what unholy’ is put up for decision (OWA 42). In this way the work of art shows its ‘workly character, for it sets up a world’ (43). A world is not a mechanical or scientific ‘collection of the countable or uncountable, familiar and unfamiliar things that are just there’ (ibid.), for a world cannot be an object before us. Rather, Heidegger cryptically explains that the ‘world worlds’, meaning that the world is that which provides the conditions of possibility for objects to appear in a particular way (ibid.). The workly character of the artwork means that this disclosure becomes historical, meaning that the artwork gives ‘things their look’ and ‘to men their outlook on themselves’ (42).
interpretation of tragedy in *Tragedy Is Not Enough* (*TNE*), a book published shortly after his correspondence with Heidegger that constitutes part of his *Von der Warheit*. Before doing so, however, it is important to highlight two dimensions of Heidegger’s lectures that will be relevant to our analysis. The first is that the political realm of human *praxis* is secondary to the realm of appearances that are constituted of works of human *poiesis*. To focus on the political in terms of *praxis* occludes the ontological dimension of *poiesis*. The second is that Heidegger’s understanding of tragedy does not consider the content of tragedy to be human actions, judgment or the outworking of human thought in the public sphere, but a poetic depiction of the movement of Being. In this sense, Being is tragic. While the identity of Being and tragedy is can also be found in *IM*, it is particularly evident in *HH*. By turning to Jaspers’ argument in *TNE*, this section aims to highlights the danger of Heidegger’s attempt to equate politics with *poiesis*, with philosophy. The importance of Jaspers’ argument for this chapter is that it shows that the knowledge gained from tragedy provides no content that might provide political direction or give access to pure being. Rather, it concerns the way of thinking, one that recognises the limits of individual speculation and clears the way for politics.

In *TNE*, Jaspers affirms several dimensions of Heidegger’s pre-Platonic reading of *techne* through of Sophocles’ choral ode, which entails that there are no guarantees for the outcome of human creative action. ‘Tragedy depicts a man in his greatness beyond good and evil’ (56), he states, and is made possible by a kind of knowledge that does not come from ‘achieving a harmonious interpretation of the universe and actually living in accord with it’, that is, from finding a ‘home’ in this world (32). Rather, it comes from discovering the limits of our power in the attempt to build this home. Thus when the tragic sense appears, ‘something extraordinary is lost: the feeling of security without the shadow of tragedy’ (33). Tragic knowledge, for Jaspers, arises whenever this feeling vanishes; that is, whenever awareness exceeds our power to act.

While Jaspers identifies tragedy with the differential nature of *techne*, and hence the differential nature of truth, he criticises Heidegger’s attempt to overcome the differential character of truth by unveiling a primordial sense of truth as appearance. Tragedy, for Jaspers, does not occur with the differential character of truth that comes into appearance without technical legislation. Rather, it occurs in a partly Hegelian fashion: ‘wherever the powers that collide are true independently of each other’ (57). This collision does not occur when the powers doing battle on their own, but exists between the bearers of truth: human beings. Of ‘genuine tragedy’, Jaspers states, ‘one can speak only with reference to man’ (94). Human tragedy can be identified on two levels. The first is that human life itself – all activity and
success – is ‘doomed finally to suffer shipwreck’, for while death and suffering might be veiled from sight, ‘in the end they engulf all’ (ibid.). The second level is that ‘reality is divided against itself, and so is truth’ (95). Tragedy is real because irreconcilable opposition is real. Truth must defend its rightful claim not only against injustice, but also against the rightful claims of other truths. Thus every ‘mortal imperative’ is ‘tainted by guilt, for it must destroy others equally moral and equally imperative’ (95).

Jaspers’ interpretation of tragedy rejects the ontological distinction, suggesting that Heidegger’s ontological project is ultimately an attempt to overcome tragedy. Tragedy, for Jaspers, does not concern Being itself, for it ‘belongs in the foreground’ (104). For example, Jaspers argues that tragic knowledge can arise in the midst of a conversation, not because the conversation is ‘tragic’, but because it can become an occasion in which we encounter the split, perspectival nature of truth. If tragedy expresses a kind of knowledge that does not arise from an encounter with Being, with a layer of reality occluded by representation, but from the experience of the split nature of truth, then it belongs ‘neither in the realm of transcendence nor in the Basis of all Being, but in the world of sense and time’ (ibid.). In other words, tragedy belongs in the world of representation. If we mistake tragedy with Being, Jaspers states, we are faced with a choice between inauthenticity or lurid grandeur: to ‘live and err, or to grasp truth and die of it’ (ibid.). This is seen in Heidegger’s recommendation for the people to support the transgressive violence of the state-maker in IM or to remain faithful to their calling to death in HH. If we place tragedy in the foreground, however, recognising it as a representation that elucidates the limits of human power and our inability to live up to our promise, then we are released from this ‘rigid either-or’ and are able to acknowledge that ‘truth, whole and complete … is not available for us in life and time’. In this framework, it is through encountering the problematic of tragedy that philosophy is displaced from the project of accessing pure being and becomes the task of outlining a way of thinking and doing that acknowledges the fact that ‘within time, truth is forever underway, always in motion and not final even in its most marvellous crystallisations’ (ibid.).

While the failure of IM to become instrumental in the political project of National Socialism might have opened Heidegger to the awareness of the limits of philosophy, the opposite is the case. Heidegger’s notion of the ontological difference allows him to ascribe the human dimension of tragedy to the realm of beings, leading him to search for the movement of tragedy that is primary to the collision of human truths. In this formulation, the task is not

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42 In this sense Jaspers affirms Benjamin’s critique of the attempt to overcome the representational paradigm of aesthetics though tragic art.
to acknowledge the tragic nature of truth and to find ways of navigating the divided nature of the world. Rather, it is to transform the ontological conditions that allow the divided nature of human truth to come into appearance. This entails a transformation of our understanding of history from a realm that reveals absolute spirit to one that sets humans on their way.

However, while Heidegger breaks with the tradition to the extent that his understanding of history entails that, unlike Hegel’s account, history cannot have a meaning, he reproduces the notion of history assumed by pre-critical philosophy that is unable to grasp that the centre of history is ultimately the being who creates form through its activity: the human being. While Heidegger radically questions the nature of temporality, the ‘eternal questions of politics are forgotten’. For Jaspers, the denigration of action to a mode of production is nothing other than a denial of tragic knowledge. Rather than moving us to sympathy for those subject to the misery of human tragedy, Heidegger’s identification of Being and tragedy ‘lifts us above reality’ (or to a layer beneath it) and allows the tragic philosopher to live ‘in an aura of grandeur’ (99).

Jaspers’ critique of Heidegger does not portray his interpretation of tragedy as a simple misreading, but as a dangerous position of philosophical isolation. By refusing to engage in the world of beings – the divided political realm where all truth is underway – Heidegger soars in reflective grandeur while ‘man presses for redemption from his terrible realities, which lack the glamour of tragedy’ (100). Tragic knowledge does not allow for such soaring, argues Jaspers, for ‘it achieves no comprehensive interpretation of the world’. Rather, tragic knowledge grounds us, transforming the practice of philosophy from individual speculation to outlining a way of thinking adequate to the political arena in which truth is underway.

44 ibid.
45 Jaspers’ critique of disengaged speculation echoes the broader critique of philosophy he develops in Basic Philosophical Writings: ‘High in the mountains on a vast rocky tableland the philosophers of each generation have been meeting since time immemorial. From there one can gaze down onto the snow-capped mountains and, still deeper, into the valleys inhabited by man, and into all directions under the heavenly canopy toward the far horizon. Sun and stars are brighter there than elsewhere. The air is so pure that it consumes all gloominess, so cool that it keeps the smoke from rising, so bright that it causes thought to soar into unfathomable spaces’. It is not difficult to gain access to this plain, yet it requires that one leave their familiar surroundings – their home – in order to learn from these heights ‘what authentically is’. While recognising that ‘no one can be encountered there’, because it requires an isolated journey, he reflects that he still attempted to seek ‘among the eternal speculations for men who find them important’. He found only one man, but not one with whom he could converse: ‘This one however was my polite enemy. For the forces we served were irreconcilable. Soon it seemed that we could not speak to each other at all. Joy turned into pain, a strangely inconsolable pain, as if we were missing an opportunity that was palpably close’. Jaspers need hardly add in the following line that ‘[t]his was the way it was with Heidegger’. Karl Jaspers, Basic Philosophical Writings, trans. E. Ehrlich, L. Ehrlich & G. Pepper, Athens: Ohio University Press, 1986, pp. 511-2.
In contrast to Heidegger’s attempt to identify a way of thinking that is aware of the tragedy of technalised thinking, Jaspers argues that tragic knowledge, as opposed to tragic philosophy, ‘accepts danger and that inescapable nexus of guilt and doom implicit in all true action and accomplishment in the real world’ (96). This understanding of tragic knowledge develops Kant’s response to the tragedy of philosophy – not by deeming it necessary to assume a theoretical order of moral value as a postulate of reason, but by attributing to all of humanity the capabilities of judging that, according to the philosophical tradition, had been the prerogative of the statesman. For Jaspers, to know the tragic is not simply to recognise the counternumbing essence of human beings, but to choose to act in light of this recognition. The significance of Jaspers’ argument for this thesis is that it shows that tragedy not only displaces us from both the task of instructing politics according to philosophically defined ends, but also from instructing politics from poetically defined ends – from keeping pure from political engagement – and opens us to the task of politics, to legislating and judging in a realm that is held in common. In this light, Jaspers argues that Heidegger’s lectures on tragedy cannot be said to express a ‘confrontation’ with National Socialism, for no philosophical project can rightly claim to ground a political project. Confrontation, as Jaspers states in Philosophy, is offered by ‘any felicitous meeting of individuals who band together in fact without oath or pathos. “Truth begins with two,” said Nietzsche’. 46 In other words, confrontation cannot be achieved by philosophy, though philosophy might clarify how we might go about confronting a political regime. Rather, confrontation can only be achieved by political action, by praxis.

6.5 Conclusion

In an interview with Ansgar Kemman concerning his relationship with Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer noted that great thinkers such as Heidegger find it difficult to submit to the preconditions of a conversation, for their ability to place their conversation partner within their own thinking is so great. Gadamer explains this point with reference to his own experience of inviting Heidegger to speak with his students, noting their ‘disappointment’ with Heidegger that interprets as a result of Heidegger’s inability to converse. For Gadamer, ‘Heidegger never got beyond that stage, but it is also difficult when one has such a superior

intellect. … For people like us, it is easier to notice that the other could also be correct’. 47 He identifies the power of Heidegger’s capacity to think as a kind of tragic fate, a dimension of his thinking that separated his ideas from conversation, rendering him vulnerable to intellectual tragedy. Gadamer’s reflections assist us to see why Heidegger’s interpretation of tragedy is deeply paradoxical: it provides, on the surface, an important diagnosis of the technical thinking that buffers us from being affected by the world, and yet this very diagnosis fails to identify a response, for it serves to elevate his thinking over the activities of political life. Rainer Schürmann captures this paradox well, arguing that while Heidegger critiques the tendency of western metaphysics to confuse the world for Being itself, he does not escape ‘the ultimacy that philosophers have pursued since Parmenides’. 48 For Schürmann, Heidegger’s intellectual power is tantamount to his political failure.

For Jaspers, *ad hominem* arguments are entirely appropriate when it comes to Heidegger’s philosophy, for his philosophical response to the project of building the collective world so that Being might come into appearance elevates the thinker above what is tragic in a state of philosophical grandeur. To separate the divided nature of beings from a more primordial concept of Being is to remove what is properly tragic from the anthropological level and to render it as an ontological problem, casting our ethical responsibilities as a shadow of a deeper problem at hand. In a letter dated December 22, 1945, Jaspers offered his advice to the denazification committee overseeing Heidegger’s intellectual career. On the one hand, he writes, Heidegger failed to grasp the dangerous intentions of the party’s leadership. Yet on the other hand, like Alfred Baeumler and Carl Schmitt, Heidegger remained culpable for self-consciously assisting the National Socialist movement with his philosophy. Baeumler, Schmitt and Heidegger, Jaspers writes, all ‘brought their very real intellectual abilities to the task, only to end up blackening the reputation of German philosophy. So I agree with you,’ Jaspers concludes, ‘that there is a touch of the tragedy of evil about it all’. 49

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CHAPTER 7

_Castoriadis: Tragedy and Self-creation_

_There is no way of eliminating the risks of collective hubris. Nobody can protect humanity from folly or suicide._

This chapter identifies the significance of Castoriadis’ contribution to the problematic of tragedy. Specifically, it explores his attempt to identify a way of doing philosophy that recognises the importance of Heidegger’s ontological formulation of political problems and yet maintains the priority of human agency. In the previous chapter I argued that Heidegger’s interpretation of tragedy sought to identify an account of _techne_ that was attuned to the movement of the _polis_. This account of _techne_ calls for an aesthetic process of political change that begins with the poet, is communicated by the thinker, and is instituted by the politician. Rather than challenging the Platonic attempt to institute the political order according to philosophically defined ends, Heidegger renders the poet in the place of the philosopher-king, retaining Plato’s neglect of the potential of communicative action to bring new form into being. While Heidegger calls into question the conception of temporality assumed by traditional philosophy, in relation to Jaspers’ work I argued that his understanding of _techne_ reproduces the traditional denigration of _praxis_ as a mode of action subordinate to _Being_.

In similar terms to Jaspers, Castoriadis argues that Heidegger’s ontological difference removes any meaningful understanding of politics from the political realm. This not only renders his philosophy inept to confront totalitarian power, but, more specifically, inept to confront heteronomy. In this chapter I claim that for Castoriadis, this failure can be understood as a result of Heidegger’s ontological interpretation of the tragedies. In Castoriadis’ view, the tragedies do not unveil a realm in which appearances are brought forth in a manner that is primary to technical legislation. Instead, they confront our attempt to stabilise the fluidity of the political sphere with philosophical discourse that is governed by

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the univocal language of ideals, security, and self-preservation. The significance of Castoriadis’ interpretation of tragedy for this thesis, I will argue, is that it extends Kant’s formulation of the problematic of tragedy into a new constellation of thought that had occluded a rich understanding of life, identifying Kant’s enlarged way of thinking as an exemplary response to the tragedy of philosophy.

Before examining Castoriadis’ interpretation of tragedy, the first section of this chapter identifies the problem that his consideration of tragedy aims to confront: the thinking of being as ‘being something determined’. To think of being as being something determined, for Castoriadis, is the effort to identify being with human signification, an effort that aims to connect intellectual questions with reality. In the intellectual environment of France during the 1960s to 1980s, Castoriadis’ critique of determinist thinking aimed at several intellectual movements that fashioned themselves as alternatives to traditional philosophy, such as Marxism and structuralism. Far from escaping the determinist thinking of the philosophical tradition, Castoriadis argues that both Marxism and structuralism express a kind of ‘logicism’, a mode of thinking that attempts to explain society and history by reference to an underlying logic that determines the arrangement of the elements (IIS 171). While Castoriadis was deeply committed to Marxism until the late 1950s, he came to see Marxism as an obstacle rather than a resource in his effort to renew radical politics. In particular, he is critical of the Marxist view of history as the result of a lawful process. Rather than calling the present moment of history into question, he argues that Marxism entails a kind of thinking where all events are seen as expressions of fixed laws that lie beneath. Social and historical realities ‘bring-forth’ these laws, and the task of history is to grasp them in a determinant paradigm. Such thinking, for Castoriadis, is ‘identitary’, for it occludes the singularity of particular appearances, fashioning itself in terms of ontological reality. It obscures the fact that, like all theories, it too is a product of socially and historically mediated forces, becoming an avatar of deeper tendencies in western thought toward determinism and the covering over of all creative being.

Having identified Castoriadis’ critique of identitary thinking, the second section examines his understanding of tragedy as a disruption of determinist thinking, providing a new task for philosophy that seeks to problematise ideas and recast them in terms of

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2 The effort to connect intellectual questions with reality is similar to what Cavell describes in terms of ‘intellectual tragedy’. As we noted in the Introduction, Cavell argues that intellectual tragedy ‘is not a matter of saying something false,’ but the ‘inability to acknowledge, I mean accept, the human conditions of knowing’. For Castoriadis, I will suggest, tragedy is a presentation of limits, ‘showing’ us rather than ‘telling’ us of the danger of stepping beyond the limits of thinking. See Cavell, The Claim of Reason, p. 19, 454.

unrealised projects. The third section considers Castoriadis’ reading of tragedy as an interpretation of Kant’s *CJ*, one that portrays Kant, at his most radical moments, as a philosopher who provides a powerful response to the tragedy of philosophy. This interpretation of Kant proposes an alternative to the Idealist and Nietzschean views, which both limit the philosophical importance of tragedy to a specific crisis. Instead, it allows us to see the problematic of tragedy as an ongoing dialogue with the goal of expanding the scope of philosophy in the paradigm of Kant’s enlarged way of thinking.

7.1 Identitary logic: Being as being something determined

Like Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger before him, Castoriadis considers tragedy as a means to confront the determination of all knowledge as *techne*. While Castoriadis explores determinative thinking in terms of Aristotle’s *techne* and Kant’s determinative judgment, he argues that by giving definition to the technical procedure of thinking, both Aristotle and Kant stumble across an insight that is analogous to the tragedies. Yet departing from Nietzsche and Heidegger, Castoriadis argues that what renders this insight in close proximity to the tragedies is not that it unveils a primordial conception of Being. Rather, it draws our attention to the priority of the imagination, especially the productive ability of the imagination to create a second nature: an order of ‘non-being’ beyond reference to the existing. As I will claim, recognising the productive capacity of imagination, for Castoriadis, involves an insight similar to that we encounter in the tragedies. Both experiences confront our attempt to gain access to a univocal notion of Being, requiring an alternative procedure of thinking that renounces this desire. Thus, Castoriadis’ interpretation of tragedy makes explicit a basic assumption of the problematic of tragedy: the primacy of the imagination in human thinking, or, in other words, the primacy of aesthetics. This returns us to Kant’s enlarged way of thinking, for it is the very attempt to uncover the logic of cognition that ‘forces’ us, to use Kant’s words, to acknowledge the primary place of aesthetics in human experience.

To understand the connection Castoriadis makes between the productivity of the imagination and tragedy, it is necessary to identify his understanding of the historical trajectory of philosophy that the problematic of tragedy confronts. For Castoriadis, ‘Greco-Western thought’, that is, thinking understood as an explicit institution in western history, has systematically attempted to seal the priority of the determinant use of judgment over the
capacity of imagination to create new, and hence contingent, form. Such philosophy, he argues in *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (*IIS*),

has constituted, developed, amplified and refined itself on the basis of this thesis: being is being something determined (*einai tī*), speaking is saying something determined (*ti legein*). And, of course, speaking the truth is determining speaking and what is said by the determinations of being or else determining being by the determinations of speaking, and, finally, observing that both are but one and the same. (221)

Castoriadis terms this model of thinking ‘identitary logic’, for it expresses a system of logical relations that ascribe identity to both individual objects and to collections of objects in ensembled sets. Identitary logic takes the form of explaining the world according to causation, finality, motivation, function and structure, all of which search for necessary and sufficient conditions that could guarantee the truthfulness of experience (ibid.). It is displayed in the fact that mathematics has offered the only available model of a true demonstration, namely a ‘sufficient determination of what is said in its necessity’ (222). By fashioning the ideal of determinant thinking in terms of mathematics, identitary logic constitutes a technical model of thinking that legislates nature according to its demand for completeness, denigrating the non-mathematical, contingent strata of living things to a realm of less-than-being.

Building from Nietzsche, Castoriadis suggests that while identitary logic is a form of intellectual tragedy – for it separates mathematical thought from sensuous life – its desire for systematic understanding entails that it is also suited to stumble across its own limits. To elucidate this dynamic in a modern context, Castoriadis turns to the development of set-theory at the end of the nineteenth century in the work of Georg Cantor. While Cantor’s original proposal is now called ‘naive’ set-theory, for it is seemingly unaware of the internal paradoxes demonstrated by Bertrand Russell, Castoriadis argues that its importance cannot be overestimated, ‘for it exhibits the indefinable within the definition of the definite, the ineliminable circularity within every attempt at a foundation’.4

Cantor responded to the question of the foundation of mathematics with the initial theory of sets that provided the groundwork for the development of what is now known as category theory. His theory begins with a definition of a set as ‘a collection into a whole of definite and distinct objects for our intuition or of our thought. These objects are called the elements of the set’.5 What is significant about this definition for Castoriadis – what makes it more philosophically important than Bertrand Russell’s critique or later developments in

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5 Cited in *IIS* 223.
category theory\(^6\) – is that it rejects previous attempts to derive the theory axiomatically and, instead, accepts its circular and undefinable terms, thus drawing our attention to several elements it presupposes.\(^7\) Firstly, it presupposes that we must be able to distinguish between objects. These objects belong to the sphere of perception, or to representation, and must be posited as definable. Secondly, it draws our attention to the presupposition of a schema for both separation and union. Only with such schemata can objects to be posited as both distinct and as being assembled into a whole. However, if the application of these schemas is premised on our presupposing their existence, then they have no *logical* support. Rather, we merely presume that they have already been applied before we apply them; that ‘each of the terms collected together in this way to form a whole has already been implicitly posited as collected together into this whole which it itself is, that the diversity of features defining it and distinguishing it …. has been united in order to posit/form/be *this* very object’ (224). Cantor’s definition of the operation of numerical sets opens the question of ‘the justification’ of their ‘starting point’, ‘implying, therefore, that this [starting point] is external to the discourse at hand and that it is posited from somewhere else’ (ibid.). In Castoriadis terms, Cantor

\(^6\) While Cantor’s naive set-theory was ultimately superseded by the set-theories of Bertrand Russel and Gottlob Frege and the category theory of Samuel Eilenberg and Saunders MacLane, Castoriadis is concerned with the epistemological implications of the initial impulse of set-theory. In this sense axiomatic set-theory and category theory build from the initial impulse of Cantor’s approach. Russell’s paradox, in Castoriadis’ view, turns set-theory in a direction that is more concerned with the coherence of logical systems than the epistemological movement begun by set-theory. In the attempt to avoid the paradoxes of set-theory, Castoriadis argues, mathematicians such as Russell were led to ‘various systems of axioms, which, at the price of an ever more unwieldy formalism, have suppressed the clear intuitive content of Cantor’s definition, and this, in my opinion, without any genuine gain on the formal level’ (see ‘The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy’, p. 292). In other words, while Russell argues that naive set-theory is paradoxical, and thus incomplete, for Castoriadis this incompleteness alerts us to the incompleteness of any attempt to classify sets. The significance of set-theory for our analysis (and, to some extent, category theory) is that it returns mathematics to transcendental (i.e. Kantian) questions, for they explore the condition of the possibility of schematic and topological experience rather than the objects of experience themselves. Russell’s response to Cantor’s paradoxes ultimately occludes this trajectory. See Robert Goldblatt, *Topoi: The Categorical Analysis of Sets*, Amsterdam: Elsevier Science Publishers, 1984, Chapter 1. Goldblatt’s use of Kantian language to explain the development of category theory from Cantor’s initial naive set-theory highlights the epistemological dimensions of this turn.

‘explodes’ the search of justification by unveiling the groundlessness (the circular reasoning) implicit in all logical systems (222).⁸

The importance of Cantor’s set-theory, for Castoriadis, lies in the way that it returns us to Kant’s original elucidation of representational, schematic thought. Building from Ernst Cassirer’s neo-Kantian interpretation of critical philosophy, Castoriadis does not understand Kant’s framework of representation in terms of a theoretical abyss between the finite realm of phenomena and the infinite realm noumena. For Cassirer, Kant’s philosophy should not be read as a ‘complete historical whole’, but as ‘the expression of the enduring and continuing tasks of philosophy’.⁹ The relevance of Kant’s philosophy, in this view, lies not in a tradition of Kantianism but in a set of enduring problematics opened by Kant’s work; problematics that do not aim to explain the world but to elucidate it, meaning that they are constantly open and forever incomplete. In the same way that Kant’s critical thought presumed the existence of mental schemata without providing justification for their existence, set-theory reopens the Kantian problematic of representation, entailing that identitary logic, the system of thinking in which mathematics provides the only available model of true determination, can only be formulated if and only if there exist sets in the sense that Cantor defined. Yet if sets exist in this sense, then their origin and the schemata that allow them to be applied are not guaranteed by logic but are simply presumed by our using them. Their application presupposes that they have been applied before we come to use them, meaning that we experience sets as determined to the extent that they precede our thinking them. Or to put it differently, each set only comes into being by virtue of being utilised. Thus the ground of mathematical presuppositions is not found in logic but in the fact that they have already been applied; that they are a practice of convention.¹⁰

⁸ Castoriadis’ argument also resonates with Kurt Gödel’s Incompleteness Theorem which problematises the justification of axiomatic statements in a logical system, meaning that no system can be complete. According to Du Sautoy, Gödel’s Incompleteness Theorem ‘was not the death knell of mathematics. Gödel had not undermined the truth of anything that had been proved. What his theorem showed was that there’s more to mathematical reality than the deduction of theorems from axioms’. We might say that Gödel cleaves open the possibility of that which exceeds the given, showing that mathematics is by necessity incomplete. His emphasis on mathematical ‘demonstration’ resonates with Castoriadis’ understanding of tragedy, for it implies that one cannot grasp the Incompleteness Theorem by being ‘told’ but by being ‘shown’. We must encounter the limits of systems in a process of self-discovery. See Marcus Du Sautoy, The Music of the Primes: Why an Unsolved Problem in Mathematics Matters, London: Harper Perennial, 2004, p. 182.
⁹ Cassirer, Kant’s Life and Thought, p. 3.
¹⁰ While the contrasting positions of constructionism and logicism lie outside the scope of our concerns here, it is important to note that Castoriadis asserts the groundlessness of sets against the logicism of Russell and Whitehead. Russell’s Paradox entails that Cantor’s naive set-theory is logically paradoxical. Following Russell’s discovery, set-theory was faced with the problem of revising the intuitive (or naive) ideas about sets and reformulating them as such a way as to avoid inconsistencies. For Castoriadis, the drive of logicism is to heal the abyss between thought and reality, thus occluding the challenge that Cantor’s set-theory poses to our understanding of logic.
The discovery of the groundlessness of our cognitive schemata has significant ramifications for our understanding of the imagination. Firstly, it implies that identitary logic is the expression of a creation – of an ontological genesis – ‘concerning what is and the manner in which it exists’ (227). Yet such creativity requires the human ability to create a second order of non-being beyond our attachment to the existing. For Castoriadis, it is not until Aristotle’s discovery of the imagination (phantasia) that the ensembling power of thought came to philosophy’s attention. For Aristotle, phantasia is an imitative, reproductive or combinatorial power. Opposed to knowledge or intelligence ‘which are never in error’, Aristotle explains that phantasia is ‘that in virtue of which an image arises for us’, and thus ‘can be false’. This kind of imagination is not always present like sensation or thought, but occurs when we recollect things that are not present. Yet he suddenly introduces a second, different phantasia: ‘As sight is the most highly developed sense, the name phantasia (imagination) has been formed from phaos (light) because it is not possible to see without light’. Without this imagination, Aristotle observes that there can be no representative or conceptual thought, for this imagination seems to precede any thought. Yet Aristotle’s reference to this second kind of imagination is only in passing, and he seems not to have linked phantasia with poiesis; with the practical ability of humans to shape their environment. For Aristotle, imagination was merely reproduction, a mode of techne that ‘brings-forth’ what

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11 Aristotle, *On The Soul*, 428a1-2, 16-17. Aristotle’s account of phantasia in *On The Soul* can be understood as an explicit response to Plato’s understanding of the term. In the infamous Book X of Republic (602c-d), Plato discusses the techne of the poet, who is said not to be an imitator of things as they are but of appearances (thrice removed from the truth). Socrates asks what kind of faculty (dunamin) imitation makes a special appeal. He then identifies the faculty of appearances (phantasia) as that which makes it possible for a man to appear to be small when he is distant, and larger when he is close; for a stick to appear straight when out of water, and bent when it is plunged half into a stream. The techne of measuring, numbering and weighing, on the other hand, help with these illusions by allowing phantasia to give way to the measuring part of the soul (logisamenon). When this faculty has done its measuring, it will often produce results that contradict phantasia. Because it is impossible for the same thing (the soul) to hold two contradictory judgments about the same thing, Socrates deems that the part with judges according to the appearance must be different from that which judges with the measurement. He concludes that the latter is better than the former, for it is not subject to representing non-being. In *On The Soul*, Aristotle argues that phantasia and logisamenon are not two types of judgment where one is inferior to the other, and neither is judgment a posteriori to sense impression. Rather, he suggests that one is judging and the other sensory, meaning that both operate harmoniously and immediately: ‘It is clear then that imagination (phantasia) cannot, again, be opinion (doxa) plus sensation, or opinion mediated by sensation, or a blend of opinion and sensation; this is impossible both for these reasons and because the content of the supposed opinion cannot be different from that of the sensation (I mean that imagination must be the blending of the perception of white with the opinion that it is white: it could scarcely be a blend of the opinion that it is good with the perception that it is white): to imagine is therefore (on this view) identical with the thinking of exactly the same as what one perceives non-incidentally’ (428a24-428b1). Against Plato’s account of phantasia as an inferior kind of judging, Aristotle seems to argue that appearance cannot be equated with judging sensibly, because something appearing in a certain way (a man appearing to be small when he is far away) is compatible with a contemporaneously held true belief that he is in fact 6ft tall. By arguing that phantasia is not opinion plus sensation, Aristotle is able to say that a man’s being 6ft can still be true given one’s perception of him being small. See Kimon Lycos, ‘Aristotle and Plato on “Appearing”’, in *Mind*, 73, 1964, pp. 496–514.

was already there rather than creatively bringing it into being. Aristotle’s failure to connect *phantasia* with *poiesis*, for Castoriadis, establishes the subsequent neglect of imagination in philosophical inquiry, seen in the fact that philosophy from the start has been a search for the truth as opposed to opinion, for *aletheia* as opposed to *doxa*.

Castoriadis argues that Aristotle’s conception of imagination, elaborated by Kant centuries later, expresses the ongoing need for a philosophical conception of mental images that transcend reality and are posited as projects.\(^\text{13}\) In order to elucidate this capacity, he builds from Cassirer and Arendt, who both focused on Kant’s distinction between reproductive and productive imagination.\(^\text{14}\) While the reproductive imagination represents what has been seen, the productive imagination produces something it has not seen, meaning that it is expressed symbolically. Kant’s response to the tragedy of philosophy leads to his identification of a realm of non-being that is always beyond the given, seen in the productive, symbolic nature of his construction of the aesthetic sphere. Yet Kant’s productive imagination, for Castoriadis, is seriously limited by his refusal to cleave from the traditional ontology he calls into question. ‘When Kant sees in the work of art “produced” by genius the undetermined and indeterminable positing of new determinations’, Castoriadis notes, ‘there will still be an “instrumentality” of a higher order, a subordination of the imagination to something else that allows one to gauge its works’.\(^\text{15}\) This poses a challenge to Kant’s overall coherence in *CJ*, for the ontological status of the work of art remains ‘a reflection or a derivative of its value status, which consist in the presentation within intuition of the Ideas for which Reason cannot, in principle, furnish a discursive representation’.\(^\text{16}\) For Castoriadis, Kant’s grappling with the creative energy of genius pushes his work to breaking point. Despite the fact that he maintains that the infinite is always noumena, beyond our cognition, Kant’s productive imagination ‘interrupts’ the ontology of his critical system, of ontology as


\(^\text{14}\) See Cassirer, *Kant’s Life and Thought*, p. 314, 323, Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992, p. 79. C.f. Castoriadis, ‘The Discovery of the Imagination’, pp. 213-235. What is important about Cassirer’s reading of Kant’s productive imagination, for Castoriadis, is that it emphasises the representational character of thinking without requiring access to a theoretical sphere of ontological fixity. For Cassirer, Kant is not concerned with determining the being of the theoretical sphere but with elucidating that which ‘reason brings forth entirely out of itself’, as he states in the Preface of the first edition of *CPR* (Axx). For Castoriadis, Cassirer’s reading of Kant does not return us to the Fichtean absolute ego that contains all of reality. For Cassirer, Kant was an idealist about form, not matter, for he argued that the existence of an empirical world, a ‘natural strata’, is logically necessary given the synthetic orientation of the transcendental categories. While there is noting outside of Fichte’s absolute I, Kant never ceased from arguing that without an ‘object’ (*Gegenstand*, that which ‘stands against’ us) there is nothing to protect imagination from fantasy.


\(^\text{16}\) ibid.
such. This is particularly apparent in Kant’s three aporias of the imagination: that the imagination ‘images’ and yet cannot be seen, let alone said; that imagination is related to sensibility and thought, but it cannot be sensed or thought; that it is neither ‘clear’ nor ‘distinct’ but it illuminates or images the world. The aporetic nature of imagination means that it cannot ground itself with any determination, for it is that which grounds; it escapes signification for it is that which signifies.

Castoriadis develops what he understands as the disruptive nature of Kant’s notion of imagination by recasting it as the ‘radical imagination’. The term ‘radical’ is used, he explains, ‘to emphasise the idea that this imagination is before the distinction between “real” and “fictitious”. To put it bluntly: it is because radical imagination exists that “reality” exists for us … it is radical because it creates’. For Castoriadis, the imagination elucidates the transition from the theoretical to the human domain through a process whereby humanity creates itself as a living being in terms of society and history. In this framework, imagination is the faculty that produces a symbolic realm that goes beyond the natural order and must be understood in its social and historical dimensions, producing the ‘significations and institutions’ that take the role of Kant’s ideas of the understanding: the schemata for the ideas of reason. Such an account of the imagination requires a basic a-causal energy that is subject to no end other than its own devising. Castoriadis describes this energy as *vis formundi*, a creative power that follows no logic. The imagination’s a-causality does not mean that it is ‘unconditioned’, ‘absolute’, or without relations, but that it is not subject to a causal metaphysics that exhausts appearances in an identitary, mathematical logic. The seat of this *vis formundi*, Castoriadis argues, is ‘the singular human being’, a living being who cannot be understood in terms of a purely causal metaphysics.

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17 Similarly, Arendt argues that Kant’s refusal to accept the ontological status of productive imagination means that it is never fully productive, for it does not create *ex nihilo* but creates with what is given to it. Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, p. 79.
18 Building from Castoriadis’ interpretation of Kant, we might argue that if the imagination has the primacy that Kant, at times, ascribes to it, then the ontological realm of noumena cannot be other than a representation of imagination.
19 Castoriadis’ notion of the radical imagination confronts the Freudian and Heideggerian imagination. For both Freud and Heidegger, the imagination ‘brings-forth’ (*poiesis*) representations, ‘producing’ or drawing into presence what was already there. For Castoriadis, the imagination creates *ex nihilo*, linking it closely with *poiesis* but with an essential distinction. He models the imagination’s creativity not on the Greek artificer who gives determinate form to the pre-existing materials of the world – who ‘brings-forth’ – but on the creativity of the Hebrew God who creates the world from nothing. Thus the very structures, meanings and ideas in the imagination are created by each imagination in every case. See CL 83.
21 Ibid., pp. 321-322.
22 Ibid., p. 322.
In the intellectual context of Paris during the 1960s to 1980s, Castoriadis’ identification of a creative basis to all human being and doing confronted the identitary thinking he saw in both Marxism and structuralism. Rather than retreating from Marxism to structuralism as did many of his contemporaries, Castoriadis viewed structuralism as an heir of Marxism, and thus the latest manifestation of the west’s penchant for deterministic systems. From the view of structuralism, the symbolic use of language is understood to reveal internal structures, entailing that meaning is ultimately an ‘epiphenomenon, a redundant accompaniment to what is supposed really to be happening’ (172). In Claude Lévi-Strauss’s work, for example, cultural and linguistic structures are determined by a combination of the structures of the mind and transregional shifts that can only be understood in terms of the social whole. ‘Symbolic function’, in his view, is a combination of diacritical elements within a structure. For Castoriadis, on the other hand, ‘symbolic function’ is ‘imaginative function’, because the basic capacity of symbolism is the creativity of imagination. Structuralism remains unable to articulate this creative, imaginative dimension to symbolism, for it has ‘nothing to say about the sets of elements it manipulates, about the reasons for their being-thus, or about their modifications in time’ (170). Masculine and feminine, north and south, high and low ‘all seem self-evident to structuralism, simply found there by humans … as if social organisation could be reduced to a finite sequence of yes/no, and as if … the terms it implies were themselves given from somewhere else’ (ibid.). It reduces the ‘instituted society to a collection of dead rules … in the face of which the subject (in order to be ‘structured’ must be immersed in passivity’. 23 Thus structuralism, for Castoriadis, is ultimately a pseudo-scientific ideology that merely legitimises established thinking. It fails to confront heteronomous modes of being with the task of breaking with inherited structures. 24 For the structuralist, there is no otherness, and hence no history, for ‘the new is, in every instance, constructed through identitary operations … by means of what was already there; the totality of the process is only the exposing of the necessarily realised virtualities inherent in a primordial principle, present from all time and for all time’ (173). While structuralism aimed to question the technical, rationalist thought of modernity, its fundamental incapacity to articulate human creativity entails that, as a theory, it is incapable of overcoming the technical thinking it aims to critique.

23 Castoriadis, Crossroads in the Labyrinth, p. 88.
While his critique of structuralism as a mode of identitary logic has clear resonances with Heidegger’s critique of technology, Castoriadis argues that Heidegger’s ontology also fails to escape the technical thinking it aims to question. For Castoriadis, Heidegger’s commitment to the ontology of ‘disclosure’, that is, ‘the placing-before of what remained hidden but, of course, was already there’, remains incapable of articulating human creativity (198). As we noted in the previous chapter, the ontology of disclosure privileges the production of poiesis over the creativity of praxis, meaning that anything that ‘emerges’ within history is framed as a possibility of Being. This entails that when humans ‘create institutions, poems, music, tools, languages – or monstrosities, concentration camps, etc. – [they] create Nothing’ (199), for these forms are mere productions, fabrications with a given form.

It is important to note that Castoriadis’ critique of phenomenology is not so much aimed at Heidegger as it is at his contemporary, Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Rather than recognise the disruption that a creative understanding of ontology might bring to the philosophical tradition, Merleau-Ponty continues Heidegger’s attempt to escape from the representational paradigm of thinking. In The Visible and the Invisible, for example, Merleau-Ponty argues that ‘if our relation with the world is Vorstellung, the world “represented” has the In Itself as the meaning of its being’. 25 In his view, representation is dualistic, because all that is ‘real’ lies outside it. The alternative that Merleau-Ponty proposes is to ‘reach’ Being itself: ‘What I want to do is restore the world as a meaning of Being absolutely different from the “represented,” that is, as the vertical Being which none of the “representations” exhaust and which all “reach,” the wild Being’. 26 For Castoriadis, however, posing the question of the meaning of Being does not draw us underneath the ‘layer’ of representation, but isolates the intuitive element of imagination without recognising the necessity of the conceptual understanding for the possibility of having experience at all.

Thus phenomenology remains unable to escape identitary logic, for it continues the Greco-Western tendency to think of representation in terms of a projection screen which separates ‘subject’ and ‘thing’, or, in Heidegger’s critique of modern technology, in terms of a fraudulent mask created by modern technology that causes us to forget Being (330). This formulation of the problem entails that philosophy – in both traditional and phenomenological forms – is premised on the drive to overcome this separation, either by identifying a technical

26 ibid., p. 253.
mode of thinking that could guarantee our access to the thing or by removing the
representational character of thought altogether. If philosophy is premised on the task of
providing a passage between subject and object, the notion of representation provides a
fundamental limit. Representation, for Castoriadis, not only ‘questions’ but also ‘destroys’ the
identitary logic in which being is considered ‘as one, … as sameness, as the sameness for all,
hence being as common – *koinon* – and the type of logical organisation consubstantial,
homologous to this thesis’ (330). Thus for philosophers in search of a common, unitary
conception of being, the failure of what is given in representation ‘to conform to the most
basic logical schemata’ entails that representation must be denounced (ibid.).

The alternative Castoriadis provides to Marxism, structuralism, and phenomenology is
based on the conviction that, to overcome identitary logic, a way of thinking is required that is
able to acknowledge the creativity of imagination (i.e. representation) and accept the
representational dimensions of thought. Again, Castoriadis argues that Kant provides an
exemplary way of proceeding in the notion of imagination’s reflective capacity he outlines in
*CJ*. For Kant, to reflect is ‘to compare and combine a given representation either with other
representations or with one’s cognitive faculties, with respect to a concept thereby made
possible’ (*CJ* 5:179). Reflection allows us to turn our own thinking into an object of
representation, and to find the concept expressed therein. If we understand the concepts that
govern the practice of thinking to be social institutions in the most basic sense, however, then
reflection is not simply a process of identifying concepts that are transcendentally necessary.
Rather, it is a process by which our thinking ‘turns back on itself and interrogates itself not
only about its particular contents but also about its presuppositions and its foundations’.
27 Since the social institution has furnished these foundations, genuine reflection necessarily
involves ‘a challenging of the given institutions of society, the putting into question of
socially instituted representations’.28 This task does not attempt to uncover a layer underneath
representation. Rather, like Castoriadis’ interpretation of Cantor’s naive set-theory, it calls the
very self-positing nature of institutions into question, undermining the constant effort of
society – and our own cognitive effort – to connect signification and being. When imaginary
significations are recognised as contingent, they become subject to question and alteration,
opening us to the prospect of new possibilities.

28 ibid.
What is important for our argument in this chapter is that the very fact that we can think of this kind of reflection, that we have some, albeit limited, language to elucidate the ability of the imagination to call itself into question, is only made possible by explicit attempts made in history to break from the closure of identitary logic. Two significant attempts, for Castoriadis, are found in Aristotle and Kant, for both recognised the power of the imagination to create images that transcend reality; images that are unrealised but not unrealisable.29 Another attempt to call the imaginary significations of society into question, Castoriadis argues, one that precedes Aristotle and Kant, occurred in the Athenian cultural revolution of the fifth century BCE. This attempt was not simply made by philosophers such as Protagoras and Democritus, but by tragic poets, historians, and politicians. What is important about the Athenian cultural revolution, for Castoriadis, is that it turned not only on the recognition of the self-created nature of social, legal, and religious meaning, but on the acceptance of human limits.

7.2 Tragedy and self-creation

To understand the reflective character of the Athenian cultural revolution, Castoriadis begins by outlining an appropriate historical method that does not simply reproduce the identitary logic of our own time. For a logicist historical method, ‘the new is, in every instance, constructed through identitary operations … by means of what was already there’ (IIS 173). In such a method, the time of radically otherness, an otherness that can neither be deduced nor produced, has to be abolished’ (ibid). Castoriadis identifies two historical methodologies that reproduce the logicist thinking that correspond roughly with the Idealist and Nietzschean views identified in this thesis.

The first is that which explores history in terms of the logical order of ideas in search for the emergence of meaning within history. The problem with this method, for Castoriadis, is that history ‘cannot itself “have a meaning” (or, moreover, “not have meaning”) – any more than a gravitational field can have (or not have) a weight, or an economic space can have (or not have) a price’.30 This view of history, for Castoriadis, seeks to explain the emergence of meaning within history as if events, thoughts, and actions were the results of causes that can be known. A better view of history, Castoriadis suggests, recognises that ‘history is creation’,

meaning that it ‘is that in and through which meaning … is conferred upon things, acts, etc’.31 In this framework, if we turn to history in order locate a concept such as freedom, it is only found because human ‘doing posits and provides for itself something other than what simply is, and because in it dwell significations that are neither the reflection of what is perceived … nor the strictly rational development of what is given’ (IIS 146). A proper historical method must be attuned to the creativity of human doing if it is to identify the radical nature of the Athenian cultural revolution. Thus, when we consider tragedy, a proper historical method begins by recognising that there ‘is no definitive concept of tragedy, only the history of tragedy’.32

The second logicist method Castoriadis identifies is put forward by a group of scholars he terms the ‘structuralist Hellenists’ (which he identifies as Vernant, Vidal-Naquet and Detienne). These scholars, he suggests, view the task of history as an anthropological task in a way that becomes paradigmatic for what we termed the Nietzschean view. Castoriadis draws from Daniel Coppieters de Gibson, who characterises these thinkers in terms of a common understanding that ‘the figure of Greek man … determines the status of anthropos, placing him in a relation with the gods and, correspondingly, with animals’.33 For the structuralist Hellenists, the western determinations of human being as a rational animal, as created in the image of God, or as the necessary and sufficient condition of knowledge, obscure a reality that is disclosed in the tragic presentation of Greek anthropos. This means that philosophy must be bypassed in favour of retrieving Greek anthropos.

While the attention this view gives to the social and political setting of antiquity clearly influences Castoriadis’ own view, he argues that the structuralist method contains a ‘danger of repeating the critical misapprehension that has plagued the approach to the ancient Greek world for centuries’.34 This danger, he suggests, is that we speak of ‘the Greek anthropos’, ‘the Greek polis’, ‘the Greek conception of nature’, etc’.35 What is dangerous about the attempt to identify a definitive understanding of the Greek world is that it occludes the fact that ‘the “spirit” of ancient Greeks is realised precisely as alteration, self-alteration, self-institution – all three notions interwoven with striving toward self-knowledge, which is

35 ibid.
continuous effort, work, and process, not a static result’. By searching for an authentically Greek *anthropos* in order to confront the Greco-Western picture of humanity, the structuralist view locates in history precisely the logic that it uses in its search, remaining unable to see the otherness of the Greek world. In short, the structuralist view, like the Idealist view, occludes the fact that the ‘basic characteristic of ancient Greek history is precisely that it is *history* in the most emphatic sense of the term’.37

Thus for Castoriadis, a method that is appropriate to the otherness of historical being is one that recognises the radical nature of human creativity. Such a method, as Suzi Adam’s states, is able to attend to that which cannot ‘be predicated, predicted or deduced from its precedents’, thus enabling us to see the enormous social-historical creation that takes place in ancient Greece.38 According to Adams, Castoriadis’ understanding of ancient Greece ‘completely alters the signification of those terms or elements [such as *anthropos*, *polis* and *nature*] making up this structure’.39 In particular, it confronts the view put forward by historical methods that remain subject to identitary logic, for it identifies the distinctive character of the Greeks precisely in their awareness of historical creation and its limits.

From this historical method, Castoriadis identifies tragedy as a transgressive form of art that orientates its audience to a new way of seeing. When understood according to this method, the significance of the tragedies for a contemporary method lies not in any specific content but in their ability to disrupt the hegemony of our own patterns of thinking, and thereby providing a window into a society that undertook the collective interrogation of its shared meanings. Tragedy, in this view, is not an idea that transcends the particular historical moment of ancient Athens or a mode of thinking that unveils a layer underneath representational thinking. Rather, it is a public institution that, for the original spectators, questions traditional notions of responsibility and agency (*Agamemnon*), explores the indeterminacy of *nomos* (*Antigone*), unveils the danger of *hubris* (*Ajax*), and even calls public decisions into question (*Trojan Women*). In short, it ‘exhibits the uncertainty pervading the [political] field, it sketches the impurity of motives, it exposes the inconclusive character of the reasoning upon which we base our decisions’.40 Tragedy does not simply problematise the central assumptions of collective life, for Castoriadis, but exemplifies a way of thinking that authentically engages with the depth of these problematics.

36 ibid.
37 ibid.
39 ibid.
Before considering the alternative way for thinking exemplified by the tragedians, it is important to establish Castoriadis’ understanding of the ability of tragedy to disrupt identitary logic. The tragedies, in Castoriadis’ view, disrupt the idea of Cosmos as the fundamental nature of the world that is able to provide the ground for determinant knowledge. Rather than presenting Cosmos as Being, Castoriadis argues that they unveil ‘Being as Chaos’, which is to say that the ‘order of the world has no “meaning” for man’. On the surface, Castoriadis’ understanding of tragedy in terms of the presentation of ‘Being is Chaos’ seems similar to Nietzsche’s idea of tragedy as the presentation of true being underneath the layer of representation. In one sense Castoriadis does draw from Nietzsche, for like Nietzsche he suggests that if we find a disruptive, a-causal and creative energy at the heart of psychic life, then thought cannot be said to access timeless truth. Yet in opposition to Nietzsche, Castoriadis does not conclude that representation occludes original chaos, meaning that it must be overcome by participating in the Primordial One. Rather, he argues that there is no possibility of a primordial participation in the chaos of being, for human thought is representation. The question is not whether representation can be overcome, but whether representational thinking can open itself from the closure of the effort to unite signification and being and accept its fundamental creativity.

What distinguishes the luminosity of the tragedies from other forms of art, for Castoriadis, is that they present the chaos of being without reproducing identitary thinking: they are ‘transparent’. The tragedies are not phenomenal, giving us an intuition of our participation with chaos that takes us under the layer of representation. Rather, they are representations, but representations of a transparent kind, for they allow us to see through the fixity of the continental plates of social institutions to the magmatic flux underneath. The notion of ‘transparency’ contains within it Kant’s notion of elucidation. Elucidation, for Kant, is the activity of reflective judgment that does not attempt to explain or stand in front of a singular appearance, but to ‘make lucid’, to unveil. To elucidate is not to submit the object under a concept but is, through a poetic kind of thinking, to allow a symbolic presentation to go beyond nature to the cognitive apparatus though which it appears. Unlike Merleau-Ponty’s

42 ibid.
43 In JB (343), Castoriadis resists the structuralist understanding of the functional categories of human thought with the notion of ‘magma’, a concept he uses to describe ‘that from which one can extract (or in which one can construct) an indefinite number of ensemblist organisations but which can never be reconstituted (ideally) by a (finite or infinite) ensemblist composition of these organisations’. The fluidity of magma supports all ensemblist organisations but cannot be understood structurally, for it is always in motion and radically indeterminate.
phenomenology, elucidation requires the self-limitation of the desire for unmediated contact with the object as thing in itself, recognising that one’s representational perspective is ‘shaped’ by a social-historical logic. Thus the tragedies do not invite us in to participate with being, but, paradoxically, give the abyssal ground of reality a kind of form.

In contrast to Heidegger’s interpretation of tragedy in terms of transcultural, ontological texts, Castoriadis’ method shifts attention to the cultural specificity of tragic presentation. In other words, because the tragedies are not merely phenomenal but transparent, they cannot be understood to give an abstract presentation of ‘chaos’ as a layer underneath the flux of representations. Rather, they reveal the chaotic basis of a particular constellation of identitary thinking by presenting the inherited content of social life in a new form. In the context of ancient Greece, the shift from representing ancient myths from epic to dramatic form oriented the spectators to their tradition in a new way. It is not the content that changes but the form in which it is presented: the univocal authority of the Chorus is displaced by the polyvocality of opposing characters. Amongst the multitude of perspectives, the Chorus becomes one voice among many, the voice of tradition, rather than providing a final interpretation of the events. Thus the tragic form refrains from giving an interpretation of the action and, instead, represents the judgments made by each character and the reasoning upon which those judgments are made. The spectators gain a new orientation to the content of epic, for they are confronted with the inconclusive character of the reasoning upon which the heroes base their decisions and make claims to legitimacy. They become the jury faced with the most monstrous of crimes performed by their heroes, thereby gaining a new orientation toward tradition. In this framework, tragedy is not transgressive because it presents new content, but, as Herbert Marcuse states, because it ‘re-presents reality while accusing it’, alienating individuals from their functional existence in the effort to emancipate the imagination.44

By placing the heroes before the watching audience, the entire cultural history of ancient Athens is cleaved open and revealed to be the outworking of individual and fallible choices, many of which were seen to be highly dubious. For example, Homer’s presentation of the battle of Troy in the Odyssey is reconsidered by Aeschylus’ three hundred years later in a manner that calls the entire myth into question. In the Odyssey, Agamemnon is forced to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia so that the winds would give a favourable passage for his army on their journey to the battle of Troy. He returns from Troy as the triumphant conqueror

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only to be killed by Aegisthus, who has taken Agamemnon’s wife Clytemnestra as his lover.\textsuperscript{45} While the death of the heroic king after a long and victorious voyage is unfortunate, Agamemnon’s death is not tragic. In Aeschylus’ \textit{Agamemnon}, however, Agamemnon meets a different fate. He returns from Troy claiming that his heroic victory was not simply his own but the act of divine vengeance.\textsuperscript{46} While he is busy heralding his shared triumph with the gods whose supposed ‘protecting power / Sent forth, and brought me home again’ (ll. 852-3), Clytemnestra awaits him. She plays the role of the affectionate wife, laying out a purple carpet to honour his victory, yet the carpet is not the victor’s path but signals her intent to turn a victory march into funeral procession. Clytemnestra holds Agamemnon responsible for murdering their daughter and brutally kills him when he reaches their home. The Chorus hold Clytemnestra guilty of a grievous crime and swiftly call for retribution, causing Clytemnestra to respond by claiming that her action was justified by Apollo who helped her to see that ‘The guile I used to kill him / He used himself at first’ (ll. 1524-5). However, the Chorus also hold Agamemnon guilty, for he sacrificed Iphigenia because he valued his glory and his war over the demands of his family. They recognise that sacrificing his daughter did not mark his ‘sending off’ by the gods but an action that aimed to ‘keep morale from sagging / in superstitious soldiers’ (ll. 806-7). It was a sin (\textit{harmartia}) that violated the ‘awe that parenthood must claim’ (ll. 226, 133), resulting in his own death. The spectators are positioned to see the battle of Troy not as the vengeance of the gods but as the outworking of Agamemnon’s ego.

While the Chorus shows that error lies with both Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, they prove unable to decide on a right course of action in response. The situation is too complex, too fraught with contradictions for the old voice of tradition to prove capable of providing a response. The spectators are left to critically assess the reasoning that each character gives for their actions, and yet they cannot make sense of the situation with their predetermined ideas of justice. They must balance the competing elements and search for a new procedure of thought that authentically engages with the tragic character of the ethical demands presented.

By refusing to present the conflict as between good and evil and by focusing on the activity of human judgment, the tragedies are grounded on the realisation of responsibility, orientating the spectators to the political order under a new way of thinking that is \textit{other} than that which preceded it. The tragedies do not appeal to any universal reference points outside a


\textsuperscript{46} When Agamemnon returns he addresses his countrymen as follows: ‘First, Argos, and her native gods, revive from me / The conqueror’s greeting on my safe return; for which, / As for the just revenge I wrought on Priam’s Troy, / Heaven shares my glory’. Aeschylus, \textit{Agamemnon}, ll. 810-813.
form of life, but present practice of judgment as a tenuous, dangerous, human activity. The tragic poets lived in a time of transition, where new institutions were emerging within traditional religious practices. They experienced a time of rupture, and saw the need for new ways of making sense of human action. They created artworks that are exemplary, prying open an old foundation of validity and revealing it to be inadequate to deal with experience, throwing the spectators back onto their own devices. They are alerted to the inescapable reality of judgment: that ‘nothing can guarantee the a priori correctness of action’, neither divine law nor human reason. Moreover, they managed to turn that awareness into works of art.

In the Greek tragedies we find that the experience of recognising the failure of an inherited mode of thinking to navigate new problems is basic to a way of thinking that is based on experience and reflection. Tradition is displaced from a position of transcendental authority, and the task of judging the singularity of emerging problems is established in its place. Thus tragic self-reflection cannot be understood as the rejection of tradition for a new form of inquiry, but as the transformation of tradition; the establishment of a new, critical relation toward tradition where new tools are drawn from a traditional gamut of references. It is not through the rejection of tradition but through the critical confrontation with tradition that the imagination is freed to think beyond the concepts it inherits.

The emphasis Castoriadis places on the critical relation to tradition and the way of thinking that it entails is best seen in his reading of Sophocles’ Antigone. Contrary to Hegel’s interpretation of Antigone as the antithesis between the family and the law and Heidegger’s understanding of the character of Antigone as the daring hero who gives voice to Being, Castoriadis argues that ‘the subject of the tragedy is hubris itself: the act committed “because of reckless daring” (tolmas charin).’ Like Hegel, Castoriadis recognises that Antigone and Creon represent two conflicting authorities: Antigone claims to uphold the ‘divine law’ that calls one, when an orphan, to forsake all for one’s brother, while Creon appeals to the self-grounding system of ‘human law’ where no city can exist without restrictions just as no city can tolerate treason. Yet against Hegel, Castoriadis argues that neither Sophocles nor the Athenian people would have seen these contrasting authorities as incompatible. Indeed, Sophocles does not present them as contradictory, for we find in the final lines of the famous choral ode that anthropos can become hupsipolis (standing high in one’s city) by ‘weaving

them together (pareiron)’. The scenes that follow the choral ode present the incapacity of either Antigone or Creon to think in a way that is capable of this weaving. Thus the drama of Antigone, for Castoriadis, is not so much about the content of the ethical commitments held by Antigone and Creon as it is about their way of thinking. Both characters blindly defend one of the two principles, becoming hubristes and apolis. The act that renders them hubristes, we find in Haemon’s warning to Creon, is the going beyond the limits of phronein by attempting to be monos phronein, the one who ‘thinks right’.

For Castoriadis, hubris provides a new schema for identifying action and speech that transgresses the limits of the polis. By presenting claims of legitimacy in terms of human judgment, the tragedies present the notion of hubris not as the transgression of some natural or divine limit, but as a transgression of the limits of judgment. The import of Sophocles’ depiction of Creon and Antigone, in this view, lies in the presentation of two kinds of thinking that transgress the limits of judgment, a transgression that occurs by holding one’s private conviction to encompass the whole. The characters act in the belief that the correctness of their action is guaranteed either by the new forms of law emerging in democratic Athens or in the old gods of the city. Thus for Castoriadis, Sophocles’ tragedy presents the fact that ‘even when we are right, it is possible that we may be wrong – there is never a final logical reason’. This is to say that nothing can provide a guarantee for our actions, not even the gods or the law.

Castoriadis’ interpretation of Antigone identifies a procedure for navigating this tragic situation in which nothing can be guaranteed, a procedure that is expressed in Haemon’s climactic confrontation with Creon. The choral ode anticipates this confrontation by celebrating the terrifying ability of human beings to build cities and create institutions while recognising their profound failure to control themselves, orientating us to a proper awe of the most unsettling and enigmatic being: the human being. Given the chorus’ injunction to weave together the conflicting demands of community life, Castoriadis argues that the collision of Antigone and Creon draws our attention to the fact that neither listen to the reasons of the other. Instead, they insist on their own notion of right, mistaking, to use Kant’s words, their

49 ibid. This is Castoriadis’ own, literal translation of Sophocles’ words. More poetically it is rendered ‘Great honour is given / And power is given to him who upholdeth his country’s laws / And the justice of heaven’. Sophocles, Antigone, in The Theban Plays, trans. E. Walting, London: Penguin Books, 1947, ll. 354-6.
50 Haemon opens his confrontation with Creon with the following monologue: ‘Father, man’s wisdom is the gift of heaven, / The greatest gift of all. I neither am / nor wish to prove you wrong, / Though all man might not think the same as you do. … Surely, to think you own the only wisdom, / And yours the only word, the only will, / Betrays a shallow spirit, an empty heart. / It is not weakness for the wisest man / To learn when he is wrong, know when to yield’. ibid., ll. 689-693, 710-713.
‘subjective private conditions … to be objective’ (CJ 5:293-4). Both approach the situation with a predetermined universal and base their judgment on a closed order of meaning that is irrefutable from the outside, meaning that neither can make a demand on the other.

Recognising the fragility of the situation, the significance of Haemon’s confrontation with his father in the climax of the drama lies in his refusal to directly engage in his father’s arguments, for Creon’s reasoning is sound within the closure of his notion of right. Haemon states that ‘Neither do I want nor am I able to say that you are wrong’ (l. 686). In his view, the reason that Creon is wrong is not because the determinate content of his conviction is false, but because he follows a procedure of thinking that occludes the divided nature of the situation at hand: ‘For whoever believes he alone is capable of judgment / or whoever believes he has a soul or an eloquence that no one else has, / when such people are opened up, they are seen to be empty’ (ll. 707-9). Haemon argues that Creon is wrong even though he is right, for he insists on being monos phronein (thinking alone). Haemon concludes in words that Castoriadis claims to be the play’s central idea, begging Creon ‘not to be wise alone’ (l. 709).

Castoriadis identifies in Haemon’s words an epistemological procedure that refrains from individual speculation and aims toward publicity, drawing the tragedies into proximity with Kant’s enlarged way of thinking. In Kant’s work after CJ, he constantly stressed that the faculty of thinking depends on its public use: without ‘the test of free and open examination’, he states, no thinking and opinion-formation is possible. Opinions are not private convictions that we bring, pre-determined, to political decision-making, for reason is not made ‘to isolate itself but to get into community with others’. This view is not limited to his later writings, however, for Kant’s goal throughout his work is impartial thought, meaning that opinions must stand the test of publicity if they are to respect the limits of judgment. This kind of thinking crystallises in CJ as ‘enlarged’ thought, the process of taking into account the thoughts of others. In Castoriadis’ view, Kant’s proposal of an enlarged mode of thinking that acknowledges the challenges of representational thinking and yet aspires toward universality outlines a way of thinking that is attuned to the fluidity of human life.

52 Kant, ‘Reflexionen zur Anthropologie’, no. 897, Gesammelte Schriften, 15:392, in Arendt, Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy, p. 40.
53 ibid.
54 It is important to note that Kant’s notion of enlarged thought builds from Rousseau’s distinction between the private and the general will. For Rousseau, it is impossible for the private will to be concordant with the general will in an enduring way, for ‘by its nature the private will tends toward having preferences, and the general will tends toward equality’. For Kant, Rousseau failed to articulate how a community would be orientated toward the general will or how the citizens would be transformed from being concerned with their private will to willing the common good. His solution, in the CJ, lies in enlarged thought. Rousseau, The Social Contract, p. 29-30.
7.3 Kant: a philosopher of tragedy

Thus far I have suggested that Castoriadis’ interpretation of tragedy can be read as a response to identitary logic, disrupting the link between signification and Being. In this section I argue that the significance of Castoriadis’ interpretation of tragedy is further seen in the way it transforms his understanding of philosophy. This understanding of philosophy, I suggest, portrays Kant’s *CJ* as a text that is analogous to the tragedies to the extent that it presents the antinomy between the concept of nature as a determinant substance and the concept of nature as an aesthetic, self-created idea, placing the being of signification into radical question and enlarging the imagination of his reader to encompass the tragic character of representational thinking.

In a framework similar to his interpretation of tragedy, Castoriadis’ understanding of philosophy begins by identifying its institutional character. While philosophy can become the effort to identify the being of signification with being itself as we see in identitary thinking, the initial creation of philosophy – and even the initial desire to (re)connect being and signification – signals a different task:

> The historical creation of philosophy is rupture of this closure [of instituted society]: explicit putting into question of these [so-called imaginary significations], of the representations and words of the tribe. … [It is] possible only in and through an onset of rupture in social heteronomy and the creation of a new type of being: reflexive and deliberative subjectivity.55

The ‘otherness’ of philosophy, for Castoriadis, lies in its break with the heteronomous instituting of society by transforming inherited institutions. Philosophy is thus an institution that begins when the being of nature, of *phusis*, appears not as a given, fixed part of experience, but as a question that demands our attention.56 The development of the Greek word *phusis* indicates that the elaboration of the *phusis* did not signal a revolutionary term, but the transformation of particular ensembles of meaning. While Homer seems to be the first

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56 In his essay ‘Fenêtre Sur Le Chaos’, Castoriadis argues that this origin of philosophy is not unique to pre-Socratic thought, but that we find it equally in Plato and Aristotle. Plato identifies the proper foundation of philosophy is *thaumazein*, a sense of wonder, and in Aristotle’s argument that it is due to *thaumazein* humans ‘both now begin and at first began to philosophize’. *Thaumazein* discloses a mode of thought that begins from our activity of seeing (*theorein*), where a particular ‘this’ (a form of *idein*) throws us into an amazed stupor, into wonder. However, it is before Plato and Aristotle that the idea of *phusis* arose as a matter of question. Plato, *Theaetetus*, trans. R. Waterfield, London: Penguin Books, 1987, 155d; Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 982b12-13; Raymond Prier, *Thauma Idesthai: The phenomenology of sight and appearance in archaic Greek*, USA: University Press of Florida, 1989, p. 85.
to use an early form of \textit{phusis} (\textit{phua}) in order to indicate generation and growth, its scope was limited to the vegetative domain.\footnote{Homer mentions \textit{phua} only once. See Homer, \textit{The Odyssey}, 10.302-3.} Heraclitus introduced an anthropological dimension to \textit{phusis}, understanding it in relation to the human condition. For the Sophists, \textit{phusis} (that which is subject to its own proper principle) was understood in relation to \textit{nomos} (that which is subject to a created principle) in a creative battle in the debate over which parts of the human condition are natural, and which are convention.\footnote{See Michel Foucault’s exploration of the sophists in ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy, and History,’ in \textit{The Foucault Reader}, New York: Random House, 1984, pp. 76-100.} It is only after Heraclitus and the work of the Sophists that the being of nature becomes a problem. It is not until \textit{phusis} arises as a question and is placed in opposition to what belongs to human convention, to \textit{nomos}, that human thought recognises its creative work in generating form in order to navigate the natural strata.

The origin of philosophy, then, does not lie in ‘the ancient Greek understanding of \textit{phusis},’ in ‘Plato or Aristotle’s concept of \textit{phusis},’ or even in ‘the ancient Greek understanding of philosophy’. Rather, it lies in the transformation of the relation of \textit{nomos} to \textit{phusis} in such a way that cleaved the being of \textit{nomos} from the determining ground of \textit{phusis}, bringing the historical character of human institutions to the attention of the ancient Greeks. This distinction between \textit{phusis} and \textit{nomos} is, for Castoriadis, ‘one of the great creative moments of Greek thought, and its most characteristic’.\footnote{Cornelius Castoriadis, ‘\textit{Phusis} and Autonomy’, in \textit{World in Fragments}, trans. D. Curtis, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997, pp. 331-341.} On one side, \textit{phusis} signifies ‘the push, the endogenous and spontaneous growth of things that nevertheless is also generative of an order’, while on the other, \textit{nomos}, ‘usually translated as “law,” originally signified the law of sharing, therefore institution, therefore usage (ways and customs), therefore a convention, and, at the limit, convention pure and simple’.\footnote{ibid., p. 331.} \textit{Nomos} establishes a lasting ‘imaginary institution by means of which we make ourselves qua human beings’.\footnote{Cornelius Castoriadis, ‘Value, Equality, Justice, Politics: From Marx to Aristotle, From Aristotle to Us’, in \textit{Crossroads in the Labyrinth}, trans. K. Soper & M. Ryle, Great Britain: Harvester Press, 1978, pp. 260-339, p. 326.} In the rupture occurring in the Greek social world whereby institutions where seen to be subject to human creation, if something pertains to \textit{nomos} and not to \textit{phusis} then that something depends on human conventions and not on the nature of beings.

Castoriadis recognises three significant implications stemming from the separation of \textit{nomos} from \textit{phusis} that provide the shared grounds for philosophy and democracy.\footnote{Castoriadis, ‘Done and to be Done’, p. 373.} The first
is that to separate nomos from phusis is to say that there can be no phusis of nomos; there can be no determinate principle of human institutions. If human institutions are separate from the natural order and are not determined by it, it follows that they are contingent and thus subject to question and alteration. The second is that nomos is created by human activity, an insight reflected in the self-adjudicating institutions that arose in Athens where the laws governing human affairs were subject to deliberation and alteration. The recognition of self-creativity entails a notion of imagination, phantasia, which does not imitate phusis but creates a symbolic world that goes beyond it (i.e. representation). Thirdly, Castoriadis identifies that the opposition of nomos and phusis entails that ‘there is at least one type of being, human being, that creates, gives rise to, its own eidos in a “non-natural” fashion, without this eidos being found already, dunamei, in its determinate potentialities’.

While Plato denies the shared ground of philosophy and democracy, for he contrasts the contingent character of democracy with the necessary truth of philosophy, Aristotle’s stance is not so clear. While Aristotle sought to bring nomos and phusis back into the realm of human affairs, he also aims to heal the tension between them by identifying a distinct realm appropriate to each, the realm in which things ‘cannot be otherwise’ and the realm of ‘coming-to-be’, thus occluding the tragedy of the tension. However, Castoriadis argues that a glimmer of tragedy arises in Aristotle’s work in the tension between Aristotle’s definitions of nature. In response to the Sophists who separated nomos and phusis, Aristotle argued that anthropos is by nature (phusis) a political animal (one who creates nomos), meaning that the creative element of human beings is a product of nature. While this definition places nomos in the human domain, it removes phusis to the determinative realm of being. Yet when Aristotle defines phusis in Physics, he gives two definitions that, Castoriadis argues, stand radically opposed. The first interpretation Aristotle gives is tied to the idea of telos, of ends:

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\text{nature [is] end and that in view of which [something occurs]} \\
\text{(he de phusis telos kai hou heneka)}
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For Aristotle, every ‘thing’ is a part of a chain of means and ends, wherein each is always end of an interior thing and means of a thing superior in value. That which has an end is a kind of artefact, what modern philosophers refer to as a ‘machine’ that has a final goal. A watch, for example, has an end, a nature, which is to tell the time. This end is not determined by an inner

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63 ibid.
64 See Aristotle, Posterior Analytics, 70b9-72b4, and Nicomachean Ethics, 1142a25f.
65 Aristotle, Physics, 194a28-29.
principle (a *principia domestica*) but is endowed as an efficient cause (*nexus effectivus*) by an external force – in this case a watchmaker.

Aristotle poses a second definition of *phusis* that stands in tension with the first. The first definition of nature in terms of efficient causation is unable to accommodate the finalities of the living being, a self-organising being that cannot be understood in terms of efficient causation but in terms of final causation (*nexus finalis*). Aristotle permits this dimension in the second interpretation of *phusis*, identifying *phusis* as

> the essence of the things that have in themselves, as such, principle of movement (*arkhen kineseos*)

This entails that *phusis* contains in itself the origin and the principle of its movement, meaning that living beings posit themselves, partially as their own ends. In this definition, movement (*kinesis*) is not only local movement but also change, generation, and alteration (*alloiosis*).

For Castoriadis, Aristotle’s second definition of *phusis* stands in a radical tension with the first, echoing something of the confrontation between *nomos* and *phusis* that is basic to tragedy. It shifts the notion of *phusis* from ‘that which has in itself the principle or the origin of its moment’ into ‘that which has in itself the principle or the origin of its change – of its alteration’. It is to say that nature forms itself; it *creates* itself, expanding our concept of nature as the determinative ground for eternal being. If nature is truly self-forming, then there is no fixed order by which we can legislate natural appearances. Rather, our concepts of natural things would be contingent significations that do not determine the thing’s being but elucidate its inner principle. The tension between Aristotle’s two definitions of *phusis* echoes the tragic collision of *nomos* and *phusis*, because it contrasts the determination of nature according to a proper principle with the concept of nature as indeterminate. This tension is ‘tragic’, for it problematises the necessary, stable determination of appearances implicit in identitary logic, introducing a zone of indeterminacy between nature and the institutions though which we understand nature. In short, it confronts us with the reality that *phusis* can give no necessary grounding for *nomos*, enlarging our way of thinking in order to recognise the contingency of imaginary institutions.

66 ibid., 192b21. In the *Metaphysics* Aristotle also refers to this interpretation, describing *techne* as the ‘principle of movement in something other than the thing moved’, and *phusis* as the ‘principle of movement in the thing itself’. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1070a6-7.

67 Castoriadis, “‘Phusis’ and Autonomy”, p. 335.
Heidegger also saw the contradiction between Aristotle’s two definitions of nature, yet he ultimately removed this contradiction by prioritising the radical indeterminacy of phusis over nomos. He argues that, in Physics, ‘Aristotle conceives of phusis as the beingness (ousia) of a particular (and in itself delimited) region of beings ... But this same treatise of the Metaphysics [I, 1003a27] says exactly the opposite: ousia (of the Being of beings as such in totality) is something like phusis’. In Aristotle’s first definition, Heidegger notes, nature is not just one of two equal terms (nature and freedom, nature and spirit, nature and law etc.) but it ‘holds the position of priority’. Freedom, spirit, law and all ‘non-natural’ potentialities of human being are determined by nature, finding their existence in relation to a ground that defines their parameters. In the second definition, however, Heidegger argues that we hear an ‘echo of the great beginning of Greek philosophy, the first beginning of Greek philosophy. In this beginning Being was phusis, such that the phusis that Aristotle conceptualized can only be a latter derivative of originary phusis’. Heidegger argues that the task of philosophy, as was the achievement of tragedy, is to allow this notion of phusis to come into appearance. It refuses to determine the beingness (ousia) of beings, like the first definition, but provides a space for beings to emerge.

For Castoriadis, however, Heidegger fails to outline a way of thinking that is adequate to the tension between nature and our way of conceptualising nature, for he fails to understand phusis in tension with nomos. By outlining the task of philosophy as one of retrieving the ‘echo of the first beginning’, Heidegger does not bring the two understandings of nature as nomos and phusis into confrontation but merely inverts the Platonic dualism of form over simulacrum, positing form as the mere occlusion of appearance. When phusis is understood as primary to nomos, the task of philosophy is one of overcoming representation; of unveiling the primary movement of being that is obfuscated by the representational paradigm of thought. In this sense, Heidegger’s philosophy casts the self-created nature of nomos aside as a part of the anti-tragic philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, rendering creativity as a mode of production in order to maintain the agency of Being. For Castoriadis, Heidegger’s

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69 ibid., p. 241
70 ibid., p. 229
71 One of Castoriadis’ many criticisms of Heidegger can be traced, as Suzi Adams states, to ‘Heidegger’s interest in and reliance on a physis that was pre-nomos, and hence an acceptance of a certain kind of a top-down unveiling (or “disclosure”) rather than a bottom-up institution (or “creation”)’. Adams, Castoriadis’s Ontology, p. 20.
commitment to pure Being renders him blind to the idea of tragedy as the collision of nomos and phusis. Thus his philosophy is unable to confront heteronomy.

To uncover the tragic dimension of philosophy, Castoriadis returns to Kant’s *CJ*. In Castoriadis’ reading of Kant, the rediscovery of the self-organising concept of nature in the eighteenth century provided the catalyst to the rediscovery of the tragedy of philosophy. When philosophy is confronted with its failure to provide a manner of thinking that is adequate to the self-forming, living being, it is again confronted with the nomos/phusis problematic, an encounter that reopens philosophy’s perception of tragedy. In Castoriadis’ interpretation, it was not Schelling, Hölderlin, or Hegel who provided a solution to the tragedy of philosophy, but Kant. In *CJ*, the conception of nature as determinate ground and as contingent appearance comes to a particular climax in the antinomy of teleological judgment. Kant’s engagement with the radical biological movements of the late eighteenth century led him to reconsider the identitary logic of traditional ontology. The discovery of the living being requires a new conception of being in terms of a fluid, dynamic and groundless condition of possibility.

Kant’s recognition of the antinomy of teleological judgment results in several important conclusions. First, it results in the recognition that our representation of nature is limited to our concept of nature, that is, to the institution of nature that is historically contingent. Second, recognising the representational character of thought thereby separates human cognition from the being of nature. Third, recognising the abyss between nature and human thought requires the acknowledgment of the contingency of human signification. Kant’s understanding of contingency, however, does not entail absolute lawlessness. Rather, it allows us to conceptualise appearances in terms of an internal purpose that dynamically responds to its environment. This understanding of contingency aims to solve the problem that was raised by Kant’s examination of judgment in *CPR*, which entails that (1) nature conforms to judgment, and (2) judgment cannot access the being of nature. The antinomy of teleological judgment between the concept of nature as lawfully determined and the concept of nature as self-forming (as beyond the limits of human thought) enables Kant to recognise that if our concept of nature is unable recognise contingency, the universe is limited to a theoretical order of cause and effect (for us). When we ‘confuse’ the heautonomy of reflecting judgment for the heteronomy of determining judgment, the otherness of historical creation is not only unthinkable but a threat to the perfection of nature. The procedure of thinking that is aware of this dilemma, on the other hand, is one that gives law to itself; it self-limits by
refraining from its determinative operation in contexts that involve living, self-organising beings.

Thus, it is not the determination of nature according to the ideas of reason that constitutes the task of autonomy, for Castoriadis, but the self-determination of judgment: heautonomy. In his essay “‘Phusis’ and Autonomy’, Castoriadis states that in the discovery of the living being we arrive

at an idea of autonomy that differs radically from simple self-constitution. We conceive autonomy as the capacity of a society or of an individual, to act deliberately and explicitly in order to modify its law – that is to say, its form. Nomos becomes the explicit self-creation of form, which thus makes it appear both as, still, the opposite of phusis – and as one of the latter’s points of culmination.72

Autonomy understood in terms of Kantian heautonomy does not reproduce the theological voluntarism of seventeenth century philosophers such as Descartes and Hobbes, but puts forward a version of voluntarism that is attuned to the lawful lawlessness of the living being. Descartes’ voluntarism, for example, can be seen in his claim that there are no truths antecedent to God’s will.73 Hobbes outlined a naturalistic account of voluntarism by identifying that political legitimacy is underpinned by the ‘irresistible power’ of God that was the underlying source of his absolute right of dominion.74 Castoriadis’ voluntarism, on the other hand, entails that because the being of nature cannot provide a definitive ground to social significations, significations must be understood as framing our most basic orientation to the world, and yet are subject to critique. Thus the voluntaristic ground of the project of autonomy conditions the possibility of calling these significations into question.

In the context of the present thesis, the importance of Castoriadis’ reading of Kant as a tragic philosopher is that it identifies in Kant’s philosophy a procedure that authentically engages with the tragedy of philosophy. If human creativity is ontological to the extent that, through creative praxis, it brings genuinely new form into being, then the task of philosophy is not to build a vision of society in terms of philosophically defined ends, but to outline a procedure that acknowledges human creativity, that is capable of authentically engaging with the contingency of living beings. Thus the significance of Kant’s attention to judgment lies in the way that his response to the tragedy of philosophy turns his project from the task of outlining the conditions of the possibility of objectivity to the task of outlining the conditions for mutual communicability; from building a system of knowledge to outlining a political

73 Redding, Continental Idealism, p. 27.
procedure. This is to say that responding to the tragedy of philosophy and turning to politics constitute one and the same task.

While Plato’s response to tragedy was to outline a system of philosophy that would remove the political nature of politics, Kant’s proposal privileges the unique qualities of the particular and the normative guidance given by aesthetic ideas that are part of the shared imagination of a community. Herein lies the importance of Kant’s *CJ* for Castoriadis: it vindicates the notion of a public realm of appearances as a political arena. Thus Kant’s intersubjective account of judgment provides the beginnings of a mode of judgment that is freed from the identitary logic that views being as being something determined. Kant’s enlarged view of judgment is regulated by social norms and ideas, yet is first and foremost an individual responsibility. In this framework, Castoriadis argues, the task of judgment must be understood not in moral but in political terms.

Castoriadis’ reading of Kant as a tragic philosopher identifies the radical nature of Kant’s critique of the faculty of judgment in its destruction of the distinction between the ‘enlightened few’, the philosophers, and the naive *hoi polloi*. When this distinction evaporates, philosophy ceases to be the quest for transcendent knowledge and, instead, embraces humankind in the manner that Kant outlined in his famous self-reflection:

> There was a time when I believed all this knowledge could be the honour of mankind and I despised all those who were bereft of such knowledge. Rousseau has corrected me. I learned to honour man, and I would consider myself less worthy than the average worker if I did not believe that all this [meaning ‘philosophy’] could contribute to what really matters – the restoration of the rights of humankind.\(^{75}\)

When philosophy embraces humankind, its preoccupation with ‘politics’ in the Platonic sense disappears.\(^{76}\) In other words, when self-interest is sublimated into a public affair and philosophy recognises that it cannot make claim to power by virtue of its superior knowledge, the old tension between philosophy and politics disappears. The need to lay down the rules for an ideal, philosophical society ceases to be the task of philosophy, and we find that philosophy becomes a task of outlining a procedure that acknowledges the contingency of signification and a critique of thought that goes beyond its limits. Philosophy, in this

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\(^{75}\) Kant, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 20:44, in Dieter Heinrich, *Between Kant and Hegel: Lectures on German Idealism*, ed. D. Pacini, USA: Harvard University Press, 2003, p. 55. Following his encounter with Rousseau, Kant never ceases to argue this point, stating in *CPR* (B859) that ‘in regard to the essential ends of human nature the highest philosophy cannot advance further than is possible under the guidance which nature has bestowed even upon the most ordinary understanding’.

\(^{76}\) For Kant, this loss is not really a problem, for it merely ‘touches only the monopoly of the schools and in no way the interest of human beings’ (*CPR* Bxxxii).
framework, involves a way of thinking that is analogous to tragedy in that it opens up society for creative transformation through the recognition of limits.

7.4 Conclusion

This chapter has argued that Castoriadis’ interpretation of Kant’s work – particularly his attempt to read Kant’s enlarged way of thinking as a response to the tragedy of philosophy – provides an alternative to the Nietzschean and Idealist views of the philosophy of tragedy. While the Nietzschean view suggests that the philosophy of tragedy is properly understood as the attempt to transform the task of philosophy by locating the message encapsulated in tragic drama, and the Idealist view suggests that the philosophy of tragedy is the attempt to reconcile the antinomy between nature and freedom arising in Kant’s critical work, Castoriadis casts the philosophy of tragedy as the exploration of a problematic that disrupts philosophical thinking and attempts to transform the scope of philosophy in the paradigm of Kant’s enlarged way of thinking. Kant’s enlarged way of thinking, for Castoriadis, acknowledges the failure of the understanding to legislate the appearance of nature according to logic. When the philosophic is displaced from its hegemonic position over the political, its task becomes one of outlining a way of thinking that authentically engages with the contingency of nature by setting oneself ‘apart from the subjective private conditions of the judgment’, and reflecting on one’s own ‘judgment from a universal standpoint’ (CJ 5:295).

The import of Castoriadis’ reading of Kant lies in his identification of the new task of philosophy given the failure of technalised thinking: the task of negotiating limits. In this sense the task of philosophy is political, though it is not reducible to politics. Philosophy is not reducible to politics, for its task is to make the political political; to transform our way of seeing, enlarging our vision to see the priority of praxis over the technical application of concepts to phenomena. If this reflective principle of philosophy were to become a working principle in a society, then philosophy could not be limited to the academy, but would become essential to the formation of citizens capable of weaving together the competing demands of the polis. Sophocles’ image of weaving is a powerful metaphor of political engagement, for it elucidates the creative task of navigating private interest and universal concern; of learning an enlarged way of thinking where each judgment made is an invitation to other citizens to judge in terms of publicity.
CHAPTER 8

Conclusion

In this thesis I have tried to demonstrate that the ‘enlarged way of thinking’ Kant develops in *CJ* assists us to see the philosophical problematic of tragedy as a major contribution to the goal of expanding the scope of philosophy. Enlarged thinking, for Kant, requires that we acknowledge the limits of our intellectual capacities, thereby sublimating the subjective interest that would lead our thought beyond the conditions of its possibility into a concern for the whole. This occurs via a reflective process that displaces the immediacy of our own view, thereby ‘enlarging’ the imagination to the possibility of new form. Enlarged thinking outlines a way of thinking akin to Aristotle’s *phronesis*, a mode of *praxis* that is distinct from the rule-bound operation of *techne* due to its ability to deliberate over contingent situations for which no rule can be found. Kant’s enlarged way of thinking highlights the importance of his representational understanding of thought for navigating the challenge that tragedy poses to philosophy. Representation is the shaping of the world beyond what is simply ‘given’ according to form that is held in common and has no foundation apart from its prior application. By alerting us to the representational character of thought, tragedy disrupts our attempts to find timeless truth and opens us to the task of making sense in common. In this way tragedy denies the hegemony of the philosophic over the aesthetic, occasioning a transformation in the form of Aristotle’s *katharsis* through which we come to see that, as Bakhtin states, ‘*the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future*’.¹

This interpretation of the philosophical problematic of tragedy aimed to provide an alternative to the two main conceptions of the philosophy of tragedy in recent thought: the Nietzschean and Idealist views. The Nietzschean view, I suggested, rejects the philosophical tradition as a systematic denial of tragedy that attempts to render suffering explainable. Tragedy serves as a bulwark against two millennia of error, presenting the collision of the old gods and the new in a world characterised by dissident forces. The Idealist view, on the other hand, is concerned with identifying tragedy as a response to the Kantian dualism, the crisis

occurring between theoretical philosophy and nature at the turn of the nineteenth century. Tragedy is seen as a corrective to philosophy, meaning that the task of philosophy is to grasp the tragic so that it can encompass finitude, contingency and death. While we have recognised elements in both views that enrich our understanding of the problematic of tragedy, by focusing on the content of tragedy they distract us from a deeper problem: that philosophy, the task we are now undertaking, is prone to intellectual tragedy. Recognising the proximity of intellectual tragedy entails that tragedy is not limited to epochal moments in cultural history wherein the old gods clash with the new – though experiences of this nature might shed light on a particular cultural blindness – but that all human thinking is prone to stray beyond its limits.

What differentiates this interpretation of philosophy’s engagement with tragedy from the Nietzschean and Idealist views is that it does not reject the philosophical project or provide a definitive account of tragedy. Both of these views essentially render tragedy as a thing of the past, meaning that the philosophical possibilities of tragedy lie in the task of remembering. In contrast, this thesis has employed a method that, drawing from Bakhtin, is attentive to the many voices that (over-)populate tragedy, leading us to discover the cogency of the philosophical problematic of tragedy not in past experiences, but in the common desire to expand the horizon of philosophy from a technalised paradigm to a new way of thinking that acknowledges the tragedy of philosophy; not an abstract tragedy, but a present tragedy that is expressed through the activity of one’s own inherited way of thinking. To have a purchase on tragedy means to be aware of tragedy in one’s own experience, for an enlarged awareness cannot be inherited or learned but is gained through a process of transformation whereby the given is opened to the possibility of the ungiven.

This interpretation, I have argued, portrays the problematic of tragedy as a matter of raising questions about the way of philosophy, and to this extent Kant’s enlarged way of thinking is a case in point. This is not to say that Kant’s philosophy must be accepted in toto if one is to benefit from this new procedure, but that Kant’s response to the failure of philosophy – his acknowledgement of the limits of philosophy and his search for a new way of thinking adequate to living form – provides an exemplary response. Even Nietzsche, who is no ally to Kant, can be understood in terms of this view. Nietzsche’s attack on the life-denying nature of rationalist philosophy calls for an enlarged vision of philosophy that is capable of reconciling the way of doing philosophy with life itself. If life does not adhere to a rational standard where all appearances can be explained in terms of efficient causation, then the procedure for thinking must encompass the singular character of appearances. Nietzsche’s attempt to usher
in the tragic age inaugurated by Kant, to reveal the life-denying character of morality and identify a way of feeling the whole of life, shows a desire to enlarge philosophy beyond what can be encompassed by a philosophical system.

My final task is to turn explicitly to the question of how this interpretation of tragedy alters the way we understand the renewed interest in tragedy in contemporary philosophy. The aim of this conclusion is to draw the argument of this thesis to a close by using the understanding of tragedy in terms of a philosophical problematic to clarify the significance of the renewed interest in tragedy. This will allow me to establish that the renewed interest in tragedy is in continuity with the ongoing dialogue we have examined in this thesis. This continuity suggests that the renewed interest in tragedy is not simply a new development in the history of ideas but a development in philosophy no less significant than other times when tragedy arose as a pressing matter of philosophical concern. To establish such a connection, this chapter identifies three themes in the contemporary philosophy of tragedy that extend the broader dialogue on the problematic of tragedy into the present context: the enlargement of the imagination, the recognition of ethical complexity, and the search for a new understanding of universality. The significance of these themes, I will suggest, is that they express the ongoing need for philosophy to expand its limits, to search for new ways of thinking that open the possibility of new form.

8.1 Enlarging the imagination

One feature of the problematic of tragedy that is extended into the landscape of contemporary philosophy is the understanding of tragedy as a disruption to established ways of thinking, enlarging our awareness to possibilities beyond the given. While for Hegel tragedy is no longer the bearer of historical truth, it still contains the ability to confront us with the limits of (Kantian) morality and expand our understanding of ethical life. For Nietzsche, tragedy entices us to riot against the moral constraints that seek to bind us to a life-denying view of reality, shattering – albeit for a moment – all limits and boundaries that are placed upon us. In Heidegger’s understanding, tragedy confronts us with the limits of creative technē that are obscured by modern technology. In Castoriadis’ view, tragic presentation tears us out of our investment in the instituted world and confronts us with the task of autonomy. While the philosophical content disrupted by tragedy is different in each case, there is a consensus that tragedy confronts a constellation of thinking that has solidified in the words
and practices of a society, opening us to the need of a mode of perception that is larger than
an inherited pattern of thought.

Developing the historical emphasis on the transformative nature of the problematic of
tragedy, contemporary philosophers who turn to tragedy aim to confront the inability of
mainstream philosophy to provide a language capable of navigating matters that lie outside
the limits of general logic or empirical science. For Terry Eagleton, the reception of tragedy is
a kind of litmus test for philosophy’s ability to understand itself as a rigorous science while
still asking the basic questions of human life and freedom. In this view, the fact that
contemporary philosophy finds tragedy to be ‘too solemn and portentous’ is tantamount to its
inability to think beyond the limits of empirical science.\(^2\) Because the tragedies ‘retain a trace
of the archaic as a kind of drag or ballast within the historical’, they provide ‘a reminder that
whatever our civilized achievements we remain an arbitrary outcropping of Nature, monstrous
or amphibious animals who straddle two domains and will never be quite at home in either’.\(^3\)
Martha Nussbaum agrees, arguing that contemporary philosophy is suspicious of tragedy
because it has confined itself to a view of philosophical thinking that is restricted to the
knowable, excluding contingency, suffering and anguish; that is, the very fabric of human life
as presented in the tragedies.\(^4\) For Dennis Schmidt, contemporary philosophy has limited
itself to such a narrow set of problems that it is unable to respond to the manifold questions
that humans have asked throughout history.\(^5\) Tragedy contains a reflective capacity, for
Schmidt, providing a new conceptual discourse ‘in which the horror that human beings can
create for themselves [can be] displayed and so reflected upon’.\(^6\) For Eagleton, Nussbaum and
Schmidt, the cogency of tragedy lies in its ability to reveal the inability of philosophy that
mimics the rigour of empirical science to navigate contingent matters that cannot be
quantified or predicted. Thus it enlarges the scope of philosophy to include topics to which it
has traditionally remained silent, such as grief, emotion, gender, motherhood, guilt, laughter,
the gods, and the contingency of ethical life.

While the critique of contemporary philosophy made by Nussbaum, Eagleton and
Schmidt comes from the vantage of the history of philosophy, the need for philosophy to
enlarge its view is also felt in other domains. For Stanley Cavell, analytic philosophy’s

\(^3\) ibid., p. 287.
\(^5\) Tragedy, for Schmidt, provides a language through which to question the fundamental assumptions of
‘metaphysics, Christianity, sciences, technology, as well as the influence of these upon the real formations of
\(^6\) ibid., p. 274
inability to tackle ‘the wider, traditional problems of human culture’ warrants a return to art, and to tragic art in particular.\(^7\) In Cavell’s vision, the dominance of naturalism in analytic philosophy results in the attempt to equate philosophical knowledge with the empirical sciences, casting any attempt to reject this assumption as super-scientific pretension. When philosophy is equated with the empirical sciences, anything that cannot be determined by naturalism is deemed insufficient to count as philosophical knowledge.

Cavell’s critique is not limited to analytic philosophy, for many philosophers also feel that the continental philosophical tradition is equally impaired. Echoing Cavell, Kalliopi Nikolopoulou argues that continental philosophy often contains an ‘explicit – and more often, implicit – denial of tragedy as a viable mode of being in and understanding our world’.\(^8\) The conventional assumption in continental philosophy, for Nikolopoulou, in the belief that culture goes all the way down, which represses the antinomy of nature and culture that is basic to tragedy. By stripping humans of any remnants of a human nature that might provide a form of subjectivity with freedom as a definitive faculty, the continental tradition, Nikolopoulou argues, occludes the tragic experience wherein their feeling of moral freedom collides with the arbitrary formations of culture, thus tipping the scale to the opposite extreme of the modern philosophers they aim to correct. While the methods of analytic and continental philosophy are divergent, Cavell and Nikolopoulou suggest that neither philosophical tradition is large enough to encompass the wider questions that philosophy has traditionally posed concerning life, death, the good, friendship, creativity and wonder. Tragedy, in their view, cleaves open the limited view of established patterns of thinking to these deeper questions that underpin human life.

However, while the contemporary interest in tragedy finds the motif of tragedy as a source by which to identify the limitations of recent trends in philosophy, it refrains from conceptualising certain parts of contemporary thinking as a present intellectual tragedy. Given our study of key voices in the problematic of tragedy, this is surprising to note. For Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Castoriadis, it was by framing the content of their own times in terms of intellectual tragedy that tragedy as a philosophical problematic has any power. The ongoing dialogue in philosophy regarding the significance of tragedy does not simply suggest that the Greek tragedies provides some kind of essential content that can enlarge our own view, but that philosophy, the task we are now undertaking, is prone to

\(^7\) Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, p. 74
intellectual tragedy, meaning that we must maintain constant awareness of the limits of thought. For Kant, the failure of traditional philosophy to encompass empirical science was nothing other than an intellectual tragedy; for Hegel, Kant’s attempt to unite the traditional and emerging views of nature rendered his work an intellectual tragedy; for Nietzsche and Heidegger, the technalised thinking of their own times prevented tragedy from coming into view; and for Castoriadis, Marxism, structuralism and phenomenology all express an intellectual tragedy, for they render historical creativity as a form of production that expresses determinant form. Understanding the problematic of tragedy in terms of an enlarged way of thinking expresses a search for a language with which to speak of contemporary forms of tragedy, opening inherited patterns of thought to new ways of thinking by which to navigate this tragedy.

This search for a new language is implicit in Nikolopoulou’s diagnosis of the inability of continental philosophy to see the tragic collision of freedom and culture. However, while Nikolopoulou argues that continental philosophy is unable to see the tragic collision, she refrains from presenting this overemphasis on the cultural dimensions of human being as a contemporary form of intellectual tragedy. Instead, she attempts to apply lessons found in ancient tragedies to contemporary problems. This approach not only undermines the specificity of each historical epoch, but also collapses what could be seen as a contemporary form of tragedy into the ancient. Nussbaum comes closer to diagnosing contemporary forms of tragedy than Nikolopoulou, yet she refrains from making this framing explicit. She argues that contemporary philosophy is unable to grapple with the themes presented in the tragedies, meaning that we must return to the tragedies in order to reinvigorate philosophy’s attention to such themes. This observation is made possible by her engagement with ancient tragedy, and yet it holds back from reframing the contemporary failure of philosophy as a productive locale of transformation, and, instead, it simply points to a solution. Nussbaum does show us how tragedy opens us to new possibilities by referring to a mode of thinking that is foreign to our current world. However, she does not consider tragedy as a way of forming a present crisis so as to open it new and hitherto unimagined possibilities.

If we think of tragedy as a thing of the past, then we limit ourselves to past forms of tragedy. Alternatively, if we think of tragedy as an ongoing problematic capable of confronting the failure of contemporary content, then the task of uncovering this tragedy becomes one of an enlarged way of thinking: a way of thinking that is able to present the blindness of the established way of thinking in a work that expresses this tragedy to a contemporary audience for whom the established way of thinking has immediate significance.
The intention of such a task would be to transform an established way of thinking by giving those who hold it a reflective self-understanding, thereby gaining an enlarged view that is capable of seeing the elements of life to which they were blinded. The work of such philosophy is not to answer the problems of a given time, but to transform the way of thinking of those who populate it.

Cavell stands as an exception to this hesitation to identify a contemporary form of tragedy. As we noted in the Introduction, Cavell argues that ‘[t]here is such thing as intellectual tragedy. It is not a matter of saying something false’, he states, but the ‘inability to acknowledge, I mean accept, the human conditions of knowing’. Cavell does not hesitate from speaking of contemporary tragedy, for in his view the renewed interest in tragedy is nothing other than the acknowledgment of the inability of our inherited way of thinking to accept the human conditions of knowing, meaning that focusing on ancient Greece is merely a foil for acknowledging the tragedy of our own thinking. This does not mean that we are experiencing the same tragedy as the Greeks. Indeed, no one has, and no one will. Rather, Cavell suggests that ‘[t]ragedy, could it now be written, would not show us that we are helpless – it never did, and we are not’. What tragedy would show us – what tragedies always did show us – is ‘why we (as audience) are helpless’. The reason why we are helpless, as the tragedians saw it, is that ‘pain and death were in our presence when we were not in theirs’. The problem for us, however, is that tragedy can no longer have such an effect on us due to the fact that ‘we absent ourselves from’ pain and death. While the purpose of tragedy thus remains unchanged: ‘to make us practical, capable of acting’, Cavell argues that this does not mean that we require a rebirth of tragedy, but a new grasp of tragedy in our own times. While tragedy used to make us capable of acting ‘by showing us the natural limitations of action’, now its task must be different. Instead of purging us of pity and fear, the work of tragedy is ‘to make us capable of feeling them again’.

Cavell’s understanding of contemporary tragedy can be understood in terms of the following paradox: that we can only move beyond helplessness when we recognise that we are, in contemporary society, helpless. The task of philosophy that takes tragedy seriously, then, is to confront contemporary thinking with our helplessness, thereby opening new possibilities of helping ourselves that were hitherto unimagined. The content of such a task

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10 Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say*, p. 346.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid., p. 347.
14 Ibid.
could be multiple: from international relations, foreign aid, human rights, the arts, local governance and economics. Yet the form would remain the same: to present the inability of any domain to alleviate the problems of the human condition; to awaken us to our limits. By enlarging our awareness in such a way that reveals the complexity of reality, tragedy does not disempower the agent, but moves her towards accepting her limitations. It is only then, argues Cavell, that we can become truly capable of acting.\footnote{Kierkegaard made a similar argument in response to Hegel’s death of art thesis, attempting to reenergise the presence of tragedy in modern philosophy. For Kierkegaard, tragedy is just as pertinent in modernity as ancient times, ‘just as weeping is still natural to all men alike’. While the content of tragedy shifts to meet the demands of new generations, the form of tragedy retains the ability to confront our self-understandings with the truth that our choices are both active and passive: ‘If the individual is entirely without guilt, then is the tragic interest nullified, for the tragic collision is thereby enervated; if, on the other hand, he is absolutely guilty, then he can no longer interest us tragically’. The greatest inhibition a society can make to its capacity for autonomy, Kierkegaard argues, is to obscure either side of this paradox and thus heal the tension. What other language than this could prove capable of navigating the problem of human agency in the contemporary world, where our choices for consumption and lifestyle are embroiled in economic systems to which we are oblivious, but which we know participate in the most grievous harm to other humans and their environment? Our ability to perceive tragedy for Kierkegaard, is the ‘aesthetic sense with regard to human life’; it is what ‘the divine love and mercy are’, it is ‘like a mother’s love’. In other words, tragedy is like an immunisation that contains a disturbing shot of life. One cannot be truly be happy, Kierkegaard concludes, until one can see tragedy. Søren Kierkegaard, \textit{Ether/Or}, trans. F. Swenson & L. Swenson, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946, p. 113-118.}

8.2 Recognising ethical complexity

Building from philosophy’s ongoing concern with the problematic of tragedy, one of the driving motivations behind the contemporary turn to tragedy is the search for a conception of ethics that is large enough to acknowledge the complexity of a world in which our awareness of conflicting ethical claims exceeds our ability to act. In the contemporary turn, however, our awareness of ethical demands and our ability to act are even greater than they were for Kant, Hegel, or Nietzsche. Unlike these thinkers, the need to develop an enlarged awareness of ethical complexity does not have the urgency it had in times past, for ethical complexity is part of the social fabric of contemporary life. The contemporary turn to tragedy, in this context, is not simply in search for a way of alerting us to pressing ethical demands – indeed, we are more aware of them than ever – but for a way of showing that our so-called solutions are often part of the mechanisms that exacerbate the problem. As we found in Heidegger’s work, the problematic of tragedy confronts us with the fact that ethical problems are not the kind of problems that require tecnologised solutions. To approach ethical problems in search for solutions exhibits a tecnalised mode of thinking, for it presumes that all the pieces necessary to solve the problem are ready to hand. Technalised thinking fails to

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recognise that the way of thinking it employs and the systems in which it is embedded are an expression of the problem it aims to ameliorate. The renewed interest in tragedy builds from Heidegger’s analysis, searching for a language that is capable of acknowledging the complexity of these problems.

One such attempt is put forward by Bernard Williams in *Shame and Necessity*, yet, as we find on close analysis, his commitment to the Nietzschean view ultimately obscures the force of his critique of moral philosophy. For Williams, philosophy is typically oriented toward the project of rendering life morally intelligible by giving us good news about our moral condition. This project, Williams argues, begins with Plato and Aristotle’s attempts to confront the tragedians in order to make ‘our ethical relations to the world fully intelligible’. However, our contemporary ethical condition, Williams argues, ‘lies not only beyond Christianity, but beyond its Kantian and its Hegelian legacies’. Thus we have ‘an ambivalent sense of what human beings have achieved, and have hopes for how they might live’. In order to find a grammar by which to express this condition, Williams turns to Greek tragedy, informing us that the ‘stark fiction’ of the tragedies confronts us with ‘the horrors’ of life in such a way that refutes the good news offered by the philosophers.

However, while Williams highlights the ability of the Greeks to explore matters of ethical complexity in a way that is beyond the language of good and evil, his Nietzschean account of the failure of philosophy does not ultimately serve his task of providing an alternative. By turning directly to the ancient tragedies for resources with which to confront the mythologies of Kant and Hegel, Williams caricatures the philosophical tradition as the Platonic, anti-tragic legacy of philosophy that aims to banish contingency for a moral theory that would render life intelligible and history as an ever developing trajectory toward the good. By doing so, Williams not only overlooks Kant and Hegel’s reflections on moral philosophy in light of natural contingency (to which he is most certainly indebted), he also fails to see that tragedy features as a search for integration, rendering life as something that can be fought for and valued. Williams’ real opponent seems to be a neo-Platonic version of Christianity in which suffering, contingency and decay are swept up into a narrative that would see all things moving toward a happy end. The alternative to this view, for Williams, is the presentation of a different ‘news’ to the philosophical tradition: that the suffering we witness as the result of unintelligent necessity outside our control. While he frames this as a

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17 ibid.
18 ibid., p. 152.
kind of ‘bad news’ that confronts the ‘good news’ of the philosophical tradition, it is, if anything, the announcement of good news. As Nussbaum argues, our contemporary world in which there is ‘a good assumption that most of the starvation and much of the other misery we witness is the result of culpable negligence by the powerful, metaphysical resignation would again be relatively good news, letting the powerful off the hook’.

For Nussbaum, the tragedies call us to ‘throw off our laziness and selfish ambition and obtuseness and ask ourselves how the harms we witness might have been prevented’. Contrary to Williams, it is not philosophy as such that is the problem, but a mode of philosophy incapable of recognising the tragedy of which it is a part.

In The Tragic Vision of Politics, Richard Lebow provides an alternative to Williams’ good-bad dualism by searching for a new, political language modelled on the tragedies that is not only capable of acknowledging ethical complexity, but of recognising responsibility. In similar terms to Heidegger, Lebow identifies the capacity of tragedy to reframe our use of language. Contemporary discourse in politics and international policy, he argues, employs language as a tool for instrumental ends, giving no concern to the original and contingent meanings to which those words first brought complex realities and questions into being. Such a language occludes the possibility of accepting responsibility for any negative consequences that come from its application of technique, becoming ‘so impoverished that it almost precludes asking, let alone answering, some of the most important questions about our own interests, the nature of influence and the dangers and opportunities that hegemonic power confronts’. Underlying the poverty of contemporary political discourse, for Lebow, is its inability to recognise the differential nature of action; the fact that even the best intentions can yield terrible and unforeseen results. Responding to this poverty, Peter Euben argues that

20 ibid.
21 Lebow’s work in political theory has sparked a new trend of exploring international relations with the aid of tragedy. This is evident in the recent collection of essays entitled Tragedy and International Relations (2012). Editors Toni Erskine and Lebow focus on two insights of tragedy for contemporary international relations: ‘its enduring capacity to warn us of the dangers of power and success and its problematization of all conceptions of justice’. The first has to do with the concept of hubris and its consequences: ‘The more powerful and successful an actor becomes, the greater the temptation to overreach in the unreasonable expectation that it is possible to predict, influence, or control the actions of others and by doing so gain more honour, wealth, or power’. Thus hubris is a kind of ‘category error’ occurring when ‘powerful people make the mistake of comparing themselves to the gods, who have the ability to foresee and control the future’. The second is concerned with our understanding of justice. Tragedies ‘present the audience with contrasting and equally valid conceptions of justice’, demonstrating that ‘our conceptions of justice are parochial, not universal, and are readily undercut by too unwavering a commitment to them’. Toni Erskine & Richard Lebow (eds), Tragedy and International Relations, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p. 9.
‘Greek tragedy might … help us determine who we are and what we are doing to ourselves and others, while making it clear that such questions are never fully answered or finally resolved’. For Euben, modernity must find discursive practices like that we find expressed in tragedy if it is to acknowledge its regressive moment, a language capable of opening complex questions as much as proposing answers. Such a discourse would be premised on the ‘belief that order was fragile, that human efforts to control, or even, reshape, their physical and social environments were far more uncertain in their consequences than most leaders and intellectuals recognised, and that hubris – in the form of an exaggerated sense of authority and competence – only made matters worse’. 

By arguing that philosophy must learn to speak the language of tragedy, Lebow and Euben problematise the attempts made by states and global institutions to determine social unity under universal banners such as democracy and human rights. The problem with contemporary political discourse, in this view, is that its desire to maintain authority and correctness entails that it views the tension between the demands of ethics and the practical task of politics as a threatening contradiction. Thus political leaders find it necessary to couch their language in self-justifying narratives that are incapable of recognising errors, misjudgments and the complexity of the decisions at hand. Such language turns on a technalised discourse that actively aims to occlude ambiguity and contingency, precluding the capacity of language to explore the dimensions of human error that cannot be understood in a technalised paradigm. It has no way of articulating the fact that good intentions do not necessarily lead to good outcomes, for it retains a technalised mode of conceptualising problems. 

Yet as we found in the case of Nussbaum, Eagleton and Schmidt, Lebow and Euben also hold back from naming the contemporary ethical discourse as, following Cavell, an intellectual tragedy. For Lebow, it is not the failure of contemporary discourse – a tragedy of our own time – but tragedy in the form of Greek drama that ‘confronts us with our failures and limits, and the disastrous consequence of trying to exceed them’. Building from Euben, Adrian Poole argues that it is not the critique of contemporary political discourse, but ancient

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24 Euben, *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory*, p. x.

25 Ibid.
Greek tragedy that ‘diversifies man’s universe, severing the certainties that seem to bind
human beings together, to make men and women at one with each other, with themselves,
with their world’. For Jonathan Badger, it is not the contemporary turn to the problematic of
tragedy, but Greek tragedy that ‘offers a vision of how communities might cope with the
conflicting elements of human nature and avoid the calamity that comes from thoroughly
indulging one side or the other’. These observations may well be true, identifying many key
lessons that can be learned from the tragedies. However, focusing exclusively on what can be
learned from ancient Greek tragedy undermines the more basic intuition that they are aimed to
establish; that mainstream philosophy and political discourse is subject to intellectual
tragedy. By appealing to the ancient sources rather than naming contemporary tragedy, the
lessons learned from tragedy become simply more arrows in one’s critical quiver, while the
transformation that comes from recognising the intellectual tragedy of one’s own form of life
remains unrealised. Recognising the intellectual tragedy of contemporary political discourse –
its refusal to allow the antinomy between the demands of ethics and the practical concerns of
politics to appear as a basic tension of all institutions – requires new forms of tragedy capable
of presenting the content of the prevailing paradigm of thinking in such a way that reveals its
blindness, allowing its spectators to gain an enlarged awareness of ethical complexity.

Euben comes closer to this task than Lebow and Badger, arguing that any philosophy
of tragedy must recognise the ‘tragedy of tragedy’. In contemporary policy, Euben argues, a
dynamic is occurring that could blow out into a contemporary tragedy: ‘single-minded
devotion to security and order is likely to increase the intensity of the disorder it will
eventually bring about, whether it is the return of the repressed’. To elucidate this point,
Euben turns to the scene in Euripides’ Bacchae wherein the King’s attempts to reign in the
god and his intoxicated worshippers not only fails but exacerbates the situation, escalating the
original problem to its extreme. Bacchae calls for a complex self-awareness, for it recognises

27 Jonathan Badger, Sophocles and the Politics of Tragedy: Cities and Transcendence, Routledge: New York,
28 Similarly, Nikolopoulou argues that the German idealist tradition occludes the ‘core principles of the tragic
world’ by understanding tragedy in terms of the philosophy of tragedy. Thus they miss ‘the political force with
which tragedy once addressed the actual nature of conflict and the importance of human responsibility’. While
Nikolopoulou makes a legitimate attack on some of the central themes advanced by the German idealists, she
strips them from their historical experience of rupture and dislodges their thought from the political order to a
theoretical realm of philosophical speculation. Thus she fails to see that the turn to tragedy in German
philosophy, while certainly problematic, contains resources with which to transform the way of doing
29 Peter Euben, ‘The Tragedy of Tragedy’, in Toni Erskine & Richard Lebow (eds.), Tragedy and International
30 ibid., p. 87.
the dangers of *hubris* and yet suggests that enforcement of limits cannot stem the tide of human excess. Euben does not simply appeal to *Bacchae* as a means to provide an alternative to contemporary thought, but allows Euripides’ narrative to inform his critique of the present, enlarging his own work in order to see a similar dynamic in the patterns of thought operative in contemporary life. Yet what Euben does not note is that the task of presenting new forms of tragedy is not simply to anticipate the ‘return of the repressed’ in the forms of ethical life, but to present this tragedy before it leads to self-destruction. Tragedy is not the collision of ethical powers in lived experience, independent of human presentation, but a way of framing contradictory ethical powers in such a way that alters our orientation to them.

If philosophy is to present the tragedy of contemporary forms of technalised thinking, it must be characterised by a language that is able to name the darkness created by our own hands and not be claimed by it. It must provide a discourse in which we are able to take responsibility for the consequences that come from a fate unfolding in our own action, recognising that the choices that produced disastrous results were entirely our own. It must experiment with new ways of articulating the complexity of contemporary ethics, enabling us to acknowledge that the problems we face are both unsolvable and yet require our efforts to ameliorate them. It must search for ways to express the possibility of freedom from within the natural and cultural orders that bind us. Tensions such as these, as Richard Eldridge aptly states, provide the ‘enduring material for human tragedy’, meaning that tragedy only becomes a possibility when we can grasp the full dimensions of experience. Without such a language, the most inspiring visions of the future and the most illustrious promises of technology become escapist mythologies, ultimately drawing our attention away from the systems in which we are embedded. An enlarged way of thinking, on the other hand, begins when we acknowledge intellectual tragedy and embarks on a way of proceeding that is not in search of a solution, but opens new projects in the effort to engage with the extremities of collective life.

8.3 A new understanding of universality

While the renewed interest in the problematic of tragedy in contemporary philosophy finds in tragedy a powerful tool with which to question current forms of philosophy and political discourse, it also aims to go beyond the recognition of limits in search for a

productive insight: a new understanding of universality. In this search, tragedy is seen to express a way of thinking about universality that is neither metaphysically grounded nor contingent to a specific cultural community, but a principle akin to Kant’s aesthetic *a priori* that is found in the experience of tragedy.

This is best seen in Bonnie Honig’s *Antigone, Interrupted*, which searches for a new kind of humanism in the collapse of the humanisms of the twentieth century. Honig explores Sophocles’ *Antigone* as a lamentation of ‘sovereignty’s excesses and the disappointments of rationalism’, one that resonates with us today. The power of her reading of *Antigone* is that it does not turn to the original text in order to locate the form of tragedy, but identifies a shared cry that is uttered in both Antigone’s voice *and* in the contemporary world. This cry, for Honig, expresses ‘a new universalism that might take the place of these discredited contenders: whatever our differences, we are all mortal and we all lament our finitude, since the time of Antigone’. Honig explores modern thought in terms of intellectual tragedy, arguing that in the failure of modern projects of universalism we experience a deeper feeling of the whole that heralds a new form of universalism based on our capacity to suffer, to experience loss and to grieve. Echoing Rita Felski’s statement that the ‘growing self-doubt of philosophy and the questioning of reason, analytical method, and conceptual knowledge’ are solicitations to tragedy, Honig argues that contemporary philosophy is the task of thinking from within this failure. Philosophy’s growing self-doubt, for Honig, contains the possibility for a new humanity united around our shared failure and finitude, a unity that cannot be grounded on the capacities of the subject but must be felt in the process of lamentation and grief. Our recognition of the tragedy of philosophy is itself a cry for a new universal.

Honig’s attempt to locate the resources to build a new kind of universalism in the failure of modern projects of self-fashioning returns us to Kant’s original task in *CJ* to unite reason and feeling. Kant’s enlarged procedure for philosophical thinking identified a rational principle in the feeling experienced in the failure of philosophy; not a principle of theoretical reason, but a principle that is found in the search for a procedure of philosophy capable of engaging with the contingency of the aesthetic sphere. The acknowledgment of the failure of philosophy, Kant suggests, does not provide a new universal, but leads us to search for a principle that might regulate the exercise of judgment, allowing it to authentically engage in the aesthetic sphere according to the ground of mutual communicability. A community that

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33 Ibid.
aspires to judge in such a way not only recognises that there is no knowledge of political and aesthetic matters. It also expects the same practice of universal thinking in each judger. Judgments of beauty, of morality and of political matters become invitations to the universal exercise of judgment whereby we attempt to set ourselves ‘apart from the subjective private conditions of the judgment, within which so many others are as if bracketed, and reflect [on our own judgment] from a universal standpoint’ (CJ 5:295). The task of philosophy that acknowledges the failure of technalised thinking, for Kant, is precisely to outline such a procedure.

The contemporary search for a new understanding of moral universality is premised on the intuition that tragedy restores a feeling of the whole, a feeling that does not give any positive content or ‘good news’, but one that can empower moral activity in a political sphere where there is no guarantee that the outcome of reasoned judgments will yield good results. If it is true that contemporary philosophy is becoming aware of the tragedy of our own times, then this search is urgent. Enlarging our view to become aware of tragedy throws us onto our creative resources, opening the future as an indeterminate reality. Moreover, it reveals that such a future cannot be determined by philosophically defined ends, but that philosophy can assist by outlining a procedure though which the aesthetic sphere might become the site of the reconciliation of our rational and natural selves in creative works and actions that anticipate a future of enlarged thinking, thus empowering each citizen to see more than there is to be seen in a given social order, to see more than there is in their fellow citizen, and to see more than there is in themselves. The task of philosophy that takes the problematic of tragedy seriously is to find a way of thinking that neither aspires toward exhaustive understanding nor collapses into chaos, but authentically engages with the singularity of what appears in order to envisage the given in terms of an unrealised project of which we are a part.

8.4 Concluding remarks

The call for an enlarged imagination, for a way of thinking capable or recognising ethical complexity, and for a new understanding of universality in contemporary philosophy’s turn to tragedy extends the ongoing problematic of tragedy into uncharted territory. This continuity suggests that the renewed interest in tragedy is not simply a new instalment in the history of ideas but a creative engagement with a present crisis. The examination of philosophy’s ongoing dialogue in this thesis has tried to show that the philosophical
problematic of tragedy is best understood as a way of framing the failure of philosophy to stabilise the aesthetic sphere in determinant form in such a way that transforms our relation to the aesthetic sphere, cleaving open the possibility of new form. It is in this regard that tragedy has much to contribute toward the demands of philosophical thinking today; not because it contains a set of lessons for us to learn, but because the form of tragedy is transformative, interrupting philosophy’s search for timeless knowledge and opening it the task of outlining a way of thinking that authentically engages with the fluidity of life.

Establishing the capacity of tragedy to transform our way of thinking reveals that neither the Greek tragedians nor the post-Kantian Idealists have a monopoly on the problematic of tragedy. To suggest that the tragedians had a unified view of tragedy fails to note the rapid historical creativity that underpinned the institution of tragic art. To suggest that in Kant’s time the antinomy between nature and human action was felt for the first time fails to recognise that it was precisely this problematic that troubled both Newton and Leibniz one hundred years earlier. What is unique to both the tragedians and to Kant’s philosophy is that they refrained from sealing individual agency and the law of the gods in two separate domains, and attempted to express the viability of agency in the natural sphere that is permeated by forces outside the agent’s control. Throughout this thesis we have noted the cogency of CJ in Kant’s presentation of the antinomy between nature and freedom as arising from overstepping our limitations: from techinalising the maxims of nature and morality as machine and unconstrained activity. If we recognise that the antinomy is between our concept of nature and our experience of moral freedom – not nature itself and freedom as an abstract ideal – then the possibility of reconciling the antinomy does not belong to the philosophic but to the aesthetic; to the creation of new form in all domains of society through practical experimentation, dialogue, philosophy, the arts and the sciences. It is only when the task of philosophy is diverted from establishing timeless truth to making sense in common that the antinomy can be resolved in a community’s praxis.

Intellectual tragedy akin to Kant’s own time is not alien to recent intellectual trends that posit nature as subject to basic laws that unfold irrespective of our feeling of moral freedom. Indeed, the constant resurgence of techinalised forms of thinking return us to the expediency of Kant’s philosophy. One example that expresses a constellation of techinalised thinking in the twentieth century is the development of gene theory. In the discovery of DNA, scientists come to understand the direct transcription from a strand of RNA to a corresponding DNA in a process that seemed to operate oblivious to environmental factors, revealing a law-governed structure at the basis of all human development. From the view of gene theory, our
DNA is a kind of fate that determines human behaviour all the way down. In the early 1980s, however, a radical biological movement called epigenetics challenged this view, and in recent years this contemporary form of epigenesis has become the primary view in genetic theory. The theory of epigenetics entails that genes are merely one aspect of a cast of biochemical factors in a cell, meaning that they are susceptible to all that goes on in the cell’s formation. The decisions as to which proteins will engage in synthesis are not predetermined by a prewritten ‘script’ encoded in a single strand of DNA, but are a function of the cell as a whole. This entails that cells are self-organising, living beings that dynamically respond to their environment. Being able to turn on and off gene synthesis in given contexts, cells are self-regulating and create their own form: they are both organised by their environment, by nature, and by their own inner principle, having the ability to communicate this development to the following generations.

The cogency of epigenetics for contemporary thought is that it effaces the line between biological and social inheritance, entailing two significant implications. The first is that our inheritance extends beyond merely physical traits to social, cultural and psychological dimensions. The second is that we are far more malleable than we might have thought. The acknowledgement of the failure of gene theory and the search for a new procedure for scientific thinking might, if we recognise its significance, plunge us again into the space of tragedy, where we are both inescapably oriented to the world through what we have inherited and yet, due to the contingency of the natural strata and our own creativity as living beings, our inheritance is not determined but is subject to alteration. Such a universe is, to use Kant’s terms, lawlessly lawful. To frame the eclipse of gene theory by epigenesis in terms of intellectual tragedy could resurface a critical reconsideration of the limits of human reason and a new way of thinking in which natural determination and disruptive creativity might coalesce.

However, failing to understand gene theory in terms of intellectual tragedy has left space for new forms of biologism to arise, one of which we find in neuroscience. In the past decade, new mapping technologies have become able to observe our mental lives in the activity of our neurons, re-birthing the question of rational deliberation given the mechanicity of nature. Because our thoughts and actions are the products of our brains, and because our

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brains are determined by the physical state of the world, there appears to be no room for choice, meaning that our moral feeling is epiphenomenal. What we find in this trend of thought, as was the case in the discovery of DNA, is the attempt to render a determinate basis of life that might prove capable of delivering the good news that we are not ultimately responsible for the work of our own hands. Presenting the antinomy between nature and freedom in neuroscience, however, might yield new forms of tragedy that open a much needed conversation about moral culpability, problematising the way we administer praise and blame according to assumptions of equal opportunity and even conditions. From the view of neuroscience, much of our conscious experience is subject to neural pathways that are predetermined by our inherited constitution, our nutritional history, the way we have experienced nurture and countless other factors. Yet to say that these determining factors destroy the possibility of freedom establishes a new dualism between physical causation and ideal freedom. What neuroscience ultimately reveals is the same recognition of Kant’s *CJ* that human dependency is prior to human freedom, and must provide the ground for it. Instead of considering the implications of this fact, contemporary neuroscience reinforces established systems of power that are reproduced in the neural framework of the brain. What might have opened the possibility of productive ethical conversations at the nexus of the physical and the psychological instead becomes a new form of heteronomy.

The penchant of contemporary society to absorb the biologism of popular science is just one aspect of recent thought that calls for new forms of tragedy capable of turning these sites of technalised thinking into spaces in which new, creative endeavours become possible. The conversation begun by Euben and Lebow in the political sciences is another. When understood in light of Kant’s enlarged thinking, the problematic of tragedy allows us to frame linguistic patterns in new ways, cleaving open determinate closures in order to map new conceptual spaces that reorient our thinking. The question that the problematic of tragedy poses to us is how the recognition of human fragility might open a space that is based on the mutual recognition of fallibility rather than on fantasies of self-fashioning and endless pliability. The space of tragedy invites us to problematise the fate that unfolds in our own lives, accepting our limits in such a way that opens the future to new possibilities. Moreover,

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38 While Kant’s emphasis on the dependency of freedom comes increasingly apparent in *CJ* and his post-critical work, he holds onto the ineliminable conviction that every ‘now’ is the locus of freedom: ‘Every evil action must be considered, whenever we seek its rational origin, as if the human being had fallen into it directly from the state of innocence. For whatever his previous behaviour may have been, whatever the natural causes influencing him, whether they are inside or outside them, his action is yet free and not determined through any of these causes; hence the action can and must always be judged as an *original* exercise of his power of choice’. Kant, *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, pp. 62-3.
it empowers us to invite others to take responsibility for the fate that is shared amongst a community, not administering praise and blame according to technalised criteria, but accepting the singular character of every human life and the part of the shared social fabric that he or she inhabits.

After two and a half thousand years since the original staging of the tragedies, we are still confronted with our fundamental inability to attune ourselves to our condition. By recognising the failure of philosophy to legislate the fluidity of natural and collective life, Kant’s *CJ* stands as an exemplary attempt to transform the failure of philosophy into a way of thinking that is attuned to the fallibility of human knowledge. In Kant’s time, the nature and limits of human knowledge were pushed to their limit, turning him to search for a principled way of thinking about the autonomy of the aesthetic sphere: our aspiration for mutual communicability. His proposal of an enlarged way of thinking reveals the paradox of the problematic of tragedy: that the acknowledgment of the tragedy of philosophy is the very means by which one finds a new way of philosophy.
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