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## The Place of Tragedy within Christianity

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The problem of the relation between Christianity and Tragedy is not new.<sup>1</sup> One way to approach it is to ask whether a Christian tragedy might be possible. The negative answer appears to be troubling, at least to those who would like to take both Christianity and Tragedy seriously, because they imply fundamental and mutually irreducible claims about the world and our place in it. Richard Sewall in his influential study of tragedy frames the tension in the idea of a Christian tragedy as a contradiction in terms: ‘In point of doctrine, Christianity reverses the tragic view and makes

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1 I will distinguish between ‘tragedy’ in its many standard uses which range from the colloquial to the literary, and ‘Tragedy’, which I take to be a certain worldview, or an understanding of the human condition sometimes expressed through tragic art, and which has been part of many philosophical and theological doctrines. The latter sense will be indicated with the capitalized form. The distinction is elaborated in the course of the argument; I will not however be focusing on either the colloquial or literary senses of the tragic with the exception of a few examples where it will be useful for bringing out a particular aspect of the world view I denote with the capitalized Tragedy. Likewise, and quite obviously, I do not pretend to represent in its contrast with Tragedy all aspects, strands, or possible interpretations of Christianity and its doctrines. Rather what I am hoping for, as the title suggests, is to enquire whether there might be a place for Tragedy amongst them. This I hope is made clear in what follows.

tragedy impossible'.<sup>2</sup> To assume one standpoint is, in other words, to have already rejected the other. Consequently, attempts to find common ground between the two risk misrepresenting one view in order to square it with the other, and in effect sidestepping the problem being addressed.<sup>3</sup> In what follows I will argue for a perspective which hopes to avoid this difficulty, and suggest that there might indeed be a place for Tragedy within Christianity, though only one which does not trivialize the tension between them.

It should be noted at the outset that there is an important asymmetry between Christianity and Tragedy which presents difficulties in their comparison: at the centre of Christianity is a body of doctrine, derived from sacred texts and traditions, and with systematic theology providing a rational and coherent account of the relation of this doctrine to Christian belief and practice. Tragedy, conversely, is not something which is, or could be, systematized in a similar fashion. Nonetheless, it is possible to speak of a worldview proper to it. I will therefore draw a distinction between 'tragedy', in its various uses, and 'Tragedy', which I shall use to denote the worldview (contained and expressed by tragedies) and which I focus on and contrast with the Christian worldview

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2 Richard Sewell, *The Vision of Tragedy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 50. Sewell uses the term 'Christian tragedy' 'as a useful way of referring to tragedy written in the Christian era which bears the mark of Christian thought and feeling'. He does however very clearly say that these works fall short 'of the doctrines of the Church' and that to be tragedy they always must. Sewell argues this is because tragedy taken as a world view rather than merely a form of dramatic art is the metaphysical opposite of Christianity. I shall argue that metaphysical opposites they may be, Tragedy and Christianity can nonetheless be usefully understood as ways of representing contrasting aspects of human experience, which as a whole does not submit to the degree of uniformity expected of metaphysical doctrines.

3 I comment on this more extensively elsewhere. As examples I point to Kierkegaard who has arguably produced the most consistent and convincing picture of 'Tragic Christianity'; however, at the cost of misrepresenting the latter, and as an instance of an argument for a 'Christian Tragedy' I discuss Sr. Miriam Joseph Rauh's interpretation of *Hamlet*, which conversely diffuses all that is Tragic in the play.

(contained and expressed by its doctrines). Thus the specific question, or the particular version of the problem of the relation of Christianity and Tragedy I will examine here, is to what extent the worldviews represented by them can be understood as compatible with each other.

The natural point of departure however is the tension, or the outright irreconcilability, usually ascribed to the idea of a Christian tragedy. Karl Jaspers famously asserted that ‘no genuinely Christian tragedy can exist’, and likewise that ‘what is essential to the Christian cannot even emerge in tragedy’.<sup>4</sup> Jaspers thus represents the strongest position rejecting the possibility of Christian Tragedy: Tragedy as a form of art is unable to express the Christian vision without ceasing to be Tragic. Likewise, Christianity, in so far as it proclaims the overcoming of Tragedy, is utterly unreceptive to the dramatic art expressing it. I believe Jaspers to be correct in so far as he relies on formalized accounts of Christianity and Tragedy.

But where exactly is the contradiction? Thinking of Tragedy and Christianity in terms of doctrines, in one of the most well-known discussions of the problem Jaspers conceives of the source of their irreconcilability as lying at the level of the presupposed conditions for the very possibility of knowledge. Tragedy, Jaspers writes, ‘reveals itself in man’s unconditional will to truth [...] as the ultimate disharmony of existence’.<sup>5</sup> For the Christian the ‘will to truth’ is completed by the act of faith, which reveals the world as ordered according to God’s grace. Therefore Jaspers argues that ‘the believing Christian no longer recognizes tragedy as genuine’, and so consequently, and rather bluntly, that ‘a Christian is bound to

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4 Karl Jaspers, *Tragedy is not Enough* tr. Harald A.T. Reiche, Harry T. Moore, and Karl W. Deutsch (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1952), 38-9.

5 *Ibid.*, 42.

misunderstand Shakespeare since the openly religious – and only that – escapes Shakespeare'.<sup>6</sup>

This last claim is an especially controversial one: not only has Shakespeare been a source of inspiration both to Christian and non-Christian currents within European culture, but he himself also drew inspiration both from tragic poetry and Christian doctrine. The controversy which Jaspers points to however has a much deeper meaning than that of staking a claim to cultural heritage: if we take seriously the Tragic view of the human predicament, then tragedy as a literary form can be understood as one of its expressions. The question is not whether tragic *plays* can be based on Christian themes: some of Shakespeare's arguably are. Rather, it is whether the truth of Tragedy can be accepted and integrated into a Christian worldview. It is in this metaphysically fundamental sense that a work of Tragedy will either be intelligible or not to believing Christians.<sup>7</sup>

Yet the reference to Shakespeare raises another issue. The Christian world has not only proved hospitable to tragic drama, but it has also witnessed its flourishing to a degree unparalleled elsewhere since antiquity. George Steiner goes as far as to say that it is only in the Christian world that tragedy as the representation of personal suffering and heroism continues as an art form.<sup>8</sup> If Christianity and

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6 *Ibid.*, 82, 39.

7 The sense in which understanding is used here is not the everyday sense in which we could say that we understand P but do not believe P (as in 'I understand your argument, but I don't believe what you infer to be the case'). Here I use 'understand' to mean something close to 'to accept the truth of'. This meaning should be familiar enough from the sense in which religious claims can be said to require understanding: we have not really understood, for instance, the meaning of the incarnation if we do not also accept its truth. In this sense, as I think it is plain, the non-believer not only does *not believe* the incarnation, but does not *understand* it also. In this sense understanding implies an experience of the world transformed by belief.

8 In a widely quoted passage Steiner claims that 'oriental art knows violence, grief, and the stroke of natural or contrived disaster; the Japanese theatre is full of ferocity and ceremonial death. But that representation of personal suffering and heroism

Tragedy are in such glaring contrast, it is surprising that an art form which expresses the latter should continue at all, let alone so fruitfully, in a culture dominated by the former. If the correlation is non-accidental (and suggesting it is would give us an implausibly 'Humean' vision of culture), the relationship between Christianity and Tragedy emerges as a deeply complex one, implying unassuageable tension, despite a deep-seated connection.

I shall argue that each worldview is in a certain way at least *open* to the other, insomuch as this openness is rooted in the unity of human experience encompassing the metaphysical opposites that these worldviews emphasize. Tragedy is witness to man's 'ontological homelessness'<sup>9</sup>, in a world where there is no underlying meaning or order to discover, and no purpose to human fate; Christianity, by contrast, acknowledges a transcendent divine order, of which we are assured by Revelation and find ourselves part of by grace. I believe these visions convey different aspects of human experience, the truth of which might not be fully reducible to either. Despite the alleged incompatibility of Christianity and Tragedy, I will suggest that human experience is simultaneously open to those aspects of both which constitute the apparent contradiction.

### Senses of the tragic

Commonly, 'tragedy' and 'tragic' are used in two distinct, but related, provinces: the colloquial and the literary. The former attaches the term to events from the trivial to the catastrophic, in

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which we call tragic drama is distinctive of the western tradition.' George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 3.

<sup>9</sup> This is a particularly fitting term used in this context by George Steiner and explained as 'the exclusion from the safeguard of a licensed being' – which can be opposed to the Christian way of experiencing existence as inscribed with divine purpose, love, and order. See George Steiner, "'Tragedy'", Reconsidered', in *New Literary History*, 35:1 (2004).

contexts ranging from a particular occurrence, like ‘a tragic accident’, to more general states of affairs like ‘the tragedy of war’, to abstract ideas like ‘the tragic sense of life’, implying that the inevitability of harm is part of our fate. In this sense ‘tragedy’ is unequivocally a bad thing, implying violence, suffering, or grief. The literary meaning derives from a form of art, most famously known in its Athenian idiom through the works of Euripides, Aeschylus and Sophocles, continued and transformed by Marlowe, Shakespeare and the great French dramatists; and closer to our day arguably by Chekhov or Miller. Neither of these senses however will be my proper point of focus.

One justification for focusing on a more general notion of a worldview, rather than tragedy in its colloquial and literary senses, is that it will make the contrast with Christianity more pellucid. Indeed I believe that it is only with respect to this sense of the Tragic that we can speak of an inconsistency with the Christian worldview. This is not so for the other senses. For on the one hand it seems plain that there is no inconsistency between tragedy in its colloquial use and the Christian worldview, as Christianity does not in any way deny human misery, albeit an important area of Christian theology concerns its justification as part of the created order. On the other hand there is no room for contradiction in the sense that is interesting here, because while a system of beliefs entails certain propositions, a literary genre obviously does not.

Indeed part of the difficulty in defining tragedy by reference to genre distinctions arises from the confusion of the form of dramatic art with the Tragic vision it communicates.<sup>10</sup> The first is by

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10 There is an interesting question about the relation of the tragic form to the tragic worldview it conveys. This can take the form of asking whether the tragic view can be successfully conveyed in the comic idiom. There are various examples which could be

definition unique to particular forms of tragedy (like the Ancient Greek and Roman, Elizabethan, or Romantic), whereas the second has clearly been the subject of Western literature and culture more broadly, including in poetry, the visual arts, and music: Beethoven in his heroic period displayed a heightened sense of the Tragic, and explicitly marked the *Egmont* Overture as a tragic work; but non-illustrative music too can be inspired by this sense, as for example Brahms's *Tragic Overture*, or Mahler's Sixth Symphony. To understand such works, as Donald Tovey suggests, we must look beyond the air of pathos, in which reverberates the unanswered question 'What will become of me?', and once we do, we find ourselves forced to ask 'What ought I to be doing?' in the face of the inevitable.<sup>11</sup> The latter is a question which characterizes the tragic hero's attitude to the first, 'pathetic' uncertainty, and opens the avenue to what Jaspers will call 'Tragic knowledge'.<sup>12</sup>

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pointed to in support of this possibility (like Kafka, who considered his work comical, or Miller who, in *Death of a Salesman*, dwells on the pathetic character of his hero, which could be taken to undermine the tragic quality of the plot), and arguments to be put forward against it. This discussion however, although clearly deserving attention, like many other interesting and connected issues, falls beyond the scope of this essay.

11 See Donald Francis Tovey, *Essays in Musical Analysis* (London: Oxford University Press, 1939). Tovey also laments the fact that in the twentieth century the Tragic and the pathetic are often misapprehended one for the other, as in the case of Tchaikovsky, whose Sixth 'Pathétique' Symphony has been unduly acclaimed as tragic. See *Essays*, II: *Symphonies*, 151.

12 A more formal distinction is offered by Zygmunt Adamczewski who separates the *dramatic form* of tragic plays from the content which makes them into tragedies: the formal features of drama, such as a general eventfulness of the plot and the consequential character of the events, even their abruptness or severity, are not sufficient for a play to be tragic (a comedy can share these features with a tragedy). The tragic content of a play is a certain truth about the world disclosed through the dramatic form (however a formal description of an event can never determine the event as tragic). Adamczewski calls this truth the 'Tragic Vision' of the world, and associates it with a kind of sickness, (a view redolent of Camus and Kierkegaard), which culminates in a heroic protest both against being (in which the hero finds no place), and against the becoming, (which ultimately leads only to the void). I sympathize with Adamczewski's idea of the 'Tragic vision' leading to the 'Tragic Protest', as it is very similar to the one I suggest. However I retain the distinction between tragedy and Tragedy, rather than adopting Adamczewski's distinction between the dramatic and the tragic, not only because this way I avoid introducing an additional concept, which would add little to my

There is, however, a sense in which literary tragedy will be important here, as it is particularly well suited to express the Tragic worldview, often endowing it with solemnity and gravity, which seem to transcend the demands of most actual circumstances in which our resolve might be tested. It strikes us as an effort to understand the relation of the human being to the world, through the actions of a hero embodying the extremes of human character in a situation where no compromise is negotiable, or where the hero's nobility precludes negotiation, and where lack of compromise means disaster.<sup>13</sup>

Engagement with the issue of the vision of reality revealed in tragedy undoubtedly flourishes during the Romantic period in Germany. Augustus von Schlegel argues that the two extremes of the tragic world are the '*Freedom* within, and *Necessity* without'.<sup>14</sup> This is echoed by Jaspers when he writes: 'where there is no sense of the *infinite* vastness of what is beyond our grasp, all we finally succeed in conveying is misery, not tragedy'.<sup>15</sup> This necessity, or destiny in classical tragedy, is, according to Schlegel, more than physical necessity – it encompasses the deeds of gods and men alike in the 'bottomless depths of the infinite', in which any particular existence is ultimately drowned.<sup>16</sup> The tragic plot exposes the tension between the autonomy of the finite individual and the

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argument, but more importantly since my focus is the 'Tragic Vision', to use Adamczewski's term, and its contrast with the Christian paradigm; the question of the relation of the formal features of drama to the tragic content is less important to my argument, while it is central to Adamczewski's purpose to bring this distinction to focus. See Zygmunt Adamczewski, *The Tragic Protest*, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1963).

13 Variations on the hero's default attitude can range from arrogance, which prohibits negotiation, as in the case of Lear, to weakness of character which renders the hero incapable of it, as in the case of Willy Loman.

14 See August von Schlegel, 'Lectures on the Dramatic Art and Literature of the Ancient Greeks and Romans', in John William Donaldson, *The Theatre of the Greeks*, 5<sup>th</sup> edn. (Cambridge: Pitt Press, 1844), 331.

15 Jaspers, *Tragedy is not Enough*, 48. Italics mine.

16 Schlegel, 'Lectures', 331



undifferentiated background of existence from which it briefly emerges, only to be forever lost again.<sup>17</sup> The recognition of this fact, however, need not be either the result or cause of suffering. So Schlegel argues that misery is itself not the essence of tragedy:

[We] are wont to call all terrible or deplorable events tragical; and true it is that Tragedy does prefer such incidents, though a melancholy termination is by no means indispensably necessary, and several ancient tragedies (for instance, the Eumenides, Philoctetes, even Oedipus at Colonus in some measure, not to mention a great proportion of Euripides's Plays) are wound up with a happy and cheerful termination.<sup>18</sup>

So, in the literary sense the 'tragedy' may be understood not so much in terms of misery and desolation, but as the relentless assertion of human concerns; an assertion which, when thwarted, often leads to such desolation. The literary result has been the tragedians' mastery of 'pathos' rather than merely the degradation and ruin celebrated by nineteenth-century naturalists like Zola.<sup>19</sup>

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17 Hegel in the *Aesthetics*, building on Schlegel's and Schiller's interpretations, famously also attempted to construct a philosophical theory of tragedy, giving rise to a new understanding of the phenomenon which lies at the root of most later debates. (See G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, tr. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) primarily Part III Section III, and especially Chapter III, as well as more generally ch. I & II of Section I, Part I, as well as Part II on the classical and romantic forms of art – ch. I & II) His account is developed from his view of the function of negation in the universe, and finds expression in the idea of the tragic conflict of 'right and right' where competing forces, like love and honour, are both pushed into the wrong. According to Hegel the most perfect example of this pattern is Sophocles' *Antigone*. (See esp. c. Dramatic Poetry in Part III, Section III, Chapter III of the *Aesthetics*). However these efforts cannot pretend to systematize the tragic genre adequately, if such systematization is at all possible. There is almost unanimous agreement among scholars of tragedies ancient and modern alike that Hegel's interpretation, although very original in bringing to light some aspects of tragic narratives previously underappreciated, considerably oversimplifies things. See for example Anthony Quinton, 'Tragedy', in: *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume XXXIV* (London: Harrison & Sons Ltd., 1960), 158.

18 Schlegel, 'Lectures', 331-2.

19 As Stewart Sutherland argues in chapter 3 of *Faith and Ambiguity* (London: Duckworth, 1971), the tragedian only shows a partial truth here, as in classical tragedy

The dramatization of suffering and violence – of ‘tragedy’ in the colloquial sense – fails to attain tragedy in the literary sense because of the lack of such relentless affirmation of those concerns. The resultant invitation to wallow in human anguish and humiliation remains merely horrible. (Popular horror films are a more innocent example of a fascination with the human person being eclipsed by suffering, rather than becoming ennobled by enduring it; snuff films arguably exploit the same impulse but push its fulfilment to the extreme.) In ancient tragedy, violence almost always occurred offstage and was merely reported in the text. The pleasure derived from exposure to literary tragedy, as Schlegel argues following Schiller’s *Aesthetic and Philosophical Essays*, comes not from the horror of the hero’s torment and agony, but from the hero’s affirmation of his humanity in spite of suffering, even if it leads to the hero’s demise.<sup>20</sup> Regardless of whether we agree with Schlegel’s conclusion, it seems plain that the colloquial usage reduces the meaning of tragedy merely to human misery, whereas the literary usage involves problematizing misery as a feature of human life. The Tragic worldview, which I shall go on to outline presently, while often endorsed or expressed in tragic plays, is grounded in a

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the depiction of the hero avoids the mundane detail of character and circumstance, which compose the greater parts of our lives. Telling the whole truth in this regard, as is typical of the novel for example, disperses tragedy in everyday irrelevancies from which the tragedian keeps his art ‘chemically pure’. This in itself is not a novel discovery and has been recognized by Classics scholars for a long time. Schlegel notably in the quoted ‘Lectures’ observes that the ideal of tragic poetry ‘was to altogether separate her ideal of humanity from the soil of Nature, to which the real human is fettered as a vassal of the globe’. However the ‘chemical purity’ thus obtained yields a broader and clearer truth: ‘The Greeks in their poetry and fine arts succeeded in blending most perfectly the ideal with the real, that is to say superhuman beauty with human truth, and in investing the manifestation of an idea with an energetic corporeality. They did not leave their creation to flit unsupported in empty space, but set the statue of humanity on the eternal and immovable pedestal of moral freedom.’ See Schlegel, ‘Lectures’, 330.

20 Cf. Schiller, *Aesthetic and Philosophical Essays*. For a thorough treatment of Schiller’s views on tragic pleasure to which I’m also indebted see Samuel Hughes, ‘Schiller on the Pleasure of Tragedy’, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 55.4 (2015).

broader understanding of reality as structured in a way such that human misery is inescapable.

A great advantage of this kind of approach for our present purpose is that it focuses on a certain view of reality conveyed by tragic works; or more precisely, on human responses to the experience of this reality. I take this experience to be that of finitude, of the ultimate limitedness of our condition, an experience to which Christianity and Tragedy represent contrasting yet perhaps complementary responses. It is the broad outlines of these responses to finitude that I will now endeavour to present. Despite differences in emphasis, I will argue that the two world views are nonetheless open to one another: Tragedy remains open to a sense of the transcendent, and Christianity retains at its very foundation a feeling of profound uncertainty and existential anxiety.

### **The Tragic worldview**

In Jaspers' words, the essence of Tragedy is that it confronts the human individual with the experience of 'fundamental reality made plain, as things break wide open in a shipwreck'.<sup>21</sup> The picture Jaspers thus articulates is that man as a self-conscious being feels the need to order his life according to some meaning or purpose vindicating his privileged first-person perspective. Seen through the Tragic lens, the human place in the world requires *justification* as it stands apart from the rest of being as its centre, around which everything else is arranged within the subjective horizon of experience. But being at the phenomenological centre of things seems neither to reflect the ordering of nature nor impose order onto it. So, we find ourselves desperately in want of an explanation.

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21 Jaspers, *Tragedy is not Enough*, 80.

Tragedy is a form of knowledge which reveals the groundlessness of individual existence amidst a cold reality unable to return the human gaze; it is witness to the longing for justification having to go unanswered. Before the 'tragic revelation', as Jaspers puts it, man feels at home in his mortality because he understands it as an eternal cycle of living and dying. This feeling is lost with 'tragic knowledge', which the revelation brings, and which uncovers the scandal of one's individual consciousness having no part in the logic of the universe.

The idea that facing this truth is itself already the undoing of individual consciousness comes from Lev Shestov, who argues that the discovery of the irrational character of reality, where human values have no foothold, deprives Tragedy of mystic grandeur.<sup>22</sup> The truth of Tragedy in the end makes even tragedy as the expression of this truth impossible – there is nothing to express, as the truth of Tragedy is that there *is* no truth – revealing every human action as absurd and groundless. Moreover the revelation leaves no way back: 'the ships have sailed, the bridges burned – one has to go forward towards the unknown, incredible future', and, as Shestov insists, its full realization leads to insanity or suicide.<sup>23</sup> A central point in this grand tormenting vision, however, is that the discovery of the absurdity of the universe is not just another fact *about the world*, rather, it strikes at the very core of any internal relation we thought we may have had with reality severing our

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22 This vision also permeates 'the tragic sense of life', which Unamuno identified with mortality as the annulment of all meaning. In light of such ideas the question 'Tovey identifies as the beginning of Tragedy, the question 'what ought we to be doing?', materializes as an almost demonic presence, rendering all efforts at justifying the ways we comport ourselves in the world impotent and groundless. Beyond the brink of hope for an 'ontological homecoming', the only rational outlook seems to be Camus' philosophy of the absurd.

23 I use the Polish edition: Lew Szestow, *Dostojewski i Nietzsche Filozofia Tragedii*, Cezary Wodziński trans. (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1987), 42.

existence from the logic of the universe and exposing its haunting solitude.

This Tragic understanding of man's predicament is reflected in certain aspects of Heidegger's characterization of *Dasein* – the particularly human way of being Heidegger takes issue with. For Heidegger, being itself seems to emerge as Tragic in the sense of having a crack running through it: the incongruity which underlies man's Tragic struggle for belonging in a world which affords him no proper place is a feature of the fundamental reality itself. In consequence 'anxiety' surfaces as a basic feature of the human constitution as an individuated being: being in the midst of beings as such is an issue, as an 'uncanny manifestation of the fundamental incongruity'. Heidegger's terminology seems here to be designed to convey an intimately personal dimension of the Tragic revelation, which obliterates any hope of authentic vindication, or true belonging:

In anxiety one feels '*uncanny*'. Here the peculiar indefiniteness of that which *Dasein* finds itself alongside in anxiety, comes proximally to expression: the 'nothing and nowhere'. But here 'uncanniness' also means 'not-being-at-home'.<sup>24</sup>

Heidegger suggests two ways in which a human being, understanding and accepting the truth of individual existence as his own, can relate to the world: the first emphasizes a violent primordial struggle whereby *Dasein*'s mode of being consists of its attempts to break through prevailing commitments to meaning. The second announces the more subdued theme of 'waiting upon being' where *Dasein* prepares for the arrival of another historical

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24 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, tr. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1962), 233.

revelation<sup>25</sup>. Jaspers however criticizes Heidegger for identifying the Tragic as the fundamental discontinuity within being itself, as in so doing he arrives back at the illusion of understanding, of which Tragic knowledge strips us. Jaspers notices that Heidegger inserts the characteristics of the phenomenal world into being itself. Whereas being as ‘fundamental reality made plain’, the background of all backgrounds, inevitably turns every structure of meaning into a ruinous heap, even Tragic knowledge itself.<sup>26</sup>

It should be plain by now that the Tragic world view has little to do with the belief in destiny or fate. Or more precisely, destiny and fate are merely among the possible ways of conceptualizing (and coming to terms with) Tragedy: a way characteristic of many instances of tragic drama. Tragic knowledge on the other hand is not an *explanation* of the human condition, but rather a haunting awareness of an utter dearth thereof. It is the unpredictable randomness of the absurd perceived as the kernel of reality by Camus, and postulated as the arbitrary and absolute ‘Will’ behind the empirical world by Schopenhauer before him. In his early manuscripts, Schopenhauer, prefiguring Jaspers’ notion of ‘tragic knowledge’, suggests we perceive the free reign of the Will in a flash of ‘*besseres Bewußtsein*’ (‘better consciousness’)<sup>27</sup>, which he compares to the Platonic ideal of looking beyond the world of

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25 This openness to a possible collapse of all meaning and the emergence of a new world-ordering paradigm, now yet beyond any means of comprehension, is termed ‘Radical Hope’ by Jonathan Lear in his book by that title. The book informatively conceptualizes the story of the Indian Crow tribe transforming its fundamental principles of existence and self-knowledge after surviving complete cultural devastation brought about by its move to a reserve. See Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope*, (London: Harvard University Press, 2006).

26 For a discussion of the differences between Jaspers and Heidegger in their respective approaches to the concept of tragedy, and how they relate to the philosophers’ biographies see David Nichols, ‘Heidegger and Jaspers on the ‘Tragic’, *Existenz, An International Journal in Philosophy, Religion, Politics, and the Arts*, 4:2 (2009).

27 A concept Schopenhauer later abandons, realizing that the reality of the Will is impossible to comprehend to the human mind. His *World as Will and Representation* however is itself arguably intended to be just such a flash of ‘*besseres Bewußtsein*’.

appearances to discern the pure forms of which perceptible objects are distant shadows. He says that in this way, through ‘the mockery and sham of the world’, we glimpse the unthinkable truth that ‘we are not meant to thrive and flourish like the plants of the earth’.<sup>28</sup>

One of the central themes of Schopenhauer’s later philosophy is art as a means of liberation from the tyranny of the Will. Tragedy, however, remains privileged in this regard, for in it the Will is confronted, whereas in other forms of art the hold of the Will is merely temporarily lifted in serene contemplation. The only means of reconciliation with the Tragic reality, however, is through art that exposes it. Tragedy, on Schopenhauer’s interpretation, reveals individuation as the source of the Tragic conflict, and transports us to a sphere wherein the world can be understood without this burden. By exposing the Tragic reality, tragedy evokes resignation and abandonment of the individual ‘will to live’, which is as close as an individual may hope to get to a form of consolation for his orphan fate. Aesthetic experience not only ‘atones for the crime of existence’, but provides us with an objectivity explicitly superior to that of science or ordinary empirical knowledge, which fails in explaining reality, both by assuming individuality as a point of departure, and by deferring to the sham world of appearance.<sup>29</sup> Through it we are able to see that ‘knowledge in general is itself only phenomenon, and therefore it takes place only in the world, just as the world comes to pass only in it.’<sup>30</sup>

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28 Arthur Schopenhauer, *Manuscript Remains*, tr. E. F. Payne, (Oxford: Berg, 1988), I: 8.

29 For valuable interpretations of the place of tragedy in Schopenhauer’s philosophy of art see Christopher Janaway, ‘Knowledge and tranquillity: Schopenhauer on the value of art’, and John E. Atwell, ‘Art as liberation: a central theme of Schopenhauer’s philosophy’, both in *Schopenhauer, Philosophy, and the Arts*, ed. Dale Jacquette, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 39-61, 81-106.

30 Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, tr. E.F.J. Payne (New York: Dover Publications, 1966), II: 642.

The above is of course merely a brief sketch of the Tragic worldview based on impressions of the aspects which some of the more influential commentators have accentuated as central to it. This however is as far as we can hope to get without patent inconsistency or paradox. The Tragic worldview delimits a one-sided boundary. We not only have no means for traversing it, but there are in principle no such means to be had. Tragic knowledge reveals truth and value as contingent, relative to circumstance amidst 'the infinite vastness of what is beyond our grasp'. They thus allow for conflict of value, and contradicting truths, which, as Jaspers would argue, is the subject of both Tragic experience and its representations in art.<sup>31</sup> I have said that this is the experience of finitude. This should be understood in the following sense: as limited beings, the horizon of human existence is epistemically and phenomenologically finite. The experience of finitude is the apprehension of the piecemeal character of this existence, its incompleteness in the sense that it does not contain within its bounds its own justification. In the Tragic worldview this experience is taken as the form of an impossible premonition of there being no justification beyond those impassable bounds either; no greater structure in which this spark of consciousness of ours could find its justification, only darkness.

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31 Max Scheler explains the tragic in terms of a world which permits an insoluble conflict of value – an idea which, although Hegelian, is developed by Scheler into a metaphysical condition, which cannot be dialectically overcome, as it ultimately is in Hegel's philosophy. Scheler focuses primarily on the ethical consequences of a Tragic reality, in an effort to oppose the Kantian founding of morality in universalizable obligation. He understands the tragic perspective to be one where no obligation is absolutely universalizable, or in other words where any obligation, in the right (tragic) circumstance, will contradict another. See Max Scheler, *Bemerkungen zum Phänomen des Tragischen*, in *Abhandlungen und Aufsätze*, (Leipzig : Verlag der Weissen Bücher, 1915).



## The Christian worldview

Christianity, on the other hand, without denying the limitedness of our contingent being, suggests a different interpretation of its meaning, and gives a very different vision of the response we might have towards it. Christianity takes its name from its founder, Jesus Christ. Or more precisely, as Paul Tillich points out, from its founding act of recognizing Jesus *as* Christ. Hence Christians are those who recognize Jesus of Nazareth to be Christ, the Son of God.<sup>32</sup> The term 'Christ' is derived from the Greek word *Χριστός/Christós*, and means 'the anointed' or 'chosen one', (which is the meaning of the Christian theological term 'the Messiah', which at a central point of Mark's Gospel St Peter confesses Jesus to be). His true identity however is only revealed at His passion (Mark 14:16 ff.), in His death (Mark 15:39), and ultimately in His resurrection (Mark 16:1-14). Jesus was executed as a messianic figure, and the significance of His being the Messiah is that His sacrificial death and subsequent resurrection atone for the breaking of the old covenant by sinful Israel, and bring about reconciliation with God, or redemption.<sup>33</sup> Hence, the significance of Jesus as Christ can also be expressed by calling Him the 'Saviour' or 'Redeemer'.<sup>34</sup>

The theology of salvation, atonement and redemption (or soteriology) is a vast area of scholarship, and I neither can nor hope adequately to represent in what follows even the disputes central to it.<sup>35</sup> For the purpose of bringing out the tension between Tragedy

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32 Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 97

33 See 'Atonement', 'Christ', and 'Messiah', in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, Third Edition, eds. F.L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

34 *Ibid.*, 165-170.

35 For the history of the doctrine of redemption see: H. Rashdall, *The Idea of Atonement in Christian Theology*, (London, Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1919); H.E.W.

and Christianity, however, I take it to be an uncontroversial claim that, regardless of whether Christ's death should be considered a ransom paid to the devil (as St. Augustine thought), a debt paid to the Father (St. Anselm's doctrine), or an act of unconditional love (Pierre Abelard's view), the promise of subjective (or individual) redemption brought into the world with it, and the objective (or general) redemption of which it is believed to be a sign, are essential aspects of the Christian worldview. The Christian worldview, therefore, can be said to constitute a 'redemptive' metaphysical narrative. By contrast, Tragedy can be said to constitute an 'un-redemptive' narrative, as the metaphysical backdrop it implies denies the possibility of salvation and the existence of a transcendent order from which it could proceed.

However, it seems to me that the problem of the relation of Christianity and Tragedy is more complicated than this. To bring out this complexity I will look more closely at one compelling interpretation of the doctrine of salvation in Christian theology. The account I will consider is heavily influenced by what has come to be called 'existential theology', and as such it begins with the individual human experience of existence, in assembling the metaphysical picture in which it grounds its fundamental doctrines. This, of course, is not the only possible way of understanding the place of redemption within Christianity, but the fact that it was developed at all is enough for the complexity I want to explore to arise.

Fitting broadly within this tradition Rahner and Vorgrimler note that 'redemption'

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Turner, *The Patristic Doctrine of Redemption: A Study of the Development of the Doctrine in the First Five Centuries* (London: A.R. Mowbray, 1952); A.C. Clifford, *Atonement and Justification: English Evangelical Theology 1640-1790: An Evaluation*, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1990); M. Hangel, *The Atonement: A Study of the Origins of the Doctrine in the New Testament* (New York: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2007).

in the widest sense signifies that that condition of man in which, individually and collectively, he inevitably finds himself and which he experiences as miserable and not terminable by himself, is definitely overcome.<sup>36</sup>

Yet any subjective redemption, in the sense of individual human salvation, is preceded, both logically and chronologically, by 'objective redemption'. '[T]hrough the incarnation of the Son of God (Jesus Christ), his death and his resurrection, God's will to *justify* man is present in the world, eschatologically certain and irrevocable'.<sup>37</sup> The key concept for understanding the idea of 'objective redemption' is that of justification, which humanity requires because of the Fall. This aspect of the meaning of justification in the Christian worldview partially overlaps with its meaning in the Tragic worldview. As we have seen in the Tragic paradigm man finds himself in need of justification, understood as a form of 'ontological belonging'. In Christianity justification is understood as the event in which God brings man into a meaningfully closer relationship with Himself, by giving him a share of His divine nature.<sup>38</sup> This is also sometimes referred to as the 'new creation', signifying that, the Fall, or original sin, undid the order commanded by God at the moment of the 'first' creation.<sup>39</sup> General redemption therefore is the act of bringing humanity back into the fold, as it were, and reconstituting the original unity of creation by *justifying anew* the human place in it.

Rahner and Vorgrimler, however, also describe redemption as something that does not enter human existence completely from

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36 Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, *Concise Theological Dictionary*, Second Edition, tr. Richard Strachan, David Smith, Robert Nowell, Sarah O'Brien (London: Barnes & Oates, 1983), 432.

37 *Ibid.* 261. Italics mine.

38 See *ibid.*, 260.

39 And Christ is in this context often called the 'New', or the 'Last Adam'. See Romans 5:12-21, and Colossians 1:15.

‘without’, ‘because God is no ‘stranger’ but the self-subsistent ground of that which is most proper to us’.<sup>40</sup> In other words the seed of redemption is already there in each human being. The idea of self-salvation within Christian theology is a difficult and problematic one, with Pelagianism, and the soteriological determinism of Manicheanism or Calvinism marking out the extremes of the debate. Henri de Lubac notes in his famous *Catholicisme. Les aspects sociaux du dogme* that the Greek ἀνακομίζω (‘to redeem’), means also ‘to gather up’, and argues that the ambiguity is used to characterize the meaning of redemption in Jeremiah 31:10-11.<sup>41</sup> He points to St. Augustine to stress that that the justification of the human place within creation is not only achieved through the renewal of the human relation with God, but also through the renewal of the human relation to himself. It consists in humanity rediscovering its place in the divine order, but also in rediscovering the divine ordination in humanity itself. Augustine writes:

Adam therefore has been scattered over the whole world. He was in one place, and fell, and as in a manner broken small, he filled the whole world: but the mercy of God gathered together the fragments from every side, and forged them by the fire of love, and made one what was broken.<sup>42</sup>

Theologically this is maintained as that which is believed, but cannot be ascertained reflexively. The proof the new creation, and

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40 Rahner and Vorgrimler, *Concise Theological Dictionary*, Second Edition, Richard Strachan, David Smith, Robert Nowell, Sarah O’Brien trans. (London: Barnes & Oates, 1983), 433.

41 See Henri de Lubac, *Catholicisme. Les aspects sociaux du dogme* (Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 1947), ch. 1. Throughout the narrative of Jeremiah the opposition of ‘gathering up’ and ‘scattering’ is prominent in the descriptions of the human relation to God more generally. See e.g. Jeremiah 3:16-17, 9:13-16, and 28:20-23.

42 St Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms 73-98: Volume 4*, Maria Boulding trans. (New York: New City Press, 2002), Exposition on Psalm 96, Paragraph 15.

the regained unity with God, therefore, is only indirectly provided by the sacraments. The sixteenth-century Council of the Roman Catholic Church at Trent defined a sacrament in Augustinian terms as ‘a visible sign of an invisible grace, instituted for our justification’.<sup>43</sup> Vatican II, the Council of the mid-twentieth-century, in turn included the Church as one of the sacraments. This is a logical conclusion of the understanding of justification defended by Lubac (who was himself a theological expert to the Council): redemption is not something which merely happens inwardly either. Rather, it encompasses all of humanity, as a renewal of the human relation with God, but also that of each human being to all others, of which the church is a sign and an instrument.<sup>44</sup>

Tillich also discusses various forms the concept of self-salvation takes within the religious world view founded upon revelation. In his view they ultimately prove inadequate in that all imply a possibility to claim through one’s own actions what can only be given. The doctrine that divine aid is superfluous to the human earning of salvation through his sovereign will was associated with Pelagius, and condemned as heretical at the Council of Carthage (418). Meanwhile, the deterministic view has been equally condemned by many Christian Churches, as it suffers from an overreliance on revelation and divine grace, undermining the reality of human free will in relation to good and evil altogether. Tillich stresses that the simultaneous presence of the elements of both these perspectives accounts for the paradoxical nature of revealed religion:

It is equally wrong to identify religion with revelation,  
just as it is wrong to identify religion with the attempt at

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43 *Catechismus ex decreto Concilii Tridentini*, part II, chapter 1, article 4.

44 For a discussion of the theological meaning of the church as a sacrament see Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology*, tr. Sr Mary F. McCarthy (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 44-55.

self-salvation. Religion, like all life, is ambiguous. On the basis of revelatory experiences, religion turns to self-salvation. It distorts what it has received and fails in what it tries to achieve. This is the tragedy of religion.<sup>45</sup>

Regardless, however, of how this dispute might be settled or even interpreted in Christian doctrine, its presuppositions constitute a metaphysical backdrop against which the possibility of individual salvation must be considered. The human condition, similarly as at the outset of the Tragic narrative, requires justification as it stands apart from the rest of reality: the Fall displaces man from his proper place and banishes him to the fate of the 'ontological nomad', seeking the meaning of his existence outside of the world he inhabits. In the Christian worldview the individual efforts of self-justification in the end prove inadequate, as the order from which this justification can proceed is a transcendent one. Thus the human quest for salvation can only be brought to fruition by the will of a transcendent being – God – since the order it expresses a longing for is itself the divinely commanded unity of all creation. Even so, there seems to be a parallel between the story of the Fall and the view of man's predicament in Tragedy. This parallel, I want to suggest, stems from assuming the individual experience of finitude, or the limitedness of existence, as the point of departure for metaphysics. Within the Christian worldview, this tendency is of course characteristic of Protestant interpretations of Christian doctrine; however, to say that the apprehension of the Fall and its consequences renders the human need of 'ontological belonging' urgent is beyond doubt one of the central tenets of the Christian worldview.

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45      Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 80.

## Tragic redemption

If Christianity acknowledges human experience of finitude, there is also a sense in which Tragedy is open to a sense of redemption. There are at least two ways in which a form of Tragic redemption might offer more than the consolation which Schopenhauer argued comes with resigning from the struggles of life. One possibility is introduced to the Tragic universe by Hegel, another by Nietzsche. For both, Tragedy also offers a form of justification of human existence, and a way of overcoming the contingency of value. Each perspective has contributed to the idea of Tragedy, and is implied in the contrast Jaspers draws between Tragedy and Christianity.

Hegel understood the Tragic conflict to be the result of a limited perspective on life that humans have as finite, historical beings, and in which tensions arise that cannot be reconciled by the limited means they possess. In a dialectic oscillation the synthesis of each pair of opposites gives rise to another conflict. However, history, understood as the process of the Absolute gaining consciousness of itself, having begun with the recognition of the dialectic tension, ends with its final reconciliation. For Nietzsche, conversely, human finitude finds its own justification in embracing these tensions. It is the familiar vision, to use Jaspers's phrase, in which the tragic hero is 'at one with reality when he goes to meet his doom'.<sup>46</sup> Warriors of all ages and cultures prayed for a death on the battlefield because they were seeking completion – a death that would give ultimate expression to the values they fought to defend. This is a typical motif of the Medieval *chansons de geste* where, as in the *Song of Roland*, the hero's death is not merely symbolic of his life, but is

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46 Jaspers, *Tragedy is not Enough*, 79.

his life's very fulfilment, embodying perfectly the ethos by which the hero lived.<sup>47</sup>

However this idea is also recognizably pronounced in Hegel, who described the self-assertion of consciousness itself as a process in which individuality is an obstacle to be overcome, where self-fathoming is impossible without self-thwarting, and where the ultimate consequence of the drive to self-realization is death. The struggle for recognition, in which man must risk his life, constitutes the dialectical movement of history. But for Hegel, this movement has its end in the ultimate reconciliation of the dialectical opposites. Without this post-historical absolute hindsight the slave's sacrifice would have meant little: his self-awareness only torment. Self-sacrifice only gains its proper articulation when combined with the hopeful apprehension of this ultimate resolution. Schopenhauer objected to this conclusion vehemently, seeing in it an exoneration of poetic justice, and called it a 'dull, optimistic, Protestant-rationalistic, or peculiarly Jewish view of life.'<sup>48</sup> Schopenhauer's comment is characteristically hyperbolic, but it contains an important observation, which is that Hegel's view effectively dismantles Tragedy by reducing it to a temporary (or indeed, temporal) illusion.

Nietzsche on the other hand admits no absolute vantage point from which human actions could be judged. He does not, however, advise resignation: man must carve out his own justification from the raw

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47 Of course, in the *Song of Roland*, like in most other works in that genre, the hero's death is followed by a swift carrying off to heaven of his soul. The glory of his death is not the only thing Roland might hope for. However, as a mortal being his life of courage and virtue are not only brought to an end in his final deed, but epitomised by it. It is in his last stand that Roland truly becomes the hero of songs and ballads, as his death, brought about by the unshaken allegiance to the king and valour on the battlefield, is the undeniable proof and expression of his resolve. Had he not been killed Roland would in all likelihood still have earned his place in heaven, but his heroism might not have become the subject of an epic passed down by generations.

48 I quote after A.M. Quinton, 'Tragedy', 159.



material of disaster itself, or be nothing at all. Nietzsche's most recognizable formula, in which he characterizes the human condition, is perhaps that of the 'death of God'. It signals the need for a 'revaluation of values', which he postulates must be the consequence of accepting this revelation: the order of reality, and the place humanity believed itself to have had in it, lose their grounding – their *console* – together with the denial of the transcendence upon which they were ultimately founded. The death of God exposes the arbitrariness of all hierarchies and points of reference:

How did we manage to drink the ocean dry? Who gave us a sponge to wipe the entire horizon away? What did we do, when we untethered the earth from its sun? Where is the earth headed now? Where are we headed? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backwards, sideways, forwards, to every side? Is there still an Above and Below? Are we not fumbling our way through an endless nothing?<sup>49</sup>

The meaning of this revelation, of what Jaspers later will call 'tragic knowledge', can, according to Nietzsche, only be grasped by a madman, for it uproots all the schemas of thought previously adhered to. The madman speaking in Nietzsche's famous section of the *Science of Joy* does not, however, address the religious, who believe in the living God. He speaks to those who like himself have already buried him:

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49 I use Lesley Chamberlain's own translation of the passage which she uses in her forthcoming piece 'Sidgwick's Dilemma' (in *The Meaning of Mourning*, ed. Mikolaj Slawkowski-Rode) as I feel it brings out the urgency and torment with which Nietzsche apprehends the metaphysical desolation he describes. The one exception is my keeping 'Are we not plunging continually?', which I quote after Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, (New York: Vantage Books, 1974), §125. Instead of Chamberlain's 'Don't we keep tripping over?', Chamberlain also suggests an alternative title for Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*, namely *The Science of Joy*, which I believe to express Nietzsche's meaning more fully than the usual rendering.

How will we comfort ourselves, we murderers of all murderers? The most holy and powerful being that the world possessed until now bled to death from our knives – who will wipe us clean of this blood? With what water can we purify ourselves?<sup>50</sup>

The murder of God is simultaneously the murder of man. Without the transcendent frame of reference, humanity loses its birth right of dignity: as much as the death of God is an event of the most fundamental meaning – his murder is the ‘greatest deed in the history of man’ – from that deed onwards the death of man ceases to mean anything. There is no crime and no punishment. There is no damnation, but also no *consolation* – in the sense of grounding proceeding both from the hope of individual salvation, and from belief in universal justification in the perspective of an objective order. Without God man can either himself become God or be swallowed up by the nothingness God has left in the world after his death. Nietzsche, as Anthony Quinton puts it, is ‘midway between the extremes of Hegel and Schopenhauer and asserting the reality and attainability of human excellence in a world that neither guarantees triumph of good nor the fruitfulness of human effort’.<sup>51</sup>

Jaspers follows Nietzsche in suggesting that it is in these utter depths of abandonment that humanity has to look for its own justification: ‘where all meaning disappears, and all certainty vanishes, something arises deep inside man: the self-preservation of his essential identity’.<sup>52</sup> Tragedy thus understood is not merely, as for Schopenhauer, the wail of sorrow at the recognition of the disinherited place of humanity in the order of reality. Rather as, Jaspers puts it, ‘in its climax of silence tragedy suggests and brings to realization the highest possibilities of man [it lends] meaning to

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50 Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §125.

51 Quinton, ‘Tragedy’, 161.

52 Jaspers, *Tragedy is not Enough*, 78.

meaningless doom'.<sup>53</sup> However, he departs from Nietzsche by denying that this 'doomed triumph' can still be glorious and exalting. What Jaspers stresses is the key feature of the Tragic worldview is that the resistance of reality man encounters is formative of his character as an individuated being. Tragedy marks the point at which, despite man's continuing efforts, this resistance can no longer be overcome or negotiated with. This is what Jaspers means when he says that 'man liberates himself from the tragic by facing it'.<sup>54</sup> In Jaspers' conception, unlike in Hegel, there is no ultimate resolution for which Tragic knowledge might bring hope. There is only the Nietzschean flight of Icarus in which the Tragic hero defies all, and goes down in the inevitable blaze. This attitude has been well expressed by Dylan Thomas:

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,  
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,  
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight  
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.<sup>55</sup>

Tragedy lays human finitude bare: it exposes the insurmountable limit of which there is no beyond as defining our very condition. Limitedness deprives the human condition of the possibilities in anticipation of which his striving seems justified. All growth is exposed as decay, and wreckage wrought upon his immortal longings. Human hope, however, points always beyond the visible horizon. Catastrophe offers the forging of this justification out of disaster: 'that man is not God is the cause of his smallness and

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53 Jaspers, *Tragedy is not Enough*, 27.

54 *Ibid.* 41.

55 Dylan Thomas, *Do not go gentle into that good night*, in *The Poems of Dylan Thomas* (New York: New Directions, 1953), 239.

undoing. But that he can carry his human possibilities to their extreme and can be undone by them with his eyes open – that is his greatness'.<sup>56</sup> Jaspers thus finds in Tragedy itself the answer to the question it forces on us: 'What ought I to be doing?' The answer is that man 'may find his deliverance through his sheer strength to bear the unknown without question, and to endure it with unshakable defiance'.<sup>57</sup> It is this understanding of the Tragic worldview that is most immediately inconsistent with the Christian worldview, as it affirms that which Christianity in all forcefulness denies: the only alternative afforded to the human spirit being between heroic self-vindication and the utter ruin it must face if it cannot live up to the demand. The contrast is made particularly stark when Tragedy is thought not only to deny any transcendent source of human redemption (which Christianity effusively affirms), but also to open an avenue for an immanent justification of human existence (which Christianity sees as insufficient).

### **The contradiction**

One possibility of conceptualizing the source of incompatibility between the Christian and Tragic perspectives signalled earlier is in epistemological terms. The structure of the Tragic universe, or the lack thereof, undermines the very possibility of knowledge, whereas Christianity makes divine order the object of belief and dogma, thus allowing a knowable world. However, from the perspective of human experience this order is at a remove which cannot be bridged by human means. Indeed, the lack of certainty is what prompts belief.<sup>58</sup> For the Christian, one *cannot have* the 'God's-eye view',

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56 Jaspers, *Tragedy is not Enough*, 55.

57 *Ibid.* 42.

58 Indeed, the misguided lack of belief in the divine order, founded on such epistemological uncertainty, may from a Christian viewpoint seem tragic in the colloquial sense – damning its victim into senseless despair. Perhaps it might even be the subject of a tragedy in the literary sense: George Steiner interprets Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for*

from which all inconsistencies are reconciled, and all paradoxes explained. In the Tragic perspective there is *no such view*. However, in both cases the human outlook is left riddled with tensions and discontinuities. If anything the uncertainty with which man is faced as an individuated being seeking justification establishes a strand of similarity between the two perspectives. Donald MacKinnon argues in *The Problem of Metaphysics* that the similarity runs very deep, so that Tragedy and Christianity are two responses to the same metaphysical doubt and never fully free of each other.<sup>59</sup>

The real divergence is in how this metaphysical uncertainty can be confronted and overcome. Jaspers revealingly understands the difference to be a possibility of deliverance ‘from the tragic’, open in Christianity through objective redemption proceeding from a transcendent order; and ‘within the tragic’, open to the human individual as a result of realizing that there is ‘no beyond’ from which justification can come.<sup>60</sup> In a Christian context, every one of man’s basic experiences ceases to be Tragic, as the core of the Tragic worldview is that the human being remains universally or objectively unredeemed, and the individual human being is left to seek his own justification. Conversely, objective redemption is a necessary aspect of Christianity, suggesting not merely individual salvation, of which man is incapable by himself, but that the universe as a whole makes sense; that man is part of God’s creation, and may rediscover his place in it. Even if this has been obscured by the Fall, redemption re-enters the world with Christ’s sacrifice, and is perpetually renewed through grace.

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*Godot* as a play concerned with the despair of the lack of hope. Attempts have been made to argue for the possibility of a Christian tragedy based on this. However, even if they are able to explain certain aspects of the literary genre in Christian terms, they do so by removing all aspects of Tragedy from it. I will return to this point in the next section.

59 Cf. Donald MacKinnon, *The Problem of Metaphysics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

60 See Jaspers, *Tragedy is not Enough*, 39.

The contradiction in the idea of Christian Tragedy is therefore this: Christianity constitutes a redemptive narrative, which admits objective justification, and Tragedy denies it thus constituting an un-redemptive narrative about the world and the human place in it. Moreover Tragedy opens the possibility of self-justification, a completely autonomous vindication of individual existence, which in turn Christianity deems inadequate and self-defeating.<sup>61</sup> This tension can be restated in terms of the role of transcendence in human justification: the Tragic view postulates a necessary limit, which in Christianity is necessarily transgressed. In the Tragic view human justification can proceed solely from a relentless heroic assertion of human concerns, where these concerns are exposed as having no transcendent grounding. Humanity is won in a struggle against a world where it has no place, and epitomized in the obliteration of those who would not abandon it even at the cost of their existence. In the Tragic worldview the death of the tragic hero is at once the definitive revelation of the Tragic paradigm where the human has no place (exposing humanity as homeless amongst all that exists), and the ultimate affirmation of the human (in terms of the meaning supervenient on an axiological reordering of existence).

The Christian worldview, conversely, affirms the existence of a transcendent order from which any and all possibility of justification proceeds. The adversities of the post-Fall condition are ultimately reconciled from the perspective of this transcendent order in which humanity is justified as part of the whole of

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61 This is also how I understand Stewart Sutherland's interpretation of redemption as it appears in the Christian and Tragic world views, and which he puts forward in his brilliant essay 'Christianity and Tragedy': 'It could be argued with some plausibility that the chief barrier to the compatibility of Christian and tragedy is the stress within Christianity laid upon the notion of redemption and conversely its almost complete absence from the dark landscapes of the tragic vision'. See Stewart R. Sutherland, 'Christianity and Tragedy', in *Literature and Theology*, 4:2 (1990), 158. If I understand Sutherland's thesis correctly my conclusion runs largely in accordance with his view.

existence. Moreover, individual or group efforts at self-vindication – those efforts which alone, in the Tragic perspective, can constitute and affirm the human – in the Christian perspective always and necessarily fall short of the task, as true justification lies exclusively outside of the horizon of human presence in the world and its experience, in that transcendent realm which can only be glimpsed through divine revelation.

### **The openness of experience**

I want to outline a way of seeing the Tragic and Christian world views as *open* to one another, but without denying the fundamental tension between them. The claim that there is a degree of openness between the two perspectives is of course much weaker than any assertion concerning their compatibility. I understand this degree of openness to imply a form of self-knowledge whereby each perspective takes seriously the claim of the other, finding itself phenomenologically wanting. Tragedy, I believe, is not fully closed to a sense of the religious, which completes its longing for transcendent justification, even if in the last analysis the grit that confronts this longing turns out to be a pearl. Similarly, I believe that the Christian worldview is not devoid of the sense that this longing may be experienced in complete detachment from any possibility of its satisfaction. I want to suggest that this mutual openness is rooted in a discontinuity at the heart of experience itself, and that viewed in line with the asymmetry I have mentioned, the Christian worldview is permeated by the Tragic, and that Tragedy is perhaps one of the ways in which belief is brought to a consciousness of itself.

The juxtaposition of Christianity and Tragedy in terms of the possibility of transcendent justification or redemption brings out the impossibility of their reconciliation, but it also reduces each

perspective to this opposition: both turn out respectively rather superficially cheerful on the one hand, and morbid and pompous on the other. There are indeed darker aspects of the Christian belief than the redemptive characterization might suggest, and similarly Tragedy need not be all gloom and doom, even without the promise of salvation. The casus here is similar to that challenged by Stewart Sutherland in *Atheism and the Rejection of God*. If atheism is formalized as the ‘belief that there is no God’, Sutherland writes, then all that is left of theism is the reverse assertion, that ‘there is God’: ‘there is an internal relation between the account which one gives of atheism and the account which one gives of belief: if one lacks subtlety so will the other.’<sup>62</sup> Likewise, redemptive and un-redemptive characterizations are mutually reductive of the accounts of Christianity and Tragedy.

Now although a sense of redemption ‘within the Tragic’, as it is suggested by Jaspers, does not offer a resolution to man’s Tragic predicament, it also reveals that he stands apart from the rest of the world. The reconciliation to this fate, which Tragedy offers through oblivion, reaffirms the detachment – the source of Tragedy. The Tragic view, as I have attempted to show, denies any possibility of transcendent justification, but it also justifies the human longing for it. Peter Connolly argues that, although ‘tragedy bears witness to an order of reality where certain conflicts are so irreconcilable that they can only be resolved at the price of the total convulsion and transformation of a man’s familiar self and world’, it is through being a domain of moral enigma, paradox and mystery, that Tragedy keeps a door open to a sense of the religious.<sup>63</sup> I take this sense to derive from the gap between human subjectivity and the

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62 Stewart R. Sutherland, *Atheism and the Rejection of God: Contemporary Philosophy and The Brothers Karamazov*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977) 4.

63 Peter R. Connolly, ‘Tragedy’, *The Furrow*, 29:9 (1978), 511.



rest of the world which appears to exist apart from it – revealing the subjective outlook to be something beyond all objective reality could ever be.

This discontinuity within human experience proclaimed openly by the Tragic worldview seems, however, in many respects to be mirrored in the Christian tradition. Christianity of course sees the fundamental reality beyond experience to be harmonious, and as Sutherland points out, it is ‘committed to an ultimate reconciliation of these discontinuities, to an ultimate re-connection of these disconnected realms whether in this world or the next’.<sup>64</sup> However, it also recognizes a distinction (deriving from St John of the Cross, and which constitutes a long strand in Christian faith), between spiritual doubt, where one feels uncertainty about the claims of faith but without losing the experience of divine presence, and spiritual darkness wherein one suffers the lack of experience of God, even without necessarily doubting the claims of faith.<sup>65</sup> It is the latter that accompanies a saint in his martyrdom undertaken purely out of love or conviction, and without hedging his bets on transcendent salvation. It is no less than ‘spiritual darkness’ that I take to be the raw experience of discontinuity between the world of human value and the rest of existence within the Christian worldview.

Sutherland goes on to say that ‘the point of the reconciliation, the redemption, the re-connection, can only be grasped following the depths of the experience of disconnection and discontinuity.’<sup>66</sup> If this is so, then for redemption to be real, for it to be a bridge between the finite and the infinite, death, the ultimate mark of

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64 Sutherland, ‘Christianity and Tragedy’, 164.

65 St John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, (London: Baronius Press Ltd., 2006).

66 Sutherland, ‘Christianity and Tragedy’, 164.

finitude, has also to be real. This is the Tragic paradox of experience at its purest, and it is expressed in the Christian tradition by the sheer desolation of the Fall. In light of this paradox, as Roger Scruton writes, 'faith verges on hope'; threatened by annihilation, we can see death as a 'transition'.<sup>67</sup> The transition, however, is not into an afterlife that succeeds death in time. Rather it is 'an awareness and acceptance of mortality', which 'changes our way of being' in the sense of 'making a place for us' in the order of reality – extending our experience of it to include the sense of our own standing apart – or re-enchanting it.<sup>68</sup> Scruton points to Simone Weil as expressing this point in terms of the Christian myth:

Man placed himself outside the current of Obedience.  
God chose as his punishment labour and death.  
Consequently labour and death, if Man undergoes them  
in a spirit of willingness, constitute a transference back  
into the current of Supreme Good which is Obedience to  
God.<sup>69</sup>

This is a change in the way the world can be experienced or, to be more precise, another possibility of experiencing one's relation to it. I take this empirical dualism to be a form of the cognitive dualism Scruton advances. The difference in the form of experience translates into a difference in understanding. To the extent that Christianity and Tragedy might be represented as embodying different and irreconcilable aspects of human experience, each needs to be given exclusivity in order that the respective aspects of that experience might be adequately grasped. To ascend to the truth conveyed by a vision of the world, and for this truth to take effect

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67 Roger Scruton, *The Soul of the World*, (London: Princeton University Press, 2014), 196-7.

68 *Ibid.*

69 Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots*, tr. Arthur Wills (London: Routledge, 2002), 293.

on our understanding of reality, one must grant it exclusivity. In the moment of unconditional surrender to that truth, we are given a glimpse of its meaning.<sup>70</sup> Hence the exclusivity of either view necessarily precludes a necessary aspect of the other: this as I have argued is the nature of the inconsistency in attempts which aim at their reconciliation. However, to the extent that they can be understood as responses to subjective human experience of discontinuity with existence, there is a connection between these visions. There is also therefore a truth revealed in a perspective which does not rely on the exclusivity of either the Tragic or the Christian vision as articulated by Jaspers. This truth is the antinomy of experience itself as outlined above. I believe, contrary to Jaspers, that this antinomy is not opaque to the Christian or Tragic worldviews.

One reason to take this perspective seriously is that the tension between Tragedy and Christianity has been extremely troubling for authors reflecting on the subject, and that it rarely seems to be a satisfactory solution to treat veridically their opposing claims, to the effect that one is definitely ruled out by the endorsement of the other. Rather the emphasis tends to be on the paradox of their coexistence and simultaneous appeal to the human spirit. In the concluding section I will point to some of the more dialectically compelling instances where the antinomy of experience is articulated, incorporating aspects of the Christian and Tragic worldviews without denying the tension between them.

### **The Tragic experience within Christianity**

Even the intersection of the human and divine, which is initiated in the Incarnation, and which is brought to completion through the

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<sup>70</sup> In an unpublished paper Ralph Weir has discussed a similar idea under the title of 'The Aspectual Shape of Value Experience'.

Crucifixion, can only be apprehended darkly, still from the perspective of the Fall. Indeed Christ's death on the cross is where all the discontinuities that fill Christianity find their apex. As Connolly writes:

It is instructive in this context to compare St. John's rendering of (Christ's public ministry and death by crucifixion), which is shaped and controlled by a perspective above and beyond tragedy – that of Christ's subsequent resurrection and entry into glory – with Matthew's version. Whereas in John a clear vision of the spiritual victory to come pervades the account of the crisis and agony and reduces its extremity, Matthew dwells without relief on the contrast between Christ's public and private utterances, stresses the divided will and oppressed spirit in the garden and the final darkness on the cross which climaxes in the cry of total abandonment and dereliction.<sup>71</sup>

Precisely this tension is taken up by Bach in his *St Matthew Passion*, where arguably the most desperate and tragic moment is that of Peter's asking forgiveness of a God he has betrayed, and who cannot grant it, as he has died on the cross ('Erbarme dich'). Scruton argues that Bach's *St Matthew Passion* is the nearest art has come to a Christian Tragedy in counterposing the reality of the divine with the reality of death in a single experience: 'the wonderful C-minor chorus that concludes the work is a kind of ritual dance, a lullaby of acceptance that recalls the ritual burials of ancient tragedy.'<sup>72</sup> Although Scruton rightly points out that Bach's *St Matthew Passion* ultimately only tells half of the story, Christ's resurrection does not in any way reduce or soften the appalling reality of his Passion. The promise of redemption does not take

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71 Connolly, 'Tragedy', 558.

72 Roger Scruton, *Death-Devoted Heart: Sex and the Sacred in Wagner's Tristan and Isolde*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 170.

away from the reality of death, which is the result of original sin. It is because of the Fall, the *dis*-grace that the human condition is Tragic. As Stewart Sutherland argues the mood and atmosphere of Christian reflection accepting the truth of Tragedy will be the closed, rather than the empty, grave. He writes:

The epistemological coda to this is that there are forms of agnosticism which are deeply religious. Those are the forms which accept human limitation, which accept that any affirmation about God and the eternal is no more than and no less than an affirmation of what men and women say of God and the eternal.<sup>73</sup>

In other words, the position of the believing Christian is epistemically akin to that of the women who, on the third day following the Crucifixion, went to visit Christ's tomb: they were not going with the hope of meeting their Messiah resurrected, for they prepared burial spices, and were unsure if they would be able to move the stone. Their purpose was that of mourning.

Kierkegaard considers mourning the highest and most perfect work of love precisely because in mourning one is denied any possibility of reciprocation.<sup>74</sup> In a true act of Christian faith, the separation from God is experienced as intensely as His presence. Protestant Liberal Theology in the early twentieth-century attempted to explain this tension in Christian life, resulting in discontinuities in the most difficult areas of moral and social theology by characterizing the place of the believer as being 'in this world but not of it'. This place is affirmed in mourning the dead, in which the reality of death is accepted and yet challenged. It seems to me this is also the stance of the tragedian. Auden points to the

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73 Sutherland, 'Christianity and Tragedy', 166.

74 See Søren Kierkegaard, 'The Work of Love in Remembering One Dead', in *Works of Love*, tr. Howard and Edna Hong (London: Collins, 1962).

unassuageable difficulty this poses for any attempt of representing the experience of faith. He sees this difficulty most clearly pronounced with regard to depictions of Christ:

The contradiction between the profane appearance and the sacred assertion is impassable to the imagination. It is impossible to represent Christ on the stage. If he is made dramatically interesting, he ceases to be Christ and turns into a Hercules or a Svengali. Nor is it really possible to represent him in the visual arts for, if he were visually recognisable, he would be a god of the pagan kind. The best the painter can do is to paint either the Bambino with the Madonna or the dead Christ on the cross, for every baby and every corpse seems to be both individual and universal, *the* baby, *the* corpse. But neither a baby nor a corpse can say *I am the Way, etc.*<sup>75</sup>

So what of tragedy as a literary form of expression? If the Tragic view is ultimately true in its scepticism, why write, why perform, why watch and listen? As Sutherland says 'the most significant point about tragic drama is that it is written and performed at all'.<sup>76</sup> The enactment of tragic plays is the surest testimony of the longing for truth, although doomed, not being abandoned in the Tragic worldview. As the heroic act of faith, which brings Peter to his knees, the Tragic can be thought of as a heroic act of engagement, wrestling with and refusal to accept the inevitable. The affirmation of the world as it is *sub specie aeternitatis* lies not in what is proclaimed, but in the act of proclamation, which, as is postulated by Rilke in his *Duino Elegies*, is an act of re-enchanting the world. Bradley revealingly observes, however, that modern tragedy, unlike the ancient, ignores the accepted religious ideas of the time. He adds in a note to his essay on Hegel's views on tragedy:

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75 W.H. Auden, 'Postscript: Christianity and Art', in *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 457.

76 Sutherland, 'Christianity and Tragedy', 167.

The ultimate reason for this difference, on Hegel's view, would be that the Olympian gods are themselves '*sinnliches Scheinen der Idee*', and so are in the same element as *Art*, while this is on the whole, not so with modern religious ideas. One result would be that Greek tragedy represents the total Greek mind more fully than modern tragedy can the total modern mind.<sup>77</sup>

The open conclusion I promised can hardly be surprising at this point: the Tragic and the Christian worldviews can be understood as representing two ways of understanding the world and our place in it, based on responses to different and irreconcilable aspects of human experience of reality as ontologically, existentially, and axiologically discontinuous. However, in so far as these are aspects of the same human experience, it seems to me they cannot adequately represent the human life-world independently of each other. As Jaspers declares of Tragedy in the title of his study: 'Tragedy is not enough'. He further elaborates:

For a man to abandon and forget religion completely would be to end the philosophic quest itself. It would be replaced by unreasoning despair ignorant of itself, a life lived merely from moment to moment, a kind of nihilism full of chaotic superstition.<sup>78</sup>

In this way religious belief too misrepresents our experience of the world, and consequently perverts our understanding of the human condition, if it is not informed by the haunting doubt deriving from the apprehension of human limitedness. I understand this to be roughly the position which MacKinnon takes, although he gives this tension I called the antinomy of experience only a brief

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77 A. C. Bradley, *Oxford Lectures on Poetry*, (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1909), 95.

78 Jaspers, *Tragedy is not Enough*, 25.

commentary.<sup>79</sup> Speaking from the existential tradition in Christian Theology I referred to earlier, Hans Urs von Balthasar looks at the ethical side of this relation, suggesting that goodness in human life can be obscured by the limitations and brokenness which are its natural part. The kind of obscurity affected by limitation and human imperfection he describes as tragic. In his theological aesthetics he attempts to illuminate the tragic features of Christ's life in order to understand better the tragic dimension present, in varying degrees, in everyday Christian life. On Christopher Steck's interpretation of von Balthasar, in tragic situations where the 'brokenness and sin of the human condition threaten to undermine human love, the Christian's moral response, like Christ's own, will be inspired more by hopeful fidelity to God's call than by confident expectation of the fruitfulness of his love'.<sup>80</sup> It seems that the Tragic and Christian worldviews can be understood if not as complementary, then at least as open to one another, providing a perspective from which each gains a better understanding of itself in view of the intrinsic ambiguity of human experience.

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79 Cf. Donald MacKinnon, *The Problem of Metaphysics*.

80 See Christopher Steck, 'Tragedy and the Ethics of Hans Urs von Balthasar', *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 21 (2001), 233.