

Tragedy as an Independent Real-World Phenomenon

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Abstract: *Tragedies, as real-world phenomena, are independent of their literary genre and are suitable for philosophical analysis. My analysis focuses on a type of tragedy that emerges in the practical lives of individuals in a broad sense. Tragedies often manifest in mundane, everyday situations. However, the fact that a situation is tragic does not mean that any unfortunate event that happens to an individual qualifies as a tragedy, nor does it imply that any practical pursuit is a tragic candidate. Instead, these practical tragedies occur when the world obstructs pursuits that are fundamentally valuable. Tragedies are frequently dramatized in specific contexts such as moral dilemmas and historical calamities. Yet, these are merely instances of how the world can oppose what matters more universally.*

1. Introduction

Most discussion of tragedy in the history of philosophy has viewed it as something to be evaluated on aesthetic grounds with only indirect significance outside this context. Aristotle, in the first book of his *Poetics*, evaluates tragedy as a literary type that functions in a particular way aesthetically. Schiller's "On the Art of Tragedy" analyzes the tragic form to say something about the sensuous nature of human beings given tragedy's positive appeal, but still understands tragedy as a form of art to be evaluated as such. Schopenhauer, in *The World as Will and Representation*, likewise uses tragic art to explain a curious fact about human reason: how we are able to take pleasure in the depiction of terrible events. Hume's "Of Tragedy" explores the same problem. Hegel, in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and Nietzsche, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, also discuss the genesis and evolution of tragic art from a philosophical point of view. What each of these approaches have in common is the view of tragedy as first and foremost an aesthetic category that has only indirect application to practical human life generally.

Contemporary philosophical explorations of tragedy have not always followed suit. Martha Nussbaum, for instance, argues that in difficult moral dilemmas pure cost-benefit analysis does not capture what she calls "the tragic question," or the question concerning whether any of the available options in a dilemma involves serious moral wrongdoing.¹ Thomas Hill similarly understands "tragic choices" as occurring when an individual is faced with options all of which involve something any good person would find repugnant morally.² In locating tragedy in the context of moral life, Nussbaum and Hill recognize that tragedy is a phenomenon that exists in the real world independently of its dramatic

¹ Martha Nussbaum, "The Costs of Tragedy," pg. 1007.

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

form. Other contemporary philosophers have extended this application of the tragic to practical dilemmas generally, especially in circumstances of value incommensurability (Richardson³, Wiggins⁴). However, these discussions typically assume that tragedy only occurs in contexts of conflict between values. This characteristically occurs without independent argument for this narrow conception of tragedy. The concept of *tragedy* itself is usually left unanalyzed. I think that tragedy is a much broader phenomenon than this, and that it deserves careful analysis independent of the contexts of serious practical or moral dilemma where it is found in much of contemporary philosophy. Tragedy is not primarily an art form, nor is it merely found in contexts of value conflict or moral dilemma. Instead, I claim that tragedy is a phenomenon of practical life that occurs when the world is inhospitable to what matters. This understanding of tragedy has significant implications for how we understand the tragic aspect of the practical, moral, and aesthetic dimensions of life.

A note about methodology: I do not in this paper attempt to convince a skeptic concerning my claims about value, practical reason, or morality. I take for granted that these things are in some sense real features of human life that can be analyzed through philosophical reflection on their everyday functions. My aim here is holistic and abductive: to explain how all of these things fit together in a way that illuminates and is illuminated by instances of tragedy in everyday human life. This is why I begin with paradigmatic examples of tragedy in human life and seek to discover what it is that ties them together.

2. What is Tragedy?

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

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

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

Furthermore, what makes the cases tragic appears incongruous. Case 1 seems tragic because of lost potential. Children dying is paradigmatically tragic because they have so much life left. But cases 2 and 4 do not lose their tragic element if the individuals involved are elderly or near death. In case 4, it would not make sense to help alleviate the tragic burden on the son by advising him that both of his parents are near death so his obligations to them lose much of their weight.

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

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

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

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

In this paper, I provide an account of tragedy that captures these features, among others. My view is that tragedies arise out of a relation between individuals and their practical world. This relation is one of *inhospitality*. Tragedies occur when the world is inhospitable to what matters. In the context of the practical lives of individuals, this occurs when the world obstructs choiceworthy practical aims. Therefore, while tragedies are harmful to those who experience them, not all negative events are tragic. Similarly, not all practical aims thwarted by the world qualify as tragedies. Practical tragedies afflict individuals in the pursuit of aims that truly matter, or choiceworthy aims. Tragedies do not exclusively occur in moral dilemmas, or only in contexts of irony; they are not narrowly confined to situations where values irreconcilably clash. These are specific *modalities* of tragedy. The fundamental feature of tragedy is the world's inhospitality to what matters.⁵

3. Tragedy as a Philosophical Concept

This thesis concerning the nature of tragedy entails that tragedies are real-world phenomena appropriate for philosophical analysis. Walter Kaufmann notes in his *Tragedy and Philosophy* that the Greek word *tragos* was coined only *after* the Greek tragedies had been composed.⁶ According to Kaufmann, “the tragic” did not refer to a commonly recognized phenomenon or experience that the tragedians depicted in narrative form. Instead, the narrative form created the logical space for analyzing real-life events as tragic insofar as they resembled the tragic formula. If *tragedy* is first and foremost a literary form, then this would undermine the theory of tragedy as a legitimate real-world object of philosophical analysis. Instead, *tragedy* would be a mere literary genre descriptor that real-world events sometimes resemble.⁷

Etymology notwithstanding, *tragedy* does refer to a common, real-world phenomenon. In the context of analyzing tragedy, there are two main reasons for rejecting Kaufmann's argument: 1) The pervasiveness of the concept of tragedy across cultures, including those without strong roots in Ancient Greece.⁸ 2) Everyday recognition of tragedies is more conceptually basic than its paradigmatic portrayal in literature. This helps explain why tragic literature formed in the first place: to elaborate on and explore a common existential phenomenon. Even if the literary form gave rise to the term *tragos*, this is consistent with the concept of tragedy preceding the literary innovation. The birth of tragedy in literature must itself be explained, and this is best accomplished by positing a pre-existing concept of tragedy which the tragedians helped fix in their works.

One upshot of exploring the etymological argument against tragedy as an independent phenomenon is that it exposes the main drawback of focusing on literary examples as paradigmatic cases of tragedy. Literary tragedies are typically meant to function cathartically for their audience.⁹ Catharsis requires comprehension of events, but does not necessarily involve deep theoretical understanding of them. This makes literary tragedies poor candidates for philosophical analysis done at the ontological ground

⁵ I distinguish *what matters* from *the good*. Something matters when it warrants practical concern. There are several types of things that are good (goodness relative to function, welfare, instrumental goods, etc.) and not every instance of them warrants practical concern (e.g. the excellence of an assassin). I again explore this more in a later portion of this project.

⁶ Kaufmann, *Tragedy and Philosophy*, pg. 310.

⁷ Think here of the classic American *noir* films from the 1940-50s. There is likely no real-world phenomena of *noir-ishness* that exists independently of the genre. But those familiar with the genre's trappings will see femme fatales and hardboiled detectives in the real world.

⁸ For example, in the Jewish tradition, the *Book of Job*. In the Buddhist tradition, the story of Patavara in the *Pali Canon*.

⁹ See Aristotle, *Poetics*, Sec. 1449.

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

The paradigm cases of tragedy given in section 1 provide the means for analyzing its fundamental nature. Of first concern is what constitutes the *subject* of a tragedy. As cases 3 and 4 make clear, the subjects of tragedy are often everyday individuals in the course of their practical lives. It is misleading to posit a narrow and unique character to the tragic subject such as the tragic hero of many Greek narratives. In addition to the paradigm cases already given, Sophocles (especially in his characterization of Antigone) illustrated that tragic flaws are not necessary for tragic subjects. And Shakespeare's tragedies are well-known for their amoral character. Narrow requirements on the subjects of tragedy over-specify its ingredients. Tragedy is not necessarily quotidian, but it does occur in the lives of unexceptional individuals in the course of their everyday lives. Tragedies are not typically world-historical events, even if these are the cases that are often dramatized in literature.

A second feature of tragedies is that they involve *events*. All four of the paradigmatic cases in section 1 involve events in the sense of temporally (and sometimes spatially) extended but limited occurrences (as distinct from mere *instances*). However, given that tragedies necessarily involve subjects, tragedies cannot be *mere events*. Not any old event is a tragedy. Such an account would be overbroad. A natural disaster that occurs on a planet without individuals would for that reason not be a tragedy.

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

4. Inhospitability and Inescapability

Tragedies are best understood as a circumstantial relation between individuals and their practical world. This relation is one of *inhospitability*. Hospitality is a relation between an individual and the conditions of their environment relevant to their practical success. A practical world is hospitable when it provides conditions adequate for the success of an individual's practical aims.¹⁰ A practical world is inhospitable when it fails to provide these conditions.

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

Tragedies emerge from the conditions of a world inhospitable to the success of practical aims. In order for tragedy to occur, these conditions must be *inescapable*. Consider an individual who desires to become a film director, but never purchases a camera, watches films, or involves himself with other filmmakers. He would fail in his aim to become a film director, but not because of the inescapable conditions of his practical world. The failed film director is not a tragic subject because his predicament predictably arises from conditions within his control. Contrast this with an aspiring female film director

¹⁰ Not any practical aim is a candidate for tragedy, however. As I will add later, tragic inhospitability occurs only for *choiceworthy* aims.

living in a context where women do not have the opportunity to work behind the camera. She would be a tragic subject because the conditions of her world are inescapable. It is not within her power to prevent the failure of her aim to become a filmmaker.

The inescapability criterion of tragedy captures what most conspicuously characterizes tragedies: that the individual fails because their aim is *at odds* with the circumstances of their practical world. I may have an aim to practice playing guitar, but if I fail because I decide to read literature in my free time instead, this is not a tragedy. I have merely decided to attend to one aim over another. Since this decision does not follow from the inhospitable conditions of the practical world, it is not tragic. Contrast this with an individual with an aim to play guitar who cannot because a terrible accident has left their dominant hand disfigured. Their practical failure is tragic because of the inhospitable conditions of their practical world.

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

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

The inescapability of tragedies reintroduces a problem mentioned earlier: Some tragedies appear to have easily escapable conditions, and their status as tragedies constituted in part by the fact that they nevertheless occur. Consider a tragic case of the bystander effect, where several individuals refrain from helping someone in dire need because they assume someone else will come to the rescue. This is an instance of collective failure where several individuals could have prevented disaster, but each failed to do so. This tragedy appears to be as easily escapable as the non-tragic case of the failed filmmaker since it is within the power of each bystander to avoid disaster. Crucially, this high degree of escapability appears in part to constitute the bystander effect *as a tragedy*. It is the stark coincidence of disaster and avoidability that seems to fix an instance of the bystander effect *as a tragedy*. If these reflections are accurate, then the thesis that tragedies involve inescapable conditions is undermined.

What this line of thinking misses is the locus of inescapability in tragedies. It is not the unfortunate outcome of the tragedy which is inescapable, but the *practical conditions* under which individuals make decisions. These practical conditions consist of whichever elements of the environment are relevant to practical success. Inescapability obtains when the relevant practical conditions are outside of the control of the individual. This can occur locally or globally. Locally inescapable conditions arise when practical conditions cannot be changed at a particular time but can be changed over time. Practical conditions are globally inescapable when they cannot be changed at all.¹¹

In the case of the bystander effect, individuals in its grip find themselves in locally inescapable conditions. The fact that understanding of the bystander effect appears to weaken its effect¹² only

¹¹ Illustrative here are certain features of human finitude, both physical and psychological.

¹² See van Bommel, et al. "Be aware to care: Public self-awareness leads to a reversal of the bystander effect," in *Journal of Experimental*

means that it is globally escapable over time. This makes sense of how determinant instances of the bystander effect are tragedies (partly due to the locally inescapable conditions), while acknowledging that such disasters can be avoided by taking measures to change practical conditions (realizing their global escapability).

This same pattern of argument can be used for other examples of apparently escapable tragedies. Alcohol addiction is a tragedy not because each individual drink is fated,¹³ but because human physiology and psychology allow for, and in some cases partially facilitate, addiction. Addiction creates locally inescapable conditions, but with the right measures these can often be overcome. Economic disasters are tragic (if they are) not because they are radically contingent effects of individual choices, but because they create deleterious conditions outside the local control of individuals. Losing your job due to a recession is paradigmatically tragic for this reason. Macroeconomic realities are characteristically inescapable for those who suffer their consequences, but they are alterable.

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

5. The Demarcation Problem of Tragedy

Tragedies emerge from the inhospitable conditions of the world. This characterization is helpful for resolving what I call, following Walter Kaufmann's question in his *Tragedy and Philosophy*, the demarcation problem of tragedy: *What separates the tragic from the merely pathetic or bad?*¹⁴ I warned of the dangers of over-specification with regard to the subjects of tragedy. What of the dangers of under-specification, of deflating tragedy into the merely bad?

Consider the following case: I stub my toe on a coffee table. In some instances, the pain experienced by stubbing a toe may be of greater intensity than the pain experienced in some minor tragedies, but this is not a sufficient reason to think it tragic. Stubbing a toe is a pain best characterized functionally as a mere practical inconvenience or frustration, distinct from tragic events that arise from a relation of greater tension between an individual's aims and their world.¹⁵ An instance of physical pain may be pitiful, may elicit sympathy, and may make an individual worse-off, but these factors do not make it tragic. Tragedy involves but is distinct from *bad things happening*.

Even on a grand scale, many or terribly *bad things happening* is not sufficient for tragedy. A natural disaster may destroy an ecosystem of merely living things in its wake. This is a disaster for the many living things in the ecosystem, but it is not in and of itself tragic.¹⁶ Tragedies do not involve merely living things or systems. Tragedies befall individuals like the novelist or the child with the preventable disease.

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¹³ Such rhetoric is well-meant, but fails to explain how some individual alcoholics *do* in fact stop drinking. The tragedy of addiction for the addict is found foremost in the having of a type of self-destructive desire in the first place.

¹⁴ Kaufmann, pg. 311.

¹⁵ There may be a sense in which the capacity for experiencing pain is tragic, but this is because pain characteristically functions to inhibit the successful exercise of agency. Where pain does not function in this way, it is not tragic.

¹⁶ I have in mind here merely living things, such as plants. I am open to the idea that non-human animals are subjects of tragedy, although this is not necessary for the main claims of this paper.

Tragedies are characteristically bad for those who suffer them. Losing a long-developed personal project in a house fire is bad for the novelist. But this does not mean that anything that is bad for an individual is a tragedy. Tragedies involve events that are detrimental to individuals' well-being, but they cannot be fully explained in terms of the world's inhospitality to well-being.

There are a few additional reasons for thinking that tragedies cannot be fully explained in terms of the world's inhospitality to well-being. First, this would not explain why tragedies occur only in the lives of individuals with psychologies, and not functionally organized things like computers and cars. The latter are analyzable in terms of well-being or functional success (what is *good for* the thing given the type of thing that it is), but they are not subjects of tragedy.¹⁷ In some cases, the destruction of a computer may be a tragedy, but it is not a tragedy *for the computer*. Second, there are events that are bad for individuals but which are not tragic. Stubbing my toe is bad for me. Missing a meal because I am helping my friend move is bad for me. A hangover after a night out is bad for me. None of these are in and of themselves tragic. Each of these events may contribute toward tragic circumstances if they play the proper role in inhibiting the success of a practical aim. But this functional role is not occupied by any event that is detrimental to well-being.

Finally, the content of an individual's well-being depends in part on the exercise of their agency: namely, the decisions they make and what they recognize as valuable.¹⁸ The novelist's well-being is constituted in part by the writing of their novel because they deem the project worthwhile. To characterize their tragedy in terms of a detriment to their well-being is to get the explanatory direction backward: The novelist is a subject of tragedy because the world has prevented them from realizing an aim they recognize as valuable. The tragic house fire is bad for them only because they first had the practical aim of writing a novel. The recipe for tragedy involves more than merely bad things happening. It involves the exercise of agency in pursuit of what matters and its failure brought on by the world.

The key fault of explaining tragedy in terms of well-being is that it does not locate and explain what makes circumstances tragic. Recall case 4: The son who must decide whom to care for between two ailing parents does not face tragic circumstances because his dilemma threatens his well-being (although it surely does). He faces tragic circumstances because his practical aims are undermined in a way outside of his control. Taking care of one parent entails failing to take care of the other. His reasons are in conflict, each demanding the same resources. The tragedy in this case is explained at the level of reasons and agency, not merely well-being.

6. The Thickness of Tragedy

Tragedies involve a relation of inhospitality between an individual and their practical world. This occurs when an individual's practical aims are thwarted by the world. This does not mean, however, that any thwarted practical aim is a candidate for tragedy. Consider someone who has a practical aim to murder an innocent person for financial gain. If the circumstances of the world were to make the successful execution of this aim impossible, it would not be a tragedy. This is because impermissible practical aims are not candidates for tragedies (although, for reasons I will explain, tragedies often arise in the context of impermissible aims). This is because *tragedy* is an evaluatively "thick" concept. Evaluatively thick concepts are concepts that contain both non-evaluatively descriptive and evaluatively descriptive content.¹⁹ For instance, *courage* is an evaluatively thick concept because it combines opposition to

¹⁷ One difference between merely functionally organized things and individuals that are subjects of tragedy is that the latter have the capacity for happiness. The world's inhospitality to an individual's happiness is closer to accounting for tragedy than well-being. However, happiness cannot ultimately play this role because happiness can be secured through the success of impermissible practical aims, which I argue later are not candidates for tragic failure.

¹⁸ For more on this line of reasoning regarding well-being, see Ebels-Duggan, "Against Beneficence: A Normative Account of Love."

¹⁹ See Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, pg. 129.

danger with an evaluative claim that such action is choiceworthy. In a similar way, *tragedy* conjoins the failure of a practical aim brought on by the world with the claim that the aim is choiceworthy.²⁰ Losing a novel in a house fire is a tragedy only if the practical aim of writing a novel is choiceworthy. Losing blackmail materials intended to extort an innocent person is not tragic if the blackmail is impermissible.²¹

The evaluative content of *tragedy* is helpful for determining the locus of inhospitable conditions within complex circumstances. Some cases do not have their tragic aspect *on the surface*, where the world directly undermines the execution of an individual's aim. Consider the case of a happy slave who finds themselves content with their enslavement. At first blush, this case appears to undermine the given account of tragedy: The happy slave has no practical aim to escape enslavement, but their state is clearly tragic.

The problem with this objection is that it expects the world's inhospitable conditions to manifest only in the practical conditions of the world *external* to the individual. The happy slave's tragic conditions, however, partially lie in their inability to recognize that their practical aim exists due to the poor conditions of the world making enslavement appear preferable to freedom.²² If the slave truly has no aim to be free, then such myopia concerning choiceworthiness is tragic.²³

A modal argument helps make the case: If the slave had developed their practical aims in conditions more hospitable to the exercise of autonomy and to the understanding of choiceworthiness, this would have resulted in a practical aim to be free. The happy slave's practical aim is akin to what Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum have called *adaptive preferences*,²⁴ or preferences that are warped by inhospitable practical conditions. Warped preferences of this type are characteristically tragic. Their *warpedness* speaks to this fact: Warped preferences are best understood as a misalignment between an individual's desires and what those desires would be under more hospitable conditions. In the case of the happy slave there is no desire to be free, but this is due to the world's inhospitality. Under more hospitable conditions where freedom appeared possible, there would be *at least* a tension between a desire to remain enslaved for the sake of security and a desire to be free. Tragedy's evaluative content secures insight into how the happy slave's tragic circumstances include the content of their desires. Their enslavement is tragic because in more hospitable conditions they would surely find freedom choiceworthy.²⁵

Reflection on the tragic aspect of the happy slave case helpfully illuminates a famous case from literature: *Macbeth*. *Macbeth* is a paradigmatic tragedy in literature, but it is not immediately clear in what sense it is tragic. *Macbeth* aims to take the Scottish throne by nefarious means, including

²⁰ It should be noted that I am using choiceworthiness in a broad sense here, referring to aims that are choiceworthy in normal conditions, or all else being equal. In a narrow sense, some actions are non-choiceworthy that would be choiceworthy in this broad sense. Consider a medical doctor who aims to practice a particular brand of medicine. This is normally choiceworthy. In an emergency medical situation like a pandemic, however, they may have an obligation to give up their niche practice and join a general force treating victims of the pandemic. Refusing to fulfill this obligation would be non-choiceworthy in the narrow sense even if continuing their practice is choiceworthy in the broad sense. Importantly, situations like this where broadly choiceworthy aims become narrowly non-choiceworthy are characteristically tragic. This is because narrow choiceworthiness includes the conditions of the world, which in tragic cases are inhospitable to what is broadly choiceworthy.

²¹ Noting that tragedies occur for choiceworthy aims doesn't require being dictators about what's choiceworthy. It only means that disagreement over what's tragic will partly depend on which aims are considered choiceworthy.

²² We might consider a case where the reason for the slave's contentment is not because of the poor conditions of the practical world, but because the slave simply wishes not to expend the effort to make choices of their own accord. This would undermine the argument here, but this is clearly not the phenomena the happy slave case wishes to capture.

²³ In cases like this, there often arises a concern about paternalism. I claim, however, that it is not paternalistic to disagree about what is choiceworthy. Impermissible paternalism occurs when an individual overrules another's rightful exercise of autonomy. Interestingly, in the case of the happy slave, it is autonomy itself which is the value in question. This undercuts the accusation of paternalism since the latter turns on the happy slave being right about autonomy's relative disvalue.

²⁴ See Sen, "Equality of What?"; Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development*.

²⁵ It is also important here to consider persons not just modally, but *over time*. This foregrounds how non-choiceworthy aims are developed in accordance with inhospitable conditions.

deception and murder. He is a diabolical figure for this reason. His failure to ultimately hold on to the throne cannot be tragic, although it involves the world's inhospitality to his aim. This is because his aim is vile. The tragic aspect of *Macbeth* must be found elsewhere: namely, in his warped understanding of the choiceworthiness of power for its own sake. In this sense, Macbeth is an example of tragic *character*, as it is his character that is tragic. The world is not tragically inhospitable to his practical aim to hold power, but to the flourishing of his virtuous character and to the appropriate recognition of the value of political power.²⁶ Macbeth's aims are impermissible and for this reason not candidates for tragedy. His tragedy arises from the choiceworthy aims he does *not* have. If it is because of the conditions of his world that he does not have these aims, then he is a tragic character.

Tragedies befall choiceworthy practical aims. But there are often tragedies that occur in the context of impermissible practical aims. Sometimes this is because individuals must for moral reasons give up on narrowly impermissible aims that would in normal circumstances be choiceworthy. But some other tragedies arise in the context of impermissible aims because the aims themselves have been formed under inhospitable conditions. This is why I have characterized tragedy as *inhospitality to choiceworthy aims (in general)*, and not merely to choiceworthy aims adopted by individuals. This account includes the choiceworthy aims individuals ought to have, but the world prevents them from having due to its inhospitality. This is why it is often tragic when individuals adopt non-choiceworthy aims, especially when doing so for reasons that are rationalizable in terms of what matters. It is understandable that the happy slave values security. It is also understandable that Macbeth values political power. These are tragic figures because their worlds are inhospitable to the recognition and realization of the choiceworthy aspects of security and power. They aim at what matters, but they miss the mark. If the world had been different (including the world's role in the character-formation of the individuals involved), the choiceworthy could have been realized.

7. The Impossibility of Values

Tragedies emerge when the world is inhospitable to choiceworthy aims. Choiceworthy aims characteristically realize values. Tragedies thus prevent the realization of values characteristically associated with choiceworthy aims.

This claim may appear incompatible with a certain class of tragedies recognized in everyday life. Consider the following case: A middle-aged doctor regretfully wonders whether they should have pursued a career in athletics instead of medicine.²⁷ The doctor would be correct to describe their circumstance as tragic although it is unclear that the world has thwarted a practical aim. Consider two different extrapolations of the case: 1) The doctor suffered a catastrophic accident during competition which effectively ended their athletic aspirations. In this version of the case, it is clear that the circumstances are tragic. The doctor's practical world thwarted their ambitions in a manner outside of their control. Their practical aim remained but the means for realizing it were vitiated. 2) The doctor had a successful collegiate athletic career, but ultimately decided that a medical career would both be more financially stable and a better use of their time and energy. In this version of the case, it is less clear that the circumstances are tragic. This is because it is not obvious that the doctor's practical world has thwarted an aim. In fact, the doctor appears to have given up the aim entirely of their own volition. Given the account of tragedy given thus far, how can this case be maintained as a tragedy?

Tragedies can be intelligibly understood only under the condition that choiceworthy practical aims realize genuine values. The case of the regretful doctor is specifically a case of the *impossibility of values*. The impossibility of values refers to situations of value trade-off where inevitable value-loss occurs. In these situations, all relevant values recognized by an individual cannot be realized. Not all

²⁶ Consider the role that the Three Witches and Lady Macbeth play in constituting Macbeth's practical world.

²⁷ Thanks to Jonathan Garthoff for pointing out a scene from *Fields of Dreams* (1989) that features this type of tragedy.

such cases are tragic, however. Consider the choice between going to one of two beloved restaurants for dinner. In choosing one restaurant I choose against the other, though I recognize its value. This case is not tragic since I am highly unlikely to simultaneously maintain practical aims to dine at both restaurants *tonight*. Contrast this with a case where an immigrant desires to eat the cuisine of their native country, but no such restaurants exist in their current city. In this case, their practical aim is thwarted by the world, its associated values left unrealizable, and their circumstances are appropriately described as a (minor) tragedy.²⁸

When cases of the impossibility of values are tragic, it is because the world has thwarted the realization of the values associated with choiceworthy aims. In the second version of the case of the regretful doctor, there is good reason to think that a tragedy has occurred even though the doctor has voluntarily given up their practical aim of becoming a professional athlete. This is revealed by the fact that the doctor has given up their aim of becoming a professional athlete not because they lost interest in it, but because an athletic career was not as likely to provide a good life as a career in medicine. This is importantly different from giving up a practical aim for the reason of no longer recognizing its value. If the latter were the case, then the doctor's regretful wonderings would not be intelligible.²⁹ That the doctor wonders whether they should have taken up an athletic career only makes sense if they still recognize the *value* associated in the unrealized path of life. Taking on a medical career necessitates the loss of value that would be realized in a career in athletics. The doctor's practical world was such that these considerations proved determinative for their choice in career. They are right to wonder, if things (i.e. *the world*) had been different, whether they could have succeeded in athletics as well.

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

8. Conclusion

Tragedies arise for individuals out of the inescapable conditions of an inhospitable practical world. These conditions undermine the realization of values associated with choiceworthy practical aims. This account of tragedy binds together cases as disparate as a plane crash and a doctor's mid-life crisis. It also illuminates cases from literature such as those of Macbeth and Oedipus. In each of the cases discussed, the world is inhospitable to the realization of values associated with choiceworthy aims. Tragedies are not fundamentally circumstances faced by moral agents in "damned if you do, damned if you don't" scenarios. Nor are they found solely in situations in which impossible values clash. These are *types* of tragedies, but tragedy proper fundamentally arises from a relation between the pursuit of what matters and the inhospitable conditions of the world.

²⁸ In addition to being a minor or mundane tragedy, this is also an example of a tragedy that does not involve a *clash* of values. Cases of tragic impossibility of values are a species of tragedy proper, which is brought on by the inhospitable conditions of the world.

²⁹ Unless of course they wonder whether they were wrong in this change of mind, which satisfies the same point.

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