Tragedy, Pluralism, Agonism: Ancient Greek Tragedy as a foundation for pluralist theory, with an application to pluralist agonism

by

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A thesis submitted to the Victoria University of Wellington in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Victoria University of Wellington
2015

Preface and acknowledgements:

It woz Robert Deuchars who drew me into this quagmire. His superb course on theory in international relations and his suggestion of a topic for my Honours dissertation started me down this path. I would like to thank him nonetheless, for feeding my mind, and especially for his years of supervisory service. I hope for the sake of students everywhere that he will one day return to lecturing, and that the trend of corporate ignorance getting in the way of academic excellence will be reversed.

Xavier Marquez took up the flame and coped with the unfathomable student. His encouragement and unconditional support helped me to get over the line in the end. Discussions, and editing and peer reviewing work for AntePodium, Robbie Shilliam and Joel Colon-Rios were also helpful, as was tutoring for the Politics and International Relations programme. The company of Jason Young enhanced many chats, journal editorial decisions, and a few beverages too.

Sasakawa Young Leaders Fellowship Fund and Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga provided the scholarships that made this possible. MAI ki Pōneke was a rock built on shared experience – tenā koutou i ā koutou tautoko, team.

To my wife Bryony who stood by me, particularly through debilitating illness, to my boys who arrived along the way, to my parents and in-laws, to friends and whanau, ngā mihi nui ki a koutou. To my Koro, who was the keenest amongst all to see the final article, but passed on before the end – you will have a fair amount of paper to go alongside the whenua of your mokopuna, and keep you warm.

Abstract:

In Fifth Century B.C. Athens, the tragic playwrights took upon themselves the traditional mantle of poet-sage and responded to the cultural crisis of their time: the rupture within the Athenian mindset between on the one hand, an emergent Enlightenment-style discourse based on the juridico-political rationality of the democratic *polis* and on a confident assessment of the human condition, and on the other, the archaic discourse of myth and its "pessimism of strength".

Their plays held the two in an uneasy yet creative tension, projecting a pluralist ethos grounded in the assertion of the ambiguity and limits of the human condition. The thesis seeks to elaborate on the nature of this pre-philosophical ethos through the exploration of ancient Greek history and thought and the plays themselves. It delineates the expression in this ethos of a dual movement of problematisation and renewal: a critical, problematising, attitude towards both "rational" and "mythic" discourses, and in the space of thought created by this self-questioning, the elaboration of a minimalist platform for claim-making compatible with both the tragic onto-epistemology of limits and moderation and life in the democratic *polis*.
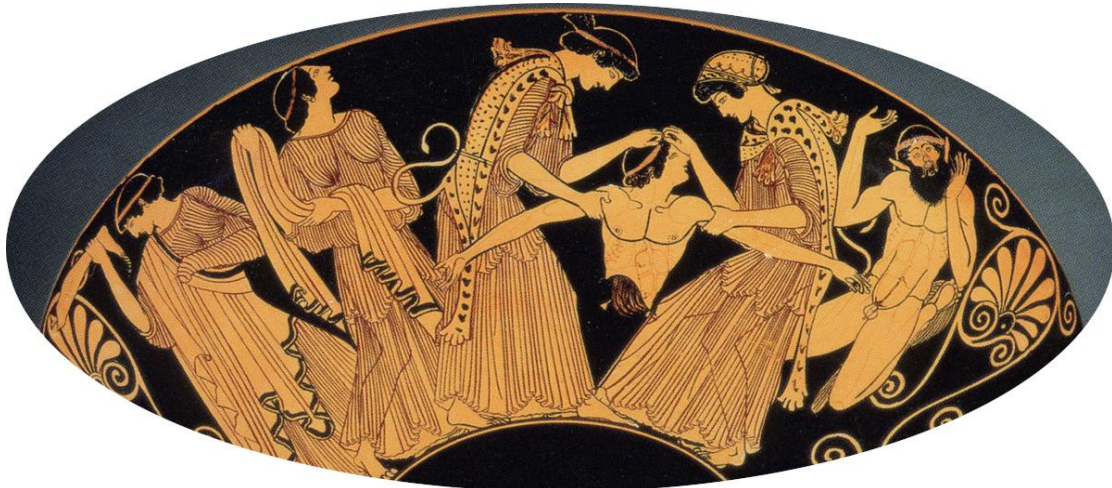
This reading of the plays recognizes the problematisation of monistic claim-making in terms of truth, identity, values and politics. For instance, the playwrights call into question the archaic code of honour of the hero or the instrumental rationality adopted by some of their contemporary Athenian politicians: both systems of value are deemed too rigid and too simplistic to accord with the ambiguity and diversity of life in the city. It also outlines the values of moderation, reciprocity, and public-interestedness that are put forward by the tragedians as palliatives to the antagonism generated by monistic claim-making. These form a pluralist platform on which the democratic contest can be played out without reifying any singular and substantive account of politics, and with a lesser likelihood of dividing the city into factions that seek power at the expense of the city's survival.

The thesis then concludes with an application of the pluralist ethos of classical tragedy to a contemporary pluralist theory. By maintaining the tension between rationalist and mythic discourses, classical tragedy presents to Athenians a "constructive deconstruction" of their worldview. Tragedy's pre-philosophical and pluralist ethos can underpin the democratic theory of "pluralist agonism", helping it to navigate a course between modern foundationalist and anti-foundationalist philosophical ethos and their expressions in democratic theory: the liberal reification of constitutionalism and the democratic privileging of popular sovereignty.

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Overall Introduction

The dismemberment of Pentheus depicted by Douris on a kylix, circa 480B.C.

'Graspings: things whole and not whole, what is drawn together and what is drawn asunder, the harmonious and the discordant. The one is made up of all things, and all things issue from the one.' Heraclitus.[1]

If one was to draw a genealogical chart of modern Western political thought, what would it look like? The "founding fathers" of the Enlightenment and of liberalism would loom large. The likes of Hugo Grotius and Thomas Hobbes reach back in time to draw inspiration from the classical Greek philosophies of Plato and Aristotle, and are followed by Baruch Spinoza, John Locke, Montesquieu, Immanuel Kant, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Stuart Mill, and others.[2] Their descendants in recent times could be said to include the likes of Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls, who continue, to varying degrees, to carry the flame of the Enlightenment's pursuit of a universalist political rationalism in the context of late modern liberal democratic theory.[3] This unification through the reason of the individual, through *'una scientia universalis'* [4], embodies a monistic way of thinking, privileging the One over the Many, and some form of rationality as the ultimate basis for epistemology and the conduct of politics. As a faculty deemed common to all, reason is understood to have a disinterested, objective quality that can help to create a just consensus or democratic settlement.

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[1] Heraclitus in Burnet J., fragment 59
[2] Cassirer E., pp.3-36 & pp.234-274
[3] Gray J., Mouffe C., 2000, p.8 and pp.80-107, Cassirer E., pp.13-28
[4] Francis Bacon quoted in Horkheimer M. & Adorno T., p.4

If one looks on the "other side of the ledger" of Western thought, there have been various reactions to the monistic tendencies of these diverse Enlightenment projects. One such strand can be fed through the work of Niccolo Machiavelli and Friedrich Nietzsche, who also reach back to Ancient Greece, but critically disengage their work from the classical philosophers and the search for a monistic ground for politics.[5] Instead, like successors such as Hannah Arendt, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and a wide array of post-structuralist theorists, they tend to draw inspiration from the earlier Attic tragedies and comedies or pre-socratic figures in order to criticise the monistic and foundationalist projects. They construct aesthetic approaches to theory in which there is no universal method for discerning truth or political conceptions of the "good" - pluralist theories.[6] In this type of perspective, conflicts of values are not necessarily rationally decidable or undesirable in society; as in the tragic plays themselves, they are a recurrent feature of life in societies where interests and values are deemed to inevitably diverge and be imposed by some upon others. Such pluralist theorists have inspired their own late modern followers in the realm of democratic theory, albeit on the margins of the discipline, with "agonists" such as Chantal Mouffe among these: broadly speaking, scholars who seek to privilege contestation over rational consensus as a central organising principle of democratic society.

Many if not all of the theorists named above have directly engaged with texts and concepts from Ancient Greece, namely with the culture of the Fifth and Fourth centuries B.C. Greek city states, and of democratic Athens in particular.[7] Western political philosophy finds many of its roots in ancient Greece, but this does not mean that it is only a 'series of footnotes to Plato'[8]; it also clearly 'emerges from a democratic political tradition significantly shaped by tragedy'.[9] Its pluralist strands in particular draw not only on reactions to Platonic tradition, but draw on post-structuralist philosophers whose thought has been shaped by their own readings of the tragedies – this includes many philosophers such as the aforementioned Nietzsche or Foucault, and others such as Heidegger or Barthes. The question

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[5] For the concrete link between the two - Nietzsche's reading of Machiavelli - see Von Vacano D., pp.73-111. For the tragic leanings of Machiavelli, a self-described "*historico, comico, et tragico*" see Sullivan V.B. (ed.).; for those of Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* is of course but the tip of the iceberg. For an account of a wider pluralist "genealogy" in the history of Western philosophy, see Gray J., 1996, pp.38-75, & 122-140; & Gray J., 1995b, pp.144-184

[6] "Pluralism" is used here in its active, philosophical, sense, that is, as a theory seeking to promote the idea that no single explanatory system can account for all of reality, *contra* monism. Cf. *pluralism in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. For a longer discussion of the notion amounting to the same level of simplicity, see James W., in particular pp.258-270 & 405-417. Deleuze expresses this in an interesting way in his reading of Nietzsche: 'There is no event, no phenomenon, word or thought which does not have a multiple sense. A thing is sometimes this, sometimes that, sometimes something more complicated – depending on the forces...which take possession of it.' Deleuze G., p.4

[7] Euben J.P., 1990, throughout & Rocco C., pp.1-33

[8] Whitehead A., p.6

[9] Euben J.P., 1990, xi

animating this thesis is simple: what is the pluralism projected by Fifth-century B.C. Attic tragedy? It is posed with one eye on contemporary political theory, and the pluralist expression of democratic theory that is agonism in particular, as will be seen in the excursus of the concluding chapter, as well as agonism's critique of liberal democratic theory. The attempted response thus bears in mind the opposition between the loose categories of monism and pluralism outlined above, and the related disjunction between Enlightenment and mythic or pluralist forms of sensemaking; connecting monism, Enlightenment and liberalism on the one hand in opposition to tragedy and agonism on the other. The project consists of a search for inspiration from ancient cultural phenomena for the sake of political philosophy in the present, and contains a degree of speculative literary analysis. It is ultimately not fully philological or historical, in the sense of a quest to establish "facts"; rather it seeks inform the construction of a present-day worldview, or political philosophy. In this framework, the past is not merely an object of observation in a closed system, but becomes a springboard on which to project contemporary insight; and the inspiration gathered is reflected back to open up a space of thought in the present.

The first chapter explores the historic context of Athens at the time of tragedy's emergence, in order to gain some insight into the genre – limited as this may be due to the lack of written evidence from the period and its cultural distance from the present. It is a theoretical essay in the history of thought that examines how events and developments in archaic Greek culture shape this context. Tragedy is explained as a form of pluralist sensemaking developed in response to the rupture between an emergent Enlightenment-style discourse based on the juridico-political rationality of the democratic *polis* and its confident assessment of the human condition*,* and on the other, the archaic discourse of traditional myth and its "pessimism of strength." The following chapter then briefly explores the origins of tragedy as an art form growing out of myth and religious ceremony in the festival of the City Dionysia, its place in Athens as an educative institution of the *polis,* and its cultural function as a form of negotiation of the aforementioned rupture and as a source of cultural renewal.

The third chapter seeks to sketch the tragic vision expressed in the narratives of the plays, and the teaching it offers to the watching citizenry. The basic plotline of great heroes of myth suffering for problematic reasons is read as an aesthetic representation of the human condition that calls into question our capabilities and creates an awareness of our limits. The playwrights deploy it to disrupt conventional ethics by creating situations in which values conflict or are stretched to their breaking point as the heroes uphold them with total commitment and inflexibility, over and against others in their community. The plays tend not to

offer any solutions to these problems, only the "wisdom borne of suffering", that is, the need for moderation in thought and action; and they model the type of critical and pluralist ethos arising from the awareness of human limitations.

The next three chapters "unpack" this reading of the tragic vision in three loose categories of endeavour: the question of truth, how it applies to the self (questions of identity and values), and how it applies to politics in the wider community (questions of justice or the political "good"). Chapter Four explores tragedy's practice of problematisation through its onto-epistemology of limits, first in terms of the ambivalent nature of the human condition, the potential for tragic reversal when men and women step outside its ambiguous limits and for conflicts of values, and the resulting understanding of human action as an inherently problematic endeavour. It then provides an account of the genre's cultural renewal through its pluralising critical ethos and examines its position both inside and outside of Enlightenment-style thinking through the prism of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos*. Chapter Five goes on to distil this account in terms of tragedy's enigmatic self and subjectivity with reference to the self of modern liberalism: as with Oedipus uncovering another side to his past which redefines his present, tragedy uncovers the multiplicity behind oft-essentialised identity, and the irrational passions and historically and socially circumscriptions driving and defining the "rational and autonomous individual". This leads to the exposition of a tragic concept of greatness and the construction of meaning within the limits of this pluralist framework, as well as the identification of the minimalist set of ethical values promoted by the playwrights and compatible with the democratic requirement for a strong ethic of public concern. Chapter Six extends this analysis of problematisation and renewal to the realm of politics *per se*, examining the tragedians' exposure of the value and limits of rational attempts to order the just community and the dangers of monistic claim-making. The plays emphasise that the definition of justice is always subject to the partiality of language, the extraneous motivation of private interests and factions, and the terms of the prevalent hegemony of public discourse. In this context, any political claim that asserts its own universality is not only illusory but a risk to the integrity of the community, as it represents some part of the latter asserting itself over the other parts and denying them a place in the city through their claims, threatening to destroy the whole. A ritualised and reciprocal competition between claims thus has a central place in the city, reconciling diverse values and parties through a pluralist sensitivity that is prepared to hold them in tension and acknowledge the place of each in the community.

The concluding chapter begins with a summary of the tragic vision before sketching its mutual compatibility with a modern pluralist form of democratic

theory, "pluralist agonism". It shows the affinity between the two at various levels, how the latter can be seen to offer a late modern response in terms of democratic political theory to many of the wider issues raised by tragedy, and how the pre-philosophical ethos of tragedy can underpin the political philosophy of its late modern counterpart, in particular by providing it with a powerful aesthetic and symbolic framework at an axiomatic level.

Chapter I:

The Moment of Tragedy in Fifth century B.C. Athens:

Democracy, Enlightenment, Rupture

Outline:

Introduction

A – Athenian Progress in the Fifth Century B.C.

      i- Birth of Athenian Empire

      ii- Athenian Revolution: *isonomia* and archaic rationality

B – The Enlightenment Rupture

      i- Greek Enlightenment: from *mythos* to *logos*

      ii- A Rupture in Nomological Knowledge

Conclusion: The Moment of Tragedy.

'Tragedy is born when one looks at myth with the eye of the citizen'[10]

Greek tragedy appears to us as a phantom of the past: dim, fragmented, incomplete. The extant plays, of which there are few, belong to a specific place, the city of Athens, at a particular time, the Fifth century B.C. – a juncture from which little written evidence is available. As public performances, the Attic tragedies expressed definite messages from the playwrights to the assembled citizenry of the democratic *polis*; in order to understand these, one must attempt to re-constitute the wider context of both author and spectator. This includes both an external context of their lives in Athens and the events surrounding them, and crucially, a perspective on their inner world, the shared framework of the Athenian mindset reflected in the vestiges of their culture and thought. Only then can one lay claim to an insight, limited though it may be, into the ancient meaning of tragedy – by looking at it anew with the eye of the citizen.

The need to relate text to context is by no means a revolutionary proposition. The distinction that Walter Nestle alludes to goes beyond this, to evoke a phenomenon of Attic culture of such significance that in the early Fifth century B.C. it became a defining element of the new art form of tragedy: the rupture of the Athenian mindset between the traditional worldview based on myth, and the new "enlightened" worldview of the citizen. The popularisation of this new rationalist outlook disrupted previously settled questions of ethics in an otherwise relatively homogenous Athenian culture, to the extent that the tragic playwrights, inheritors of the mantle of poet-sage for their city, felt it necessary to respond. They would go on to do so by adapting the new artistic genre to systematically negotiate the rift between the two worldviews and hold them in an uneasy, yet creative tension: tragedy offered a form of pluralism that sought to highlight the ethical problems raised by this cohabitation, in a critical reflection on their culture. Through this problematisation, the tragedians called into question key values of both the mythic and rational discourses, and thereby opened up spaces of thought in which new forms of judgement could be explored.

This chapter will give an account of Athens in the Fifth century B.C. that is centrally focused on the point of rupture in the transition of Athenian culture

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[10] Walter Nestle quoted in Vernant J.P. & Vidal-Naquet P., 2001, vol.I, p.21

from a predominantly mythic to a predominantly rationalist worldview, so as to both provide a historical context of the period of tragedy's emergence, and to explain the cultural phenomenon that the tragedians responded to. This will serve not only to cast some light on the driving forces of tragedy, but also to lay out the background against which the tragedians' pluralist outlook – their subversive and constructive use of elements of both mythic and rational forms of sensemaking[11] - will later be brought into focus (tragedy itself will be examined in detail in the following chapters).

It will begin with an overview of early Fifth century B.C. Athenian developments, emphasising how the successes of a new collective and participatory regime characterised by the rationality of its associated identities and institutions helped to forge a new belief in progress through reason. Subsequently it will show how this "enlightenment" emerged from and yet clashed with the mythic worldview, creating a rupture in the Athenian mindset and a measure of self-doubt amongst citizens. Finally, it will conclude by proposing that this period of rupture is the moment of classical tragedy, and that the rise to predominance of an enlightened worldview in Athenian civic and intellectual culture brought with it both the transformation and decline of the genre.

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[11] The term "sensemaking" is used here as a synonym of "reasoning" in its broadest meaning – making sense of the world – and so avoiding the rationalist connotation of the latter term. In this thesis, both terms are understood in a phenomenological sense – reasoning as emergent rather than linear process.

A – Athenian Progress in the Fifth Century B.C.

i.   Birth of Athenian Empire[12]

a. Persian wars

The triggers for Athens' golden age were two extraordinary victories over the might of the invading Persian empire. These were not just military successes, as they also represented a feat of communal organisation, strategic planning, and unyielding collective will. The triumph at Marathon in 490 B.C., where a phalanx of vastly outnumbered Athenian hoplites obtained the first ever victory of a Greek force over a Persian army, beggared belief. For over 50 years the methodical annexation of the Ionian cities by the Persians had reverberated throughout the Greek world, and the lack of any pan-hellenist resolve to confront it left the Athenians in an increasingly desperate situation. Nonetheless, despite the temptation – particularly for aristocratic families - of the offer of a bloodless and voluntary submission, the "Athenian collective" had chosen the path of resistance.

Immediately after becoming an *isonomia*[13] in 508 B.C., the Athenians had moved to support a rebellion of the Ionian cities against Persian rule, thus earning for themselves the wrath of successive Persian emperors. Alone, they had defeated the Persian army; and Sparta, until then the undisputed military power of Greece, had tactfully avoided the conflict by arriving late to the battlefield. The enormous impact of the achievement on the Athenian mindset cannot be underestimated: this was a victory to be measured on the mythical scale, to be matched with the sack of Troy in the Homeric cycle. The prestige of a Marathon veteran was such that the great playwright Aeschylus chose to omit any mention of his supremacy in

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[12] The following section is a summary history from the following sources: Murray O., 1993; Meier C., 1993; Burckhardt J., 1998; Davies J. K., 1981; Holland T., 2006; in addition to primary source material at the forefront of which were Herodotus, *The Histories* and Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*

[13] *Isonomia*, literally "the equal order" is the political concept employed to describe the "democratic" Athenian system of collective government that followed the reforms of Kleisthenes in 508.B.C. Roughly a half century later, after a series of even more far-reaching reforms, it had been supplanted by the term *demokratia* and the more radical egalitarian system that is now referred to as Athenian democracy. For a good discussion of this see Vlastos G. & Graham D., p.89 ff.

the tragic competitions on his gravestone epitaph, noting only his prowess at Marathon. Those citizens who fought in the battle, the *marathonomachai*, were seen to have inaugurated a new Age of Heroes, equalling the exploits of their ancestors of the mythic world. Like these cult heroes, the hoplite warriors of Athens were elevated to become the object of communal veneration and cult worship.

By 483 B.C., the Athenians had wind of the preparation of a huge Persian force designed to annex the whole of Greece. In a show of great resolve, the citizens took the advice of the orator Themistokles and devoted all of the city's energy and resources towards the construction of a naval fleet – no mean feat considering that it also required over half of the male population to be trained as rowers for trireme manoeuvres. Another display of collective decisiveness was the tactical evacuation of the whole population to a more defendable position on the island of Salamis, sacrificing Athens and all of its sacred places to the invading army. This radical strategy was a direct product of the new instrumental rationality, without historical precedent or justification in the myths of their ancestors.

The ensuing naval victory over the fleet of the "Great King" Xerxes in 480B.C. was testament to the strength of the new regime. Radical, risky, and strategically inspired decisions had been voted for by the citizenry; and the small Athenian collective had prevailed over the far greater might of a Persian army fighting for a divinely appointed Emperor. The *isonomia* of Athens, relying on the citizens' own rationally-devised projects, seemed to be favoured by the gods over the old mythical order of kings and nobles - even though the latter was still revered by the Athenians in the Homeric canon.

Moreover, in contrast to the victory at Marathon a decade earlier, the hoplite class (roughly a third of the citizenry) were not the only Athenian combatants; most able-bodied men were a part of the victorious navy. The soldiers of Marathon could no longer claim an exclusive hold over glory on the battlefield and its privileges, contributing somewhat to a dilution of social divisions and a reinforcement of civic unity and the radical political equality. The new egalitarian identity of "*polites*", the citizen, shared by the male population, now acquired the prestige of warfare that had hitherto been reserved for elite castes.

b. From counter-offensive to imperialism

By now, the Aegean tide had turned against the Persian invaders, and the unexpected explosion of energy of the young Athenian collective led to a successful counter-offensive spanning three decades; a venture met with such success that it quickly turned into an imperialist crusade.

At the battle of Salamis the Athenians had seriously weakened the Persian navy, and now had at their disposal a "wooden wall" of ships unmatched in the Mediterranean. Furthermore, occupied Greek city-states on both sides of the Aegean now had a reason to hope, revolted from Persian rule, and had willingly joined an Athenian-led confederacy in 478B.C.: the Delian League. This was to become the instrument of Athenian imperialism abroad, as well as the means to defend against Persian counter-attacks and actively promote Greek interests throughout the Mediterranean. Generally, the other members of the league preferred to contribute money towards Athens' fleet rather than risk their lives manning their own ships[14], thus adding to Athens' power and influence in the Aegean. Athens' domination and intolerance of dissent amongst its "allies" became such that those cities who left the League to avoid paying tribute were re-integrated by force (as were both Naxos circa 470 and Thasos in 463 B.C.).

The annexation of some of Ionia's fertile lands by Athenians, as well as the implantation of many colonies and their rule-by-proxy of the "liberated" cities made it clear that the league implied more of a colonial empire. This was further backed up by Athens' claim to the legitimising title of "oldest city in Ionia". The Aegean had for all purposes become an Athenian lake. Furthermore, Athens' influence was to extend far beyond the Aegean, with her trade-posts and colonies all over the Mediterranean, and her huge fleets (sometimes manned by up to a quarter of the male population) campaigning as far as the Black Sea, Sicily, or even Egypt. The league, as well providing as an almost uninterrupted flow of tribute to Athens, was to remain stable (despite the occasional revolt) for almost seventy years.[15]

The immense economic benefits of the new empire fuelled the transformation of Athens and its citizens. Goods and merchants converged on the city from everywhere, and the resulting exchanges of knowledge led to an increase in technical expertise that modified established practices of artisanry and craftsmanship. This also impacted on the arts, with the delineation of specialised

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[14] Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, 1.99, in Strassler R., 2008
[15] Cf. in particular Davies J.K., pp.76-98; and Thucydides, 1.94-111

disciplines such as rhetoric, and the birth of new movements such as sophism, which advanced new methods of education adapted to the particular activities of public life in Athens. Moreover, from roughly 460 B.C. onwards, the military general and politician Pericles held sway over the Assembly (he is said by Thucydides to have all but governed the city "as first citizen"[16]) and poured the imperial revenue into the arts and large public building projects. For Christian Meier, the overall effect of the Athenian boom was to foster a sense of self-confidence and belief in the possibility for progress in human life akin to that of the Enlightenment in XVIIIth and XIXth century Europe[17] - a zeitgeist that by the end of the Fifth Century B.C., after decades of war with Sparta, the ravages of the plague, and the overthrow of democracy, had been severely shaken.

Indeed, 459 B.C. was to signal the beginning of the end for Athens' "Golden Age", as the once unstoppable city experienced a prelude of future failures. In that year, Athens sent out the near totality of the Delian league's fleet in order to support the Egyptian rebellion against Persia; an armada which was to be obliterated five years later, spelling the end of the Athenian expansion at Persia's expense. The same year saw the beginning of the Peloponnesian wars with Sparta and her allies, a conflict that would gnaw away at the city until its subjugation by Sparta in 404 B.C. The first war lasted some fourteen years and ended in a stalemate; Athens' golden age of public works could continue virtually unabated, fuelled by the tribute from the Delian league, until large-scale conflict erupted again in 431 B.C. The second war brought with it three years of plague (430-427 B.C.) that saw a temporary breakdown of Athenian society and the death of Pericles, the statesman identified with the previous thirty years of prosperity. Morale amongst the citizenry was so bad that the plague was interpreted as the gods' preference for Sparta.[18] From then on, the city never fully recovered, and a disastrous expedition to Sicily in 415B.C. sealed its fate when, in an attempt to colonise the whole island, the entire Athenian army was destroyed. The surrender to Sparta in 404 B.C. marked the end of Athens' economic and political prominence in the Aegean, as well as the genre of Greek tragedy as we know it (Euripides, last of the classical tragedians of renown, died circa 406 B.C.).[19]

However, previously, in the space of a few decades, as a result of both its successful defence and counter-offensive against the Persians and its subsequent

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[16] Thucydides, 2.65
[17] Meier C., pp.29-31
[18] Thucydides, 2.54
[19] Meier C., pp.33-34

consolidation of a Mediterranean empire, Athens had improved its status from that of inward-looking and slightly backward Hellenic city to that of the pre-eminent naval, cultural and economic power in the Aegean. Herodotus, perhaps influenced by the optimism of his Athenian contemporaries, pointedly attributed the city's progress to the adoption of a ground-breaking and rationally designed regime of equal political rights, *isonomia*[20] - to which we now turn.

ii.   Athenian Revolution: Isonomia and the new rationality

After the end of the tyranny of Peisistratos and his sons (from 546 to 510B.C.) and the subsequent popular uprising against a Spartan-led coup, Cleisthenes the Alcmeonid "took the people into his party" circa 508 B.C.[21] His subsequent reforms meant that the city was collectively governed for the first time, resembling more closely what was later to be called a *demokratia*. Most public offices were now filled by citizen representatives chosen for a limited term (as opposed to being reserved for the aristocracy), and the sovereignty of the Assembly over the city's leaders and officials was now established – *eunomia*, the "good order" of the alliance of rulers (be they king, tyrant, or general) with the hoplite class in an uneasy power-sharing arrangement with the aristocracy, had been replaced by *isonomia*, the "equal order" of the citizenry.[22]

The great lawmaker Solon had applied his own instrumental calculations to the problems of Athens in his radical constitutional reforms of the beginning of the Sixth century: in a conciliatory and pragmatic solution, he is said to have balanced the power of the landowning nobility against the basic needs of the majority. At the end of this century, Cleisthenes continued this rationalisation of the *polis* by systematically re-organising the citizen body through a complex transformation of the electoral geography, replacing the traditional authority of birth and its tribal and sometimes aristocratic links with artificial political units. This in itself represented a momentous break away from a "traditional society", in which most

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[20] Herodotus, *The Histories*, 5.78.1
[21] Herodotus, 5.66.2
[22] Murray O., 1993, p.279

of one's life is mapped out by virtue of one's birth.[23] The new political categories had no basis in the existing social order, and no justification in the mythic worldview and the genealogies that it used to legitimise a family's prestige. The new divisions joined three sections of citizens from the coastal area, city and inland area to create one larger cross-geographical "tribe"; an attempt was initially made to legitimise these groupings in mythic terms by associating each of them with a local cult hero.[24] The effect of this social transformation was to dramatically weaken the factionalisms associated with the bonds of customary kinship – family and local clan chief. These had driven the politics of Attica in earlier centuries and divided its inhabitants: the great aristocratic families vied for power, often calling on their allies in other cities to assist them in coups. In their place, the local inhabitants now owed most of their allegiance to an abstraction, "the Athenian *polis*", and the single associated identity of the citizen (even their second names were replaced with civically assigned ones). Revealingly, the laws associated with these reforms were no longer referred to by the word *thesmos*, or divinely-inspired ordinance handed down by an authority (as in Solon's time), but *nomos*, meaning a custom imposed on the community by its own collective decision.[25] The identity of Athenians had effectively been rationalised: its foundation in the ambiguities of myth and the various loyalties this commanded had been replaced by a single abstract and universal concept, citizenship, which had only one referent, the Athenians themselves. Traditional mythical discourse, which had long defined identity according to bonds of blood and heroic and divine lineage, had been 'subverted and reformed in service of the state'[26]; and indeed, according to Oswyn Murray, these two social forces – kinship and religion – were being reshaped all over Greece by the dominant imperative of the *polis*: the politics of the city-state itself.[27]

This radical identity shift changed the dynamics of Athenian society, uniting its citizens around extraordinary collective actions for the purpose of increasing the prestige of their city, fuelling both rational innovation at home and imperialism abroad, the twin engines of Athenian "progress". The new political equality meant that the competition for *arete*, excellence, in the city, and the honour associated

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[23] Karl Popper associated this with the transition from the "closed" society to an "open" one. Cf. Popper K., p.330, n.8

[24] *phylai in Hornblower S. and Spawforth A. (eds.)

[25] For discussions of the historical debates surrounding these events, cf. Mossé C., pp.425-437; and also Ober, J. "The Athenian Revolution of 508-507B.C." in Rhodes P.J. (ed.), pp.242-286

[26] Murray O. & Price S. (eds.), 1990, p.10

[27] Murray in Ibid., "Cities of Reason", pp.1-29

with being the best in public life[28] that was the pinnacle of achievement in Greek society, was now becoming a possibility for all male citizens, not just the well-born. Every one of them could join with his peers in what was considered to be the most prestigious activity of all, *ta politika,* the affairs of the city. The energy of citizens was now focused on increasing the standing of Athens, and by extension, the prestige of the exclusive right of citizenship in which they shared. The "public self" took on a great importance for each citizen – to the extent that *idiotes*, "private person" and root of the modern "idiot", was the contemptuous term levelled at people who did not participate in city politics. This did not mean that the ancient Athenians were complete altruists relative to, say, the modern liberal individualist. Rather, their set of values was based around what has been termed a culture of "shame": the Athenian measured his judgements against somewhat aesthetic standards that are both anthropocentric and external - those by which his community would judge his actions and pronounce them honourable (notion of *time*), or indeed shameful (notion of *aidos*) and unseemly (notion of *aischron*) [in contrast with the judeo-christian culture of "guilt", whereby one judges oneself predominantly according to one's own internal standards of morality (one's conscience), which are themselves derived from absolute or divine law].[29] In his funeral oration, Pericles notes that the unwritten code of shame binds the Athenian community together with a greater strength than the force of written law.[30] And so, as the code of honour, itself defined by the community of citizens, determined that the only achievements that were to be celebrated were those that glorified the city, one can more readily understand the strength of the ethos of public-spiritedness amongst Athenians (in addition to the protection offered by city walls and a cooperative army against exploitation, enslavement, or death). Pericles neatly sums up the existing rationale for the primacy of the *polis* over the individual when says: '... national greatness is more to the advantage of private citizens than any individual well-being coupled with public humiliation'.[31] In many ways, the *polis* was a tightly knit collective, and ideally at least, was intimately

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[28] Public life was deemed to include city politics but not money-making activities, considered private.

[29] Cf. Jagu A., and also Cairns D. As Cairns has pointed out, this distinction between the ancient Greeks and the moderns is not hard and fast, but a matter of degrees, in that both groups make ethical judgements according to both internal and external standards: the code of honour of *aidos* also involves internal standards of "appropriateness". However, it remains clear that the Greek code of honour was more aesthetic (beautiful and ugly) and less moral (right and wrong) relative to modern Western standards.

[30] Thucydides, 2.37

[31] Thucydides, 2.60

bound together as a partnership (*koinonia*) of mutual regard (*philia*) between equals.[32] All of these things made for a formidable ethos of public service.

It is little wonder, then, that such a motivated and optimistic collective should expend a great amount of energy in common ventures. Thucydides, whose *History of the Peloponnesian War* does not shy away from highlighting many Athenian failings, nevertheless uses a speech of the Corinthians to describe the Athenians as 'addicted to innovation', 'never at home', 'spending their bodies ungrudgingly in their country's cause' and finally 'born into the world to take no rest themselves and to give none to others'.[33] Indeed, throughout the first half of the Fifth Century, the Athenians had poured themselves into cutting edge (particularly in terms of naval equipment) and increasingly daring collective ventures, and had been incredibly successful. Their sense of what was possible, their expectations on the world around them, and their vision of progress grew accordingly.

Ephialtes' reforms of 462 B.C. abolished most of the powers of the Areopagus, the council of the aristocratic elders, and so completed the transition towards a system where citizens' political rights were for the most part equal, not based on birth or wealth but on their common identity as citizens. These reforms also moved Athens from a somewhat moderate democracy to *demokratia*, literally, the empowered citizenry,[34] the radical system in which all of the city's significant public policy was determined by votes at the meetings of the *ekklesia*, the assembly open to all citizens; and in which nearly all of the public offices were chosen by lot.[35] As such, as observed by Aristotle, political power now resided with the majority of the citizenry who had little property: the poor.[36]

These meticulous reforms showcased what Oswyn Murray refers to as "archaic rationality": the rational re-organisation of the socio-political order over and against its traditional features, of which little is preserved apart from a legitimising veneer of the older mythic terminology.[37] The main thrust of the justifications for the reforms was a return to ancestral custom, cloaking the radical changes with a

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[32] *Koinonia* is Aristotle's later term to describe the *polis*, and *philia* is used throughout Vth century B.C. literature to describe the mutual regard extending beyond family to friends and kin – including fellow citizens.
[33] Thucydides, 1.70
[34] For a discussion of the usage of *demokratia* see Ober J., pp.3-9
[35] Roberts J. W., p.50
[36] Aristotle, *Constitution of the Athenians,* 27.1
[37] Murray O., p.279

veil of deeply conservative language, a mythic aetiology.[38] A new political imaginary of the past had been created, presenting the Athenians' revolution as the fulfilment of the work of their forebears. *Isonomia* was indeed the culmination of a gradual process of power-balancing, brought about largely through rational public debate between different classes in a relatively homogenous society: the *eupatridai* (men of good birth, the aristocracy), the hoplites (warriors and land-owners) and the broader *demos* (the whole of the citizenry). Neither popularly-installed tyrants nor noble families had managed to impose their authority on the city for the time necessary to establish a lasting dynasty, leaving the way open for lower-class citizens to claim equal political rights. This power vacuum, along with the absence of any powerful religious caste to anoint and mythically justify a regime, is what Christian Meier sees as the *exception grecque* in world history, enabling *isonomia* to develop in various greek cities.[39]

The absence of a kingly figure could seem trivial, and yet a kingship was central to the mythical worldview. The hereditary *basileus* or *anax* (king) mediated between the supernatural realm of the divine and the natural world of humanity, and on his person depended the society's relation to the cosmic order and thus the physical and spiritual life of his subjects. The king justified the socio-political order.[40] As such, the kingless world of the greek *polis* was strangely disconnected from the mythic worldview of its inhabitants, it could not be directly related to the foundational poems of Homer or Hesiod – the *polis* had no basis in *mythos* (that is, literally "mythical speaking", in other words, the traditional Greek mythic discourse). As evoked earlier, the modern concerns of Athens, in particular its imperialistic enterprise, were also beyond mythic justification. All in all, the Athenian *polis* was constituted outside of the boundaries of the worldview based on *mythos*. A form of "modernisation" had taken place, in some ways akin to the process of detachment from traditional parish and village with the rural exodus of the industrial revolution: identification now took place within a small-scale "mass society" framed by the artifices of civic divisions and associated political activities. A new type of discourse had developed to underpin the realm of public decision-making, which had become a separate sphere of Athenian life. This civic rational discourse, also referred to here as a juridico-political discourse, was devoid of mythic inspiration, and grounded in the rhetorical prose of debate prevalent in the polis.

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[38] Davies J. K., pp. 73-75
[39] Meier C. , p.14
[40] Segal C., 1986, p.28

In post-tyrannical Athens, where the inhabitants had given themselves the right to decide on every aspect of the socio-political order by vote in the assembly, the citizens themselves were required to define the political good and the nature of its institutions. There was no professional bureaucracy to provide advice or determine the detail of how to execute the actions voted on, and no elected representatives to make decisions in their stead. The burden of decision-making and its implementation lay squarely on the shoulders of each and every citizen. This meant that they had to forge an opinion on all aspects of the public affairs of Athens; and with little guidance to be found in myth for their decidedly modern concerns, this came through debate. And debate they did, up to forty times a year, and sometimes for more than a day at a time.[41]

The *ekklesia* was not the only place in Athens where argumentation was systematised; the law courts (now crucial to the life of citizens with the proliferation of public and private lawsuits as well as the civic obligation of jury service) saw the development of a specific form of debate that was to indelibly mark Athenian life. *Agon,* a word used to describe contests of all sorts as well as "struggle", or "ordeal", came to be used in the Fifth century B.C. as the term designating a trial and/or the specific type of argumentation employed to settle it.[42] Archaic[43] Greek culture was full of such contests, whether they be in the arts, sports or civic procedure, where competitors fought for *arete* (success, excellence, to be the best) over their peers; so much so that *agon* is also a term for "public gathering" or "bringing together"[44], and Jacob Burckhardt designated the archaic period as the "age of the agonal man".[45] "*Agon"* was also used as the word for a "trial": in ancient Athens, these proceeded through the successive antithetical speeches of both parties, once each for public lawsuits and twice each for private ones (if no specific sentence was fixed in legislation, it was also followed by the adversaries proposing a sentence, one after the other, for up to six times each).[46] The trial was held in front of a judge, a jury, and a watching public – none of whom could make a formal contribution to the debate. As such it was more of a serial monologue and a tournament of rhetorical prowess than a dialogue, but its

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[41] Thucydides, 1.44.1
[42] *agon* in Liddell R. & Scott H.
[43] I follow Oswyn Murray in his dating of the Archaic period from 600 to 460 B.C, cf. Murray O., 1993, p.201
[44] Nagy G., p.1426
[45] Murray O., 1993, p.202
[46] Duchemin J., p.12

antithetical format encouraged the development of formal reasoning and refutation.

In the Athenian democracy, the outcome of a public debate was decided by fellow citizens (be it a jury selected by lot for trials or the assembled citizenry in the *ekklesia*). The condition for victory was hence the force of the "better" – that is, the most persuasive - argument. It is interesting to note that the earliest public speeches available to us from the end of the Fifth Century B.C. onwards[47] rarely appeal to myth as part of their justifications. It would seem that by then, the standard of judgement for public matters was very much an instrumental one: any policy was required to be perceived as a logical strategy by the popular audience, as well as consistent with the public interest. Before this, the extraordinary and continuous popularity of the orator Pericles indicates that this rationalisation of political discourse was already well advanced: he apparently shunned rhetorical artifice in favour of a more dispassionate approach to public speaking, even gaining agreement for unpopular policies (even some that would be traditionally deemed shameful or dishonourable) on the basis of their instrumental necessity for the city.[48] For all practical purposes, day-to-day public business associated with life in the *polis* was characterised by its "archaic rationality": it was now predominantly a rational domain, governed by the new juridico-political discourse, but with tokenistic references to the mythological tradition that was still at the core of "private" family life. One important thing to note is that this form of rationality was itself indelibly marked by the context of the *polis*: it was always conceived of as a political and rhetorical way of reasoning – it was reasoning through public debate in a process of public policy making - and was not divorced of private interests or attributed transcendent status, as in the modern meaning of the term.[49]

The generalised requirement for decision-making through public debate in *isonomia* is thus attributed to the popularisation of the rational discourse in the greek cities, and particularly in the more radically egalitarian and participatory system of Athens. As a rationalised system of government, *demokratia* was a product of the

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[47] Beginning with Antiphon's speech "On the murder of Herodes", presumed to have been made in 407 B.C. Saunders A. N. W., p.8. Similarly, the dozen or so speeches of Athenians as they are reported in Thucydides from 433 B.C. onwards do not contain any references to mythology. Only the military harangues of Nicias facing defeat at Syracuse contain references to religion or heroic genealogy (Thucydides 7.69 & 7.77); cf. Thucydides, throughout.
[48] This included letting the Spartan army lay waste to Attica, and perhaps even the bribery of the Spartan king. Cf. Thucydides, 1.142 & 2.21.
[49] Vernant J.P., 1962

new rationality; but as a system not reliant on the authority of myth and necessitating constant public debate, it was also a cause of the propagation of rational discourse. The arena of public decision-making had become a separate sphere of Athenian experience, it brought with it a new worldview that justified the *polis*, of which both the institutions and the identities were disconnected from myth. In particular, the redefinition of the Athenian self as "citizen" at the expense of all other identities strengthened collective endeavour, spurring Athens forward on the path of increasingly radical innovations and aspirations. In this way, the new rational worldview of the citizen came to be associated with progress. The advent of participatory democracy was thus integral to what is sometimes called the Greek Enlightenment.

B – The Enlightenment Rupture

i.   The Greek Enlightenment: from mythos to logos

'Socrates: First of all, it appears, we ought to supervise the myth-tellers, making sure that only noble stories [*muthois*] are selected, while the rest are rejected.'[50]

How can one justify comparing the Athenian situation at the time of tragedy's emergence to the Enlightenment? A "standard" account of the Enlightenment will generally refer to the essay "*Was ist Aufklärung?*", in which Immanuel Kant famously defined the Enlightenment as the generalisation of the autonomous use of Reason or individual critical capacity, with the catch-cry: '*Sapere aude*!' ('Dare to know!').[51] By the middle if not the beginning of the Fifth Century B.C., in parallel with the concretisation of *isonomia*, this is to some extent what was happening amongst the Attic citizenry (bearing in mind the small proportion this represented of the wider Athenian population).The Kantian definition implies a project of "emancipation", relying on first, a specific type of self-confidence and teleological claim - the belief that humanity can achieve progress for itself, and that each individual can obtain the knowledge essential to this progress free from external powers and interests; and second, a radical epistemological claim, rationalism - that knowledge and progress come through reasoning using only the power of rationality[52]. In other words, Enlightenment is a shift to a worldview founded on faith in progress through the power of Reason alone. The knowledge obtained by rational means is the only truth, and it is neutral and free from the pollution of worldly power and influence; moreover, it is certain knowledge of the world, and is assumed to give humankind the power to control it, and thus provide freedom

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[50] Plato, *Republic*, 377c
[51] Kant I., Nisbet H. (transl.), 2010
[52] "Reason" is here defined as sense-making: the human faculty that strives towards understanding through the application of explanatory narratives to perceived reality (it is hence a tendency towards unity, an imposition of a one on the many). I follow W. Welsch in defining a rationality as a specific system of principles restricted to a pre-defined field and pre-defined objectives (cf. Welsch W., pp.17-31). Rationalism is the privileging of this systematic type of reasoning until it is considered the only valid form of sense-making; and in its absolute form is coupled with the reification of a particular rationality e.g. in logical positivism or scientism. The latter is the "Reason" (capital R used to distinguish with reason as sense-making) that Kant refers to. It should also be noted that the modern connotation of "rational" as necessarily valid (rationality as a process connected to or productive of objective facts) is not included in its usage here.

from necessity. This confidence is strengthened by a context of rapid modernisation in which the application of rational methodology results in changes in many areas of endeavour. As noted previously, the crescendo of Athenian achievements under a collective form of governance seems to have given the citizenry a form of self-confidence similar to the first criterion above, and their increasing sophistication in science, medicine, art, philosophy, architecture and political organisation throughout the Fifth Century B.C. is also reminiscent of the later Enlightenment.[53] That this had been at least partially achieved through a rational way of thinking, embodied in a modernised democratic system divorced from the traditional discourse and forms of identification of traditional mythic culture, goes part of the way toward fulfilling the second point.

Enlightenment is also presumed to be a shift away from a worldview of "myth" (in the perspective of many Enlightenment thinkers, this is any rationally unverified – and hence false – narrative). Each of us should use the universal intellectual faculty of reason to critique the received knowledge of traditional authorities, eradicate unwarranted beliefs, and so free ourselves from falsehood: an individual effort of critique is required to eliminate irrational thinking. Whether in ancient Greece or Eighteenth century Europe, the movement towards the "light" of certain knowledge of the truth is conceived to be an emancipation from a "closed society"[54] of myth - the repressive "darkness" of unverifiable tradition, belief, and the acceptance of mystery, which rule everyday life whilst being insulated from criticism or reform by virtue of an otherworldly foundation. The Enlightenment project, as Horkheimer and Adorno put it, is the 'disenchantment of the world'[55]. Its avowed nemesis is myth, with its "fables" and "superstitious" explanations of the world: enlightened reason demythologises. And yet the paradox is that ultimately, when taken to its extreme, enlightenment reverts back to enabling the very subjugation that it denounces in mythical thinking.[56] As will be shown, the quote attributed to Socrates above is but one of many examples of rational discourse seeking to supplant myth in Fifth century B.C. Athens, whilst still preserving some of its characteristics.

Werner Jaeger adds another typical component of this "standard" account when he points out that the distinctive characteristic of classical Greek culture, inherited by the West in the Enlightenment, is a heightened awareness of the individual: the

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[53] Lebow R., 2003
[54] Popper's terminology in Popper K.
[55] Horkheimer M.& Adorno T.W., p.1
[56] Ibid., p.xviii

Greeks gained this indirectly, through their obsession with the formulation of objective standards and laws governing reality, against which their subjectivity could be gauged. Thus highlighted, the role of the subject – of man, his nature, and his capacities – and a properly humanist speculation on the ideals governing it, take centre stage in Greek culture.[57] This sharp distinction between subject and object is one of the key markers of a shift towards rationalist discourse: others, such as anthropocentric and abstract thinking, are apparent in archaic Greece and are highlighted in the account that follows.

There is enough here to suggest that the situation in Fifth century B.C. Athens merits the rough comparison to the Eighteenth century movement in the Western world that it inspired; and hence that it is at least partially characterised by a "Greek enlightenment". Nevertheless, it is also clear that this shift towards a worldview based on an archaic form of rationality was only beginning: rational discourse was for the most part tied to the political system and not the metaphysical standard of its platonic or modern counterparts, and mythic narratives of reality were alive and well, if somewhat overtaken in the public domain of life. Despite this, it remains clear that in the time of tragedy's emergence, the rational form of sense-making had developed to the point where it rivalled mythic discourse in Athens.

The advent of rational discourse as the predominant way of making sense of the world was not, as was long held to be the case in academic circles, a sudden, miraculous and final discovery based on the superior genius, unique in all of history, of the Greeks (an argument sometimes used by their self-appointed Western heirs to legitimise their own superiority). Rather, the rational worldview had gradually taken shape out of a variety of developments from earlier centuries, and during the Fifth century B.C. was also co-existent with its mythical counterpart in Greek societies. Even in the following century, after it had usurped the authoritative position of myth in the minds of the Greek intelligentsia, it never eradicated all of the mythic culture (its associated rituals in particular). Further, it was the culmination of some long-term trends that were inherent in the mythical framework itself, for instance, the tradition of myth criticism and its function of systematisation of the diffuse body of myths into the wider narrative of mythology.

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[57] Jaeger W., pp. xvii-xxvi

In order, then, to give an adequate account of the moment of tragedy, the following section will explore the relationship between the mythic and the rationalistic worldviews[58], offering a schematic narrative of the emergence of the latter both out of and at the expense of the former in Greek thought; before explaining how the co-existence of the two created a rupture in the mindset of the Athenian citizen – a rupture to which tragedy responded.

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[58] I use the term 'worldview' in this sense: both a conscious (involving rational and emotional elements underpinned by beliefs) and unconscious or subconscious (involving reflexes, instincts, attitudes, predispositions which may be biologically or socially conditioned and are interactive with conscious components) assemblage of insights about the world. This concept of 'worldview' is here loosely underpinned by the Gilles Deleuze's concept of assemblage or *agencement*, in which any concept is neither exclusively a statement (a product of the conscious Subject's will) nor a mere state of affairs (exact description of an already existing Object in the world), but the continuously changing product of their dynamic interconnection, a meaning that exceeds both and of which they form a part. It is the merger of what one says and what one does. In this schema, the worldview is more than a Subject's perspective (conscious or not) – *a view on the world* – or the conditioning (social, biological etc) of the perspective by the Object – *the world's effects on the view* - but a product of the interactions between this perspective and the state of affairs in the world. In a dynamic reminiscent of quantum uncertainty, neither of these two elements can be viewed in complete isolation lest the observation of one skew that of the other. See for example Lecercle J., pp.185-187. A worldview changes the world, and the world acts back on the worldview in a kind of performative interaction. The continuously changing end result, the worldview, is an assemblage, a multiplicity forming dynamic interconnections with other social/cultural/biological assemblages – such as other worldviews.

a. From myths to mythology

A myth can tentatively be defined as a traditional story with a shared underlying societal significance, that is, a narrative that expresses some sort of guidance for life in the community.[59] This general definition is not concerned with the rational validity or otherwise of myth, but with its narrative logic: the narrative provides the framework in which the idea or phenomenon is made sense of. Not only is it a story we tell about ourselves in a present interpretation of a perceived common history, but it also acts normatively: it informs our shared identity, and projects certain positive values that those who so self-identify should follow in their daily lives (lest they fall foul of their community). All human sense-making, or reasoning in the wider sense of term, involves some element of mythical narrative. In archaic Greece, many of these myths provided a framework through which to make sense of the world and to structure one's experience. For instance, the story of Icarus, who burnt his artificial waxen wings and fell to his death by flying too high and too close to the sun, was a well-known myth often used to illustrate a wider truth about the limitations of the human condition and the retribution one would suffer if one sought to overcome those limitations (hubris). As this wider significance is rarely explicit in a myth itself, and yet is the mutual interpretation in the social group in which it is told, a mythical tale relies on a collectively shared, pre-existing system of signs and mythic categories within which it is understood - 'a second-order semiological system'[60]. For the tale of Icarus, this is constituted by his mythical genealogy and the notions of hubris and the limits of the human condition. This mythical imaginary is a web of narratives that gives an extensive background as well as other levels of meaning to even the shortest of stories; in archaic Greek culture, this was particularly well developed and explicitly so, as the predominant discourse was explicitly myth-based – a depth that the tragic plays fully exploit. Ultimately, myths provide lenses through which particular events are ascribed narrative categories that give them wider meaning.

In archaic Greece, the prevalent mythical worldview has a number of narrative characteristics that set it in a particular category of myth, here called "traditional" or "archaic" myth and referred to as *mythos*. The characteristics of

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[59] For the definitions of myth that influenced the version above see Edmunds L. (ed.), pp.13-15; and in particular Burkert, W.

[60] This is Roland Barthes' definition of myth in general, using a Saussurian vocabulary (my translation). Barthes R., p.187

this type of mythic discourse are shared by other "pre-modern" societies: they include narratives set in a distant past that involve a genealogical relation to divinity and paradigmatic ancestral figures, and an explanatory system of eternal principles (or cycles) that are seen to govern nature and humankind alike. The distinction of *mythos* from fables like those of Aesop and other types of stories is broadly speaking, chronological[61]: as in the accounts of both Hesiod and Homer, the age of the gods (the theogony culminating in the reign of Zeus) preceded the heroic age (where both gods and heroes interact), which itself preceded the age of humanity (in which humanity has become a lesser race). Unlike fictional stories or recent historical accounts, the mythical narratives and genealogies relate to the distant, inaccessible past of gods and heroes, and never, as Herodotus puts it, the "so-called human age" (*genee*)[62]. And so the aforementioned glorification of the events at Marathon and induction into cult of its heroes, although a mythic process in the wider sense of "myth", is not a part of "traditional myth" as it is defined here. The archaic Greeks believed in the distant mythical past in much the same way that we believe in history: some "events" were more or less universally accepted, others were disputed and varied from place to place for parochial reasons, and some were rejected as contradictory or utterly incredible. The mythical past was for them historical truth, woven in myth[63] - and thus the meaning of the term diverges from its modern connotation as an untrustworthy account. There is also a degree to which *mythos* is tied to geography and genealogy, linking people to their land through a narrative based on ancestry: the Athenians, for instance, believed themselves to be "autochtonous" to Attica, that is, direct descendants of ancestors "born from the earth" of the area itself. Hence *mythos,* the mythical discourse and form of sense-making referred to throughout this chapter, refers to the archaic, traditional, Greek body of myth.

Originally, archaic myths were deeply intertwined with rituals of everyday life, many being tied to ceremonies such as male rites of initiation (e.g. stories about the warrior Achilles), marriage, farming, eating and other activities. Typically *mythos* (mythical speaking or discourse) binds together the divine and natural dimensions of the world in an interaction that inextricably links the two: an event in the natural plane of experience will have repercussions in the divine plane and vice versa. As in the many other societies that acknowledge their

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[61] Edmunds L. (ed.), pp.3-5
[62] Herodotus, 3.122
[63] Mazzarino S. in Edmunds L., p.92

direct dependence on the natural world, the mythical universe of the Greeks took its rhythm from the cycles of nature, linking myth, rituals, and the yearly calendar. The backbone of myth was a divine genealogy, linking the gods, the hereditary king (*basileus*) and cult heroes in a *whakapapa*[64] of ancestral connections and stories of its evolution; myth was thus central to Greek religious beliefs, and explained the place of humanity in the world in relation to the divine. Many myths served an aetiological function, explaining the origins of rituals or the causes of contemporary phenomena: how man came to master fire or how a city had come to be as it was. Michael Anderson neatly summarises the extent of the functions of the body of myth for Greek communities: 'myths provided a revered form of validation for cultural institutions, practices, and beliefs. They recorded the foundation of cities and sanctuaries, explained the origins of rituals, conveyed beliefs about the gods, mapped out social relations and hierarchies, exemplified positive and negative behaviour, and reflected generally on the cycle of human life, exploring its most intense joys and its deepest sorrows.'[65] In sum, they were the bedrock of the Greek worldview, providing people with a 'a self-image: the images of their gods and the ethical and practical wisdom of their people'.[66] Myths were the foundation of a worldview that was yet to be sectioned off for educational purposes into rational disciplines such as "history", "theology" or "philosophy", but which relied on particular episodes to provide them with particular lessons for the present.

The worldview projected by archaic Greek myths shared many of the principles common to the wider Oriental body of myth. In all of these, the human condition is perceived as deteriorating: both within the contemporary historical era, and relative to previous historical eras. The degeneration follows the path of a pre-determined cycle of ages culminating in a final regeneration through great catastrophe. For the Greeks, the foundational myths of the lost paradise of Kronos and of eternal recurrence formed the basis of this cyclical understanding of human history, which was most influentially reformulated in Hesiod's chronological account of the ages of gold (the lost paradise), silver, bronze, heroes, and iron. The scope for human action and the potential for

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[64] Māori word for "genealogy" which more accurately reflects the wider significance of these mythical genealogies as connections which have important repercussions for present identity and values through ancestors and their stories, social hierarchy, spiritual links and so forth.
[65] Anderson M., "Myth" in Gregory J. (ed.), p.122
[66] R. Fagles in Homer, 1997, p.12

improvement are thus restricted in the face of events which appear both necessary and inevitable[67], a perspective that helped to define the tragic genre.

The other protagonists of Greek myth also participate in shaping the human condition. First among these, the gods are the masters of human fate. The various Greek myths present the gods of heaven (Olympian) as self-interested and unpredictable, intervening erratically in human affairs for the purpose of restoring order or advancing their own, sometimes petty, purposes. Men and women are powerless in the face of their whims, but can still attract their favour through worship, libations and sacrifice at their respective temples: the loose contract between humans and their gods is founded on the practice of ritual. There are also more stable powers intertwined with the ambiguous Olympian gods that guarantee the principles of a cosmic order defined by Fate. Various divine figures of the Chtonian order (gods of the earth) uphold these absolute principles, beginning with the *Moirai* or fates, who like their siblings the seasons (*Horai*) are immutable features of existence (both are the offspring of Themis, the titan goddess of order); the *Erinyes* (Furies) and *Nemesis* (goddess of retribution) also participate by avenging any breaches of the necessary order of things. From a human perspective, the term *moira* is literally one's "share" or "portion" of this order, i.e. one's fate.[68] Human existence is necessarily determined by fate, and death is always a part of it; in light of this, one had to step carefully to avoid acting *hyper moron* (beyond one's fate, such as the hubris of Icarus). Perhaps as a result, the archaic worldview of the Greeks is centred around cautious values: *sophrosune* (moderation) was a recurrent principle most famously manifest in "*medan agan*" (nothing in excess!), the inscription on the temple at Delphi. The second category of mythical actors are the heroes, who as both ancestors and members of a more powerful race of humans from an earlier age, serve as paradigmatic figures that can be venerated and petitioned - much like the gods but generally on a lesser scale. As predecessors to the likes of the Catholic saints, they are often the object of private cults in Greek homes according to their characteristics (fertility, war, beauty and so forth) and are associated with rituals by virtue of their particular symbolic value.[69]

Greek myths were initially strictly a part of the archaic oral culture: they were formally transmitted in the format of poems that were composed and recited by

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[67] Eliade M., pp.130-137
[68] Cf. Hornblower S. and Spawforth A. (eds.), p.589
[69] Dodds E., pp. 141-155

aoidoi (bards) or lyric poets; and informally passed on through popular re-telling in everyday conversations, often as illustration for argument, sometimes in prose.[70] From the end of the Sixth century B.C. onwards, their form was fixed in writing for professional recitation at the festivals by the rhapsodes, and used for rote-learning in the education of the young, but their informal diffusion continued, ensuring the co-existence of a variety of versions. The many versions of each myth, often divergent or contradictory, meant that as a discourse it was inherently competitive: the recital of one version of a myth would mean a rejection of other variants. A reaction to this came from epic poetry, in which myth was reformulated on a large scale for greater consistency.

For Herodotus, Homer's epic collections (estimated VIIIth or VIIth B.C.) were indeed the first to give canonical shape to Greek myth, along with the *Theogony* of the Boeotian poet Hesiod (possibly VIIth century B.C.): both authors contributed to the formation of *a* mythology.[71] As stories that were transmitted orally, myths were subject to many variations, with different versions adapted to different localities and their particular customs; the storyteller also had a huge part to play in the ongoing evolution of any given myth. They thus formed a part of a popular culture in constant evolution. Homer's grand reformulations moved beyond this by organising, classifying, and ironing out inconsistencies – they were already marked by the "discipline and power" of the Enlightenment impulse.[72] The very popularity of his works brought with it a certain homogenisation of *mythos*, as they became a referent for all of Greek knowledge and life.[73] Even Plato, whose heavy criticism of the Homeric oeuvre proved how seriously it was taken as a treatise of morality and ideals, describes Homer as the "educator of Greece".[74]

Hesiod participated greatly in the systematisation of the body of myth through his inauguration of the intellectual tradition of active theogonic speculation, directly replicated in Ionian cosmology. Most notably, in his *Theogony*, Hesiod's concern for social issues lead him to derive abstract political concepts from the divine genealogies - *Eunomie* (good order), *Dike* (social justice), and *Eirene* (peace) were the *Horai* (seasons) of his ideal social relations, personified as goddess daughters of Zeus and Themis.[75] He transformed the Horai from "seasons" into "norms" and

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[70] Edmunds L. (ed.), p.6
[71] Herodotus, 2.53
[72] For a short account of this, see Horkheimer M.& Adorno T.W., "Excursus I", pp.35-62
[73] Murray O., 1993, p.272
[74] Plato, *Republic*, l.606e. Over a century earlier, Xenophanes, founder of the Eleatic School, comments that all his contemporaries have learned Homer's epics. Fairbanks A., p.28
[75] Hesiod, *Theogony,* ll.901-906 and commentary Murray O., p.92 & p.186

their mother Themis from "order" into "custom"; and thereby added other immutable principles to the fated cosmic order. To a certain extent, the gods were no longer themselves the natural elements or forces, but representations thereof. In addition to this, Hesiod emphasised these norms, *dike* in particular, as guiding principles of divine behaviour: in his pantheon Zeus became more of a moral enforcer, and less of the selfish libertine from the Homeric account.[76] It is also worth noting that his narrative of the human condition in *Works and Days* starts out with two key principles of mythic Greek thought: the concept of reversal (or hubris - strong men being brought low by the gods[77]); and the two types of *Eris*, strife, which according to Hesiod can be good (the productive competitive ethic leading to greater achievement) or bad (the destructive conflictual ethic leading to war).[78]

The type of abstraction developed by Hesiod exemplified and probably further contributed to the separation of myth from its day-to-day expression in ritual. In itself this represented a defining rupture: as the rites of everyday life were split from mythical thinking, the latter was transformed into a theoretical mythology that was reduced to attempting an abstract intellectual explanation of reality. At one level, this separation of the divine dimension from the human or natural world was a mere continuation of the dualism of animistic thinking, in which every thing had an outward appearance and a hidden essence. At another, it introduced a clear break between two dimensions which had previously been intimately linked (every event in the natural world had also been intrinsic to the divine), thereby starting the Greeks on the path towards the fulfilment of the first condition of rational thought: a dualistic conceptualisation of reality in which human and divine levels are strictly separate. The ambiguity of myth, where reality is perceived as an uncertain interrelation of human and divine dimensions at once, was now on its way to being "resolved" by two tidy and mutually exclusive categories.[79] The detachment of mythical thinking from ritual also facilitated the shift towards another discourse – the annual calendar of rituals embedded in local culture and lifestyle could continue unabated on the basis of customary practice, while the "high level" system of beliefs moved on.[80]

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[76] Jagu A., p.29
[77] Hesiod, *Works and Days*, ll.1-10
[78] Hesiod, *Works and Days*, ll.10-20
[79] Vernant J.P., 1974, pp.101-106
[80] Harrison T. in Goldhill S. & Osborne R., 2006, pp.123-141

With the demarcation of a realm of abstract speculative thought from that of natural experience, the thinker became other than the world around him. Where before myth simultaneously described the eternal cycles of nature and humanity's place within them, the distance created by abstract thinking estranges the subject from the object of its thought. As Horkheimer and Adorno explain it, 'the manifold affinities between existing things are supplanted by the subject which confers meaning and the meaningless object'[81]. As the method of reasoning shifts from explaining given features of the world through particular narratives to discovering the abstract principles that universally order it, the focus of reasoning switches from the world itself (the object) to the realm of principles that govern it and the human mind that is capable of deciphering these (the subject). This new anthropocentrism was perhaps what was famously expressed in Protagoras' (Fifth century B.C.) 'man is the measure of all things' or the famous injunction to 'know thyself' inscribed on the temple of Delphi (somewhat reminiscent of Kant's 'sapere aude!' – "dare to know!"); similarly, Socrates can later assert that man is capable of complete knowledge of what is just, and can thus act freely and independently. [82] The surrounding world is objectified, and the transcendent subject now feels free to manipulate it to suit his own purposes. The subject-object split already evident in Hesiod's mythology was to become a cornerstone of rational thinking, and was therefore also a step on the path of the Greek Enlightenment.

The systematisation of Homer and Hesiod was not the only form of reaction to the natural variability of myth. The criticism of myth had long been an intrinsic component of the mythical worldview, and indeed, was difficult to avoid where contradictory versions of the same myth collided. In the Sixth century B.C., however, a new type of myth criticism emerged and gained momentum, marked by its distanced stance towards the "high level" basis of the mythical worldview (the foundational framework of the mythical imaginary – the divine pantheon, genealogical hierarchy and so forth) and by its invention of a new, materialistic, replacement. This Ionian movement, provoked in no small part by the popularisation of literacy, built on the innate *esprit critique* of the mythical worldview and pushed it to its extreme to found a new system of sense-making – rationalism.

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[81] Horkheimer M.& Adorno T.W., 2002, p.7
[82] See in particular, the Socrates depicted in the *Apology* and *Crito*.

b. From cosmogony to abstract rationalism

> *'Every people has produced a code of laws; but the Greeks always sought for one Law pervading everything, and tried to make their life and thought harmonise with it.'* Werner Jaeger[83]

One concrete development in Archaic Greece aided the generalisation of rationality: the spread of literacy and the beginning of a slow transition away from a predominantly oral culture. An ongoing phenomenon since the Eighth century B.C., literacy had been rapidly propagated in an era where many Greek cities had to communicate with colonies over long distances. By the Fifth century, many Greek citizens were formally educated in reading and writing. Nonetheless, the oral culture was still very much in existence, as writing was mainly restricted to pragmatic uses; public debates, for instance, were not recorded until the second half of the century. A fully literate Greek society in the modern sense was not brought about until early in the Fourth century B.C.[84]

One effect of literacy is to fix in writing previously fluid definitions, thereby homogenising discourse. Officially sanctioned versions of Homer's epics were in this way formalised in the Sixth century B.C., and recited at public festivals, contributing to the systematisation of myth. The mythical worldview was intrinsically linked with oral culture in that myths were stories memorised, reinterpreted and recited, and as the fluid tradition was replaced with the less-forgiving fixity of the written word, the inconsistencies of myth were exposed. One Hecateus of Miletus, around the turn of the Sixth and Fifth centuries, famously proclaimed: 'I write what seems to me to be true; for the Greeks have many tales which, as it appears to me, are absurd.'[85]

The Milesian cosmologists were among the first to record their thoughts in prose (as opposed to poetry); fixed in written form, they were more easily cited, verified and criticised by subsequent theorists (leading to a more intentional process of change – "progress"). Literacy brought a new contestability to life as written accounts of experience could be compared and judged accordingly, resulting in the adoption of a more critical attitude among the Greeks, as well as the assumption

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[83] Jaeger W., p.xix
[84] Murray O., 1993, p.100
[85] Hornblower S. and Spawforth A. (eds.), p.619

that reality was essentially accessible to reason.[86] Any proposition now had to be demonstrable through consistency with the fixed canon of literature, be it legislative or mythical. The written word had inaugurated an intellectual sphere that existed only on the page, and with it, reinforced the new abstract and theoretical dimension and its separation from lived experience.

Literacy was no doubt also a contributing factor to the rationalisation of the *polis*; as the great Athenian *nomothetes* (lawgiver) Solon said of his radical reforms:

> *'I wrote down laws alike for the base and noble,*
> *fitting straight judgement to each.'*[87]

Writing down legislation effectively replaced the variable oral customs as guidelines for the political, as well as providing a new authoritative reference for debate. Applying Max Weber's insight to ancient Greece, one could postulate that the spread of literacy was a key determinant of the rationality of its political institutions.[88]

Although the development of rationalism was due in no small part to the growth of literacy, it was also driven by a parallel movement in Greek thought from the Eastern shores of the Aegean – Ionian cosmology.

The Sixth century B.C. cosmologists of Miletus (Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes), often referred to as the "fathers of reason" or the "first philosophers", did not invent a new framework for their explanations of the world. They merely transposed the theogony of Hesiod into cosmogonies with abstract depersonalised forces replacing the divine genealogy.[89] The gods were replaced by their effects (e.g. Hephaistos the forge-smith by Heat or Fire). In doing so, however, they exhibited a new requirement for physicalism by rejecting the supernatural and the direct involvement of the divine in *phusis* (the natural world) that permeated the world of myth. This inspired the likes of Xenophanes of Ionia (active in the second half of the Sixth century) to denounce the traditional gods as anthropomorphic projections of dubious moral quality, and muse about a

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[86] Murray O., 1993, p. 99
[87] Solon, Fragment 36.18-20 in Murray O., 1993, p.181
[88] For Weber, this is the defining mark of Western civilisation. Weber M., 1978
[89] The cosmogony of Anaximander shows similarities with the theogony of Hesiod right down into the detail cf. Vernant J.P., 1974, p.97

"one greatest god".[90] In the Milesian account, *phusis* became more of a simple mechanism, devoid of any divine or mythical justification, and thus also became a problem to solve through reasoning. The divine was abstracted to another dimension which transcended the natural world and regulated it from the outside; this new force took on the characteristics of a reified and depersonalised *Ananke* (Necessity); for instance, with the "*apeiron*" of Anaximenes , an absolute force governing the cosmos according to the rules of geometrical symmetry (amongst other things).[91] Later thinkers would follow along similar lines, the "*nous*", the "mind" or ordering principle of the world, of Anaxagoras being one of the more famous examples. It was in this transcendent dimension, the realm of thought, that the problems of *phusis* were addressed. Foremost among these was the existence of unity in a world assumed to be in continuous flux, that is, a world in becoming. The Milesians chose to resolve this paradox through the speculative assertion of a primary element constitutive of all things, the One, based on their observations of the natural world.[92]

Furthermore, the cosmogonies of the Milesian physicists replaced the structuring principle of the mythical worldview, the hierarchical genealogy of gods and king, which had already become problematic due to the move away from monarchy in Greek societies. The cosmic order was now founded on a law of justice inscribed in nature, and before which all were equal – a demonstration of the physicists' tendency towards the universalism that drives rational thinking. This evolution would seem to be intimately bound up with the nature of the developing *polis* and the increasingly egalitarian legislation; indeed, many see the principles of justice in cosmology as a straightforward projection of the rules of the new social order that governed the cities of the Greek thinkers (particularly in the work of Anaximander - a tendency that was already visible in Hesiod's abstract divinities).[93]

Through the dual principles of physicalism and abstract thought, the Milesian cosmologists opened the way for a new requirement for rational sense-making: absolute intelligibility. In the early Fifth century B.C., thinkers such as Parmenides, Pythagoras and Heraclitus gave primacy to the transcendent world of abstract thought over the empiricism of the Milesians. Inspired by the absolute, apodictic,

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[90] 'But mortals suppose that the gods are born (as they themselves are), and that they wear man's clothing and have human voice and body'; 'God is one, supreme among gods and men, and not like mortals in body or in mind.' Xenophanes, in Fairbanks A., p.67

[91] Hornblower S. and Spawforth A. (eds.), p.86

[92] For a good account of Milesian cosmology see Copleston F., pp.29-97

[93] See Copleston F., p.30 and Vernant J.P., p.403

and ideal character of geometry, they rejected the cosmological speculations of the Milesians as inconsistent (particularly because of their empirical tendencies), advancing instead the perfect coherence of an abstract, metaphysical world of thought structured by a single force. In so doing, they preserved the absolutist affirmation of 'one law pervading everything', and the universal notion of necessity, Heraclitus stating that: 'all events proceed with the necessity of fate'.[94] To schematise, one could say that for Parmenides and the Eleatics, this monistic world was governed by the principle of identity (Being); for Pythagoras and his disciples, change and plurality (Becoming); and for Heraclitus, a combination of both in tension (unity in diversity, identity in difference).[95] Heraclitus' ontological "compromise" is notable for its ideal of *"dike eris"* (strife is justice): 'war is common to all and strife is justice, ... all things must come into being through strife.'[96] In other words, all is perpetually in becoming as opposite entities are always in productive and destructive strife with each other and flowing in and out of being; the appearance of stability, of being, is the harmony of justice, which is a a state of tension akin to the string of a bent bow.[97]

Despite their divergent perspectives, all of these thinkers seem to have shared the belief that the world was structured according to one universal law, intelligible to humankind – it was a law of both mind and nature. Heraclitus neatly encapsulates this belief when he declares: 'One must follow what is common to all... Reason [*logos*] is common to all... All becomes One and One becomes All'.[98] The Pythagoreans invented the term "monad" to describe this, the One which was also the essence of everything. The ontological principles that structured the world were assumed to be the same as those governing the new rational form of intellectual discourse. For the new intellectual elite of pre-socratic thought, truth was now founded in reasonable speaking, on demonstrability through the formal logic of an argument's propositions and their consistency with an ideal system of axioms, not on sensory evidence. Crucially, this One principle and the governing logic that it projected were divined through contemplation – the universal system of explanation of reality was merely posited on the basis of abstract intellectual musings and a belief that intuition could lead to truth. Monistic reason was founded, and still rests on, a

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[94] Kahn C., p.157
[95] Heraclitus did seem to give primacy to Becoming with his doctrine of perpetual flux, cf. Russell B., pp.57-59
[96] Heraclitus, DK B80
[97] Heraclitus, DK B51
[98] Popper K., p.13

mystical assertion.[99] As with mythical sense-making, it bases itself on unsubstantiable belief. Unlike myth, by its very nature as a claim to unity issued from the abstract and transcendent realm of the mind, monistic reason is characterised by a purity and a simplicity that is not to be found in the interdependent world of *mythos*; and this purity, the unity of the monad, makes it a more forceful and absolutist assertion.

As a monism, an imposition of the One on the Many, *logos* already met some of Kant's later criteria of enlightened reason, as understanding characterised by 'a certain collective unity as the goal'[100]. This projection of unity ran counter to the logic of *mythos*, which instead of systematically deducing particular truths from a universal theory, draws lessons from a plurality of particular stories of the mythical past in order to explain particular contemporary events.[101] Moreover, the requirement for clarity through absolute systematicity ran counter to the mythical way of knowing through the interpretation of enigma: like the pronouncements of the oracle at Delphi, truth was revealed but cryptic in nature, and humankind, with a capacity for understanding that is always limited, could only ever grasp at it through fallible interpretation. The unity of the rational worldview is achieved through its systematisation into a hierarchical order of concepts guided by some absolute principles, themselves interrelated by the certain laws – in ancient Greece those of geometry, and in modern times those of mathematical logic - thus satisfying the requirement for self-consistency (the so-called principle of non-contradiction). As for *phusis*, the phenomenal world, it had to be governed by the characteristics of transcendent thought (much like the system of the cosmologists), and was therefore accessible to human reasoning – it was intelligible. In Fifth century B.C. Greece, it began to be said that the whole world ran according to *logos* (reasonable speech)[102].

Absolute intelligibility - the anthropocentric assertion of the world's conformity to man's rational categorisation, expressed in Protagoras' idea that "Man is the

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[99] Karl Popper evokes this mysticism in the context of his explanations of the origins of historicism. Popper K., pp.11-12.

[100] Kant I., 1973, p.533

[101] Williams R., 1992, p.17

[102] The terms *mythos* and *logos* are used here with similar meanings to those of Plato, that is, as mythical and rational discourse respectively. They are convenient terms to use schematically as names for the respective worldviews, although as these are loose assemblages (as per their earlier definition) they should be thought of as overlapping and interrelated cultural phenomena, and not absolute entities forming some sort of perfect dualism or dialectic.

measure of all things" - represented in itself a momentous paradigm shift. A newly objectified reality was now also posited to be entirely knowable, and governed no longer by the repetition of nature's eternal cycles, but by that of rationality's consistent principles. Thus, a form of sameness – whether through *mythos* or *logos* – is still imposed on the world in order to understand it. However, spurred on by the inner strength of its abstract purity, the new enlightened dogma was pushing this tendency to its absolute. Where the unpredictability of the gods and nature create an acceptance of mystery, ambiguity, and the unknowable in myth, the rationalistic mode is forthright in its totalitarian aspirations: all can be submitted to the criteria of physicalism and intelligibility, and thereby explained. Absolute knowledge is achievable, and an ideal unity can be attained – the identity of the subject with itself is correlated with the unity of its object. Nothing can exist outside of this dualistic totality; the incommensurable is rejected as much as it is feared, as it is never completely knowable or controllable, and thus stands in defiance of the basic enlightenment drive towards universality.[103]

The rise to prominence of this rationality was evident in the new importance given to *techne* – that is, the systematic application of rational inquiry to any field of human endeavour. As mentioned previously, in the Athenian boom of the first half of the century, this was producing astonishing advances in many domains. Hence Polykleitos, the Greek sculptor (active from 460B.C.), thought himself capable of calculating the golden mean, using geometric theory to determine the ideal real-world proportions for the human body. In his *Canon*, he presented his aesthetic theory as a system of proportion whereby every body part was related to every other and to the whole - even stating that 'perfection comes about little by little through many numbers'[104]. And he applied this rational system to create statues such as the *Doryphoros* (spear-bearer), of which the proportions (and the principles behind them) were imitated throughout the Ancient world. Another illustration is the record of a town-planner called Hippodamus proposing that technical awards be given to 'those who discovered something of advantage to the State'.[105] Advances in abstract disciplines such as theoretical geometry were being put to practical use and the results were clear: systematic thinking was a tool that could lead to advancement in many fields of endeavour.

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[103] Horkheimer & Adorno, p.11
[104] Hornblower S. and Spawforth A. (eds.), p.1211
[105] Dodds E., p.19

The correlated idea that the knowledge acquired through *techne* could be built upon to reach greater heights of achievement – that is, an "enlightened" faith in human progress through instrumental rationality – took hold in the Athenian consciousness. A statement from Xenophanes of Ionia is the first record of a departure from the degenerative understanding in myth: 'Not from the beginning did the gods reveal everything to mankind, but in the course of time, by research men discover improvements.'[106] Medical writers of the period showed explicit faith in the future of their discipline as a result of its rational epistemological foundations, one of them declaring that:

> Medicine is not like some branches of enquiry in which everything rests on an unprovable hypothesis. Medicine has discovered a principle and a method through which many great discoveries have been made over a long period and what remains will be discovered too if the enquirer [...] takes [past discoveries] for the starting point of his enquiry.'[107]

Such statements displayed belief in humanity's intellectual capability to solve the problems and overcome the limits of its existence.[108] The new hope was that the certainty and control over the world offered by *techne* would overcome the ambiguity and contingency accepted in the mythic worldview as part and parcel of human existence: *tuche,* that is, luck, fortune, the element of life that is not under human control.[109] As one of the Hippocratic treatises from the end of the Fifth Century B.C. puts it:

> 'They did not want to look on the naked face of luck (*tuche*), so they turned themselves over to science (*techne*). As a result, they are released from their dependence on luck; but not from their dependence on science.'[110]

The opposition between *techne* and *tuche* became so commonplace in the extant literature of the Fifth century that it is deemed essential to the understanding of the former concept: *techne* is the kind of human craft, art, or science, that is systematic and deemed capable of control, planning and prediction, and deployed precisely in order to avoid being at the mercy of luck.[111] The emerging notion of

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[106] Xenophanes in Dodds E.,op.cit., p.11
[107] Unknown author of *On Ancient Medicine* quoted in Goldhill S., 1986, p.200
[108] For a good discussion of the evolution of the Greek belief in progress see the essay of the same name in Dodds E., pp.1-25, and Goldhill S., 1986, pp.199-243
[109] Nussbaum M., p.89
[110] Hippocratic treatise *On Science* (*Peri Technes*) quoted from Nussbaum M., p.89
[111] Nussbaum M., pp.94-95

progress was directly tied to faith in rational intellectual endeavour and the success of its practical applications, and driven by a desire to eradicate uncertainty and obtain control over life.

The humanist shift in focus from object (through cosmology for instance) to subject (epistemology and culture), and the associated privileging of the *polis* and its juridico-political activities as the principal field of endeavour and study, meant that broadly speaking, the sense of progress through *techne* was focused more on the humanities than on applied science. Although it encompassed both, the new faith in progress through *techne* had a larger emphasis on the intellectual than the technological, at least relative to the modern Enlightenment.[112] As in tragedy's famous "ode to man", mastery of nature is the beginning of civilisation, but the *polis* is its pinnacle.[113] Similarly, E.R. Dodds sees *Prometheus Bound*, Aeschylus' tragedy written circa 456 B.C., as evidence that the idea of humanity's cultural and intellectual progress by rational means had already gained currency in Athens: in the play, the titan Prometheus says himself that '[I have] made men rational and capable of reflection, who till then were childish'; and in the ensuing list of all of the human crafts that empower humankind emphasises intellectual arts over any others.[114] Dodds attributes the adoption of a belief in progress to the life experiences of the Athenians of Aeschylus' generation - a more than feasible proposition in light of the rapid successes of the city in the first half of the Fifth century B.C.[115] Superior technology is rarely cited as a driver of this success, but intellectual superiority is frequently affirmed: Thucydides has his Corinthian envoy warn the traditionalist Spartans of the increasing danger posed by their innovative Athenian adversaries, declaring that: 'in politics, as in any *techne*, the latest inventions always have the advantage'[116]; and his Pericles proclaims that Athenian superiority resides in their 'intelligence [...] which proceeds not by hoping for the best, but by estimating what the facts are and thus obtaining a clearer vision of what to expect.'[117]

Another development which came in tandem with this faith in rational progress was the greater instrumentalisation of public reasoning in Athens. The

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[112] Goldhill S., pp.199-203
[113] Goldhill S., p. 203 commenting on Sophocles' *Antigone*
[114] Aeschylus in Dodds E., pp.5-6
[115] Dodds E., pp.1-25
[116] Thucydides, 1.71, in Dodds E., p.11.
[117] Thucydides in Goldhill S., p.200

systematic methods of the various disciplines tied to *logos* had had such impressive results that faith in them as an effective practical means seems to have grown; and grown to the point that other more traditional considerations (such as the code of honour or the value of moderation) were taking a back seat in any decision-making.[118] As described, the intellectual domain of the "presocratics" as well as the domains of art and technology were progressively infused with rational logic; and so was the prestigious civic domain of the *polis*. The records of the oratory from the end of the Fifth century B.C. onwards show that politicians sought to legitimate their policies in practical terms alone (mythical concerns seem to feature very little if at all[119]) – Oswyn Murray commenting that: 'it is surprising how much of the argumentation ... is about expediency, danger, cost, and likely results, and how little concerns religious duty, taboos, ritual purity and so on'.[120] Already in 479 B.C. the Athenians had desecrated their own tombs in order to hastily build a stone wall for their city, in what was no more than a strategic play for a stronger negotiation position with Sparta[121]; and by 432 B.C., Thucydides has them openly claim that 'calculations of interest'[122] are a central, natural, and legitimate motive for human behaviour, and records many other instances (such as the strategy at Salamis) when instrumental reason dictated their actions over and above other traditionally more significant factors.[123] It would seem that Athenian judgement was increasingly following standards of utility and calculability, and that other, non-measurable, more substantive considerations - pertaining to cultural meaning and thus ultimately, to myth in the wider sense of the term – were being overtaken.

Another term that sometimes operated as an apologetic for instrumental, self-interested, reasoning indicates the extent to which the latter had become prominent: the concept of *ananke*. Instrumental considerations were the ones being qualified as "imperious necessities" (*krataie ananke*).[124] The concept of Necessity, which had been elevated from the position of one among many

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[118] This follows Max Weber's notion of instrumental rationality as a form of calculation in which effective practical utility overrides other considerations (of meaning, etc.) as a motive for judgement. Cf. Weber M., p.5ff.
[119] Cf. n.38 above
[120] Murray O. quoted in Goldhill S. & Osborne R.(eds.), 2006, pp.126
[121] Thucydides, 1.89-1.91
[122] Thucydides, 1.76
[123] Ibid, 1.76. R.N. Lebow also reads into the *Peloponnesian War* that Thucydides is critiquing the excessive amount of weight being given to instrumental concerns in Athens' policymaking of the latter half of the Vth Century B.C. in *The Tragic Vision of Politics*, 2003
[124] Cf. Euripides' *Hecuba* for example.

other divinities to the place of guiding metaphysical force in presocratic thought, was also being reified as an ethical value to justify pragmatic behaviour.[125] Thucydides' famous Melian dialogue illustrates the instrumentalisation of reasoning in Athenian public policy quite clearly. In this account, the Athenian generals are presented as justifying their invasion of Melos without any legitimising discourse of a traditional, mythopoetic variety (right to rule based on genealogical superiority, for instance) or any other substantive ethical consideration (historical grievance, entitlement based on code of honour, and so forth). In fact, they explicitly choose to forgo these justifications, which they call 'specious pretences'[126]. Instead, in short, blunt statements, they justify their actions in instrumental terms alone and 'speak only of interest'[127], completely inverting traditional Greek values in favour of the effective, self-interested, means to the end that they consider necessary: they must maintain the dominance of their empire by projecting the image of power and causing fear, simply because they can ('the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must'[128]).[129]

The connection of fear and domination with the rise to prominence of a new form of necessity, itself constituted by instrumental rationality and associated with a teleology of human progress, fit well with Horkheimer and Adorno's critical analysis of the processes of Enlightenment as a passage from myth to rationalism. In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, these phenomena are linked to the aforementioned dualism between subject and object: this split, and the abstraction of subjectivity to a separate metaphysical reality, lead to a new set of necessities for humankind. In *mythos*, humankind has to find correct ways to participate in a multifaceted, mysterious, and uncertain world regulated by eternal natural cycles, associated divinities, and unknowable Fate – daily existence is coloured by the acceptance of this ineradicable uncertainty, the vagaries of meaningful but impenetrable mythical explanations, and fear of dangerous, unpredictable world. In the enlightened life, humanity exists independently and outside of a fully intelligible world that is merely an object to be exploited, but this separation is also alienation: nature, and all that exists outside the Self, is feared as it is Other. The Other is the unknown, that which

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[125] The elevation of the concept of *Ananke* is mentioned in Hornblower S. and Spawforth A. (eds.), p.589. For examples of "imperious necessity" cf. Thucydides 3.82, 3.40 etc.
[126] Thucydides, 5.89
[127] Thucydides, 5.90
[128] Thucydides, 5.89
[129] Lebow R.N., pp.123-124

cannot be categorised and controlled in the world outside, and hence that which presents a threat to the alienated Subject. The response is an overwhelming compulsion towards self-preservation and the correlated necessity of controlling that which is external. Rational knowledge, which is both certain and absolute and thus a source of reliability and reassurance, is applied to the human endeavour to master everything. As a distinct entity, the thinking subject declares itself free to dominate the outside reality, but it is in fact shackled to this pursuit by the fear of the Other: controlling through the discovery and application of knowledge is the insatiable, fear-driven, thirst of enlightenment. The increasing domination over the world is necessary progress; uncertainty, ambiguity, and mystery represent the limits of knowledge and control, and so are obstacles that are feared and must be overcome. The diktat of the One over the Many is an absolutist quest that can only come with insecurity in the face of mystery, which enlightenment rationality is obliged to denounce as the great taboo: it is the avowed target of a system that is presumed to apply and repeat itself everywhere. The enlightened, such as Thucydides - who rejected *to muthodes*, the mythical 'fables' of predecessors such as Herodotus in favour of 'the truth of things done'[130] - devote themselves to eradicating ambiguity, de-mythologising through rational understanding. Monistic rationalism cannot escape the totalitarianism inherent in its imposition of one way of knowing on the whole: all that is Other is marginalised and conquered – will-to-truth and will-to-power converge in the enlightened impulse. Human reasoning becomes fixated with control of the world (and of other people); questions of meaning are subsumed beneath the instrumental imperative. Finally, the relentless criticism inherent in the imposition of one way of knowing and being is applied to all except the One itself, which, as an axiom that is mystically intuited in the otherworld of abstract contemplation, cannot be challenged. Enlightened self-criticism cannot apply to the logic of Enlightenment itself.

The expression of this enlightened convergence can be detected in the collective actions of Fifth century B.C. Athenian citizenry. Free from the explicit compulsion of tyranny, in an egalitarian system that they themselves govern according to universal principles, the Athenians become estranged from their own homes, as "addicted to innovation" and overseas exploration, they seek knowledge far and wide. With this new freedom, they strive together not for the emancipation of others according to their own democratic ideals, but -

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[130] Thucydides, 1.22

as related in the Melian dialogue - to control and dominate the cities around them, and to build an empire for themselves. Significantly, they are driven not only by this unrelenting need for control and self-determination ('the fundamental trait of the Hellenic spirit'[131]), but also admit to the converse motive: self-preservation[132], particularly with regard to the fear of enslavement[133], the worst of all imaginable fates for the Greeks (which as a common practice of war, they regularly imparted to their enemies). Drawing together the drive of fear, the necessity of domination, progress through modernisation and the accumulation of knowledge is a statement by the orator Alcibiades in 415B.C., who urges Athens to launch an (eventually disastrous) expedition against Sicily for fear that first, by ceasing their imperialist expansion they might be in danger of being themselves conquered; second, that they might otherwise stagnate in their knowledge and expertise; and finally, that choosing to engage in such activity will allow the Athenians to accumulate constantly new experience.[134] Thucydides' account of Athenian public policy in the Peloponnesian War is littered with the evidence of these motives: on the whole, he seems himself eager to highlight how their neglect of traditional ethics in favour of instrumental domination results in disaster.[135] These Athenians seemed to be convinced that self-preservation requires continual progress through the expansion of their empire. The oft-noted paradox of this behaviour is that their ideals of equality and democracy were never accorded to others – barbarians, other Greeks, Athenian women, and their own slaves. For them their "advanced" political and technical systems were now merely proof of their own superiority as Athenian males, which they had to preserve by the very means that had acquired it: imperialist domination. The evident double standards inherent in this position, explicitly pointed out to them by others[136], did not disturb them: the traditional ethical values, which they shared with fellow archaic Greeks, have been obliterated by an instrumental reasoning that cannot itself be called into question.

Thus, at the beginning of the Fifth Century, the foundations for a rationalistic worldview had been extrapolated from mythology and formulated in the theoretical propositions of the "pre-socratics", and a critically rational attitude

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[131] Jagu A., p.14

[132] The Melians point this out when objecting to their treatment as inferiors: 'is that your subjects' idea of equity [...]?' in Thucydides, 5.96

[133] Gaus G. & Kukathas C. (eds.), p.303

[134] Thucydides, 6.17-18

[135] Lebow R.N., and also Williams M., discuss this extensively.

[136] The Melians refer to it directly in Thucydides, 5.96

fostered by the fixity of the written word. Everything was now to be measured against the yardsticks of *logos*: the positivist requirement of consistency within the physical, not supernatural, world; and the requirement of intelligibility, that is, conformity to logical reasoning and the principle of identity, the laws of abstract thought.[137] The other characteristics of the rational worldview such as the "subject-object" split and the humanist belief in progress were also already apparent. Although its origins were in myth, rational sense-making had evolved into something new that disrupted the mythical worldview. The new wave of Ionian teachers in vogue in Athens themselves exemplified this, professing a growing scepticism towards the religious cults of their cities and a corresponding attraction to pantheism, a better fit with their systematic, unified explanations of the world.

Furthermore, rationalism had both emanated from the mythical worldview and was innately opposed to it. As the continuation of the aforementioned movement of systematisation through the formulation of ever wider narratives, the Greek Enlightenment preserved some of the mythical framework, rather than replacing it with a completely alien alternative. Just like Socrates quoted above, the proponents of rational discourse preserved those myths deemed "noble", if only as fables used to illustrate wider principles. As with Hesiod's depersonalisation of the gods, the early rationalists carefully abstracted them from their particular roots of place, people and time so as to give them the veneer of rationalist universality. And so the movements of abstraction and unification drove towards a universal narrative – many of the "pre-socratics" devoted themselves to this task. These universal claims, inherent in this monistic ideology, were a form of epistemological exclusivity, and so were perceived as a full rejection of mythical discourse. In sum, by both building on a part of *mythos* and still explicitly negating it, enlightened rationalism sublated[138] the archaic worldview of myth.

Athenian citizens were unlikely to have escaped the new ways of thinking, as each of them was intensely involved in the affairs of the city and exposed to the rationality inherent in both the juridico-political framework and, to a lesser extent no doubt, the ideas of the Ionian schools. However, the predominance of this "enlightened" worldview over its co-existent mythical counterpart was in many

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[137] The tension between the principles of intelligibility and positivity was to result in the dualistic opposition of Being and Becoming, *nomos* and *phusis*, the One and the Many (respectively) in what Vernant identifies as the dialectic that drove Greek philosophy. Cf Vernant J.P, 1974, p.106

[138] In the Hegelian sense of negating or eliminating, but also preserving as one partial element of a synthesis.

ways restricted to the domain of the *polis*, the public assemblies and law courts where it had been popularised. In the first half of the Fifth Century at least, there is little to suggest that this new *Weltanschauung* had also taken over the rest of Greek life; activities in the home, in festivals, and on the farm were still conducted according to the traditional ways of the "Old" body of myth.[139] [140]And yet the two were clearly incompatible: the juridico-political rationality was dissonant with the mythopoetic tradition in many ways.

ii. *Rupture in Nomological Knowledge*

a. *mythos* and *logos*

In little over three decades, Athens had transformed itself from a somewhat backward city-state dominated by feuding aristocratic families to a serious colonial and military power, not only in Greece but throughout the Mediterranean, with a radically innovative and rationalised model of collectivist socio-political organisation. Self-confidence and patriotism amongst Athenian citizens – who had voted on, and worked towards their achievements together - should have reached a paroxysm. Yet the speed of change combined with the very enormity of their successes had transported them all into the unknown. The "Brave New World" in which they now lived was not supported by their worldview based in *mythos*: the "empty place" of the democratic sovereign now stood *in lieu* of the throne of the king of divine descent, and their empire far outstretched any legitimising genealogical myths. The very source of their identity, long determined at birth through genealogical links to tribe or family, had been formally displaced by arbitrary civic categories that even assigned a new name to them.

These anachronistic features of the traditional worldview were to a certain extent addressed by the new rationalism, its narratives of progress, juridico-political discourse, and abstract ontology; however, the innate universalism of the new worldview meant that it could not be selectively applied without contradicting

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[139] Meier C., pp. 22-23
[140] Dodds E., pp. 141-155

mythical discourse. Notably, it clashed with the framework of the "private life" of citizens, which from what little is known about it today was deeply infused in mythical thinking. For many citizens this was a life on the farm punctuated by rituals corresponding to the natural and agricultural cycles; for probably all citizens, this involved the religion of the family, centred around the home and the cult of heroes and ancestors. As a result, the co-existence of the two forms of sense-making cannot have been comfortable in the mindset of the citizens. The obvious disconnect between the two became a cultural rift. For Vernant[141] as well as Meier[142], it resulted in a torn consciousness, a split between the political sphere of the various assemblies and law courts and the rest of day-to-day life that was still ruled by the rituals of *mythos* – the private domain. Meier in particular emphasises this rupture:

> *'What, for example, was the relationship between the rational language, which must have characterised public discourse, and the language learned and spoken in the home, or the ideas, the myths, with which the men had grown up, and which their wives were probably still passing on to their own children? Surely considerable discrepancies must have arisen, and these must have been particularly severe where public life was fundamentally determined by broader sections of society.'[143]*

It is of course difficult to get a precise idea of what constituted the mindset of the average Fifth Century B.C. Athenian – as opposed to the intelligentsia, the thinking minority, whose beliefs were recorded in writing. The classicist E.R. Dodds sought to provide an insight into popular belief and concluded that what little can be established originates in our knowledge of Greek rituals – tied to farming, the seasons, and the cult of ancestors in heroes central to Athenian home life – and the mythology surrounding them.[144] For Meier, although the city's intellectuals seemed further along the rationalist path than the average citizen (as evidenced by the occasional failure of the likes of Pericles to "sell" less traditional policies to the Assembly), the constant exposure to the new discourse in the assemblies and festivals and its enshrinement in the institutions in the *polis* meant that all were implicated in its growth and propagation.[145] It is well-established that the Athenian citizenry was relatively well educated, culturally quite homogenous and a "tightly-knit bunch" – mostly as a consequence of their heavy schedule of

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[141] Vernant J.P. & Vidal-Naquet P., 2001, vol. I, pp.13-40
[142] Meier C., pp.22-32. Both Meier and Vernant follow Nietzsche in the identification of the opposition between *mythos* and "reason" in the Vth Century B.C. cf. Nietzsche F., 1956
[143] Meier C., p. 22
[144] Dodds E., pp. 141-155
[145] Meier C., pp.32-33

joint activities and duties in the polis. All of the new ideas were widely circulated in public recitations, by itinerant teachers such as the sophists or in the massively popular tragic and comic plays, making it almost impossible for the majority not to have been exposed to them. Even the problematic gap itself - between the mythic values and rituals of the *oikos* (household) and the institutionalised juridico-political rationality of the *polis* - was an explicit and recurring theme in many of the tragic plays.[146] In any case, for Dodds as well as for Meier, the gap between the traditional belief based on a mythical worldview and those beliefs promoted in the life of the *polis* – all of which formed an integral part of an Athenian's daily experience - was indeed a wide one.

The two perspectives carried attitudes towards the world that were in many ways fundamentally opposed.

On the one hand, the new rationalism that guided public policy had resulted in resounding success. It seemed to be an indomitable force that made the impossible a reality and put the rest of the world at Athens' feet. The underlying assumptions were that the world was an object that humans could gain knowledge of and manipulate through reason, and without the aid of the gods, to achieve their own ends; this was progress, and it had to be relentlessly pursued. Moreover, the rational worldview was often expressed in direct contradiction to the mythical one, first at the level of ideas (in the tradition of myth criticism), but also in the spirit of *agon* that pervaded the intellectual sphere as much as every other in Greek life – just like drama, their material was recited or propounded publicly in competition with the ideas of others. Most of the rationalist authors wrote in prose rather than poetry, asserting that their work was founded on their own faculties rather than the inspiration of the Muses, and openly aspired to displace the poets as the nation's wisdom-givers and truth-tellers.[147] As espousers of a notion of progress, they fundamentally challenged the degenerative principle of the mythical worldview, and framed their ideas as the New Way, above and against the traditional ways of life. This is already evident in Heraclitus (late Sixth and early Fifth centuries B.C.) when he states: 'We should not act and speak like "children of our parents": in other words, in the way that has been handed down

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[146] Most frequently expressed in the conflict of women and their traditional priorities of household and family honour with those of men and their duty to the state. See for example Euben's commentary on the Oresteian trilogy, Euben J. P., 1990, pp.74-76

[147] Heraclitus for example repeatedly attacks Homer, Hesiod and other "singers of the people" (see for instance fragment 104 in Kahn C., p.54).

to us.'[148] Of his many provocative comments, this is perhaps the one that would have appeared the most violent to the ear of his fellow Greeks, setting itself against their culture as a whole. Later on in the Fifth century B.C., Thucydides wrote that Athenians had been conquered by this radical spirit, 'slaves to the latest craze' and 'contemptuous of custom'.[149]

On the other hand, their traditional worldview of *mythos* alerted them to the possibility that in their empire-building they had committed *hubris*, an overreach of the condition allotted to them by the gods, and that their *nemesis*, or retribution to re-balance the order of the cosmos, awaited them. The perspective of the traditional archaic body of myths on reality asserts its ambiguity: human actions have unpredictable consequences that often differ from their intended outcomes, whether due to individual fate (*moira*), the intervention of the partial and often capricious gods or humanity's lack of foresight for long-term repercussions. The world is not seen as an entirely anthropocentric proposition: man is confronted by mysteries and paradoxes that resist his full understanding and thus his control. Furthermore, rather than seeing human progress in history, the archaic Greek saw degeneration: no-one could achieve feats comparable to those of the heroes of their glorious mythical past anymore, as humanity had progressively become a lesser race through the degradation of the Ages. This was what Nietzsche referred to as their 'pessimism of strength'[150], which contrasts strongly with the enlightened optimism of the Fifth century B.C. Indeed, these notions of the existence of the "unknowable" or the "unachievable", are thoroughly unenlightened (in the "standard" account of the Enlightenment at least) in that they point at the limits and not the potential of humankind.

The relationship between the two discourses was evidently more complex than a straightforward opposition, as they were co-existent features of the Athenian mindset. As described in detail earlier in this chapter, elements of the rational framework had been developing for many a century before the Fifth, if only at the cultural margins; similarly, for many a century after the rise to predominance of *logos*, elements of the mythical discourse survived. The specific feature of the century in question was that both of the rough assemblages denoted here as *mythos* and *logos* had for a short time come to be acceptable forms of discourse in an otherwise homogeneous Athenian culture, and so their incompatibilities became

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[148] Kahn C., p.106
[149] Thucydides quoted in Meier C., p.33
[150] Nietzsche F., 1956, p.4

points of disruption, irresolvable questions of judgement that were keenly felt in everyday life. Moreover, as discussed earlier, the elements of *logos* were sublations of features of the mythical worldview, and so extensions of *mythos* rather than entirely alien notions. Their complex interrelationship is illustrated by a statement attributed to Protagoras, most probably delivered in the middle of the century, asking his audience if they want him to deliver a speech as a *mythos* or as a *logos* and promptly going on to deliver both: the first, his own version of a myth to both illustrate and prove his point, and then, in case some of the audience were still to be convinced, a logical argument in the manner of the sophists.[151] Similarly, in Euripides' play *Ion,* the eponymous hero asks another character to reveal his father's identity to him, only to be referred to the pronouncements of Apollo's oracle; not satisfied with this, he asks to try another form of discourse, and proceeds to a rational investigation of the facts of the matter via a series of questions and answers (much like an Athenian court *agon*).[152] These records explicitly shows that the two forms of discourse both held currency for a time (even if philosophers like Socrates were already rejecting *mythos* by the end of the century); and also, that some Athenians were partial to one over the other – the two were also placed in competition with each other.[153] This contest was natural in a Hellenic culture that was still to a large extent orally based, in which new ideas were generally disseminated in performance as well as in *agon*, whether in political and juridical oratory, historical exposition, drama, recitation or song. Any new form of expression, including elements of the rational discourse, had to quite literally compete on the same stage as the traditional forms for attention. The proponents of *logos* were often seeking to demarcate their thinking and claim its superiority by criticising their mythopoetic counterparts, who had long held the position of authoritative truth-telling in Greek culture: in this vein, one of Heraclitus' fragments records him attacking the poets Homer and Hesiod along with other "singers of the people".[154] In addition to incompatibility, competition thus played its own part in opening the rift between the co-existent *mythos* and *logos.*

This disconnect resulted in the growth of self-doubt in the minds of the Athenians; as Versenyi puts it: 'historically, [...] the Athenians themselves were

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[151] Plato, *Protagoras,*320c
[152] Foucault M., 2001, pp.46-47
[153] E.g. the *muthoi* of Heracles being preferred to the *logoi* of Neoptolemus in Sophocles, *Philoctetes* – see Winnington-Ingram R., p.299
[154] Cf. Allan W., in Gregory J.(ed.), pp.71-75

going through a crisis of belief with respect to traditional myth.'[155] In Heidegger's term, the "reliability" of their worldview was upset: the framework of reference that provides a basis for judgement and thus a sense of assurance and security in one's dealings with the world, was torn between two poles.[156] Without monarch or priestly caste, there was no absolute authority that could act as foundation for communal values, and rule on the new and pressing ethical questions assailing them. In a democracy without a professional bureaucracy, the generalised requirement of public decision-making exacerbated this uncertainty by constantly forcing the Athenians to choose which standards to adhere to, the old ways or the new.[157] The promotion of the policy of evacuation before the battle of Salamis exemplifies this. For those citizens hesitant to embrace the strategy of evacuation on grounds of instrumental rationality alone (abandoning the sacred places of Athens to be violated by barbarian invaders was far from customary practice and was denounced as such at the time), Themistokles also proposed a more conventional legitimisation in mythological terms: a reference to a "wooden wall" in a riddle of the oracle from Delphi was conveniently interpreted as his proposed naval fleet.[158] That the two forms of discourse had to be employed for the sake of political expediency indicates not only that 'notions of a double causation ... at once human and divine'[159] existed among Athenians, who adhered to one, the other, or both ways of seeing the world; but also that there was at best an uneasy cohabitation between these often contradictory value-systems.

There is good evidence for this in the dramatic arts of the great festivals. It should be noted that these were competitive public events that regularly drew over half of the citizenry, and thus were not only written to appeal to the popular mindset - thereby reflecting its values - but influenced it as well. The tragedians continuously play on the gap between the two mindsets throughout most of the century. After all, one of the features that defines the genre is a problematisation of human thought and action through an insistence on the limits of the human condition: the plays' characters suffer and fall as a result of their imperfect ability to know and control the world around them, and become victims of both the unforeseen consequences of their own actions and of greater external forces (Fate,

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[155] Versényi L., p.183
[156] Heidegger M., "The Origin of the Work of Art", in Inwood M., pp.116-128
[157] Cf. Meier C., pp.34-40
[158] Herodotus, 7.417. There are numerous other examples from the early Fifth Century B.C. or before, in both Herodotus and Thucydides, of politicians deploying mythical legitimisations to convince the people to pursue a particular policy for which there is clearly also a strategic rationale. E.g. Sparta using an old curse as a pretext for diminishing anti-spartan influences in Athens (Thucydides, 1.127.1)
[159] Meier C., p.42

the gods) that preside over everything. In this vein, the playwrights choose to exploit the rupture in their own culture and highlight the inconsistencies that result from it: these are ready-made illustrations of the tragic nature of their own worldview and its problems. Already in Aeschylus' (active 499-458 B.C.) *Prometheus Bound*, the wisdom and just ways personified by the older titan Prometheus are opposed to the innovative violations of convention represented by the younger but more powerful Zeus, in a dualism evocative of the aforementioned transition from *thesmos* to *nomos*. In Sophocles' *Antigone* (estimated 442 B.C.), the word *nomos* is used repeatedly by different characters with different meanings as they talk past each other – for some, it means custom as in the old traditions passed down by their forefathers and embedded in myth; while for others, it refers to custom as in the ordinances decided on by the *polis*. The play thereby exposes the contradiction and asks the question – which of the old or new standards of justice should we apply? And in one of the last extant tragedies, *The Bacchae* (estimated 408 B.C.), Euripides offers a subtle exploration of the antagonism between the extreme forms of both customary religious belief and the new self-reliant individualism. One quote from this play illustrates the rift between the old ways of myth and the new rationalism quite clearly:

> *We do not trifle with divinity.*
> *No, we are the heirs of customs and traditions*
> *hallowed by age and handed down to us*
> *by our fathers. No quibbling logic can topple them,*
> *whatever subtleties this clever age invents.*[160]

The evidence of a cultural rift is also present in the comedies: Aristophanes (principal comic poet, active from 427 B.C. onwards) repeatedly portrayed traditionalist characters troubled by the new ways of the *polis*, playing out the mistrust that many harboured with regards to the growing rationalism.[161] For instance, *The Clouds* (circa 420 B.C), a satire on the novel terms of thought and education, is a play centred on the portrayal of a somewhat backward Athenian struggling with the new values of sophistic education, a scenario Aristophanes exploits to ridicule not only Socrates but the speculations of the physicists and the rhetoric of the sophists in one fell stroke. In particular, as he attempts to mock the spirit of the age, he emphasises a distinction between the old discourse, that he presents as just, and the new *logos*, that he presents as a cunning device to make

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[160] Euripides, *The Bacchae,*ll.200-204
[161] Meier C., p.32

the weaker argument appear the stronger (sophistry in the pejorative sense of the term).[162] In *The Frogs*, staged at the height of Athenian despair in 405 B.C., Dionysos goes to Hades to revive a tragic playwright who will save the city. In accordance with the main theme of the play (noted for its unusual seriousness of tone), the long-dead Aeschylus is chosen over the more contemporary Euripides: the former is portrayed as a meaningful sage adhering to the Old ways, while the latter is presented as a rhetorically gifted but superficial representative of the New. In this late work, Aristophanes seems to be nostalgically urging Athenians to return to values that are no longer theirs.

Even the architecture of the period displays signs of this antagonism. John Carroll notes that the two temples of the Acropolis, the Parthenon and the Erechtheion, diverge in style to such an extent as to seem a deliberate ploy of their designers.[163] And this despite having been commissioned by the same statesman (Pericles) and built progressively over the course of roughly the same time period (the latter half of the century). The Parthenon, archetype of classicism, displays Athenian *techne* in all of its splendour, a geometrical feat that preaches the universal virtues of proportion and measure. It celebrates Athena, the goddess of wisdom, housing her twelve metre statue wrought by Pheidias, a sculptor also known for his perfect proportions. Immense, beautiful and perfect, it is a public monument to the glory of the *polis* and the greatness of human achievement, to which the rest of Athens below - in private squalor – can look up to. In sum, it can be seen as the house of enlightened reason, expressing faith in Athenian progress. In a supreme contrast, the Erechtheion, built after the long Peloponnesian war had gnawed away at the wealth and probably the confidence of the city, is a much smaller and seemingly disjointed effort. Composed of three elements at different floor levels with incompatible styles, it offers a certain visual incoherence; balanced precariously on the edge of a cliff, it lies in darkness, half underground. Its entrance is guarded by the statues of six ominous, brooding maidens, who for Carroll evoke the chtonic order of the Fates or the prophecies of the doomed Cassandra. It is a temple built to commemorate a mythical event, the founding of Athens, a contest between Athena and Poseidon over who could provide the better gift for mortals. As the Erechtheion was built in full sight of a completed Parthenon, it seems a deliberate re-assertion of the values of *mythos*: the obscure, cryptic, and profound truths of necessity that constantly evade human understanding and are only revealed through twisted means such as the riddles of oracles or the paradox of the

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[162] Goldhill S., p.1
[163] Carroll J., pp.5-21

suffering hero. It is a warning against hubris and a visual reminder of the limits of human endeavour in an indifferent, enigmatic world. The clash of the two temples, Parthenon and Erechteion, across Athens' most holy site, can thus be seen as a reflection of the tension between two worldviews.

At a more general level, the rift resulted in a conscious re-examination of language itself, and a new sense of uncertainty about its social role. This permeated the century's extant literature. The pre-socratics from Heraclitus onwards had shown a strong interest in reasoning itself; and their competing systems, forms of argumentation, and comparative criticism of each other's concepts helped to give rise to the study of language and the Fifth century discipline of rhetoric. One exchange in Aristophanes' *Clouds* mocks the intellectuals of the day specifically because of their pursuit of linguistic precision through etymological correctness and terminological innovation, through a somewhat specious debate with Socrates on the correct usage of the word "chicken".[164] Indeed, the various accounts of Socrates' conceptual investigations in the latter half of the century and his belief that these mattered for the wellbeing of the city and its citizens is a clear example of the newfound importance ascribed to language. The ongoing debate about the meaning of fundamental ethico-political concepts such as *nomos* or *logos*, reflected in the tragedies, comedies and Socratic dialogues, highlighted the problematic and variable nature of language as well as its power to shape social relations. The link between language and power was all too visible in the *polis,* where institutional outcomes in assemblies and law courts were nearly all determined through debate. Gifted orators became prominent and influential: Themistocles and of course Pericles dominated policymaking in this very manner. Young citizens sought out teachers of rhetoric so as to increase their prospects in the city. Tellingly, the historian Thucydides chooses the shifting meaning of words to illustrate the turmoil prevalent during the plague in 427 B.C.:

> *'The whole Hellenic world was convulsed… Revolution ran its course from city to city … Words had to change their ordinary meaning and to take that which was now given to them'[165]*

In other words, for the historian, language had become an object of study and an indicator of the state of social relations. For Simon Goldhill, such texts were evidence of a new recognition that language was not a transparent medium or

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[164] Aristophanes, *Clouds*, ll.658-699
[165] Thucydides, 3.82

system of direct representation, but a problematic object in its own right, possessed with a role in the shaping of meaning, culture, and politics, and thus subject to manipulation for societal gain; and also characterised at times by conflicts of meaning and ambiguity. This "linguistic turn" opened up a raft of ontological and epistemological problems which were exploited by the tragedians in particular for the purpose of calling into question social norms old and new; and, as noted by Thucydides above, added to the uncertainty of the Athenians environment.[166]

Overall, one can say that what little cultural evidence left to us from the Fifth century B.C. is permeated by the signs of a disconnect between the old and new worldviews and a sense of the anxiety that resulted from it.

This rift, between the two contradictory yet co-existent mindsets, is described by Meier as a 'rupture in nomological knowledge'. "Nomological" is a term from sociologist Max Weber used here to describe the overarching store of knowledge to which we refer all of our thoughts, actions and experiences, both consciously and unconsciously, in order both to make judgements about what feels "normal" or "right", and to make sense of the world (it has both normative and positive dimensions). It is the framework of principles that we presume to be true and refer to for any conscious activity. The concept of "worldview" can be said to incorporate nomological knowledge if the former is considered with this phenomenological, unconscious dimension and its consequences – namely, that it is not always systematic and may be emotionally-driven. In this scheme, nomological knowledge is the *a priori* referent of the worldview, the set of rational or irrational assumptions, dispositions, attitudes, and "gut feelings" that precede and shape our outlook. To the extent that it is shared in a given community there is also a collective nomological knowledge; and in everyday life, this gives expression to an "ethos", in the sense of 'characteristic spirit, prevalent tone of sentiment, of a people or community'[167] (as opposed to an ethics, which is understood as a wilfully constructed system of thought, and can only ever be but one influence on an ethos). The homogeneity of the Athenian population, their propensity to gather *en masse* for activities such as assemblies or festivals, as well as their strong sense of communal identity as citizens and mutual history as a city (their strong public

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[166] Goldhill S., 1986, pp.1-32
[167] *ethos in the *Oxford English Dictionary,* as opposed to an ethics, which is understood to presuppose a constructed and theoretical system of thought. "ethos" is used in this sense throughout this thesis.

ethos), would tend to indicate that the Athenian citizen shared much of his nomological knowledge with his fellows. For Meier, the shared responsibility for the city's governance had accentuated the need for a firm base from which to judge policy proposals, a need that was felt all the more keenly in a system where city politics pervaded most of the citizen's everyday life. At a time of great change and extraordinary events, in which the survival of Athens itself was often at play, the citizenry was under great stress to make choices without precedent in the history of the city. And yet the store of meaning which they referred to was torn between the opposing frameworks of *mythos* and *logos*. They could not, as previous generations had done, unthinkingly appeal to the normalised customs of their forefathers as standards of judgement. The Attic citizenry was affected as a whole by the rupture in their shared nomological knowledge – their need for new meaning was great.[168]

The Athenians' uncertainty about the foundations of their judgement was apparent in the extensive pre-occupation with the conscious articulations of these: their ethical and political norms. This is manifest in the history of Thucydides, whose main theme seems to have been the link between the breakdown of the traditional ethical framework at the commencement of the second Peloponnesian War[169] and the destructiveness and degeneracy of Athenian conduct. As to the behaviour of Athenians at home, he highlighted the disregard for the public good, and naked self-interest and the resulting factionalism and social fragmentation;[170] abroad, the imperialism and the instrumental exercise of power without restraint or consideration of justice, and how these led to shameful behaviour and violent excess.[171] Moreover, the debate between *nomos* (societal convention, law) and *phusis* (nature; or a related term, *thesmos*: natural, cosmic, absolute, or divine principles) was a recurrent theme in the tragic plays and arguably a central theme of Fifth Century BC Athenian thought. It centred on whether moral and social norms originate in nature or human convention, and by extension, whether they were absolute and universal or relative to a particular society or individual. In the second half of the century, the movement known as sophism popularised this ethical debate and many others as a result of its general tendency to promote the questioning of customary norms and practices. The sophists ("sages" or "experts") were a

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[168] Meier C., pp. 34-43
[169] In his terms: 'The ancient simplicity into which honor so largely entered was laughed down and disappeared.' Thucydides, 3.83
[170] Cf. for example Thucydides, 3.82-3.83
[171] Cf. Williams M. and also Lebow R.N., for extensive discussions of this.

number of individual professors, well versed in Ionian philosophy and various other disciplines (roughly mathematics, history, geography, and anthropology), who travelled and gave both public lectures and specialised instruction throughout the Hellenic world.[172] They had no common doctrine or school, but shared a focus on teaching the young for practical purposes (and generally in exchange for a fee); in Athens this meant preparing them for the duties of citizenship in the *polis*. The sophists were thus the first to formally develop the teaching of rhetoric, providing aspiring orators with the skills necessary to prevail in the public debates that governed most aspects of city life (including the numerous private lawsuits).

Plato depicts the doctrines of Protagoras (c. 490-420 B.C.) and Gorgias (arrival in Athens 427 B.C.) as both radically sceptical and relativist towards any standards of judgement, espousing the game of reasoning over the search for absolutes. [173] They seem to have formed part of a reaction against the highly theoretical, essentialist and objectivist pursuits of the Ionian schools; in particular, their continuous travels led many of them to adopt some manner of cultural relativism made famous by Protagoras' utterance: 'man is the measure of all things' (thereby privileging *nomos* over *phusis*). Their focus on man, civilisation, and culture over theogonical or cosmogonical speculation marked the shift in the focus of Greek thought from object to subject[174], and continued the humanist trend towards anthropocentrism already present in the cosmologists.[175] Combined with their fondness for logical argumentation and critical scrutiny of traditional values, this inscribed their teachings in the latter stages of the rational conquest of the Greek mind; even as their critique of Ionian thought was itself in part a reaction against the ontological essentialism of the early Greek enlightenment (provoking the counter-reaction of Plato's philosophy, which turned back to essentialist, universalist, and rationalist tendencies[176]). As a feature of these anti-essentialist tendencies, although the

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[172] Hornblower S. and Spawforth A. (eds.), p.1422

[173] Although what we know of the sophists is largely handed down to us in small fragments by Plato and Aristotle and omits their wider teachings. Plato in particular presented them as "straw men" for his arguments in which they were portrayed as the opposite of his revered master Socrates, so it is difficult to ascertain what the sophists really taught. Goldhill S.,1986, p.225; De Romilly J., 1998, preface.

[174] Copleston F., p.96

[175] As per Jaeger's scheme deployed earlier. As Jaeger puts it: '*yet the great men of Greece came forward not to utter the word of God, but to teach the people what they themselves knew*'. Jaeger W., p.xxvi

[176] In this progression, Plato's philosophy can be seen as a direct reaction to the Sophists' relativism and emphasis on the subjective – his doctrine of forms and ideas re-asserting not only the existence of the Object but also its supremacy over the subjective, presenting it as the realm of universality and Truth. So Plato elevates the *logos* at the expense of all other ways of knowing, including *mythos,* and in

likes of Protagoras and Gorgias deployed many rational devices (e.g. logic), they proposed a kind of sublimation of the ethical dilemmas of the time by deploying rhetorical performances, whilst at the same time refusing to construct any new standard of judgement. That is to say that the sophists exposed and criticised the inconsistencies of an Athenian consciousness split between *mythos* and *logos* through ostentatious mind-games (e.g. paradoxical, or even fallacious, but generally eloquent and persuasive arguments), but they rarely felt the need to push beyond scepticism and answer the questions that they raised (Gorgias even famously renounced philosophy entirely in order to concentrate on rhetoric). It is possible that this reflected either the fact that they were more concerned with the practical art of rhetorical persuasion than any search for meaning (as in Plato's account), or that in their anthropocentric anti-essentialism they considered rhetoric the only meaningful pursuit (considering language the only possible object of certain knowledge). Either way it resulted in a lack of any real political projects, which despite their radical teachings in other fields seems to have amounted to little more than a conservative espousal of traditional values.[177] At the same time they had subjected most of their culture to a withering critical and anthropocentric deconstruction along rationalist lines; some sophists, like Prodicus, considering even the gods to be mere personifications of the forces of nature.[178] In some ways, the radical scepticism of the sophists - alongside the linguistic turn in which they participated - represented the flipside of the new focus on the subject and the enlightenment-style systematic critique: just as this had lead to a growing awareness of the constructive potential of human knowledge and its applications, so it also lead to a deconstructive and relativistic questioning of the security of all knowledge (resembling in many ways the late modern dichotomy between "scientism" or "positivism" and "post-modernism").[179] Overall, sophism, as a movement exploiting the uncertainty created by clashing value systems in the Attic mindset, can be seen as evidence of the ethical vacuum created by the rupture in nomological knowledge, and as the expression of Athenians' pressing need for a cultural response to it.

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doing so closes the rupture in nomological knowledge with a new rationalist hegemony, taking the Greek Enlightenment to its philosophical apogee.

[177] Protagoras, for instance, espoused a conservative social morality based on a version of what would today be called social contract theory. Hornblower S. and Spawforth A. (eds.), p.1264

[178] Guthrie W., p.179

[179] Goldhill S., pp.200-201

To a certain extent then, the fixation of the Athenians on the question of the origin of their norms points to the rupture in their nomological knowledge. This rupture and the questions it provoked can also be framed in terms of a problem of truth. In an account somewhat parallel to the *nomos-phusis* debate, Michel Foucault traces the history of the concept of *parrhesia* – truth-telling or frank speaking - from the Fifth Century B.C. onwards. Foucault notes that in early literature, the truth-teller has a consistent set of characteristics, such as moral integrity, courage, and frankness. However, as the century progresses, these are increasingly questioned. In a democratic environment where every citizen is entitled to speak, and where rhetoricians train orators to persuade, to impose their opinion, and to appear sincere, rather than to actually speak frankly and openly, the traditional notion of truth-telling is called into question: who is now the bearer of truth? The norm that was *parrhesia* had become a problem: in foucauldian terms, there is a rupture in the prevailing truth regime; and this, accordingly, is the cause of a certain amount of anxiety. Indeed, the conquest of the Attic mindset by *polis*-based rationality over the course of the Fifth century BC entailed a relocalisation of the perceived sources of truth. The enlightened rejection of *mythos* had disrupted the traditional worldview in which the source of truth was at once to be found in the authoritative *mythopoeisis* (myth-making) of the likes of Homer and Hesiod as well as in the divine guidance transmitted through the various oracles and their prophets in their respective temples, foremost among which was the Pythia at the temple of Apollo in Delphi. In Athenian public life, truth lay in the best argument, it was agonal (the result of a contest), and was determined according to the *logos*, the new discourse that followed rational principles. In geographical terms, rational truth did not have any location in temple or sacred text; just as the seat of the democratic sovereign was empty, and sovereignty diffused in the citizenry, truth was now devoid of spatial referent, and had been emptied out from the *phusis* into the debates and institutions of the *polis*. In the city, truth came through a process in which the citizen played an integral part – the collective *agon* of public debate. It could thus be ascribed to the *polis* itself, and to the efforts of each and every citizen. In broad terms, one can say that truth was becoming more a matter of rhetoric than of revelation. Furthermore, it was no longer external to the city (e.g. an oracle in Delphi), it had been collectively internalised. As Michel Foucault notes in his commentary on Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, by the very end of the Fifth Century the locus of truth had shifted from Delphi to Athens itself, eschewing the centuries-old centre of mythopoetic revelation in

Greece.[180] Thucydides, writing in the last years of the century, does not hesitate to openly mock the way the Pythia's pronunciations are adapted and re-interpreted to fit any situation.[181] Pericles' boast, that 'each of our men, graced with skills for most things, stands as a self-sufficient personality'[182], illustrates the Athenians' own belief in this self-made status. As the creators of their own myths, the Athenians were by the end of the century reaching the point where they themselves were legitimising both the social order and its rational discourse, in effect adopting their own, new, regime of truth – a collective store of nomological knowledge more suited to their new situation of rationalised communal governance. At the end of the century, the consolidation of the predominance of enlightenment-style rationalism in public life marked the waning of the rupture in Attic culture.

b. Evolution and closure of rupture

The Fifth century had been a time of rapid transition, marking the rise of the rational worldview at the expense of its mythopoetic counterpart: at its beginning *logos* had become a challenge to mythical discourse, creating a period of rupture, nomological plurality and uncertainty; and by its end *logos* had become largely predominant in the influential civic domain and amongst the intelligentsia of the city.

The evolution of the word *mythos* provides us with a good illustration of this progression: originally meaning "word, speech, or message" in rough synonymity to *logos* (that differentiated from *mythos* mainly in that it was linked to prosaic rather than poetic speaking), it had by the end of the Fifth century B.C. acquired the connotations of 'entertaining, if not trustworthy tale' (connotations that it still has today).[183] Over the same period, the meaning of the term *logos* had become restricted to "reasonable" speaking (particularly in formal argumentation); and by the beginning of the next century, Plato was using it as a direct antonym of *mythos*, which he criticised as "old wives chatter" in his *Theaetetus*. Further, a comparison of the development of the conception of history from Herodotus (mid-Fifth century B.C.) – who considered myths and fables relevant to his account (gaining

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[180] Foucault M., pp.37-38
[181] Thucydides, 2.54
[182] Pericles' funeral oration quoted in Meier C., p.212
[183] Hornblower S. and Spawforth A. (eds.), p.1019

for himself the appellation "Father of Lies") – to Thucydides (end of Fifth century), who declared that he was excluding the supernatural from his accounts[184], gives us an idea of the speed of the change.

The centuries-long development of the social and political structures of the *polis* had contributed in no small part to this trend. As mentioned previously, the archaic Greek society of the city state was driven by the political imperative, particularly so in a democratic Athens, and its many components had been geared towards the collectivity of the *polis*: kinship, religion, and even individual identity had progressively been adapted and rationalised according to the city's needs; and sometimes (as in the case of the new civic identities) deprived of much of their mythic underpinning. For the likes of Murray and Meier, politics, and not mythical tradition or religion, was the 'central organising principle'[185] of Athenian society and culture; in the absence of any powerful religious caste, its mode of development had occurred along instrumental and rational lines, and had shaped its shared nomological knowledge accordingly.[186] Murray in particular sees the evidence for this in the continual willingness to reform the civic rituals and institutions so as to perfect their compatibility with abstract democratic principles, often in defiance of tradition (as with the reforms of Cleisthenes or Ephialtes); he contrasts this with the conservatism and lesser coherence of modern liberal democracies where traditional features such as a centuries-old American constitution or the House of Lords are resistant to reform.[187] The Athenian *demos* was consciously improving the design of its democratic system and was prepared to reinvent its institutions in spite of its mythic traditions; and so by the very end of the Fifth century, when the transition was made from a highly flexible 'oral customary democracy' to a more static 'written formal constitution', the latter inherited a rationally-driven 'self-conscious and elaborate system of checks and balances' in a coherent legal framework.[188] In other words, Athenian life and culture was driven by politics, and politics was dominated by the discourse of instrumental rationality: its institutions had been consciously adapted to meet the requirements of abstract democratic principles. This juridico-political rationality was formed around an ideal of collective unity (*koinonia*) and of equality of political rights for male citizens (*isonomia)*, and these appealing ideals formed a

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[184] Eg. Thucydides, 1.22.4
[185] Murray O. & Price S. (eds.), 1990, p.19
[186] Murray unlike Meier uses the terminology of Durkheim to refer to this as their "collective consciousness" Ibid., p.6
[187] Ibid., p.21
[188] Ibid., p.11

powerful homogenising and unifying force: the aim of Attic politics was unity, not compromise between competing factions (to such a degree that *stasis,* the division of the city into a static network of antagonistic political factions, was considered a unnatural disease comparable to the Plague of 430 B.C., corrupting the foundations of their politics[189]). In this framework, traditional myth and its rituals still mattered, but generally as a means for political ends; as such they were often adapted and manipulated along rational lines to suit the contemporary needs of democracy (as in Aeschylus' reformulation of myth to provide an aetiological basis for the judicial system in the *Oresteia*), and thus became an ever-thinner veneer of legitimisation for actions – a legitimisation that was often dispensed with altogether by the end of the century (as heavily emphasised by Thucydides in his historical account[190]). Political necessity, often qualified as "imperious" (*krataia ananke*), had overtaken any other discourse as a form of legitimisation. The *logos* had to a certain extent "taken over" as the authoritative discourse at the source of the Athenian nomological knowledge precisely because it was the language of political decision-making, the activity that mattered most in Athenian culture.

The few records available of speeches from the end of the century confirm this. As has already been noted, justifications for political decision-making no longer included references to myth, but were restricted to the "calculations of interest" of instrumental rationalisation. During the Persian wars, Athenian oratory was punctuated with mythical justifications and oracular consultations such as those of the "wooden wall", and declarations of trust 'in gods and heroes as our allies'[191], whose temples and icons they are prepared to defend with their lives.[192] By the end of the century, Athenian speeches not only generally omit mythical justifications (be they of a divine, genealogical or prophetic nature), but in some instances, openly mock them. For instance, in one address to the Spartan assembly in 432 B.C., Thucydides presents some Athenian envoys asking:

> 'Of the ancient deeds handed down by tradition and which no eye of
> anyone who hears us ever saw, why should we speak?'[193]

Similarly, in the Melian dialogue, they prefer to emphasise their calculations of interest in the matter at hand rather than refer to any myth[194], and when the

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[189] Thucydides, 3.82-3.83
[190] Cf. Thucydides, 3.82-3.83 or 5.85-5.114
[191] Herodotus, 8.143 (in 479 B.C.)
[192] Ibid.
[193] Thucydides, 1.73 as translated by Jowett B.,1900.

Melians bring up the favour of the gods, the Athenians merely ascribe the same schema of power politics to the divine realm as they do to the human one, whilst carefully differentiating this former realm of unsubstantiated belief from the latter realm of certain knowledge.[195] In fact, in all of Thucydides' records of late Fifth century B.C. speeches by or to Athenians, there is hardly any mention of myth at all, and the one clear mention of a desperate general haranguing his troops by referring to their gods and ancestors is accompanied with the comment that such appeals are 'out of date'[196]. Although this could be attributed to the historian's own tendencies, it goes much the same with the few extant speeches of late fifth century B.C. orators such as Demosthenes, Lycias or Antiphon.[197] This is not to say that everyday religious practices, the rites associated with myth, were not taken seriously - the existence of lawsuits against prominent Athenians on the basis of obscure matters of ritual in the official public religion demonstrates the opposite – however, even when defending such charges, the mythic beliefs behind the rites are not deployed in the apologetic of the orators.[198] The rational elaboration of the present political necessity has risen to such a dominant position in the *polis* that orators feel altogether emancipated from the weight of history: not only do they forsake the justification of policy in terms of the distant past of traditional myth, but they also freely alter and invent the accounts of more recent historical events in order to support their arguments for present policies.[199] This abstract rationalism, unimpeded by empirical considerations, had by the end of the century begun to perform some of the functions of myth (in the wider sense of the term – here by making sense of the past) in the place of traditional *mythos*, at least in the political domain. This rationally driven mythmaking revealed something of the enlightenment *zeitgeist* of the tyranny of the present and its radical criticism of all things past, as well as of the abstract and instrumental nature of its reasoning. At this extreme, the Greek enlightenment "reverted to myth" (in the manner of Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis); and in so doing had deprived *mythos* of its place and of much of its authoritative status as a reference for ethical judgement in the affairs of the city.

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[194] Cf. Crane, G., throughout
[195] Thucydides, 5.105
[196] Thucycides in Jowett, 7.69. Nicias was a desperate Athenian general in the disastrous Sicilian expedition. Thucydides, 7.69-7.77
[197] Saunders A., throughout. & Murray O., "Cities of Reason" in Murray O. & Price S. (eds.), *The Greek City: from Homer to Alexander*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1990, pp.1-28
[198] Andocides defends himself on charges of violating official ritual in a speech circa 400B.C. for a case going back to events in 415B.C. Gagarin M. &Macdowell D., pp.93-170
[199] This is Nicole Loraux's analysis of the funerary orations as summarised by Murray in Murray O. & Price S. (eds.), 1990, p.17

The development of this paradigm shift is also evidenced in popular culture through the changing content of the tragic plays. In rough terms, from Aeschylus (early in the century) to Euripides (end of the century) via Sophocles, the preferred themes of Attic tragedians reflect the evolution of their cultural milieu. As documented by the likes of Amand Jagu and Jacqueline De Romilly, the extant plays move from the early century's preoccupation with the object, the external world governed by fate and the will of the gods, and the impotence of man in the face of these impersonal forces (the "divine drama"); towards a focus on man as subject, and an exploration of the complex inner world of motives and emotions that precede and shape any of his actions (the "human drama"). This shift can be seen in the evolution of the concepts of suffering and the divine in the plays themselves. Suffering, that key ingredient of the tragedy, is in Aeschylus caused by something largely external to man - the ambiguous forces of destiny or the divine – and so is a sacred form of anguish. Through suffering, human beings can participate in something greater than themselves; from this, they can gain greater perspective and thus wisdom. In the later plays of Sophocles, suffering results from human actions and their lack of regard for the aforementioned external forces and/or for their unforeseen consequences; and the protagonists can choose to be valiant in their suffering and thus gain some dignity and wisdom out of the experience. Last of all, many of Euripides' works display a tendency towards a more "individualist" style of play in which there is less to be found in terms of greater external meaning for suffering: rather than belonging to any outside scheme, it is personal and intensely felt by characters whose inner psychological movements are on display for the audience. The suffering of the individual is thereby self-sufficient, de-sacralised and driven by human passion; hence it offers an emotional experience for the spectator, but little in terms of a wider narrative of meaning.[200] Although this outline is somewhat schematic, and suffering itself always has a mixture of causes in the tragedies, the movement towards a quasi-existentialist approach to drama accords itself well with a shift away from mythical discourse, and towards a rationalised context in which the human and divine planes of being are disentangled: man, as the supreme subject, experiences a separate existence from the world around him. The euripidean plays are also readily distinguished from preceding tragedies as a result of their "realism": the forcible manner in which myths are injected with the speech, ideas, tone of everyday life in Athens, and deprived of their otherworldly nature; in a sense,

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[200] Jagu A., pp.39-64 & Romilly J., pp. 134-ff.

reduced to a narrow and immediate human perspective.[201] Furthermore, the concept of divinity undergoes both criticism and rationalisation in Euripides. Somewhat influenced by the sophists, the tragedian shares their criticism of the anthropomorphic character of the gods in myth as well as their distaste for the difficulties this creates with regards to justice (unjust suffering in particular) and other universalist notions. Five of his plays end with a choral comment on the difficulty of understanding the ways of the gods.[202] However, the playwright does not stop at sceptical commentary but sketches the basis for a purification of divinity, repeatedly criticising the mythopoetic depiction of immoral gods as an invention of the early poets and instead positing divine wisdom and justice (much like the aforementioned Xenophanes had done a century earlier).[203] This understanding of divinity as both other than humanity and superior to it is pushed to its idealist zenith in the transcendent rationalism formulated by Plato at the beginning of the next century (whose divine metaphysical dimension of ideas – the theoretical, objective, and rational reality – is separate and transcends the illusory dimension of sense-perception), a doctrine that signals the rise to predominance of *logos* in Greek thought.

If by the end of the century, both the tragedians, the city's official poets, and its orators, who were constantly tasked with winning over public opinion, were revising or drifting away from many of the traditional values of *mythos* without being fined or ostracised for it, it would seem likely that the citizenry was at the very least receptive to such ideas, if not following a similar path. When added to the influence of somewhat demythologised accounts of the historians and the scepticism of the sophists, all of whom set the tone of the prevailing discourse of the *polis,* there is a sense that the intellectual, legal and political affairs at the heart of its culture were now predominantly rationalised. This is not to say that *mythos* had been discarded from the Athenian mind: the practical expressions of traditional myth in recitation and ritual were alive and well in everyday life, and persisted in dinner-parties, festivals, private cult and various other activities, and the myths were still taught to children by their mothers.[204] Rather, by the end of the century, it had to some extent lost its hold as an authoritative source of reference for judgement in the most influential domain of Athenian life– politics.

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[201] See for example Grene D. & Lattimore R., Vol. IV, p. 187; or Hornblower S. and Spawforth A. (eds.), pp.571-573; or Gregory J., "Euripidean tragedy" in Gregory J., pp.251-ff. ; or even Aristophanes, *Frogs*, ll.959-962.
[202] Euripides *Helen, Andromache, Alcestis, Bacchae,* and *Medea*
[203] Jagu A., pp.58-60
[204] Edmunds L., pp.2-13 & Dowden K., pp.38-39

The increasing competition of rational forms of prose had undermined traditional *mythos,* at least among the cultural elites – including the tragic poets - and in the political domain. The lessened authority of *mythos* as a competing system of values in this crucial domain represented a waning of the rupture in nomological knowledge, as the pluralist situation was slowly being reduced to more of a hegemony of *logos.*

Indeed, already by the end of the century, Socrates is purported to have deemed traditional myths to betales not worthy of serious investigation and is not alone in doing so (or so we are told in Plato's *Phaedrus*[205]). In fact, as exemplified by the tragic plays, a general retreat of traditional notions of the supernatural and the divine is apparent in all of the extant literature of the late Fifth century[206] - to the extent that a certain Critias went as far as to suggest that the gods were invented by "some shrewd man" as props to bind public morality.[207] Once rational discourse has become predominant, the status in the Attic mindset of myth as a historical record of the Greeks' forefathers is severely undermined, and its value as a source of religious, ontological and ethical inspiration increasingly challenged. The influence of the transition from an oral to a written culture also diminished the influence of the poets in favour the newer breed of intellectuals writing in prose.[208] From the end of the century onwards, the challenge that philosophical prose offered to mythic poetry in all its forms grew stronger, and according to its terms traditional myths were either rejected, rationalised or allegorised.[209] The Sophists sometimes used these myths and the traditional maxims emanating from them as a starting point for rhetorical display, an ad-hoc foundation from popular culture for hermeneutical exploration and debate; whereas Socrates seems to have classified them as inferior to his more systematic craft of interrogation and argument (his *elenchus*). With this method, Socrates sought to impose greater clarity and unity on discourse in the city through the rational pursuit of disinterested, coherent, and universal knowledge: his project was consciously monistic, and took on many of the characteristics of modern Enlightenment philosophy.[210] His disciple Plato, active in the first half of the Fourth century B.C., extended this

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[205] Plato, *Phaedrus, ll.*229b-230a*.* When Socrates is asked if he believes in a local traditional myth, he says in an ironic tone that seeking any explanation or rationalisation for the fantastic events in such myths is "to investigate irrelevant things" (230a), and that it was ordinary for learned men to simply disbelieve them (229c).
[206] Romilly J., p.134
[207] Dodds E. R., 1973, p.8, evokes the fragment of Critias presumed to be from the lost play *Sisyphus*.
[208] *mythology in Hornblower R. & Spawforth A., op.cit.
[209] Ibid.
[210] Jowett B. in Plato, Jowett B. (transl.), *Protagoras,* pp.3-14. The Socrates portrayed in this earlier dialogue is held to be closer to the historical figure and less of a vehicle for Plato's own ideas.

rationalism from the study of ethics to epistemology and back to cosmology, "squaring the circle" of Greek thought and pushing the *logos* to a metaphysical level (conceptually separating the abstract theoretical realm of perfect Forms or Ideas from their imperfect representations in the world of appearances). This broadening of scope reflected the self-consciously universalistic nature of the new rationalism's monistic attempt to explain everything. Plato varied in his attitudes towards mythic discourse, but condemned many traditional myths as morally corrupt or unverifiable fictions, particularly with regards to heroes and the gods; and also takes it as read that his learned audience considers *mythoi* to be quaint and fabulous, stories as opposed to argument.[211] In the main he classifies mythic discourse as inferior to his own highly rationalist philosophy. However, he saw the value of its special type of narrative for teaching "noble fictions" that communicated morally worthy lessons, particularly when seeking to express otherwise ineffable and mystic meaning about metaphysical notions such as the soul and the afterlife; however, this meant creating new, and consciously allegorical, myths to underpin his rationalist philosophy – philosophic myths.[212] Tellingly, later in the same century, some mythographers devoted themselves to the rationalisation of the traditional body of myth; the likes of Palaephatus or Euhemerus gave totally materialist explanations of the supernatural phenomena in mythical narratives, viewing these as exaggerated accounts of "real" historical events. Even the gods were naturalistically reduced to great men venerated by their peers to the point of mistaken deification.[213] The predominance of monistic rationalism, which was directly critical of mythic custom, left little place for traditional *mythos* as an authoritative source of nomological knowledge.

To a certain degree, *mythos* had lost out to the new rationalism in the competition for authoritative status in the civic and intellectual domains of Athenian life. The nomological knowledge of the Athenians, dominated by the political imperative, had come to be mainly based on the assemblage of insights connected by the principle of *logos,* juridico-political discourse, and progress in *techne*; and the rupture begins to diminish.

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[211]In *Gorgias*, Plato takes it as a given that his audiences will not take the myths he tells literally, but only as moralistic fables; similarly in *Phaedrus,* the works of Hesiod and Homer are considered to be false stories.

[212]On the Plato's usage of and attitude towards traditional myths, see Most G.W., pp.13-24, and Dowden K., pp.34-35, Morgan K., 155-184. Plato, *Protagoras* 324d and the *Sophist* 242c are examples where *mythoi* are deemed stories as opposed to argument.

[213] Stern J., *Palaephatus: On Unbelievable Tales*, Bolchazy-Carducci, Wauconda, 1996; *Euhemerus* in Hornblower S. & Spawforth A.

It was in the century before this, however, that the rupture in nomological knowledge was more keenly felt. Faced with this ambiguous situation, the Athenian citizen of the Fifth century B.C. is assailed by ethical doubt: to which framework should he turn as a reference for judgement, *mythos* or *logos*? It is this situation to which the Attic tragedians respond, in this period of rupture that they stage plays that are clearly aimed at a negotiation of the two discourses and a general interrogation of their ethical framework.

Conclusion: The Moment of Tragedy

It has been shown that the Fifth century B.C. is a time of transition in the Athenian mindset from a worldview predominantly based on myth to one heavily influenced by rationalism. This is the point of tragedy's irruption onto the Attic stage, for less than a century: after the flourishing of epic and lyric poetry and their underlying mythological worldview, but before the full establishment of the rational paradigm of "Greek philosophy" – that is, in the time of their uneasy co-existence.

The archaic era was characterised with a worldview predominantly based on traditional myth. Despite this, it had given birth to a number of phenomena such as the *polis*, the spread of literacy, or the novel systems of thought of Ionia; all of which were outside of this worldview and in some way or other undermined it with new rational principles of understanding. From the beginning of the Fifth century B.C., through the dynamics of *demokratia*, these principles were propagated and applied in Athenian public life to the extent that by the middle of the century they had coalesced around it into a new form of discourse. Although co-existing with *mythos*, the new rationality had by the end of the century overtaken it as the predominant form of political and intellectual discourse of the *polis*, if not of private life. This gradual movement of the rise to prominence of the rational worldview at the expense of the archaic myth seems to gather pace, until by the end of the century, traditional mythical discourse is criticised to the point of being discredited as an authoritative source of reference for judgement. Instead it took on an increasingly "ceremonial" or "heritage" value as it was progressively excluded from everyday civic practice and the arguments of prose writers, and increasingly confined to providing a narrative backdrop for religious ritual. *Mythos* is on the path to becoming, in the sense that it is most often used in today, "myth".

The decline of traditional archaic myth as an authoritative discourse heralded the death of the genre of classical tragedy in its original form.[214] Any sense of

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[214] I do not seek to claim here, like George Steiner for example (cf. *The Death of Tragedy*), that the triumph of rationalism in a secular society has led once and for all to the death of tragedy as a philosophical concept. Rather, and this is the point of the likes of Vernant, Meier or even Raymond Williams (cf. *Modern Tragedy*), the death in question is that of the classical form of tragedy as it is inextricably linked to its very particular cultural context. So much so, that in the space of a few decades, the tragedies had changed so radically that they had become a different genre of theatre.

reverence for archaic myth had already been dwindling in the tragedies of Euripides, who often portrayed the stories and their gods and great heroes in a somewhat contemptuous – and sometimes outrightly impious – manner.[215] The last decade of euripidean plays (the *Bacchae* excepted) are even seen as drifting away from the tragic genre and towards a more "entertaining" form of escapism in "tragicomedies" and "melodrama" – perhaps in reaction to the degrading context of Athens, as a people in dire circumstances felt a need for pure entertainment.[216]

By the end of the century, the Athenians had indeed lost their great war with Sparta as well as their great empire, and had even experienced the temporary loss of their autonomy and democracy; perhaps, as Vernant puts it, they had 'lost... the inner strength and confidence necessary to confront, let alone relish, critical portrayals of themselves and the human condition'.[217] The serious nature of classical tragedy required the cultural bedrock that was myth, whereas the new trend towards entertainment did not. The influence of the Athenian decline on the demythologisation of tragedy is highlighted with great effect by the contrast between the treatment of the same mythic storyline in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* of 458 B.C. and Euripides' *Orestes* of 408 B.C. In the former, all of the characters are constrained by the mythical forces of fate, prophecies and curses, and act as they must, despite the danger to their own persons, in a murderous cycle of revenge that is finally curtailed by the institution of civic justice in Athens. Euripides' play, set after those events, references and deliberately eschews his predecessor's serious aetiological and mythopoetic efforts: it follows the same characters acting whimsically for no great purpose other than their own petty interests, in a corrupt and bitter society seen to represent the state of affairs in Athens at the time. The later play also includes a melodramatic plot line with a deliberately absurd ending, in which the 'storied reality of myth'[218] is shown to be completely out of step with the random, morally anarchic, and contextually relevant events of the play (at a time of significant political breakdown in Athens).[219]

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[215] For instance, by depicting the heroes in rags, or having the chorus go on about some obscure anecdotes of myths only to end their stories with "All that's just myth" cf. Euripides' *Elektra* or *Iphigenia in Tauris.*

[216] cf. Hornblower S. and Spawforth A. (eds.), p.572. Kitto influentially categorised *Alcestis, Ion, Helen*, and *Iphigenia in Tauris* as tragicomedies and the *Electra* and *Orestes* as melodramas – effectively other genres of dramatic theatre. Kitto, H.D.F., p.311ff.

[217] Vernant J.P., "Greek Tragedy: Problems of Interpretation," in Macksey R. & Donato E. (eds.), p.275

[218] Arrowsmith W. in Grene D. & Lattimore R., Vol. IV, p.190

[219] Cf. Ibid., pp.188-191 and Meier C., pp.33-34

After his death at the end of the century, new tragic plays continue to be written and produced, but they follow the lead of some of Euripides' less orthodox material and take on the features of a different genre (notably melodramatic plotlines, a lesser role for the chorus, and an episodic structure[220]). Some take on radically altered characteristics – one playwright at least (Agathon) no longer used myth as a narrative for his plays but invented all of his material. And yet myth had been an essential part of nearly every tragic play, and the tragic genre had relied on it completely to constitute itself as a type of drama that performed a ritual re-enactment of the watching citizenry's shared past, with all of its ancestral, geographical and religious links to the present, and the ethical inspiration that these provided. The little that is known about the Fourth century tragedians indicates that, heavily influenced by the sophists, they pushed the tendencies towards the antithetical style of rhetorical discourse, foreshadowed in Euripides' plays, to another level: Aristotle writes of them making their characters speak "rhetorically" (describing, justifying and reviewing their actions to the audience in a "conscious" attempt to have an effect on the spectators), as opposed to the "political" style (as real people reacting directly to real situations and "unconsciously" affecting the audience) of the previous century.[221] Moreover, the everyday prose of the city dilutes the poetical ornament of earlier tragedy as it colours the language of the plays. This new emphasis on self-presentation, self-analysis, and contemporary dialogue meant that the world on-stage no longer presented itself as fully real within its own fictional universe, but almost as a self-conscious fiction, which must have diminished the dramatic impact of the performances.[222] As dramatic re-enactments of traditional myth, the classical tragic plays' impact on the audience relied on this "real-life" effect as well as the "serious" (*spoudaios*) nature of mythopoetic narratives, which had long been considered a primary source of meaning in Attic culture. The ethical value of these was now heavily undermined by rationalism, and the use of *mythos* and poetry as a means to educate the adult citizens was under siege. Once the latter no longer wholeheartedly believe in the significance of their mythical past, or at least feel so far removed from it as to deem it of little relevance for their decision-making in the city, then it begins to lose its place in plays that rely on being taken seriously. Tragedy ceases to exist in its classical mythopoetic form; to reverse Walter Nestle's quote, when the citizen no longer looks at myth, tragedy dies. As the archaic body of myth loses its relevance, the new tragedians begin to discard it as a narrative

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[220] Banham M. (ed.), p.444
[221] Aristotle, *Poetics,* 6.1450b, 4-8 & 19.1456b,5-8
[222] Xanthakis-Karamanos G., pp. 66-76

background. The new plays no longer require *mythos* - whether in the imagination of the citizens or in the actual narrative of the play – but thereby lose a large part of the essence of the original genre, and morph into another.

It would seem that their innovations failed to capture the imagination of the citizenry, reducing tragedy's impact and popular appeal as it became an 'increasingly conventional and self-reflexive literary genre'.[223] In the long run, the post-Euripidean playwrights are subsumed beneath the prestige of their more esteemed forebears, and unlike them, are not considered important enough to merit having their works extensively commentated on or preserved. Already from 425B.C., Aeschylus' old plays are being staged again at the City Dionysia; and in 386 B.C., another contest is set up for the old tragedies of the previous century to be performed anew in Athens, as was already happening throughout the Greek world – the tragic movement was becoming more of a monument to its own past. By the end of the Fourth century B.C., the new tragedies were no longer widely attended, and had been surpassed in popularity by the new comedies of the likes of Philemon and Menander, who had themselves remodelled the comic genre along the lines of Euripides' melodramatic plays.[224]

The equation of the decline of traditional myth with that of tragedy can also be attributed to the incompatibility of the genre's mythic values – many of which are upheld in tragedy - with the new predominance of rationalism. Already by the Fourth century, Aristotle is trying to understand classical tragedy in retrospect (in his *Poetics*), as the plays no longer make complete sense in contemporary Greek culture. For Marcel Détienne, after the rise to prominence of the rationalistic philosophy of Plato, the classical notion of tragedy is both immoral, and its ambiguous conception of truth – a truth which is always questioned, never quite accessible to man in its fullness - constitutes a nonsensical violation of the principle of identity and other platonic axioms.[225] It therefore falls short of the Truth of the new philosophical discipline, and its epistemology is discredited for its (literally) archaic teachings: both Plato and Aristotle include it with other reprehensible forms of myth-evoking poetry that they oppose to Philosophy, and its prosaic and more direct attempts at defining and propagating virtue.[226] Plato is following Socrates' lead in denouncing the mythic poets and the classical tragedians as bad teachers, and attempts to wrest what is left of the mantle of

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[223] Cropp M., "Lost tragedies: a survey" in Gregory J., p.290.
[224] Banham M. (ed.), pp.444-445
[225] Detienne M., pp.119-124
[226] Cf. for example Aristotle's *Metaphysics* 983 b27 – 984 a3

nomological authority from them for philosophy and its abstract dialectical rationalism.

Moreover, the tragic plot relies on the ambiguity of the world in *mythos* – its unpredictable and often paradoxical nature, ruled by capricious gods, mysterious fate, and a twisted causality whereby human action can turn back upon itself – to contribute to the causes of its special type of suffering. Even the most reasonable actions of the exemplary heroes are liable to result in unforeseen disaster. In the plays, there are no clear ways of avoiding a tragic turn of events – calculative planning, ethical behaviour, grandiose actions cannot insure the characters against their implacable fate. The typical scheme of classical tragedy with its "pessimism of strength" is undermined by a new ontology in which reality is thought to be governed by consistent laws that are accessible to humankind: in this scheme there can be no tragedies, only avoidable mistakes. Man sees himself as the measure of all things, and his behaviour is his own responsibility; it can no longer be influenced or judged by the external powers of archaic myth, and so, like the new suffering, has no greater external meaning: it cannot be tragic. Further, where the tragedians explicitly focus on adding depth and complexity to the problems of human existence and only implicitly advance tentative solutions, the new philosophy of Plato and his counterparts offers the reverse: it is focused on providing rational solutions, whilst, in Plato's case at least, only implying the limits of human endeavour and the loss occasioned by such solutions.[227] The effect of this rationalist discourse on Athens' intelligentsia and its tragic poets seems to have been profound – already we have seen the change it brought about in some of Euripides' plays – and it transformed the tragic genre.

The rise to prominence of *logos* over *mythos* brings with it a certain amount of closure in the rupture of nomological knowledge in Athenian culture, just as it marks the emergence, with philosophy, of a consciously monistic rationalism. If one follows Meier or Vernant, the rupture was itself constitutive of tragedy, as it poses the cultural problem to which the tragedians respond: a conflict between two incompatible discourses within the Athenian mindset to the extent that the basic ethical framework is unhinged. Tragedy is a form of sense-making that is born out of the uncertainty and plurality of its context of cultural rupture. Hence when this rupture and the uncertainty that it creates are no longer as pressing a concern, the tragedians no longer feel compelled to respond to it: the cultural

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[227] Euben P., 1990, pp.272

function that classical tragedy performed is no longer required, and the new tragedians modify their genre in response to other concerns.

Indeed, as will be shown in the following chapters, tragedy tends toward a questioning of all ways of being and knowing, be they mythical or rational, in light of the limits it posits for the human subject. As a part of annual festivals that were both civic and religious, tragedy had taken on what Murray calls a "typical function" of such communal rituals: an exploration of the limits of the *polis* and its new rational discourse through the confrontation of these with the irrational "pre-state" discourses (of archaic religion, of pre-civilised savagery, of the aristocratic code of honour, and so forth) expressed in traditional *mythos*.[228] Whereas the core institutions of the *polis* were driven by a unifying, monistic rationality that upheld its democratic *koinonia*, tragedy was a pluralising ritual that explored the problems arising from the very centrality of this discourse. The tragic poets confronted the citizenry with the flipside of its often triumphant political discourse, searching out the dilemmas that it posed for the other spheres of existence, such as the family, religious belief, the needs of the individual, and the customary discourse that ruled them. They exposed the margins, exclusions and shortcomings of a culturally homogenous, male-only citizenry and its official rational discourse, confronting these with the Other in the form of mythic narratives about women, barbarians, heroes and gods. By mixing their contemporary discourse and concerns with the narratives and actors of myth, they also called into question the mythic discourse, its heroes, divinities and their antiquated ethics. Rarely was any solution provided to the dilemmas raised. The classical tragedians were driven by a vector of problematisation, disrupting "common-sense" in the city by exposing its contingency and ambiguity, as Goldhill puts it, challenging 'the sense of the secure and controlled expression of the order of things'.[229] They exploited the context of pluralism by highlighting the rupture between competing discourses, staging situations where commonly-held mythic values conflict with their commonly-held rational counterparts, thus exposing the contingency of both. This active pluralisation of nomological knowledge places classical tragedy both inside and outside of traditional mythic discourse and rational enlightenment discourse, as it develops an immanent critique of Athenian culture as a whole. When traditional *mythos* is no longer as relevant, and a rational discourse is predominant, the rupture is largely overcome, and tragedy's function as a negotiator is obsolete.

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[228] Murray O. & Price S. (eds.), pp.18-20
[229] Goldhill S., p.56

It is before this, in the period of tension between *mythos* and *logos*, when the gap in social experience between the old values of myth and the new legal-political values of rationalism is big enough to be keenly felt, and yet small enough for there to be constant conflict and uncertainty, that the tragic moment is constituted. In this space of rupture, the Athenians become conscious of their own worldview as the assumptions which constitute it - previously self-evident and thus invisible - become visible as the two competing and yet autochtonous discourses render them problematic. This particular human experience of a "torn consciousness" - a pluralism of discourse - forms the social and psychological context to which classical tragedy is indelibly linked, as it juxtaposes mythopoetic and juridico-political discourses in order to actively problematise them, without offering any great theory or systematic discourse to solve the problems raised.[230] Classical tragedy is not only born out of a situation of pluralism, but also actively *pluralises*. At this point of rupture, the Athenian citizen, like the protagonists in the plays, is unsure of his judgement and asks a question which is also a central theme of tragedy: *ti draso?* How must I act?

The following chapters will show how the early tragic playwrights took upon themselves the traditional mantle of poet-sage, and attempted to answer this question for the watching citizenry. To this end, they moulded their genre into a device for cultural renewal that avoided privileging mythical or rational perspectives, instead confronting both worldviews in a staged experiment that held them in an uneasy, yet creative, tension. Through the problematisation of both *mythos* and *logos*, the playwrights sought to develop an immanent critique of the Greek enlightenment; and out of this reflection construct a new and viable pluralist ethos.

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[230] Cf. Vernant J.P. & Vidal-Naquet P., 1974, vol.I, pp.20-24

Chapter II

Tragedy for Athens

Outline:

Introduction

A. Origins
      i.   Beginnings
      ii. Tragedy and the City Dionysia

B. Tragedy as a public institution

'Art is truth at work'.[231] Martin Heidegger

As we have seen, the phenomenon of Attic tragedy did not appear *ex nihilo*, as a "Greek miracle" springing forth from the depths of the archaic Dark Ages. The genre is itself a product of the *zeitgeist* of great change that accompanied *isonomia*; a communal structure, which, despite its revolutionary features, was but the latest development in a *polis* that had been evolving for centuries. The plays express the angst of their context: a people shouldering the burden of collective decision-making for the first time, unsure of themselves, their values, and their course in the face of new possibilities and great risk.

If one follows Heidegger's theory of art[232], tragedy could be said to be grounded in the enduring features of the Athenian world - their language, land, traditional worldview of *mythos* - and also in the precursory, *avant-garde,* features of their future - the juridico-political discourse of *logos* and its drive towards rational ordering.

The strength of the tragic playwrights of the Vth century B.C., however, is to have taken their art beyond the mere capture and reproduction of the popular feeling of their time. They manage to simultaneously extract themselves from their context through the self-distance afforded by the fiction of drama whilst integrating the concerns of their contemporaries in its otherworldly narrative from the mythical past. The resulting mix of withdrawal from and involvement in the present enables them to engage their public in a conscious reflection on their situation. With the plays, the tragedians create a space in which their public, the citizenry of Athens, could become a part of a negotiation between the old worldview of *mythos* and the new *logos*, and thereby reconstruct a store of nomological knowledge with which to face the era of *demokratia*. Tragedy offered itself as a new vehicle for truth-seeking, the creation of meaning in life.

For the watching citizenry, there is little doubt that the genre was not only a form of entertainment, and that it offered meaningful lessons on the serious issues of

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[231] Heidegger M., "The Origin of the Work of Art", in Inwood M, pp.116-128
[232] Ibid.

their time.[233] Already at the productions of the first tragedies in Athens[234], an elderly Solon is said to have worried – somewhat prophetically - that its fictitious nature would have consequences for the relationships between citizens.[235] The playwrights were indeed using their genre as a public art, taking upon themselves the traditional mantle of poet-sage for the *polis*, and re-creating the framework of sense-making for the Athenian citizen. The following chapter will first briefly explore tragedy's origins before proceeding to discern its function in Athenian society as a public institution.

A.   Origins

i. *Beginnings*

From the standpoint of the modern observer, ancient Greek tragedy belongs to a precise moment in history, the Fifth century B.C., and a specific place, the city-state of Athens. Although tragic productions were not exclusive to Attica, nearly all that is known today about tragedy is of Athenian provenance, and it is in the Athenian festivals that tragedy acquired its authoritative form – referring to Greek tragedy is tantamount to speaking of Attic tragedy. From the entire Fifth century B.C., only thirty-two full tragedies remain[236], alongside fragments of and references to a few hundred others; all of the complete plays were written by the three Athenian playwrights Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. Roughly one quarter of the century's tragedies were composed by this same trio, whose renown was to eclipse that of all other tragedians to such an extent that the legacy of all the other playwrights combined is restricted to records of their names and a few dozen titles and lines of verse. No other Greek tragedy from any of the six following centuries of the genre's existence has been found. Of the extant plays, many have only survived in one manuscript, and at least three of these have small

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[233] As will be seen in the following chapters. Also, as noted in the previous chapter, some of Euripides plays drifted away from the tragic genre and towards pure entertainment in the form of "tragi-comedy" (*Alcestis, Helen, Iphigenia in Tauris*) or "melodrama" (*Electra, Orestes*) cf. Kitto, H.D.F., 2003, p.311ff or Grene & Lattimore (Eds.), vol.III, pp.1-3; as such they are intentionally sidelined in the following study of tragedy, and used only where they offer elements of a serious/momentous (*spoudaios*) nature.
[234] The dates of these productions are estimated somewhere in the second half of the Sixth century B.C. – see note 238 below.
[235] Plutarch's *Lives* quoted in Vernant J.P. & Vidal-Naquet P., 2001, vol. I, p.17
[236] The extant tragedies of the three authors represent only a small part of their repertoire: for Aeschylus, only 7 out of at least 73 plays survive, for Sophocles 7 of 123, and Euripides 18 of 92. Garland R., pp.1-2

sections that have been in some way altered from their original version. Moreover, none of the recovered manuscripts pre-date the fourth century B.C. In sum, our knowledge of Greek tragedy, just as with any other feature of Ancient Greece, is restricted to a narrow and partial reconstitution of an art from which we are separated by over two millennia.[237]

As to tragedy's official date of birth in 534 B.C., it is literally carved in stone in the Parian Chronicle, which records the first representation of the playwright Thespis. [238] The latter is said to have invented the genre by adding the part of an individual respondent to the chorus, breaking up what had been a continuous choral narrative. Interestingly, doubt is cast on whether the naming of an Athenian as the first tragic playwright is anything other than an attempt to reclaim the genre from its apparent Dorian origins[239], or to give it an earlier and thus more prestigious birth date than its probable institutionalisation a few decades later with the advent of a democratic system in the city.

Little is in fact known with any certainty with regards to tragedy's genesis. Aristotle suggested that the genre evolved out of the dithyrambic singing contests (male choruses in the honour of Dionysos) and satyr plays[240]. Like these predecessors, tragedy became a part of the competitions (*agones*) in the city's main festival, the City Dionysia (also honouring Dionysos), with nine plays annually.[241] As such, they were not confined to a minority of theatre-goers but watched by a large proportion of the citizenry.[242] It involved a dramatic performance centred on the interaction of a limited number of speaking actors (two in Aeschylus' time increased to three actors by Sophocles) and a chorus (12 or 15 singers). The actors were identified as characters in the play by their various masks; other non-speaking parts were performed by extras (sometimes in great number for a powerful visual effect).[243] The members of the chorus would both sing and dance, creating a strong musical element rendering the whole somewhat comparable to a modern-day opera. Overall, tragic plays were much more complex and rigid in

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[237] For discussions of the remaining historical evidence of the tragic plays see Cropp M., "Lost tragedies: a survey" in Gregory J. (ed.), and also Garland R.
[238] In the Parian Marble, itself dated 264/3 B.C. The first tragedian it names is Thespis, but the year of his play could be interpreted as any number between 538 to 528B.C. West M. L., p.253
[239] Hornblower S. and Spawforth A. (eds.), p.1539.
[240] Aristotle, *Poetics*, IV, 1449
[241] Garland R., p.2. Later in the century, perhaps from 440B.C. onwards, there were up to four tragic productions annually in the less prestigious dramatic competition of the Lenaea festival, which was also held in honour of Dionysos. This was also roughly the period when minor productions of the most well-known plays began throughout the countryside of Attica, in the festivals of the Rural Dionysia.
[242] Meier C., p.1
[243] Hornblower S. and Spawforth A. (eds.), pp.1540-1541

form than modern drama, with scripts in set musical and poetic formats that employed different types of metric in accordance with the context of the verses (formal argument, exchange between chorus and protagonist and so forth). The standard storyline of the tragic play centres on the suffering of its main characters, generally heroes of Greek myth, and follows them over the course of a few key events. There is not necessarily any final resolution to the plot of each play. The broad lines of Aristotle's definition capture the main elements of the genre as it was standardised: tragedy was a poetic (rather than prosaic), and dramatic (rather than narrated) form of representation of a set of events of a serious nature (*spoudaios*: worthy of attention and respect), that drew a strong emotional response from the audience.[244]

In the Fifth century B.C., tragedy had become a self-contained piece of heroic legend, poetically reworked in elevated style for dramatic presentation by a chorus of Athenian citizens and two or three actors as part of public worship in the sanctuary of Dionysus. Essentially, the tragic narrative is built around the difficult situation or downfall of its main characters and traces their suffering and reactions to it. There is not necessarily any final resolution to the problems of the characters in the plays. Ultimately, the playwrights use this particular form of narrative to explore the limits of the human condition, the consequences that ensue from any overstepping of these boundaries, and the many ethical questions that arise as a result.

ii. Tragedy and the City Dionysia

Purpose of festival

The tyrant Peisistratos is attributed with the decision to include a competition of tragedies in his newly re-organised festival, the City Dionysia (or Great Dionysia), around 530 B.C. The City Dionysia is said to have been transformed as a part of Peisistratos' project to make Athens a religious centre to rival all others, alongside temple-building and patronage of the arts.[245]

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[244] Aristotle, *Poetics*, IV, 1449
[245] Murray O., 1993, p.272 - although it is possible that this did not actually occur until the new democratic regime at the very end of the VIth century B.C., cf Hornblower S. and Spawforth A. (eds.), p.1539

The festival, an expression of the Greeks' holistic tendency to integrate religious, social and political aspects of life, had a variety of dimensions that made it much more than a merely recreational public holiday. Thucydides pointed out that the Athenians in particular were guilty of this somewhat over-zealous approach to festivity: 'their notion of a holiday is to do what is necessary'[246]. The City Dionysia was a public political event. Elements of the festival such as the chorus in the plays themselves were paid for through the equivalent of the public purse – the contribution of the wealthy citizens (there being no official tax at the time). Those with the means to sponsor a festival had much to gain in terms of public favour and prestige, lending an element of *panis et circenses* (bread and circuses to pacify the masses), and its associated competition between upstanding citizens for civic status, to the festival. This also enabled the rich to defuse the tension caused by the inequality in wealth between the upper and lower classes. In this as in other ways the festival acted as a safety valve for the various pressures of life in the city.[247] As an outlet of public criticism, the various stage performances – the tragedies, and more particularly the satyr plays and the comedies - were notable in this regard. The Athenians' willingness to engage in biting criticism of their own politicians, institutions, and policies was such as to provoke attempts to outlaw it altogether. Also, like the other festivals, the City Dionysia brought the citizenry together to affirm their identity as Athenians, increasing solidarity as the locals "let off steam" together for a few days in a break from routine. The festival also included elements of external politics, in no small part due to the presence of foreigners it attracted from wider Greece and beyond. Treaties with other cities were traditionally ratified in the weeks leading up to the celebration.[248] Finally, in the theatre itself, and before the start of the dramatic competition, the city organised the ritual pouring of a libation by the leading statesmen and generals, followed by a military parade of both the tribute from their "allies" and of the war orphans who had come of age after a life in the care of the city-state, in an overt demonstration of Athenian military power.[249] The celebrations, and the ostentatious expense they represented, were thus in part designed to enhance the prestige and standing of Athens' and its citizenry among the Greek cities.

Secondly, as its name indicates, the City Dionysia was a religious celebration in the honour of Dionysos, the god of wine and intoxication, and also of ritual ecstasy,

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[246] Thucydides, 1.70
[247] Meier C., p.48
[248] Ibid., p.56
[249] Goldhill S., "The audience of Athenian tragedy", in Easterling P. E., *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, CUP, Cambridge, 1997, p.56

the mask, illusion, impersonation, and of the afterlife. It marked the end of winter, spring being the season of Dionysos, and was by far the largest annual festival in Athens, its scale matched by only one other Athenian festival, the Panathenaia (itself held only once every four years). The god is said to have arrived from a village near the border of Attica, Eleutherae, in commemoration of which a procession of his statue from outside the city to the theatre began the festivities. One of the specificities of the festival lay in the emphasis placed on theatrical performances - satyrs, comedies and tragedies - as a means of worshipping the god. As a feature of this celebration, tragic representations became an integral part of the yearly rhythm of an Athenian working life that was marked at every step by festivals (one Fifth century observer noted that Athens had more festivals than any other Greek city[250]).

Procedure of festival, Dionysos in tragedy

During the City Dionysia, Attic citizens joined in the first day's procession of the god's image to his temple, with dithyrambs praising Dionysos while dancing around his altar; followed by a day of contests for both poetry recitals (including Homer) and jousting. The last few days were those of the theatrical representations, involving tragic plays, satyr plays, and comedies; generally each tragedian had one morning to present a tetralogy of three tragedies (not necessarily linked) followed by one satyr play. Dionysos' various characteristics were also honoured by heavy wine-drinking (as the god of wine), libations, and sacrifices of animals associated with the god; as well as by lewd songs, all sorts of pranks (*komoi*) and the exchange of obscenities (said to ward off the adversaries of life and thus of Dionysos).[251] The lewdness, pranks, and insults all form an integral part of comedy and mark it clearly as a celebration of the god, even if the subject matter of this genre was largely based around contemporary events. Much the same can be said of satyric drama, in which the chorus plays the part of the god's sacred band of companions, the satyrs (imaginary wild men who unabashedly pursue sex and wine); and in which the storyline was directly based on Dionysiac themes and motifs.

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[250] Meier C., p.45

[251] This account of the City Dionysia draws on Meier C., op. cit.; Hornblower S. and Spawforth A. (eds.), p.476 and also Pickard-Cambridge A.

How was this religious element reflected in the tragedies themselves? Apart from Aristotle's assertion that tragedy developed out of dithyrambs and satyr plays, little is actually known about the genre's founding influences. The etymology of the word, broken down into *trag-oidia*, or song of the billy goat, has provided the pretext for much speculation with little to substantiate it.[252] This is not the only controversy that arises out of modern attempts to neatly explain how tragedy's content grew out of its religious context, in order to fill a glaring gap. Indeed, the inconsistencies between tragedy and the festival in honour of the strange god were so conspicuous that already at the genre's earliest productions the following question became a well-known saying:

> *"What has this got to do with Dionysos?"*

Or simply:

> *"There is nothing here that concerns Dionysos."*[253]

Plutarch tells us that these expressions were first pronounced in the early years of Phrynicos' and Aeschylus' plays, towards the beginning of the Vth century B.C., in the face of their novel usage of "fictions and misfortunes".[254] Certainly, the Attic citizenry was raising a valid point: *quid* of the wild, disruptive, offensive, disturbing, evasive nature of the god, so different from the other sober figures of the Greek Pantheon[255], in the relatively serious, reverent, structured, mournful and eloquent tragic dramas? The plays were generally constructed around storylines derived from legendary myths - most of the playwrights opting for those heroic narratives of epic poetry that depict the more conventional divinities and heroes. How then was Dionysos being celebrated, worshipped or represented when, unlike in the rest of the City Dionysia, the outrageous god and his exploits were not even mentioned in the plays[256]?

Jean-Pierre Vernant has attempted to answer this question, and whilst rejecting any full explanation of the stuff of tragedy through its religious origins, still sees a

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[252] Cf. Vernant J.P. & Vidal-Naquet P., 2001, vol.II, pp.17-24.

[253] Ibid., p.17

[254] Plutarch, *Table Discourses*, Book I, 1, Presumably Plutarch is referring here to tragedy's use of *muthos* (intrigue relating to epic, legendary myth) and *pathos* (with stories of misfortune and suffering)

[255] A distinction heavily drawn upon by the likes of Nietzsche in his opposition of dionysiac and apollinian art in the *Birth of Tragedy*.

[256] The surviving exception being Euripides play *The Bacchae* – however this is the last extant classical Attic tragedy, first performed in 405 B.C.

somewhat hazy reflection of Dionysos in the core mechanics of tragedy.[257] The key to this is the distinct nature of the god, a figure far removed from all of his divine counterparts. Dionysos, son of Zeus yet an outcast, is the foreign, wandering god struck by madness that the city must accommodate at specific times during the year. He is the god of the Other, who leads his followers on the paths of alterity through drunkenness, mania, and ecstatic possession. Through a transgression of the limits of reason and a transcendence of existential boundaries, he ultimately enables his followers to experience a '*dépaysement radical de soi-meme*'[258] ("a radical distanciation from their selves"). In Vernant's somewhat Nietzschean interpretation, it is precisely this dionysian self-distanciation that is reflected in Attic tragedy's recourse to the mechanism of fictitious representation, thus subtly marking the tragic genre as a celebration of Dionysos:

> *'If one of Dionysos' main traits is to blur the boundaries between the illusory and the real, to make the elsewhere appear here, to distance and differentiate our selves from ourselves, then it is indeed the enigmatic and ambiguous face of the god smiling at us, in this game of theatrical illusion that tragedy, for the first time, inaugurates on the greek scene.'[259]*

One could add that tragedy celebrates the god of the Other through another type of disruption than the simple violation of standard codes of behaviour in comedy: much like Euripides' play about Dionysus (also known as Bacchus), *The Bacchae,* and the procession of the Great Dionysia itself, it returns the disorderly and wild god into the orderly and civilised community, disturbing the everyday juridico-political discourse of *logos* with the archaic but not yet forgotten otherworld of *mythos,* and depicting the resulting *agon* of values to problematise the nomological foundations of the Attic worldview (as will be seen in chapter six).

B.   Tragedy as a public institution

In sum, the City Dionysia had a variety of aspects that were assembled into a celebration of Athenian values: whether of citizenship, of Athens' achievements abroad or at home, or of communal devotion to Dionysos. Of specific concern to

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[257] Vernant J.P. & Vidal-Naquet P., 2001, vol.II, pp.17-24
[258] Ibid., p.19
[259] Ibid., p.24, my translation.

the study of tragedy, the activities involved went beyond a mere repetition of ritual to the constant re-examination of these shared values, in a public and institutionalised form of reflection.

Setting of tragedy – as an institution of the polis

The setting of the plays demonstrates that tragedy was a fully-fledged institution of the *polis*. Its examination by Aristophanes, whose comedies sent up other institutions like the Assembly (in *Knights*) and the law courts (in *Wasps*) in a similar fashion, indicates as much.[260] The tragic competitions were placed under the authority of the eponymous archon, the chief magistrate of Athens, who chose the three playwrights as well as the three wealthy citizens that provided for the expenses of the choruses; they were held in the theatre of Dionysos on the south side of the Akropolis, only a few hundred metres away from the regular meeting place of the *ekklesia* (assembly); and they followed the same institutional norms and procedures as the other assemblies and popular tribunals of the city. These included the fact that the tragedies were judged by representatives from each of the ten *phylai* (administrative "tribes" created by the reforms of Cleisthenes), some of whom were selected in randomising processes of varying degrees of complexity. The city also financed the actors' salaries. The audience itself was partitioned into an exact representation of the citizen body and its democratic divisions as it was seated by sections allocated to each *phylai*. Attendance itself was a quasi-sacred part of a citizen's civic duties: not only was it fully subsidised by a public fund, but this fund was protected from political meddling by law. It was also the most popular of the democratic duties as various records indicate that, astoundingly, up to half of the citizenry might attended a given tragic play, compared to a maximum of a quarter for the *ekklesia*. In many ways, the audience of tragedy was the city of Athens itself.[261]

Accordingly, being a *theates* (watching spectator) of a tragic play was more than just a passive affair; it meant playing the role of a democratic citizen. The Athenians were described as 'spectators of speeches' by Thucydides[262], and vaunted their democratic system's principle of placing all matters *es meson*; that is, in the public limelight to be contested. [263] The very act of attending one of the city's assemblies, whether *ekklesia*, jury or indeed, tragic play, was to fulfil one's civic duty as a participant in *ta politika*, the affairs of the city (Plato explicitly linked

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[260] Croally N., "Tragedy's Teaching", in Gregory J.(ed.), p.58
[261] Historic details from Meier C., pp.9-61
[262] Thucydides, 3.38
[263] Goldhill S. in Easterling P. E., p.54

the audiences of all three because they were all noisy[264]). The language of the plays mirrored this, often descending from its mythopoetic and stylised heights into the rhythm and lexicon of the vernacular of courts and assemblies – incorporating the new juridico-political discourse.[265] As with the other assemblies, the needs and context of the audience steered the agenda of the plays to a certain extent. Indeed, somewhat unusually for an annual festival of religious rituals, the City Dionysia's dramatic contests exhibited constantly changing material, with new plays being written for every contest. As it was a competition, the playwrights were required to come up with content that pleased the watching public if they were to win. The plays had to be innovative, stimulating and relevant to their public. The feedback of the spectators could be instantaneous and direct: the semi-circular architecture of the amphitheatre invited audience participation, as did the format of the plays involving a dialogue between actors and a chorus that at times played the part of the citizenry itself. Accounts of the period mention unruly and partisan crowd behaviour (as could be expected in a competition); on one memorable occasion, when a play reminded them of a recent disastrous military expedition, the citizens went so far as to ban a play deemed offensive and to fine its author for reminding them of a national misfortune.[266] All in all, weighty expectations were placed on the playwrights by the Attic citizenry.

Teaching of tragedies – renewal of culture

What is known of the content of the plays indicates that the citizenry required more from tragedy than just easygoing entertainment. The obviously negative aspects of a genre centred on the downfall of its main characters could be construed as merely a dark form of entertainment if one overlooks the fact that the underlying narratives are generally mythological, and hence the source of meaning and identity as well as the subject of ongoing religious devotion for the Greeks. The popularity of self-critical and disturbing plays that pointedly call into question otherwise unproblematic values and institutions at the heart of Hellenic culture – e.g. Aeschylus' *The Persians* (472 B.C.), which sympathetically portrays the woes of the Persian enemies after their defeat by an Athenian-led fleet; Sophocles' *Antigone* (442 B.C.), which "un-patriotically" called into question the value of allegiance to the *polis*; or Euripides' *Medea* (431 B.C.), which involves extreme violations of its contemporary social norms (a mother murdering her own children to gain revenge on her husband) - shows that the spectator-citizens had come to

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[264] Plato, *Republic*, 492b-e
[265] Croally N., in Gregory J.(ed.),p.65
[266] The play *Capture of Miletus* was banned and its author Phrynicos fined in 492 B.C. Herodotus, *The Histories*, 6.21.2

require something serious from the tragic genre: namely, a form of teaching that involved critical self-examination and public reflection.

The role of the poet - educator

In this, the tragic genre was firmly inscribed in a traditional function of the City Dionysia: political education. Sources from the time highlight this constructive civic role: for Plato, the festivals were an occasion for the citizens to experience "teachings … in the presence of the gods" with Apollo, his Muses, and Dionysos as their "partners"[267]. As poets, the playwrights were expected to be teachers, and, to some extent, truth-tellers – in archaic Greece, with its predominantly oral culture, the identification of poetry (*poesis*) as a source of wisdom and of poets as sages and teachers (*sophos*) had been continuous from Homer to Solon, and was evidently still the case for Plato in the Fourth century B.C.[268] The tragedian's status is confirmed by Aristophanes, who in *The Frogs* depicts poets as purveyors of adult education.[269] The comic insists on the particular role of the tragedies 'to make citizens better';[270] that is, to educate them politically in the widest sense of the term, by offering them a framework of values through which they can see the world and make judgements in their capacity as prime decision-makers for the city. At the very end of the play, Aeschylus is even implored to 'save our city'.[271] A few decades later, Plato deplores a situation that he labels a 'theatrocracy'[272] and attacks the tragedians because of their political influence: he sees dramatists and sophists alike as his competitors in the education of Athenians.[273] Further, the authority of the early tragedians was derived from more than their ability as authors: Aeschylus was one of the cult heroes who had won the battle of Marathon, and Sophocles held various role high-ranking public offices, including that of military general. In some ways, like the legendary Solon, they embodied what Werner Jaeger considered to be the city's highest ideal of leadership: the 'trinity of poet-statesman-sage'[274]. Correspondingly, the prestige, authority and influence of the playwrights over the Attic mindset was considerable.

Why the citizens need education

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[267] Plato quoted in Meier C., p.44-48

[268] Plato deplored this situation as he sought to wrest the mantle of authoritative truth-telling for his Philosophy. Cf. *Republic*, 608.

[269] Aristophanes, *Frogs*, ll.1054-1055 as translated by Croally N., in Gregory J. (ed.), p.58

[270] Ibid., ll.1009-1010

[271] Ibid., l.1510

[272] Plato, *Laws*, 701a

[273] Schwartz J. in Euben P. (ed.), 1986, p.186

[274] Jaeger W., p.*xxvi*

When considering the role of tragedy as a source of education, it is important to place ourselves in a context where the average Athenian citizen had no formal pedagogical instruction beyond perhaps basic literacy, numeracy and musical appreciation. Tragic plays were to some extent a part of the formal instruction of those privileged enough to receive an education in that like the Homeric epics they were read, studied, and learnt by rote to be performed at symposia, and in this way disseminated throughout the Hellenic world. Most Athenians did not receive anything further in terms of an explicit course of education. [275]

And yet, as explored in the previous chapter, the need for guidance was keenly felt. Since the reforms of Cleisthenes in 508 B.C., each and every citizen was faced with the unprecedented requirement of governing their city using a process of decision-making through public debate. There was no specialised bureaucracy or priestly caste to advise them in this revolutionary system of self-rule. At best, in times of great need they could make a collective inquiry to an oracle at Delphi who had been increasingly discredited as the result of numerous corruption scandals throughout the course of the century, and whose cryptic pronouncements led to various contradictory interpretations. Moreover, the rupture in nomological knowledge between the old ways of *mythos* and the new *logos* meant that the Athenians no longer had one coherent framework through which to perceive the world and by which to judge the policies of their city – the poetry of Homer and even the legislation of Solon were out of touch with many new developments in their rapidly modernising democracy and expanding empire. This, along with the exceptional challenges that faced their city, had created a measure of self-doubt.[276]

Where, then, was the citizen to find guidance? Thucydides provides us with the Athenians' expectation when he quotes their great leader Pericles presenting the whole city as an education to themselves and others, 'the school of Hellas'[277]. In the new enlightened Athens of the democratic era, active participation in self-government through mass public deliberation - in the various public assemblies including the theatre - was itself considered to be the source of education for the citizenry. Again Pericles: 'our ordinary citizens... are fair judges of public matters... instead of looking on discussion as a stumbling-block in the way of action, we

[275] Cartledge P., "Deep plays: theatre as process in Greek civic life" in Easterling P.E.(ed.), p.19
[276] This is a key idea in Meier C., throughout, especially pp.1-61
[277] Thucydides, 2.41

think it an indispensable preliminary to any wise action at all'.[278] Education was conceived of primarily as the production of competent citizens (it was "political"); and competent citizenry could only be achieved through the activity of politics (which was itself educative)[279]: everything in the new worldview was geared toward the *polis* and overridden by a public ethos. As one of the Athenian institutions, tragedy was 'a democratic *paideia* [education]... in itself'[280]. [281]

The teaching of tragedy was of course slightly different in nature to that of the other assemblies: although it was at its most basic level both a *mimesis* and a model of the active political life and its juridico-political discourse, it also went beyond this to address universal questions of truth, identity and ethics, and renew Athenian nomological knowledge.

First, at this basic level, it was a typical institution of Athenian *demokratia*, and thus of civic education; that is, a teaching through the representation of models of civic skills, ideals, and discourse. The plays themselves embodied a pedagogy of discussion, by creating an interplay between the playwright and the audience and stimulating discussion among citizens. Furthermore, the content of the plays took the form of an extended dialogue between the protagonists who personified competing worldviews about personal, family, civic and religious relations and responsibilities.[282] In this way, public deliberation as the activity of politics, and all the components of its juridico-political discourse - with its new forms of rhetoric, decision-making, and formal argumentation – are all injected anachronistically into plays narrating the myths of the Hellenic past. And so the *theatai* are offered the scene of the goddess Athena voting to resolve a hung jury in the Aeschylus' famous Oresteian trilogy; at least one *agon* in each of Sophocles' and Euripides' plays[283]; numerous scenes of mythical characters haggling like professional rhetoricians in Euripides; the odd allusion to contemporary public matters known to the audience of the play (for instance, Aeschylus using the goddess Athena to call for the avoidance of social strife in a 458B.C. production, in a period where Athens was close to civil war after the assassination of Ephialtes in 461B.C.); and on infrequent occasions, the city or its citizens represented in the plays by protagonists or the chorus. The content of the plays thereby reflects to some

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[278] Ibid., 2.40
[279] Croally N., in Gregory J.(ed.), p.68
[280] Arrowsmith W., 1963, p.33
[281] See also Jaeger's seminal work on Classical Greek education - Jaeger W., 1961
[282] Lebow, R.N., p.362
[283] Duchemin J., pp.235-238

degree the basic techniques of Athenian democratic politics back to its audience. This overt type of civic education through direct representation, however, is clearly not the main thrust of tragic plays which - at face value - only rarely disrupt the otherworld of myth with the explicit depiction of contemporary political issues.

Rather, this second, "higher" level of teaching sought to influence the very foundations of the Attic mindset through an 'analogical, allusive and indirect'[284] method of instruction. The tragedies – set squarely in the tradition of mythopoetic culture - present stories about how people make decisions and act on them, with the aim of addressing wider questions of meaning at an ethical level, rather than directly discussing the particular political issues of the day. In Aristotle's terminology, tragedy goes beyond imitation alone to *mimesis praxeos*[285], the representation of action (making it *drama*: a greek word for momentous action) – thereby enabling it to answer a central question of tragedy: *ti draso?* How shall I act?[286] So, in the *Oresteia* for instance, first staged almost immediately after the major constitutional reforms of Ephialtes in 462 B.C., Aeschylus is addressing an audience that would have been preoccupied by issues surrounding institutional justice. Yet he does not stage some policy debate between characters to examine the merits of the Athenian justice system and thereby directly address the problems of the day. Instead, Aeschylus examines the wider matter of the nature of justice in the *polis* through a narrative based on well-known myths from the epic cycle of the Mycenean royal house. The curse on the House of Atreus, passed down through the generations in a cycle of retributive violence, is used in a trilogy of plays to question the traditional standards of justice in *mythos* as well as the modern juridico-political standards (by introducing the anachronism of an Athenian trial to end the trilogy). The *theatai* are invited to ask of themselves questions such as: should the main character, Orestes, be put to death as the latest perpetrator in a vicious cycle of revenge murders? And in parallel with this: is true justice achieved through the "natural" principle of direct retribution, the societal convention of citizen deliberation, or divine preference? Although the final trial ends with a verdict which tends toward the new legal conventions, the playwright's position on the question of justice is put forward with such subtlety or indeed, deliberate indirection, that to this day it is still disputed (attempts to

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[284] Cartledge P. in Easterling P.E., p.19
[285] Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1450b
[286] Vernant J.P. & Vidal-Naquet P., 2001, vol.I, p. 37

discern Aeschylus' opinion of Ephialtes' reforms are even more contentious).[287] Aeschylus offers no new or explicit definition of justice to replace the traditional notion of retribution criticised for its never-ending cycles of violence in the plays, only a benevolent appraisal of the practical mechanisms by which the city can settle disputes.[288] Various mythic elements are deployed to reinforce the aetiological message of the playwright and provide the new high court of Athens with a foundation in myth : the final trial is held on the Areopagus, in the exact same location as the mythical trial of the god Ares, and is also endorsed by Athena, patron goddess of Athens. The watching citizens were hence exposed to a problematisation of their own understanding of justice through the confrontation of its differing characteristics in *mythos* and *logos*: the play's narrative is designed to be a web which slowly draws the established norms of justice together into an inevitable conflict, an *agon* of truths (in both of its senses of competition and trial) unveiling the contingency of their normative framework. They are also presented with an aetiology of the new legal system, even though it is presented as imperfect: it is a tentative basis for renewal. In this way, they were drawn away from the particular decisions about their city's constitution and invited to reflect critically on some of the key assumptions behind the values of their own worldview, and arrive at new standards by which to judge the affairs of the *polis* – a new framework of nomological knowledge.

This short example illustrates the fact that the teaching of the tragedians reaches beyond public education through representation of perceived or even ideal models of living; the playwrights used their projections of the present dilemmas onto a distant and mythical otherworld, fictitiously brought to life on-stage, in order to question and renew the core truths of their own culture. By re-visiting myths on their own terms, the tragedians were subtly recasting the very fabric of Greek culture: beliefs about religion, ethics, politics and the nature and meaning of life – their "self-image". Offsetting the events of a play against the wider tapestry of myth enabled it to access a depth of meaning outside of and greater than itself: tragedy was thus further removed from the particularities of the everyday life and could aspire to become part of the universal teaching of myth. [289] In effect, the tragedies created a public space in which previously unchallenged values of their

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[287] Ibid., p.22. Also for a summary of various modern authors' contradictory interpretations of the end of the *Oresteia* see Goldhill S., pp.33-56.

[288] Cairns D., in Gregory J. (ed.), p.307

[289] Lattimore discusses this in his introduction to *Agamemnon*, in Grene & Lattimore (Eds.), 1956, vol. I, p.14. Many other plays have a choral introduction or prophetic conclusion which directly reminds the audience of past or future events in the epic cycle and links the play into this wider narrative.

nomological knowledge were first made explicit (e.g.: the various conceptions of justice above), and then problematised (in the *Oresteia* by creating a situation in the play in which their incompatibilities are exposed), thereby opening up the possibility of their re-creation. Subsequently, rather than fixing new meanings for these values by formulating total "solutions" to the problems raised, the playwrights chose to leave open the new spaces of thought they had created – in a dialogical (an open-ended and continuously debated) rather than a dialectical (synthesis of opposites into a closed solution) manner.[290] They promoted an awareness of the limits of such solutions, and a few compatible and largely traditional precepts ("nothing in excess!") that created a platform for the co-existence of conflicting perspectives. They invited spectators to reflect on and criticise the key tenets of their own worldview, but did not spoon feed them ready-made answers; in the process, they fomented the development of a particular kind of *esprit critique* amongst the citizenry. In this way, the tragic process was a constant vector of problematisation and renewal, which taught an ethos of moderation and self-critical interrogation designed to shape the decision-making of the democratic citizen. Tragedy was a form of sense-making that offered an *a priori* framework of pre-dispositions for judgement – a store of nomological knowledge - rather than a substantive philosophy or ideology: a set of assumptions, values, and attitudes that constituted a tragic ethos or as Vernant called it, a 'tragic consciousness'.[291]

Moreover, by integrating a questioning of both traditional and innovative standards of judgement, tragedy negotiated the rift between the old mythological worldview of epic poetry and the new rationalist outlook, participating in the renewal of Athenian culture. The assembled citizens could watch as the chorus interrogated the heroes of myth, questioning their motives and decisions just as they would, sometimes according to their own modern concerns. The polarity between the values of myth and those of the modern *polis* was thus mirrored by the play's structural tension between hero and choir, and this tension helped to open a space of negotiation on the rupture in nomological knowledge.[292] The allusive and open-ended nature of the plays avoided privileging either of these sets of values, instead holding them in an uneasy tension on-stage, prompting in the watching citizenry a self-critical interrogation, and flowing from this, a reformulation of Athenian values. Overall, to employ Meier's terminology, tragedy

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[290] Regarding "dialogical" Cf. Bakhtin M.
[291] Vernant J.P. & Vidal-Naquet P., 2001, vol.1, p.23
[292] Vernant J.P. & Vidal-Naquet P., 2001, vol.I, pp.17-19

was a 'special example of a social body carrying out quite publicly the maintenance and development of its mental infrastructure'[293]. It was a public institution of renewal of nomological knowledge for the *polis*.

Much is made here of the deeply political nature of tragedy. It was also, of course, an art form – although not in one modern sense of the term that perceives the aesthetic as a creation in and for itself, produced by an artist as an expression of their inner world and for their own individual satisfaction. The tragic art genre created new meaning, but for the community of citizens – a community of which the tragedian was an integral member with an institutionalised role. It was quite clearly possessed by the same powerful public ethos that drove Athenian life through the Fifth century B.C.; in other words, it was art in the service of the polis. Tragedy was an integral part of *ta politika*, the affairs of the polis that took up much of the life of the Athenian citizen and provided the only realm in which he could gain for himself the esteem of his peers – so much so that Aristotle gave this species a new name, *zoon politikon,* literally the "political animal".[294] The tragedians, in their role as poets for the city, composed their works of art for an audience of fellow citizens, as part of a regular public festival. It is not hard to conceive that they did so in accordance with the aforementioned rationale of "national greatness" proclaimed by Pericles in his funeral oration.[295] Indeed, the function of the chorus was a key expression of tragedy's nature as a public art form: it generally played the role of "the people", and was a proxy for the audience itself within the play, leading its response and channelling their interpretation of the action, often by placing it in a wider mythic perspective on events. By some accounts, the chorus was a group of young men who were about to reach the age of citizenship, and who unlike the actors, were amateurs and sometimes wore no masks. It also generally played the role of a group of city-dwellers affected in some way or another by the action, but not directly influencing the course of the play: city elders, palace women, personal servants, mothers, and so on. Always at a slight remove from the main protagonists, they were witnesses of a play's events; they also often had some status that endowed them with the authority to analyse the situation and give advice (e.g. seniority, relationship with characters or insider knowledge). They were themselves spectators within the play, reacting to events, interpreting and analysing the situation, or questioning the heroes on their motives and actions. In terms of the performance, the effect of the choral presence is its

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[293] Meier C., p.4
[294] Aristotle, *Politics*, I, 1253a
[295] Thucydides, 2.60

transformation of the space of reflection into one that is communally shared: it is a mechanism that brings the *theatai* into a communion of shared suffering with the hero, into "sympathy" in its etymological sense (*sympatheia* or suffering together). And so the *kommos*, lyrical song of lamentation that occurs at the emotional climax of many plays, is sung by the chorus and the hero together, in an expression of their shared feeling.[296] The teaching of tragedy as well as the learning of its lessons becomes a communal endeavour, founded in a mutual experience; or in Raymond Williams' words, 'a shared and indeed collective experience, at once and indistinguishably metaphysical and social.'[297] This was particularly the case for the young chorus members, whose "acting out" of the tragedies was an educative experience for them, a part of their initiation into citizenship.[298] This mutual experience infuses the tragic space of reflection with a public-spiritedness that ultimately defines it, an ethos of "service to the community". And this ethos originates in the fact that tragedy is itself a *practice* of community, and that the community it serves is democratic: the *polis* of equal citizens that exists not to glorify a monarch or tyrant, but to perfect and reinforce itself, or more precisely, that which binds the citizens together - the shared way of life of the democratic *polis*.

As the role of the chorus demonstrates, tragedy's teaching was achieved by other means than just narrative content: various mechanisms of artistic performance contributed as well. The dramatic representation of myth offered *theoria*: this is a "seeing", the verb used for the experience of being a spectator (a *theates*); and also a contemplative and self-reflective way of developing a vision of the world, a "theorising", a philosophical activity.[299] The first form of *theoria*, the spectator experience of the performance, was designed to contribute to the development of the latter: traditionally this form of contemplation was achieved by embarking on a sacred journey, wandering the world for insight and knowledge.[300] By providing a multi-sensory experience through music, dance, costumes, and acting as well as narrative, the playwright is transporting the spectators into an "otherworldly" fiction that distances them from their everyday lives and engages both their emotions and their intellect: it artificially replicates the experience of sacred wandering. And yet, the self-distance of the theatrical representation is balanced

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[296] Rehm R., 1994, p.57. Famous examples of the *kommos* include the last appearance of Antigone in Sophocles' eponymous play, Xerxes lamenting his defeat at the end of Aeschylus' *The Persians*, and the first appearance of the blind Oedipus in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos*.
[297] Williams R., p.18
[298] Nagy G., 2013, pp.500-503
[299] *theoria* in Liddell H.G. & Scott R., 1940.
[300] Cf. Herodotus, *Histories,* 1.30.2

by a self-awareness: this fiction is based on the narrative background of the "storied reality of myth" that provides a "self-image" to Athenians of their own culture for educative purposes, and the spectators are fully conscious of the fictitious nature of its representation on stage (Vernant calls this the "consciousness of fiction"[301]). In this way the experience of the performance of tragedy offers a form of sense-making akin to the combination of intellectual abstraction and intelligibility of rational thinking: not so distant or fanciful as to be mere escapism or thought-play, and not so rigid or close to reality as to be a political pamphlet. By running the gauntlet between these two extremes, it avoids irrelevance on the one hand or the sensitivity and ideological barriers that accompany the direct portrayal of contemporary political matters on the other. With the added emotional dimension of drama, inspiring "fear and pity" in the audience[302], tragedy is capable of offering a more holistic and more accessible form of teaching than that of rational prose; by the same token, it cannot compete with the precision of explicit philosophical argument.

There is no doubt, however, that the tragic plays put forward a form of political philosophy; as already mentioned, the likes of Plato sought to supplant it with his own teaching. Aeschylus' *The Persians* illustrates this process: the play portrays the repercussions of the Athenians' victory over Xerxes' invasion force in the imperial Persian court. And so, when the Persian herald arrives home with news of the defeat, and repeats the Athenians' battle cry ('*O sons of Hellas, free your fathers' land*'[303]), the spectators are torn between pride for their city's victory, and sorrow for the downfall of the noble Persians from whose perspective the action is now seen. In the theatre, the joy of victory and sadness of defeat are united, as the once faceless enemies are humanised, their grief experienced and identified with, and Athenian audience and distant barbarian united in common mortality. As Peter Euben puts it: 'such dual vision provided at least a momentary disengagement from (but also a further articulation of) the web of relations and narratives that constituted the Athenians as a people'.[304] That is, the *theatai* are exiled for a moment from their own selves and from this external viewpoint offered a wider perspective: they are thus made self-aware and able to re-evaluate themselves and their patriotic myths. They are not, however, transported so far as to be lost in pure abstraction of metaphysical theory or fantasy; just as the issues dealt with are related to their present dilemmas but do not directly evoke the Attic politics of the

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[301] Vernant J.P. & Vidal-Naquet P., 2001, vol.I, pp.17-21
[302] Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1449b28.
[303] Aeschylus, *Persians,* ll.402-403
[304] Euben P., 1990, p.xii

day (and the inflammatory reactions that this would provoke). It is thus a 'politically philosophical moment'[305], a moment that opens up a space of contemplation in which their joint political project and shared nomological knowledge can be critically assessed and renewed.

Thus, the festivals disrupted everyday life, bringing the Athenians together to celebrate the Other as personified by a foreign god, and reaffirm their shared identity. The plays, shaped by this context, were staged by the city, for the city. They were art works grounded in the very stuff of Attic culture that also stretched beyond it, breaking all sorts of taboos and creating new meaning at a time where rapid change and nomological rupture demanded it. The tragedies, as Charles Segal puts it, were both 'rooted in local institutions and structures [of the *polis*] and yet detached from them in [their] fundamental questioning of all structure'.[306] In this way, they combined artistic innovation with civic and religious education in an overt form of social engineering, geared towards "making citizens better" – not through some kind of superficial patriotic propaganda, but through self-critical, and often subversive and counter-cultural, reflection. For Jaeger, the tragedies' 'atmosphere of spiritual liberty' was 'bound by deep knowledge (as if by a divine law) to the service of the community', and it was this overriding public ethos that 'lifted it out of the category of pure aesthetics'[307]. As a public art form, the truth that tragedy set to work was to be shared by the community: tragedy shaped truth for Athens.

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[305] Ibid.
[306] Segal C., 1999 p.406
[307] Jaeger W., p.*xxvi*

Chapter III

Tragic vision in the tragic narrative

'[Tragedy] does not reflect reality, but problematises it.'[308] Jean-Pierre Vernant

What is the *theoria*, the vision, of tragedy, understood in the sense of a conscious reflection on reality? The tragic playwrights, in their role as poet-sage for the *polis*, were seeking to express something meaningful and to teach it to their fellow Athenians; what was the notion of "tragic" that, to a large extent, defined the genre, but more importantly in the context of this project, anchored a new worldview? For Jean-Pierre Vernant, by enacting the downfall of individuals who are wilful and yet influenced by outside forces, intelligent but prone to error, the drama reproduces 'the play of contradictory forces to which all humankind is subjected... the tensions and conflicts inherent to any society or culture'. It thereby expresses a 'tragic vision' that offers a 'wider questioning of the human condition, its limits and necessary finitude... and offers some kind of theory... concerning the illogical logic that governs the order of our human activity'. [309] The wider narrative content of the extant tragedies, despite a multitude of divergences among authors and plays, are briefly examined in the following chapter in order to provide a sketch of this tragic vision.

At face value, the plotlines of the tragedies offer little help with this task. There is no set storyline for every play in terms of a strict sequence of events. This differs from one play to the next, with a few rough types emerging. The plotline that perhaps matches the general expectations of a logical sequence of events climaxing in a disastrous ending is only present in some of the plays[310], such as Aeschylus *Seven against Thebes*, which builds relentlessly from the siege of the city to the prophesied duel between Oedipus' two sons who die at each other's hand. In other plays, there are no tragic events *per se*, as the plot merely works out the grievous consequences of an earlier tragedy known to the spectators through myth, recent history, or the preceding plays in a trilogy (so Xerxes' imperialist hubris and the defeat of his forces at the hands of the Greeks precedes the action

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[308] Vernant J.P. & Vidal-Naquet P., 2001, I, p.25, my translation
[309] Vernant J.P. & Vidal-Naquet P., 2001, II, p.89, my translation.
[310] Other plays with this master storyline are Sophocles *Women of Trachis, Antigone, Oedipus Tyrannos,* and Euripides *Medea, Hippolytus, Hecuba, Phoenician Women, Iphigeneia at Aulis,* and *Bacchae*. Storey I. & Allen A., 2005, p.82

of the play in Aeschylus *Persians*) [311]; or tragic events are followed by a redemption of sorts within the play (such as, in Sophocles *Ajax*, the rehabilitation of Ajax in the eyes of his peers after his "honourable" suicide in mid-play)[312]; or tragedy threatens but is averted altogether (in Euripides *Ion*, Creusa plots to kill a man who, unbeknownst to her, is her own son; but disaster is avoided at the last)[313]. However, what the plot lines do have in common is a dramatic and generally serious (*spoudaios*) tone and events[314] that involve emotional and/or physical torment: the plays are centred on human suffering, and as a result, we are told, provoked pity and fear in the hearts of the spectators.[315] If one extrapolates from these plot lines to the wider narrative alluded to in each play, whilst focusing on the causes of the characters' tragic misfortune, a common vision emerges.

The tragic plays depict paradigmatic figures as they run up against the limits of their condition, and endure a problematic form of suffering as a result. This suffering is problematic in that the tragic situation is ambiguous: its characters, their choices, and their circumstances are presented so as to preclude any simple moral judgements about justice or responsibility – it does not readily submit itself to a straightforward rationalisation.[316] The main reason for this is that, generally, the characters are both agents and victims of their demise; they are never completely responsible for their downfall, even though they bring it about, wittingly or not, through their own deeds.[317] Indeed, the limits inherent in their human condition – namely, their imperfect ability to know and control the world around them, or to foresee the consequences of their actions – together with the impervious nature of greater forces governing the world (Fate, the gods) and directly influencing them, combine to spin the web that entangles the tragic characters.[318]

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[311] Storey I. & Allen A., pp.82-83. Other plays with this type of plot: Aeschylus' *Suppliant Maidens*, or Euripides *Trojan Women*.

[312] Ibid. Plays with this redemption plot: Aeschylus' trilogy *Oresteia*, or Euripides' *Heracles*.

[313] Ibid. Plays with the "tragedy averted" plot: Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonos*, *Philoktetes*, or Euripides' *Andromache, Ion, Helen, Iphigeneia among the Taurians, Orestes*.

[314] As noted in the first chapter, a few of Euripides plays, the so-called "tragi-comedies" (*Helen, Ion, Iphigenia in Tauris*, *Alcestis* being the chief examples) and "melodramas" (*Electra, Orestes)* have a great deal less of this serious and elevated tone, and even have happy endings – however even in these the disaster generally still threatens and the characters are at least somewhat tormented by the possibility. Storey I. & Allen A., 2005, pp.83-84.

[315] Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1449b28

[316] Versényi L., pp. 162-207 has a good discussion of responsibility in tragedy along these lines.

[317] Aristotle makes an analogous argument 'a person... who passes into ill fortune, not because he is bad and vicious, but because he makes some error [*hamartia*]'. In *Poetics,* 1453a7-10.

[318] See for example Romilly J., 1980, who emphasises throughout that human suffering and human impotence are the stuff of tragedy.

On the one hand, the causes of tragedy are never entirely external to the tragic figures (e.g. a natural catastrophe), but are somehow related to them as repercussions of their own actions or the actions of their ancestors. Typically the tragic figures suffer as the result of an error (*hamartia*[319]), and/or an excessive and uncompromising disposition (*ate*[320]) in which they or their forebears have acted beyond the limits of their condition (*hyper moiran*[321]) – whether by overreaching their position (hubris, in the modern sense of the term[322]) or not living up to it (*theriodes bios*, acting in an uncivilised manner, like beast or barbarian[323]). This upsets the order of the cosmos (*dike*); as a result, they have to endure retribution (*nemesis*).[324] In other words, although they are heroic figures, they are in some way fallible, having erred in a somewhat venial manner. Indeed, their suffering is generally incurred in the pursuit of goals that are of great importance to them, and that, in most cases, would be considered virtuous (not the least by the characters themselves): their emotional and thus often "irrational" care for, or commitment to, someone or some cause is an expression of their individual character. As a form of *ate,* their passion is for a specific cause and may be excessive, but by the same token it can be sacred (as it may be of divine origin), and in any case, it is a characteristic of their heroic greatness (*megas*) as they challenge the limits of their human condition.[325] In any case, whether justified or not, their torment and the often irreparable damage inflicted on them seems disproportionate in relation to the actions provoking it.[326]

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[319] *hamartia* is a failure of judgement, fault or error cf. *hamartia in Liddell H.G. & Scott R.; also the discussion of *hamartia* in Golden L., pp.26-27

[320] *ate* is a bewilderment, an infatuation with a particular principle or course of action, and can be the result of blindness or madness sent by the gods or some agent of fate, generally as punishment; it sets its victims on the path to ruin. Cf. *ate* in Liddell H.G. & Scott R., op.cit. & Hornblower S. and Spawforth A. (eds.)

[321] Or *hyper moron* literally beyond their *moira* or portion of destiny, beyond their fate. *Moira* in Liddell H.G. & Scott R., op.cit. & *fate* in Hornblower S. and Spawforth A. (eds.)

[322] "Hubris" does not appear in italics here as it is used in the modern (mis-)reading of the term as "overreach of one's condition" or "sin of pride" derived from the modern analysis of tragedy and myth; the ancient meaning would appear to be much narrower i.e. "intentionally dishonouring and shameful behaviour" (bringing shame on oneself and dishonour to others, often because of a misguided sense of superiority) – although this is itself a particular type of "overreach". Hornblower S. and Spawforth A. (eds.), op. cit., pp.732-733. *Hyper moiran* is one example of an ancient expression better matched to the modern concept of "hubris".

[323] Segal C., 1986, p.34. Segal also lays out a useful schema of the ancient greek perception of a world order defined by the hierarchical relation of god–man–beast (p.27). Transgressions of human limits can thus occur by acting above or below one's station.

[324] The greek terminology used here belongs to various ancient sources from Homer and Hesiod to Aristotle (e.g. in his *Poetics,* 1448-1454), and is still used in a variety of forms in analyses of the tragic progression, for instance in Lebow R.N., pp.131-132

[325] Winnington-Ingram R., pp.162-215.

[326] Steiner G., pp.7-8

On the other hand, the tragic turn of events is never exclusively the characters'
fault: it is also brought about by natural features of an archaic ontology resistant to
human endeavour. The first of these is inherent to the very nature of the human
condition: the plurality, ambiguity and imperfection of epistemology and language
(ways of knowing and communicating), and of the human character itself (ways of
being), prone as it is to the excesses of both irrational passions and the rational
need to control the other. These all lead to the ever-present possibility for
misapprehension, tension and conflict in society. In other words, individuals are
always at risk of falling short in their attempts to understand and manipulate the
world around them, resistant as it often is to any rationalisation. A reversal of
fortune is always lurking: their choices and the actions that result are always prone
to unforeseen consequences or the effect of volatile emotions; and their views,
however plausible or genuinely held, are constantly at risk of clashing with the
claims of others. And so, Agamemnon is talked into meekly walking to his death
by words that are at once warm welcome and murderous threat; Medea's love
turns to hate so passionate that even her own children's lives are sacrificed in its
service; and Creon and Antigone strenuously uphold values that are both accepted
as virtues in their community and yet clash in their particular context.[327]

The second of these exogenous causes are external forces greater than
humankind: the imperious fate shaping history and the inscrutable gods.[328] In the
"untidy" ontology of *mythos,* where the dual causation of human will and these
immanent forces ambiguously interact[329], both fate and the gods are presented as
key determinants of events, and yet ever mysterious, lying outside of the bounds
of human understanding. The terms *ate* and *hamartia,* used to qualify the ruinous
mistakes of the heroes, plot an ambiguous course between human responsibility
and divine intervention[330]: inherited curses dictated by fate and personal history
(Orestes[331]), or a temporary madness sent by the gods (Ajax[332]) might drive the

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[327] These episodes in, respectively, Aeschylus *Agamemnon*, Euripides *Medea*, and Sophocles *Antigone.*
[328] There is of course a large reasonable amount of variation in the notion of tragedy from playwright to
playwright; particularly the evolution of tragic causation over the century, with early Aeschylean
tragedy having a heavy emphasis on these "external" causes, whilst Euripidean plays at the end of the
century have much more of a humanist perspective – cf. section B – ii – b. in the first chapter.
[329] See first chapter, section B. i. b.
[330] In archaic Greek literature, both *ate* and *hamartia* are used somewhat ambiguously in the spectrum
between human or divine responsibility for tragedy but the leaning of *ate* is generally towards divine
causation and *hamartia* toward human error. Moreover, the gods can cause errors in human reasoning
so that both terms can be used, one implies the other. Both are types of *blabe*, that is, either harm,
damage; and/or mischief from a god. Cf. Dawe R.D., 1968, pp. 89-123; Winnington-Ingram R.,
pp.162-215.
[331] Aeschylus *Oresteia*
[332] Sophocles *Ajax*

tragic figures in combination with their own will, so that even the tragic mistake is not totally of their own making. Tragedy is never completely avoidable, as human agency is limited. Like the Oedipus of Sophocles' plays, the objective culpability of the tragic figures can condemn them to suffer even if they were unconscious of any wrongdoing.[333]

In any event, these various causes always point back to the limits of a species whose existence, as neither powerful god nor aimless beast[334], is coloured by the ability to act wilfully but with only partial knowledge or control of the end results: human limitations are at the root of tragedy. Indeed, the specificity of the tragic storyline is that it confronts the tragic figures with their limits, sometimes even the defining limit of existence: death. Notably, it pits the pre-deterministic and fateful logic of mythical reasoning, which explains events by positing their place in wider chains of necessity (prophecies, cosmic retribution, societal convention and so forth – the logic of "what will be must be"), against the individual will and desire for self-determination of the tragic figures.[335] The tension between these two teleologies, in a way those of archaic myth and of the quasi-enlightened Athens, creates the pathos of frustration that sustains much of tragic drama.[336] This pathos is created when the tragic figures are placed in a context in which their wilful actions are frustrated by some timeless necessity, often unknown to them, but known to the audience (e.g. the curse of Oedipus).[337] And so conflict is also at the heart of tragedy, in form (the isolated actor on stage and the stylised *agon* with others) as well as in content: the tragic figure strives against fate, the gods, the others and/or their own insufficiencies, all of which represent the limits of the tragic figure's will and power over the world.[338] Many powerful rulers, such as Pentheus (in the *Bacchae*) or Theseus and Hippolytus (*Hippolytus*), are shown the shortcomings of their authority when faced directly with the gods, or with their own implacable fate (Oedipus in *Oedipus Tyrannos*); human knowledge, particularly with regards to prophecies, is challenged time and again (Heracles and Deianeira in *Women of Trachis,* Xuthos in *Ion*); heroes with extraordinary ability lose control when assailed by madness or sickness of supernatural origin (such as Ajax or

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[333] David Grene sees the Theban plays as an example of this tragic situation – the Oedipus of Sophocles is the character propelled by fate towards disaster whilst remaining convinced of his own conscious innocence. Grene & Lattimore (Eds.), vol.II, p.5
[334] See note 324 above
[335] Versenyi L., pp.185-187.
[336] Ibid. p.187
[337] Versenyi summarises it thus: 'individual actors subjectively detached from and consciously confronting yet objectively involved in and inescapably driven by inevitable necessity'. Ibid. p.187
[338] Ibid. p.205

Heracles) or their own emotional excesses (Medea); and death threatens or overcomes most tragic figures.[339] Tragedy confronts great figures of myth with their mortal limits, and reveals their actual situation, which they are unable or unwilling to see; it demands a re-evaluation of their beliefs, identities and actions, all of which can be called into question in light of unyielding necessities and the will of others.

Tragic teaching: responding to limits through moderation

In the plays, only some will recognise the tragic nature of the situation and the causal chain that created it; at times it is a peripheral character (such as Cassandra in *Agamemnon*) or the chorus, at others, the tragic figures themselves (Orestes in *Libation Bearers*[340]); but in all cases the audience is made to share in the realisation and the concomitant angst. Of these scenarios, the most spectacular is a sudden awakening of the tragic figures to their own plight - Aristotle called it *anagnorisis* ("recognition"[341]) – but usually, this only takes place after their stubborn attachment to some course of action has already sealed their downfall (such as Creon or Oedipus in the Theban plays[342]). And so the recognition comes generally too late for the heroes themselves: the wisdom offered by tragedy is *pathei mathos* ("learning that comes through suffering"[343]), as it is a feature of hindsight and a product of suffering. A defining statement of this is given by an Aeschylean chorus:

> '*Zeus who guided men to think*
> *who has laid it down that wisdom*
> *comes alone through suffering* [*pathei mathos*]
> *Still there drips in sleep against the heart*
> *grief of memory; against*
> *our pleasure we are temperate* [or wise: *sophronein*].'[344]

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[339] Agamemnon and Cassandra in *Agamemnon*, Oedipus in *Oedipus at Colonus*, Heracles in the *Trachinae*, Ajax, Alcestis and Antigone in the respective eponymous plays: these are but some of the many tragic characters who knowingly face their deaths in one way or another, making mortality an important theme in the plays

[340] Aeschylus, *Libation Bearers* l.1017: '*Orestes: I have won; but my victory is soiled, and has no pride.*'

[341] Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1452a

[342] Examples of recognition scenes and their aftermath Sophocles' *Antigone Oedipus Tyrannos* 1183ff. or *Ajax* 348ff.

[343] Euben P., 1990, p.89. *mathos,* that is *mathesis,* learning (cf. **mathos* in Liddell H. & Scott R.)

[344] Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, ll.176-181

As an euripidean Orestes bluntly states in *Electra*: 'Wisdom hurts.'[345] This wisdom is little more than an awareness of the tragic nature of human existence: an understanding of one's limits as a human being, particularly of the impossibility of knowing the consequences and meaning of actions other than in hindsight. Derived from *mythos*, it is the greater sense of perspective, and the sane state of mind and emotions (*sophrosune*, i.e. being *sophron*)[346], that accompany the knowledge of one's place in the order of things. And following from this, the knowledge that action – particularly the passionate, unyielding action of the heroic kind[347] - always entails a risk of disastrous consequences. '*Who acts, shall endure*'.[348] This law of action-reaction, or talionic law, contributes to a cyclical notion of time in which an ever-changing world brings about countless unforeseen *peripateia* (reversals).[349] As such it borrows from the natural cycles of degeneration, destruction and renewal of *mythos* and applies the process to human affairs - '*the same spirit is never steadfast either among friends or between city and city*'[350]. It cautions against excessive faith in any endeavour, and the unyielding attitudes towards others that result from it, as '*Time, the all-mastering, confounds all things*'[351]. If fate has decreed it, one's actions will bring about one's own downfall. The subsequent grief and remembered pain would drive one away from the excesses of the tragic heroes and towards the wise state that is *sophrosune* (moderation, temperance, a balanced state of mind and emotions[352]): '*Know that the gods love men of steady sense and hate the proud*'.[353] The step back from absolute, unyielding, postures also involves some concession to the importance of open dialogue (such as the "full disclosure" speech mode of *parrhesia*), sympathy or fellow-feeling (*suggnomosune[354]*) and reasoned persuasion (*peitho[355]*) over domination and violence, lest the conflicts of value inherent to society harden into destructive cycles of antagonism and retribution.[356] This is much in line with the various authorities of archaic Greek

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[345] Euripides, *Electra*, l. 295

[346] Winnington-Ingram R., p.122: one's psychological state is *phrenes*, to have control of or to possess (the prefix so-) one's *phrenes* is to be *sophron*, in the state of *sophrosune* –wise, self-controlled, temperate. Cf. n.353 below.

[347] The very greatness of the heroes of myth and tragedy is tied to their passionate attachment to principles or projects, and their unwillingness to compromise. Winnington-Ingram R., p.22

[348] '*... so speaks the voice of age-old wisdom*'. Aeschylus, *Libation Bearers*, l.313

[349] Zeitlin F. in Euben J.P. (ed.), 1986, pp.138-139

[350] Quotes from a speech of Oedipus in *Oedipus at Colonus*, ll. 609-615

[351] Ibid.

[352] *sophrosune* in Liddell H.G. & Scott R.; its meaning, and that of its other forms *sophron* and *sophronein*, ranges wide. As a state of mind, *sophrosune* includes such notions as self-control, sanity, good sense, and mental balance. Winnington-Ingram R., p.9. See also North H., 1966 and Rademaker A., 2005.

[353] Sophocles *Ajax* ll.131-132.

[354] *suggnome* in Liddell H.G. & Scott R., op.cit.

[355] *peitho* in Liddell H.G. & Scott R., op.cit.

[356] Lebow, R.N., p.362 & Winnington-Ingram R., p.325

culture, from Homer and Hesiod to the Delphic injunctions ("Nothing in excess!", "Know thyself!"). There is little more, of a substantive nature at least, to the "wisdom" or "learning" that tragedy advances by explicit proposition: in the tragic universe, human understanding is delimited with impenetrable ambiguity. Furthermore, in the plays, there is nothing automatic about the attribution of this wisdom, as many tragic figures go to their downfall without recognising their plight (such as Pentheus in the *Bacchae*, or Agamemnon in the eponymous play). The tragic message and its open-ended teaching are still implicitly presented to the audience, which, after all, is the key target of the playwrights' didactic intentions.[357] In sum, the wisdom that tragedy explicitly lays out for the *theatai* has little in the way of defined normative content, as it is a response to human limitations: the wise are aware of their limits and act with a corresponding level of moderation.

The disruptive tragic perspective

The tragic outlook, whether it is adopted by fictitious hero or watching citizen, disrupts the self-referential perspective on everyday life. It inverts the perspective of the individual looking out on the world, instead looking at humankind from the "outside-in", situating it in the greater scheme of things; a scheme in which the external forces of fate and the gods, combined with a world recalcitrant to human endeavour, constrain the possibilities for action. Tragedy projects an onto-epistemology of limits. From a human standpoint, it is all about one's limitations and lacunae, and, at face value, has little to offer in terms of positive or constructive content for grand normative projects. Tragedy is the place of failure – of the lack - of human capability.[358] This *theoria* disrupts life in that it is squarely focused on the limits of human endeavours rather than on the potential of the latter to contribute to everyday living. It makes use of the mythical past in order to distance itself from, and interrupt, the present. The largely pessimistic understanding of the human condition inherited in *mythos* was carefully exploited by the playwrights so as to create a cognitive dissonance with the "enlightenment" zeitgeist of progress and rationalism that came to prominence in the Athenian polis in its golden age – a dissonance that still resonates in our "enlightened" era. The tragedians also reverse this dissonance as they use the newer discourse of *logos* to criticise those mythic values still current in, and yet deemed incompatible with, the modern democratic *polis*. And so the two worldviews are used to problematise

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[357] Vernant J.P. & Vidal-Naquet P., 2001, vol.I, p.35
[358] Lambropoulos V., 2006, pp.10-11

each other, resulting in a tension that is both disruptive and creative: disruptive, as the nomological knowledge of their culture – the basis for thought and action - is called into question; and creative, as this provides a space for new thinking and the "precarious platform" on which to found radical choices in the midst of acknowledged uncertainty. This pluralist ethos of self-criticism and moderation is a foundation for pluralisms (pluralist worldviews) and a rejection of the monism inherent in enlightenment (or indeed, heroic) projects: the onto-epistemological simplicity of the scheme whereby one system of thought apprehends and controls reality is deemed a tragic hubris.

From tragedy's negative perspective, in which the power of human agency is revised downwards, the judgement of many actions is disturbed or even completely reversed. Tragedy offers a corrective angle that unravels our previous evaluations: Oedipus, for instance, realises with hindsight that his whole life involved a series of fate-driven perversions that at the time had seemed natural, just, and the outcome of his own wilful choices and intelligent rational enquiries. Even a basic act of survival, self-protection from an attack on his own life, can no longer be judged as blameless in the tragic retrospective, as it is revealed that the man he killed in self-defence was his own father: in the wider scheme of things, Oedipus has committed a crime long foretold, and in doing so, fulfilled a prophecy and sealed his shameful fate.[359] In the midst of unavoidable tragic events, the necessities that face the heroes are dreadful; the risk of disaster hangs over all of their potential actions, which are all subject to the same limits. Their fate, generally hidden from them but known to the audience, will come to fruition regardless of their choices; this forms the backbone of the plays' drama. [360] The tragic paradox is that human action is often both necessary and ruinous, and that heroic greatness amounts to a pyrrhic and hubristic defiance of a reality fraught with suffering and injustice that is indifferent to humankind.[361]

> '*I am perplexed, and fear possesses my soul whether to act, or not to act and take what fortune sends.*'[362]

Once an awareness of the limits of action is reached, and most importantly communicated to the audience, the drama - from the word *dran*, to act (in a momentous way) - becomes fully tragic; awareness of the potential for disaster

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[359] Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannos,* which is examined in chapter 4.
[360] Versenyi L., p.170
[361] Arrowsmith W., in Grene & Lattimore (eds.), vol.IV, p.496
[362] Aeschylus, *Suppliant Women*, ll.380-381

casts a shadow of fear over all choices.[363] Tragic recognition disrupts business-as-usual in that it throws a pall over what was considered the normal course of things (the notion of justice as retribution in the *Oresteia*, for instance). The consciousness of human limits, magnified by the inadequacy of even the greatest of the Greek ancestors of myth, draws all of this back into question. In the world of tragedy, human potential is ontologically constrained by greater forces that are pitiless[364] (the gods) or immovable (fate) in the face of the ever-present reality of suffering; and epistemologically constrained by imperfect knowledge of both the outside world and their own selves. There are always areas of ambiguity that are neither apprehensible nor controllable in the human environment, resistant to the powers of human reasoning and the discourse of *logos* that was rising to prominence in Fifth century B.C. Athens. And so, as in Aeschylus' quote above, all action becomes problematic: it may be burdened by great necessity but carries with it the possibility of tragedy. The playwrights highlight the uncertainties of human existence in *mythos* in order to enable the audience to enter into the play: the latter is invited to identify with the heroes' suffering (*pathos*) as a form of shared human suffering, and quite literally "sympathise" (etymologically: to suffer alongside) with their plight. With this awareness of the tragic nature of existence, the spectators are invited to respond emotionally. Aristotle stated that tragedy worked by invoking 'fear and pity'[365] amongst the watching citizens: in part for the fictitious characters, and perhaps, in part also for themselves, as they identified with the loss occasioned by a life of fateful necessities. The intellectual flipside of this response to the on-stage drama is that the moment of tragic recognition is a moment of *remise en question[366]*, where like Oedipus at the moment of dreadful revelation, everything about one's actions, beliefs, and way of life is called back into question; it becomes a problem. Tragic consciousness – the awareness of the potential for tragedy – re-injects ungovernable ambiguity into the human outlook, and hangs a critical question mark over human endeavour. As such, tragedy's *theoria* is driven by a dynamic of problematisation.

Ethical problematisation

So then, the narrative of the tragic play sets out a problem – or more often, a complex web of problems - related to the misfortune of its characters, their

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[363] Versenyi L., p.170

[364] Winnington-Ingram notes that pity in tragedy only comes from the human characters, and never the gods, who have their own agenda. Op.cit., pp.304ff

[365] Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1449b28.

[366] *Remise en question* (French expression): A calling (back) into question of something that had previously been established or normalised, a problematisation (my translation).

responsibility for this, and their choice of response to it. The playwrights are thereby inviting questioning, reflection and judgement of an ethical kind. The justice of the tragic situation is always in question, mainly as a result of ambiguous causal relations: did this action deserve such grave consequences, given the many factors that drove it? Indeed, the question of justice is already embedded in the ancient Greek conception of humanity, in which a notion of both cosmic order and social justice (*dike*[367]) requires retribution for any breaches of the divinely and socially ordained boundaries of acceptable human behaviour. Human action is circumscribed by the rules of social custom and right order, and yet it is determined by fate and supernatural interference as well as wilful decision. So the question is not, then, one of straightforward moral judgement, of approval or disapproval of the characters and their actions – an Ajax treacherously seeking to torture and kill his own officers can no more be approved of than an Antigone wishing to bury the remains of her dead brother could be disapproved of, and yet both are tragic figures.[368] Rather, the audience is presented with more difficult problems, such as the extent to which characters are responsible for their plight. The question of *dike* 'underlies every surviving play to a greater or lesser degree'[369]. This is related to the dramatic nature of the plays as representations of action: the tragic heroes are faced with momentous decisions and events, which always imply suffering or great risk thereof. Thus the question that hangs over them is inherently ethical: *ti draso* - how shall I act?[370] Jean-Pierre Vernant calls it the central question of tragedy[371], and with good reason. The question is not just implicit: it appears frequently throughout the plays[372]; often at crucial moments, such as when Orestes utters it when deciding whether to murder his own mother in the *Oresteia*[373], or when Creon realises that he needs to retract the order to execute the heroine of *Antigone*.[374] It is generally a plea for advice from one character to another, or to the chorus, and by extension, to the audience itself. Thus framed, the question takes on the urgency and poignancy of the drama, and

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[367] *dike* in Liddell H.G. & Scott R., & *Dike* in Hornblower S. and Spawforth A. (eds.), p.469
[368] Winnington-Ingram R., p.323
[369] Storey I. & Allen A., p.70
[370] *dran*: "do, accomplish, especially do some great thing, good or bad" in Liddell H.G. & Scott R.
[371] Vernant J.P. & Vidal-Naquet P., 2001, vol.I, p. 37
[372] A non-comprehensive list of occurrences of the phrase *ti draso* ("what shall I do?"- and variants of person and tense): Aeschylus *Agamemnon* l.1059, *Libation Bearers* l.899, *Prometheus Bound* l.743, *Suppliant Women* l.380; Sophocles *Oedipus at Colonus* ls.824 829 834 & 1254, *Ajax* ls.809 921 & 1024, *Philoctetes* ls.757 908 969 & 974, *Electra* l.1258, *Antigone* l.1099, *Oedipus Tyrannos* l.738; Euripides *Hecuba* l.419, *Andromache* l.828, *Orestes* ls.309 & 1610, *Phoenician Women* ls.1310 & 1615, *Suppliants* l.265, *Trojan Women* l.793, *Hippolytus* ls.598 & 612, *Medea* ls.1042 & 1376. [line numbers are those provided by
http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/wordfreq?lang=greek&lookup=dra%2Fw accessed 01/06/11]
[373] Aeschylus, *Libation Bearers,* l.899
[374] Sophocles, *Antigone,* l.1174

when the latter is combined with the wider ethical themes at stake, reaches outside the fiction of the plays to resonate with the audience. How shall we act? In the problematic situations set up by the tragedies, the question has a wider scope than the particular context of the play, where the disastrous alternatives at hand often reduce it to a rhetorical status; it is also asked of the framework of reference for judgement from which the unpalatable answers are chosen.[375] The shared nomological knowledge of the watching Athenians is itself called into question.

As if conducting an experiment with the stage as a laboratory, the playwrights set out extreme sets of circumstances under which ethical values are stretched to their breaking point, thereby engaging the spectators' critical capacity. This is first achieved as a direct result of the standard tragic narrative theme: heroic figures suffer for problematic reasons. If the audience is moved to pity by the suffering of protagonists who never seem to be entirely at fault, that is moved by *suggnomosune,* the ability to enter into, make allowance for, and sympathise with the feelings and perspective of another, as well as by a rational evaluation of the justice of the situation, then pity is in itself the result of both emotional sensitivity and ethical judgement.[376] Emotion and reflection are hence linked through the craft of drama (including the emotional effects of the musical performance, which is lost to us). These heroes are also paradigmatic in that they are set up to act as symbolic elements within a complex ethical structure[377]: their struggle is used by the tragedians to represent the various ethical problems that they are addressing in the plays. An obvious way in which they stage these problems and expose the limits of the values involved is by creating situations in which characters are duty bound to uphold conflicting principles, and confront each other in formal and stylised *agon*. These 'extreme conflicts of obligations' will be found 'disturbing or horrifying' by the audience 'precisely because ethical assumptions that are normally regarded as unproblematic are being placed under strain.'[378] Antigone and Creon clash over duty to family and *polis*, Philoctetes and Neoptolemus over individual justice and military duty, and Orestes is himself conflicted between his obligation to avenge his father and his duty to his mother.[379] Such ethical quandaries are often used to highlight the inconsistencies of a nomological knowledge built on both the older discourse of mythos and the "new" juridico-political discourse of the *polis*. In other words, the plurality of sources of reference for ethics (that is, of

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[375] Versenyi L., pp.163-170.
[376] Cairns D. in Gregory J., p.305
[377] Segal C., 1986, pp.29-30
[378] Ibid.
[379] In, respectively, Sophocles' *Antigone*, *Philoctetes*, and Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers*

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nomological knowledge) within the Attic culture was exposed and used as a starting point from which to critique and disrupt the hegemony of ethical values: notions that appeared singular and settled are pluralised and problematised. In some plays, there are also quite explicit explorations of a particular ethical concept, in which its many different meanings are juxtaposed to showcase how problematic it becomes when people interpret and deploy it in conflicting ways to serve their own ends. The meaning of *sophia* vacillates between wisdom as self-knowledge or worldly cunning in Euripides' *Bacchae*[380]; the aforementioned *dike* is employed ambiguously to mean justice as retribution, as civic legality, or as divine order in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*[381]; and *ananke* (necessity) is used by many to justify their conflicting premises in Euripides' *Hecuba*[382]. These are but a few of the many ethical concepts shown to be plural and subject to conflicting interpretation as characters seek to deploy them for their own purposes; indeed, the by-product of the problematisation of these legitimising ethical concepts is the exposition of the relationship of truth, and language, to power (as will be discussed in later chapters).

In any case, the choice of myth, the events, characters, dialogue and choral commentary are contrived so as to highlight the ambiguity of the concepts being examined, particularly through the paradoxes and contradictions inherent in the thoughts and actions of tragic figures going to their downfall. The broken cycle of murder and retribution in the *Oresteia*, the unspeakable yet unknowing crimes of Oedipus, or the metamorphosis through relentless victimisation of a trusting Hecuba who then herself becomes obsessed with vengeance by any means[383]; these are all storylines where simple causal chains of crime and punishment are muddled, judgement is faced with dilemma, and the discomfort incited by a spectacle of suffering is magnified by an ethical void. As the chorus in Euripides' *Orestes* puts it:

> *Just the act, crime unjust.*
> *Right and wrong confounded*
> *in a single act.*[384]

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[380] Arrowsmith W., in Grene & Lattimore (Eds.), vol.IV, pp.530-534
[381] Goldhill S., pp.33-57
[382] Ibid. pp.494-496
[383] Euripides, *Hecuba*
[384] Euripides, *Orestes*, ll.193-195

There is no immediate way out for the characters, who for a time at least must endure the cruel necessity of a tragic fate, despite never being outright villains; correspondingly, the ethical values at play in their situation are challenged by the necessity of their suffering. Settled notions of the "good", "just", or "true" are disturbed by the fatalism of the tragic situation in which human will has little power over an often disconcerting outcome; just as traditions of *dike* are called into question by the divine pardon of a guilty Orestes, the fated punishment of an Oedipus innocent of any conscious wrongdoing, or the bestial transformation of a victimised Hecuba. The tragic narrative does not overtly solve these dilemmas; the playwrights are more interested in problematising values than upholding them.

In line with this vision, rather than presenting resolved and authoritative guidance, the plays work alongside the citizen to develop a powerful *esprit critique* that deconstructs Athenian values and remains open-ended. The many ethical dilemmas that are evoked are for the most part left unsolved by the end of the plays; unlike Aesop's fables, there are rarely any clear-cut moral recommendations beyond the traditional ethos of *sophrosune* and *pathei mathos*, only 'problems, tensions, uncertainties'.[385] There are no easy solutions proposed for the problems of *dike, sophia,* or *ananke* raised in the aforementioned plays. Although it does suggest a new way forward for justice in Athens, the triumphant end of the *Oresteia* does not proclaim a complete and final resolution to the clash between the old justice of retribution and its newer civic counterpart, but an uneasy compromise where a hung jury needs to be supplemented by the vote and the somewhat abrupt proclamation of a goddess[386]; by the end of the *Bacchae, sophia* remains a murky concept with clear overtones of the *pathei mathos* as the characters are encouraged to accept their suffering as a bleak and divinely-sanctioned necessity, and learn to console each other[387]; and in *Hecuba, ananke* remains an ad-hoc legitimising term abused to such an extent that it is reduced to acting as a synonym for the self-interest of the powerful and a refusal of ethical conduct.[388] Similarly, Oedipus' honourable death at the end of Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* muddies even further the picture of his guilt for the crimes of incest and parricide he committed unknowingly.[389] In all four of these examples, the aforementioned traditional ethos is subtly re-affirmed, not as a solution to the tragic ethical problems at hand, but as a set of attitudes and practices that might enable citizens

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[385] Goldhill S, p.286
[386] Versenyi L., pp.198-205; Goldhill S, pp.33-57; Euben P., pp.68-92
[387] Arrowsmith W. in Grene & Lattimore (Eds.), vol.IV, pp.539-541
[388] Arrowsmith W. in Grene & Lattimore (Eds.), vol.III, pp.495-496
[389] Winnington-Ingram R., pp.248-279

to live on together in spite of their tragic limits and minimise the damage wrought by these. Respectively, these palliative practices are: the notion of justice as imperfect but functional compromise in the *polis*; the wisdom of moderation[390] and the role of community in times of suffering; the importance of sympathy and listening to the perspective of others; and the notion that those who accept their fate, however terrible, can gain *pathei mathos* and thus be of value to others.[391]

Even when there is a happy ending for the tragic character[392], the paradigmatic problems raised in the play are generally not resolved. Euripides' *Ion*, for instance, follows the eponymous hero and ancestor of all Athenians as he investigates the myth of his birth. Apollo, the god of prophecy and purification, is central to the narrative in that he is presumed to have fathered Ion himself. Apollo appears to have behaved in many dishonourable ways (chiefly by seducing Ion's mother and by falsely prophesying that her new husband Xuthus was his actual father) that would seem at odds with his divine character. And yet the god remains silent throughout, sending the goddess Athena to defend his credibility to an increasingly sceptical Ion who remains unconvinced at the end of the play.[393] Ion concludes with irony, hesitation, and asks a highly irreverent question of the god himself:

> '*But, mother, does Apollo tell the truth*
> *Or is the oracle false?*'[394]

Hence, through Ion, Euripides is questioning the credibility of the oracular god at his temple in Delphi, the very same shrine where official delegations from cities all over Greece came to receive his advice, and thereby challenges what had previously been an authoritative and institutional source of truth in archaic Greek culture. It was a challenge that cut to the heart of the Athenians' shared nomological knowledge, particularly the older culture of *mythos*, and the play ends shortly thereafter, without any answer to it. The watching citizenry is left with dissatisfaction and doubt, first towards this question of truth: where is it to be found, if not at Delphi, in the temple of Apollo? One of the pillars underpinning

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[390] As will be recounted in chapter six, the young Pentheus is brought to his doom in Euripides' *Bacchae* through his rashness of action and abuse of his power against a disguised god.
[391] This is a simplification of the recurring theme of the man who is both cursed and blessed, polluted by crime and yet sacred; Oedipus and Philoktetes being prime examples. Cf. Winnington-Ingram R., pp.248-279 or Grene & Lattimore (Eds.), vol.II, p.402-405
[392] Particularly in Aeschylus' *Suppliant Women*, *Oresteia*, and Euripides *Alkestis, Ion, Andromache*
[393] Willetts R.F. in Grene & Lattimore (Eds.), 1992, vol.IV, pp.2-6.
[394] Euripides, *Ion*, ll.1537-1538

archaic Greek epistemology is left to vacillate with no obvious authority set up in its stead.[395] Second, towards the initial question of the play: what is Ion's origin? As Ion is the father of the Ionians and thus the mythical ancestor of all Athenians, this is fundamental to the identity of the watching citizens themselves. If he were the issue of a god, the Athenians could claim greater prestige and authority for themselves, not only as first among Ionians but as among all the Greeks; the converse would have degrading consequences.[396] By questioning the myth of their origins in the middle of the Peloponnesian wars[397], the playwright is not only problematising their sense of self but also the shared ethos that flows from it: their level of prestige relative to other peoples determines, in part at least, the ethics of their engagement with them. And so, the doubt at the end of the play is extended – in a highly provocative manner - to the *politeia* (polity)*:* the constitution, policy and actions of their community, the *polis* of Athens.

Such endings, where key values are challenged and left suspended in a state of indeterminacy, are characteristic of tragedy. The *theoria* offered by tragedy's artistic representation of the world is a form of relentless problematisation of the human condition in light of its many limitations. The playwrights critique their contemporary worldview, drawing on the rupture in nomological knowledge to highlight its inconsistencies, and call into question the predominant discourses of myth and enlightenment. Yet they do not set up another hegemony in their stead, instead leaving open the spaces of thought they have created by deconstructing the common-sense of their culture. These spaces, full of the creative tension that results from critique, in addition to the methods and ethos of problematisation, and the re-affirmation of a select few traditional values (*sophrosune* first among these) form the building blocks of a tentative and cautious base for the renewal of their shared nomological knowledge: 'a sceptical faith necessary for the renewal of ethical politics'.[398] It is not a complete or definitive form of sense-making that enables the construction of closed systems of thought, but a simplified representation of the world characterised by its self-avowed incompleteness – its lack. The reflexive result of the negative evaluation of the human condition projected by tragedy is that any new worldview constructed on this base must

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[395] Although, as noted in the previous chapter, Euripides does seem to be hinting that some measure of truth can be found through rational inquiry and debate in Athens – all of which are personified by Ion and his inquisitive method of straightforward questioning and answering throughout the play. Cf. Chap.I, B. ii. a.

[396] *Ion, in Hornblower S. & Spawforth A., p.763

[397] Euripides *Ion* is estimated to have been first produced between 420 and 410 B.C. Willetts R.F. in Grene & Lattimore (Eds.), 1992*,* Vol. IV, p.2

[398] Moretti in Lambropoulos V., op.cit., p.147

share its critical ethos and its onto-epistemology of limits; if humankind is bound in a tragic condition then its ideologies are limited and incapable of perfectly apprehending reality, always incomplete and subject to criticism. Hence, the tragic vision also calls the audience to develop a sense of awareness, that Vernant names 'tragic consciousness'[399]: an awareness of the limits of ways of knowing, being and acting in the light of the existence of ungovernable ambiguity and external necessity. As such, the tragic representation cannot underpin the universalist, totalising and monistic worldviews such as those arising out of enlightenment, but only undermine them; tragedy pluralises just as it offers a foundation for pluralisms. The next section will outline in three chapters how tragedy pluralises through its ethos of problematisation, and in the three loose divisions of nomological knowledge that characterised the end of Euripides' *Ion*: the question of truth, of how it applies to the politics of the self (questions of identity and values), and of how it applies to politics in the wider community (a question of justice - the "political good").

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[399] Vernant J.P. & Vidal-Naquet P., 2001, vol.I, p.23

Chapter IV

Tragedy and Truth

Outline:

A. The ambiguity of the human condition

    i.   External limits

    ii.   Hubris, tragic reversal and the limits of human projects

          a. Hubris and reversal

          b. Ethical *agon*

          c. Problematic nature of human action

B. Tragedy in relation to *mythos*

C. Tragedy in relation to enlightenment truth

    i.   Problematisation

    ii.   Renewal

'You do not know the limits of your strength.
You do not know what you do.
You do not know who you are.'[400]

This statement, made by the god Dionysos to Pentheus, the young ruler of Thebes and tragic figure of Euripides' *Bacchae*, is a good demonstration of the tragic logic of problematisation. Coming, as it were, at the end of the century, and from a playwright who was probably in a 'bitter self-imposed exile'[401] whilst he wrote the play, it can also be read as a symbolic rebuke to a hundred years of Athenian imperialism, modernisation and progress; in other words, a critique of the excesses of his city's enlightenment. The basic thrust of the play is that the city of Thebes fails to recognise Dionysos, son of a Theban, or his cult, incurring the wrath of the god. Pentheus, ruler of the city and described as an irreverent and anti-traditionalist innovator,[402] is led to his destruction by a disguised Dionysos, who is mistreated by the former as Pentheus thinks him to be an arrogant dionysian priest. The god is accusing Pentheus of lacking an awareness of the limits of his condition, namely, a lack of knowledge with regards to his actions, and his own identity and place in the greater scheme of things. In terms of the central ethical opposition of the *Bacchae*, Pentheus is accused of *amathia*, or ignorance, in the sense that he lacks *sophia*, or knowledge/wisdom, meaning principally at this point in the play that he lacks a specific type of self-knowledge: an understanding of his own limitations as well as the moderation that would ensue from it.[403] In an typical tragic reversal, Pentheus, the ruler who seeks to imprison Dionysos, is imprisoned by his own 'fixed understanding and single angles of vision'[404]: his overconfidence in his own worldly wisdom and rigid attachment to the hierarchies of his own narrow worldview render him blind to the situation at hand and deaf to the perspectives of others. This points back to the first problem of tragedy, on which of all of its other questions are built - the problem of the human condition – but also to one of the main categories of this problem, the question of knowledge. Indeed, in tragedy, this *sophia* as self-

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[400] Euripides *Bacchae*, ll.505-507
[401] Arrowsmith W. in Grene D. & Lattimore R., *Euripides,* Vol.IV, p.530. The *Bacchae* was first produced in Athens in 506 B.C., two years after Euripides death in exile in Macedonia.
[402] Euripides, *Bacchae*, ll.43-48 & ll.200-213
[403] Ibid., p.532
[404] Euben P., 1990, p. 27

awareness is presented as a form of true knowledge, however elusive its form (a large part of Euripides' *Bacchae* is dedicated to problematising its various meanings), and the path to justice and right conduct relies on it. These overtly ethical matters represent the main subject matter of tragedy, but as we have seen, they rely on a specific but implicit onto-epistemology of limits. In other words, they rely on the tragic assumptions of what the world is and the place of humankind within it, and how the latter comes to know the truth of it. This chapter begins with a focus on this very broad category of onto-epistemological assumptions, regrouped under the banner of "truth", by examining how the tragic ethos of problematisation exposes the limits of the values in this category of nomological knowledge. It then pauses briefly to review tragedy's relation to myth, before going on to explore in detail its relationship to enlightenment through the prism of Sophocles *Oedipus Tyrannos.*

A. The ambiguity of the human condition

How does tragedy expose the limits of the human condition, and thus also, of enlightenment? At a basic level, it sets out to uncover ambiguity both in the outside world (the object) and in the individual (the subject), as the will of the latter is frustrated by its own restricted sense-making capacity and a world that overwhelms it through external necessity in tragic events. This ontology of limits is soon played out at the epistemological level: if the both subject and object are beset by ambiguity, even at the margins, then they can never be fully known, let alone controlled. In the *Bacchae*, for instance, Dionysos is the unflinching external power and Pentheus the narrow-minded individual who seeks to impose his worldview on everything around him. Pentheus thereby brings about his own downfall as the god is fundamentally other, and cannot be explained or controlled in the parameters of his clever but all-too-human logic. Already, at the level of assumption, one can see the fundamental incompatibility of tragic onto-epistemology with monistic projects relying on the premises of absolute intelligibility and "one law pervading everything", be they ancient (Heraclitus' "All becoming One" through the unity of the *logos*[405]) or modern (D'Alembert's 'true system of the world'[406]) – we will return to this later. We have seen that exposure of ambiguity is principally set at the ethical level in the plays (how should one act

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[405] Cf. Chapter 1, B. i. b.
[406] D'Alembert claimed that 'The true system of the world has been recognised, developed, and perfected' in his *Elements of Philosophy*, a mid-XVIIIth century general portrait of contemporary thought. Cassirer E., p.3

when faced with a conjunction of implacable necessities and one's own limitations?). It is the resulting problematisation of human action that seeps upwards to reveal the implicit challenge to the higher level of onto-epistemological assumptions as the audience's nomological knowledge is challenged: if there is no clear way out of the tragic conundrum then what is lacking in our framework of reference for judgement? Nonetheless there are also more explicit statements in the plays that refer directly to ambiguity at the onto-epistemological level.

The most famous of these is without a doubt the so-called choral "Ode to Man" that appears early in Sophocles' *Antigone*.

> '*Many are the wonders, none*
> *is more wonderful than what is man* [...]
> *A cunning fellow is man. His contrivances*
> *make him master of beasts* [...]
> *So he brings the horse with the shaggy neck*
> *To bend underneath the yoke; [...]*
> *and speech and windswift thought*
> *and the tempers that go with city living*
> *he has taught himself* [...]
> *He has a way against everything* [...]
> *Only against death*
> *can he call on no means of escape* [...]
> *With some sort of cunning, inventive*
> *beyond all expectation,*
> *he reaches sometimes evil,*
> *and sometimes good.*
> *If he honours the laws of earth,*
> *and the justice of the gods he has confirmed by oath,*
> *High is his city; no city*
> *has he with whom dwells dishonour*
> *prompted by recklessness.*'[407]

If taken out of context, most of this ode would seem to be praising the power of self-made man to subjugate the world for his own purposes and control his

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[407] Sophocles, *Antigone*, ll.369-408

existence through knowledge. It is certainly an ode to enlightenment; however, in a play on words typical of the tragedians, its meaning is deliberately ambivalent (which is seemingly unknown to the chorus, whose words turn back on themselves), and prefaces the turn of events later in the play. The key to this is the double meaning of the word *deinos* deployed repeatedly in the opening line, here translated as "wonder" – it can mean both terrible, dangerous and awful as well as marvellously powerful, awesome, or clever.[408] The ambiguity of the concept is projected onto human thought, action, and potential. This duality continues throughout, with death the limit of human contrivance; the latter reaching both "evil" and "good" ends; the law-abiding faring better than the law breaker; and the usage of direct antonyms *pantaporos – aporos* (resourceful – resourceless) and *hypsipolis – apolis* (high in the city – without city). [409] However, as Versenyi outlines at length, once placed in the context of the play, these dualisms, as well as the simple ethical precepts that they enunciate, also take on the ambiguity of the awesome/awful fate of humankind.[410]

In *Antigone,* the first of Sophocles' Theban trilogy, (production estimated 442B.C. at the height of the Periclean golden age) the eponymous heroine seeks to fulfil her family duty and bury her brother who has died attacking the city, despite the decree of her ruler and uncle Creon, which forbids it. The clash of family (*genos*) and civic duties (*polis*), embodied by the two tragic figures as they oppose each other to the point of mutual destruction, brings to mind the debate between *nomos* (human convention) and *phusis* (natural, divine law) - Creon chooses to privilege the laws of the *polis* in spite of his own kinship with the deceased, and Antigone calls on the older traditions of chtonic justice and blood kinship.[411] Sophocles certainly does not present any simple, rational solution this conflict of incommensurables; the sophistic style of argumentation both for and against is as inconclusive as the dramatic finale, in which Antigone dies an outcast (albeit a more stereotypically heroic one as she never yields[412]) and Creon lives on without hope amid a ruin of his own creation (his son, promised to Antigone, and wife have also committed suicide as a result of his actions). Only adding to the complete ambiguity of the situation is the fact that Antigone, unlike Creon, seems to be acting in accordance with a "higher purpose" - the will of the gods - and her

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[408] *Deinos* in Liddell H.G. & Scott R.
[409] Versenyi, pp.210-211
[410] Ibid., pp.208-213
[411] Versenyi L., p.209 and Winnington-Ingram R., pp.119-120
[412] Winnington-Ingram R., p.148

suffering is by this same measure an injustice that she herself is fully aware of. [413]
The chorus explains her downfall as a result of the excessive and inflexible
manner of her claims, which they put down to the *ate* of her family curse, thus
partially exonerating her. However, Antigone does not admit to any excess despite
plenty of evidence to the contrary in her earlier behaviour, while Creon recognises
his and seeks to make amends, but too late to save anybody; and the consequences
for him are just as grave. At the end, there is no real clarity as to what the "truth"
or "good" of the matter is; if anything, Sophocles has rejected any clear cut
solutions to these ongoing ethical debates.[414]

Read in the light of this situation, the last few lines of the ode exude the ambiguity
and irony of the playwright: it would seem impossible to satisfy both the "laws of
the earth" and the "justice of the gods", and neither of the tragic protagonists,
who have upheld one or the other, could be said to have ended "high in the city".
Rather than demonstrating the all-conquering power and knowledge of
humankind, the chorus of the elders of Thebes are merely displaying their naivety
and misplaced faith in human potential. Indeed, the tendency of the Sophoclean
chorus to play the role of the average citizen desperately clinging on to simple,
traditional certainties, despite their disruption throughout the plays[415], is deployed
to great ironic effect by the playwright here: the chorus' own language is about to
turn back on itself later in the play, in a tragic reversal where only the benefit of
hindsight after suffering (*pathei mathos*) will reveal the truth of the radical ambiguity
of the human condition. In the tragic perspective, easy certainties, desirable as
they might be, are nought more than comforting illusions, and human existence is
a great deal more uncertain than the average person would care to accept. Holding
on with all their might to such certainties, the duties to *genos* and *polis* that anchor
Greek culture[416], has only led Antigone and Creon to mutual ruin. Through
knowledge and inventiveness, the chorus says, humankind has mastered the
savagery of both nature and his own nature, taming both so as to live in control of
the former and in civilised harmony with others. And yet the tragic reversal in
both the dramatic events of the play and its ambivalent language reveals that
humanity is always *deinos,* that its self-taught powers of speech and thought are just

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[413] Sophocles, *Antigone,* l.985 '*the injustice* [*ekdikos*] *they are meting out to me*'.
[414] Sophocles still has a somewhat sympathetic approach towards Antigone and the claims of the *genos*
relative to those of the *polis*; at least when compared to the earlier, lost, Aeschylean version of the
episode in which the destruction of the *genos* is necessary for the salvation of the city. Winnington-
Ingram R., p.120
[415] Versenyi L., p.210
[416] Both duties are tied up with *philia*, kinship love, and "the duty to do good to one's friends and harm
one's enemies" as we will see in the discussion of the ethical *agon* further on in this chapter.

as capable of turning back on themselves to destroy the city, and that justice, be it of divine or human origin, is an uncertain quantity that does not have a necessary causal link to good fortune.[417] Humankind is *both* all-resourceful and resourceless, as great crafts achieve feats beyond measure, and yet achieve nothing, as they still lead to death; and is both capable of civilisation, securing community through laws, and of savagery, excluding its own members (such as Antigone) from the community through the very same laws, and destroying others through the exercise of its collective might.[418] Ambiguity runs all the way down the line, as despite its efforts to understand and control existence through intelligence, an enlightened humanity fails to understand itself. In the terms of Rocco's commentary on the ode:

> '... even in our most complete knowledge, we remain imperfect; the world remains impenetrably obscure even to the most discerning gaze. Human knowledge is thus profound ignorance; our power is impotence; our greatest achievements are also our greatest failures. We are caught, Sophocles suggests, between the elusive promises of enlightenment and the surprising reversals of tragedy.'[419]

The ontology of humanity, that is, the human condition, is problematised, and those worldviews that are founded on a comfortable epistemology of certainties and faith in human potential are called into question in light of the tragic turn. The knowledge that gives one control over oneself as well as nature, that enables one to discern and communicate the "good" in order to live in harmony with others, is found lacking: it is fatally flawed in its insufficiency to fully apprehend a reality beset with ambiguity[420]. The full truth, in both the ontological and epistemological domains[421], is beyond human understanding; flowing from this, the truth of *ethos*, of the self as character (or identity) and as its expression in the principles for right

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[417] The latter point is a problem Antigone herself deplores at the end of the play: she has been a champion of religious and familial piety, and yet still she suffers a terrible fate. Winnington-Ingram R., pp. 148-149

[418] Versenyi L., p.212

[419] Rocco C., p.38

[420] An "ambiguity" which by definition cannot be rationally apprehended. Cf. Chapter I.

[421] The notion of "truth" used throughout this chapter is a very loose term denoting veracity at the level of assumption (that is, at the level of onto-epistemological and ethical assumptions, in other words, at the level of nomological knowledge). It remains imprecise here as it is merely a loose category, a "banner", under which to regroup these assumptions. Also, there is no explicit discussion of truth - as a modern metaphysical notion - in the tragedies and archaic or pre-socratic literature; the closest concept, *aletheia*, is related to sincerity in speech – one speaks or does not speak the truth. Campbell R., 1992, pp. 30-35. As such, it meant unconcealedness in speech and had little to do with modern notions of correspondence or coherence. Heidegger M., 1972, pp. 69-71

living (ethics), extended to the form and rules of the community in the concept of *politeia* (polity), is thus a contingent and ambiguous entity. The "ode to man" is unique in tragedy because of the specific and wide-ranging picture it paints of the human condition. However, it encapsulates a tragic representation of human limitations that is referred to explicitly in numerous other passages, many of which focus on the external limits of both knowledge and action. Some basic representative examples follow.

i-   External ambiguous limits

As noted previously, two forces in particular are presented as necessities outside of human control that constrain the possibilities for both knowledge and action: fate and the divine. The gods are variously portrayed: they are sometimes humanised and possessed by their own, often whimsical, purposes (such as Apollo in Euripides *Ion*); but in the ambiguous scheme of *mythos* they are also sometimes the chtonian[422] enforcers of fate or of the principles of *dike* (Athena perhaps fulfils this role at the end of Aeschylus' *Eumenides*), incapable of mercy. In the plays, the resulting relationship between divinity and humankind is eclectic – gods intervene for clear or unknown purposes and prayers, rites, and supplications may or may not elicit a response – and this is exploited by the tragedians in order to expose the ambiguities and uncertainties of both this relationship and of existence as a whole. In Euripides *Hecuba*, for instance, the plight of the eponymous *mater dolorosa* is deplored in this statement:

> *'What can we take on trust*
> *In this uncertain life? Happiness, greatness,*
> *Pride – nothing is secure, nothing keeps.*
> *The inconsistent gods make chaos of our lives*
> *Pitching us about with such savagery of change*
> *That we, out of our anguish and uncertainty,*
> *May turn to them.'[423]*

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[422] As defined in the previous chapter, the "chtonian" or "chtonic" aspect of a divinity tends to refer to its characteristic as an inflexible necessity attached to specific eternal principles, and is thus somewhat different from the anthropomorphic aspect of say, the Homeric gods, who take on the more unpredictable characteristics and motivations of human beings.

[423] Euripides, *Hecuba*, ll.956-962

There are many other similar statements throughout the plays concerning the gods. [424] In any case, much like Dionysus was for Pentheus in the *Bacchae*, the divine represents an enigmatic and relatively inflexible necessity in the face of which humanity is utterly helpless.[425] One of the gods' key characteristics in the tragedies is their indifference (*agnomosune*) towards human suffering, which Hyllus directly points out as he prepares to burn his poisoned father alive out of mercy in Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*:

> '*Raise him, my helpers. From you let me have*
> *much compassion* [*suggnomosune*] *now for what I do.*
> *You see the great indifferent thoughtlessness* [*agnomosune*] *of the gods...[426]*
> *they can look upon such suffering.*
> *No one can foresee what is to come*
> *But what is here now is pitiful for us*
> *And shameful for the gods...*
> *you have seen a terrible death*
> *and agonies, many and strange,*
> *and there is nothing here that is not Zeus'[427]*

The contrast in antonyms (*suggnomosune – agnomosune*) is clearly made, and highlights an oft-made distinction between the gods and humankind - only the latter seems to be considered capable of compassion. Even in plays of the second half of the fifth century B.C., where doubts about the gods' very existence began to be more frequently expressed, the alternative of a universe ruled by 'random careless chance and change'[428] results in an equal if not greater indifference of the world to the lot of humankind. Neither of these alternatives envisages an anthropocentric universe, nor are they encouraging with respect to progress in human endeavour. Much if not more of the same is said of fate, to which no supplication can be addressed: one's *moira*, or portion of destiny, is uncertain but cannot be appealed ('*For what is destined/For us, men mortal, there is no escape*'[429]).[430]

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[424] As discussed in the first chapter regarding the "realism" of the Euripidean plays in particular. For examples see Jagu A. pp.39-64 & Romilly J., pp. 134-ff.

[425] Arrowsmith in Grene D. & Lattimore R., pp.540-541

[426] This line alone taken from the translation in Nussbaum M., *xxxiv*

[427] Euripides, *Women of Trachis*, ll.1264-ff.

[428] '*Or do we, holding that the gods exist, / Deceive ourselves with unsubstantial dreams / And lies, while random careless chance and change / Alone control the world?*' Euripides *Hecuba*, ll.489-492

[429] Sophocles, *Antigone,* ll.1411-1412

[430] There is of course, an enlightenment transition operating in the 5th century B.C. with regards to divinity through which the gods, particularly of the Olympian category, are being purged of their human whims and attributed with purer and more abstract principles more consistent with the juridico-

One of the great limits that *krataie ananke*, "imperious fate", imposes on humanity, is the utter unknowability of the future:

> *'What men have seen they know;*
> *But what shall come hereafter*
> *No man before the event can see,*
> *Nor what end waits for him'*[431]

This includes the twists of fate, the reversals, that characterise the tragic vision of existence and upset human projects. As the latter rely on predictable chains of causality, they are always prey to the often disruptive power of fate (*'What all awaited, fails of achievement'*[432]), which is impervious to inquiry, even to the new enlightened methods of research.

> *'Fortune is dark; she moves, but we cannot see the way*
> *nor can we pin her down by science and study her'*[433]

As is natural for *mythos,* with its ambiguous distinction between human and divine spheres of existence, there is a whole complex of personified agents of fate who bring it about by intervening supernaturally in everyday life. Of particular importance is the *daimon* (literally "allotter"), the general personification of unexpected manifestations of divine powers (including the Olympian gods), often referring to a specific "personal guardian and agent of fate" that is said to accompany one throughout life and bring about one's *moira,* be it good or bad (the greek concept for a fortunate person – or happiness - *eudaimonia,* comes from Hesiod, and simply means "with a good daimon").[434] Hence when Oedipus discovers the perverted nature of his own identity in *Oedipus Tyrannos,* he can say:

> *Would not a man be right to judge of me that these things come from a cruel daimon?*[435]

political discourse of *dike* (cf. Chapter 1). Even the notion of fate is challenged by the notion of randomness and chance (cf. Euripides *Hecuba*, ll.486-493). If anything, this is making the gods more predictable, as they operate according to absolute principles but also more inflexible; whilst fate, already unknowable, is losing its links to the laws of justice.

[431] Sophocles, *Ajax*, ll.1417-1421
[432] Euripides, *Andromache*, l.1286
[433] Euripides, *Alcestis*, l.786
[434] *daimon,* Hornblower S. & Spawforth A., p.426
[435] Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannos*, l.828, as translated in Winnington-Ingram R., p.174

Such statements are common currency in the tragedies and provide the onto-epistemological foundations of a worldview at odds with the reliable and universal systematicity required by enlightenment projects. The tragedians assert that there are features of the world that are utterly ambiguous and thus outside our capacity to fully understand, explain and control, and correspondingly that the human condition is limited and *deinos*: both mighty and impotent, awesome and terrible. This is the realm that the tragic represents: the place of failure of human capability, the features of reality that forever escape our epistemic grasp, 'what goes beyond, but does not and cannot transcend'.[436] The tragedies offer an onto-epistemological narrative that is marked by its constitutive lack. The scope for human action in a world governed by indifferent and unpredictable forces is certainly not limitless, but nor is it totally hopeless: the gods can still be appealed to, the twists and turns of fate bring good with bad, and, as will be seen later in this chapter, there is a nobility and greatness in those actions that are resolute in spite of everything. However, this tragic ontology actively undermines the more radical promises of enlightenment, which are reliant on an ontology of certainty: in its tragic representation, the universe is not exclusively governed by one rational system of "clockwork" and deterministic laws (as with the presocratics in ancient Greece, the deists in the eighteenth century, or the logical positivists of the twentieth), but often beset with irrationalisable ambiguity. As such, in the tragic perspective, the enlightenment's scheme whereby a single monistic system apprehends a fully intelligible world[437] is a dangerous utopia. Laszlo Versenyi goes so far as to call this type of scheme 'untragic': it is 'a place where being and seeming completely coincide and human knowledge is fully adequate to reality, a place that is totally safe for man to dwell in'.[438] Such an ontology is clearly at odds with the vision of a fragile, uncertain human existence presented in the tragedies.

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[436] Rosenstein in Lambropoulos V., 2006, p.10

[437] Alexander Pope's sonnet captures this simple scheme quite well: 'Nature and Nature's law lay hid in the Night / God said, "Let Newton be" and all was light.' Pope A., in Reill P. & Wilson E. (eds.), 2004, p.x

[438] Versenyi L., p.206

ii – Hubris, tragic reversal and the limits of human projects

a - Hubris and reversal

Indeed, the tragic vision actively undermines human action: if the individual can never fully know the world, they can never have total control over the future consequences of their actions. A tragic turn of events is always a possible outcome in a chain of causality beset with ambiguity, and the likelihood of a reversal increases wherever someone inflexibly adheres to a monistic worldview, as this is itself a form of universal claim that is incompatible with human limits: it relies on the correspondence of mind and reality, and the very systematicity and certainty that is precluded by the tragic representation. As has already been pointed out, in the tragedies, this reckless and uncompromising disposition (*ate*) is a mistake (*hamartia*) that oversteps the boundaries of the human condition: the general term used here for this violation of the tragic understanding of the cosmic and social order is hubris. A tragic reversal is the consequence of hubris, in this wide (and modern[439]) sense of the term: the latter occurs whenever someone acts in a way that oversteps human limits, by acting excessively without proper regard for the consequences or making an absolute claim and thereby demonstrating an overconfidence in their ability to understand the world and control the future course of events. As H.D.F. Kitto defines it, it is 'the presumptuousness of thinking that you can do anything, that there are no limits'.[440] It is a "category mistake" that occurs when people think or act as if they were other than human, be it as beast or savage (beneath their status) or as god (above their status),[441] and whether they are motivated by passion or pride.[442]

In the plays, various types of hubris are encountered along these lines. The general notion of arrogant overreach is captured by the term *hyper moiran* (beyond one's fate), and also the Greek term *hubris* itself, for instance in Aeschylus' *Persians*:

> '...*mortal man should not vaunt himself excessively.*
> *For presumptuous pride [hubris], when it has matured,*

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[439] As noted previously, the modern notion of hubris used here has been developed through the study and interpretation of tragedy for the very purpose of explaining the causes of tragedy in the tragic narratives.
[440] Kitto H.D.F., p.44
[441] Cf. Segal C., 1986, pp.27-30
[442] *hubris in Liddell H. G. & Scott R., op.cit.

bears as its fruit a crop of calamity...'[443]

The Persian emperor is here describing his own "sins of pride": first, the sacrilegious outrage committed by his armies as they destroyed the temples and statues of the Greek gods in their conquest; and second, his building of a bridge over the Hellespont, interpreted by the Greeks as a clear overreach of his human status which impinged on the authority of Poseidon, god of the sea.[444] The play makes it clear that the Persians are rewarded for this hubris with military defeat. Any action that injures, usurps or impinges on divine authority is one particular type of action beyond man's station and worthy of *nemesis*, the retribution that returns the cosmos to equilibrium.

Another type of hubris is wanton violence toward others, in word or in deed[445]: this 'intentionally dishonouring and shameful behaviour'[446] can be considered to be an abuse of power (and often comes about because of a misguided sense of superiority) that oversteps one's status, or fails to live up to that status. The murder of Agamemnon by Clytemnestra, who overreaches her position as wife, woman, and subject, is just one of many examples of this in the tragedies. The latter, the incest of Oedipus, or the murderous madness of Ajax, are all instances of hubris as savagery or anarchy that are beneath the status of the citizen; this is *theriodes bios*, the beast-like life, or *anomia*, the state of lawlessness, and both are unfit for civilised humankind.[447] This type of hubris, where one does not live up to one's status, is often the result of people giving themselves over to their appetites, whether driven by emotions or some great passion (Ajax), or by the rational calculations of interest and the related desire for control and domination (Agamemnon and Odysseus in Euripides' *Hecuba*).

Here one can see the opposition between hubris and *dike*: one breaches the cosmic order, the other upholds it.[448] The mythic narratives used by the tragedies are full of these excesses of prideful or passionate insolence and violence. However, as previously mentioned, the emphasis of the tragedians, as civic-minded "poet-sages", is not on a straightforward morality tale of crime and punishment, but on the opportunities presented by the latter to create problematic

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[443] Aeschylus *Persians,* ll.820-823; cf. the "high thoughts" of Sophocles *Ajax*, ll.758-761
[444] Ibid., ll.808-814 & 745-750
[445] *hubris* in Liddell H. G. & Scott R.
[446] Hornblower S. and Spawforth A. (eds.), pp.732-733
[447] Segal C., 1991, p.35
[448] Goldhill S., 1986, p. 34

ethical situations through which nomological knowledge – the framework of reference for judgement – can itself be called into question, and a way forward sketched for the values required by the new context of the city. Hence the notion of hubris that is emphasised as the cause of tragedy is one of excess, of "injustice" as a violation of the cosmic order and its expression in the social customs rather than as a violation of an absolute code of right and wrong (a morality)[449]: on the spectrum from moral to aesthetic value, hubris is a notion with aesthetic leanings as a result of its attachment to the ontology of human limitations.[450] Evaluations of the rightness of an action have little to do with its hubristic, and thus tragic, nature; as has already been noted, many actions with "right" intentions have tragic consequences. The notion of hubris as the breach of the human condition is a relative one, as the definition of these limits is embedded in the local culture as an ethos and not a code of laws: it crosses limits that are recognised with hindsight by the community but are not clearly defined - 'limits that nobody can point to in a tangible way'.[451] As such it is a pluralist ethical value, closer to an aesthetic or stylistic of life than an absolute moral framework. The opposition that exists between hubris and *sophrosune* (moderation) is a helpful dichotomy in this regard, as the latter is itself also more of an aesthetic value and less bound by modern connotations than "justice". *Sophrosune* is a state of mental and emotional balance contributing to the equilibrium of the social and cosmic order; hubris, as the "bold recklessness" (*hypertolmon andros phronema*) that drives beyond proper boundaries and place[452], is very much its antithesis. *Sophrosune* is in itself the avoidance of hubris, not only in the negative sense of knowing one's limitations, but also in the active sense of managing one's life through prudence and self-control[453]: it is the self-knowledge required by the Delphic saying "*gnothi seauton*" (know yourself). As such, *sophrosune* cultivates an awareness of limits and attempts to keep in check the appetites that can lead to excess and hubris. In the tragedies, it is upheld time and again for this very reason, and despite the problematisation of some of its marginal uses (for instance, its authoritarian usage, when nobles tell commoners or husbands tell wives that moderation requires them to obey without question

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[449] Cf. Chapter I, A.ii.

[450] The classification of morality, ethics, and aesthetics here draws on Nelson's polynomic theory of value: all three are types of schemes by which the "good" is determined. In very rough terms, an aesthetics determines what is good or beautiful in and for itself (good-in-itself) and so is pluralistic, an ("ideal") ethics is a particular form of aesthetics that determines this good relative to ends and the purposes of persons (good-for-us), and a morality is particular type of ethics that requires an absolute and universally systematisable framework to evaluate means (as well as ends) in terms of "right" or "wrong". Cf. Nelson L., throughout.

[451] Lambropoulos V., 2008, p.23

[452] Euben P., 1990, p. 68

[453] Rademaker A., pp. 99-188

lest they commit hubris[454]), *sophrosune* is the only value consistently promoted as a way to mitigate the possibility of tragedy. By definition, the effort of self-control to remain within the limits of one's condition lessens the likelihood of hubris.

The flipside of this is that the cause of the tragic reversal is focused around the simple notion of excess as a breach of human limitations. However, there is one aspect of hubristic excess that the tragedians seek to highlight as a response to the contemporary needs of the citizenry, and relevant to the new developments of the enlightenment: inflexibility, particularly of the individual relative to the collective, and the presumptuous claims that underpin it. The playwrights often retell the myths in a way that places a strong emphasis on this type of tragic mistake: in the *Oresteia*, inflexible claims to justice as retribution by most of the main characters are shown to be the cause of the tragic cycle of revenge murders; in the *Bacchae*, Pentheus' intransigence towards Dionysos leads him to destruction. Sophocles' play *Ajax* is perhaps the starkest example of the tragic hero contributing to his own downfall in such a way: Ajax reifies the heroic code of honour, and the dualism of *philoi* (doing good to your friends) and *echthroi* (harming your enemies) in particular, taking the latter to such extreme lengths that when slighted by his own allies (the Greek leaders give Achilles' armour to Odysseus instead of him, in spite of his greater contribution to their victory) he pursues revenge by any means (a surprise night attack on said allies with intent to torture and kill); and when denied the latter by gods that he has shown repeated disdain for (Athena creates an illusion to trick him into slaughtering animals instead), prefers to commit suicide by falling on his sword rather than living on in a world that does not conform to his exacting expectations (and would require compromise with his enemies and a loosening of his values). Sophocles has purposefully chosen a version of the myth in which Ajax is tainted[455], and pushes the inflexibility of Ajax's commitment to the heroic code far beyond the Homeric account. In this way, he emphasises the hubris of Ajax's indifference and cruelty toward others (including his own child) and the sheer lack of humanity implied by it.[456] Any strictly uncompromising position that does not make any allowance for other perspectives is the hubris of inflexibility: it is an inhuman stance that ignores the limits of the human condition - particularly, the ability of any one individual to grasp the truth with full certainty - and it leads to tragedy.

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[454] For example in Sophocles *Ajax*, cf. Rademaker A., pp.123-125 (noble scolding a commoner) or in Euripides *Medea* (husband commanding wife) ll.911-913 & Rademaker A., pp.182-184
[455] By contrast, the lyric poet Pindar's version has Ajax as a blameless hero struck down by the gods. Moore J., in Grene D. & Lattimore R., Vol.2, p.215
[456] Winnington-Ingram R., pp.11-53

This form of hubris represents a direct confrontation of enlightenment projects by the tragic representation. In terms of Sophocles' play, one could say that Ajax has built up his own monistic ideology around himself, and upholds it over and above all else, living and dying as if he were "the monad" and not a member of a wider community and world. Ajax displays what is elsewhere referred to as *monos phronein*[457]: "being wise alone" or relying exclusively on one's own judgement.[458] The absolute nature of his theoretical and ethical system requires him to cut himself off from fellow-feeling (*suggnomosune*) and from other people altogether: this individualism, the private life of the *idiotes*, is all that is left to him and culminates in his suicide in isolation.[459] The rational implication of his strict code of *philoi-echthroi* is that once friends betray their status and become enemies they must be pursued as such until either self-destruction or their annihilation. Ajax wants no part of a mutable and pluralist world in which alliances change and principles are compromised.[460] In the tragic perspective, this is a clear excess: Ajax's worldview is more of a god-like claim in its absoluteness, rejecting dependence on anything (even the gods[461]) other than his own self; it completely lacks in the humility or flexibility of one who acknowledges the limits and contingency of his own knowledge and power. In parallel with this, the monism of enlightenment follows a similar hubristic pattern: the assertion of the power of the individual to emancipate him or herself ("*sapere aude*!") by relentlessly criticising all else through the lens of its one system of thinking. The teleology of progress masks a lack of awareness of limits and a lack of willingness to compromise (for instance towards opinions emanating from "irrational" traditions) that also results in an individualistic excess.

The case of Solon the lawgiver and his Athenian constitution is an interesting ancient example from the juridico-political tradition of the *logos* that can be read as a parable to this effect. Solon declared the latter "fitting straight judgement" for "the base and the noble" alike, the just balance between the interests of the wealthy landowners and the indebted masses – a solution that Solon seemed to consider both disinterested and ideal, and that was fixed for a century. In the Aristotelian account, rather than stay and negotiate or debate with the many

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[457] The words of Haemon to Creon in Sophocles *Antigone,* ll.707-709
[458] Cornelius Castoriadis in Curtis D., p.286
[459] Ibid., p.60
[460] Ibid., pp.54-55
[461] Ajax's arrogance towards the gods is related by his words: 'Father, with God's help even a worthless man / could triumph. I propose, without that help, / To win my prize of fame.' Sophocles, *Ajax,* ll.767-769

objectors (who he thought should confine themselves to obeying his laws), Solon preferred to absent himself from the city for a decade – much like his famous Spartan counterpart Lycurgus, who preferred death rather than the modification of his constitution.[462] In the intervening period, the factionalisms which the constitution was meant to resolve intensified, as conflict crystallised around the unchangeable laws in the absence of their author; eventually, the intensifying factionalism made it possible for the installation of the tyranny of Pisistratus.[463] In a reversal that brings to mind modern and liberal constitutional projects, the laws that Solon considered a rational, balanced, and complete solution to the problems of Athens, had instead acted as a focus point for grievances that could no longer be negotiated and thus only intensified. Solon had sought to bring a greater measure of political power to the many through the exercise of his unique influence and intellectual prowess to devise a balanced constitution (rejecting greater power for himself[464]), but the unintended result was the concentration of power in the hands of one man. In their plays, the tragedians aim to highlight such instances of the irony and contingency of human action and moral intention.[465] In the tragic perspective, any human project that fails to acknowledge the limits of the human condition is a form of hubris, and the inflexibility that results from this lack of awareness opens the way for a tragic reversal: the lack of knowledge that is built in to the project's plan result in unforeseen consequences. In the case of the enlightenment, this lack is compounded by the subject's mistaken assumption of the possibility of total knowledge and power over the world, as we will see in the case of Oedipus explored in the next section. Any monistic project makes this claim by definition, and enlightenment projects are no exception, by virtue of their universalist assertion of the exclusive power of a rational system to provide a true explanation of reality. Already at the level of assumption, the absoluteness of their claims are generally explicit, for instance in a founding document of the liberal political project, the United States' declaration of independence, where it is simply asserted: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident...'. In the tragic perspective, any such transcendent epistemological claims and the foundationalism inherent in them are hubristic by nature, as in their universalism, they deny ambiguity, exclude alternatives and fail to acknowledge the possibility of their own insufficiencies.

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[462] Lycurgus was in Greek myth the author of the Spartan constitution, who persuaded his fellows to promise not to change it until he returned from the Oracle at Delphi. When the latter revealed to him that his constitution was good, Lycurgus killed himself and had his ashes scattered so that none could claim his return and change the constitution; it was said that the Spartan constitution remained unchanged for 500 years. Thompson D., p. 251

[463] Aristotle, transl. Rhodes P.J., *The Athenian Constitution,* 1984, sections 10 -14, pp. 50-54

[464] Ibid., p.53

[465] Euben P., 1990, p.85

b - Ethical agon

This hubristic inflexibility is expressed by another tragic situation that the tragedians highlight in their plays, and which also undercuts enlightenment projects: the ethical *agon* or conflict of the goods. For Lazslo Versenyi, Aeschylus was the first in ancient Hellenic thought to pose the problem of the existence of incommensurable values within the same ethical framework[466], when in the concluding play of the *Oresteia*, he opposed '*dike* with *dike*'[467] - the concept of justice as retribution to that of justice as a deliberative civic process. The other tragedians followed suit, often deploying this tactic as a means of exposing the problematic nature of the ethical values at hand, as well as of human action in general. Sophocles' *Antigone* is a play in which an ethical *agon* take centre stage. As we have already seen, the respective figures of Antigone and Creon embody the related oppositions between firstly, the private or individual commitments and public duties; and secondly, natural or divine law (*phusis* or *thesmos)* and human conventions (*nomos*). Both fight their corners with excessive zeal until the destructive dénouement. Creon's determination to punish Antigone for the crime of burying an enemy leader (her brother), in spite of the recalcitrance of his advisers in the city, is paralleled by Antigone's rejection of her sister Ismene's compassionate offer to die alongside her (as Ismene had refused to join her in the burial of their brother): both cases explore the theme of justice as retaliation, and more specifically the ambiguity of the *philoi/echthroi* (kinship love/hate) division in a culture where the priority of kinship affiliations is shifting along the spectrum from *oikos* (family, household) and *genos* (blood links) to *polis*.[468] The dictum of doing good to one's friends and harming one's enemies, ubiquitous in ancient Greek culture[469], becomes problematic indeed in the context of sometimes incommensurable loyalties. In all of these conflicts, Antigone and Creon reveal themselves to be narrow-minded and inflexible to the point of tragedy - as in Creon's accusation of Antigone, unwittingly self-incriminatory: '*I would have you know the most fanatic spirits fall most of all.*'[470] Haemon points out their form of hubris when asking Creon not to be '*monos phronein*'.[471] It is evident that without such

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[466] Versenyi L., pp.206-207
[467] 'Warstrength will collide with warstrength, right [*dike*] with right'. Aeschylus, *Libation Bearers,* l.461
[468] Winnington-Ingram R., pp.130-134
[469] Ibid., p.312
[470] Sophocles, *Antigone*, l.518
[471] Ibid., ll.707-709

unyielding stances, compromises could be reached, and conflicts of value dampened. And so it is still the hubris of inflexibility, the rigid conviction of the righteousness of one's claim, that underpins the tragic nature of the "catch-22" situation of the ethical *agon*, in which accepted values are shown to conflict.

The result of an *agon* of values is not only the problematisation of the latter but also of the wider framework of nomological knowledge: as in *Antigone*, the clash at surface level between loyalties to *oikos* and *polis* reveal the deeper problems of the simplistic doctrine of *philoi/echthroi,* of the nature of *dike* (does it abide by *nomos* or by *phusis*?), and of the rupture between archaic mythical discourse and the rational discourse of the law courts and the assemblies. The many contested dualisms of the play regroup in a nutshell the majority of the themes around which these ethical dilemmas rage throughout the corpus of tragedy. Some other clear examples of ethical agon involving clashes of two different values are the clash of *nomos* and *thesmos* in Aeschylus' *Suppliant Women* trilogy[472] and *Prometheus Bound*[473]; and Sophocles' *Philoctetes,* in which the parameters of individual justice for one forced into exile by his own kind clashes with his communal duty to re-join and win the Trojan war for "king and country". In the tragic corpus, the most prevalent form of ethical *agon* results from accepted but conflicting interpretations of just a single value - such as with the aforementioned concepts of *dike* in the *Oresteia, ananke* in Euripides' *Hecuba* and *sophia* in his *Bacchae.* This challenges the very fabric of Greek ethics, their shared nomological knowledge, and also the laws that govern these values in the *polis.* Furthermore, the assertion of the existence of incommensurable but equally valid conceptions of the good is a pluralist stance (it asserts a value-pluralism) that also undermines monistic ethical schemes such as that of enlightenment liberalism: it devalues the liberal claims as to superiority of their political project; it marks the limits of rational choice; and the doctrine of fundamental rights (a rights-based political morality) fails when the liberties it defends are shown to be conflicting, as the rationalist construction of a hierarchy of rights required to settle the matter always presupposes a political debate (and

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[472] Two of the three plays out of this trilogy are lost, but according to Seth Bernadete, the events contained within the two missing plays play on the opposition of *nomos / thesmos* throughout: the evolving situation requires an alternation of appeals to either the law of the people over divine law or vv. in order to secure the freedom of all the Danaids (the suppliant women), in an escalating cycle of contradiction that requires a *deus ex machina* for a final resolution. Bernadete S. in Grene D. & Lattimore R., vol.1, pp.174-176

[473] The authorship of this play has been questioned but not decisively. In any case, it includes a clash between the titan Prometheus and Zeus who is presented as a tyrant behaving and making laws according to his own whims (*nomos*). Unlike the recently installed Olympian god, the titan stands for absolute and pre-existing standards of justice (as in the term *thesmos*). Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound,* e.g. ll.148-151

radical, contingent choices) about conceptions of the good (however hard it may try to conceal it).[474] The assertion of value-pluralism also leads to the position that humankind has a natural tendency for conflict, as a result of situations in which ethical positions have no rational resolution; this clashes with the teleological notion of progress in social evolution that exists in enlightenment and liberal doctrines such as Kant's notion of perpetual peace, wherein social harmony through the rule of (rationally-determined) law is said to be the natural outcome of human history (and antagonism is merely a device of nature to set humankind on the path toward this outcome).[475]

c - Problematic nature of human action

Ti draso? The ethical *agon* is but one of the many tragic situations posing the question in the starkest of terms. In light of human limitations and an ambiguous world, all projects are in danger of lapsing into hubristic excess and encountering a tragic reversal: tragedy asserts the problematic nature of all action. 'Who acts [*drasanti*], shall endure [*pathein*]'[476]. As Peter Euben points out, this famous statement in the second play of the *Oresteia* colours the meaning of the question above, as *pathein* can be read in this context to mean "endure suffering", but also "live on in memory". Hence when Orestes asks "*ti draso?*" later in the play, it can be read to mean: "How shall/should I act?"; "How can I bear the suffering that awaits me?"; but also, "How will I be remembered for the deed I am about to commit?"[477] Human action, like its authors, is *deinos*: it can bring suffering, but also greatness. In the tragedies, the latter always involves at the very least a heavy risk of the former - the playwrights' emphasis when addressing the potential of action is generally pessimistic. Indeed, when Orestes hesitates to murder his mother and be shamed by the deed, and asks

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[474] Gray J., 1995, pp.69-74 summarises both Joseph Raz and Isaiah Berlin's arguments to this effect. In particular, they dismiss the Kantian separation of "rights" and "goods" (rights and liberties being deontic principles that regulate the hierarchy of goods, but are independent of them) as a convenient fallacy – as rights base themselves on the protection of human interests, any debate about rights relies on assumptions about human interests and some assumptions about human wellbeing and thus about "goods". They also reject Rawls' "contouring" of rights to avoid their conflict; for Berlin in particular, it merely amounts to a legal fiction that conceals the inevitable conflicts between them in order to protect the illusion of objective rational choices, when these only ever amount to radical (and ideologically based) choices.

[475] Cf. Kant I., "Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View" (1784), in Kant I., 1963. E.g. 'Eighth Thesis: The history of mankind can be seen, in the large, as the realization of Nature's secret plan to bring forth a perfectly constituted state as the only condition in which the capacities of mankind can be fully developed, and also bring forth that external relation among states which is perfectly adequate to this end.'

[476] Aeschylus, *Libation Bearls,* l.313

[477] Euben P., 1990, p.85, note 49.

his friend what to do, he is reminded that to   otherwise would be to offend the gods that witnessed his sworn oath and prophesied the deed. Agamemnon, in the first play of the trilogy, asks an analogous question to Orestes' one (when faced with the choice between his daughter's life or the sailing of his fleet to Troy): '*ti tonde aneu kakon?*'[478] Which of these choices goes now without disaster? As in most tragedies (and particularly those of Aeschylus), the heroes are driven by necessity and not offered much in the way of painless alternatives, leaving little room for optimism.[479] The tragic potential of action is omnipresent. As Versenyi puts it:

> 'This is what makes *dran [action]* tragic: the agent's consciousness of the antinomical nature of all action, his realization of man's *aporia* in the face of open alternatives and *amechania* [helplessness] in the midst of action'

The necessity of action and the ambiguous nature of the alternatives at hand, in light of the possibility of a tragic reversal that confounds one's intentions, create the tragic moment. And so the question "what am I to do?" resonates with anguish as a result of the realisation of the potential for harm and injustice regardless of the option taken, rather than with the apprehension of one faced with freedom of choice (in part because the spectators generally know the predetermined outcome of the mythical storylines, and in part because the heroes are driven by some necessity that makes their course of action inevitable). The anguish of the heroes driven by necessity and faced with the uncertainty as to the ultimate meaning and consequences of their actions makes up a large part of the pathos of tragic drama. Hence the plays tend to dwell on the angst leading up the tragic event: noteworthy examples include the long hesitation of Agamemnon prior to entering the palace[480], the slow ritualistic buildup to Eteocles' decision to fight his brother[481], or Medea's dithering as she makes the decision to murder her children[482].This sense of angst is an emotional component of the notion of "tragic consciousness": the awareness of the problematic nature of action based on the appreciation of human limits in an ambiguous world. The lack of control that one has over future repercussions of actions, in part because of unknown fate and the intervention of powerful

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[478] Aeschylus, *Agamemnon,* l.211
[479] As mentioned at the end of Chapter I, from Aeschylus to Euripides, there is a gradual shift away from the influence of great external forces trapping the heroes in tragic situations, but this is still a key element in most tragedies.
[480] Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*
[481] Aeschylus, *Seven against Thebes*
[482] Euripides, *Medea.*

external variables (be it others, the great weight of history and culture, the gods or other unforeseen pressures), means that a decision can become a trap that, like Orestes' matricide, will later ensnare its author. Human autonomy is never total; in the tragic perspective, to act is, as Vernant puts it, to make 'some sort of wager, on the future, on destiny and oneself'.[483] "Who acts, shall endure": the gamble always takes on the possibility of suffering. Or as Pelasgos puts it in   :

> *'To act or not to act, and tempt fate'*[484]

Who knows what one's *moira*, one's portion of destiny, holds in store? There is no way out of this equation: even prophecies are cryptic enigmas, the full meaning of which is only unveiled with the benefit of hindsight. In the enlightenment scenario, the omnipotence of rational understanding makes for a clear causal chain: uncertainty is axiomatically deprived of the idea of irresolvable ambiguity and reduced to the concept of risk. This "risk" is a "known unknown", it is calculable and manageable, it is a gamble on the future of which the odds can be determined, analysed and mitigated, bought and sold.[485] Not so in the tragic representation of the world, where the onto-epistemology of the limited human facing an oft-ambiguous world perceives situations where the "unknowables" – created by paradoxes, the complexity of excessive variables, the enigmatic nature of fate and divine will, and so forth - preclude full knowledge, control and rational choice. Acceptance of the possibility of reversal and suffering is a requirement of action and life. The aforementioned example of Philoctetes is instructive in this regard. Philoctetes, wounded by divine will with an ever-painful gangrenous foot as a result of his loyalty to a friend (Heracles), has been deceitfully marooned on a desert island by his fellow Greeks as they set out on the Trojan expedition. Now that his divine bow is prophesied to win the war, they seek to convince him to return with them; somewhat understandably, he refuses, wishing only to return home, as:

> *It is not the sting of wrongs past,*
> *but what I must look for in wrongs to come.*

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[483] Vernant J.P. & Vidal-Naquet P., 2001, vol.I, p.37, my translation.

[484] Aeschylus, *Suppliants,* ll.379-380, Vernant's translation (in Vernant J.P., & Vidal-Naquet P., 2001, vol. I, p.37)

[485] Best J., 2008, pp. 355-374

For David Grene, this refusal commands the sympathy of the audience, but is also a 'great tragic human truth'[486]: it is irreconcilable with the necessity of accepting the possibility of future "wrongs" if Philoctetes wishes to go on living. Philoctetes will not yield to the request of his fellow Greeks, despite the gods' prophesied will and the greater cause at stake for his people; this is his hubris. Finally, a demi-god appears to petition him and so end the play; it is Heracles, who, much like his former ally, suffered greatly of an injury and was healed (as Philoctetes is about to be), only to suffer all the more until death. He calls Philoctetes to endure the same:

> *All this must be your suffering too,*
> *the winning of a life to an end in glory,*
> *out of this suffering.*[487]

The tragic message is that living requires one to dare to act and take on the risk of suffering; and also that this is what makes for greatness: a willingness to act exceptionally and to endure equally great suffering, should it ensue, even if it seems unjust.[488] This tragic revision of the notion of "greatness" (*arete* or *megas*) does not necessarily involve any moral approval; indeed, it is often a characteristic of the hubristic heroes who go to their doom as a result of an inflexibility that is sometimes shameful (both Creon and Antigone in *Antigone,* for instance), and always incompatible with their human status.[489] The traditional archaic notion of heroic greatness from *mythos* is portrayed as a flawed one by the tragedians in the context of their city, in part because the codes of *aidos* and *philia* that underpin it are shown to be somewhat incompatible with their contemporary life (as we shall see in Chapter V). Nonetheless, the playwrights revalorise another aspect of mythical "greatness" in their plays: the 'pyrrhic defiance of a reality fraught with suffering and injustice that is indifferent to humankind'.[490] Once one comes to the realisation of the tragic nature of both one's self and the world – human limits in the face of ambiguity, and the fictitious and contingent nature of those reassuring representations of reality that pretend otherwise – to act in full knowledge of the wager is "heroic". In a Nietzschean analogy, it is to 'see the abyss, but with

[486] Grene D. in Grene D. & Lattimore R.(eds.), vol. II, p.404
[487] Sophocles *Philoctetes,* ll.1422-1424
[488] Euben P., 1990, p.85
[489] Winnington-Ingram R., p.10 & p.317-ff.
[490] Winnington-Ingram R., p.320

an eagle's eyes' and yet 'grasp it with the eagle's claws'[491] – it is to act radically, in spite of an awareness of both the potential for suffering and of the contingency of all human representations (affirming life and will in the face of meaninglessness). Philoctetes' final acceptance of Heracles' demands, much like Cassandra's acceptance of her fate in Sophocles' *Agamemnon*, involves a measure of this tragic greatness: he is called upon to knowingly take on more suffering on behalf of those who have betrayed him, despite the meaninglessness their cause now carries for him; further, he accepts to relinquish the meaning that this sense of injustice had provided for his life of suffering,[492] seemingly accepting the appeals that Heracles makes to some greater cause. [493] Necessities such as this, and the conflict of values that they sometimes engender, are the source of untold suffering; they are the product of a world indifferent to the fate of humankind. The continued defiance of this reality by men and women who are aware of it and yet dare to act, and choose to re-assert the existence of some framework of justice and order, in spite of their experience, is heroic in the tragic sense. In the latter, great action involves radically choosing to bridge the gap between reassuring illusion and intolerable reality and defying the lack in human existence in order to live with some measure of hope.[494] It recognizes ambiguity and yet overrides nihilistic attitudes, a "pessimism of strength" that eschews mere cynicism by planning and acting with knowledge of one's limits – a tragic consciousness – and "tempting fate". It accepts suffering, not out of some self-righteous desire for martyrdom, but because in a tragic world it must be endured in human projects, and brings meaning (and wisdom): as a fundamental feature of existence it provides a foundation for a greater purpose (such as Philoctetes' sense of injustice); as it is a common feature of human life, it can be used as a basis for community (joining together for assistance and

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[491] Nietzsche F., 2003, p.296 – the abyss is created by the "death of God": in part this "grasping of the abyss" is the consideration of life without relying on fundamentalist or metaphysical systems that attempt to explain reality in its fullness by relying on an axiomatic or transcendent point of reference. In an unpublished note, Nietzsche proclaimed that 'He who does not find greatness in God finds it nowhere. He must either deny it or create it' Tanner M., 2000, p.42. To grasp the abyss is "courage" and "greatness" and the beginning of this self-creation that leads one to become an *übermensch* (higher man).

[492] Grene D. in Grene D. & Lattimore R.(eds.), vol. II, p.405. Returning to fight for the Achaeans against Troy means that Philoctetes must deny himself the right to keep feeling wronged by their treachery – a bitterness that had served as a *raison d'être* and helped him to survive in exile.

[493] '*All else our father Zeus thinks of less moment* [...] *Whether* [men] *die or live,* [holiness] *cannot perish.*' Sophocles, *Philoctetes,* ll.1442-1445.

[494] 'Man continues to demand justice and an order with which he can live, and it is the nobility of this demand, maintained ... in the teeth of the universal indifference and the inconsistency of fortune, that in Euripides makes man tragic.' Arrowsmith W., in Grene D. & Lattimore R., vol.III, p.496

compassion, as at the end of the *Bacchae*[495]). To act tragically is, in some ways, to say: "We will do what we must, and suffer what we have to, but we will also do what we can to give our lives greater meaning in an ambiguous world." It is an aesthetic of existence: the cultivation of a lifestyle in the absence of clear transcendent or absolute moral guidance.[496] Just as with Philoctetes and the "wrongs to come", it requires the adoption of an attitude of openness towards the future, an acceptance of vulnerability and of the contingency of one's projects; and further, the drive to create meaning, to cultivate a wider purpose in oneself and others (creating "culture"), and so live on in hope.[497] Within the *polis,* this attitude requires a flexibility with respect to the unforeseen and other people, and their values; a flexibility that is lacking somewhat in both the older tradition of the individualistic hero of the epics and monistic projects such as the enlightenment.

Thus, we have seen how tragic *theoria* problematises and renews representations of the world ("truth"), first of all through its assertion of the existence of ambiguity and human limits, and second through its delimitation of these boundaries in the notions of hubris and reversal, thereby leading to a problematisation of human action. We now pause briefly to assess how this affects the relationship of tragedy to the mythical worldview (as outlined in the first chapter), before turning to its relationship to enlightenment.

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[495] As touched upon earlier, the parents of the deceased Pentheus learn that however horrible their plight and its divine necessity (ordained by Dionysos), they can still find comfort in compassion for each other; and this is an exclusively human dignity, as the gods, who have no limits, do not have the capacity for it. This learning is the tragic *sophia*, the *pathei mathos*, and is a marker of human greatness. Arrowsmith W. in Grene D. & Lattimore R., vol.IV, pp.539-541

[496] Flynn T., 1985, pp.531-540 & Foucault, 2001, p.166

[497] Versenyi L., pp.247-251

B. Tragedy in relation to mythos

Here we can pause to further assess the relationship of tragedy to the mythical worldview outlined in the first chapter. The tragic reassertion of an ontology of limits is but one of the many examples already offered of the tragedians' strategic redeployment of the worldview of *mythos* as a tool in the problematisation and renewal of Athenian nomological knowledge, and in particular of the enlightenment-style faith in progress through the rationalism of the *logos*. It is worth noting here that the playwrights were using myth to perform the opposite of its usual function: it was being recast by the tragic plays in order to complicate and distort, rather than resolve and explain; or in Roland Barthes' words, 'tragedy, on the contrary [to myth], refuses the mediation, keeps the conflict open.'[498] As an illustration, many of the tragedies selected portions of myth where some immutable element resists rational explanation or reform; the main protagonists are strongly motivated (such as Pentheus in the *Bacchae*) but are faced with an equally unyielding power (Dionysus in the same play) that limits their individual aspirations – this is the 'sustaining-frustrating element' of the pathos of tragic drama.[499] Similarly, the playwrights chose to use mythical characters who are not models of virtue (or whose virtue is downgraded in the tragic versions of their myths), but rather models of inflexibility, in the sense that they hold to principles in such an excessive way that the playwrights can unfold the tragic implications of these values.[500] In other words, the tragedians use the inflexibility of the characters' attachment to ethical values in order to push the latter beyond their limits and problematise them. The fervent attachment of various characters to the principle of justice as retribution in the *Oresteia*, or the rigid assertions by Antigone and Creon of loyalty to either family or *polis* in *Antigone* are cases in point. Moreover, the many dichotomies highlighted in the play - between the will of the individual and the "necessity" of the community or of the gods or fate, transcendent and conventional justice, archaic/religious and contemporary/political values – are a product of the rupture in nomological knowledge highlighted when the tragedians bring the "modern" citizen into a disruptive encounter with their archaic and mythical heritage. Such an unnatural usage of myth, in order to ask rather than answer questions, is one of the two ways in which tragedy relates to *mythos*.

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[498] Barthes R. in Segal C., 1999, p.51
[499] Versenyi L., p.185
[500] Winnington-Ingram R., p.317

The other way is the more typical function of renewal: the tragedians actively reinforce and reconstruct myth. The manipulation of mythic materials by poets such as the tragedians, for the purpose of reshaping and thus renewing their culture to suit the needs of their city, is squarely in line with centuries of mythopoetic practice.[501] Firstly, as touched on in the second chapter, there are various elements of the form of tragedy that give the myths used as narrative backgrounds a new structure and systematicity, bringing them (to a degree at least) into line with the new and increasingly rational requirements of the Athenian mind. In other words, they are applying enlightenment precepts to revise myth. The experience of spectating (the first meaning of *theoria*) offered by the mechanisms of the theatre provides both the self-distance and self-awareness necessary to the critical evaluation of the shared nomological knowledge that Athenian culture derives from myth. The performance of myths on a stage renews them for the audience, and the selections and minor innovations made by the tragedians in their adaptations of the narratives helps to re-create them and impose their vision on them. The choir as a proxy audience, representing the citizens and the modern-day *polis* inside the play, questioning and reacting to the individual hero, sometimes with modern concerns; the restructuring of the myth in the dramatic narrative into a theatrical sequence – all of this went even further in this redevelopment of myth. Secondly, in contradiction with the culturally disruptive content of the play, the tragedies reasserted shared norms through the performance of communal rituals such as funeral rites, and the institutionalised context of a publicly funded theatrical performance reaffirmed the value of myth for the *polis*.[502] Thus in its form, tragedy was to some extent reinforcing and renewing the discourse of *mythos,* just as it was participating in its limited adaptation to the criteria of enlightenment thinking and the new Athens.

Thirdly, as previously discussed, the problematisation of myth itself also prepares the way for the renewal of mythical discourse, and thus of nomological knowledge: the disturbance and deconstruction of settled notions of their shared ethos (such as *dike*) opens up new spaces in which these notions can be re-thought and adapted to contemporary requirements (as is attempted with *dike* at the end of the *Oresteia*). Upsetting such fundamental ethical notions

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[501] Versenyi L., p.183
[502] Segal C., 1999, p.50

as justice, wisdom, duty, necessity and so forth, stimulates a reflection on their nature by the spectator.

Fourthly, the tragedians confine their renewal of the substantive content of myth to offering subtle and tentative indications of the path to follow, as opposed to any ready-made reformulation of these notions or a resolution to the problems they have raised – their mythologising is deliberately incomplete. As already discussed, they will only explicitly reinforce the traditional ethos of *sophrosune* and *pathei mathos*, for instance through declarations of the chorus at the very end of the play[503]*; beyond that, the most explicit plays will generally demonstrate a new approach to the ethical values in question through the drama itself, rather than any overt or "preachy" pronouncements.[504] These new approaches are subtly exemplified in drama as practices and attitudes, often by secondary characters; and sometimes by the tragic heroes themselves, but only after an *anagnorisis*. Indeed, the behaviour of these heroes, in its inflexibility, is itself presented as the antithesis of the new ethos required for life in the polis. The tragedians tend to cast the heroes of *mythos* as "antiheroes" of the new world: much of the old aristocratic and archaic ethos of greatness (*megas*) and honour (*time*) is discredited because of the inflexibility of this ethos as well as its individualism, its prioritisation of the *oikos* (family household) and the *genos* (the private identity and network of obligations to blood and tribe) over the city and the wider democratic project at work in Athens.[505] Their behaviour and its terrible consequences problematises that old ethos and often exists to serve as a counter-example in the tragedians' teaching; in some plays (such as Euripides' bleak *Orestes*), this modelling of un-virtuous behaviour in a tragic world, and the absurdity of myth, is all that is offered.[506]

As a result, it is often the non-heroes of the plays that are deployed to demonstrate the positive values of *mythos* revised or re-asserted by the tragedians. In the *Bacchae,* Pentheus is the model of excessive behaviour: he is a modern man, possessing worldly cunning and an associated arrogance, and

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[503] E.g. Euripides *Andromache*, ll.1284-1288; *Medea,* ll.1415-1425; Sophocles *Ajax* ll.1417-1421; *Antigone* ll.1420-1424; Aeschylus *Suppliant Women,* ll.1060-ff.

[504] The end of the Oresteia is a bit of an outlier in this regard in that it addresses head-on the problems of justice that it has raised, but as we have seen, there is no total solution; rather a pragmatic compromise, that itself seems to be the practice promoted by Aeschylus as a valuable ethos for the citizenry.

[505] Winnington-Ingram's commentary on Sophocles *Ajax* is instructive in this regard. Winnington-Ingram R., pp.11-72

[506] Aeschylus *Seven against Thebes*; Sophocles *Women of Trachis*; Euripides *Medea* are to varying extents other examples of this type of play.

sophistic debating skills; when combined with his lack of self-knowledge, this mixture of traits propel him towards his own final destruction (already one can see here the problematisation of enlightenment as well as myth). The secondary characters of Agave and Cadmus (Pentheus' parents), having contributed in their own ways to this disaster, and suffering greatly as a result, are left to discover the aforementioned *pathei mathos* of the play: accepting the painful necessities of life together teaches them the virtue of compassion, the value of pity for each other and the consolation that it brings.[507] When the heroes themselves model the beginnings of a renewed ethos in the form of some virtuous practice, it is generally in a roundabout way: in Euripides' *Alcestis*, the main character Admetos is by divine favour allowed to escape death if he can find someone willing to die in his stead; only his wife Alcestis will do so, and only after her death does he regret the scheme and realise his love for her; despite his mourning, he receives the demi-god Heracles with full ceremony; and in spite of his selfish idiocy, and because of his virtuous *xenia* (the tradition of friendship and hospitality which is upheld as a "good" in the play), Heracles saves his wife from Hades. Similarly, in the aforementioned play *Ion,* despite the overt problematisation of Athenian religion and identity, a new source of truth is presented in the critical and inquisitive attitude, and quasi-Socratic investigative method, of the eponymous hero - but nowhere is this explicitly announced.[508] All in all, the renewal of myth offered by tragedy, its 'superimpos[ition] of a new vision on an old worldview'[509] to create new guidance in the present, is only a series of sketches on which the citizens are invited to draw their own firmer lines: the subtlety of dramatic role-modelling in spoken or sung poetry is far from the precision of a systematically-defined ethics written in prose. However, the body of attitudes and practices promoted by tragedy does provide a loose ethos on which to base a tragic worldview (as will be seen in the later two sections on self and politics).

In the two ways outlined, tragedy was participating in both the problematisation and renewal of *mythos*. This dual function of deconstruction and reconstruction was exercised by the tragedians (in their position as public poet-sages) with regard to their culture as a whole as they sought to negotiate a way out of the rupture in nomological knowledge. This awkward positioning, both inside (reformulating traditional knowledge) and outside (at a critical distance from)

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[507] Arrowsmith, W., in Grene & Lattimore, *Euripides*, vol. IV, pp.540-541
[508] Cf. Chapter I. B. ii. a.
[509] Versenyi, L., p.191

their culture, provided them with a space of creative tension necessary for their task of critique: in their ethical experiments, they stretched their nomological knowledge to the breaking point, as they oscillated between mythic context and modern requirement, adapting some traditions and rejecting others. The result is a tragic consciousness that is only dogmatic insofar as it sets up a basic platform of firm, pluralistic values – the assertion of tragic limitations and a resulting requirement for self-criticism and moderation - which prohibit the monistic ideological projects that violate them, and which provide a foundation for less ambitious projects (other, positive, values are sketched without been given final form). This dual approach extends to the emerging enlightenment worldview of the *logos*, which is problematised and revised in a similar manner: just as the latter is used to critique and reconstruct *mythos*, so mythical discourse is used to critique and reconstruct *logos*. Having established some of the onto-epistemological incompatibility of the tragic vision with the monistic tendencies of the enlightenment at the level of assumptions, we now examine the tragedians' active problematisation and renewal of enlightenment through the tragic reversal of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos*.

C. Tragedy in relation to enlightenment truth

Oedipus and the Sphinx of Thebes, red figure kylix, c.470B.C.

i - Problematisation

> Creon [to Oedipus]: *Do not seek to be master in everything,*
> *for the things you mastered did not follow you throughout your life.[510]*

The Oedipus of *Oedipus Tyrannos* is the paradigmatic character *par excellence.* The play was first produced around 430 B.C., at the very end of the golden era of Periclean Athens, just around the time of the death of Pericles (429B.C.), the outbreak of the plague (430 B.C.), and the beginning of the second Peloponnesian war with Sparta (431B.C.). It is difficult not to see a reflection of this sudden downturn of Athenian fortunes in this depiction of a man "first among men", brimming with self-confidence and unyielding in the pursuit of knowledge, a self-made tyrant who benevolently controls his city by virtue of a superior intellect, and who is at the centre of everything (much like Pericles had been for Athens or Athens for its expanding empire[511]), but who by virtue of all of this force of character relentlessly drives towards his own downfall by uncovering himself as both totally self-ignorant and the "pollution" at the source of a plague in the city (as the slayer of father and king, and incestuous lover of his own mother, as per the prophecy at his birth). The relevance of the play extends outwards beyond these parallels with historical events to reflect the Athenian crisis of values at the paroxysm of the rupture between mythic and enlightenment discourses. First, as was seen in the first chapter, a new collective system of government defined by a juridico-political rationality and a new civic identity put each and every citizen in charge of decision-making: none of this had any clear basis in myth, but it had led Athens to impossible heights and the conquest of a great empire, which was now faltering. The enlightenment discourse of *logos* and progress that had led them to this point now also had to be questioned, alongside the mythic discourse that had seemed increasingly irrelevant. Second, the generalisation of a self-critical scrutiny of the past led to a problematisation of the Athenians' present values, identity and behaviour, and hitherto unquestioned presuppositions gave way, leaving a void defined by a freedom full of isolation, self-doubt, and greater self-consciousness than ever before. [512] Sophocles depicts this on stage with the parable of one ruler's search for truth through the critical investigation of his own past, after which all of his previous illusions of control and self-determination are crushed, his rule as

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[510] Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannos*, l.1522-23
[511] The whole play is – somewhat forcibly – examined in terms of the analogy between Oedipus and Pericles in Ehrenberg V., 1954 and more convincingly in terms of the analogy between Oedipus and the city of Athens in Knox B., 1971, ps.99 &107
[512] See Chapter I and also Versenyi L., pp.247-251

tyrannos lost, and his knowledge of the truth about himself, however terrible, is enhanced. The play depicts the 'ambiguity of man's power to control his world and manage his life by intelligence'[513], dramatising 'the triumphs and failures attending the heroic attempts of enlightened reason to fix the identity of the rational, autonomous, emancipated and fully self-constituted subject'[514]. In sum, it is, as Christopher Rocco calls it, a 'tragedy of enlightenment'.[515]

The knowing "know-nothing" tyrant

At the start of the play, we are presented with an all-seeing, all-knowing Oedipus, *'whom'*, he declares of himself, *'all the men call Great'*.[516] He is the personification of the power of enlightenment: the self-made man who masters all he encounters through the power of his own intellect. We are reminded that he left behind all the inherited benefits of his adopted family's city of Corinth, saved Thebes by solving the riddle of the Sphinx, and is proclaimed ruler of the city, but as *tyrannos* (non-hereditary ruler) not *basileus* (traditional hereditary monarch of *mythos*). Just as enlightenment rejects irrational tradition and starts its new constructions *ex nihilo* from the *tabula rasa* of the individual's critical capacity, so Oedipus appears out of nowhere and bypasses custom to create his own fortune from his intellectual talents. In this way and others, he is the personification of *monos phronein,* thinking and judging without the lessons of community or custom. He accounts himself *'a child of fortune'*[517], a homeless exile free of the inherited constraints of birthright, community and tradition; and by the same token, ultimately autonomous and a true tyrant – a law unto himself.[518] It is worth noting that the Greek tyrants of the Sixth and early Fifth centuries were idealised by Fifth century authors as the paradigm of the free individual, whose rule was not constrained by limits, be they constitutional or hereditary. They thus served as a model for 'human rationality [with] the capacity to move beyond accepted boundaries and opinions in order to imagine what was previously unimaginable, to transform the world through the power of one's mind and speech, severed from the bonds of birth and history.'[519] Moreover, it is known from the contrast with other versions of the myth that Sophocles has de-emphasised the role of fate in the initial presentation of his

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[513] Segal C. in Rocco C., p.39
[514] Rocco C., p.34
[515] Ibid.
[516] Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannos,* l.8
[517] Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannos,* l.1082
[518] Euben P., 1990, n.8, p.98
[519] Saxonhouse A. quoted in Rocco C., p.40

Oedipus, who is seemingly the master of his own fate and whose early life is not merely pre-determined by a family curse.[520] He is not a god, we are told, only *'first among men'*[521], but in an inversion of the customary order of things, he is waited on and treated with quasi-religious reverence by a priest, and later in the play speaks like a god or prophet, claiming to reveal the truth.[522] Oedipus himself reminds us that he needed no divine revelation to solve the riddle: *'I, know-nothing Oedipus, came and put an end to it all by my own insight and not taught by birds'*[523]. His repeated assertions, "I know" and "I have seen" (both *oida* in the greek - a pun on his name[524]), and the way he cuts short the requests of suppliants because *'I have known the story before you told it'*[525], and has already addressed their concerns (having sent for word from Apollo's oracle as to a solution for the plague), all point us back to his great capacity for understanding and his limitless self-confidence therein. As in the metaphor of the "enlightenment", and the constant references in the play to light and sight, Oedipus illuminates and clarifies the obscure and enigmatic around him through his superior reasoning.[526] One of the meanings of his name is Know-Foot (*pous*: foot), recalling the riddle of the Sphinx ("Which creature walks on four feet in the morning, two in the afternoon, and three in the evening?"[527]) about the human species: by solving it, Oedipus rids the world of a savage and primordial supernatural beast and secures order for both human civilisation and its civilising conception of the divine.[528] Indeed, this is precisely why the priest comes to him in the manner of a suppliant at the opening of the play: Oedipus' intellect is perceived to have some power over the supernatural world, as if he were the old *basileus* of myth, the king with authority in religion as well as public affairs, the intermediary between gods and men.[529] He is also presented

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[520] For example, Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes* mentions that Laius disobeyed a divine order not to have any children and thus brought the curse down on his family. There is no such order in Sophocles' version, where Oedipus' fate is shaped around his own actions and not those of his parents. Cf. Rocco C., p.40

[521] Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannos,* l.32

[522] Ibid., p.110

[523] Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannos,* l.395

[524] Rocco C., p.36

[525] Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannos,* l.58

[526] Rocco C., p.36

[527] This is one of the extant versions of the riddle. The oldest is 'There is on earth a being two-footed, four-footed, and three-footed that has one name; and of all creatures that move upon earth and in the heavens and in the sea, it alone changes its form. But when it goes propped on most feet, then is the swiftness in its limbs the weakest.' Sophocles, *Three Theban Plays,* Wordsworth, Ware, 2004, *xx*

[528] The Olympian divinities and their use to personify natural forces or "civilised" virtues (as in Hesiod's works) bring much of the mythological pantheon back into line with an orderly conception of the supernatural, as opposed to the Sphinx and other mythical beasts which are being cleansed from enlightened history. Segal C., 1999, pp.207-208

[529] Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannos*, l.34

as the enlightened ruler, open to discussion and full of sympathy for his citizens, his "children" as he calls them, presumably because – like Plato's "philosopher-king" - he knows best.[530] Civilisation as progress through systematisation and modernisation in society: Oedipus represents these things as well. He has complete faith in his ability to see, to know and understand, and in his *techne,* his method of investigation (*zetein*) which is both legal and scientific, embedded in the new *logos* of the city.[531] And so, when Creon informs him that Apollo's oracle has identified the unknown murderer of his predecessor Laius as the cause of the plague, he launches himself with relish into the investigation. Oedipus will question eyewitness after eyewitness, trusting only the memory of what was seen, in the empirical style of the new Athens.

Unbeknownst to him, he is delving into his own origins and launching a prosecution in the trial of his own past actions: he is walking into a divinely laid trap. Like the Sphinx's riddle, Oedipus thinks it but another problem for him to solve through the force of his own rationality, despite the many warnings given to him by others – any wider meaning that it may have is of no concern to him. He must know: who the murderer is, and later, what secret lies at the source of his own identity, for to do otherwise, he says, would be to "prove false" to his character.[532] Oedipus is driven by the will-to-truth - "*Sapere aude!*" could have been his catch-cry. He is equally driven by the desire for power: healing the city of the plague, by discovering Laios' murderer, is the condition of the continuation of his rule.[533] His sovereignty derives from the respect accorded to him by citizens who accept his superior intellect and its ability to master supernatural problems: he embodies truth and power all at once[534], and citizens wilfully accept it and become subjects. He is a tyrant of the mind.[535] For Bernard Knox, Oedipus is the paradigm of the *anthropos tyrannos*: 'man the master of the universe, self-taught and self-made ruler who has the capacity to conquer complete happiness and prosperity'.[536]

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[530] Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannos*, l.57
[531] Vernant J.P., 2001, vol. I, p.112. Oedipus uses technical vocabulary from many new disciplines, including medicine, to qualify his investigations. Cf. also Knox B., 1957, pp.107-146
[532] Ibid., ll.1065-66, 1084-86
[533] Sophocles, ll.54-55
[534] Foucault M., 1994, p.568
[535] Euben P., 1990, p.98
[536] Knox in Euben P., 1990, p.101

And yet even at the beginning of the play, the audience, which already knows the myth, is given many an indication of Oedipus' limits, his self-ignorance, and the ambiguity of his situation. Sophocles gives his main protagonist a series of statements that are fully ironic in the light of later events: '*I know that you are all sick yet there is not one of you...*

that is as sick as myself'[537] . The murder investigation leads him to many unwitting statements, condemnations, and curses about his own self: '*Whoever... killed the king may readily wish to dispatch me with his murderous hand*' (Oedipus later blinds himself)[538]; '*Since I... have his bed and wife ... I fight in* [Laius'] *defence as for my father*' (Laius is later revealed to be his biological father that he himself attacked and killed).[539] Some of these double meanings are lost in translation: his declaration that '*I will bring this* [crime] *to light again*'[540] can also mean "I shall discover myself as the criminal".[541] Already, Oedipus' language has obvious double meanings that he himself does not perceive; and the unintended meaning is always the one that is proven to be true. Hence the paradox of the matter is that Oedipus deceives himself and speaks the truth, and this reversal of language foreshadows the *peripateia,* the dramatic reversal of action in the play. Vernant notes that the ambiguity of language is different to that of other plays, such as Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and the scene between Clytemnestra and her husband, where classic *qui pro quos* involve one character deceiving the other: Oedipus deceives only himself, as if some fateful or divine supernatural force were toying with his powers of speech.[542] Oedipus' words contains two discourses at once, like the two sides of a coin: the clear speaking of the enlightened man of the modern polis (his intended meaning); and the cryptic language of a divine oracle, in which the truth is hidden, often misinterpreted, and only revealed with hindsight, once time has worked it into being.[543] And so, just as Oedipus seeks to control his fate and others through the mastery of speech, the latter doubles back on him through ambivalence, and masters him.[544]

The master of clarity who solves the riddles of others speaks unwittingly in prophetic enigmas that turn back upon themselves, and upon him. For his own identity is a mystery, and a large blind spot in his otherwise total knowledge: he

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[537] Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannos,* ll.58-61
[538] Ibid., ll.138-140
[539] Ibid., l.264
[540] Ibid., l.132
[541] Vernant J.P. quoted in Euben P., 1999, p.112
[542] Vernant J.P. & Vidal-Naquet P., 2001, I, p.105
[543] Ibid., pp.105-106
[544] Rocco C., p.53

cannot solve the riddle of his own name. The many puns that toy with the etymology of his name, which is explicitly discussed with a messenger, include "perhaps you know"[545] and "I don't know the roads"[546] – both point to Oedipus' lack of understanding. The latter is particularly significant as it refers to the tragic reversal at the crossroads where the parricide occurs; Oedipus had sought to flee Corinth, his presumed parents (later revealed to be adoptive), and the prophecy that predicted the murder of his father and incest with his mother, only to unknowingly begin its fulfilment at the crossroads. Even the most knowledgeable of men cannot escape his fate, for he cannot know the future, and human action has a knack of turning back upon itself. "Alas, two-footed" is another of these puns;[547] it recalls the sphinx's riddle: it is precisely when man thinks himself at his strongest (standing two-footed in the prime of life) that he begins his inevitable decline towards life propped up by a cane (the third "foot"), like Oedipus wandering blind in the wilderness after his fall. And indeed, the curse of Oedipus is also that of an awesome/awful humankind (*deinos*), whose great potential for mastery of the world through knowledge is matched by unsurpassable limits: progress is stunted by tragic reversal. And this reversible tendency begins with names, with language, the very framework through which knowledge is formed and systematised; the building blocks of the enlightenment. Just as "Oedipus" is a name that proves to be an omen, working itself out in many directions over space and time throughout his life, so language is interconnected with context and people in a complex and evolving web. It is an assemblage in the deleuzian sense of the term,[548] and so its meaning can never be absolutely fixed and isolated. In the tragic perspective, language, like human action, always reserves some ambiguity, and its meaning and effects are only clarified with hindsight: language is ambiguous in its relation to truth.[549] Hence the very means by which the subject codifies, categorises and separates itself from objects for their usage depends on a medium that is continuously being redefined by its interactions with all of these at once – in the tragic representation, the absolute clarity and certainty required for enlightenment progress is elusive and ultimately fictitious.[550] And the linguistic turn, to which Sophocles is here contributing, highlights the ambiguity

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[545] '*oistha pou'*, ibid., l.43, cf. Euben P., p.103

[546] '*oik oid'; ho dous'* ibid., l.1038, cf. Goldhill S., 1986, p. 218

[547] When the name is broken down into "*oi"*(alas!), *dipous*" (two-footed) cf. Goldhill S., 1986, p.218

[548] See n.49 in chapter I.

[549] Rocco C., p.51

[550] The topic of language in tragedy is covered in chapter six.

of the subject itself, and of the knowledge of the object which is codified in enigmatic language (all the while highlighting the need for clear speaking).

Encounter with Teiresias: the blind leading the blind

The darker side of this enlightened ruler is revealed in his encounter with Teiresias, the prophet of Apollo. At first Oedipus receives him with all the dignity afforded by his position, and great religious deference; but when Teiresias frustrates Oedipus' quest for truth by refusing to answer his questions, the facade is lifted and the latter turns to insults, threats and irreverence. Nothing can be allowed to stand in the way of his will-to-truth; the prophet's concern for Oedipus and warnings of the destructive nature of this truth fall on deaf ears. Teiresias reacts; his pride is piqued and his anger shows that the servant of Apollo is still human. He displays an arrogance about his own way of knowing, and his silence and enigmatic utterances are almost petty in their contrariness, considering that he had accepted Oedipus' summons; his cryptic and riddling way of speaking, just like Oedipus' own ambivalent speech, is also just another example of human language failing to explicitly convey the truth, and yet still being a vehicle of it in a veiled form.[551] Nonetheless, he fulfils his duty as divine messenger, and matches veiled references with clearer expression, albeit in a manner which often deviates from the explicit description of the matter at hand. One of these exclamations captures the spirit of the whole play: '*Alas, how terrible is wisdom when it brings no profit to the man that's wise*'.[552] The scene is once again dripping with the irony of reversal, as the prophet who is blind but knows the truth is accused of being mistaken by the king who sees everything and does not know:

> '*It* [the truth] *has* [strength], *but not for you; it has no strength*
> *for you because you are blind in mind and ears*
> *as well as in your eyes.*'[553]

Oedipus taunts and bullies the silent Teiresias, accusing him of all the things that he himself is guilty of: the destruction of the city, the murder of Laius, the failure to discern the truth.[554] The latter accusation is particularly irreverent as it is aimed at prophecy as a whole[555], revealing Oedipus' disdain for knowledge obtained

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[551] Segal C., 1999, p.240
[552] Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannos,* ll.316-317
[553] Ibid., ll.370-372
[554] Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannos,* ll.330-372
[555] Ibid., ll.356-358

through divine revelation ("*and not taught by birds"*). The enlightened "tyrant of the mind" does not care for knowledge which he has not himself seen, tested and discovered: he thinks his own system of knowing, his own form of rationality[556]- logic, questioning, discussion - is the only reliable pathway to truth. In this encounter, his claim over truth is shown to be exclusive, there is thus no room for a religious authority in the enlightened city; like Ludwig Feuerbach in the nineteenth century, he proclaims "*Homo homini deus est".[557]* Oedipus is marked by the blessing and curse of the monism of enlightenment: blessed with an amazing method of discerning instrumental knowledge, and cursed by the uncompromising systematicity that underpins its effectiveness, alienates the individual from others, and renders one blind to wider meaning and the possibility of other ways of knowing. It is reminiscent of the modern-day adepts of scientism who are enchanted by the successes of their particular form and method of rationality, and believe that it will deliver an ultimate universal theory (generally the "unified field theory") that will somehow obliterate the need for investigating questions of meaning through religion and philosophy.[558] The curse unfolds in this scene as Oedipus demonstrates all of its venom in his dehumanising attitudes towards the prophet: the relentless criticism and the manipulation of the other as object, both of which uncover knowledge and enable control, are turned against Teiresias as the angry Oedipus seeks to make him speak. The prophet's cryptic utterances and silence on the matter at hand challenge not only the authority of the tyrant, but also the very essence of his character as a self-sufficient truth-seeker and truth-revealer. Oedipus is self-reliant ("*by my own insight"*) because in truly enlightened fashion, he believes his freedom to be the product of self-determination, the assertion of his will-to-truth giving him knowledge and thus power over the world. To deny him answers is to challenge what he conceives to be his freedom (and as a *tyrannos*, he is supposed to be one of the freest Greeks ever), to deprive him of his source of power (knowledge), and to enslave him to both the status quo (no progress in knowledge) and the uncertainty of unsolved mystery. Like the Athenians of Thucydides' Melian dialogue, Oedipus lives in fear of ambiguity, stagnation, and the other (who/that he must dominate in order to control) – in other words, in fear of slavery - for to accept a state of uncertainty is to give oneself over to the control of other forces. For the enlightened, there is self-

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[556] Much like Socrates and his *elenchus*, or Euripides' character Ion, Sophocles' Oedipus relies on coherence, logic and questioning: in fact he asks more questions (123) than all the characters in any other play put together. Versenyi L., p.222

[557] "Man is god to man" or "god is nothing other than man to himself". Feuerbach L., 1854, p.158

[558] Warman M., "Stephen Hawking tells Google that philosophy is dead", *The Telegraph,* http://soc.li/iH9CkRL, accessed 1st July 2012

determination, or there is slavery (what Kant called the state of "minority" – the tutelage of others[559]). As we have seen, will-to-truth and will-to-power converge in the enlightenment impulse, and the flipside of the alienated subject's drive to mastery through rational knowledge is fear of the other. Oedipus presents all the symptoms of this as he lashes out in every direction, first at Teiresias, and later, at his brother-in-law Creon who he suspects of feeding lines to the prophet in a plot to overthrow him.

First, the tyrant, who clearly feels that his enlightened epistemology is threatened by the religious alternative of the prophet, abruptly reveals his rejection of the prophetic vocation. Unlike the prophet, he says, he has no need of divine guidance to find answers; '*but I came, Oedipus, who knew nothing, and ... solved the riddle by my wit alone.*'[560] The irony of this statement is writ large when, as Teiresias is provoked into revealing the truth, Oedipus fails to grasp it: first failing to understand the prophet's revelation altogether ('*You are the land's pollution*'[561]), and then dismissing it out of hand. This irreverence towards Apollo's prophet culminates in the later rejection of all oracles[562] and religious – revealed – knowledge. The gods themselves, and their relation to truth, are not directly called into question[563], for Sophocles' play is first and foremost about the human search for truth, not divine revelation[564]- in this as well as other things it is a humanist play and a part of the wider enlightenment movement in Attic culture – but the relevance of the gods to human life is undermined when their messengers are called into question. Oedipus presumes that his direct way of knowing renders the convoluted alternative of the religious orders – the interpretation of cryptic signs revealed by the gods – obsolete. For him, the straightforward *gnome* (intelligence, judgement, way of knowing[565]) and *techne* (method, technical skill) of *logos* triumphs over the ambiguity and revealed truths of *mythos*. The implications of this rejection of a foundation of the archaic worldview are not fully exposed until Oedipus' later encounter with his wife Jocasta.

Encounters with Creon and messengers: the self-ignorant tyrant of power/knowledge

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[559] Kant I., Nisbet H. (trans.), 2010
[560] Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannos*, ll.397-398
[561] Ibid., l.353
[562] Ibid., ll.964-973
[563] Ibid., ll.280-281
[564] Versenyi L., p.221
[565] *gnome in Liddell H. & Scott R.

Second, the unmasking of Oedipus' pursuit of truth as the expression of his desire for power continues in his encounters with Creon and the messengers. The benevolent "philosopher-king" who exists only to serve his "children" is suddenly revealed to be the paranoid dictator who sees conspiracies everywhere and cares chiefly about himself. At the start of the play, Oedipus was shown as a magnanimous and level-headed ruler who came out to his suppliants rather than holding court, who listened carefully to requests and advice, and preferred transparent deliberations, in public: he is presented as the model of rational and disinterested rule.[566] His power, it would seem, is the product of a superior aptitude for reasonable decision-making exercised on behalf of the people, not his own whims. But from the moment Oedipus' knowledge is challenged and his position questioned by the refusals and then the accusations of Teiresias, the lid is lifted on the emotions, prejudice, and self-interest that truly drive the great man. The impact of his emotions – his anger and vindictiveness, and later fear and despair - are readily apparent in all of his conversations and decisions, even if he himself is not aware of them[567]: the legal-scientific investigation he is conducting all of a sudden takes on the colour of a personal vendetta. His concern for the citizenry, so eloquently stated early in the play (although even then it betrayed his self-interest in the matter)[568], evaporates, leaving only a tyrannical egotism. This is apparent when he denies *isegoria,* the equal right of every citizen to free speech, to both Creon and Teiresias, violating the key law of the Greek *polis*[569]; and also when he denies justice to Creon.[570] For Oedipus' chief concern is his own political power, his position as *tyrannos* of Thebes. *"You speak as one that will not yield or trust'*, remarks Creon.[571] Oedipus repeatedly asserts that he is acting in his *'own interest'* and will not yield.[572] Indeed, there is little to indicate that he fears his guilt in the matter of Laius' murder, but he certainly fears the loss of his position: when accused of the murder he ignores the charge and immediately lumps Teiresias together with Creon in a plot to depose him.[573] The fear of losing power drives him to exercise it all the more: all of those he interrogates thereafter (including the old herdsman who saved him as a child) suffer similar intimidation and frequent

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[566] Euben P., p.110
[567] Sophocles, Oedipus Tyrannos, ll.337-338 'Teiresias: *You blame my temper but you do not see, your own that lives within you.'*
[568] Ibid., ll.63-64 &136-138
[569] Segal C., 1999, p.213
[570] Sophocles, Oedipus Tyrannos, ll.681-682
[571] Ibid., ll.624-626 (omitted in the text, see note I, l.623, p.37 of Grene D & Lattimore R.)
[572] Ibid., ll.137-141 & l.627
[573] Ibid., ll.399-400 & 532-542

death threats. His debate with Creon is an *agon* caused by this abuse of power*:* a trial of Oedipus' rule and a theoretical debate over the foundation of this rule.

| Creon: | *Suppose you do not understand?* |
| Oedipus: | *But yet, I must be ruler[574]* |

When Creon suggests, in rather measured terms, that Oedipus might be mistaken in his accusations, the latter explicitly sees this as a challenge his authority. For to question his knowledge is to question the source of his power, including his concrete political authority as *tyrannos*. Creon is clearly questioning his authority on this very basis: Oedipus' lack of understanding is causing him "rule badly" and leading him to mistakenly fear for his power, which is causing him to privilege his own interests at the expense of those of other citizens (including Creon).[575] So it would seem that even Creon believes that the legitimacy of Oedipus' rule rests first on the excellence of his judgement on behalf of the the city as a whole (which could reflect the democratic concerns of Fifth century B.C. Athenians as they examine this past model of political rule). Further, Creon appeals to Oedipus' own rational method of judgement, suggesting that the evidence should be examined before he is condemned – only to be ignored by a ruler who is not aware of the impact of fear on his judgement.[576] The rest of the play is in many ways an examination of both Oedipus' right to rule and the type of this rule: the tyrant combining supreme knowledge with supreme power.[577]

This Sophoclean hero presents a warning of the illusory nature of pure objectivity and disinterested knowledge: the search for truth – and indeed, truth itself (as it is perceived by individuals) - is shaped by the interests of its actors and their desire for control over the world around them, and rationality is coloured by emotion.[578] '*Aner ennous*', he is called in the play, the "man of sense"; yet he is shown to be driven by fear above all else.[579] This reversal of destiny, of the man with superior intellect thrust into power, only to then live in constant fear of losing it (and often abusing it to protect his position), is the mark of the historical figure of the Greek tyrant as it was characterised in Fifth century B.C. thought ("tyranny" as it was understood in Fifth Century B.C. Athens did not carry the same injurious

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[574] Ibid., l.627
[575] Ibid., ll.622-631
[576] Ibid., ll.584-613
[577] Cf. Foucault M., 1994, vol.II, pp.553ff.
[578] Rocco C., p.37
[579] Winnington-Ingram R., p.182

connotations as it does now).[580] The tyrant was typically installed after the overthrow of an aristocratic rule by a disaffected faction, and perceived to have "saved the city" by enacting some wise economic (e.g. Cypselus of Corinth or Pisistratus of Athens) technological (Periander of Corinth) or legislative measures (Solon of Athens); some went on to abuse their power through abhorrent acts or by seeking dynastic succession against public opinion (both Cypselus and his son Periander[581]). The Sophoclean Oedipus fits squarely into this category: the man who thanks to his superior intelligence defeats the Sphinx, saves Thebes and rules alone, only to self-destruct as a result of the unnatural isolation and the excess of possibilities afforded by the position of supreme power. Like the tyrants of old, Oedipus' rule is founded on the sequence of privileged knowledge begetting privileges of power with the assent of a large part of the citizenry. Interestingly, this is not only a "negative" form of power, the force of domination, law and restriction, the type that results in obedience and is generally associated with the power of the sovereign; but a "positive" form, the subtler force that manufactures consent through the exercise of an excellent judgement that the people recognise as both superior to their own and in the public interest (at least as a bulwark against an elitist faction, historically, the aristocratic classes).

This level of privilege, however, is not enough for Oedipus, who like some of the historical tyrants has begun to give in to his own appetites rather than upholding the public interest. He now seeks even greater powers on a par with the older *basileus* (hereditary king) or the Persian emperors – the man-god at the junction between humanity and the divine, and another historical model of political ruler that was the subject of debate in Athenian thought.[582] As with these priest-kings, Sophocles' Oedipus would be the revealer of truth, the intermediary between the transcendent world and his fellows – he would seek to shape knowledge through his power (just as his level of power was shaped by his knowledge). Oedipus moulds the truth through his own *logos* (rational discourse), which he thinks will uncover the *erga* (deeds). Indeed, in Oedipus' view, Teiresias' accusations are not Apollo's truths delivered by his servant; they are merely the details of a plot of rational men like him, who seek to rule. Creon is no loyal brother-in-law, serving the city's interests before his own; he is merely a self-interested party like Oedipus, looking to expand his sphere of influence. Even the avoidance strategies of the

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[580] Foucault M., 1994, vol.II, p.566
[581] Herodotus, 5.92-93. Cypselus is said to have murdered many Corinthians to protect his rule. His son and successor Periander was said to have murdered his wife, sexually defiled her body, stripped naked all the women of Corinth, and attempted to abdicate in favour of his own son.
[582] Foucault M., 1994, vol.II, p.569

messengers, who seek to protect Oedipus and their city from destruction by not giving up the truth, are interpreted by the tyrant as treasonous deceptions of men protecting their own interests. In his investigation, Oedipus applies his monistic worldview to all and sundry, a logic of sameness projected onto everything that is both the climax of objectivity and subjectivity at once; it ignores the complexities of both human psyche and history in its simplifying systematicity, but by the same token expresses and replicates Oedipus' own idiosyncratic perspective (notably, that people are rational and self-interested like he believes himself to be).

In a way, Sophocles' Oedipus embodies the foucauldian concept of "power/knowledge": knowledge is power (the aim of knowledge is control), as in the standard enlightenment account of the likes of the aforementioned Francis Bacon; but power also shapes knowledge (the aim of control is knowledge), in particular by shaping the unconscious part of our nomological knowledge (the "episteme", or "discursive formation" in foucauldian terminology), which determines how we know.[583] The playwright's warning is perhaps that human accounts of truth, whether they are formulated in the discourse of *logos* or otherwise (as in the case of Teiresias' antagonistic silence then angry revelation once provoked), are shaped by subjective factors such as emotion or the desire for power. Hence, Oedipus' words takes on a completely paradoxical relation to the deeds he is describing, such as in the initial address to his citizens about the murder of Laius:

> '*What I say to you, I say as one that is a stranger to the story* [*logos*], *as stranger to the deed* [*ergon*]'[584]

The intended meaning of his words is failing to describe these facts (objective deeds), whilst their unintended meaning both reveals much about his psyche (his subjectivity), and cryptically hints at the "(objective) truth of things done" (he is of course no stranger to the murder). He explicitly denies his involvement because of the fear of losing power inherent in the alternative (and is criticised at other points by both Creon and Teiresias for failing to see how emotions are clouding his judgement). For he is no stranger to the story or deed, but their very author, just as he is no stranger to Thebes (he believes himself to be from Corinth), but the highest born of all Thebans: he is only a stranger to himself. So both Oedipus' personal history and his current emotional state are – unbeknownst to him, in his

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[583] Foucault M. in Gordon C. (ed.),1980
[584] Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannos*, ll.219-220

enlightened self-ignorance - shaping the unconscious context of his discourse, and seeping out into his speech. Oedipus' words say both too little and too much, just as he knows too little and too much – his great intellect crowding out any awareness of his complete self-ignorance. He is as perceptive about the world as he is blind to himself.

Oedipus' example is also a warning of the individualism that oft accompanies the enlightenment way of knowing: its relentless criticism of all but the knowing subject delivers amazing knowledge and control over the environment and emancipates humankind from many fears; but it also alienates one from the others, dehumanising them through rationalisation, and threatening the fabric of community as shared custom is dismantled in the drive to demythologise, thus intensifying a fear of the other. Oedipus demonstrates the callous nature of his logic when a messenger arrives from Corinth to announce the death of his presumed father. He immediately questions the cause of said man's death, and when told that it is merely old age, and not treachery – thus exonerating Oedipus of any possible involvement – he rejoices. No sympathy is in evidence for his family, only joy that he should be proved right and the oracles wrong: '*the oracles* [...] *they're dead as he himself is, and worthless*'. [585] The man he believes to be his father is dead, a foundation of religion and of the Greek worldview is presumed disproven, but in Oedipus' warped perspective, both his position as ruler and the way of knowing that he so deeply identifies with are reinforced, so he exults in it. Much like the character of Creon in Sophocles' *Antigone*, he has given complete priority to the *polis* (which as ruler he conflates with himself), and its juridico-political discourse, over the *oikos* (household, family), and the older discourse of *mythos*. Of the former Oedipus knows everything, which is the source of his power; as for the latter, he is shown to indeed be "know-nothing Oedipus", which will be his downfall. Interestingly, in but one of many reversals, it will only be after his fall from power that Oedipus once again demonstrates real concern for his family in the persons of his daughters[586], and takes the pronouncement of the oracles seriously[587]: only then does he escape the confines of his individualistic paranoia and take note of others. Other people, who he has treated as obstacles in the path of his investigation, turn out to be the sources that unveil his own past: his self-knowledge is uncovered relationally, through his encounters with others.

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585 Sophocles, Oedipus Tyrannos, ll.970-973
586 Ibid., ll.1463ff.
587 Ibid., l.1445

For a moment, after the news of his Corinthian "father's" death, Oedipus thinks his life project is a success. He sees himself all-powerful, more godlike than man, more like the Persian emperor than the Greek tyrant[588] – his supernatural knowledge has now replaced the prophets', and his power is about to extend over two city-states at once (just prior to this point the messenger had revealed that the people of Corinth were about to select Oedipus as their new ruler). It would seem that he has overcome the prophecies about his life, perhaps even, the power of fate. In a moment which is eerily reminiscent of John Locke's concept of *tabula rasa*,[589] Oedipus imagines that his fate is random and his life the product of chance[590]: truly he is the self-taught and self-made man. He has gone so far down the enlightenment path that its own myths have re-ordered the foundational assumptions of his worldview: his intelligence is 'now threatening to destroy the very order and coherence that give it meaning'[591], inverting – in a Copernican revolution - the basic tenets of the archaic and mythological culture of the watching audience. Oedipus exults in the failure of the prophecy and of Teiresias' pronouncements.[592] The chorus reacts by expressing fear for their worldview: '*When* [man] *reaps gains without justice... why should I honour the Gods in the dance*?'[593]. Should Oedipus be right, then fate, prophecies and the gods' oracles are all irrelevant, and the foundations of much of their nomological knowledge lie in ruins. '*God's service perishes*'[594]: revealed truth and its religious institutions seem to be of no use in human life, and the worldview of archaic Greece is shown to be contingent if not irrelevant - as Nietzsche put it: 'God is dead'.[595] Oedipus too is afraid[596], but his fear is only that he may turn out to be wrong, and that somehow the other half of the prophecy (the incest with his mother) will come to pass. The optimistic hope, which he clings to, is that fate is shown to be empty in a random universe – and his self-determination through knowledge all-powerful.

Enter Jocasta, who plays the role of the model wife: realising her husband is not at his self-confident best, she seeks to buttress him against fear by becoming the "voice of Reason" that he himself has suddenly forsaken in this moment of doubt.

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[588] Michel Foucault believes that Sophocles is aiming a critique of both tyrants and the Persian emperors with this play. Foucault M., 1994, vol.II, pp.568-569

[589] In which the mind is considered to be a blank slate at birth that is thus radically free to author itself. Locke J., Winkler K.P. (ed.), 1996, pp.33-36

[590] Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannos*, ll.1077-1086

[591] Rocco C., p.54

[592] Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannos*, ll.971-973

[593] Ibid., ll.895-896

[594] Ibid., l.910

[595] Nietzsche F., 2003, p.296

[596] Ibid., ls. 922, 976, 986

Jocasta does not shy from this state of utter lawlessness: she rationalises the incest of mother and son as something that '*many a man*' has already experienced, if only in dreams.[597] This intervention is of course greatly ironic considering that Jocasta herself is Oedipus' mother – both of them, however, believe his mother to be the Corinthian Merope. In the framework where '*chance is all in all*' and foreknowledge impossible, Jocasta posits that '*such things* [incest] *are nothing*'; '*best to live lightly... unthinkingly*'.[598] The problem is that the acts of the prophecy haunting Oedipus – incest and parricide - are so completely outwith the bounds of conventional Greek morality that any justifications sound hollow. Taboos such as incest are so great that even the radical criticism of enlightenment struggles to overcome the instinctive fear involved. Oedipus is tempted to accept the care-free life offered by Jocasta's nihilism, but is still concerned about the possibility of incest with his "mother" in Corinth. Worse still, Jocasta renews his fear of involvement in parricide: she seeks to reassure her husband about the vacuous nature of oracles, and tells him how Laius and herself had cast out their child in the wild in order to avoid a prophecy – it was foretold to them that their child would kill Laius (her presumption is that the child died). Years later, she says, Laius' life is ended by "highway robbers" at the crossroads; and so the oracle, she thinks, was proven false. Oedipus, still believing himself the child of Corinthians, nonetheless recognises the crossroads as the place where he had killed in self-defence, and once again fears the possibility of his involvement.[599]

The inversion of Oedipus' inquiry

This is the turning point of the play, as for Oedipus, what was once a simple investigation of the previous king's murder in order to save the city from the plague becomes an inquiry into his own past. A pursuit of knowledge about the external world (the object), which matches Oedipus' skills and the enlightenment project, is turned back into a questioning of his own identity and past, calling into question the self (the knowing subject) and the project that it underpins. The play is revealed to also be a tragedy of self-knowledge[600], as well as a metaphor for the shift in the focus of Greek thought from object to subject. The Sophoclean Oedipus has taken the spectators on a journey of radical enlightenment, its narrowly-framed but relentless criticism calling the very foundations of *mythos* into question until they are on the brink of the Nietzschean abyss: the breakdown of

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[597] Ibid., l.982
[598] Ibid., ll.977-983
[599] Ibid., ll.707-835
[600] Versenyi L., p.223

all of their values and frameworks of meaning. Jocasta had offered a typical response: nihilism. But such an "unthinking" position, that disregards the evidence at hand, will not do for the tyrant of the mind: he will get to the bottom of the matter. Oedipus, like the enlightenment process itself, had until this point set aside one "sacred" area, one blind spot that is never brought into question: his own self (and the enlightenment-style worldview that he holds – the sacred cow of the enlightenment process). Only now that he is being confronted with evidence does he suspect the truth of his origins and begin to examine his own worldview in light of its contrast with *mythos*. His way of knowing had brought him great power, but was just a part of the whole truth. Oedipus finds out that his quest for truth has another dimension, hitherto neglected, and that he must delve back into his own past to complete the picture. In doing so, he chooses to test the claims of Apollo's prophet Teiresias, until now dismissed out of hand, as well as Apollo's oracle at Delphi, who had long ago informed him of his future as his father's bane and his mother's lover. Indeed, it was after hearing this prophecy at Delphi that he fled from both Apollo's sanctuary, on which is inscribed the injunction to "know thyself", and his parents at Corinth, trying to avoid his fate; but the truth of both the god's words and Oedipus' fate followed him to the crossing of three roads, where the paths from Delphi, Corinth and Thebes meet. The hero now has to retrace all the steps that have brought him to Thebes, and piece together his past.

This means that Oedipus must go back on the very enlightenment path that he presumed would remodel his destiny according to his own will, unwittingly returning to other ways of knowing that he had consigned to the past, the revealed truth of oracles and *gnothi seauton* of *mythos*. The latter is customarily understood as a call to moderation, humility even, in light of the limits of the human condition and the vagaries of human fate: "know thy limits".[601] It is a traditional wisdom of *sophrosune,* at cross-purposes with the humanistic self-confidence of enlightenment, substituting caution for faith in progress and recognising necessities other than the sheer force of human will. Oedipus is now obliged to follow the direction of this adage if he wishes to succeed in his task. However, in line with the *zeitgeist* of Fifth Century B.C. Athens, Oedipus seeks to redefine the saying in his own terms, and infuse it with the indomitable will to truth of the enlightenment. He will not accept received truths about himself – namely, the mythic delimitation of the human condition - but investigates his past with all the zeal of the "*Sapere aude!*" and by the new methods of historical investigation. '*I will not be persuaded to let be the*

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[601] Schwartz J., in Euben (ed.), 1986, p.187

chance of finding out the whole thing clearly'[602]. Like Herodotus, Oedipus will rely on the testimony of eyewitnesses, and like Thucydides, he will apply his own rational criteria to weed out obfuscation and falsehood. He hopes to discover that he is indeed a "child of chance", even relishing low-born origins[603] as they would confirm his self-made status as *tyrannos,* the free man, with boundless potential and unfettered by any inherited ties. He will not give in to mythic ways of knowing - to prophets, oracles, or any others - without first confirming for *himself* their affirmations, in his own way, according to his own enlightened methods of discerning the truth, for "man is the measure of all things". He will establish the facts of the matter like a prosecutor, interrogating the witnesses to his past one by one. In these and other ways, he is truly a representative of the new Athenian emerging half-way through the Fifth century B.C., and the enlightenment discourse of *logos.* Moreover, he refuses to let a sleeping dog lie, and remain happily ignorant, as everyone he encounters repeatedly urges him to do: his power as *tyrannos* depends on the citizens' perception of him as the saviour of the city, so rid the city of pollution he will. He is trapped between his will to truth, both in his need to find the truth about the world and himself and his desire to live accordingly (being true to himself), and his will to power, which depends on the continuing accumulation of knowledge. Thus, paradoxically, it is Oedipus' indomitable desire for both power and truth, which has brought him so high, that will also prove his undoing; he chooses to put his status as the free and self-determining ruler beyond doubt, only to unwittingly uncover just how dramatically his life has been shaped by fate. And he discovers the ambiguity at the heart of his identity, as both the enlightened self-made man and the mythical child of fate.

Despite the news of his father's death, Oedipus still has doubts: he still does not know the whole truth about Laius' murder, and as long as his presumed mother Merope is still alive he fears the possibility of incest. The Corinthian messenger tries to reassure him by volunteering the secret of his birth: Oedipus was in fact only adopted. Oedipus questions the messenger further until he reveals that he was found in the wild by a herdsman, and then sends for the latter, only to discover the awful truth: his parents are in fact Laius and Jocasta, who cast him out on the mountainside as a child to avoid the terrible prophecy. The realisation is sudden and the consequences swift. Oedipus, the enlightened one who relied on

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[602] Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannos*, ll.1065-66
[603] Sophocles, Oedipus Tyrannos, ll.1077-1080

his sight, curses the light of the sun and vows to never again look upon it.[604] The chorus of Theban elders bemoans the fragility of man's fortunes and declares Oedipus to be the *'paradeigm'* of this.[605] Their verdict on his rule is immediate: he *'was'* their king and he *'ruled'* their city[606], but now *'time who sees all has found you out against your will'*.[607] In a fit of rage, Oedipus seeks to murder Jocasta, only to find that she has already hung herself. Oedipus then puts his eyes out with the brooch he recovers from her body. Afterwards, having returned to his senses, he calmly demonstrates a newfound wisdom and insight. With a clarity that was absent from all his early ambivalent speeches, he declares the result of his inquiry: his own culpability.[608] Oedipus now speaks with a humility and compassion for others, be it the chorus who attends him, or the daughters he now pities and requests to see. He now wishes never to have been spared when he was cast onto the mountainside as a boy, but when asked why he has not simply killed himself, he answers that he prefers not to be reunited in the incestuous relationship with his parents in death, and feels bound to fulfil the sentence of exile that he had unknowingly pronounced upon himself, and that his parents had wished for him, by returning to wander in the wild.[609] Creon – now declared the *'sole ruler'*[610] - appears and grants him the right to see his daughters, but then orders him to return inside the palace while he consults the oracles about Oedipus' future. Oedipus begs to be driven into exile if this accords with the gods' wishes, but accepts to wait in the palace. So ends the play.

A paradigm of reversal

The *peripatias* of the play are too many to count: the great reversal of fortune in Oedipus' life plays out at many levels in a precisely symmetrical fashion. The hero goes from tyrant to exile, prosecutor to criminal, mastery to helplessness, seer to blind man, saviour to polluter, stranger to native Theban, and so forth. Oedipus was all of these things all along of course; they are merely brought to light through his own investigation. And as a result of these efforts, Oedipus manufactures his own downfall; and yet there is also one area of growth for him, the only sphere of progress in which he is not degraded by reversal: that of self-knowledge. The sum total of these revelations is that like Oedipus himself, the spectators are shown

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[604] Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannos*, ll.1180-1185
[605] Ibid., l.1193, original Greek version in Jebb R. (ed.), 1887.
[606] Ibid., ll.1200-1203
[607] Ibid., ll.1213-1214
[608] Ibid., l.1384
[609] Ibid., ll.1370-1415
[610] Ibid., l.1418

how they embody the contradictions of the human condition; contradictions that, like the unsatisfying end of the play, are not resolved but remain suspended in tension.[611] The chorus has said it outright: the life of Oedipus is a paradigm for all '*generations of men*'[612], a lesson of reversal of fortune that the Athenians are invited to take out of the theatre.[613] As in Sophocles' *Antigone*, humankind is *deinos,* a species which exists in the tension of opposites[614] – power and slavery, freedom and fate, knowledge and ignorance – the space of tragic tension between capability and limits, enlightenment progress and mythical reversal. The character of Oedipus is an expression of the split consciousness of the mid-Fifth century B.C. Athenian, of the rupture in nomological knowledge, and an examination of the enlightenment way of knowing that brings it about; Sophocles has put a great deal of effort into concentrating a great number of the dichotomies of his culture into the story of one man. A key part of the balancing act between discourses here is the identification of the hubris of enlightenment, of the excess faith placed in human capabilities. The new humanistic belief in progress - no doubt pushed to new heights under Pericles' reign in Athens only to be cut down by his death, a difficult war and the plague at the time of the play's production - is here tempered by reversal and the caution characteristic of *mythos.* This reversal and many others can be examined around the explicit problem of the play: the question of Oedipus' right to rule, which, as it is based on mastery through rational knowledge, is also the problem of the enlightenment. A few of the main dualisms are examined here: sovereignty in the tension between civilisation and savagery, truth in the tension between power and knowledge, and identity between the universal and the particular.

Sovereignty between civilisation and savagery

Oedipus' sovereignty and the basis of its legitimacy is the foremost question of the play: the latter opens with Oedipus being greeted as the powerful (*kratunon*) ruler of the land,[615] and closes as he is farewelled as the man who once was powerful (*kratistos*)[616] and who should '*not seek to be master (kratein) in everything*'.[617] As Foucault points out, the whole tragedy – of power and holding political power - is

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[611] Rocco C., pp.60-61
[612] Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannos,* l.1187
[613] Schwartz J. in Euben P. (ed.), p.186
[614] Vernant in Segal C., p.240
[615] Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannos*, l.14
[616] Ibid., l.1525
[617] Ibid., l.1523

played out between these two addresses.[618] The rule of Oedipus is finally revealed to have been established by the murder of his father the King on the crossroads, and sealed by a marriage with his mother in the city itself. Oedipus had thought it based solely on his superior knowledge, the victory of his insight over the sphinx (unlike in other versions of the myth where he kills the latter) and the ensuing popular acclaim: the rule of the self-made *tyrannos*, not divinely determined *basileus,* and thus the paroxysm of human convention (*nomos*). He discovers, however, that his sovereignty is also founded by '*accursed*'[619] acts of violence and incest. And these acts, of parricide and incest, are precisely those that the archaic Greeks associated with the savagery of wild beasts, the antinomy of the civilised (*phusis,* nature).[620]

The life of Oedipus thus highlights the ambiguity of the enlightenment project of modernisation and civilisation: however rational and calmly deliberative, the exercise of sovereignty is underpinned by a foundation of brute force and of fear of the other, and is always in danger of reverting to bestial instinct. There is no way of fully emancipating oneself from the "nasty, brutish" and lawless life of *phusis* through the artifices of *nomos*: even the rule-based community of the polis is menaced by a regression to violence, on which sovereignty is founded; and the instrumental knowledge of *techne*, which enables this emancipation through mastery of nature, is liable to be turned on others as a part of this regression. The investigation of Oedipus, the enlightened ruler, turns to threats of violence, murder[621] and even acts of torture[622] as soon as he feels his sovereignty questioned - recalling the repressive security policies of many a modern state (including liberal democracies[623]), and some of the foreign policy of Fifth century B.C. Athens itself.[624] Knowing – the ordering of perceptions and the production of truth - goes hand in hand with the "negative" power of domination. For Oedipus has come to embody both the epitome of enlightened Greek civilisation, as the self-made technocratic ruler of the polis, and the epitome of the savagery that the civilised community seeks to control: he is the ultimate lawmaker, and also the ultimate lawbreaker, representing both extremes of the human effort to

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[618] Foucault M., 1994, vol.II., p.564
[619] Ibid., l.1214
[620] Euben P., 1990, p.104
[621] Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannos*, e.g. l.1166
[622] Ibid., l.1154
[623] See for instance the "ICRC report*"* on the torture of detainees at Guantanamo Bay by the CIA.
[624] The Athenians' imperialists conquests and the repression of numerous revolts over decades in the Delian League provide numerous examples, with perhaps the salient one being the execution of all males and enslavement of all women and children at Melos in 416 B.C. Thucydides, 2.45-2.46

create order out of life. In this ambiguous duality, he projects the tragic understanding of the fragility of civilisation, its alternation between progress and reversal in contrast with both the inexorable progress of enlightenment and the degradation of the ages in *mythos*. Charles Segal develops this theme at length[625]: Oedipus, the child cast out of the city onto the slopes of Cithaeron, the place of bestial wilderness in myth, who returns by the strength of his extraordinary intellect and is made *tyrannos,* highest in station; only to once again be rejected as the *pharmakos* (scapegoat[626]), the polluted one, lowest of the low, cast out to cleanse the city. The reversal is complete. The ambivalence of his fate is once again foreshadowed by his words, as he is indeed the "child of chance" living the "random" life, but in its lowest sense: the lawless, beast-like, life of pre-civilised man. Moreover, Oedipus is in breach of the human condition for exceeding it, becoming so preeminent in the city as to appear a god among men, and thus – as per Aristotle's formula[627] - must be ostracised in the time-honoured Athenian ritual to preserve equality in the city; but he has also violated the norms that separate man from beast, acting in the manner of *theriodes bios,* and falling short of the human requirements he is expelled in the ritual of the *pharmakos.*[628] He is doubly hubristic and doubly expelled –'*double weighs the burden of your grief*' says the chorus[629] - precisely where he had once been doubly honoured: pollution and scapegoat in the very city where he was once cleanser (of the sphinx) and revered ruler. Everything about Oedipus is double, he is *deinos* in the extreme; he is also Sophocles' paradigmatic representative of all men and women. Like Oedipus, the latter are seen to live in the space of tension and ambiguity between planned progress towards enlightened civilisation and its promise of a self-determined life, and the unexpected reversal towards the life of savagery, fear, and slavery to instinct.

The failure of the monistic outlook: humankind between wilful subject and constrained object

The tragic verdict on the great *nomos* and *phusis* debate in Greek thought, and on enlightenment's faith in its capacity to emancipate humankind from nature through civilisation, is one of balance and caution (*medan agan* – nothing in

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[625] Segal C., 1999, on the subject of *Oedipus Tyrannos,* pp.207ff.

[626] Every year in Athens two people – *pharmakos* - were chosen from the lower ranks of slaves to be paraded around the city and castigated for its sins; they were then exiled from the city as a cleansing ritual. Ibid.

[627] Aristotle, *Politics,* 3.1284a11ff. in Segal C., 1999, p.213

[628] Segal C., 1999, p.213

[629] Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannos*, l.1320

excess!). It is a reassertion of *sophrosune* (moderation, self-control). Oedipus, like Athens in the Fifth century, achieves great things, feats so far beyond imagining that they seem supernatural, when he concentrates on increasing his power through systematic knowledge. However, when this instrumental way of knowing is mistaken for the only truth, and universalised, and when faith in progress overreaches to the point of forgetting the limits of the human condition, the ambiguity that is ignored comes back to disrupt the projects that presume total control. As a paradigm of enlightenment self-determination, Oedipus' life, with its progress and sudden downfall, is a model problematisation thereof. As soon as the subject believes itself objective - above and separate from nature and others - it is forgetting itself and the instinctive savagery that constitutes it, as well as its embeddedness in the world around it, and the effect of external forces that shape it just as it seeks to shape them. Sophocles reminds us here of what Foucault calls the "marginalisation of the subject".[630] The striving for absolute objectivity represses the awareness of subjectivity and the many contingent and historical features that shape human knowing, leading to a self-blindness that distorts and dehumanises knowledge and action: like Oedipus' investigation, what starts out as a "disinterested" search becomes precisely the opposite through self-ignorance and a lack of self-critique – leading to a lack of awareness of the influence of subjectivity in the production of knowledge. So, the play would seem to suggest that we should be sceptical about the relationship between our search for truth and our desire for power: the two are intertwined, and although knowledge enables control of the world around us, this very quest for control can end up shaping the truths that we find, narrowing and distorting them into purely instrumental values that blind us to the ambiguous features of reality beyond our control, including the forces that shape our selves; and these last features have an unfortunate tendency to disrupt our carefully systematised projects. As has been shown, the myth of Oedipus is an example of this process: he projected his own motives onto others (such as Teiresias) in order to discredit the truths he did not want to hear; namely, the accursed nature of the sequence of events that brought him to power, and their roots in forces outside of his control - the unforeseen consequences of his past actions and the long-prophesied fate he had sought to avoid. At the end, when it becomes clear that his belief in a self-made status is delusory, he also realises that the opposite does not hold true: his plight is not only the result of an accursed prophecy and the will of the gods, but of the conjunction of these with his own actions:

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[630] See for instance Foucault M., 1966

'It was Apollo, friends, Apollo,
that brought [...] my sorrows to completion.
But the hand that struck me
Was none but my own.'[631]

Oedipus has discovered how a mixture of will, contingency (the consequences of his own choices, for instance, the decision to flee Corinth) and external necessity (his divinely ordained fate) have driven his actions. Sophocles, like Socrates, asserts that multiple forces drive human action, and that individual will is just one of these: there are external necessities, be they quasi-transcendental (fate and the gods) or immanent (the influence of one's past, culture, or of others).[632] An example of the latter is the way in which Oedipus' belief in the enlightenment myth of the self-made man has sprung from his own early disconnection from family and community: although he is (for all intents and purposes) the son of the ruler of Corinth, he leaves that city in a momentous breach of archaic tradition, in order to escape his curse. It is little wonder that later, having achieved so much in defiance of the prophecy, tradition and social hierarchy, as an exile in Thebes, that he believes in the idea of "man as an island". The discovery of his true past offers us another picture: that of a man who cannot escape his own particular origins, history, and fate. Hence Rocco observes that:

> 'Watching Oedipus enlighten himself, we cannot help but recall Foucault's observation about modern disciplinary power: no matter how much in control we believe ourselves to be, forces beyond our power circumscribe our lives and direct our destinies, even as we desperately, sometimes madly, attempt to shape the forces that shape us.'[633]

The idea of total freedom through self-determination, of the total subject, is a dangerous illusion that ignores the fallibility of intelligence and the inability to create projects resistant to unforeseen consequences (Oedipus' flight from the prophecy a case in point). As Euben says of this, Sophocles' message is that 'like Oedipus, we sometimes live among unsuspected and unsought ironies that bifurcate life and action'.[634] So, if even the great intellect of Oedipus is defeated,

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[631] Ibid., ll.1329-1324
[632] Euben P., p.105
[633] Rocco C., p.41
[634] Ibid., p.105

'how can we be sure of who we are and what we are doing?'[635] Oedipus lacked the awareness of himself as an already-constituted subject, of the past events that had already determined, at least in part, his subjectivity and all of its attendant assumptions that helped to define his vision of the world. In the end, Oedipus' quest for self-determination was self-defeating, his desire for power through knowledge turning back upon itself to reveal his ignorance and his powerlessness.

In addition to this, by alienating himself from all else through the exclusive adherence to a monistic system of knowledge in which he is sole judge and critic, Oedipus created an artificial situation of isolation in which, paradoxically, he reverts to the very mixture of fear and instinctive violence from which he had sought to liberate himself. He escapes death in isolation in the wilderness of Cithaeron as a child, but having mastered then lost the city through his desire for knowledge, will return there to wander and die.[636] In his individualistic outlook, he had forsaken the importance of relationships and community, both within his *oikos*, where he fails to notice the perversity at hand, and in the city, where in his paranoiac excess he tramples over the partnership (*koinonia*) of mutual regard (*philia*) between equals that underpins the *polis*. Sophocles is also warning his public against this un-civic behaviour of the *idiotes* (private person), the privileging of the individual and his/her appetites over the public interest that is also a consequence of enlightenment excess, and which he links to a regression to the primitive life of fear and slavery to instinctive desire. In the tragic perspective, progress is a two-sided affair: civilisation requires individual self-understanding and vice versa. Thus, reshaping the world in controllable form brings a measure of freedom, but, when pushed too far, also a measure of enslavement: the systematic method by which the subject knows and masters the world turns back upon it, and remodels the knower with precisely the same inhumane qualities that make it so powerful. The enlightenment is also double, mastering the secrets of nature whilst also subjugating the subject it was meant to empower: Oedipus' masterful rise and devastating fall attests to it.[637] Sophocles problematises the excessive faith of the enlightenment by pointing out that what is lacking in this equation is a form of self-knowledge: a recognition of the limits of knowing, the wisdom of self-awareness - a tragic consciousness. The catch, however, is that the pursuit of power/knowledge is tied to the restrictive sight of a monistic enlightenment and seems to require blindness to oneself; to see inwards and acquire this wisdom

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[635] Ibid.
[636] Ibid., ll.1450-1455
[637] Rocco C., p.55

requires blindness to the outside world. It is not acquired by *techne* but through the self-examination and critique that can accompany suffering and a tragic recognition (*anagnorisis*). It is another field of knowledge, which enlightenment *techne* can never fully grasp, governed by murky rules, for like Oedipus, we must always remain strangers to ourselves in order to conquer the world; only through suffering and by giving up in this quest can we learn wisdom. In the tragic vision, truth is of little use in the affairs of men.

Oedipus' sovereignty is founded on a hubris of knowledge as well as the traditional hubris of violence and excess; at fault, however, is not his desire for truth, but the exclusive monistic worldview through which he seeks to discover it, and the lack of self-awareness inherent in it. The hubris of Oedipus, which is that of the enlightenment and any other monistic theorising, is to mistake himself for the totality. This results in a deficiency of self-critique inbuilt into the universalistic claim: if there is no alternative, there can be no fundamental criticism, and any knowledge outside of the paradigm is devalued (just as Oedipus dismisses the sacred knowledge of oracles and prophets). The play highlights this failure and undermines the scheme of progress through instrumental knowledge represented by Oedipus' rise to power, by injecting the reversal of Oedipus' totalitarian excesses, loss of authority over the city, and realisation of his self-ignorance: the truth that he discovers is not instrumental, in fact, it altogether destroys his life project of power through knowledge. The play explores this in terms of the paradox of sight in blindness that becomes obvious in Oedipus' encounter with Teiresias: the blind man can see the truth (like Oedipus at the end of the play), whereas the sighted one is ignorant. At work is a problematisation of the equation of sight with knowledge, and by extension, the separation of subject from object, precisely the empirical basis of the *techne* that yields instrumental knowledge and underpins Oedipus' enlightenment epistemology. For Oedipus' way of knowing was based on the foundation of *oida*, "*I* have seen", as the prerequisite of *oida*, "*I* know": it was empiricist and autocratic. He was the supreme ruler who magnanimously held public hearings, but did not listen to public opinion, because he "already knew"; he also piously called on Apollo's prophet, but did not heed him, as he "relies on his own insight" and is not "taught by birds". The input of others, and of other ways of knowing, was excluded: he was a one-man epistemic elite, a technocrat and absolute ruler in whom all knowledge and all power were concentrated, a totalitarian who mistook himself for the city as a whole[638]: "*l'État,*

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[638] Ibid., ll.63-64 & 630-631

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c'est moi"[639]. In other words, he is the symbol of totalising theory resulting in totalitarian excess. His way of knowing and being was radically monistic, imposing the One on the Many at every turn, perceiving and shaping the world – and his own identity – according to his own particular system, which he believes to be universal.

Like every "mature" knowing subject of the enlightenment, who dares to use his/her critical capacity without the assistance of others, Oedipus is himself a symbol of the monad: the individual component conceived of by the Fifth century Pythagoreans and Eighteenth century enlightenment philosophers[640] through which the One imposes itself on all else, that contains within itself the metaphysical totality projected and replicated everywhere. Like Leibniz or Pythagoras positing this fundamental atom of the universe, Oedipus imagines his universal system to be the only truth, and then encounters it everywhere: the many objects become nothing more than a projection of the subjective and are all assumed to be part of a transcendent whole, in a self-fulfilling prophecy. His sight deceives him as, unbeknownst to him in his self-ignorance, it is already skewed and conditioned by subjectivity and the forces that have shaped it (his unknown past being one of these). A lack of awareness of this process and its limitations ensures that a reversal is always lurking: Oedipus' actions were always ironically self-directed, for instance in his encounters with others, who all cared for him and through their silence, sought to protect him from himself – he scorned their advice and in so doing scorned himself.[641] He forces them to speak, in spite of their warnings, for he cannot cope with the uncertainty of ambiguity; like the enlightenment, he is autistically dependent on his own type of certain knowledge. As Versenyi says, he is 'the only true subject and object, the foremost actor and sufferer of the whole tragedy'[642], the '*agon* of one'[643] who is prosecutor, judge, victim and perpetrator of his own crime. Unlike in most of the other tragedies, there is no real struggle against others, only within himself – Oedipus embodies a great many of the contradictions of archaic Greek culture and is truly paradigmatic. The master of knowledge, who dared to see and know all, collapses the distinction between subject and object, self and other, but is thus blind to

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[639] "The state is me". Saying attributed to Louis XIV, King of France and model of absolutist power.
[640] E.g. Gottfried Leibniz in his *Monadologie* or Immanuel Kant in his *Monadologia Physica*
[641] Versenyi L., p.218
[642] Ibid., p.217
[643] Ibid., p.219

himself, and falls prey to the unsuspected consequences of his own actions. He is everything, but in the end, as the chorus proclaims, he is nothing.[644]

What his great unifying vision of the world could not see was the disparity and the multiplicity that constituted his own identity – son and husband, father and brother, cleanser and polluter, *tyrannos* and *pharmakos,* savage and civiliser, self-determining and determined by fate, know-all and know-nothing, all at once – the Many out of the One. Like the enlightenment simplifications he thrives on, he collapses distinctions essential to the functioning of human society (be it at the level of the *oikos* or of the *polis*) and to ethical and intellectual clarity: as Segal says, 'it is his tragic destiny to replace apparent oneness with binary or ternary terms'.[645] Even in the straightforward matter of the murder of Laius, Oedipus was unable to count and had repeatedly confused plurality with unicity[646]; he is always imposing the latter, even though he embodies the former; hence the irony of his statement that '*one man cannot be the same as many*'.[647] Oedipus is *deinos,* and the side of himself that he was not aware of is the awful one: this combination of ignorance and complete confidence in his ability to know is his *hamartia,* his tragic mistake. It is spelt out in the language of the play: Oedipus was awesome, as the chorus says, '*he shot his bolt beyond the others and won the prize*'[648], precisely because of his great intellect and his confidence therein – as he says of himself, '*the flight of my own intelligence hit the mark*'.[649] As it turns out, he has completely missed the mark, and this is the literal meaning of *hamartia* (as a term originating in archery[650]). His hubris, his excessive commitment to an enlightenment faith in which he (and his one system of knowing) became the measure of all things, resulted in the deficiency of a type of knowledge that the narrow *techne* of the *logos* ignores: self-knowledge. In a variation on the modern adage of "power corrupts", the infinite possibilities offered by instrumental knowledge blind the powerful to the need for a reflection on their manner of using it. Like the adepts of scientific reductionism rejecting the need for the humanities, this monistic position results in the exclusion of those other interpretive ways of knowing that create narratives providing meaning for life (the answers to "why?" as opposed to answers to "how?" prevalent in the strictly causal explanations of rational empiricism). The

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[644] Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannos,* ll.1186-1190.
[645] Segal C., 1999, p.243
[646] Sophocles, Oedipus Tyrannos, ll.118-125 & ll.292-294: where both Creon and later the chorus speak to him of murderers, Oedipus, prophetically, replies in terms of '*the killer*'.
[647] Ibid., ll.844-845
[648] Sophocles, Oedipus Tyrannos, ll.1197-1199
[649] Sophocles, transl. Fagles R., *The Three Theban Plays*, Penguin, NY, 1984, l.453 as discussed p.139
[650] *hamartia* in Liddell H. & Scott R.

question of Oedipus' identity is one of these existentially meaningful matters that have shaped how he lived his life; once his unwitting self-examination reveals his previous ignorance in this, he gives up his pursuit of mastery through sensual knowledge. In the end, having blinded himself, he admits that he is a man 'seeing nothing, knowing nothing'[651], but even then, it is only half of the truth: in terms of his quest for power through knowledge of the world, he has failed, but in terms of the wisdom of awareness of limitations acquired through suffering, the tragic consciousness, his eyes are now open. The parallel with one of Socrates' anecdotes, who was teaching in Athens at the time of the play's production, is remarkable: having been told that the oracle at Delphi reckoned none wiser than himself, Socrates investigates and finds this to be true, but only in the paradoxical sense that he was the only man aware of his complete lack of certain knowledge – he knew his limits.[652]

From enlightenment sight to tragic insight

The journey of Sophocles' Oedipus from sight to blindness (and vice versa) thus highlights the tragic gap between the two quests of the injunctions "*sapere aude!*" and *"gnothi seauton!"*. Whereas the former, the enlightenment quest, is aimed at enabling self-determination through mastery and knowledge of the world, easing in practical ways the burden of living, the latter provides for the need for narratives to give meaning to life. The self-understanding of the *gnothi seauton,* the awareness of subjectivity and its contingent and constructed nature, begins with the knowledge of the lack in the human condition shared by Oedipus and Socrates, but does not end there. The ultimate human limit is death, and it is this endpoint that raises the question of life's meaning; hence, when Oedipus is told that he would be '*better dead than blind and living*'[653], he denies it with a long monologue about his life and its significant events. He has faced death in the suicide of his wife/mother, considered it, and instead created a new life narrative based on the terrible truth of his past. He forges new meaning out of the latter, preferring physical blindness to sight in both this life (where he would have to look on his ill-begotten children and the people he betrayed) and the afterlife (where he would have to look on his parents).[654] His individualistic quest for power through knowledge is over: he accepts his '*strange evil fate*' and will follow it

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[651] Ibid., l.148
[652] Plato, *Apology*
[653] Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannos*, l.1369
[654] Ibid., ll.1370-1415

rather than seek to shape it[655]; he is humble in his dealings with the new ruler and wishes only for exile from the city[656]; he shows compassion for others and rejoices in their touch, particularly his daughters[657]; and finally, by blinding himself he has consciously rejected the way of knowing, reliant on sensual perception, which had brought him mastery.[658] Like the blind seer Teiresias, he is locked out of the world of sight, and into the unseen world of insight, the wisdom brought by the understanding of one's limitations, particularly death, and hidden from those who have complete faith in the empirical feedback of their senses. The separation between these two worlds is clear; the realm of self-understanding is not, however, transcendent or metaphysical, like the forms of Plato, nor is it the only reality or a higher one: it is another immanent realm where reflection on the limits of the subject (self-contemplation) and its place in the nexus of lived experiences (phenomenological) and cultural discourses yields a narrative of meaning - it is the realm of myth, of mythological reasoning.[659] Segal contrasts this with the technological way of knowing as provided by the myth of Prometheus: this divine figure gave humankind the gift of intelligence, opening their eyes to instrumental knowledge in the *techne* of fire and the other crafts that master nature, but an integral part of this package was the "negative gift" of blind hopes, so that people could endure their lives without foreknowledge of their death.[660] In other words, the instrumental knowledge and mastery of nature sought in the enlightenment quest is considered dependent on blindness to the questions of meaning raised by the individual's contemplation of death, and the ignorance of the very human limits and their consequences for human projects that the *gnothi seauton* seeks to address – a "self-unconsciousness". For as with Oedipus, this introspection might kill our hopes for a life of freedom through self-determination, as the examination of the past uncovers the artifice and contingency of our identity and nomological knowledge, and the external forces that have already shaped the latter and hence the sphere of possibilities that we see for ourselves. The price of insight, which Oedipus pays at the end of his life, is blindness and loss of control over the physical world; the price of enlightenment mastery, which Oedipus had paid in his rise to power and later reneged on, is blindness to self-understanding:

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[655] Ibid., ll. 1457-1459
[656] Ibid., ll.1450-1455
[657] Ibid., ll.1413-1415 & 1480-1515
[658] Ibid., ll.1386-1391: he includes hearing as a sense he would have foregone if he had known how to mutilate it, wishing to "lock up his miserable carcass, seeing and hearing nothing".
[659] "Myth" in the general sense: the mythological way of knowing in general, somewhat akin to existential phenomenology, as opposed to the particular case of the discourse of archaic greek mythology.
[660] Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, ll.248-250

The Promethean vision of the inner workings of the physical universe requires a determined blindness to the knowledge of death. To conquer nature, man must ignore death in himself and turn away from the dark and mysterious paths that lead to a full knowledge of the self. [661]

There is a trade-off in the paradox of sight and blindness of the play; the two ways of knowing tragically limit each other. Once again, humankind is shown to be caught in the space of tension and ambiguity, this time between power/knowledge over the other and one's own self. In the end, Oedipus chooses the latter, but only after he has heroically pushed the enlightenment quest to its breaking point and threatened the order of the universe as it was traditionally understood in archaic Greece. His downfall restores this order and the equilibrium of tension between the two quests of *mythos* and *logos* in human life, just as it problematises the monistic claims of enlightenment. The *theoria* of tragedy is pluralist and the play has rejected the dominance and universalisation of the enlightenment way of knowing. The traditional mythological discourse is not celebrated either; rather, it is raised from the status of outdated and irrelevant tradition, which Oedipus had hoped to consign it to, and restored to a place of significance in the Attic worldview. This message would not be lost on the contemporary audience of the play at a time when Athens was abuzz with the new and often anti-mythic teachings of the sophists. This restoration does not mean that *mythos* escapes the critical eye of the playwright; although it is not the main focus of the play, Sophocles not only problematises the traditional religious incarnation of the truth-teller in the figure of Teiresias, but also constructs a new alternative model in the transformation of Oedipus. Teiresias was presented as a somewhat distant, arrogant figure, who does his god's bidding but in such a manner as to alienate his interlocutors and obstruct the clear communication of the truth (his initial refusal to share the truth imperils all of Thebes, and then the angry manner of its disclosure further entrenches Oedipus in his rejection and conspiracy theory).[662] He is the archaic stereotype of the ambiguity of revealed truth, impervious to systematic human enquiry and thereby frustrating any enlightened attempts to clarify and control. Much like the early Oedipus, Teiresias was an isolated figure, detached from the people and their concerns, and instead exclusively dedicated to the service of the mysterious Apollo. Just as the enlightened way of knowing is blind to its own subjectivity, the mythic tradition of revealed truth is blind to the

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[661] Segal C., 1999, pp.240-241
[662] Ibid., p.240

practical needs of the citizenry: this truth is veiled by its revelation through the enigmatic code of the oracles, and only becomes clear once time has gone by and fate has been fulfilled.

Unlike the prophet, the new Oedipus has none of the conceit of the messenger of divine truth, and there is nothing to indicate that he will go on to an excessively individualistic pursuit of self-understanding and self-mastery and ignore the world around him (as he now reaches out to his daughters and the chorus of Theban elders). Indeed, Oedipus does not display any of the arrogance of the possessor of a secret, sacred knowledge: he speaks in the clear language that was denied him earlier in the play, and is forever denied to the prophet as a servant of the cryptic gods.[663] Oedipus' knowledge is not the fruit of divine revelation, but of his own life struggle: he has gained the insight of blindness through his own life experience and suffering, and his knowledge is not the foreknowledge of the prophet but the understanding of his past and its meaning for himself in the present. Like the trap of the illusion of self-mastery through knowledge, the world of blind insight is a prison, but unlike the former, it is one that Oedipus has chosen for himself (‘*locking up my miserable carcass*’[664]). Hence, although Sophocles has problematised both enlightenment and (to a lesser extent) mythic ways of knowing in the play, he does not oppose the two quests in a fruitless dichotomy, but uses the transformation of Oedipus to provide renewal, sketching the basis of a humbler revision of human knowing for his time.

ii – Renewal

The play, and the life of Oedipus, is more than a zero-sum game of rise and fall, as the latter has gained in tragic wisdom; and through this, the audience is presented with the sketch of a new way of knowing. Like Socrates, he now understands his strength-in-weakness[665], through the pattern of his life: the king's son, cast helpless into the wild, achieving mastery and greatness in the city through knowledgeable actions that also prove self-ignorant, and bring about his own downfall and a return to life outside the city. Oedipus had answered the riddle of the Sphinx about the human condition with a sentence that came easily to his quick intellect, but like all else in his life, he only came to understand the truth of

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[663] Rocco C., p.62
[664] Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannos*, l.1389
[665] Segal C., 1999, p.246

it by living it out, completing the cycle as a blind man with cane walking "three-footed" in the twilight of his years.[666] The great necessity that is the march of time has brought itself to bear on the mortal Oedipus: '*Time who sees all has found you out against your will*', says the chorus.[667] The end result is a self-understanding, a tragic consciousness that emanates from suffering and lived experience; it is the existential awareness of the limits of the human condition and its fragility. As Creon admonishes at the end of the play: '*Do not seek to be master in everything, for the things you mastered did not follow you throughout your life.*' Oedipus has become aware of himself and of his fate in a recognition typical of the tragic play. However, the manner in which he has achieved this wisdom is the key to the Sophoclean innovation.

Firstly, he is no passive recipient of some divine message, but has grasped hold of it himself, and faced up to the awful truth. Unlike Ajax in the Sophoclean play bearing his name, Oedipus has not opted for suicide in the face of an unbearable fate: he has chosen to blind himself and live on. He accepts his fate but on his own terms, shunning a visible world that has long misled him, and becoming the new blind seer but of a different kind, as the knowledge he holds is purchased by his own suffering: it is an inherently human knowledge. In the terms of his former self as the *anthropos tyrannos*, the tyrant of power/knowledge, he has failed, losing mastery along with the eyes that provided it for him; but as the man who can only be true to himself by uncovering the truth, he has succeeded. In his musings with Jocasta, Oedipus had pushed this striving for knowledge to its ultimate limits by envisioning the contingency of the traditional Greek representation of the world, thereby overcoming all of the culture that he and the audience have inherited: in Nietzschean terms, he has 'seen the abyss with the eagle's eyes.'[668] He had toyed with a new start by positing his own enlightened myth of total mastery in the random universe (thereby fulfilling Adorno and Horkheimer's observation of enlightenment reverting to mythology, as seen in the first chapter). Only later, in a "self-overcoming", when he recognises the illusory nature of this mastery, does he truly 'grasp [the abyss] with the eagle's claws'[669], tearing out the eyes that had deceived him throughout his life, and with them the blind hopes that are oblivious to limits. It is a self-overcoming in which he has given up the belief in total self-determination and the path of sensory knowledge, but not his life, and not his

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[666] Ibid.
[667] Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannos*, ll.1213-1214
[668] Nietzsche F., 2003, p.296
[669] Ibid.

struggle for the truth. He accepts the triumph of his '*strange evil fate*'[670], the power of the gods and their '*hate*' for him,[671] and his loss of mastery over the world around him, but chooses to live; which in these circumstances, is itself an act of defiance. He accepts a life of suffering, and like the aforementioned Philoctetes, is heroic in the tragic sense: as he says to his children at the end of the play, '*give me a life wherever there is opportunity to live*'.[672] His newfound awareness of his place in the world (the limits of his ability to know) and the pattern of his life (bringing about an inescapable fate through his own actions), his strength-in-weakness, is also the source of his 'greatness-in-nothingness'[673]: despite his consciousness of the tragic nature of life, he affirms it. He still sees possibilities for personal fulfilment, however fleeting; after all, being authentic (true to his character) has required pursuing truth to the point of 'overcoming, fulfilling, and at the same time almost destroying himself'.[674] By putting out his own eyes, he has resolved to live without illusion and embarked on a new quest for self-knowledge and harmony with himself, pursuing truth, and curious about where his own fate will lead.[675] The symbolism reinforces human agency relative to *mythos*: where Teiresias was blinded by the gods and receives compensation for it in the gift of foresight,[676] Oedipus blinds himself out of his own insight and in recognition and rejection of his fallible project of mastery. As Versenyi concludes, this tragic version of the *gnothi seauton* is a revised epistemic model, still reminding humankind of its weakness and finitude as per the Delphic injunction, but with a greater emphasis on self-discovery and self-fulfilment, ascribing greater independence and self-sufficiency to humankind than is generally the case in *mythos*.[677] It is a modest humanistic shift by which Sophocles contributes to the renewal of archaic nomological knowledge and participates in the Greek enlightenment. In spite of everything, Oedipus has made progress in his life, he has grown through his wilful self-destruction, not shrinking from the senseless suffering that is the lot of humankind, but affirming his own existence by enduring it, being true to himself, and forging some meaning out of his own struggles to justify his actions. This may prove futile in the larger scheme of things, but from a human perspective in the tragic representation, it is perhaps the greatest of all achievements.[678] The absence of the gods or their

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[670] Sophocles, Oedipus Tyrannos, ll.1457-58
[671] l.1519
[672] ll.1513-1514
[673] Segal C., 1999, p.
[674] Versenyi L., p.225
[675] Sophocles, Oedipus Tyrannos, ll.1458-59
[676] Hornblower S.& Spawforth A., *Tiresias
[677] Versenyi L., p.223
[678] Versenyi L., p.225-251

explanations in the play helps to emphasise that Sophocles is here interested in the human search for knowledge of an immanent kind, not the transcendent knowledge of the absolute subject; the perspective of lived experience. And indeed Oedipus proves to be heroic not by the supernatural character of his actions (unlike many of the epic heroes), but through their unyielding and perhaps even excessive humanity.

Secondly, the traditional myth of Oedipus' path to knowledge is now infused with the methods of *logos*, even though the enlightenment's universalistic aspirations have been denied, and its aims reversed from mastery of the other to understanding of the self: his quest is both inside of (it is a part of) and outside of (it is critical of) the enlightenment (just as it is inside/outside *mythos*).

On the one hand, as has already been shown, Oedipus' *remise en question* is a problematisation of the enlightenment. The play's shift from a quasi-transcendent to an immanent way of knowing, from the discovery and mastery of nature to discovery of and harmony with the self, is a conscious step back from the enlightenment monism and along a path which equates roughly with the one Foucault terms the "critical ontology of the present".[679] Just as in the case of Oedipus, this involves an investigation into the past in order to uncover the determinants of one's nomological knowledge in the present (Foucault's "genealogy"), and in particular, how the relationship between power and knowledge has shaped present truths. In other words, it is the exposition of the contingency of those past events that have shaped our ways of being, thinking, and acting in the present, in order to open up new and different possibilities of so doing: a problematisation of the present.[680] It runs against the grain of the enlightenment, and Kantian critique in particular, as where the latter seeks an essential formal structure that has universal value and determines the limits of our ability to reason (within which reason rules supreme), the critical ontology of the present examines these reified structures that are presented to us as "given", and looks to identify the singularities, contingencies, and arbitrary choices in their historical constitution. It is not a transcendental endeavour as it deals with particular historical events; Foucault calls it a positive questioning as in these contingencies it is uncovering new possibilities for ourselves rather than fixing our limits.[681] Just as Oedipus investigated himself and discovered the mixture of

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[679] Cf. Foucault's essay "Qu'est ce que les Lumieres?"in Foucault M., Vol.IV, 1994, text nr.339
[680] Ibid.
[681] Ibid.

contingency and external necessity that lay behind his identity and drove his actions, providing the opportunity for him to develop a new life narrative that transformed his worldview, so Sophocles is asking his audience to examine themselves and their joint venture as the city of Athens. Part of the Sophoclean innovation in the Oedipal myth is precisely this discovery of contingency, of the power of his own choices in shaping his life. In archaic terms, it is a shift away from the investigation of *phusis*, the true or natural essence of phenomena as things-in-themselves, and towards the investigation of *nomos,* human conventions, and the explanation of their historical constitution. The playwright is redirecting the Athenians' gaze, long turned outwards to focus on the ever-expanding set of possibilities that comes with the increase in instrumental knowledge and a growing empire, back towards self-critical reflection and the development of an awareness of their own past, and present identity, in order to reassess the meaning of their actions and renew their framework of judgement ("Who are we and what are we doing? What events have led us to see the world and act as we now do?"). Once Oedipus is confronted with his problematic self, he has to start again, not from a *tabula rasa* on which one can freely construct oneself as a "child of chance", but from a position of genealogical awareness: he now understands how his identity, perception and judgement, and the limits thereof, have been shaped by historical events. As with the festival of the City Dionysia, one can see how this self-contemplation requires a momentary renunciation of everyday activity and a temporary blindness to its instrumental thinking. One must pause and "take stock", look inwards, and problematise oneself, identifying contingency with a pluralising historico-critical attitude rather than constructing an ideal unity with a universalising gaze: although critical ontology's method of systematic critique originates in the enlightenment, its direction runs counter to that of the latter. With *Oedipus Tyrannos*, Sophocles is modelling the tragic *theoria*, a self-problematising gaze that deploys a consciousness of contingency and human limits in an active pluralisation of nomological knowledge, thus enabling renewal through the re-working of life narratives that no longer appear fixed and essential, but malleable. It is no utopia as, like monastic life or Aristotle's contemplation, it requires at least a momentary turning away from the mastery of nature and the construction of human civilisation. As for Oedipus, it involves a return to the wilderness.

On the other hand, in line with the emphasis on the human perspective, Oedipus' method of seeking the truth involves none of the deliberately cryptic manner of the gods, nor does it depend on them for revelation. It relies on systematic inquiry

and the interrogation of eyewitnesses. Oedipus' relentless systematic questioning resembles that of Ion in Euripides' later play, the *elenchus* of Socrates, and of course the juridical methods of the *polis*. The empirical epistemological scheme wherein observation and the accumulation thereof is deemed valuable in establishing truth had already given birth to the activities of naturalists, physical geographers and botanists that Aristotle would later universalise and render encyclopaedic.[682] In sum, the epistemological method modelled by the play is very much an expression of the new lingua franca of Fifth century B.C. Athens, the discourse of the citizenry, and its establishment of the truth by way of systematic investigation: it is a part of the enlightenment.

Another aspect of this new way of knowing is related to the emerging democratic ideology, and becomes clear when one examines the identity of the truth-tellers at the end of the play. In *Oedipus Tyrannos,* the investigation of the truth is set in motion by the oracle of the god Apollo at Delphi, and the truth of Oedipus' identity is then spoken by his prophet Teiresias – in accordance with the mythic tradition of truth as the result of divine revelation. There is then an epistemological shift as the truth is confirmed at the end of the play, not by gods nor kings, but through the testimonies of the "little people" of the city: the humble servants of Polybus (Oedipus' adoptive father) and Laius, the first revealing Oedipus' adoption by the Corinthians, and the second, the herdsman, relating Oedipus' abandonment by Jocasta prior to this adoption.[683] The transcendental revelations of prophets and oracles have to be verified and substantiated through a careful investigation in which those entrusted to tell the truth are the people, no matter how modest of origin, who have themselves seen the historical events. Oedipus' requirements for the establishment of truth reflect those of Sophocles' audience: second-hand revelation (via prophet or oracle) is not sufficient; eyewitness testimony is the new epistemological test. Just as the locus of truth is shown to have shifted from Delphi to Athens in Euripides' *Ion,* so the mode of telling the truth in this play shifts from cryptic revelation to straightforward, empirical and everyday testimony, and the identity of the truth-teller from privileged caste to the "everyman" of the city. Much like Kant's critical faculty*,* it is universal, as all are deemed capable of witnessing (although in the real Athens, unlike in the tragic plays, slaves and women, as non-citizens, are not included). Moreover, like the Athenian trial, it enables any citizen to speak truth to power: in the end it is the humble shepherds that end the reign of the mighty

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[682] Foucault M., 1994, Vol.II, p.570
[683] Foucault M., 1994, Vol.II, pp.559-560

tyrant. As with the involvement of all or part of the citizenry in elections, ostracism, law-making and trials, each and every man is deemed capable of judging the matters at hand and thus in determining the power relations in the city under *isonomia*. The truth emerges in the trial of public debate, open for all to see, by many people assembled together to test it: no one man can impose it.

Further adding to the pervasiveness of a public ethos in this new epistemic model is Oedipus' shift from individual power through individual knowledge, exercised separately but on behalf of the city, to a physical and emotional dependence on the city, and an acceptance of the input of others. At the end, the blind Oedipus, for so long self-reliant in his individualistic quest for mastery through knowledge, turns to the elders of the city and his daughters for the reassurance he now needs.[684] By blinding himself, he has chosen to render himself dependent on others, who he now listens to and respects; no longer is he the knowing subject alienated from all else: the public ethos of tragedy is re-asserted over excess individualism. One of the key ethical values of this ethos, *suggnomosune,* is promoted when Oedipus recognises and appreciates it in the pity and compassion expressed by the chorus of elders[685], and then immediately after exercises it when he encounters his daughters and bemoans the plight that his actions have placed them in.[686] This social integration is affirmed by the last action of the play: Oedipus, who had prioritised his rule over the public interest ("I must be ruler"), accepts to wait on Creon's consultation of the oracles; not only does he defer to the gods but to the intermediary interpretation of the oracles and the judgement of the new ruler, and this in spite of his newfound insight (the exclusive knowledge of the blind seer). By listening to Creon's argument despite his own certainty, Oedipus also displays his acceptance of the role of *peitho,* reasoned persuasion, in the *polis*. He defers to the city and its institutionalised process of knowing, even though he has already divined that he will serve it best through an immediate exile.[687]

This consensual or intersubjective approach to truth through a form of public rationality, the rules and process of which are institutionalised like the *agon* in Athens, is akin to the process of modern liberal democracies as well as Jürgen Habermas' theory of communicative rationality (in which deliberative rational agreement is further idealised and essentialised in a constructive enlightenment

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[684] Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannos*, ll.1320-1326
[685] Ibid.
[686] Ibid., ll.1463-1465 & ll.1480-1514
[687] Ibid., ll.1450-1459

project)[688], albeit without the reification of rationality inherent in the latter's universalistic endeavour. Indeed, in the Athens of the second half of the Fifth century, it is the raw democratic principle that prevails over legal fixity - the juries are chosen by lot and the laws can be revised annually[689] - and so this institutionalised public rationality is somewhat less liberal and more democratic than the Habermasian liberal ideal or modern Western liberal democratic practice (popular sovereignty has greater weight than fixed laws relative to most modern liberal democracies). The analogy in the play that reflects this heavily democratic tendency is that in the end, Oedipus is exposed by the "little people" of the city, and accepts to submit his great intellect to the collective will: exalted rational knowledge is deemed subject to the more variable judgement of the community, and no law or constitution is deemed so rationally perfect that it cannot be changed. As in Kant's Enlightenment, everyone is deemed to have critical capacity,[690] but unlike it, there is no assumption of the existence of monistic and universal rational principles that can lead to perfect fixed consensus (and its results like "perpetual peace"). And so the new empirical methods are tied in with the democratisation of both power and knowledge in the *polis*: the systematic investigation underpinning the enlightenment is a way of knowing that diffuses the universal power/knowledge of the tyrant amongst the plurality of the citizenry, and the throne of the absolute sovereign is replaced by the "empty seat" of democratic sovereignty and the contest of the many for influence. The concept of tyranny, of the suzerain installed by the masses and entrusted with almost absolute power by appeal to superior judgement (and reflected the prominence of Pericles in Athens, whom Sophocles knew personally), is actively undermined; and by extension, the regime in which the powerful rule by virtue of their privileged access to truth is rejected (Foucault suggests that the sophists, professionals of political power and knowledge, and monarchs or emperors with religious authority are also Sophocles' targets in the play).[691] The legitimacy of any form of sovereignty combining power and knowledge is challenged as the two forms of regime are delinked in the new democratic discourse,[692] particularly so with the birth of the notion of *parrhesia* (frank speaking to the powerful out of a sense duty to the public interest) at the end of the Fifth century B.C: the powerful are considered to be blinded to truth by their own self-interest.[693] The play promotes

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[688] For instance in Habermas J., 1990
[689] Bers V. & Lanni A., p.5
[690] Kant I., 2010
[691] Foucault M., 1994, vol.II, pp.568-569
[692] Foucault M., 1994, vol.II, p.570
[693] Foucault M., 2001, throughout

the extension of the privilege of truth-telling to many and reinforces the discourse of the relevant institutional framework in the city, and thus again participates in the Athenian enlightenment and the renewal of the archaic worldview; but Oedipus' final submission to the community is also the rejection of an individualistic and universal rationality, as the pluralism inherent in the democratic principle is given more weight than the assumption of universal consensus.

Sophocles' nuanced participation in the enlightenment through *Oedipus Tyrannos* does not stop there. Just as the shepherds' testimonies assist in the validation and democratisation of empirical knowledge, so the play's exploration of the limits of human reasoning contributes to lay the groundwork for the philosophical activity of critique. Oedipus' mastery of reason, his 'analytical rigour and coherent logic'[694], is not enough to save him, and lacks the self-awareness deemed necessary in *mythos* and tragedy; as in his confrontation with Teiresias, it is incapable of apprehending the meaning of other discourses. The play's conclusion seems to suggest that enlightenment reason is anthropocentric in a world that is not: fate and the gods escape this all-too-human scheme, and the alternative vision of *mythos* is validated. The discourse of *logos* requires a clarity of sense perception and of communication that at times seems to evade human experience: in spite of Oedipus' intentions, his words carried ambiguous meanings that turned back upon themselves. And yet, once fate has done its work and the prophecies are fulfilled, Oedipus' arrives at the truth through the methods that he has stubbornly upheld, his words find the clarity that had long eluded them; and now, in a position of genealogical awareness, he is able to rationally reformulate his life narrative. His radical reconstruction of himself as a knowing subject, by biological (through self-mutilation) as well as theoretical means, is only made possible by the equally radical lengths to which he pushed his rational speculation, envisaging the random world and the contingency of human representations: the very hubris that leads to his downfall pushes the enlightenment to its breaking point, its relapse into myth, in a self-overcoming from which he rebuilds. Oedipus discovered the limits of enlightenment only by heroically dashing himself against them; he "dares to know" with a relentlessness typical of its eighteenth century proponents, criticising everything except his own system of knowledge until the radical positions that result from it become self-defeating. As Heidegger suggests, Kant too saw the abyss, breaking with the modern essentialist metaphysics of cosmic order (the clockwork universe) through his own radical criticism, before also proceeding to a

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[694] Rocco C., p.43

reconstruction of subjectivity.[695] Indeed, the many questions raised by the play's thematic of reason's limits are a dramatic exploration of what Kant called "critique", and is the foundation of modern enlightenment philosophy. Thus, although the play lays the foundations of an immanent, pluralising project (critical ontology), and not of a transcendent and monistic enlightenment project, the overarching narrative of systematic deconstruction and the examination of the limits of theorising before an ensuing reconstruction is common to both. *Oedipus Tyrannos'* symmetrical structure of reversal is perhaps not as systematic or substantive as later, properly philosophical, writing, but it is no less a 'structured deconstruction'[696] and partial recomposition of the Archaic worldview and its mythic and enlightenment discourses.[697] Alongside the various other activities of establishment of formal rules and of the axioms behind these, exercised by presocratic philosophers or geometers, and mirrored in the political sphere by the Assembly and the *nomothetai* (jurors whose task it was to ratify the assembly's decrees and verify their consistency with the existing body of law), the play participates in laying out the ingredients of scientific activity and enlightenment philosophy, both classical and modern.

Overall, then, Sophocles has used the myth of Oedipus to create a play in which the main character is a paradigm of mastery through knowledge. The examination of his legitimacy as *tyrannos* is thus also a problematisation of the monistic enlightenment project. The latter is indicted through his downfall, and partially rehabilitated through the methodological consistency of his stubborn search for, and final discovery of, the truth. The audience is shown that enlightenment, like humankind, is *deinos.* Oedipus' life is a narrative of human knowing. The play takes us first to the apparent apogee of mastery of the world through knowledge, in which the worldview of *mythos* and traditional nomological knowledge is challenged by the radical criticism of *logos.* At this lofty peak of enlightenment, Oedipus only encounters himself, as the monad, and shaken by fear, peers into the abyss of total contingency: the audience too, is given an awareness of the fragility of the truths that inform their judgement – a first step on the path to pluralism. Oedipus' slow investigation soon unveils the illusion of self-determination that sustained his totalising vision. His life and his subjectivity have been shaped by fate and the unintentional consequences of his own past decisions, and the truths

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[695] Kant however builds an essentialist framework of human (rational) limits (transcendental subjectivity) in which moral values could be universalised: 'he saw the unknown; he had to draw back'. Heidegger M., 1997, p.173
[696] Rocco C., p.58
[697] Ibid., pp.55-61

he believed in were deformed by the lens of his will to power. Recalling Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of enlightenment, the radical monism of the enlightenment epistemological scheme is shown to have excluded other ways of knowing, the narrow parameters of its drive towards self-determination blinding the subject to the consideration of the forces that determine its own subjectivity and cutting it off from other narratives required for the production of existential meaning necessary to human life - the life constrained by limits and ambiguity. Knowledge obtained through instrumental rationality, intended to emancipate through the mastery of nature, ends up turning back on itself to imprison the knower in an atrophied scheme of his/her own devising.

The play does not end here – the playwright also offers us renewal in the brief sketch of a path that seeks to mitigate ensnarement by the power/knowledge trap of enlightenment monism. Oedipus' uncovery of a long-neglected self-knowledge models a process of critical ontology that combines systematic enlightenment method with the mythic quest of *gnothi seauton*: by critically re-assessing his past, searching for the events where power (be it of the gods or his own) has shaped his knowledge, he has been able to arrive at a place of genealogical self-awareness, from which he is able to forge a new narrative of life meaning and new possibilities for himself. He asserts his will by choosing to live on and blind himself, turning his back on the unifying but exclusive light of the *logos* which had deceived him all along. The radical monism of the enlightenment is problematised, but its powerful methods are redeployed in a pluralist renewal where its emancipatory project through the discourse of *logos* is held in creative tension with the mythic quest of self-knowledge: it is an immanent critique of enlightenment, both inside (an expression of enlightenment) and outside of it (critiquing and confronting it with the otherness of *mythos*) . The relentless criticism of enlightenment is redirected inwards in order to free the subject from the disciplines of power/knowledge and to enable it to cope with – but not overcome - its limitations and the other necessities of the human condition. This critical ontology, as a cultivation of the self, requires a momentary turning away from the other, still essential, human endeavour of civilisation through mastery (the cultivation of the world). Culture, and human society (the *polis*), requires both ways of knowing, just as the character of Oedipus, which Sophocles has designed to embody the dichotomies of archaic Greece, switches at the end from one extreme to the other. The play ends in this tension: Oedipus, once *tyrannos,* has created his new destiny, but at the same time is prepared to wait on second-hand

knowledge of the gods' will for his future - he now submits himself to his fate and to the institutional way of knowing of the *polis.*

The audience, too, is left sitting in this waiting room: they are taught that like Oedipus, they exist in the space of tension between progress and reversal, *logos* and *mythos,* powerful knowledge and insightful self-knowledge, individual will and external necessity, the negative freedom ("freedom from") of individual self-determination or the positive freedom ("freedom to") of self-awareness. As Goldhill remarks, the problematisation of sight as knowledge throughout *Oedipus Tyrannos* undermines the security of their position as spectators watching from outside of the play[698] – like Oedipus searching for the causes of the plague, they are deeply implicated in a narrative that seems at face value to have little to do with themselves. Most of all they are presented with a problematisation of monistic endeavour, and as a remedy, the value of a pluralising critical ontology. Through the hubris and subsequent downfall of Oedipus, Sophocles is cultivating in them a tragic consciousness, particularly with regards to truth: the limits of human epistemology, the fallibility of totalising theory, and the limits of action, vulnerable as it is to ambiguity and reversal. And finally, the playwright is instilling in them the idea that this consciousness need not lead to defeatism or nihilism, but is best carried forward in the heroism of those who dare to know themselves and their limits, and forge meaning for their actions. As Segal concludes of the play, there is a greatness inherent in the power of self-knowledge.[699]

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[698] Goldhill S., 1986, p.220
[699] Segal C., 1999, p.247

Chapter V

Tragedy and the Self

Ajax planting his sword before impaling himself on it, amphora by Exekias ca.540B.C.

The questions of truth, of what we can know and how we can know it, have direct implications for the questions of the self (or subject), of who we are (identity) and how we should act (ethos or ethics). The latter are of course inextricably tied to the former through the mechanics of subjectivity, hence why the topic of the self has already been covered to a large extent in the previous section: what one knows of the truth depends to some degree on one's makeup as a knowing subject. Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos* illustrates this interconnection in much the same way as Euripides' *Ion*: in both plays, the explicit question is that of the main protagonist's origins, leading to the epistemological consideration of how this knowledge is to be ascertained. In both cases, the investigation of one's origins is intrinsically linked via one's sense of identity and one's character to the questions of how one should act, of where one fits in society (in line with the mythological emphasis on *whakapapa*), and this illustrates how the wide concept of "self" used here combines all of these notions: origins, identity, character, place in the world, and ethical values. This concept of the self, excluding the previously examined question of the knowing self, is the one addressed in briefer terms here: we continue the exploration of tragedy's problematisation and renewal of Athenian nomological knowledge with a particular focus on the enlightenment, first at the level of identity, then at the level of ethical values.

A. Identity

Jean-Pierre Vernant brings the tragic genre's overall treatment of the self into perspective when he asserts that as a part of its fostering of a tragic consciousness through the 'problematisation of all norms'[700], and in contrast with the naivety of *mythos* that doesn't question itself, tragedy places the traditional symbolic representative of humankind in myth, the hero, on stage and calls it into question. The self becomes a problem:

> 'In the tragic perspective, man and human action are presented not as
> realities that one can define or describe, but as problems. They are

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[700] Vernant J.P & Vidal-Naquet P., 1999, I, p.24

presented as enigmas, the double meaning of which can never be fixed or exhausted.'[701]

The plight of the main character in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos* has already highlighted much of this problematisation with regards to identity, and the basic enlightenment conception thereof: Oedipus is an enigma to himself as well as others. The process of identification of this man is particularly difficult. Generally, one is identified through a name, which may have a specific meaning and some aspiration for or omen about identity, then located in space and time through a narrative that involves some information about genealogical as well as geographical provenance, and finally about present activity; it is the concurrence of an essential process that expresses one's intrinsic properties (e.g. one's name) and a differential process that demarcates one's singularity relative to others, and also an associative process in which one is identified with a community and a context.[702] In Oedipus' case, most of this information is unknown, as if he had no past: his identity, deprived as it is of traditional associative markers other than those of his present occupation, is ruled by a synchronic tyranny, a tyranny of the present. In the same way, by returning to his mother's bed, he returns to the place of his conception and birth in a perverse loop that symbolises this entrenchment in the present and a defiance of the natural order of time. This facilitates his identification as the enlightened self-made man, the autonomous individual emancipated from the constraints of birth, community and tradition.[703] Oedipus' understanding of his identity, akin to Locke's influential theory of self, is of an intrinsic, essential, character, unchanging in time;[704] and he exclaims his need to act in ways that remain true to it[705]: his identification is dominated by a Parminedean demarcation of singularity. Everything and everyone refers back to Oedipus, who is totally self-absorbed: the citizens who implore him to save the city from the plague are told by him that their suffering is also his (but his, he says, is greater), that '*my spirit groans for city and myself and you at once*'.[706] Even his expression of selflessness is self-referential[707], and his apparent compassion is

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[701] Ibid.p.30

[702] Euben P., p.96

[703] Ibid., p.98

[704] Locke considers the self as the "same thinking thing" throughout time, and this understanding of continuous personal identity is necessary to the *a posteriori* justice of rewards and punishments. Locke J., 1996

[705] E.g. Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannos,* ll.1084-1086: 'Such is my breeding, and I should never prove so false to it, as not to find the secret of my birth...'

[706] Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannos,* ll.63-64

[707] Euben P., p.110

perhaps only concern for himself.[708] As he lacks the bulk of the relational markers that would associate him to community and land, binding him to particularities, he is free to define himself from a blank slate and become the One, the discrete individual who can impose an ahistorical universality through the projection (and thus replication) of his essential conception of identity onto relationships and social categories as well as objects of knowledge. Oedipus does not consider his identity to be bound in any way by relationships to person, custom or place: it is a thing-in-itself, non-relational, independent of all else. Hence he chooses for himself the role of tyrant, the absolute ruler who breaks with custom and justifies his total domination not through any qualities inherited from the past, be they mythological or genealogical, but only through the excellence of his present ability. Of course, the role also matches the requirements of the characteristic that Oedipus considers to be the essence of himself: the desire to know. Oedipus' approach to identity as a function of the present follows the same broad lines as the approach of the enlightenment, and even, through Locke's influence, of liberalism: the knowing subject relentlessly criticises all past "givens" with the view that one can emancipate one's present self from repressive social forces, and thereby express one's essential characteristics. The self, apart from the axiomatic assumption of its rational essence, is a blank slate, an entity that is not part of the natural world and thus cannot be discovered other than through the effects of its expression in behaviour – hence the quest to know the self through "innate ideas" and contemplation is rejected, from Locke, to D'Alembert's preface to the *Encyclopédie,* to Voltaire and beyond.[709] Identity is prioritised over difference, being over becoming in an essentialist ontological schema of fixity. The past is a fixed slate on which the present can write itself, an inconvenient pre-determined multiplicity on which the simple universality of the single vision can assert itself through the will of the individual. The associated understanding of human action is tied to the notion of autonomy, the negative freedom from external authority where "pure" individual will can assert total self-determination by casting off the shackles of the past or of others, and express the self in its true nature. Oedipus makes many statements along these lines: he will assert what he considers to be the essence of his character (his will to know) in spite of all other considerations.[710]

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[708] Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannos,* ll.135-141
[709] D'Alembert, *Discours Préliminaire de L'Encyclopédie,* Colin, Paris, 1893 e.g. "All of our knowledge is reducible to sensual knowledge ... innate ideas [take the place of] ... truth when prejudices or sophism have expelled it" pp.14-15 (my translation). Locke J., & Voltaire, *Lettres Philosophiques* as cited in Kors A.C.
[710] E.g. Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannos*, ll.1058-59, l.1065, 1076-77

Just as it has problematised the monistic epistemology represented by Oedipus, so the play problematises its expression in the essentialist ontology of the self. The riddle of the sphinx, hanging like a spectre over the play, points to many of the questions about the self, such as: how can one man also be many, taking on so many forms throughout life and still persist with a continuous and identifiable essence? It is clear from the beginning that the apparent unity of the great Oedipus is but the veil of his own ignorance on the multiplicity beneath. As we have seen, the meaning of his name is ambiguous, a portentous omen of the rupture and confusion lying behind his own that constantly threatens to break out: his own speech unwittingly expresses the polarities of his character, polysemic expressions twisting back on themselves to speak the truth that is unknown to him. In the play, the truth of personal identity or of any other human qualities is a function of the names that express it (words) in oft-ambiguous language, and the latter translates the multiplicity and ambiguity of the human self.[711] Hence, the excessive unity required by an idealised attempt to make one simple identity (for instance, of the *tyrannos*) out of a variety of intertwined and sometimes counteractive layers determined by the past (e.g. birth, curse, abandonment by Thebans, adoption by Corinthians) or sought for in the present through an effort of will (e.g. advancement of knowledge or social status) becomes a source of continued frustration as well as a source of disruption, particularly in the environment dominated by the expectation of total self-determination. Indeed, Oedipus' attempts to impose a singular identity bring about his downfall as they are shown to violate distinctions essential to social order, on all levels: his incest collapses many of the generational and kinship differences of the *oikos* just as it transgresses the boundary between civilisation and savagery, man and beast; his parricide and regicide desecrates the basis of a patriarchal society; his tyranny, and the manner in which he exercises it, crosses the threshold between man and god whilst also breaching the juridical and political equality of the *polis*.[712] Oedipus thinks himself above and outside the social distinctions and associated constraints that circumscribe the lives of others, imagining himself self-made and thus emancipated from these; and yet, by being himself, the rational seeker and master, he is bringing about the necessitous fate, tied to his origins, that he thinks to free himself from.[713] Indeed, he had thought to have earned his authority as ruler of Thebes in defiance of the line of succession, and discovers that he has merely

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[711] Rocco C., p.51
[712] Segal C. in Rocco C., p.49
[713] Euben P., 1990, p.98

inherited that which was predetermined by his birth. As Euben puts it, Oedipus' initial enlightenment-style redefinition of himself turns out to be 'neither chosen nor innovative but rejects a past it unknowingly replicates.'[714] The enlightenment individual seeks to become the ideal model of the autonomous, rational, and fully self-constituted subject by imposing its universality on all else, and the tyrant is a brilliant metaphor of this monistic totalitarianism; the downfall that Oedipus precipitates through this very project is generally read as a Sophoclean indictment of it as well as a reassertion of the multiplicity, contingency and ambiguity within human identity.[715] His singular identity turns out to be a disguised multiplicity, the Many behind the One, embodying an answer for this component of the riddle but not a solution to it: his life, like the human condition, is merely another riddle.

The mechanisms of the play's tragic reversal first involve a reassertion of the relational and collective nature of identity, and thus of its evolution in time. Oedipus turns out to be the central node in a network of polarities, and this is brought to light through his successive encounters with others in the play; and each of these encounters contributes to his development and final choice to radically transform himself. Each meeting, be it dramatised in the play (with the priest, the supplicant citizens, Creon, Teiresias, Jocasta and two shepherds in succession) or merely evoked (with his father at the crossroads, or the oracle of Apollo at Delphi) discloses his identity both differentially, through his antagonism and/or evident difference with his interlocutors, and associatively, through his connection to them and their community by way of some sort of similarity. In other words, the audience discovers that his "identity/difference" is created socially through interaction and not exclusively through what he thinks to be self-expression. We have already seen how Oedipus' *agon* with Teiresias exposes the radical difference between the prophet of revealed knowledge and the tyrant of self-obtained, rational knowledge; and also how it discloses the similarity between the two in terms of the arrogance of the possessor of knowledge who believes himself outside of the community he purports to serve. This unacknowledged connection is taken further when Oedipus purposefully blinds himself, uniting himself with the blind seer in terms of his outward condition.[716] In a comparable manner, his first encounter with the supplicant citizens shows how he identifies with them to excess through his present function as ruler of the city, and is thus paradoxically akin to one of them at the same time as he is utterly different to

[714] Ibid.
[715] Euben P., 1990, pp.96-129; Segal C., 1999, pp.207-248; & Rocco C., pp.34-67
[716] Euben P., 1990, p.125

them (groaning, as he says, for all of them at once); much in the same way, he suffers with them from the plague and yet is himself the cause of the plague. The whole narrative of *Oedipus Tyrannos* is in many ways a reassertion of particularity, and of the roles of family and community, in the formation of identity: the man who thinks of himself as *sui generis* unknowingly returns to his birthplace and discovers the role of his parents and his city in shaping his life, and the resulting new sense of identity leads him to change his way of life. The previously highlighted return to a willing dependency on his daughters, the city elders, and the new ruler at the end of the play is the climax of this new identification within the collective: not only does he understand how they will play a part in his new life, but he also acknowledges the impact of his new characterisation on them – his daughters, he says, will be shunned because of who he is.[717] Here there is a clear emphasis on the desirability of this conception of identity as the juncture of individuality and community, co-constituted by the one and the many, as opposed to an exclusion of one by the other: Sophocles is reinforcing the public ethos and its notion of the "public self" for the citizens, while also disrupting the essentialism and individualism of Oedipus' enlightenment-style approach to identity. As Dodds sees it, Oedipus is the embodiment of the daring spirit of Periclean Athens as it is outlined in Pericles' funeral oration, and it is his public ethos that initially drives him forward in an investigation that everybody else wishes to sweep under the rug out of concern for him.[718] Oedipus pushes on despite the danger to himself, in the same spirit as the Athenians who 'in the city's service [...] use their bodies as if they did not belong to them'.[719] However it is not a complete dissolution of the individual within the collective; far from it, as once Oedipus has recognised the delusion of his project of mastery, he blinds himself, which is not only an act of self-abnegation (a mutilation of his senses) and of surrender to others, but also an act of self-determination, an assertion of his individual will through which he chooses insight over sight. In a similar duality, he asks Creon for a life of exile, and thereby submits himself to the collective authority whilst expressing his own will to pursue an independent project. This great reversal also exemplifies the final "rupture-and-continuity" of Oedipus with himself: in his self-blinding, he is rejecting everything that he once was and his life purpose of mastery through knowledge, in a conscious act of becoming; and yet in this same action, he remains true to himself, pursuing truth, which he has steadfastly declared to be essential to his character (only the means has changed

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[717] Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannos,*ll.1486-1502
[718] Dodds E.R. in Sophocles, transl. Fagles R.,   pp.138-140
[719] Pericles funeral oration in Thucydides *History of the Peloponnesian War,* quoted in Sophocles, transl. Fagles R., p.140

now that sensual knowledge has proven fallible). It is thus an ending exemplifying the creative tension that exists in human life between a necessary duality of individual and collective identification: plurality in unity, the riddle of existence in the "tension of opposites".

The riddle of the sphinx, as Euben sees it, points to the question of human ontology, and also the question of agency or freedom within this: "What is man?" And: "Can man be defined by men?"[720] Overall, the answers of Sophocles in *Oedipus Tyrannos* can be read as a contribution to the tragic problematisation of the self, with a specific emphasis on critiquing the monistic excess of enlightenment essentialism, and its tendency to fix and reify identity-as-being whilst marginalising differentiation and becoming. Whilst reacting against this Parminidean schema, the play and the tragic genre does not promote the complete opposite which would have identity as an irreducible plurality. In presocratic terms, *Oedipus Tyrannos* adopts more of a Heraclitean position of diversity-in-unity, being in becoming: as a reaction to the Greek enlightenment, its emphasis is on diversity and ambiguity underlying identities that like Oedipus' maintain a degree of stability over time, can be shaped through individual will, but are also greatly determined by outside forces. For Vernant, the tragic genre maintains the ambivalence of Heraclitus' statement: '*ethos anthropou daimon*'; that can be read as either "man's character is in reality a *daimon*" or "man's character is what is [erroneously] called his *daimon*".[721] In other words, in tragedy, the self and individual will are neither driven exclusively by a transcendent agent of divine will and fate, nor as a totally independent and logical expression of each person's character (thus maintaining the ambiguous interaction of human and divine that is characteristic of archaic thought). Sophocles' Oedipus is a clear example of this: at the end, he recognises that his actions are both the product of his own character and the will of Apollo, and heroically takes responsibility for them ("*but the hand that struck me was none but my own*"). He thus becomes the symbol of tragic freedom, asserting some level of individual autonomy and responsibility in spite of the great forces that co-constitute his self and his actions. In the terms of the modern western debate about the self, tragedy can also be situated in the tension of opposites: the debate has largely been conducted in the spectrum between those like Jurgen Habermas who, in Euben's words, believe that as 'autonomous beings possessing a unified will and stable self, we can ... define ourselves and control the consequences of our actions and the meaning of our lives', and those like Michel

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[720] Euben P., 1990, p.100
[721] Vernant J.P. & Vidal-Naquet P., vol.I, 1999, p.30

Foucault for whom we are 'socially constructed individuals or historically constructed subjects who lack any fixed identity apart from the ... forms of discourse that shape regimes of power/knowledge that we are largely unable to consciously control or judge and completely unable to judge outside their own terms.'[722] As we have seen, the life of Oedipus is a progression from a belief in complete autonomy and self-definition, via its problematisation in a tragic reversal, to a revelation that is perhaps closer to the determinism of the "constructed subject": a life defined by fate, the enlightenment trap of power/knowledge, and the unforeseen consequences of past actions. William Arrowsmith summarises this aspect of the play:

> 'Oedipus has [...] the ungovernable tragic ignorance of all men: we do not know who we are or who fathered us but go, blinded by life and hope towards a wisdom as bitter as the gates of hell. The cost of action is suffering and heroism is the anguished acceptance of our own identities forged in action and pain in a world we never made.'[723]

This is the conception offered by the play with regards to a human identity that has ultimately been recast as a riddle with no final interpretation, and as an ambiguous entity that is bound by forces outside of our control and/or muddled by our own limited attempts to control it. Oedipus the subject is shown to be an historically constituted entity, shaped at every turn by a complex web of relations with people and societal practices (his early rejection of prophecy for instance): the play itself is akin to a Nietzschean "historicisation of the subject" or a Foucauldian "genealogy of the self".[724] It demonstrates that Sophocles had some form of understanding of the mechanisms of subjectivity as the interrelations of truth, power and the self, foreshadowing the works of these modern authors: what we think of ourselves ("identity") is determined by how we come to know ourselves, which is in turn related to how we go about governing ourselves and others (ethical practices). And yet Sophocles still offers a lesson that hovers in between both extremes: even though its conclusion is closer to the state of imprisonment and limitations that one would naturally expect in tragedy and myth, it subtly promotes the aesthetic greatness inherent in Oedipus' assertion of agency in the face of his tragic limitations. His *anagnorisis* (recognition) of the tragic nature of his identity and fate is somewhat forced upon him (by Apollo and

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[722] Ibid.
[723] Arrowsmith quoted in Euben P., 1990, p.106
[724] Cf. Flynn T., throughout, for an explanation of these concepts.

Teiresias); and yet by not accepting this until he himself has tested the truth by his own criteria, continuing to investigate it despite the danger it poses to himself, and finally appropriating it by integrating it into an existential narrative and a conscious change of direction, Oedipus is grasping an "awful" life with his claws and tearing out a redefinition of himself within the narrow parameters available to him, displaying an "awesome" heroism that gives us a final impression of his life as *deinos,* awesome and awful at once. He is thus affirming his self as an assemblage that, like his life narrative, is heavily determined by outside forces, and yet still an entity from which he can wrest something new: existential meaning and the sense of direction that this brings, however fragile and contingent their premises might be. And this seizure of meaning is an expression of individual will and a practice of freedom, at once a symbolic act of resistance against his overwhelming fate (opening up new spaces for thinking and action) and a constructive re-creation of meaning for himself within this fate (a self-cultivation). In this way, he can go beyond the senselessness of a tragic reality shaped by ambiguity and reversal – without transcending it through the assertion of some metaphysical premise (as in Kant's transcendental assumption of freedom[725]) - and remould his identity and ethical framework through the lessons of life experience and on the basis of the aesthetic framework of the tragic representation. The tragic, as Rosenstein says, 'represents what goes beyond but does not and can never transcend'[726]; it is the place of failure of human understanding and capability that is immanent to existence. Hence the tragedies' principal role is to highlight the contingency and the lack in human representations – any constructive content is tentative, relatively implicit, and political (debatable or "radical": without any essential foundation other than an awareness of tragic limitations). Oedipus was never able to transcend his circumstances, his origins, his identity, or his fate; but he was able to question and redefine himself within these, and thus construct a sense of something greater than himself, which became a new point of reference for his framework for judgement.

It is important to note that this new conception of his identity and the resulting ethos are also founded in the community, in his family and the *polis* of Thebes, without which the tragic problematisation and renewal of the self would be restricted to an individualistic exercise. As is often the case in tragedy, his suffering turns him back to his community for consolation, teaching him a form

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[725] For Kant, freedom is a transcendental notion, an axiom at the start of the causal chain, an assumption that emanates from the noumenal world. Lambropoulos V., pp.22-28
[726] Rosenstein quoted in Lambropoulos, 2006, p.10

of wisdom he would not otherwise have acquired. After all, the *polis* is the 'vital realm of speech and action'[727] in the play, and even the supremely isolated and all-knowing tyrant only finds himself through dialogue and debate with a wide array of its citizens. As it is, by founding it inside a communal framework, the playwright enables the tragic process to draw on and contribute to the wider ethical framework that is the public ethos (escaping the accusations of individualism often levelled at other presumed "anti-essentialists" like Nietzsche or Foucault[728]). In any case, just as mortality provides a limit through which life can acquire meaning, the tragic consciousness of human limits can provide an immanent framework in which meaning can be defined. By charting an ontological course between radical determinism and total freedom, tragedy posits notions of self, identity, and autonomy as problematic, and thus as political notions; it avoids the enlightenment pitfalls in which transcendental notions are dogmatically asserted and become 'counter-political'.[729] Tragedy's rejection of monistic theories on the basis of these limits, as well as its continual problematisation of the self and the resulting ethical values, is also a platform for pluralism and politicisation; it offers a disruption of fixed and normalised identities and thus, as already mentioned, it is 'a sceptical faith necessary for the renewal of ethical politics'.[730]

B. Values

Tragedy's pluralisation of nomological knowledge through the problematisation of truth and of the self involves a questioning of ethical values, as well as a re-assertion of a basic framework of values on which tragic and pluralistic worldviews can be constructed. The monistic scheme in which a fixed and essentialist conception of truth and identity lead to a fixed and dogmatic conception of ethics - and the resulting inflexible behaviour - is disrupted time and again as the playwrights call into question the widely held values of their fellow citizens. By placing the heroes of myth on a modern stage, they play off the archaic *mythos* of oral and poetic lore and *logos* of the *polis* and its new enlightenment thinking against each other in order to call much of their framework of nomological knowledge into question. As has already been briefly

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[727] Euben P., 1990, p.128
[728] E.g. Nehemas A., *The Art of Living,* Berkeley, UCP, 1998 speaks of the individualism of aesthetics in Foucault and Nietzsche as opposed to the universalism of Kant.
[729] Lambropoulos V., 2006, p.22
[730] Eagleton quoted in Lambropoulous, 2006, p.147

discussed, the playwrights deploy dramatic devices such as ethical *agon* between differing interpretations of a value (such as *dike* in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*), or situations in which various values are incommensurable (Sophocles' *Antigone*), so as to highlight the inconsistencies of a culture built on both discourses, and disrupt what had been normalised.

An interesting element of this generalised ethical problematisation is a vector of critique deriving from the tragedians' role as "public servants" in an increasingly democratic polity: a new standard by which they measure a value is its compatibility with an emerging democratic imperative. This standard combines well with their pluralistic ethos - the doctrine of tragic limits results in the rejection of absolutist, monistic and inflexible truth claims – and is derived from their "public-spiritedness", the allegiance to the joint project of forging a great Athenian *polis*. In a society where all citizens have roughly equal political rights, and many of the decisions are made through the public competition of arguments and majority voting, some form of allowance for the expression of conflicting perspectives is essential for the achievement of democratic ideals. Fixed identities and entrenched opinions (like those of Ajax, Creon or Antigone), which do not allow for their own tragic limitations, the possibility of the other being in the right or the flexibility of compromise, can be continuously frustrated if in the minority and lead to non-democratic actions (the imposition of a policy by means other than provided for in democratic rules, e.g. minority rule by violent means) or the rejection of democracy itself. Such inflexibility is perceived by the playwrights as an enemy of their democratic community, and they problematise its incarnations in both mythic or enlightenment values whilst also promoting those values that enable flexibility: the tragic awareness of one's limits (the self-knowledge required by the Delphic injunction of the *gnothi seauton*) and its expression in values such as *sophrosune*.

Tragedy and enlightenment values

First we turn to tragedy's questioning of inflexible enlightenment values. Much of this has already been covered in the discussion of *Oedipus Tyrannos,* which is a problematisation of these values *par excellence*. The universalistic, monistic claims of enlightenment are called into question through their embodiment in the character of Oedipus. The paradigm of faith in human progress through the power of reason is undermined at every turn, and its excessive nature, its hubris, is emphasised in what is a tragic representation of the human condition and its limits. Like enlightenment theory, Oedipus is shown to mistake his own system

for the totality, and to believe its rationalistic and individualistic values to be universal. That a tyrant embodies these values is instructive: Sophocles has chosen to link them with totalitarian rule and present their excessive deployment as somewhat anti-democratic. We have seen how Oedipus' progression from all-knowing rule to insightful *sophrosune* and submission to the institutions of the *polis* runs in parallel with a shift in the identity of the truth-teller from select divine agents to the many "little people" of the city. The values that Sophocles promotes serve his representation of the diffusion of power and knowledge amongst the citizenry: Oedipus displays not only moderation, but mutual regard (*philia*) for his fellows through the acceptance of reasoned persuasion (*peitho*) and an openness towards the perspectives of others (*suggnomosune* or fellow-feeling). These pluralistic values, promoted not only as responsive to the potential for tragedy but also as beneficial in the context of the democratic *polis,* are presented as an antidote to the hubris of enlightenment inflexibility.

The values of self-reliance, meliorism as emancipation through rational endeavour alone, instrumentalism and universalism are fed from the epistemology of the enlightenment through to its ethics and retain the same monistic tendency that sees its problematisation in the tragic representation. For example, John Locke's ethical foundation, influential to liberalism in particular, is that the "good" is posited to be rationally accessible, instrumental, and essential to the universe (by divine ordinance): essential, as like the order of nature, it can be ascertained by any person through the application of their reason to experience; and instrumental, as virtuous behaviour is believed to lead to happiness and un-virtuous conduct to suffering (it is "profitable", and this, Locke claimed, could be empirically verified). Hence, to behave ethically is to do what is both rational and in the interest of oneself (it is "natural") by pursuing happiness and avoiding suffering, as this will be of ultimate benefit to society as well. This expression of the rational self requires the elimination of the influence of arbitrary authority and irrational ideas over the mind: freedom is negative individual liberty, the freedom from constraints imposed by others that hinder the exercise of rational self-expression (the pursuit of self-interest).[731] This naturalised essentialism differs somewhat from the more idealist strand of enlightenment thinking traced back to the likes of Kant and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in which self-interested behaviour is not *per se* virtuous, and freedom is not therefore, the simple absence of constraints. Rather, it is the wilful imposition of self-enacted laws upon oneself: it is a transcendental

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[731] Kors A.C., throughout.

ideal that is rationally but not empirically or instrumentally self-evident. For Kant, the rational will is necessarily an autonomous will, and ethical values are necessarily universal as reason dictates the same things to all people through the categorical imperative (roughly, the moral imperative that one should act only according to maxims that one can conceive of as universal laws with the proviso that one sees oneself as, and treats other rational persons as, ends and not merely means to an end). Morality is rational, and persons endowed with reason are assumed capable of adopting a "moral point of view" through a thought process in which they adopt an objective, disinterested and impartial position from which they can rationally evaluate morals and judge accordingly. Kant's categorical imperative (itself preceded by Rousseau's "general will") and his conception of autonomy have inspired, in more recent times, Rawls' "original position" and Habermas' "ideal speech situation"; all are ethical foundations justified by the imaginative thought experiment that is the "moral point of view".[732] Even in these more recent theories, which attempt to evade or at least address accusations of monism through a doctrine of fundamental rights, a specific form of rationality is reified and essentialised as a universal characteristic of the human condition; and this is the foundation on which an idealised and universal procedure of negotiation is built in order to reach an ideal rational consensus (a liberal political project constructed around a rights-based political morality).[733] In any case, the ethical systems inspired by Locke or Kant that have been dominant in enlightenment and liberal thought rely on foundations that are universalist and rationalistic and thus, in the tragic perspective, problematic and prone to reversal.[734] We have already seen how such foundations are hubristic – in the sense of excessively inflexible - in the tragic representation and how, as in the example of Solon's laws, the presumption of a perfect rational consensus is a vehicle for tragic reversal; and also, how tragedy's assertion of the existence of value-incommensurability through the dramatisation of ethical *agon* further problematises monistic ethical systems.

Tragedy and mythic values

Second, the tragedians call into question many of the ethical values of *mythos*. The early archaic values of the heroic ethical code had persisted as an influential source

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[732] De Oliveira N., pp.583-606; and also *original position*, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy
[733] See Chapter IV, n.71 on the pluralist pretence of the rights-based projects of Habermas and Rawls. Chantal Mouffe outlines how they are in fact attempts to find a transcendental ground for politics in Mouffe C., 2000, pp.17-45 and 80-107

of Hellenic nomological knowledge, in particular through the epic canon of Homer, which was still an essential feature of their education, was recited in public festivals, remained influential for ritual and cult, and further idealised in the epic poetry of Pindar and others.[735] Many of the values of the heroic code - composed centuries earlier when raiding was more prevalent than mass warfare, and the *polis* was still emerging from clusters of rural aristocratic estates and warrior assemblies[736] - were dissonant with the environment of a democratic Athens and ripe for revision. The tragedians placed the heroes on-stage and problematised the elements of this code that were clearly out of step with the greater collectivism and egalitarianism required by the democratic city. This required a dampening of the individualistic, competitive, and retaliatory ethical values that could harm societal cohesion, and a participation in the historical shift of Greek culture towards a more 'cooperative ethics'.[737] The old heroic ethos was built around the pursuit of *arete* (excellence measured in success or skill) and *time* (personal honour) and the avoidance of *aidos* (shame – the loss of status before one's peers), in part, through a code of reciprocity that demanded gift for gift and retaliation for injury, in a network of obligations to others (*xenia* – the guest-host relationship) that separated *philoi* (friends) from *echthroi* (enemies).[738] We have already seen how many of the plays point out the hubris of an inflexible enforcement of the heroic code, whether it be on one hand through the exposition of the absurdity and inhumanity of rigid attachment to principle, or on the other through the dramatisation of the insoluble social conflicts that this leads to when the obligations of different agents are incommensurable. Instances of the former kind include Ajax preferring to torture, kill and commit suicide rather than moderate his stark division of the world into *philoi* and *echthroi*; the never-ending cycle of revenge killings in the *Oresteia*; and the honourable, stereotypically heroic, but ultimately naive and futile self-sacrifice of Polyxena in Euripides' *Hecuba*[739]. Ethical *agon* such as those in Sophocles' *Antigone* and *Philoctetes* pit duty to the *polis* against the tighter-knit allegiances to individual and familial justice, and are examples of the latter kind. Indeed, the overall stance of the tragedians with regards to values is one of moderation, of *sophrosune*: the universalistic truth claim inherent in the inflexible attachment to and/or identification with a value is presented as tragic and utterly devoid of the awareness of human limitations (tragic consciousness). In tragedy, only the gods, who have no limits, can afford to

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[735] Cf. Chapter I.
[736] Murray O., 1993, pp.36-58
[737] Ibid., p.135
[738] Ibid., pp. 36-58 also Winnington-Ingram R., throughout.
[739] Arrowsmith W. in Grene D. & Lattimore R., vol.IV, p.496

have such rigidity and indifference to the suffering it brings about (for instance, Dionysos in the *Bacchae* or Aphrodite and Artemis in *Hippolytus*[740]), and there is nothing laudable about this "great indifferent thoughtlessness".[741] The heroic men and women of myth are portrayed attempting to act with this godlike inflexibility as they follow draconian codes of justice, but as mere mortals, they come to grief; this is precisely the type of hubris portrayed by the tragedians as leading to their downfall.[742] The point here, it would seem, is that the inflexible adherence to ethical values and associated identities leads to a tragic reversal: when people mistake their beliefs for universal values, when they see them as an extension of their own identities, tragedy is at hand, and the negotiated compromises of democracy in peril. The tragedians' problematisation of the notion of justice as retribution – a central issue in many tragedies - and the tentative ethical renewal that they offer in its stead are instructive in this regard.

The principle of *xenia,* of reciprocity in relationships expressed in the demarcation of *philoi* from *echthroi* and summarised in the maxim "do good to friends and harm to enemies" was a key target of the tragedians' critique; many if not most of the extant plays problematise this important pole of ancient Greek ethics.[743] The trouble with *xenia* is that in certain instances, as in the debates about the burial of enemy combatants in both *Antigone* and the *Suppliant Women,* the socio-political version of *philia* (friendship or mutual regard) that one owes to fellow citizens can clash with the other version, kinship loyalty. And so Antigone's brothers are *philoi* by blood, but as they both died in a battle against each other for the Theban throne, one defending Thebes and the other attacking it, they are also *echthroi* – an enmity of war in the heroic code that even death does not annul.[744] A central question of the play is then: should the *philia* of family be honoured and both accorded the rights of burial, or should the *philia* of the city-state prevail and its enemy left to rot? The sequence of injury, resentment and retaliation demanded by the principle of *aidos* is also called into question, first as a result of these

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[740] Aphrodite, goddess of love and passion, and Artemis, goddess of chastity, affirm their respective properties against each other at the expense of the protagonists of the play and in a most undignified manner. Euripides often presents the people of his play as capable of a greatness not possessed by the gods who are inconsistent, whimsical and yet enforce values with absolute rigidly, whereas his heroes are capable of pulling back and exercising moderation and compassion in their own endeavours.
[741] The theme of divine pitilessness *contra* human compassion appears in many tragedies including the aforementioned Sophocles *Women of Trachis* (and its "thoughtlessness [*agnomosune*]" comment). For commentary along this line cf. Arrowsmith W., in Grene D. & Lattimore R., vol. IV, pp.537-541
[742] Winnington-Ingram R., p.328
[743] Aeschylus' Oresteian trilogy and *Seven against Thebes*, Sophocles' *Ajax, Antigone* and *Philoctetes* as well as Euripides' *Hecuba, Orestes* and *Suppliant Women* (amongst others). Winnington-Ingram R., p.129 & Storey I. & Allan A., p.70
[744] Ibid., pp.131-133

contingent and often conflicting obligations of *philoi-echthroi* (the main characters of *Antigone* and *Ajax* seem to end up unjustifiably classifying virtually everyone else as an enemy[745]) and then as a part of the critique of the insoluble cycle of retaliation that it creates.[746] This neverending sequence in the code of honour of offence demanding retaliation, which is in itself an offence demanding a new retaliation, *ad infinitum*, is quite literally 'a formula for tragedy'[747] on which many a play is built: the issue of endless retribution is a major preoccupation for the playwrights.[748] The heroic ethos is shown to be individualistic and anti-social; as Winnington-Ingram puts it:

> 'A contradiction is revealed inherent in the code between its social and its individualistic aspects. The individual strives to be outstanding and to obtain the greatest possible prestige, but it is only within a community and in the eyes of his fellows that the prestige can be won. If his claims are uncompromising - and not admitted [by his fellows], he can only cut himself off from the community'[749]

The remedial values that the tragedians put forward as a part of their renewal of nomological knowledge are generic and a part of their wider antidote for inflexible, monistic, and individualistic behaviour. They are also discreetly presented, often through secondary characters, re-asserting the genre's tradition of suggestive and tentative ethical renewal rather than authoritative and moralistic "preaching". In *Ajax*, Sophocles presents us with a stark contrast to the uncompromising hero in the flexible and generous disposition of Odysseus, who opens and closes the play by refusing to take advantage of Ajax's predicament, as would be his due in the heroic code; instead, he chooses to take pity on the fallen hero when no such pity was extended to him (Ajax had attempted to torture Odysseus), and persuades others to follow him in this course of action (others wish to deny Ajax's corpse the honour of burial).[750] Odysseus rejects the heroic code as it is too rigid and too absolute for the vagaries of human life and the contingencies of ethical thinking.[751] As in *Oedipus Tyrannos,* Sophocles is presenting

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[745] When Ismene decides to support her sister Antigone, she is rejected as an enemy for her past hesitation in the same matter, and indeed Antigone declares her allegiance only to the dead. Ajax writes off the whole Greek army for a perceived slight in the issue of his war spoils. Cf. Winnington-Ingram R., pp.11-46 & pp.117-149

[746] Ibid., p.264 & p.324

[747] Ibid., p.264

[748] Ibid., pp.324-325 & Storey I. & Allan A., p.70

[749] Winnington-Ingram R., p.60

[750] Ibid., pp.66-72

[751] Ibid., p.71

this flexibility, that is, the ability for fellow-feeling and forbearance towards others (*suggnome*) and the willingness to compromise with the opinions of others through discussion (*peitho*), as *sophrosune*, the practice of moderation necessary for living life in community*,* and the individual ethos adapted to life in the polis.[752] *Suggnome* is this initial attitude of openness and understanding when encountering the other that can be rooted in tragic awareness and moderation: if human judgements and worldviews (including one's own) are never completely reliable, then an allowance must be made for the views of others. They might be right, and even if they seem to be misled some compassionate forbearance must be made for the tragic limitations – the compassion due to all who suffer a human plight. And so, in this sense, *suggnome* is also a form of pity that is required of people towards each other as a result of a recognition of the tragic nature of their shared condition.[753] Similarly in *Antigone,* Haemon personifies for a short time all of these values in opposition to an excessive tyrant, his father Creon (before succumbing to his own tragic passion and threatening to kill his father, then committing suicide alongside his bride-to-be Antigone). In one key address to Creon, he outlines the spirit of this moderation, and characterises its opposite in the person who claims to possess an exclusive hold on truth and/or sees it as an extension of their own inflexible identity:

> *A man who thinks that he alone is right,*
> *Or what he says, or what he is himself,*
> *Unique, such men, when opened up, are seen,*
> *To be quite empty. For a man, though he be wise,*
> *It is no shame to learn - learn many things,*
> *And not maintain his views too rigidly*[754]

Shortly thereafter Haemon accuses his father of wanting to talk '*but never to hear and listen*'.[755] His call for moderation and openness to the perspectives of other in debates is another demonstration of *sophrosune* and *suggnome*, but also of *peitho,* the persuasion and persuadability that defuses antagonistic conflict by virtue of its reasonable – that is, moderate and flexible – nature. It is differentiated from self-interested rhetoric (persuasion as imposition – in sophistry for example) through its openness towards the other, unlike, for instance, the clearly self-serving Greek attempts to bring Philoctetes back into the Trojan war in the eponymous play.

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[752] Winnington-Ingram R., pp.11-72
[753] Ibid., pp. 327-328
[754] Sophocles, *Antigone*, ll.762-767
[755] Ibid., l.821

The insertion by Sophocles of a character such as Haemon to mediate the tragic and implacable ethical *agon* of Creon and Antigone shows the importance that the playwright attaches to *peitho* and all the practices it represents: moderation in argument, listening to one's adversary, open-mindedness, willingness to concede, and so forth. Moreover, as Haemon is facing in Creon a tyrant who very much embodies the pejorative sense of this term, there is a sense that the playwright is using Haemon to play the part of the democratic role-model: his *peitho* is also being presented as a value of public interest in the Athenian *polis*. The concept is also central to three Aeschylean trilogies (of which the *Oresteia* is one as will be seen below) in which the victory of persuasion brings some kind of resolution to ongoing tragic conflicts of value.[756] For Winnington-Ingram, it reflects a tragic promotion of the moderating concept of *peitho* – 'its transforming, reconciling power' - in its dualism with *bia* (violence, force), which is itself a recurring theme in Greek thought.[757] The fact that Haemon himself is – by all accounts justifiably - not able to hold to *peitho* or any other of these tragic principles in the face of his father's extreme provocation (Creon sentences Antigone to death) illustrates their fragility and their embeddedness in a tragic world: they are immanent values that can be deployed in attempts to avert tragedy, not transcendent ideals that will inoculate society against it. Not only do people frequently fail to uphold them, but even when they do it can lead to nought: Oedipus' daughter plays a similar mediating role, attempting to gently persuade those around her in *Oedipus at Colonus*, but fails repeatedly in the face of their tragic inflexibility.[758]

All of these values are also infused with *philia,* the bond that can rise above blood-kinship and thus enable the artificial community (with its artificial identities) that is the *polis.* In this positive tragic deployment, *philia* is detached from its opposite *echtria* (or *echtos,* hate or enmity), and the emphasis is placed on its stand-alone merits at the expense of reciprocity (*xenia*) and enmity. The emphasis of *philia* is re-oriented as a value that enables the fellowship of community (*koinonia*) rather than the divisions within the community; one can imagine how this would be of use in the transition from the old aristocratic society and its blood-based distinctions of *genos* to the more egalitarian democratic city with its artificial divisions (the new "tribes" and second names). In his generosity, Odysseus had chosen to privilege *philia,* the mutual regard of those belonging to a community,

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[756] The victory of persuasion over the schism between *nomos and thesmos* in the trilogies of *Suppliant Maidens* (cf. n.69 in chapter IV) and *Prometheus Bound* (cf. n.70 in chapter IV). Cf. Winnington-Ingram R., p.326 n.55

[757] Winnington Ingram R., p.272

[758] Ibid., p.274

over the demands of honour for retribution against Ajax. The importance of *philia* is explicitly demonstrated at the end of Euripides' *Heracles*, where the arrival of another model character, the mythical Athenian ruler Theseus, prevents the play's eponymous hero from taking his own life (in an act of auto-retribution for the mad slaughter of his own children). Because of his *philia* for Theseus, and the hope that the latter's compassion brings to him, Heracles eschews his duties to heroic code and blood kinship that demand his suicide; unlike Ajax, he will not succumb to cowardice but endure to live.[759] In a move heavily imbued with symbolism that closes the play, Theseus welcomes the hero to return with him to Athens to enjoy the *philia* of the *polis,* the mutual regard of co-citizens that will act as surrogate for the lost love of his blood relations. Mythical heroes, Theseus tells him, do not need *philoi*, as they have the supernatural help of the gods, but humans do;[760] Heracles, newly reduced to the weakness of humanity by divine abandonment, must adjust to the necessity of suffering that he now faces; the '*fatherland*' of the *polis* which '*breeds good children*'[761] is the environment in which the *philia* that enables the individual to cope with this suffering flourishes. Much like the other values espoused by tragedy, the version of *philia* promoted for the *polis* is no romanticised notion; like in *Heracles*, it gives the main protagonist enough hope to live on in spite of suffering, but just as the hero carries with him the curse of his infanticide, *philia* in the democratic *polis* 'is never absolutely clear of the blood and violence created by its exclusions'.[762] Violent force is at the origins of the city-state and secures the boundaries within which *philia* can thrive; even within the *polis* the fear of this violence or its communally-sanctioned exercise secures the city when *philia* fails*, as in the end of the *Oresteia* (as we will see in the next chapter).

Parrhesia

The mythic concept of justice as retribution is but one of the traditional ethical themes that the tragedians problematise in their plays,[763] but as with the critique of

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[759] Euripides, *Heracles*, ll.1345-1351

[760] Euripides *Heracles,* ll.1336-1338

[761] Euripides *Heracles,* ll.1404-1405 as translated in Taxidou O., p.145

[762] Ibid., p.145. Taxidou, Arrowsmith and Storey and Allan all see the importance of this *philia* for the *polis* in the interpretation of the play. Ibid., pp.144-146; Arrowsmith W., in Grene D. & Lattimore R., vol. III, pp.270-282; Storey I. & Allan A., p.266

[763] Love and the duties of husbands and wives to each other or to their children is another example of a prominent ethical theme explored in tragedy, for example in Euripides' *Medea* or *Andromache*, Sophocles' *Ajax*, *Women of Trachis* or Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (cf. Storey I. & Allan A., p.70). The promotion of tragic values in the stead of traditional or passionate inflexibility is much the same: in *Women of Trachis*, for instance, the secondary character Hyllus will yield and honour a forced marriage against his instincts and is thus portrayed in benevolent contrast to his father the great Heracles who

enlightenment values, it illustrates well their approach to ethics as a whole. The *mise en scène* of another value, *parrhesia* (free speaking or 'telling the truth as one sees it'[764])*, is an example of how tragedy was responsive to other contemporary ethical problems, problematising and promoting new values. Indeed, when it appeared in late tragedy, this concept took on a particular political sense as an important democratic ideal - frank speaking to the powerful out of a sense of public duty. It was framed in opposition to tyranny and to the rhetorical manipulation of the sophists, and was embedded in the juridico-political discourse of *logos*. The problem of the relationship of power and knowledge was expressed in everyday Athens in the activity of the sophists, private teachers for hire who taught the art of manipulation through oratory, and went to the heart of democratic politics: in a system based on assembly debates and *isegoria* (equal rights of speech), the art of crowd control through rhetoric represented a direct threat to the ideal of political equality (*isonomia*). And so, *parrhesia* embodies a democratic response: rather than a practice of manipulative speaking to gain power over other citizens in one's own private interest, it is one of full disclosure to challenge the powerful in the public interest (and thus at a risk to oneself and one's interests). It was a recognised practice of freedom through the exercise of critical autonomy in the public interest, and it distinguished the free life of democracy from the slavish life under tyranny in Athenian thought.[765]

It first appeared in tragedy towards the end of the century in some of Euripides' plays[766], and generally means "to say everything".[767] This meant that the *parrhesiastes* – the truth-teller or person who speaks freely – communicates everything on his or her heart and mind, without holding anything back or veiling it in rhetoric, so that the interlocutors can comprehend exactly what the *parrhesiastes* thinks and believes. There was no claim to have uncovered certain, indisputable truth, or to a flawless logic of argument, but rather a view supremely worthy of confidence[768]: it means being "true to oneself" (what we would later term integrity), and having the courage to live it by speaking "truth to power".[769] It is dramatically enacted in the *Bacchae*, for instance, when a herdsman who bears

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acts in typically intransigent and heroic fashion. Jameson M., in Grene D. & Lattimore R., vol.II, pp.278-281

[764] Monoson S. in Euben P. et al.(eds.), 1994, p.175

[765] Ibid, p.176-77

[766] In *Hippolytus* circa 428B.C., and later in *Ion, The Phoenician Women, Electra, Orestes, The Bacchae*. Cf. Foucault M., 2001, pp.25-74

[767] Foucault, M., 2001, p.12

[768] Monoson S., in Euben, J. P. et al. (eds.), 1994, p.183

[769] Flynn T., 1985, p.538

dark tidings to the ruler Pentheus wishes to avoid being punished for it and asks if he can use *parrhesia* without too great a fear of reprisal, to which Pentheus consents as the messenger himself is innocent of wrongdoing.[770] The other uses of the term show that it was an informal but recognised right available only to citizens of good repute, that is, those who are perceived by their peers to have some kind of wisdom, moral integrity and good social standing[771]; and also that it was understood to be an essential component of democracy: life without *parrhesia* is the antithesis of the free citizen's, and was considered a '*slave's life*'[772], as the powerful are then unchecked and free to abuse their strength. *Parrhesia* is thus an important part of tragedy's democratic delinking of truth and power referred to in the *Oedipus Tyrannos*: the truth spoken by the upstanding citizen, his knowledge, is a necessary check on the powerful, who are blinded by the trappings of their position. Foucault sees Euripides' *Ion* as an entire play devoted to this game of truth-telling, a 'parrhesiastic play'.[773] The god Apollo is the 'anti-*parrhesiastes*'[774] who makes use of his superior power to deceive and avoid having to speak a shameful truth (that he raped Ion's mother Creusa to father the former). Ion, on the other hand, is the parrhesiastic figure who is prepared to challenge the god and any other authority (royalty or *demos)* in order to establish such truths: Euripides even provides him with short diatribes criticising monarchy and democracy alike in the manner of contemporary historical figures such as Socrates or Isocrates, in order to showcase this political form of *parrhesia*.[775] However, even though his critical attitude and questioning show him to be a *parrhesiastes* by nature, Ion – and he says this explicitly - must establish who his parents are in order to enjoy the informal civic right of *parrhesia* upon his return to Athens (a requirement for citizenship is Athenian parenthood).[776] In the end, it is Creusa's "parrhesiastic" and public denunciation of Apollo that establishes Ion's parenthood and his full rights of citizenship: the truth is finally brought to light in spite of its god, by mere mortals piecing it together through the exercise of *parrhesia* (recalling, in a roundabout way, *Oedipus Tyrannos*).

The practice of *parrhesia* is indicative of the aesthetic and public form of the values of the tragic ethos: it is an application of the pluralist understanding of truth first to the self and second to democratic politics in the city. First, as in Ion's

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770 Euripides *Bacchae,* ll.664-676
771 Foucault M., 2001, pp.25-74.
772 Euripides, *The Phoenician Women*, ll.391-392
773 Foucault M., 2001, p.36
774 Ibid., p.44
775 Ibid., p.51
776 Euripides, *Ion,* ll.670-675

case, it is clear that it is not merely an abstract principle but describes a specific activity, a 'verbal activity in which a speaker expresses his personal relationship to truth'[777] to a higher authority, within a framework of social guidelines (requiring citizenship but without being too high in the city), and also implies certain personal qualities cultivated by the *parrhesiastes* in his or her life (speaking out in service of the community rather than private or factional interest, in spite of the risk).[778] It is more of a specific practice of truth expressed and cultivated in one's lifestyle – an aesthetic of the self - than a universal principle aligned with an absolute, transcendent standard.[779] It fits well with tragedy's pluralist conception of the truth as an open-ended question rather than an absolute notion-in-itself, and this Dionysian question – of what one is, does, and can do – led to an individual search for truth-practices that one considered creative of an admirable life. *Sophrosune*, the moderate state of mind expressed in prudent actions such as *suggnome* and *philia,* is another such stylistic of life, the result of a reflection in which the individuals decide to constitute themselves as subjects and their lives as things of beauty[780], through self-mastery. The tragic ethos is a collection of such aesthetic applications of a pluralist outlook to oneself and one's lifestyle, and presupposes a conception of the self and "identity" as malleable entities (and not as later in Plato, an eternal, metaphysical "soul", or in the Enlightenment conceptions of the likes of Locke, an ontologically fixed entity). Moreover, *parrhesia* as the speaking of truth to power is an ethical practice of freedom: it embodies an individual resistance to overweening social pressures or factions. It is like an incarnation of the tragic principle of limitations and the traditional catch-cry of "*medan agan*!" (nothing in excess!) in the city.

Second, much like the other values promoted by tragedy, *parrhesia* was intended to have a positive effect in politics. Sara Monoson maintains that the citizens of Athens viewed a pervasive cultural ethic of *parrhesia* to be a necessary precondition for the flourishing of democracy's debate-centred institutions, particularly the Assembly: in today's terminology it might be designated as a part of the necessary "checks and balances" of the democratic system. The orators themselves deployed the term to describe the ideal of speech expected of them as advisors to the *polis* – they will risk punishment in order to speak what they consider to be in the public

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[777] Foucault, M., 2001, p.19
[778] Flynn T., 1985, p.538
[779] Monoson S., in Euben, J. P. et al. (eds.), 1994, p.175
[780] This was in accordance with the Greek ideal of *kalon kai agathon*, that is, of the beautiful-good. Flynn T., 1985, p.535

interest.[781] The speaker's claim to *parrhesia* was also an appeal to the virtue of the audience of citizens[782], it constituted an informal contract between the orator and the audience[783]: by suffering to listen to the conflicting opinions of others, and often criticism of its own policies, the *demos* is displaying the moderation of *suggnome*, *peitho* and *philia*. Their acceptance of such discourse is thus proof of their own placement of the public interest ahead of their private pleasure: the appeal to *parrhesia* was also a test of public interestedness, just as it is a test of the social contract of Athens and its ideals of *isegoria* and *isonomia*. Euripides' promotion of *parrhesia* can be seen as an expression of his desire to encourage healthy terms for the agonal culture of Athenian democracy, fostering the notion of a shared public interest as a bottom line for the competition of opinions. Indeed, the Athenians believed that a proposal that could garner the confidence of a large number of citizens was likely to be the best alternative available, but their belief in the accuracy of a majority decision was predicated on a certain expectation of the quality of the debate preceding the vote. They considered a decision to be the best judgement available only if it had been tested by the *agon* of differing opinions, assuming that a proposal able to withstand scrutiny and gain the reasoned confidence of many was more likely to be in the public interest.[784] The practice of *parrhesia* could help to ensure that this conflict would be carried out on a common platform, and that however divergent or unpopular the opinion, it could garner a minimum respect – and perhaps be listened to rather than shouted down - by virtue of its sincerity and public interestedness. This lessened the probability of the total exclusion of minority views and kept those who held them engaged with the democratic process. It was also a palliative for the corrosive effect of the rhetoric of demagogues and factionalists, who motivated by private or factional gain seek to dissuade the *demos* from the consideration of the general interest, and end up pitting groups against each other in unhealthy struggles for total control (leading to what Thucydides considered as the plague of civil strife). *Parrhesia* thus contributed to the test for the ideal standards of debate in democracy: that it be agonal, "parrhesiastic", and thus pluralistic. Any view could be expressed under *isegoria*, but only those spoken sincerely in the general interest are worthy of being heard, and only after conflicting views of this nature are expressed can a decision be made that reflects considered judgement. Both of these standards were actively pluralising: they lessened the likelihood of a capture of discourse by a hegemonic

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[781] Monoson S., in Euben, J. P. et al. (eds.), 1994, pp.174-175 & an example of Demosthenes using the term in such a manner p.184
[782] Ibid., p.183
[783] Foucault M., 2001, p.32
[784] Monoson S., in Euben, J. P. et al. (eds.), 1994, p.133

ideology, as a diversity of views and criticism of the powerful (the majority, leading orators, generals) were not only heard, but valorised as a requirement of ideal debate. *Parrhesia* was hence an ideal of democratic decision-making thought to result in considered and pluralistic judgement.

It is worth noting that tragedy acknowledged the limits of *parrhesia,* and problematised it like most of the other ethical values in the plays. Foucault remarks that these limits were exposed in one of Euripides' very last plays (*Orestes* circa 408 B.C.)*,* in which the word is used both in a pejorative sense for one speaker (*'bluster and ignorant outspokenness'*[785]), and in a positive sense for another: by portraying its abuse, particularly in the context of a play depicting a dystopian and anarchic democratic city, the playwright raises the question of its exact definition for practical purposes (what are the exact qualifications required by the truth-teller?); and by extension problematises truth and its relationship to power in a democratic regime (who is entitled to tell the truth in a democracy where all are free to speak and the claim of *parrhesia* used to defend ignorant bluster?).[786]

Overall, we have seen how the tragic doctrine of human limitations leads to the problematisation of absolute and inflexible ethical positions and monistic ethical systems in any discourse. By the same token it precludes the absolute adherence to any ethical framework or way of life and deliberately eschews the formulation of its own substantive ethical framework: as Lambropoulos puts it, 'the tragic has played an ethical role without acquiring a fixed moral value.'[787] The tragedians call their audience to an awareness of the limits of the human condition: the absolute truth of the "good" is not accessible in personal or political ethics as a result of the limits of ways of knowing, and thus a tragic consciousness - awareness of these limitations combined with an ethos of moderation and flexibility that does not allow for monistic or absolutist commitment - is the ethos promulgated. As a result of this very awareness, the tragic ethos is itself tentative and not a substantial ethics, but a limited set of values that constitute an open and pluralist ethical framework: open because it is not a total system or doctrine (as it rejects the possibility of such a monistic system) and because it is characterised by its constitutive lack – its self-imposed incompleteness as a worldview. The tragic awareness of limitations – the tragic consciousness - is thus a pluralist foundation on which any non-monistic ethics can be constructed. The limited set of values

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[785] Euripides, *Orestes,* ll.902-904 as quoted in Foucault M., 2001, p.58
[786] Foucault M., 2001, pp.57-73
[787] Lambropoulos V., p.10

(*peitho, suggnome, philia*) that are promoted as a response to the awareness of tragedy are themselves all derived from *sophrosune,* which in the tragic genre becomes not only self-restraint in order to avoid exceeding one's limits ("nothing in excess!"), but active self-management through moderate conduct. In his study of the term, Adriaan Rademaker notes that this meaning of *sophrosune* as prudential self-management seems to have been created, or at the very least given new emphasis, by the tragedians, as they sought to adapt the notion to the needs of the citizen in the *polis.*[788] In this active sense, it becomes also the 'positive and desirable quality of the non-heroic, free, individual citizen, who prudently manages his affairs and avoids behaviour that will bring only losses and no gains.'[789] As in the case of the notion of *parrhesia* appearing in later tragedy*, sophrosune* is not an abstract principle attached to some transcendent standard, but a "beautiful-good" value, an aesthetic of existence expressed in ethical and political practices – a nature shared by the tragic ethos of which it is a part. The pluralist vision of truth emitted by tragedy's outlook is expressed in understandings and practices of the self and politics that are equally resistant to absolute foundations and fixity, which pairs well with the egalitarian ethos of the democratic system they participated in. Once again, in their role as poet-sages for Athens, the tragedians' ethos of public spiritedness shines through and drives the renewal of nomological knowledge, adapting ethical values to the democratic imperative: producing a competent citizen lawmaker. *Peitho, suggnome, philia,* and later, *parrhesia*: all are selected for their benefit in this regard, and re-shaped to fit the mould of city under popular sovereignty as well as the tragic requirement for *sophrosune.* This central notion of tragic ethics is thus combined with the ethos of public-spiritedness, the anti-individualistic, communitarian sentiment through which the person considers the good of the community as well as their own before acting (an ethos partly rooted in the traditional "shame" ethics of *aidos* and *arete* in which one's value is primarily perceived as an external attribute ascribed by one's community[790]). The tragic consciousness is geared to the practical end of living in the *polis.*

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[788] Rademaker A., pp.137-142

[789] Ibid., p.141

[790] Schematically speaking, as opposed to the judeo-christian "guilt" morality where an individual's value comes internally, from his/her own evaluation of his/herself. Cf. Chapter I, n.27

Chapter VI

Tragedy and Politics

Reconstruction of Phidias' Athena Lemnia (450 B.C.), Staatliche Museum Dresden

Outline:

   A. The ambiguity of language and justice in the city

   B. Partiality of justice and the centrality of the *agon*

   C. Renewal through reciprocity: a limited basis for justice through reciprocal contest

We have seen how the tragic vision involves the problematisation and tentative renewal of nomological knowledge in two areas loosely categorised as "truth" and the "self". In the first an exposure of the limits of onto-epistemology precludes total knowledge and monistic claims to it, in the second this approach to the question of truth applied to the self precludes essentialist conceptions of identities and inflexible or universalist claims about the "good" in ethical values for the individual (the exposure of the limits in ethics and identity); yet in both areas, the need to construct wider meaning and a way of life is upheld, and the elements of a pluralistic platform for the renewal of these is suggested. The third category here is the extension of this tragic problematisation and renewal to the *politeia* (polity), the forms, values, and rules of the community: it highlights the plays' questioning of justice and the political "good" in the democratic *polis,* and their establishment of an ethos of moderation and reciprocity in the political contest.

Conflict – of individuals, groups, and values – is omnipresent in the tragedies, and used by the playwrights to draw attention to some of the cultural problems that cause it. By bringing to light these issues and their negative consequences, the tragedians also emphasise that some form of consensus is required, that some framework of negotiation must be institutionalised, so that competing claims would not always end in tragic spirals of violence and destruction. The *polis,* like Athenian democracy itself, is often presented as problematic and riven by conflicting claims (as is clearly the case in Sophocles *Antigone* or Euripides *Orestes,* for instance), but it still requires a space of interaction with a defined centre and boundaries, even if these are only palliatives rather than cures for the tragedy of politics. The city, in the tragic perspective, is a theoretical project with the same limitations as any other human construct: it cannot be conceived of as a total system with a substantive and fixed definition; but rather, it must restrict itself to cater for the struggle between competing claims, whilst promoting a moderating tragic ethos of *sophrosune* and public spiritedness so that this struggle would not threaten the *polis* itself. The ideal of a just polity is questioned, and the many ills of unhealthy political competition highlighted, but in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* in particular, this ideal is also partially re-founded on the notion of justice as reciprocity between claims. This notion is compatible both with the flexibility required by the pluralism of the tragic ethos, as well as with the democratic ideals of equal political rights (such as *isonomia* and *isegoria*) that appear as an

anachronistic undercurrent in the mythic setting of many of the plays. The plays reflect this search for a pluralist framework of justice, in parallel with the establishment of the democratic and legal system in Athens throughout the Fifth Century B.C.

This chapter will focus on the tragedians' exposure of the value and limits of rational attempts to order a just polity, first by briefly examining their exposure of the ambiguity and partiality of language and the distortions in communication that this creates in all of the debate-centred institutions of the democratic *polis*. It then goes on to explore the tragedy's problematisation of monistic claim-making, particularly in the discourse of instrumental rationality, as well as the centrality of the political *agon* to the city. Last of all, it uses the end of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* to highlight the value of an ethos of justice as reciprocity as an imperfect but useful pluralist framework of negotiation between political claims.

A. The ambiguity of language and justice in the city

In Fifth century B.C. Athens, as discussed in the first chapter, intellectuals such as Thucydides and Gorgias were emphasising the importance of language to the social and political order – the simultaneous disruption of linguistic and ethical conventions had exposed the arbitrary and interested nature of both of these.[791] In a polity governed through public debate, the exposure of the ambiguous nature of language was a matter of considerable political import. The tragedians both exploited and participated in this linguistic turn by actively problematising language throughout their plays, exposing its unfixable and partial nature, and hence the limits of communication and the political projects that rely on it.

We have seen how Sophocles "Ode to Man" extends the ambiguity of human capabilities to language itself, embodying the polysemic indeterminacy of "speech and windswift thought" through its deliberate ambivalence (for instance the Ode's usage of *deinos*), just as the omen of Oedipus' name demonstrated the enigmatic and powerful nature of language and its ambiguous relation to truth. As Simon Goldhill puts it, the 'tragic texts, which depict and analyse the tensions, uncertainties and collapse of social order, return again and again to the shifting, distorting, qualities of language - the ambiguities of the normative terms of

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[791] Goldhill S., 1986, pp.1-32

society, the tensions in the civic and familial vocabulary and discourse, the twisting manipulations and over-rigid assertions of agonistic debates'.[792] Indeed, the culture-wide rupture between the archaic discourse of *mythos* (still a large part of everyday life through religious ritual and poetry recital) and the juridico-political discourse of *logos* that was the lingua franca of public life, provided fertile ground for the plays' exposure of linguistic uncertainty and its link to political conflict. The two vocabularies and the distinct principles behind each of them were already the subject of explicit comparison and debate in the domain of city law[793], and their clash, opposing old and new, contributes to the broad divide between "aristocratic/conservative" and "democratic" factions in Athens itself.[794] This disconnect was highlighted in the plays with the same fundamental legal terms (such as *dike* in the *Oresteia* or *nomos* in *Antigone, Suppliant Women or Prometheus Bound*) being appropriated by various characters in different ways for their own purposes, leading to frequent *agon* of values and the resulting tragic conflicts.

Moreover, as previously mentioned, the playwrights exposed the uncertainty at the heart of many key ethical principles in Hellenic culture: *sophrosune* in Euripides' *Hippolytus*, *sophia* in Euripides' *Bacchae*, *ananke* in Euripides' *Hecuba*. In these plays, the tragedian has chosen a central term and confronted different appropriations of it by different characters, exposing the diversity of interpretations, and thus the contingency and uncertainty inherent in both the concept and language itself. There are many other ethical terms brought into question in these as well as other plays without being as central to the narrative: in the Oresteian trilogy, for example, Charles Segal lists no less than seven.[795] The fact that there is no real resolution to the many semantic debates that characterise the plays serves to underline the ambiguity of language and of the nomological knowledge that relies upon it; this is similar in a fashion to the dialectic methods of Socrates, who repeatedly questioned ethical concepts and often ended in *aporia*.[796] Semantic uncertainty and ethical incommensurability are combined to problematise the ideal of a just political order emanating from rational debate and consensus.

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[792] Goldhill S., 1986, p.3
[793] Vernant J.P. & Vidal-Naquet P., 2001, vol.I, pp.14-16
[794] The aforementioned example of Aristophanes *Clouds* (cf. Chapter I) is a good illustration of the role of old and new vocabulary in the debates between "conservatives" and "democrats", the latter being derided for having taken power in the city with specious newfangled arguments associated with the new juridico-political discourse.
[795] Segal C. in Vernant J.P. & Vidal Naquet, 2001, vol.I, p.35
[796] *Aporia* is a position of impasse, doubt, puzzlement, and confession of ignorance, reached after the systematic investigation of a matter through *elenchus* (Socrates' preferred form of dialectic). Cf. Guthrie, W. K. C. , 1991, pp.122-129

The conflicting appropriations of such concepts, with characters of varying social standing upholding differing interpretations against each other (such as the outcast Philoctetes debating the justice of his situation with the Greeks), also served to emphasise the political and manufactured nature of consensus with regards to the meaning of language and the ethics that it codifies. In other words, the tragedians helped the audience to realise that the meaning of language and its concepts of the "good" cannot be divorced from political claims: as will be seen through the example of Euripides *Hecuba,* they are constructed through social interactions and their hierarchies (through politics). In the tragedies, the relationship between truth and power, ethics and politics, is frequently laid bare: justice in the city is shown to be a function of the struggle for control over discourse and public opinion. The various values of the political "good" are articulated not only in terms of a particular epistemological regime, but also in terms of a particular political regime.[797] Both the theory and practice of politics (in public decisionmaking), however well-intentioned the participants, are always subject to private interest and the exercise of power.

The *Oresteia*, for instance, is for Goldhill a trilogy specially dedicated to providing a drama of language and its link to the political struggle over justice in the city. In his reading, these plays trace the human project of controlling the social order by deploying accurate and powerful language. As the trilogy is also considered to be an aetiological and mythopoetic prehistory of the *polis* and its emergence[798], it is also an evaluation of the role of discourse and the use of *logos* in the construction of the civic project. The act of naming and categorising things is singled out as a form of control: in myth as well as in the tragedies, correct naming or wording can have a 'direct or binding effect'[799] on the future. This is demonstrated when, in a similar scenario to *Oedipus Tyrannos*, the chorus reflects on the naming of Helen (*Helena*) of Troy: they consider her to have been prophetically and "accurately named" (*etetumos,* root of the word etymology), in that she is revealed to be a destroyer of ships (*helenas*), of men (*helandros*) and of cities (*heleptolis*).[800] However, the characters' speeches, debates, prayers, prophecies, blessings and curses all fall short of the utopian standard of absolute communicability of language that would enable them to control their world; just as the meaning of the omen contained within Helen's name is only revealed through the tragic turn of events, so the act of naming her, like any other human project, is subject to the twists and turns of

[797] Euben P., 1993, p.29
[798] Cf. Meier C., pp.116-123
[799] Goldhill S., 1986, p.4
[800] Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, ll.681-689. Cf. Goldhill S., 1986, pp.19-20

unknowable fate. The original meaning of her name is lost, reshaped by a cruel chain of events, and reformed in a play on words that unveils its intrinsic prophetic power and also the powerlessness of the name-giver: once enunciated, language escapes the control of the enunciator and is remoulded by context (and the prejudice of the receptor). In the trilogy, the chain of communication is upset at every turn: by deceitful (Agamemnon's wife manipulating him to walk meekly into her murderous trap, and her son Orestes deceiving her in turn as he impersonates another in order to kill her) or ambiguous statements (such as the complex metaphors of the prophetess Cassandra, completely misunderstood by the chorus), the faulty interpretations of these, and outright misunderstandings. Speech is a tool for domination over others and a way to shape the world, but it turns back all too frequently on itself, with tragic results. *Dike*, justice, is repeatedly equated with the quasi-homonym *nike*, victory, by various characters seeking only to impose their will on others, and who reduce their perception of each other to enemies, in spite of their close family ties.[801] The trilogy dramatises 'the disjunctions and distortions of the exchange of language'[802] as well as the double-edged nature of those asserting themselves over others through rhetorical manipulation.

To discuss but one example, in the first of these encounters, Clytemnestra persuades her husband the king Agamemnon, newly returned from the Trojan war, to walk down a purple carpet of precious cloths that she has laid down for him upon his entry into the palace, wherein she slays him, naked, in his bath, with an axe. Her language is dripping with hypocrisy and double meaning, with repeated references to lies, ensnarement, blood, violence, bending him to her will, and death. For Kitto, she is challenging Agamemnon to see through her plot[803], for Goldhill, her 'false language is describing itself in the tale of lies that she is constructing'[804] – in other words, her speech contains a reflexivity or reference to itself through which the playwright is drawing attention to the nature and role of its language. Agamemnon at first refuses, because of the hubris inherent to the action of walking on such precious cloths (only the gods are worthy of such honour); but his wife deploys an array of rhetorical arguments, clever and yet unethical, to persuade him.[805] The queen concludes her invitation with a personal

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801 Ibid., pp.44-46
802 Goldhill S., 1986, p.28
803 Kitto H.D.F. in Goldhill, 1986, p. 11.
804 Goldhill S., 1986, p.11
805 Ibid., pp.12-13

claim to both *dike* and the will of the gods[806], which is a blatant contradiction in terms considering the action she is requesting from her husband is not only hubristic, but perverts the justice of social order in Greek culture in a variety of ways: it involves the submission ('Do not cross my will!'[807]; 'yield!'[808]) of a man to a woman, husband to wife, king to his subject, and a hubristic violation of the boundary between man and god, all due to the false pretences of deceitful language. This whole scene anticipates the even greater perversion of the king's murder at the hands of Clytemnestra, which is an actual overthrow of the social order in their city, and an unnatural assertion of passion over reason, and of the *oikos* (domain of the family[809]) over the polis; but also serves to emphasise the role of language in the maintenance of this order in both its institutional and its sexual aspects.[810] Even the queen attributes her murderous victory to her verbal prowess[811] and the chorus professes their shock at her '*mouth so arrogant*'[812]. The abiding impression after the first two plays of the trilogy is akin to that of the first half of *Oedipus Tyrannos*: language is no transparent medium of communication or rational debate, but a cryptic and ever-shifting code never fully under control of the person deploying it. There is also no room here to imagine language or discussion as a neutral system of representation or decisionmaking, as they are presented as vehicles for private interest and manipulation that should be regulated in the *polis* if some measure of justice is to be attained (as is attempted at the outcome of the trilogy, as will be explored in section iii. below).

B. *Partiality of justice and the centrality of the agon*

The playwrights expose the tragic limits of political justice in another way: not only are its foundations in language never fully fixed or controllable, but its exercise can never be fully divorced from the expression of private interest or the terms of the prevailing public discourse. Nor can a just politics be conducted exclusively in terms of a "pragmatic" rational discourse or a passionate emotional commitment. The communal ideal of the public good is always at risk of being

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[806] Aeschylus, *Agamemnon,* ll.910-914 & 958-974
[807] Ibid., l.943
[808] Ibid., l.931
[809] Clytemnestra is asserting the claims of the *oikos* over those of the *polis* in that her issues as a woman and a wife (jealousy towards Agamemnon's mistress Cassandra, mourning of the absence of her husband, revenge for the sacrifice of her daughter conducted in service of the *polis)* are given precedence over the life of the king, who is, in a sense, the State. Euben P., 1990, pp.74-76
[810] Segal C. in Rocco C., pp.145-146
[811] Aeschylus, Agamemnon, ll.1371-1375
[812] Ibid., ll.1399-1400.

disproportionately influenced by individual and factional claims, and the partial justice that results from it can transform healthy political competition into destructive conflict, leading to the community's oppression and marginalisation of some of its own members. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Euripides' *Hecuba.*

One of the main themes of the play is the problematisation of the use of "necessity" as a legitimising term. After the sack of Troy, the queen Hecuba is enslaved by the Greeks, one of her children dies as a sacrifice in honour of a dead Greek soldier; and the other is treacherously murdered by his guardian, a barbarian king and former ally who takes advantage of Hecuba's downfall to rob her son of his wealth as well as his life. In a series of antagonistic confrontations with tormentors who all claim only to be acting out of practical necessity, the suffering Hecuba slowly loses her ethics, her self-respect, and her humanity. [813] Searching for a reason for her suffering, she is faced only with the bleak logic of the tyranny of the powerful ("might is right"), where pragmatic calculations of self-interest and fear of the uncontrollable[814] underwrite a prioritisation of instrumental reasoning over the traditional ethics of honour and justice. The realisation of this contributes to her transformation into a creature (the 'bitch of Cynossema'[815]) bent on its own particular necessity - revenge at any cost, even that of her own freedom (which is offered to her, but which she spurns in favour of revenge). Tellingly, she shares her recognition of this form of societal compulsion, and of the homogenising drive of a universalist instrumental discourse, before embarking on the final path to vindictive murder and self-destruction:

> *Then no man on earth is truly free.*
> *All are slaves of money or necessity.*
> *Public opinion or fear of prosecution*
> *Forces each one, against his conscience*
> *To conform.[816]*

A specific component of social compulsion is denounced by Hecuba here: the role of social power in shaping and normalising a particular political order (in defining justice), and marginalising and repressing those at the bottom of the social

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[813] Arrowsmith W. in Grene D. & Lattimore R., vol.III, p.494
[814] The Greek leaders Agamemnon and Odysseus both explicitly state these motives in their respective encounters with Hecuba in the play.
[815] Euripides, *Hecuba*, l.1271
[816] Ibid., ll.864-869

hierarchy. Hecuba's interlocutors, rulers, generals and warriors, are the ones who can define "necessity" because they have the means to enforce it; new to the life of slavery, Hecuba learns that she must merely "conform", and that her own "necessity", even though it is perhaps more justifiable[817], will always lose out relative to the whims of the powerful. The will of the individual is always subject to the constraints of a discourse of "common sense" shaped by those who have the means to do so, in that their privileged position grants them the power to sway the masses:

> *Even if your arguments were weak*
> *If you faltered or forgot your words, it would not matter.*
> *Of themselves that power, that prestige you have*
> *Would guarantee success, swelling in your words*
> *And borrowing from what you are a resonance and force*
> *Denied to less important men.[818]*

In this case, the play - much like Athens at the time, one suspects (Thucydides' aforementioned Melian dialogue a case in point) - is filled with populist orators and a juridico-political discourse in which the instrumental *raison d'État* trumps even the most clear-cut ethical concerns: the new discourse of *logos* has found an expression in a narrow political ideology (one which is akin to modern day "realism" in international relations, which is itself inspired by a reading of Thucydides history of Fifth Century B.C. Athens[819]). Persuasion, often upheld as a virtue that prevents violence and secures harmony in the *polis,* is shown here in its less exalted form: reasoned argument and even rhetorical prowess (the latter held in lower esteem due to sophistic misdemeanours[820]) are ignored in favour of the prestige and hierarchical position of the speaker. And yet the powerful, whose position in the *polis* is never totally secure as it relies on the perceptions of others[821], are themselves trapped by a discourse of political necessity that they are merely reproducing: they use it to argue that they have no choice ('I pity you

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[817] The chorus certainly judges it like this in the play, stating that Hecuba is '*compelled by violence to suffer wrong*' (l.334); and the self-serving and sophistic arguments of her interlocutors gives one no reason to think otherwise, especially when measured against her initial motives (protecting her children).

[818] Euripides, *Hecuba*, ll.291-296

[819] cf. Lebow R.N., throughout.

[820] '*There are... sophists who make a science of persuasion/Glozing evil with the slick of loveliness/But in the end a speciousness will show*'. Euripides, *Hecuba,* ll.1192-1194

[821] Agamemnon, leader of all the Greeks at Troy, spells out how his decisions depend entirely on the perception of his armies. Ibid., ll.853-861.

[Hecuba] deeply... but my position here is delicate'[822]), as they act without regard for justice, or indeed, for Hecuba.[823] In the - deliberately anachronistic - democratic subtext of the play, they claim that the masses whose support they must maintain have no moral sensitivity outside of collective self-interest. Other events clearly demonstrate the contrary (for instance, the armies paying tribute to the nobility with which Hecuba's daughter faced her death); and so this claim is unmasked as the rulers' lack of understanding (of their subjects) and an excuse to mask their fear.[824] By extending the scope of this pragmatic logic of "necessity" to everything, they are denying customary ethics and reifying instrumental reasoning out of fear – a fear of uncertainty (the whims of the masses) that they attempt to remedy through the application of a single logic of control. This type of reasoning is admirably suited to the purpose as there is no real external referent for it: pragmatic necessity is in the eye of the beholder, and as they preach it to the people under their sway, the expectations of the latter adjust accordingly. Instrumentality then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, a *carte blanche* for self-seeking behaviour, and yet also a vicious cycle that reduces the scope of thought and action to its narrow parameters.

So then, on the one hand, Hecuba's interlocutors, despite their position at the top of the social hierarchy, "shut themselves in"[825] to their own circular logic of necessity and "out" of the ethical considerations that they recognise, revealing themselves to be enslaved by their commitment to the instrumental discourse. Like Oedipus, they are mastered by their own desire for power. They also shut themselves out of the emotional dimension of their encounter with the other, the fellow-feeling (*suggnomosunè*) that might inform these considerations, particularly the sense of pity or sympathy that they acknowledge but explicitly discount in favour of the political "necessities" at hand (parallels could be drawn here with modern political theories focused on instrumental rationality such as the realist theory of international relations[826] or the "aggregative" or utilitarian variants of liberalism[827]). The Greek king Agamemnon recognises the barbarian's injustice towards Hecuba and the need for punitive action, expresses sympathy for her, but will not do anything about it, lest it upset his "delicate position" (his army, he says,

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[822] Ibid., ll.849-854
[823] Arrowsmith W. in Grene D & Lattimore R., vol. III, p.494
[824] Euripides, *Hecuba*, ll.868-870: '*But since your fears make you defer to the mob...*'
[825] The word for "forces" in the quote above ('Then no man on earth... to conform') is *eirgousi*, which means to shut in or to shut out. *eirgousi in Liddell H. & Scott R.
[826] See Lebow R.N., for a tragic critique of realism
[827] Mouffe C., 2005, p.12

might believe him to be responsible for the murder the barbarian king).[828] The "ruler of all Hellas" is no freer than his subjects; he is just another captive of an all-pervasive discourse. In a monistic scheme of instrumentalism, the subject is isolated, fearful, and doomed to pursue control of all else, individualism triumphs, and the ethics of care that results from identification with and feeling for the other is subsumed by the definition of ends that must be pursued by any means necessary (as noted in Chapter I). Slaves and rulers alike are captured by its logic. Euripides is presenting this enlightened state of affairs - in which justice is but the plaything of the dynamics of power in society, and all are entrapped by a hegemonic[829] discourse - as a tragic situation not only for Hecuba, but for all involved: it is a 'group tragedy'[830] of the effects of a hegemony of instrumental rationality.

Hecuba is on the flipside of this scenario: the heroine is slowly ground down by the harsh effects of this monistic discourse (the "necessary" killing of her children), until she has lost all hope for justice. She is betrayed by a former ally who takes advantage of her loss of status to break the most basic of customary values, the duty of *xenia,* of hosting a guest-friend, in favour of a base form of self-interest, the desire for wealth. Like the Melians, her appeals to traditional notions of honour and morality fall on deaf ears, as they are met with the unyielding assertion of power governed by self-interest. Every time she pleads in ethical terms, appealing to the laws of mercy or to an absolute moral order, her 'prayers are thrown away on the empty air.'[831] Hecuba's stated belief in the existence of goodness and justice, her trust in matters she cannot control (like respect of her own friends for *xenia*), her willingness to become vulnerable and risk her pride, give way to despair[832] as this trust is repeatedly violated, until the only thing that is left to her is suffering.[833] Her paradigm is that of the family (*oikos*), and is not governed by the juridico-political discourse of the *polis* but by her role as a mother, by her emotional attachment to her children (unlike Antigone for whom the *oikos* was the source of duty rather than love). As the latter are unjustly taken from her, one by one, Hecuba is deprived of her trust in

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[828] Euripides, *Hecuba*, ll.853-854
[829] "hegemony" is used here and throughout in the wide, late modern, post-gramscian sense as a imperialist form of political discourse, encompassing a wide array of social, political and economic terms in a loose worldview, which seeks its own insidious normalisation and the control of the collectivity on behalf of a select group. Cf. for instance Mouffe C. & Laclau E., 2001, p.93 & p.187
[830] Arrowsmith W. in Grene D. & Lattimore R., III, p.494
[831] Euripides, *Hecuba*, l.335
[832] Ibid., ll.593-603
[833] Ibid., l.786

others and in any broad ethical framework. Like her persecutors, she loses her wider understanding of and connection to the world, her sympathy for others (*suggnomosune*), and shuts herself into a narrow self-centred "necessity": suffering and vengeance (for as suffering is all that is left to her, she will seek to make those who harmed her suffer in turn). The difference is that where the powerful follow a practical rationality aimed at self-preservation and ignore their fellow-feeling, their victim, Hecuba, rejects this approach completely and gives herself over to her emotion, hate, and to her passionate desire for retribution at any cost. It is a passion that leads her to put out the eyes of her former friend and murder his children, exhibiting a level of deceit and inhumanity that at least matches his own. In the end, the barbarian traitor-king is nothing more than an object of hate in her eyes. As with Clytemnestra *vis à vis* Agamemnon, or Medea and Jason in Euripides' *Medea*, conflict is taken beyond ethics until the other is merely an adversary to be destroyed.

'*Necessities define them all,* [...] *alienating friends*', as the leader of the chorus says.[834] Indeed, the very claim **the very claim that any human custom [hoi nomoi] should be necessary [tas anagkas]** is exclusive of others and seeks to avoid any wider explanation. All the parties in the play have given up on an ethical framework that would extend beyond themselves, and renounced *suggnomosune*, the sympathy or fellow-feeling that enables them to be sensitive to others. They have forsaken, or in the case of Hecuba, been shorn of, their humanity. Instead, they have taken up a narrow, self-centred political ethos: the instrumental rationality of the politician for the Greeks, and the emotional commitment to vengeance for Hecuba. Each ethos is revealed in the fullness of its monstrous inhumanity: the casual refusals of the Greek rulers to pursue, at very small risk to themselves, a justice that they fully acknowledge; and the psychopathic behaviour of the former trojan queen pursuing her personal vendetta. In both cases the play highlights the lack of balance inherent in these positions.

The first aspect of disequilibrium is a recurrent *problématique* of tragedy: the plays illustrate the negative consequences of those worldviews that overly privilege one aspect of the human psyche (*psuche),* that is, the conscious self and its intellectual, moral and emotional dimensions.[835] The tragedians' frequent exaltation of the principle of *sophrosune*, the moderation resulting from the balanced state of mind, and *sophia,* wisdom as holistic understandings in lieu of strictly instrumental

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[834] Ibid., ll.847-849
[835] **psuche* in Liddell H. & Scott R., particularly IV.

knowledge, demonstrates their attachment to the ideal of this balance. [836] The context of the rise of *logos* at the expense of *mythos* highlighted obstacles to this ideal state and the ethical difficulties this created for life in the *polis*. As a contributor to the enlightenment, the tragedies were often demonstrating the disastrous consequences of passions unchecked by rational thinking. The case of Hecuba herself, in spite of her victimisation, is typical: her despair, hatred, and narrow concept of justice as retribution supersede the wider moral and rational considerations that she appeals to, but has lost all hope in, after they are trampled on repeatedly by those around her.[837] The plays based on the Trojan epic cycle, Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* first and foremost, are rife with passions wreaking havoc in the city: Clytemnestra, suffering both the absence of her spouse and the loss of her daughter, goes on to commit adultery, and murder him and his lover in a fit of hate.[838] Euripides' *Medea* or Sophocles' *Antigone* and *Ajax* are other plays where private passions and the excessive factional commitments of the resulting identity politics (and its harsh friend-enemy distinctions) threaten order in the city and violate standards of justice seen to be intrinsic to humanity and civilisation (for instance, Medea's infanticide, which mirrors Oedipus' incest and parricide as a social taboo). On the flipside, the previous account of Euripides' *Hecuba* has already brought up how instrumental rationality reified at the expense of compassionate feeling is just as destructive – its dehumanising consequences destroy the possibility for harmonious social relations and repress individuals like Hecuba to the point of psychopathic behaviour.[839] The aforementioned example of Sophocles' character Philoctetes, deceived, exiled and called back to serve his army's leaders, as and when it served them, is another indictment of this politics; as is Agamemnon's choice to make a human sacrifice of his own daughter for the sake of giving speed to his army's fleet.[840] Indeed, even when *logos* is deployed in service of a public ethos generally favoured by the tragedians, the latter demonstrate that this can be excessive: as in the case of the Creon of *Antigone*, whose instrumental thinking conceives of the city as a machine, 'with people its parts to be tamed or disposed of'[841], and only too late realises:

> '*O, errors of my ill-reasoning reason!*
> *Unyielding and bringing death ...*

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[836] Lebow R.N., p.32
[837] Euripides, *Hecuba*, ll.785-845
[838] Euben P., 1990, pp.84-88
[839] Euben P., 1990, p.74
[840] Ibid., p.71
[841] Nussbaum, M., p.59

O, how impoverished my deliberations were.'[842]

Creon, a messenger says, has 'forfeited joy' and has willingly reduced himself to 'a life trapped within a corpse'.[843] The unfeeling tendencies of the juridico-political discourse of the *logos* are thus also a popular target for the playwrights. After all, in the ode to man of *Antigone*, the temper or rage (*orge*) that builds cities is personified by Creon, who represses his emotions in the judgement of his family members for as long as he can (until his son's suicide wakes him to the "poverty of his deliberations"). His excessive rationality, characteristic of the civilising impulse that seeks to control the external world, is exposed as repressed fear and anger at his vulnerability and insecurity in the face of ungovernable ambiguity.[844] It is, as discussed earlier with Horkeimer and Adorno, the resentment of the enlightened, modernising man faced with the limits of progress. The excessive repression of either emotion or reason in politics has tragic consequences, it is the result of an imbalanced and "impoverished" outlook, and is shown to be but another form of hubris that leads to uncivilised behaviour (*theriodes bios)*, inhuman and unfit for life in the city.

The second aspect of the disequilibrium flows from the former: any commitment to a monistic conception of justice is overly reductive of the complexity of politics and human relations, and leads to partial settlements that are more expressions of the particular *rapports de force* of the situation than any normative ideal. Single-mindedness is shown to be an obstacle to justice. In the tragedy of instrumental rationality that is *Hecuba,* where the characters are all governed by their self-attributed "necessities", there is nothing approximating justice or *eunomia* (the good political order) apart from the heroine's appeals to them. In the end, from the barbarian king's opportunistic betrayal to Hecuba's deceitful revenge via the Greek rulers' expedient inaction, all follow their self-interest and act in accordance with strategic calculations, with predictable results. Even Hecuba ends up channelling her hate into careful tactics that maximise the advantage of surprise. The law of the jungle prevails, and the result is described by the chorus as "harsh necessities" and "fate without reprieve".[845] Where there is no commitment to wider standards of justice, or there is a commitment to the belief that the political order is best served when each serves themselves, all must live in fear and despair, even the powerful for whom the tables can quickly turn. The *polis* was ideally

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[842] Sophocles *Antigone* quoted in Nussbaum, M., p.62 from ll.1261-1264 of the play.
[843] Sophocles *Antigone,* ll.1238-1240
[844] Nussbaum M., p.75
[845] Euripides, *Hecuba*, ll.1295-ff.

considered as the civilised place where people come together to live in *eunomia* (good order)*,* a community or fellowship (*koinonia*) distinguished from the world outside its borders by its adherence to common standards of justice; and these standards had been understood to balance the interests of the weak against the strong and those of the collective against the individual, from the time of Solon if not before.[846] In other words, the concept of the *polis* was somewhat egalitarian as well as collectivist, and this had only intensified with the advent of democracy in Athens. The tableau in *Hecuba* of a society ruled by the individualist ethos of "rational choice", with its lack of fellow-feeling or commitment to the public good, is portrayed as the antithesis of this ideal: a sophisticated reversion to the anarchic savagery of the wilderness, deprived of the balancing principle of justice. In a wider perspective, the tragedies present any such monistic discourses as exclusive claims resulting in partial settlements and destructive conflict, be it the instrumental rationality of *Hecuba* (or *Orestes* by the same playwright), the retributive justice of the *Oresteia* and its neverending cycle of violence*,* or the communitarian imperative and its repression of the individual, imposed on Antigone or Philoctetes in Sophocles' eponymous plays.

In the tragic ethos, the awareness of human limits precludes such commitment to "fixed angles of vision", for as in the case of Pentheus rejecting Dionysus and his followers out of hand, refusing a place for the disorderly cult in his autocratic city (in the *Bacchae*), such inflexibility tears the *polis* apart (just as it physically dismembers Pentheus, the sovereign).[847] For in the absence of secure knowledge of absolute standards of justice, such immoderate claims are merely rigid and universalist impositions of factional prejudice on the public realm, privileging some at the expense of others, and running contrary to the ideal of *isonomia* as *eunomia* where the political order enshrines a balance (*medan agan!*) between competing interests. By placing themselves above the collective good of the city, such fundamentalist factions, be they driven by unyielding passion or self-interest, created the type of destructive conflict – what Hesiod called the evil form of *eris* (strife) - that tears the city apart, and for this reason were considered by the likes of Thucydides as 'a *nosos,* a disease as foul as the Great Plague at Athens itself, which corrupted language, faith, honour, all that made politics possible.'[848]

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[846] Murray O. & Price S. (eds.), 1990, p.19
[847] Euben P., pp.130-166
[848] Murray O. & Price S. (eds.), 1990, p.21 & cf. Thucydides, 3.82-3.84

Indeed, the result of the lack of balance inherent in the political claims that emerge from monistic paradigms is the type of "anti-civilised" conflict that seeks to exclude political adversaries from the *polis*: stasis, factionalist strife or political enmity.[849] It is the type of conflict that was considered by archaic Greek thinkers to be the antithesis of the *polis* as a community based on *philia*: the healthy political competition based on fraternal respect is replaced with the disease of outright enmity as factions place their private interests or passions ahead of the *polis* itself (a form of hubris), acting outside of its constitution, as if they were no longer citizens, threatening the whole for the sake of one of its parts.[850] '*Stasis*', said the Fifth century B.C. philosopher Democritus, 'is an evil to each, for both the victors and the vanquished the destruction is the same'.[851] Internecine conflict of the preceding two centuries in Argos, Corcyra, or Miletus was analysed along these lines by the likes of Thucydides or Herodotus, and even Solon referred to it as a 'public evil'[852] – his constitution sought a new compromise between Athenian factions so as to treat the "disease" before it produced civil war. The *agon*, the competition driven by good *eris*, the rule-based contest that was considered a normal feature of communal gatherings, is exacerbated to the point of becoming a lawless struggle for power (the more radical meaning of *agon*, a term that can also apply to outright war), causing the "agony" of the self-destructing *polis* (another meaning for *agon* – an "agony" or "ordeal").[853] The tragedians, although at pains to avoid obvious political references in their myth-making, also connected unyielding monistic claim-making with the passage from healthy to unhealthy *agon* in the city [854], in what amounts to an *a contrario* argument in favour of a pluralist order.

In tragedy, inflexible and single-minded politics is an anti-civic disease that marginalises and excludes, a fact which is geographically illustrated time and again throughout the plays. In *Antigone*, for instance, Creon is criticised by his son for a reductive singleness of ethos that cannot see past the instrumental necessity of the body politic, and brashly imposes itself on the complexity of its clash with more intimate duties to the family, placing both his son and niece outside the law and resulting in their deaths outside of the city. Similarly, in Euripides' *Bacchae*, the young, naive, and brash ruler Pentheus places his own reasoning above customary

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[849] Kalimtzis K., pp.1-14
[850] Ibid., pp.1-14
[851] Democritus quoted in Kalimtzis K., p.2
[852] Kalimtzis K., p.3
[853] Nagy G., p.1426 & *agon* in Liddell H. & Scott R.
[854] Sophocles' *Ajax*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and Euripides *Orestes*, are other plays not mentioned here in which the theme of *stasis* is said to loom large. Juffras in Kalimtzis K., p.2

ethics and denies the god Dionysus a place in his city, even preparing to wage battle against his own female subjects, who entranced by the god, are living outside of the city, in the wild. Dionysus, however, is just as inflexible in his own deceitful way, and deploys his divine powers to trick Pentheus into leaving the city and going to his death: there he is hunted down and dismembered by Dionysus' followers (and his own mother in particular), who pursue the '*purity*' of '*the customary way*'[855] and '*those great, those manifest, those certain goals*'[856] '*beyond which no act, no thought may go.*'[857] The aforementioned "fixed angles of vision" imprison the irreverent rationalists (Pentheus) and the traditionalist mystics (Teiresias and the chorus) – respective images of Athenian factions of "progressive" demagogic individualists and the 'corrupt conservatives'[858] - alike, and bring them into antagonistic conflict and their downfall outside of a city in which they are no longer fit to live. By adopting such a monistic stance, they are like most of the other tragic characters 'claiming too much for themselves and recognising too little in their adversaries'[859]; this lack of recognition extends to the fact that the very identities and values that they are fighting for are interdependent parts of a whole. By denying a place for their adversaries within the city, they are exhibiting the antithesis of the inclusionary flexibility that is the foundation of community; by acting outside of these metaphorical boundaries, they are violating them and threatening to cause the city's implosion. In both the *Bacchae* and *Antigone,* when factions of the city not only conflict but, unlike the Athena of the *Oresteia*, deny each other a place in the *polis* through their totalising claims, then the latter is exhibiting symptoms of the disease of *stasis,* and on the path to dismemberment and destruction.

Euripides' *Bacchae* is of particular interest here as it locates the *agon* as a concept and ritual practice that is a central dynamic of political life in the *polis* – and the tragic genre itself. According to Gregory Nagy, the play centres around the term "*agon*" in all three of its principal meanings as a coming together, a competition and an ordeal – of the hero Pentheus and the god Dionysus (as well as their respective followers – Thebans and bacchants).[860] The struggle between them is on one level prototypical of the fall of the *agon* into unhealthy strife that destroys the city: it begins simply because the Thebans fail to recognise the god as one of

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[855] Euripides, *Bacchae*, ll.1007-1008
[856] Ibid., l.1006
[857] Ibid., ll.891-892
[858] There is an element of both oppositions in the play – cf. Arrowsmith W., in Grene D. & Lattimore R., vol. IV, pp.535-536
[859] Euben P., p.77
[860] Nagy G., pp.1426-1490; in particular, he notes all three uses of the term in one passage (ll.714-716)

their own upon his return (he is the son of a Theban royal), rejecting him and his cult from their city. The competition between the hero and the god slides into a generic agony of the body politic as the civilising forces of the modern *polis* symbolised by the former clash with the wild and instinctive forces of primordial myth that Dionysus unleashes in retaliation: the juridico-political rationality and legal order represented by the sovereign ruler are torn asunder by the "anti-political" and irrational passions of those who are ecstatically possessed by the god (the bacchants, women of Thebes who rejected Dionysus and were possessed by him in retaliation, and who go on to live in the wild, in communion with nature, attacking those who disturb them). The arrogant and anti-traditional Pentheus responds brashly, declaring war on the bacchants, and imprisoning the visiting Dionysus (disguised as one of his own priests), without seeking to understand either party. To some extent, this *agon* thus showcases the limits of the rational political order when faced with unyielding and passionate political adversaries. Pentheus is singled out for his blinkered monistic perspective, and told by Dionysus that this is the cause of the coming *agon*:

> '*You alone* [*monos*] *enter the struggle for the sake of this city, you alone* [*monos*].
> *And so the ordeals* [*agōnes*] *that must happen are awaiting you.*'[861]

Despite god and hero being related by blood, they fail to recognise themselves in each other, or to acknowledge each other's role and contribution to the *polis,* and thus only treat each other as an enemy to be vanquished. As the city has dishonoured one of the parts essential to its constitution, Dionysus and all that he represents (particularly the instinctive passions that cannot be excluded from politics), the god seeks retaliation as if the city were indeed not his own, and Pentheus, feeling threatened, gives in to a recklessness that mirrors the one he is denouncing and attempts to violently re-assert control as if he were facing a foreign invader: tyranny, disorder and *stasis* are the result of inflexibility and a lack of recognition on both sides.[862] Through the contest of wills between hero and god, and the ordeal of the hero, the *agon* of the play showcases the tragic nature of political conflict that does not conform to the boundaries of the *polis*; for healthy political contestation in the city requires the mutual recognition and respect of co-citizens (*philia*) and the moderation in political contestation that flows from it. And so not only the city, but the civilised order itself is symbolically dismembered with Pentheus; just as his maternal grandfather Cadmus is sent into exile and

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[861] Euripides *Bacchae,* ll.963-964, quoted in Nagy G., p.1440
[862] Euben P., 1990, p.130

transformed into a serpent, reversing the civilising act by which he had mythically founded Thebes (by slaying a serpent).[863]

On another level, the *agon* at the centre of the play is also the agony of the sovereign Pentheus *for* the body politic as he represents the sacrifice that enables the renewal of community, re-enacting the annual ritual sacrifice in honour of the god himself. The naive Pentheus is easily deceived and entranced by Dionysos, and is led to his death like a lamb to the slaughter; he is even costumed by Dionysus as a bacchant. In ancient Athens, the annual Dionysian winter festival culminated in the ritual dismemberment and the shared eating of raw flesh of an animal representing Dionysus; this joint experience was thought to bring unity with each other and all living things, and the symbolic rebirth of the god.[864] The play points towards the renewal resulting from Pentheus' sacrifice in various ways, particularly in the words of the chorus: although the *agon,* the '*race for wealth and power*'[865] that often goes '*awry*'[866], is always a feature of communal living, there is always hope that the ship of the state can be steered safely home[867], as '*whatever is beautiful is near and dear* [*philon*] *forever*'.[868] This last expression is twice repeated, and is a line from a song sung at the wedding of Cadmus and the goddess Harmony at the foundation of Thebes: according to Nagy, it is 'an expression of the institutional and emotional bonds that integrate society thus creating the body politic'[869]; and an assertion of the hope that *philia,* harmony and social cohesiveness will return to the *polis,* as these are precious to all (which is only further highlighted by their momentary neglect in periods of *stasis).*[870] As mentioned in the previous chapter, the spectator is left with an anticipatory instance of this reconstruction of community in the final scene[871]: the exiled Cadmus and his daughter Agave (who is both Pentheus' murderer and – once she emerges from Dionysus' trance - his grieving mother) exhibit great empathy and compassion for each other as they gather around the remains of their dead king and mourn his plight as well as their own, just in Dionysian ritual the community reunites to consume the raw flesh of the sacrifice. It is an emotionally charged recognition scene in which Pentheus'

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[863] Euben P., 1990, p.131
[864] Euben P., 1990, p.151
[865] Euripides, *Bacchae,* l.905
[866] Ibid., l.909
[867] Ibid., ll.901-903
[868] Ibid., l.881 & l.901 as translated by Nagy G., pp.1484-1485
[869] Nagy G., p.1487
[870] Each of the '*whatever is beautiful [kalon] is philon'* statements (at ls.881&901) is paradoxically preceded by the question of "what is wisdom?"and whether victory over one's enemies is the highest honour. I read the *kalon-philon* statement as the chorus' alternative and perhaps even their preferred answer to this question, especially in light of their conclusion in this passage (ll.902-911).
[871] Euripides, Bacchae, ll.1165-ff.

mother finally recognises the disembodied head of her victim as that of her own son, and in which Dionysus reveals himself to all: only through the remaining adversaries' recognition of each other can the disease of *stasis* be ended. The god's verdict is implacable: Cadmus and Agave are to be banished from the city, and separated as Cadmus is to be transformed into a serpent – banished from human community altogether. The associated grief, and "fear and pity", experienced by the theatregoers at the dismemberment of Pentheus, of the *polis,* and of its founding family, comes at the point of tragic recognition: what is left when civilisation falls, when the city fails to recognise its own, so that the *agon* takes on the form of *stasis* and tears the city apart? As Agave says: '*Where shall I go?*'[872] Through the sacrifice of the hero and its repercussions on family and city, the spectators are made to experience the angst of this situation and the pity for those who lose their community, reinforcing its value to them. The message is that the community is too important to be risked by the inflexible claim-making of individuals and factions bent on placing their "part" ahead of the "whole"; and the awareness of this promotes a tragic ethos with a flexible and pluralist disposition. And so the dismemberment of Pentheus is more than merely the result of a negative form of *agon*: its dramatic re-enactment becomes the ritual sacrifice transposing the destructive consequences of *stasis* into an ordeal for the sovereign-as-body-politic, a ritual that purges the city of this disease and enables the rebirth of community.

There is a sense in which Euripides is aetiologically defining the role of tragedy within the City Dionysia as precisely this type of agonistic and civic ritual of renewal: to bring the citizenry together in a theatrical competition re-enacting the mythic agony of inflexible heroes[873] (which also problematises the citizens' shared values), and through it accomplish the "acting out" of destructive behaviour, offering a shared experience of the resulting ethical quandaries, negative consequences, and ensuing grief that would help prevent the citizens from succumbing to the excesses portrayed. For the "learning by suffering" (*pathei mathos*), the emotional trauma brought about by tragic fiction that the spectators experience for themselves, would teach the citizenry to cherish their community ("wisdom"). The wider role of the Dionysian festival examined in Chapter II is also alluded to here as a necessary counterpart to the rigid polarities of everyday politics in the city: like the god of "fusion of oppositions" whom it celebrates, it acted as an "anti-political" release valve for the pressures of city living, as the

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872 Ibid., l.1367
873 Nagy G., pp.1426-1490

juridico-political order is celebrated but also temporarily cast aside and toyed with, and as the citizens lose themselves and forget their political divergences and identities through ecstatic revelling, the self-distance of fictional performance and of myth, and the mask of the theatre. The play indicates that the city needs Dionysos and his rites: the Dionysian type of festival and its tragedies are a valuable outlet for the antagonisms built up by the *agon* of politics, and reset, so to speak, the cycle of *agon,* avoiding the curdling of political competition and the destruction that ensues – if Dionysus is not let into the city, in his annual festival, there will be *stasis.* And so, there is a cycle of political *agon,* of disintegration and reintegration of the body politic, that appears in connection with the Dionysian ritual: political competition periodically tends towards inflexible conflict as people make monistic claims and misrecognise or reject the other as an enemy, leading to destructive strife which can result in the ordeal of disintegration of the body politic; however, the Dionysian rituals can be substituted for this real ordeal by interrogating core social norms and showing their contingency[874], thereby offering a virtual simulation of social disintegration and the possibility for the renewal and the reintegration of community. Thus tragedy embodies the *agon* for the *polis* in all of its meanings as well as its cycle: as a "coming together" of people for a "competition" of re-enactments of the "agony" of heroes, which accomplishes the virtual disintegration of communal norms and the genesis of their renewal, providing a shared experience that unifies the watching citizenry.

There is another similar ritual of Athenian politics, at a remove from Dionysian cult but in tune with the city's polycratic institutions, through which the cycle of *agon* was traditionally purged of intransigent factionalism, and the rules of political engagement were reset: constitutional reform. Draco (620 B.C.), Solon (594 B.C.), Cleisthenes (508 B.C.) and Ephialtes (462 B.C.) were the agents of major reforms that were generally called for by the citizenry after periods of *stasis* where the stability of Athens was threatened;[875] even the citizenry's temporary renunciation of democracy in 411 B.C. initially had an element of remedial reform to it, following the Athenian *demos'* disastrous conduct of the war with Sparta.[876] Moreover, the laws of Athens, including those which governed the conduct of democratic institutions, were continuously contestable through the *nomothetae,* law-making panels of ordinary citizens, and were also subject to annual review.[877] As the *Bacchae* (405 B.C.) was first produced in the shadow of Athens' breakdown and

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[874] Euben P., 1990, p.161
[875] Blackwell C.W., "The Development of Athenian Democracy", pp.1-7, in Blackwell C.W., ed.
[876] Thucydides, 8.67.3
[877] Blackwell C.W., "Athenian Democracy: a Brief Overview", p.7, in Blackwell C.W., ed.

radical constitutional reversals, it is possible to think of its portrayal of the *agon* turning bad, disintegrating the city, and yet also offering the hope of reintegration in these direct political terms. In democratic Athens (as opposed to the tyrannies or monarchies of myth), the form of the sovereign and body politic is no longer the body of the king, but the assembly of citizens and the rules by which they come together and exercise their sovereignty through the *agon* of debate and decision-making. The *agon,* assembly, competition, and sometimes even, the ordeal of citizen politics is just as central to democratic Athens as it was for the mythic setting of the play. In this sense, one can see the ritual dismemberment of the sovereign as an analogy for the ritual re-examination of, and in times of strife, the overhaul of, the constitutional laws governing the form of the democratic body politic. Through the contestation and renewal of the fundamental rules governing the political competition, a divided citizenry is able to vent the bad *eris* and reconstitute itself through democratic ritual, time and again – much unlike quasi-immutable modern liberal constitutions (such as that of the United States of America, for instance), which suppress and radicalise political conflict over their clauses by restricting challenges to elite court rooms.[878] The hardening of political competition into *stasis* due to the tragic limits of political justice is not a process that can be altogether transcended, but there is a possibility that cyclical disaffection with the democratic system itself can to some extent be released and played out through open popular contest over its own constitutional terms (if only by increasing the perceived democratic legitimacy of the resulting constitution). The ritual problematisation and transformation of the rules of the political contest can hence be seen as the ritual of sacrificial dismemberment of the form of the body politic which enables its renewal. The next section explores a tragic ideal for this form: a non-substantive ideal based on a basic pluralist principle, reciprocity, which aims to minimise the likelihood of unhealthy *agon* and civic disintegration.

C. *Renewal through Reciprocity: a limited basis for justice through reciprocal contest*

The tragedians dramatically illustrate how destructive political conflict results from the ambiguity and partiality of claims to justice in the *polis*, as the debates inherent to the functioning of the democratic city are skewed by the fallible media of language and monistic discourse (be it rational or emotional), which are

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[878] Cf. Colon-Rios J., particularly chapter 2, for an overview of modern constitutionalism.

themselves vulnerable to conflicts of value or the informal operations of power. Communication and judgement are never totally rational or disinterested, and so any single comprehensive conception of the political good is deemed out of reach, and political contestation cannot be elided. The tentative response that the playwrights offer to the citizens is a pluralist platform that seeks neither to purge politics of the power relations and conflicts that are constitutive of it, nor to itself formulate the detail of some single ideal consensus: a platform of justice as reciprocal contest between conflicting political claims.

This limited and pluralist basis for justice is expressed in its most visible form in the *Eumenides*, the last play of the Oresteian trilogy, which is described as 'a series of reflections on the newly established democratic order'.[879] The *Oresteia* was produced at the height of Athens' glory, in 458 B.C., and perhaps as a result, it contains a somewhat more optimistic assessment and constructive reinforcement of the ideal of the *polis* than later euripidean plays such as *Hecuba,* or *Bacchae.*[880] Where the earlier plays in the trilogy offered a problematisation of mythic conceptions of justice, the *Eumenides* responds by presenting a new and enlightened order that seeks to resolve the earlier dilemmas through the democratic *polis*, while at the same time presenting the shortcomings of this new settlement. Through this dual scheme of construction and deconstruction, it presents a pluralist platform for a just political order.

The many examples of failures in communication throughout the *Oresteia* directly contribute to repeated instances of partial justice (Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter resulting in his murder by his wife Clytemnestra, and later her murder by their son Orestes), linking the aforementioned theme of the problematic nature of *dike* to the equally problematic nature of language: how can "justice" or a healthy *agon* be achieved if each appropriates the term to suit their own cause, if *dike* is merely equated with *nike* (victory), if it is not correctly named, categorised, and some form of definition agreed upon? How can public decision-making rise above the operation of power, the conflicts of interest of everyday politics, and the degeneration of the *agon* into facile enmity and the exclusion of the other? The difficulty of the task is further increased by the complex layers of incommensurable values at play in the question of Orestes' guilt and punishment: he was commissioned by the "new" Olympian god Apollo to execute his mother Clytemnestra for the murder of his father Agamemnon, and yet the Furies, divine

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[879] Rocco C., p.140
[880] As noted in Chapter I with its comparison to the later play *Orestes.*

agents of vengeance belonging to the "older" Chthonian order, now request his death in payment for her blood (according to the archaic law of retribution). Apollo, representing the male gender, rationality, order and enlightened civilisation, *nomos* (chosen conventions or human laws) and the *polis,* defends Orestes, whilst the Furies accuse him, and stand for the female gender, passion, violent retribution and tradition, *thesmos* (immutable divine laws) and the *oikos* (the blood ties and intimacy of the family). [881] And so a number of the dualisms fashionable in the intellectual debates of the time and representative of the wider rupture in nomological knowledge are at stake. The celebration of Athenian civic discourse at the end of the play is an attempt to show that this clash of values can be mediated, to a degree, through a communal and reciprocal approach to justice in the *polis.* The trilogy ends with the goddess Athena instituting in the fictional Athens a legal court to judge Orestes' matricide; and this court models the main features of the relatively new democratic courts of the real Athens. The final play addresses both the ambiguity of communication and the partiality of claims as parties attempt to appropriate justice for themselves.

In the first instance, communication is mediated both concretely, with the designation of a jury of peers to stand between the antagonistic parties in the formal *agon* (here competition or trial)*,* and stylistically, through the development of a specific, legal, terminology that acts as a common language so as to establish the clarity of the proceedings. The clarity of plain-spoken juridical language at the end of the trilogy replaces the obscurity of the enigmatic mythopoetic speech that marred its beginnings, modelling the ideal for the watching citizenry.[882] Second, as in the Assembly, the right to speak and respond is extended to all parties, procedurally guaranteeing a minimum of reciprocity between claimants; judgement belongs to a jury whose final decision is the result of a vote. The democratic principles of the equal right to speak (*isegoria*) and of political equality (*isonomia* – here being judged by fellow citizens whose decision is made through a vote) are institutionalised as rules that govern the discussion that leads to final judgement – this is a conflict governed and mediated by the rules of the democratic city, a democratic competition. The agents of this new civic justice are jurors called *dikastai,* judges or bringers of justice, in opposition to the older concept of the *dikephoros,* reciprocal killer or bringers of retribution, as highlighted in the second play of the trilogy.[883] The partial claims that could otherwise tear society apart are

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[881] Cf. Euben P., 1990, pp.75-81
[882] Ibid., p. 87.
[883] *Libation Bearers*, l.120 see Euben P., 1990, p.82

forced into a reciprocal process in which representatives of the *demos* will hear both sides and balance their merits, reducing the likelihood of monistic capture of discourse. This open dialogue replaces the one-sided, rhetorically skewed, and deceitful monologues of Clytemnestra or Orestes, who in the earlier plays passed judgement and executed sentences on the other parties without even hearing their opponents' claims. It foreshadows the ideal of *parrhesia* that appears later in the century as a palliative to the same problem of deceptive speech through open-hearted frank speaking. The self-interested, narrow or inflexible perspectives inherent in these one-sided judgements are instead measured against other conflicting claims and submitted to the representatives of the *polis* so that they would be judged according to their own reasoning (and to some extent according to the shared standards enshrined in laws that they too have decided on). So exalted is the process of reciprocal dialogue that even a dispute among the gods over the guilt of Orestes is handed over to a jury for judgement (accused by the Furies, defended by Apollo). As in the real city of Athens, these forms of mediation attempt to secure the social order of the *polis* in the rule of democratic law and its institutionalised rituals.[884]

This is reminiscent first of the actual Athenian democratic reforms at the time of the trilogy's production (Ephialtes' reforms circa 462 B.C.), which abolished many of the remnants of aristocracy and instituted the supremacy of the *demos* so that the principle of *isonomia* became all-pervasive and systematic; and second of the concurrent enlightenment drive towards the systematicity of *logos* that helped to drive these reforms (alongside the democratic re-categorisation of tribal and family identities and so forth). Aeschylus is clearly highlighting how some measure of progress can be achieved through the application of juridico-political rationality to the *polis*. The final settlement gives a good indication of the tragedians' ethos of public spiritedness and democratic leanings in such matters: the trial by deliberation of a jury of citizens, that is, the already-existing civic law of Athens is advanced as an alternative to exclusively retributive justice, lawlessness and the rule of violence.[885] It illustrates how tragedy participated in the Athenian enlightenment by both reflecting, and offering a reflection on, these developments, and promoting many of its innovations. The trilogy ends with a procession, in which goddess, the Furies and citizens leave the stage together following the peaceful and amiable resolution of the dispute at hand. It is a

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[884] Goldhill S., 1986, p.5
[885] Versenyi L., pp.193-197. Versenyi points out that this ideal is ultimately utopian as the goddess Athena is required to settle the matter.

communal ritual that celebrates the institution of civic justice in Athens and the emancipation from some archaic notions of justice and their destructive consequences in the *polis* (blood feuds and aristocratic rivalries, for instance). Orestes is forgotten: the fate of the individual or the royal family are no longer to determine the fate of the *polis*; the citizenry and its representatives have sovereignty in the new city. Aeschylus has presented a new democratic myth of origins that widens the space of political sovereignty and participation, underpins the rational juridico-political order, and replaces the narrower aristocratic myth that preceded it.[886] This legitimates and constructs a rational political order and defines its centre as the deliberation of citizen assemblies.

However, far from restricting itself to the discipline of a 'homogenising democratic consensus'[887], the drama is simultaneously deconstructing this newly rationalised order[888], ending in a settlement which is no full and final solution to the trilogy's dilemmas, and which calls attention to its own limitations. Tellingly, before calling for a trial, the goddess proclaims that '*the matter is too big for any mortal man, who thinks he can judge it*'[889]: in the absence of any rational solution, even amongst the divided gods, the reciprocal process of the trial is presented as a ritual competition that will provide an outcome that is short of ideal, but better than the refusal of normative standards and the victory of might. The quality of the debate is no shining example, with Apollo in particular resorting to a quasi-sophistic logic that seeks no common ground and not only concedes nothing to his adversaries, but denies them any worth or position whatsoever.[890] Even the elegant solution of civic justice proves insufficient to secure a final verdict on the problems raised in the play, as it results in a hung jury with a drawn vote; justice through civic discourse has to be supplemented by the decision of Athena herself (who casts the deciding vote to exonerate Orestes). This reciprocal platform for justice is as far as can be, a reasoned judgement promoting existing Athenian institutions - both sides are heard and weighed according to existing standards (the city's explicit laws and the nomological knowledge of the jurors). However, where the values at hand are incommensurable or irreducible to the simplicity required by an all-resolving judgement, the democratic procedures are not sufficient and must be

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[886] Rocco C., pp.144-145
[887] Rocco uses this terminology to refer to the likes of Habermas' theory of deliberative democracy as well as the archaic movement towards *isonomia*, as both are forms of enlightenment discipline. Rocco, C., pp.137-139
[888] Rocco C., p.140
[889] Aeschylus, *Eumenides*, ll.470-471.
[890] E.g. Ibid., l.721

supplemented with a model of radical decision built on a tragic ethos of *sophrosune* and reciprocity, and role-modelled not by Athenian jurors, but by a goddess.

The goddess' final decision, and she admits this explicitly, is based on a "gut-feeling": her innate bias in favour of all things masculine. Athena's strange position as nominally female, but motherless, a warrior and identifying with the male in all things, is another transgression of gender normality: for Rocco, it purposefully recalls Clytemnestra's earlier violations of the sexual order, just as Athena's staging of the trial recalls Clytemnestra's staging of her husband's "execution".[891] This has the effect of emphasising Athena's ambivalent and paradoxical nature, and drawing attention to the imperfect content of the settlement that she brokers: her nature transgresses the gender definitions that she seeks to resolve, just as her vigorous persuasion of the Furies borders on the very type of rhetoric that was the source of problems throughout the trilogy.[892] By choosing to incriminate Clytemnestra's mariticide and exonerate Orestes' matricide (a key point in the debate between the Furies and Apollo), Athena restores the "normal" patriarchal social order, but also exposes the contingency and the insidious operations of marginalisation and subordination that are at the foundations of the *polis*. The explicitly partial nature of the judgement also reveals how it is reductive of the complex conflict of values at hand: it is clear in Athena's apologetic for her decision that a rational balancing of arguments has helped to inform it, but in the end a side is chosen out of political necessity not unquestionable logic. It is a radical choice. Unsurprisingly, the Furies reject this decision, and only Athena's forceful persuasion (once again recalling Clytemnestra's rhetoric, minus its deceitful intent) will win them over to her compromise, even if they are not convinced that justice has been served. And so Aeschylus celebrates the establishment of the new judicial discourse based on rational legal principles for its improvements over the cyclical violence of archaic justice, but simultaneously exposes its limits: its reliance on debate still exposes it to the frailties of rhetoric, a tool easily manipulated to partial ends, and to the boundaries of reason, which cannot neatly resolve political complexity any more than it can be wielded with disinterested objectivity. The democratic *polis* may be a rationally-designed improvement over its monarchic antecedent, but it is shown to be founded on the continued subordination of women to men and of traditional mythic values to their juridico-political counterparts. The playwright thus exposes

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[891] Rocco C., pp.163-167
[892] Ibid.

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the hierarchization of gender and values that are the boundaries of the very same political space that he is celebrating.

With these two concurrent movements of construction and deconstruction, the tragic platform of justice as reciprocity is not conceived of in the enlightened terms of a Hegelian synthesis[893] or a Habermasian deliberation[894] that would dissolve conflicts in an ideal rational consensus or dialogue. Nor is it a Foucauldian politics of perpetual resistance to discipline and normalisation[895]: Rocco sees it as holding the two in tension as a 'democratic politics of disturbance' that resists the 'norms and forms of a democratically constituted self and order even as it provides a democratic identity and practice against which to struggle'.[896] As Euben puts it, it is about 'incorporation and inclusion not supersession'.[897] This framework for justice involves various principles, none more apparent than that of reciprocal balance in public contest. This is apparent in the call repeated by both the Furies and Athena*: 'Refuse the life of anarchy, refuse the life of one master, the in-between has the power* [kratos] *by God's grants always, though his ordinances vary.'*[898] Rather than promulgating the One or the infinite Many, the tragedians echo Heraclitus in idealising the compromise of unity-in-diversity, the co-existence of a plurality of values in the tension of settlements that will "vary" according to their context. The "God" invoked in this last play by Athena is not the Zeus who intransigently upholds a moral law (the *Zeus Xenios* invoked in the first play of the trilogy[899]), but '*Zeus Agoraios*', the god of public meetings, of the political marketplace[900]: the god of exchange, negotiation, dialogue and political *agon* is here preferred to that of absolute law. This is the moderation, the chorus says, that is associated with the balanced *phren* (state of mind)[901], *sophrosune*. The golden mean of the "in-between", of "*medan agan!*" ("nothing in excess!"), is a radical compromise in *nomos* (human convention) in light of the lack of a knowable and transcendent standard of justice. It is also presented as an ideal basis for sovereign power (*kratos*) in the *polis,* and can be interpreted in its contemporary context as a call for moderation in the exercise of their new democratic system. The moderating effect of democracy on the *agon* has its limits,

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[893] Nussbaum M., pp.63-79
[894] Rocco, C., pp.137-139
[895] Ibid.
[896] Rocco C., p.137
[897] Euben P., 1990, p.81
[898] Aeschylus, *Eumenides,* ll.526-531
[899] Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, l.60
[900] Aeschylus, *Eumenides*, l.973 and Meier C., p.114
[901] Ibid., l.536

and the "anarchy" of whimsical mob-rule must be rejected as much as tyranny; extreme actions such as those witnessed in Athens just before the production of the trilogy – the assassination of the democratic reformer Ephialtes or the corrupt behaviour of some of the members of the "high court" of the Areopagus – bring about the disease of *stasis* and have no place in the city.[902] Athena's settlement is a model of the balance of pluralist reciprocity that brings together conflicting parties in a negotiated compromise of particulars, and not an all-resolving, assimilative and universal consensus: although its content is arbitrary and partial, the mechanisms that bring it about present a model pluralist platform.

First, the goddess recognises the fallibility of all involved in the judgement of this matter, which is "too big" even for her, and hands it over to the jury to witness the verbal competition and make a decision: this is the moderation that results from a tragic awareness of limitations. This self-consciousness and the awareness of the contingency of the final judgement is made all the more apparent when Athena has to tip the scales of the hung jury: the goddess admits the bias emanating from her personal history in her final decision, deriving from her own origins, and merely adds her vote, that she does not perceive to be transcendent.[903] Athena demonstrates her consciousness of the interplay between identity, subjectivity and ethics; the former flows through to shape the latter two and the judgement that results from it, which is ultimately radical. There can be no complete elision of particularities in political settlements through some rational or universalist abstraction – she declares that she is born of a male alone and will hence vote in favour of the male. A simple expression of identity politics will decide the issue, not untying but merely cutting through a Gordian knot of contradictions; and this personal bias is made explicit by Athena, not hidden in the guise of some purportedly neutral or universal principle, but openly disclosed in the settlement. It is a pre-emptive form of *anagnorisis* (tragic recognition) and pluralisation built into the mechanism of the political settlement, acknowledging the particularities of its author and of its context, and thus its own partiality and contingency.

Second, it is worth noting that this predisposition is not a rational argument but Athena's raw, almost tribal, identification with the male gender. In this radical compromise, the goddess of wisdom is modelling tragedy's holistic version of it, a

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[902] Meier hypothesises that Aeschylus may have been calling for the Areopagus to prosecute and condemn Ephialtes' assassins, even if he was that assembly's greatest foe, and thus give itself credence as a vehicle for justice in spite of its predominantly aristocratic heritage. Meier C., p.114-115
[903] Ibid., ll.471-472

wisdom that recognises the role played by emotions and raw identification in politics and seeks to include them in balance with rational thinking. This is compounded by Athena's final incorporation of the Furies into the city, who as their name indicates, represent the passionate and uncontrollable emotions that have wreaked havoc throughout the plays (and are associated with femininity).[904] Through their inclusion, the value of passionate emotion is re-emphasised as a necessary ingredient of politics, as it is both unavoidable and even desirable: it can spur people into overcoming rational calculations of risk and attempt exceptional actions, which if carried out in full awareness of their tragic potential, fulfils the aforementioned tragic understanding of greatness. The importance of reciprocity between emotions and intellect was already emphasised in the first play of the trilogy when the chorus intoned the "grief of memory" that teaches wisdom (*pathei mathos*); similarly, the Creon of Sophocles' *Antigone* only realises the impoverished state of a reasoning devoid of emotional responsiveness after experiencing the pain of his son's death. In the same play, Nussbaum notes that the chorus of elders align themselves with Antigone and her love (*eros*) for her unburied brother (and Haemon's love for her) out of sympathy, even though they recognise that this places them outside the "laws of right": love, they say, is seated alongside these, and as they '*cannot control the springs* of [their] *tears*'[905] it is only fitting that they should honour this emotional response and judge the situation according to it.[906] In the tragedies, good judgement requires not only logic, but emotional sensitivity, the openness, compassionate forbearance and fellow-feeling of *suggnome*, which gives a normative basis to relationships in the city and is thus a key to their health. The model political settlement must allow for the irrational and passionate attachment of people to values and identities, and attempt to address these in the temporary compromise that it offers. Moreover, the sympathy that results from witnessing the suffering of others leads people to join together for assistance and compassion (as at the end of the *Bacchae*) and to political actions on behalf of the weak, as Philoctetes claims in the eponymous play[907]: such emotions present an antidote to the excessive tendencies of the enlightenment rationality that also builds the city, and thus provide a balanced foundation for a just community.

Third, returning to the *Oresteia,* through this initial delegation to a jury, the patron goddess of Athens concedes a part of her own authority in the process of decision-making, displaying the type of flexibility and willingness to compromise

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[904] Euben P., 1990, pp.85-87
[905] Sophocles, *Antigone*, ll.865-866
[906] Nussbaum M., op.cit, pp.69-70
[907] Sophocles, *Philoctetes,* ll.469-506 & Nussbaum M., xxxiv.

that is required for communal decision-making and dispute resolution in the city. By handing over all power except for her one vote, she is making a concession: doing precisely the opposite of all the hubris-stricken characters who appropriate values to suit themselves and demand totality for their partial claims. This mutuality or power-sharing is the institutionalised version of the "yielding" that is modelled throughout the tragedies – for instance, by Haemon in *Antigone* or Odysseus in *Ajax* - and contrasted to the inflexibility of the standard tragic protagonist. In the same way, the Athenians are required to hand sovereignty over to their collective institutions, the decisions of which also involve their voice. Yielding power to an assembly or a jury is a demonstration of *philia,* a mutual regard for the decision-making capacity of others, regardless of the difference in their ideology, bloodline, or position in the city. For the conflicting parties, it involves the acceptance of rules and a mediating body for their struggle, placing the *agon* within the bounds of the city. It is also a measured form of submission of one's individual will to that of the *demos*, in which the right of argument and vote is asserted but subject to wider public opinion, and thus an expression of the ethos of public-spiritedness.

Fourth, Athena's treatment of the Furies is a model display of inclusion and *peitho* (reasonable persuasion): they have effectively lost out in the final decision but are invited into the city to be venerated in its official religious rites. The violent cycle of *dike* as *nike* (victory) ends here, the goddess proclaiming that neither party has triumphed[908]: the Furies are offered a role and a position in Athens, and although they threaten violence and curses, cheated as they feel of their right to retribution, Athena patiently persuades them to accept. Unlike Clytemnestra, the goddess persuades in service of the general interest, not merely her own. The inclusion of the Furies is in part justified by Athena's rationale that *peitho* alone is not sufficient to secure order in the city; when, as in her own settlement, the conflict of values is incommensurable and deeply ingrained in the identities of the opposing parties, the resulting radical decisions will inevitably lead to discontent. Hence *peitho* and *logos* (rational discourse) hold sway but are supplemented by the less-exalted means of *bia* (violence) and *phobos* (fear) in the exercise of sovereignty to maintain justice in the city.[909] The goddess sees a place for the instinctive passion and mythic values of blood ties and intransigent retribution represented by the Furies in the new *polis,* merely seeking to soften their edges through, for instance, their new association in its marriage rites (which also reinforces the importance of the *oikos*

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[908] E.g.'*For you have not been beaten*'. Aeschylus, *Eumenides,* l.794
[909] Vernant J.P. & Vidal Naquet P., *Mythe et Tragédie,* vol. I*,* pp.24-26

to the city). This is a mythological innovation that aetiologically justifies the new Athenian order, but in so doing pulls back from a fully rational ideal of civic justice through reasoned debate: should the institutionalised *agon* turn to strife, the fear of violent punishment and supernatural retribution will also uphold order in the city.[910] The other guarantor of the rational order is the primacy of civic identity: like the Athenians after Cleisthenes' reforms, in order to become members of the city the Furies (*erinyes*) will have their name changed to one that suits its greater purpose (*Semnai theai* or benevolent ones).[911] They thus symbolically place their civic identity above all other considerations and will ideally anchor their pursuits in the public interest - another display of archaic rationality in service of the *polis.*

Fifth, in all of these balancing acts, Athena is modelling the ideal political settlement's reconciliation and recognition of plurality[912] – of epistemologies, values, identities and the resulting ethos or worldviews. Old and new, *mythos* and *logos, oikos* and *polis, peitho* and *bia, nomos* and *thesmos,* male and female: all are in some way acknowledged and included in the decision-making process, and to some extent, through the incorporation of the Furies, in the final settlement, even though a radical choice is made in favour of Apollo and Orestes and all that they represent. In part it is because both sides have been made to engage in a "civilised" *agon,* a ritual competition governed by rules based on reciprocity: when both parties exercise their right to speak, it becomes more difficult for a final settlement not to recognise and respond to their claims, or be captured by a monistic perspective. By further yielding some of her own power and rights of worship after listening to the demands of the Furies, Athena demonstrates a critical responsiveness that is yet another example of the active reciprocity of the pluralist political settlement: each party is not only acknowledged and heard in a debate but their values and identities recognised and included in the final judgement. The Furies too are persuaded to make concessions, yielding not only their right to retribution for Orestes' murder but some of their identity as inflexible divinities existing outside of the city and its compromises. Athena's acknowledgement of the contingency of the political settlement paves the way for the openness with which the parties to it are to conduct the deliberation: their outlook is pried open to consider the perspectives of others. In this plurality of outlook, Aeschylus is again offering a similar lesson to that delivered by

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[910] Euben P., 1990, p.84-86
[911] Aeschylus, *Eumenides,* l.1041
[912] This terminology is Euben's (ibid.) albeit not quite used in the same way.

Sophocles' *Antigone*: just after its assessment of the human condition as *deinos* (awesome/awful), the chorus sees the devout Antigone enter in chains, and exclaims that '*looking at this strange portent, I think on both sides*'.[913] Of this Nussbaum says:

> The image of learning expressed in this style... stresses responsiveness and an attention to complexity; it discourages the search for the simple and, above all, for the reductive. It suggests to us that the world of practical choice, like the text, is articulated but never exhausted by reading; that reading must reflect and not obscure this fact, showing that the particular (or: the text) remains there unexhausted, the final arbiter of the correctness of our vision; that correct choice (or: good interpretation) is, first and foremost, a matter of keenness and flexibility of perception, rather than of conformity to a set of simplifying principles.'[914]

An ambiguous world requires a pluralist sensitivity, a multi-faceted appreciation that is prepared to consider other perspectives and values. Interestingly, Nussbaum opposes this to the Platonic perspective, which is 'directed, in its singleness and purity, to ethical objects that are single-natured and unmixed.'[915] This perspective, like that of the many movements generated by the modern-day enlightenment (scientism, Kantian philosophy, and so forth), is monistic. And indeed, as we have seen, it is the premise of the tragedians that such monistic perspectives lead to destructive conflict in politics; and this is in itself an *a contrario* argument in favour of a pluralist sensitivity as a platform for justice.

To conclude, then, the pluralist platform of justice in the tragedies is based on a reciprocal contest in that, as Euben puts it, it brings together, but does not assimilate, 'forces and principles that create a whole larger than but respectful of the parts that constitute it.'[916] Athena has modelled the mechanisms of a just political order, which enables diversity-in-unity not by eliding difference but by instituting a competition that encourages an active reciprocity between its diverse parts: by fostering tragic recognition (the awareness and disclosure of partiality and contingency in political claims); a diversity of modes of expression and identification (balancing reason with emotion, particularly fellow-feeling); mutuality (recognition of the value of others through power-sharing); by

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[913] Sophocles *Antigone* quoted in Nussbaum M., p.69
[914] Nussbaum M., p.69
[915] Ibid.
[916] Euben P., 1990, p.130

maintaining the sovereignty of an inclusive collective through the mix of reasonable persuasion where possible and force where necessary; and by reconciling diverse values and parties through a pluralist sensitivity that is prepared to hold them in tension.

In line with the tragic ethos, it is merely a basic platform of mechanisms conducive to a pluralist community rather than a substantive formulation of the political good. Much like Athena's judgement in the *Oresteia*, it is an ideal form for political settlements that will always be at a remove from the less-than-ideal content of these settlements, and the suffering that these cause through their disciplinary enforcement and normalisation of an arbitrary order at the centre, and the marginalisation caused by the delimitation of their boundaries. The content of the new political settlement, openly acknowledged as an expression of Athena's particularity, is by the same token recognised as only contingent and temporary: it does not rationally resolve the various conflicts of value, and the seeds of its future dissolution are already sown by the controversial nature of its author, which already transgresses it.[917] It does not emancipate the *polis* from the cycle of *agon* at its centre, the public competition that is both an outlet for and an expression of the plurality of claims in the city. This lack of resolution does not mean that tragedy's political *theoria* renounces its communal task and wallows in nihilistic individualism or endless deconstructive "free play". Rather, the form of this settlement holds the various parties and values at hand in the dynamic tension of negotiated compromise – dynamic since, as in the perspective of the *Bacchae* or the constitution of Athens, ongoing political contestation will see it called back into question, "dismembered", and renewed through the ritual of "re-constitution". It provides a framework to moderate their conflict without altogether dissolving the plurality of identities or the tension between them: hence the city is celebrated and idealised at the end of the play as the political space in which the just order can be reached for.

This divergence between form and content is a key element in its reception, as the contrast between the reductive ideal of Athena's settlement and the altogether more complex and less satisfying content of politics in both the play and real-life Athens would have been palpable to the citizenry: the harmonious ending is unlikely to have been construed as anything other than an idealistic proposition, dissonant as it was with the recent disorder caused by their city's judicial

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[917] Rocco C., p.167

reforms.[918] The spectators would also still be haunted by the memory of the perversions of justice caused by those characters who had earlier manipulated each other through rhetoric, and claimed for themselves the meaning of *dike* whilst denying that claim to all others, creating irreconcilable difference and thus strife in the city[919] – an obvious parallel with the contemporary events in Athens surrounding Ephialtes' reforms.[920] There is no total rational solution: the political theory of the play falls short, just as the jury – who the watching citizens could not help but identify themselves with - fails to decide the matter. This reminds them of their limits as well as of the fragility of any of their achievements in the matter of justice. The Oresteian prehistory of the *polis* thus also follows the tragic scheme of the "structured deconstruction", as it provides not only a constructive aetiological myth founding a new social order, but also a deconstructive foucauldian genealogy exposing contingency, the hierarchical operations of power, and their normalisation within this order. As Euben comments, the constructive form is consciously idealist and utopian, creating a self-distance with the dystopian content that enables political philosophy. The form of the tragic settlement points 'outside itself for the same reasons that political justice in the *polis* can never be achieved but is always in the imperfect process of achievement. [...] drama and political justice involve a search made possible by a form whose incompleteness calls itself into question.'[921] The tension between the two movements also models in itself the pluralist and pre-philosophical ethos of politics. The overt lacuna of the construction of political theory in the plays is itself the "lack" of tragedy – the gap between reductive human understandings of the world (*theoria*) and the actual experience of it. This gap is the space explored by tragedy – "what goes beyond, but does not transcend" - as time and again, paradigmatic figures break themselves against the ambiguity of the world as a result of the insufficiency of their comprehension of it and mastery over it, or come into conflict with others whose similar limits ensures a never-ending plurality of claims, reminding us of the limits of our enlightened attempts to construct a just order. In spite of this "great indifferent thoughtlessness of the gods", we still hope and strive for justice, and this is a tragic fact in both a "negative" sense, as it is a problematic cause of

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[918] Euben P., p.90
[919] Ibid., pp.90-91
[920] In the four years preceding the production of the *Oresteia*, the long-running rift between the aristocratic and conservative faction led by Cimon and the democratic faction of Ephialtes had come to a head. Cimon's failed alliance with the Spartans led to unpopularity, the victory of Ephialtes' reforms that removed the political powers of the Areopagus, and his own ostracism. Ephialtes was then assassinated, supposedly at the behest of the aristocratic faction, and the first Peloponnesian war is declared, in spite of aristocratic opposition. Cf. Davies J.K., pp.63-75
[921] Euben, 1990, p.88

suffering, and in a "positive" sense, as it is performative of the tragic notion of greatness. It is a part of the tragedy's aesthetic characterisation of the human condition; as Arrowsmith puts it in his commentary on Euripides *Hecuba*:

> '... but man continues to demand justice and an order with which he can live, and it is the nobility of this demand, maintained against the whole tenor of his experience, in the teeth of the universal indifference and the inconsistency of fortune, that [...] makes man tragic. His suffering is limited only by his hope; take away his hope, as Hecuba's was taken, and he forfeits his humanity, destroyed by the hideous gap between the illusion and the intolerable reality.'[922]

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[922] Grene D. & Lattimore R., vol. III, p.496

Chapter VII

Conclusion: Tragic ethos as a platform for pluralism - the case of pluralist agonism

Outline:

A - The tragic ethos: a summary

B – Tragedy and Pluralist Agonism: sketching a hybrid model

      i.   *The broad lines of a "pluralist agonism"*
      ii.   *Agonistic and tragic pluralism*

A - The tragic ethos: a summary

In the guise of an overall conclusion, we can briefly recapitulate the main elements of this study of tragedy, before exploring an instance of how they can be used to reinforce a recent form of pluralist political theory.

As we have seen, the extant tragic plays of Fifth century B.C. Athens are both grounded in their historical context, and seek to provide a new outlook for its citizens. The relative homogeneity of Athenian society is offset by the plurality of competing discourses emanating from the rupture between a new enlightenment-style discourse and the worldview based on traditional myth. The nascent democratic form of governance is consolidated by a series of morale-boosting victories over the greatest empire of the known world, with a majority of the citizenry gaining access to the honour of military involvement through the shift to naval warfare. This leads to the Athenians' establishment of their own imperialist project, based on neither mythical claim nor divine right, but on a belief in their collective political endeavour and its egalitarian and instrumental rational discourse – a collective project that overtakes other domains to become the most prestigious in everyday Athenian life. This discourse of *logos* had emerged from a variety of developments in mythic thinking (myth criticism and systematisation) and the theoretical and technical domains (literacy and geometric logic), producing new abstract ontological perspectives in the process (in the cosmogonies), before a humanist shift in focus from object to subject moved towards a more anthropocentric outlook and a problematisation of traditional epistemology. The resulting onto-epistemological assemblage, which becomes predominant in the all-important public sphere of life, clashes with *mythos* and the private domain in a number of ways, leading to a rupture in nomological knowledge: the basics of their shared ethical framework are unhinged, and the ensuing questions of judgement become pressing in a democratic society where every citizen participates in public decision-making – *"ti draso?"* (How shall I act?).

This is the moment of tragedy, as the playwrights, like Hesiod and Homer before them, take on the civic mantle of poet-sage in order to dramatise these questions through the ritual staging of myth. Their art is shaped by the public festival in which it is expressed: the annual celebration in honour of both Athens and Dionysos. The latter is a peculiar figure who is not a typical patron-god of the city, upholding its institutions and values, but a disorderly foreigner disturbing the civic order and inviting his followers to lose themselves in revelry, intoxication and

competitions re-enacting the otherworld of myth. His disruptive nature is reflected by the disturbing and self-critical themes of the plays, which offer a serious form of teaching involving critical self-examination, public reflection, and an exploration of the limits of the *polis* and its new rational discourse through the confrontation of these with the irrational "pre-state" discourse expressed in traditional *mythos*. By staging – and often subtly re-casting – their traditional myths, and by deploying these in narratives that mix in rational discourse with contemporary values and concerns in problematic scenarios, the playwrights offer their community a negotiation of the rupture through the problematisation and renewal of their shared nomological knowledge.

Indeed, the tragic plays depict paradigmatic figures that run up against the limits of the human condition - namely, their imperfect ability to know and control themselves, others, or the world around them, shaped as these entities are by ambiguous and/or greater forces - and endure a problematic form of suffering as a result. Hubris, the overstepping of these limits when heroes act with inflexibility, can result in a tragic reversal as the characters fall short in their excessive commitments. As the protagonists come to grief in scenarios in which they are following fundamental ethical precepts, be they from mythic or rational discourse, these "common-sense" values are themselves called into question. This is made particularly evident when the playwrights set up ethical *agon,* conflicts of principles in situations in which they are incommensurable (highlighting the existence of value pluralism); these lead to disaster as they are generally rigidly upheld by opposing characters (who are thus in a situation of hubris). The *theoria* offered by the dramatisation of these tragic schemas thus problematises basic assumptions and principles of judgement for the watching citizenry.

In accordance with the primacy of the *polis* and its collectivist democratic imperative, one of the principal vectors of problematisation is the hubris of individuals with a monistic outlook, who refuse to acknowledge the contingency of their passionately held claims and compromise with others - placing themselves above and outside the city. As a part of this, the playwrights call into question ethical principles of myth, such as that of the great unyielding hero (*Ajax*, for instance), as well as the more recent enlightenment values, such as instrumental necessity (*Hecuba*) or the totalising scheme of power through rational knowledge alone (*Oedipus Tyrannos*). In itself, this critique of their culture's nomological knowledge is a basic form of renewal: the tragedians cast light on the normalised, and hence generally invisible, assumptions and values that shape judgement, and

by placing a question mark over them, create a space of thought for the citizenry in which these can be reformulated.

Further, by calling into question the fundaments of the Attic worldview, the plays foster a new attitude to life. The watching citizenry is taken on a virtual "sacred journey" (another meaning of *theoria*), living through the fictitious experience of the hero threatened or brought low in the pursuit of a "good", and thereby brought to the realisation of the contingency of their worldview and the fragility of their existence. This tragic recognition, sometimes modelled by the heroes in the plays, leads to an awareness of the limits of the human condition and of the potential for disastrous reversal in all human action: a tragic consciousness. The latter is a response to the onto-epistemology of limits projected by the tragedies: if the human condition is subject to these limits, and the world is beset with ambiguity, then all claims are contentious, including socially accepted ethical and political norms, and monistic claims in particular are illusory and potentially harmful within a community. The constructive reaction sometimes modelled by the plays to this deconstruction of values is a re-affirmation of the importance of community solidarity and building relationships in order to face a harsh reality together, with resilience and compassion. The "negative" tragic consciousness is thus the basis of a pluralist tragic ethos that is also built on other "more constructive" values: the active self-moderation of *sophrosune,* the wisdom of knowing one's limits and acting accordingly; the all-important public-spiritedness; and the values that derive from both of these in concert (such as *philia*). The plays' problematisation and tentative renewal thus maintains a tension between disturbing and affirming community structures for life – be they "real" (e.g. civic) or mental (e.g. cultural or ethical) institutions.

By resting on this "precarious platform", the tragic ethos precludes one from the total adherence to any substantive paradigm or way of life and purposefully resists formulating its own, "playing an ethical role" without closing off its own theoretical circle by defining a final and/or detailed set of rules. In this sense, like many other forms of art, it is deliberately pre-philosophical: it is suggestive without being prescriptive; like myth, it projects an ethos rather than a methodical ethical system. The tragic emphasis on problematisation and the plays' revelry in the *agon* of values participates in this formulation of questions without final answers. The tragic ethos draws on the community-minded and aesthetic mode already embedded in the shame-based morality (the code of *aidos*) of archaic Greek culture to resist the absolute and the universalistic mode of monistic

thought, using dramatic enactments of notions pertaining to the beautiful-good to "go beyond" the particularities of everyday life, and reflect on wider issues, "without transcending" them through abstract systems of moral imperatives, dialogical rules, and absolute rights. It offers renewal by gently promoting ethical propositions that are the less definable attitudes (such as *suggnome*) and practices (such as *peitho* and *parrhesia*) based on both the tragic consciousness (the awareness of limitations which is itself the main ethical proposition of tragedy) and the moderation that ensues from this, attempting to promote ways of life that would enable citizens to live on together in spite of their tragic limits. Among these propositions, one can include a tragic concept of greatness, the resolve to "grasp the abyss" of the onto-epistemological contingency of the human condition with "the eagle's claws", the heroic attempt to eke out whatever meaning that can be from this tragic existence - like Oedipus, "taking a life wherever there is opportunity to live". The resulting *theoria* is neither monistic nor irreducibly relativistic, and it is neither quite the degenerative teleology and ambiguity of traditional myth, nor the systematically-manufactured certainty and progress of enlightenment-style worldviews: it is the enigmatic vision of the species that is *deinos,* awesome and awful at once, caught in a world that resists full and final explanations but that nonetheless requires attempts to wrest meaning from it.

B – Tragedy and Pluralist Agonism: sketching a hybrid model

The enigmatic position of tragedy - resisting monistic codes such as the stronger expressions of enlightenment-style rationalist drive for certainty and control on the one hand, and the abandonment of one's fate in mythic and/or relativist particularisms on the other – mirrors the present position of a recent form of democratic theory. This body of theory, known as agonistic pluralism or agonistic democracy, and particularly its subset discussed here, "pluralist agonism"[923], navigates a similar course between conventional accounts of Enlightenment

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[923] The term is Wingenbach's and is used to distinguish it from another form of agonism, the "agonism of resistance" of Alain Badiou, Jacques Ranciere, Bonnie Honig and others. The grouping of Connolly, Mouffe and Tully into a paradigm of pluralist agonism is seminally made in Wenman M., 2003. It is dependent on the re-configuration of Connolly's theorising of struggles for individual self-making, and Tully's theorising of struggles for recognition through treaty constitutionalism, as sub-constitutional forms of politics. Thus re-categorised, these theories are then able to contribute at different levels (the formation of the self and that of the constitution) to a pluralist agonism constituted by the "quasi-republican" mechanism of social integration of Mouffe: the collective identification with the democratic (fully contestable) polity, which is little more than the acceptance of the identity of "citizen" and of the agonistic rules of the game (that it is fully democratically contestable including its rules) and the adoption of a "common" concern for the polity. (Cf. Ibid., pp.179-183 in particular)

liberalism and some of the more anti-foundationalist accounts of democracy.[924] The contention here is that the pluralist agonism centred on the works of Chantal Mouffe, William Connolly, and James Tully, situated at the level of the application of post-foundationalist philosophy to democratic theory, can be complemented and strengthened when it is underpinned by the pluralist pre-philosophical ethos of Greek tragedy; and also that the latter finds in pluralist agonism a compatible late modern response in terms of political theory for some of the broader concerns that it staged. The main vector used to link the two sets of *theoria* is that where ancient Greek tragedy calls us to an awareness of the potential for tragic failure in totalising attempts to explain the world and assert essentialist conceptions of the socio-political good, agonistic theory responds by allowing for and actively cultivating contingency and difference in the onto-epistemological, ethical and political strands of the platform it provides for democratic projects. The idea is to sketch out the mutual compatibility of pluralist agonism and the reading of tragedy developed in this thesis, following the broad categories laid out in earlier chapters: truth, the self, and politics.

i. The broad lines of a "pluralist agonism"

In the last half century, a large part of Western philosophy has been characterised by a commitment to a variety of pluralist stances, in part as a reaction to a predominantly monistic and Enlightenment-based philosophical inheritance. Bearing labels such as post-structuralism or post-modernism, these theories place notions of difference and diversity at the centre of social relations, rather than the notions of identity and shared rationality at the root of their Enlightenment counterparts. With the end of the Cold War, one of the dominant monistic political theories was on the wane: the decreasing influence of marxism left liberalism to stand alone as the predominant political vision in the Western world, particularly with regards to democratic theory and practice. Emergent pluralist philosophies inspired a new theoretical approach to democracy that sought to critique the already-existing liberal theory and practice, as well as its newer rationalist and "proceduralist" theoretical expressions[925]: an "agonistic" approach to democracy. The roots of this approach to democracy are derived from an onto-epistemology that shares the pluralist tendencies of tragic *theoria*.

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[924] Cf. Wingenbach E., pp.197-199

[925] Such as deliberative democracy and communicative rationality inspired by the likes of Habermas or the liberal pluralism of Rawls. Mouffe C., 1999, pp.745-ff. The agonists also dissociate themselves from communitarianism: they agree that the shape of democracy should be context-dependent (culture-dependent) but refuse to found it on "the" identity of "the" community as identification is for them a fluid, political, and never completed process. Tonder L. & Thomassen L. (eds.), 2005, pp.1-2

The central tenet of agonistic theory is etymologically explicit: the *agon*, the competition, or struggle between opponents is put forward as the defining feature of political interaction. The contemporary agonists tend to derive the notion from Friedrich Nietzsche's and Jacob Burckhardt's readings of Ancient Greek culture via the writings of Michel Foucault and Hannah Arendt[926]: it is not by chance that the vision of classical tragedy, a particular instance of this culture, has a somewhat similar philosophical thrust to a nineteenth century German reading thereof. Conflict is viewed in axiological terms, and deemed an inevitable, irreducible and constitutive feature of politics in which a plurality of social entities compete over conceptions of the "good"; and not, as is typically the case from a liberal perspective, as a failing that should be suppressed by uniting around an atemporal rational consensus.[927] For the agonists, who embrace value pluralism, there is no such final solution, only temporary and contingent settlements; invoking universalistic metaphysical claims to establish order leads to the repression of contentious issues and the exclusion of those who advance them.[928] They reject the liberal approach to the theory of politics as a philosophy of right, positioning agonism in terms of political action rather than philosophical truth – radical choice rather than rational choice.[929] Conflict, as they say, runs all the way down, in theory and in practice, including over the meaning of what is "rational" or "reasonable".[930]

This is due to the grounding of pluralist agonism in post-structuralist onto-epistemology, particularly in the "ontological imaginary of lack" of the likes of Ernesto Laclau: schematically speaking, identification always fails because of the limits of signification, which cannot be expressed in language (language can never wholly capture intended meaning); the "non-symbolisable lack" is thus a constitutive part of all human endeavour, and hegemonic articulation a necessary attempt to fill this void that will always fall short. The task of political theory should then be to expose the lack at the heart of every hegemony by critiquing its essentialising and normalising discourses, and in so doing operate a hegemonic articulation that shifts the framework of meaning as a whole, whilst also actively defining a hegemonic alternative, thus opening the space for further contestation

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[926] Wenman M., p.168, Arendt H., 1958, pp.179–180*;* Foucault M.*,* 1988, p.94*;* Connolly W., 1993, pp.365–389; Tully J., 1999, p.167
[927] Gray J., 1995b, pp.1-10; Mouffe C., 2005, p.10
[928] Wingenbach E., xiv
[929] Schaap A., p.6
[930] E.g. Mouffe C., 2000, pp.1-35 or Tully J., 2002, pp.204-228

and a different hegemonic settlement – in other words, the task is one of active pluralisation.[931]

Democracy itself is understood as necessarily involving the demarcation between an "us" (the *demos*) and a "them", as every political settlement necessarily expresses the *rapports de force* (relations of power) in a society and privileges some whilst excluding and marginalising others.[932] The *agon* and the power struggles it represents is thus not only inherent to all political activity, but constitutive of any social objectivity (shared conception of reality, the expression of a shared nomological knowledge) through hegemonic articulation. In this perspective, some of the liberal ideal is rejected, as there can be no liberty as "freedom from (operations of power)", and no neutral public space of rational debate that can evade "the fact of pluralism" or power relations; the latter are deemed constitutive of all social relations, and there is thus no ultimate constitutional framework capable of guaranteeing this ideal speech situation.[933] Instead, the likes of Connolly, Mouffe and Tully believe in the constructive nature of agonism, and set out to build a platform for politics that promotes pluralisation and contestation through the continual negotiation of collective endeavour.[934] For them, this is itself a practice of freedom.[935]

In the democratic theory that flows from this, the agonists promote opportunities for contestation, not only over the content of the democratic settlement (government policies and so forth) and the hegemonic discourse that attempts to normalise it, but also over its form, the constitutional "rules of the game" defining and governing the democratic process. Temporary consensus is deemed necessary to politics, but dissent is just as necessary.[936] The features of the democratic settlement are not only considered contingent, but exclusionary: the line drawn between those values and groups that are inevitably marginalised is thus inherently political, and it needs to be the subject of democratic debate and not monistic elision. The agonists react directly to the democratic deficit perceived to have been brought about by the privileging of a transcendent liberal framework, in which, in theory, a universal set of individual rights and liberties can be established by a Reason common to all, fixed in a constitution, and enforced through the rule of

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[931] Connolly grounds his own agonism in an ontology of abundance – an affirmation of plurality aiming at "never-receding pluralisation" and influenced by deleuzean nomadology - which rejects any kind of hegemonic closure. Both Wenman and Wingenbach prefer to underpin their conception of pluralist agonism with the ontology of lack generally but not exclusively preferred by Mouffe and Tully. Cf. Wenman M. throughout; and Wingenbach E., pp.3-104

[932] Mouffe C., 2000, pp.36-60

[933] As first laid out in Laclau E. & Mouffe C., 2001 (first published 1985)

[934] Wenman M., p.166-167

[935] E.g. Tully J., 2002, p.206

[936] Mouffe C., 1995, pp.104-105.

law. In this scheme, the democratic ideals of equality and popular sovereignty are seen to have been given too little weight relative to the liberal ideals of liberty and constitutionalism (the rule of law) – so much so that the democratic side of the liberal democratic equation is reduced, in Hayek's words, to a 'utilitarian device for safeguarding internal peace and individual freedom'.[937]

This is a dangerous development if one considers that perceptions of legitimacy for modern liberal democracies still rest primarily on the layman's notion of "power to the people". Indeed, for the agonists, this neglect has contributed on the one hand to the growing apathy towards or rejection of existing democratic procedures, and on the other to the entrenchment and escalation of conflicts of identity ("identity politics") and of values outside of the democratic framework, threatening to break the social contract altogether. In the case of the former, popular sovereignty is deemed to have been so circumscribed by the *Rechtsstaat* (State of rights - the modern liberal State with its fixed constitution and laws guaranteeing private rights) and its procedures that it has been rendered meaningless. Bureaucrats, technocrats and lawyers pre-determine the outcome of democratic deliberations to such an extent that many of these escape popular scrutiny; highly political debates are deemed constitutional matters and evacuated into the legal sphere (such as wearing the hijab in France or abortion in the United States) or handed over to unaccountable government institutions (the independent Reserve Banks for instance) to be decided by "experts". In all of these cases, excessive juridification resulting from the liberal drive to a rational consensus insulates important policies or the constitution itself from popular control, and the people respond by rejecting the liberal democratic system through non-participation (voter apathy and so on) or actions outside of its framework (dissent, "protest" votes for illiberal or anti-democratic parties, and so forth).[938] Political issues are played out instead on a moral register, in terms of "good and evil" rather than "left and right", transcending any sense of community and exacerbating divisions.[939]

The outcome is that the lifeblood of democracy, the "healthy" agonistic contest of values between adversaries identifying themselves as fellow citizens negotiating political differences, is stifled. These differences then fester and intensify, only to re-emerge as antagonistic conflicts between unyielding enemies who identify themselves through differences perceived as irreconcilable, over and above any

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[937] Friedrich Hayek quoted in Laclau E. & Mouffe C., p.172
[938] Mouffe C., 2000 p.104; Tully J. in *Modern Law Review,* 2002, p.207
[939] Mouffe C., 2005, pp.5-6

sense of membership to a community, and seek victory outside of the democratic framework. Mouffe draws this seminal distinction between agonisms and antagonisms, between "healthy" agonistic conflict, conducted by adversaries respecting each other's right to defend a position within a shared negotiated framework of ethico-political principles, and antagonistic conflicts between enemies seeking only victory.[940] A part of the agonistic project is precisely to re-articulate the liberal democratic framework so as to create a pluralist democratic platform conducive to the promotion of agonism over antagonism. This requires fostering the framework of a limited consensus strong enough to institute a sense of shared citizenry (a *demos*), and flexible and contestable enough to provide for different forms of pluralism (religious, moral, cultural or political) whilst actively cultivating their contestation in the political arena. The key to this framework is a civic virtue, a shared allegiance to this democratic arena, and what Connolly calls "agonistic respect" for other contestants: respecting their right to play the democratic game and contest within the rules as well as over the definition of these rules.[941] The agonists seek to 'create autonomous citizens with bonds of solidarity across real differences'[942] without driving towards a consensus involving a substantive conception of the good (such as, in the case of the liberal good, the principles of secularism or individual human rights embedded in institutions or the constitution). For the democratic threshold is considered to be that no social actor can represent the totality of society – there is no hegemony, only a multitude of hegemonic projects.[943] The aim is that differences are played out overtly in the public arena through political and democratic forms of identification, as political groupings of citizen adversaries in the shared public space, and are not silenced as a result of their incompatibility with the prevailing hegemony or evacuated into non-democratic fora.[944] This would be a 'conflictual consensus': a battle over not only government policy, but also over the terms of the political unity itself. The contestants are groups interpreting the ethico-political principles of democracy in different ways (social democratic, neo-liberal, and so forth, but also through cultural appropriations of democracy[945]) and each promoting a different type of

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[940] Mouffe C., 2005 p.13; Mouffe C., 1995, p.4; Mouffe C. in *Social Research,* 1999, pp.745-759
[941] Cf. Connolly W., 2002, xxv
[942] Tully J., 2002, p.219
[943] Mouffe C., 2000, p. 100
[944] Mouffe C., 2000 & Mouffe C., 1995
[945] Tully focuses on different cultural approaches to democracy, in particular indigenous conceptualisations of democratic constitutions, discourses and practices. Cf. Tully J., 1995; Tully J., 2008; or Tully J., "The Struggles of Indigenous Peoples for and of Freedom" in Ivison D., Patton P., & Sanders W. (eds.), 2000, pp.36-59.

"common good" and associated hegemony, and all are subject to the terms of the perpetually negotiated consensus.[946]

iii.   *Agonistic and tragic pluralism*

Some of the points of convergence for both pluralist agonism and tragedy should already be evident. The contingency of the "good", the resulting need to allow for the conflict of values so as to avoid the antagonistic confrontation that destroys the body politic: as we have seen, these themes appear in various plays, and all at once in Sophocles' *Antigone*. Similarly, Aeschylus' Oresteian trilogy accounts for the insufficiencies of ambiguous language underlying the ontology of the lack; the difference between destructive antagonistic conflict of inflexible enemy parties (the revenge killings in the first two plays) and agonistic conflict within a shared, constructed and imperfect democratic framework (modelled by the jury process in the third play); and the need for negotiation and radical choice between incommensurables (Athena's final vote). The agonist-antagonist distinction is also reminiscent of the stark contrast between the approaches of the supple Odysseus and the inflexible hero in Sophocles *Ajax,* or the difference between the negotiated framework of *dike* (justice) at the end of the Oresteia and the earlier search for *nike* (victory) at any cost*;* and also Hesiod's differentiation between "good" and "evil" *eris* (strife), which was mirrored by the progression from "*agon*" to "*stasis*" in the earlier reading of Euripides *Bacchae*.

This convergence can be outlined according to a pattern that reflects the nature of both forms of theory. The dramatised narratives of tragedy offer a pluralist pre-philosophical ethos that calls us to an awareness of the limits of existence, and tend to be restricted to modelling the *esprit critique* that results from this tragic consciousness, whilst only sketching out a basic platform on which more substantive ethical and political projects can be constructed. The agonists share this awareness of the contingency of human thought and action, and seek to define a philosophical and political argument for a pluralist framework that allows for it: they provide a response within the narrower context of a democratic political environment. The tragic ethos tends to operate, broadly speaking, at an existential level, highlighting the gap between capability and action in the human condition, whilst pluralist agonism formulates a framework of democratic politics that can operate within the confines of such a tragic gap. Here this pattern is painted in a broad-brush following the structure of chapters four through six.

a.   Truth

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[946] Mouffe C., 2000.

The tragedies, by depicting paradigmatic figures going to their downfall, problematise the human condition at an onto-epistemological level, creating an awareness of the limits of our knowledge and control, and staging the resulting difficulties for life in the community. The agonists, who share this "pessimistic" non-essentialism by virtue of their roots in post-structuralist philosophy, can be seen to respond to this awareness through their assertion of the inherent contestability of all political projects and the creation of a platform allowing for it: namely a democratic framework promoting the 'reciprocal interplay'[947] of competing claims over both the form and content of the temporary political settlement.

The tragic plays project a vision of humankind as *deinos*, at once awful and awesome, and the genre itself deploys the resources of the Enlightenment whilst denying the full extent of its promises (as exemplified by *Oedipus Tyrannos*). Pluralist agonism also operates inside/outside the enlightenment, rejecting its monistic extremes in liberal democratic theory - its commitment to rationalism and resulting tendencies towards Lycurgan fixity in its constitutionalism and legalism – whilst focusing only on the incremental transformation of those (enlightened) resources available within liberal societies[948], so that they would become more contestable and accountable to popular demands. Like the tragedians, the agonists balance their deconstructive project of active pluralisation through problematisation with their constructive project of building a political platform for community. For this, pluralist agonism relies on the post-foundationalism of some strands of post-structuralist theory, as opposed to the anti-foundationalism of the more radically pluralist expressions of recent democratic theory.[949] This means that unlike the latter, pluralist agonism accepts the necessity of grounding claims and creating hegemonic articulations for meaning and politics, but assert that these grounds are always contingent and contestable as they are ultimately nothing more than useful but arbitrary

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[947] Tully J., 1999, p.168

[948] Wingenbach E., xiii-xv. For Wingenbach, '[Pluralist agonism] emphasises incremental change, situated possibilities, and improving the prospects for collective agency through a multiplicity of institutional forms.' Ibid., xv.

[949] This demarcates it from the more irreducibly pluralist theories of democracy such as another strand of agonism, the "agonism of resistance". Differentiation and resistance are a part of pluralist agonism but unlike an "agonism of resistance", are not at its centre. The latter form of agonism, offered by the likes of Alain Badiou, Jacques Rancière, and Bonnie Honig tends more towards anti-foundationalism. This divergence results in an important difference in emphasis in political project, as the "agonists of resistance" tend to privilege the politicisation of difference over the construction of pluralism, a perpetual resistance to hegemony and its operations of exclusion over the construction of pluralist forms of hegemony, whereas the pluralists agonists reverse the emphasis. For a comprehensive explanation of this see Wingenbach E. throughout, and pp.41-79 in particular. Schaap A. (ed.), 2009 and Tonder L. & Thomassen L.(eds.) 2005 offer typologies of agonism along somewhat similar lines.

expressions of social will. This can also be seen as a modern response to tragic *theoria*, as to ascribe transcendent or metaphysical status to any such claims is a form of hubris: the reification of any form of reasoning is a step outside the limited human condition, concealing a will to power behind claims such as neutrality, the common good, logic or common sense (as was shown in *Hecuba* or *Oedipus Tyrannos*), and ignoring the contingency and irony of knowledge and action. In democratic terms, Claude Lefort provides a source of inspiration for many agonistic theorists when he writes: 'There is no law that can be fixed, whose articles cannot be contested, whose foundations are not susceptible to being called into question.'[950] Nevertheless, just as Oedipus recognises his dependence on the communal ways of knowing at the end of *Oedipus Tyrannos*, so the pluralist agonists recognise that hegemonies of discourse are a political standard or grammar that make possible communication, temporary consensus or resistance, and thus in a democracy, collective action; as in Lefort's famous metaphor, the democratic seat of the sovereign is empty of any one monarch, but is perpetually occupied by evolving constellations of contestants.[951] In Mouffe's works in particular, these pluralist constellations must be forged as hegemonic articulations in order to gather power sufficient for action and institutional change.[952]

Similarly, where tragedy poses the problem of the ethical *agon,* pluralist agonism can be seen to respond to it not only in generic terms, by emphasising the need for a politics encouraging contestation and pluralism, but also by specifically addressing the ethical *agon* at the heart of the modern liberal democratic project. In their analysis of the latter as a contingent historical articulation, the agonists make a point of distinguishing the democratic tradition from its liberal counterpart, noting the considerable tension between their constituent principles: equality and liberty, popular sovereignty and the limits placed upon it by constitutionalism, accountability through contestability and fixed individual rights guaranteed by the rule of law.[953] As Mouffe puts it: 'What cannot be contestable in a liberal democracy is the idea that it is legitimate to establish limits to popular sovereignty in the name of liberty. Hence its paradoxical nature.'[954] The tension of this "democratic paradox" is seen as a constitutive, constructive tension that must be continually negotiated and not as a problem in need of a final rational solution. Any hegemonic settlement, such as recent neo-liberal or "third way" consensus in

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[950] Lefort C., 1986, p.303
[951] Lefort C., 1986
[952] Particularly in Laclau E. & Mouffe C., a seminal work arguing for the need for a post-marxist hegemonic articulation that gave an impulse to much of Mouffe's later thinking.
[953] Cf. Mouffe C., 2000 and Tully J., 2002
[954] Mouffe C., 2000, p.4

Western democracies, can only ever be temporarily stabilised through negotiation, and result in the privileging of either the liberal (as in the neoliberal example) or the democratic (the current populist trend in some of Latin America) framework. Pluralist agonism rejects those monistic conceptions of democracy that are unable to conceive of it as a paradoxical articulation (placing, for instance, the political theories of Rawls and Habermas in this category as purported solutions to this paradox[955]) and seeks to combat the longer term hegemonic normalisation of such settlements through the promotion of contestability and agonistic confrontation in democratic politics and the formation of hegemonic alternatives.

b. Self

Tragedy brings the otherworld of myth into the *polis* to disturb settled identities, and re-asserts their ambiguity and contingency as a result of their relational and historically-circumscribed constitution. Like Oedipus, we are reminded that our identity is a riddle existing in the tension of opposites, our scope for self-creation limited by factors outside our control, but that we are capable of decisive and meaningful self-expression within these confines, as part of a community. In particular, tragic *theoria* calls us to an awareness of the relationship between inflexible or essentialist conceptions of our selves and the inflexible and hubristic praxis that results from it, which, like the Ajax of Sophocles' play, is incompatible with life in the community. As previously mentioned,[956] this denunciation of the monistic individualism could also be applied to the liberal political morality based on a fundamental doctrine of individual rights and its rationalistic variations of the moral point of view. Pluralist agonism develops just such a critique of essentialist liberal political morality, as Connolly puts it by refusing to 'equate concern for human dignity with a quest for rational consensus', instead disturbing the 'dogmatisation of identity' and departing from the 'political minimalism of democratic individualism' and its expression in fixed individual rights by seeking to 'open political spaces for adversarial relations'.[957] This finds its roots in the agonists' dynamic and pluralist understanding of socio-cultural identities: drawing mainly on the work of post-structuralist theorists such as Foucault, Derrida,

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[955] Mouffe C., DP, p.8 and pp.80-107: according to her, both Rawls and Habermas claim to have overcome the conflict between liberalism and democracy, but in fact privilege one over the other (liberalism for Rawls, democracy for Habermas); Habermas for instance by asserting that once the "co-originality" between individual rights and popular sovereignty is acknowledged, the conflict is dissolved. It is worth pointing out that many including Tully himself recognise that pluralist agonism has much in common with the "later Rawls" non-metaphysical approach to political deliberation, but a substantial difference in emphasis due to its foundation in post-structuralist thought. Cf. Wingenbach E.; or Tully J., 2008

[956] Cf. Chapter V.

[957] Connolly W., 1991, x & xi

Deleuze, and others, they see these as multi-layered, overlapping, incomplete, constantly evolving and intrinsically relational, a 'strange multiplicity'[958] defined by their differences with one another.[959] This demarcates them immediately from the post-second World War American liberal theory of pluralism, in which a flat terrain of interest groups are deemed to 'compete and coexist within definite cultural and constitutional boundaries'[960], a theory which for Connolly naively presumes that there is a seamless aggregation of interests and identities into an overarching consensus, without questioning how the latter acts as a self-perpetuating hegemony that resists pluralisation and marginalises some on behalf of elites.[961] In an ontological framework in which the identity of the other is deemed constitutive of one's own identity, conflict or competition becomes constitutive of one's self, and is integral to self-expression at individual or group level and thus to politics as a whole.[962] There is always some form of radical difference that escapes the bounds of social identities, including would-be attempts to found an all-encompassing consensus based on some form of hegemony that normalises its own propositions. As Connolly puts it: 'each identity is fated to contend [...] with others it depends upon to enunciate itself. That's politics, the issue is not if but how'.[963] Monistic projects such as the liberal approach to democracy, which predicates a universal framework of rights – a substantive conception of the good - on a single concept of identity (the "a-cultural" individual citizen) as well as metaphysical "skyhooks"[964] in order to declare that "we are all one people", are thus ruled out by the agonistic framework just as they would in the tragic vision. In both perspectives they are considered illusory and hubristic, like Oedipus, mistaking their selves for the whole and mistaking both their will to power and their particular conception of truth for a disinterested and benevolent "aggregation of interests".

Instead of these, the pluralist agonists outline an aesthetic conception of identities, values and "practices of self-making" that would manage to bind together the democratic citizenry and temper antagonistic relations without pre-determining other aspects of the political consensus. The key to this is Mouffe's 'quasi-

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[958] Tully J., 1995
[959] Tonder L. & Thomassen L. (eds.), 2005, pp.1-2
[960] Wenman M., p.169
[961] As Connolly advanced particularly in *The Challenge to Pluralist Theory*, in 1969 and *The Terms of the Political Discourse,* 1974
[962] Mouffe for instance uses Derrida's concept of constitutive externality: Mouffe C., 2000, p.12 drawing on Derrida J., 1976, p.71, who himself draws on Hegel's theory.
[963] Connolly W., 1993, p.28
[964] Cf. Nietzsche's famous criticism of liberal morality as a derivative judaeo-christian system without the godhead in the *Genealogy of Morals* (Nietzsche F., 1956) or Gray J., 1995, pp.85-91. The "skyhook" as a metaphysical crutch for an argument is Richard Dawkins' terminology.

republican method of social integration"[965], which draws on both Machiavelli and Oakeshott to formulate an act of collective identification around the simple ethic of public concern, a *res publica*. The members of diverse constituencies thus become citizens and a part of the political community through the recognition of a common public concern, and the agreement to be bound not by ethical, moral or cultural 'performances but conditions to be accepted in choosing performances"[966] – the rules of the agonistic game.[967] Citizenry is then synonymous with conflict within a common symbolic space, in which all identify with a common public concern and thus agree to obey the rules that are also the result of an ongoing contest.[968] Within this space they thus become contestants or "adversaries" over the meaning, institutions, and practices of citizenship and democracy, and have to substitute this agonistic contest for outright antagonism, as to do otherwise is to exclude oneself from the *demos*[969] – and this is in Hobbesian terminology the sword that secures the covenant.[970] Apart from the *res publica,* which mirrors the public spiritedness of the tragic *theoria,* the ethical value promoted by the agonists as necessary to this integration is what Connolly calls 'agonistic respect': accepting the contingency and thus the 'comparative contestability of one's position'[971], and given this contingency and the interdependence of one's identity with those of others, making allowance for their claims and being open to criticism.[972] This is an 'ethos of generous engagement'[973] that goes beyond liberalism's value of tolerance, but doesn't lay claim to its 'spurious notion of cultural neutrality'[974]. Agonistic respect is, however, reminiscent of the minimalist set of values promoted by the tragedians as a part of the ethos of public spiritedness and reciprocity: it can be seen as a condensed version of the *philia* (mutual regard of the wider community), *peitho* (the acceptance of reasoned persuasion) and *suggnomosune* (openness towards the perspectives of others). Both agonism and tragedy show how without such a

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[965] Wenman M., p.180

[966] Mouffe C. in Squires J. (ed.), 1993, p.82 – and this is what differentiates it from full blown republicanism.

[967] Ibid. pp. 180-181

[968] Mouffe C.,1995, pp.,73-74 & 99-105

[969] Even if the terms of this exclusion are perpetually re-negotiated. Mouffe C., 1993, p.4

[970] 'Covenants, without the sword, are but words, and of no strength to secure a man at all.' Thomas Hobbes quoted in Wenman M., p.165

[971] Connolly W., 1991, xxiii & xxv

[972] Ibid., xiii – xxviii. Tully mentions the expression *audi alteram parlem* – always listen to the other side – in this context. Tully J., 2002, p.218

[973] Connolly W., 1991, xii

[974] Wenman M., p.181

strong civic ethos, the reciprocity required by democratic politics flounders and its institutions – however reasonable – collapse.[975]

c. Politics

As outlined in paragraph ii. above, the tragedies showcase the difficulties of defining the communal good in the midst of onto-epistemological ambiguity, ethical *agon,* and the hubristic claims which lack awareness of these limits, and the agonists respond by seeking to channel conflict into a civil contest rather than quell it through appeals to a common rationality. Beyond this, the tragedians highlight the constitutive role of power in making truth claims: the illusory nature of disinterested or dispassionate knowledge, which is coloured by emotion, identity, and socio-historical context (*Oedipus Tyrannos);* or the self-serving nature of legitimising claims to particular types of reasoning on the basis of their purported universality, and how these can coalesce to normalise hegemony (in *Hecuba*). Just as the playwrights respond to this by modelling an ethos of problematisation, pluralist agonism addresses it in democracy by seeking to actively pluralise politics through the promotion of a vibrant public clash of democratic political positions that would reinforce the awareness of contingency and "comparative contestability" of political claims, the ultimately radical character of political decisionmaking, and make visible ongoing hegemonic articulations.[976] As for the latter, the agonists inherit from Foucault in particular the idea that democratic politics must pay attention to the informal operations of power, keeping the place of power empty so that no one entity can have mastery through highly participatory democratic practices (especially those that resist hegemony) and the promotion of a critical and reflectively self-critical citizen ethos.[977]

Further, as a part of this clash, the affective dimension of politics highlighted in the tragedies[978] - the role of psychology, of passion and instinctive identification - is catered for in agonistic politics. Rejecting the rationalist dismissal of this dimension in liberalism, Mouffe in particular emphasises the need for political partisanship as something that can have a 'real purchase on people's desires and

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[975] Euripides *Bacchae, Orestes, Hecuba* or Sophocles *Antigone* could be read in this light, and Connolly asserts the same with his generous ethos of political engagement. Connolly W., 1991, throughout. Sri Lal Sukla's satirical novel *Raag Darbari* could be read as a depiction of just such a democracy, where all the practices and institutions are present and correct but any public ethos is entirely absent.

[976] Mouffe C., 2000, pp.98-104

[977] Wingenbach E., xiii-xiv, Tully J., 1999, p.168. The agonists generally derive or transpose this critical ethos from Foucauldian genealogy.

[978] Chapter VI – B.

fantasies', creating clearly differentiable forms of collective identification that energise agonism and 'mobilise passions towards democratic designs'.[979] The traditional "left/right" distinction is seen as precisely the type of differentiation that institutionalises and gives form to the partisan and "healthy" democratic conflict, and those who would transcend it through some ideal consensus (such as "third-way" politics) are thus repressing democratic freedom (as the practice of contestation and resistance to hegemony).[980]

Finally, Tully adds a theory of constitutional practice which can be seen to respond to a tragic awareness of the hubris and potential reversals that attend codifying substantive conceptions of the good into fixed state practice (such as Creon's, Pentheus' or even Oedipus' inflexible privileging of some aspect of their city's law over and against exceptional situations requiring flexibility[981]). Drawing on recent Canadian constitutional practice as well as agonistic theory, Tully argues for the continuous exercise of constituent power in democracy, as to be a "free citizen" means to engage 'in the agonistic and interminable [...] negotiations both within and over the conditions of citizenship'[982], and as the continually negotiated constitution is the only "just" constitution.[983] As with Athena's rulings invoking *Zeus Agoraios* (of the marketplace), it is the variable, context-sensitive settlement in the balance of pluralist reciprocity, which brings together conflicting parties in a negotiated compromise of particulars.[984] This sense of a self-imposed law, of self-determination, is essential to the maintenance of the co-extensive yet paradoxical liberal democratic articulation. When this notion is extended to the nations or peoples within a multinational democracy, this means that their federation into a state should from an agonistic perspective be governed by much the same ethos as citizens: agonistic respect including critical responsiveness within the perpetually contested agonistic game. The salient institutional features of this agonistic multinational constitutionalism are that nations can challenge it at any time and must at least receive a formal acknowledgement and response by the federated parties even if the claimant is not yet recognised as a nation; and also that its legitimacy depends on all constituent nations exercising 'the right of self-

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[979] Mouffe C., 2005, pp.5-6
[980] Mouffe C., 2000, p.117
[981] Respectively in Sophocles *Antigone,* Euripides *Bacchae,* Sophocles *Oedipus Tyrannos.* The example of Solon's constitution was also contrasted with tragic principles in Chapter Four, A. ii. a.
[982] Tully J., 2008, p.164
[983] Tully J., 1995, p.211
[984] Chapter VI, C.

determination of peoples in some appropriate form or other within the state'[985] (if not, they can secede).

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[985] Tully J., 2008, p.217

En guise de conclusion, then, by asserting the need for a fully contestable but hegemonically-settled democratic framework, the agonists can be seen to present a philosophically-grounded, late modern response in terms of pluralist democratic theory to the problems of limits and contingency posed by the pre-philosophical *theoria* of tragedy. Both operate in the quasi-Heraclitean tension of unity-in-diversity, enabling them to develop forms of pluralism that allow for the need for temporary settlement in political community without predetermining its content. Apart from these considerable synergies and possibilities for mutual reinforcement, there are also many ways in which the tragic vision could strengthen pluralist agonism. Here only the chief among these shall be mentioned, at the foundational level: the ethos of tragedy provides a powerful pre-philosophical symbolic framework for pluralist projects. As an aesthetic and dramatic representation of the limits of thought and action, it provides an existential and immediate vision of the world. The struggles of its heroes speak to us on an intuitive and human level, providing through story, *mimesis praxeos* (the imitation of action), emotional and imaginative involvement a variety of abstract thought experiments with an immediacy that cannot be matched by the intricate and arcane explanations of philosophy. Its simplicity and depth is exemplified by the term "tragic", which conjures up a "grief of memory" that could be considered a shared feature of our experience of the world, and which is perhaps easier to grasp than the philosophical ontologies of lack that it can underpin. And it is indeed to be "shared", destined as it was for the majority of the polity sitting together in one space; it is also driven by a strong ethos of public-spiritedness that pushes it beyond any mere existentialist and individualistic reflection, the type of which is often said to plague the post-foundationalism at the root of many modern pluralist theories such as pluralist agonism. The tragedians present an aesthetic of existence based on narrative that projects the sort of axiological, undemonstrable principles necessary to the construction of the precarious platform of pluralism. It is also well suited to a pluralist project for democratic politics, as after all, it flourished as a public institution designed to enhance just such a democratic environment in the Fifth century B.C. And democracy, where the "many" must rule themselves as well as each other, according to rules that they themselves must establish, is the regime of ultimate uncertainty, where to act is to tempt fate, and everything, including democracy itself, can be called back into question: it is, as Cornelius Castoriadis called it, a 'tragic regime'.[986]

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[986] Castoriadis C. in Curtis D., p.283

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