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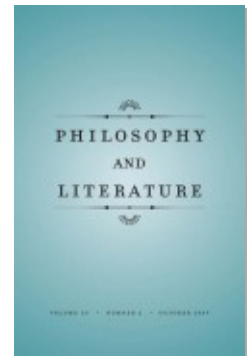
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THE FATE OF HUMANISM IN GREEK TRAGEDY

by RICHARD RADER

THE ANCIENT GREEKS SEEM to us the paradigmatic fatalists, their literature grappling with the unequal relationship between gods and humans. Perhaps for this reason we call them superstitious. We no longer believe a Zeus or Apollo is pulling strings behind the scenes of the sensible world, but we are more Greek than perhaps we know. For fate is everywhere these days. 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina were both called acts of divine retribution. Popular television shows like *Lost* and *Heroes* insist that everything happens for a reason. The sales of astrological and New-Age books and paraphernalia are booming. The advertisements for psychics and clairvoyants are nearly inescapable. What could explain our fascination with the supernatural? Our modern, secular world is driven almost entirely by unregulated globalization, so the pervasiveness of the Fate industry, with its language of guidance and determinism, is surprising. This situation reflects a contradiction between official and unofficial belief, for we are ready to believe there is a larger purpose behind seemingly random events, that our futures, however shadowy, have a definite shape. This raises thorny questions: If forces beyond our control or comprehension are influencing our lives, what happens to choice? If our decisions are predetermined to

Guilt by Descent: Moral Inheritance and Decision Making in Greek Tragedy. Oxford Classical Monographs, by N. J. Sewell-Rutter, 202 pp. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, \$90.00.

fit within a more meaningful order of existence, what space is left for human action? How are we to conceive of ethics in a world studiously indifferent to our choices?

Few understood the importance of these questions better than the Greeks, whose literature dealt with a central theological concern: What is (a) god? And how does god affect, impinge upon, or even enable human freedom? Tragedy holds the preeminent position with regard to these questions, engaging and re-imagining the relationship between humans and gods familiar to Homer, and doing so for precise reasons. Tragedy both resonates with the thematic fixations of Homeric poetry (heroes, *Übermenschen*, aristocrats) and diverges significantly from it. Compare, by way of example, a scene from Book 1 of the *Iliad* with Aeschylus' *Eumenides*.

Near the end of Book 1, after the Greeks have been ravaged for days by plague, Agamemnon and Achilles find themselves in serious conflict over the solution to their plight. Achilles, with the approval of the rest of the Greek army, suggests Agamemnon simply give back the girl Chryseis to her father, a proposal Agamemnon angrily rejects by threatening to take Achilles' girl Briseis in return. As Achilles in his anger poises to draw his sword and kill Agamemnon, Athena, prompted by Hera, arrives and prevents him from doing so. The gods' intervention in this episode, direct and unmistakable, suggests two things: First and foremost, gods play an active role in the course of the war, indeed even have personal stakes in it. Many of them have children involved, and others simply like the Greeks or Trojans for their own reasons. Second and more importantly, they intervene not only to influence the action, but also to forestall the consequences of decisions that are unforeseeable to the humans making them. (For all his justifiable rage, Achilles cannot foresee that killing Agamemnon is a disastrous move.) Human decisions and actions by themselves are short-sighted and dangerous. The gods are a necessary check on human impulse, a buffer between thought and action.

Contrast this episode with the plight of Orestes in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*. After Orestes has "justifiably" killed his mother to avenge his father Agamemnon (citing the authority of the god Apollo), he is hounded by the pus-oozing, acid-breathing Furies, punishers of kin-bloodshed. When Apollo arrives to defend Orestes (the first divine intervention in the whole *Oresteia*), he cannot simply save him like Athena saves Achilles. He must risk submitting Orestes to the bloody but lawful authority of the Furies. Even he, a god, cannot prevent the consequences of Orestes'

actions. Unlike Homer then, Aeschylus abstracts direct divine intervention. Apollo is there for Orestes, but he is no longer flicking away spears on the battlefield like so many flies. This move points to the ambiguity of human decisions taken without the guarantee of an Athena or Apollo to back them up. Though humans may invoke the gods to justify their decisions, they are essentially left to themselves.

So tragedy's reimagining of the human-divine relationship raises the question: What kind of world do we live in, and how are we to conduct ourselves, when the gods have abandoned us? How are we to confront the impasse of choice without an Athena to pull our hair as we poise to chop off our leaders' heads? Tragedy, in effect, portrays a godless world. To pose the old philosophical/theological conundrum: If god is dead, is everything possible, or nothing? One answer, and the one that pervades, is that tragedy elevates Necessity to a theological principle in the place of direct divine involvement. In a famous passage, Agamemnon, we are told, "put on the yoke of Necessity" when he sacrificed his daughter.

N. J. Sewall-Rutter, formerly Lecturer in Greek at Corpus Christi College, Oxford, takes up this issue of determinism in his recent *Guilt by Descent: Moral Inheritance and Decision Making in Greek Tragedy*. His aim is to "trace the connections within and the workings of a certain constellation of causal determinants that operate in the corrupted and inward-looking *oikoi* of tragedy, paying particular attention to the Atreids and the Labdacids" (p. xii). Ultimately (and unfortunately), for reasons I will explain, the book falls prey to the deterministic misunderstandings of tragedy that are symptomatic of tragedy studies in general. Before I begin, then, let me provide a brief overview of the state of the question.

The deterministic view of tragedy has a long history. To take just a few examples from Arthur Coffin's *Questions of Tragedy*¹: "A drama is a play about man and his fate—a play in which God is the spectator" (Lukács 1971); "The battle takes place between the single individual and the 'powers,' between man and demons, between man and gods . . . Man does not know. Unknowingly and unconsciously he falls prey to the very powers that he wanted to escape" (Jaspers 1952); "Tragedy . . . is not a spectacle of evil; it is a spectacle of a constant and inevitable relation between good and evil, a dramatic representation of a law of values" (Myers 1956); "The tragic hero is very great as compared with us, but there is something else, something on the side of him opposite the audience, compared to which he is small. This something else may

be called God, gods, fate, accident, fortune, necessity, circumstance” (Frye 1957).

On this view man faces an intractable cosmic systematicity. The tragic is the space in which a protagonist acknowledges, willingly or not, his or her limitations before it. Heroes and victims emerge either to transcend their suffering or succumb to the pistols at their heads. But the conclusion is always the same: an impersonal sense of necessity always wins out. As Terry Eagleton has explained, in this world the tragedies inflicted upon man are testament not to the vagaries of choice and chance, but to a “mysteriously providential” force. Tragic theory thus transforms human suffering into metaphysics.² Bruce Heiden has pointed out one of the reasons this is the case: the Enlightenment background of modern scholarship betrays a “determined adherence to the explanatory first principle of Necessity”: “If you believe that there is a supreme being, and that being is Necessity, then the notion of choice . . . is a pernicious illusion.”³ The reigning assumption of tragedy studies, in fact, is that freedom has precarious value in a cosmos over-determined by fate.

Even modern philosophical treatments of tragedy, which tend to speak in terms of the sublime and finitude, fail to break free from the language of determinism. The (now Kantian) hero “sees himself constrained to act under the weight of a necessity,” affirming himself and his freedom to act even in vain.⁴ Bernard Williams once cautioned we should “attend to ways in which the sense of this necessity in tragedy is an artifact of dramatic style, and not simply a deployment in the theatre of something that everyone believed anyway,” but concluded in the end that human agency in tragedy is constrained. For example, he believes Agamemnon “understands only too well that Artemis has brought it about that if he sacrifices Iphigeneia, the fleet can sail, and if not, not” (pp. 131, 135).⁵ That we have in *Agamemnon*, a paradigmatic drama for determinists, only an *account* of an act that took place more than ten years prior—and that this account is, furthermore, a retelling of an oracular interpretation by the seer Calchas, not the words of the goddess Artemis herself—ought to arrest us from such deterministic certainties. In effect, Williams comes to the same conclusion as Agamemnon.

We seem unable to shake our own necessity to invoke determinism. Recent studies have succeeded in moving beyond the fascination with freedom and fate as the crux of tragedy. For Timothy Reiss, for example, tragedy is a meta-discourse, a site opening out on the question of referential truth.⁶ Can we justly comprehend the world? The space of the

tragic (i.e., the fundamental unintelligibility of the world) is infinitely open and unresolved, tracing and haunting the gap between what we know about the world and all that escapes. Hence Reiss sees tragedy (qua genre) as an attempt to impose order and experience (“our will to knowledge”) on a world that will always outplay schematization. “Tragedy, as a discourse, would therefore be at once the creation of the ‘tragic,’ its sign, and *at the same time* the sign of its disappearance” (p. 24).⁷ Even here the referentiality of the tragic is posed in largely binary terms—the inexpressible and expressible, conflict and resolution, asemy and sign—dichotomies suspiciously similar to that of freedom and fate. But binaries do not necessarily denote equality or balance. The belief that “Freiheit ohne Notwendigkeit nicht Freiheit wäre” (“There is no freedom without Necessity”), as Karl Reinhardt noted with regard to Aeschylean theology, expresses an antinomy without equilibrium: Necessity is the opposite of freedom like a cat is the opposite of a dog. One speaks of them together, but there is little logical symmetry.⁸

To his credit Sewell-Rutter wants to tackle these questions again, and thus offers a welcome change from the current “cultural poetics” engagement with tragedy. His “constellation of causal determinants” consists of inherited guilt, curses and Erinyes (the dread punishers of kin-bloodshed). Before jumping into tragedy, Sewell-Rutter lays a theoretical groundwork for tragic theology by examining supernatural causation in Herodotus. The story of Croesus, who again and again misreads oracles and misjudges his own human limits, figures prominently in the discourse of causation because on him seem to converge all those dreadful forces—“fate, the sins of the fathers, and the uncertainty and mutability of human life” (p. 5). Croesus was famously told by the oracle of Apollo at Delphi that if he waged a war against the Persians, he would destroy a great empire—tragically, he failed to ask which. In the end, Croesus recognizes the work of the god in his downfall. For Sewell-Rutter, the “twin concepts of what is fated and what must happen run right through [Herodotus’] work, and are frequently invoked to account for some misfortune or downfall” (p. 7). Yet he is right to argue that these hapless humans are not simply helpless pawns. Rather, the course of human life is “motivated on both human and divine levels, and the divine component of its motivation is not single but multiple” (p. 11).

Sewell-Rutter notes that the downfall of Croesus is explained by Herodotus as punishment for Gyges’ original transgression against Candaules five generations earlier (hence it was predetermined). But

since this explanation comes *after* Croesus meets his demise, we need to ask to what extent the narrative framework of the story contributes to the impression of supernatural causation. To provide an analogy: If upon looking back at a failed relationship I say, “I should have seen this coming. There was that time he said this, and this other time he did that,” and then conclude the relationship was “bound” to fail, does this mean the individual events I remember “caused” or “determined” its failure? Not really (or literally), because only in retrospect can they signify in this way. Life moves forward, so how could I possibly know in the moment that any of these individual events have a larger teleological meaning for my relationship as a whole? Anything else might have happened, and anything else yet might. So it is important to keep an eye on the direction of our perspective when we start to recognize the hand of god, as hindsight tends to furnish clarity and purpose otherwise unavailable. Sewell-Rutter acknowledges narratological technique, as when he cites Gould (approvingly or not, I cannot tell) to the effect that Herodotus deploys the concept of fate “not so much [as] an explanation as a means of avoiding the necessity of explanation and the consequent break in the pace and flow of the story” (p. 2, n.2). According to Gould at least, the invocation of fate is a rhetorical move more than a statement of evident truth. With this in mind, what are we to make of the fact that all of the oracles described in the Croesus story are (1) reports of (2) the Pythia’s interpretation of (3) the god Apollo’s words, not the words of Apollo himself? Like dreams for Freud, the Pythia condenses and displaces the words of Apollo into verse. The decrees of the god are always-already mediated as a function of their very expression, and come wrapped in the ambiguity of poetic expression. To seek answers from the god, therefore, is inherently risky, rather like seeking tax advice from the poetry of Auden is risky. So there are many layers of meaning between Croesus and the “truth.” Thus Herodotus is always-already employing a narratological technique in reporting (the reporting of) oracles. How are we to cut through all this narration to find the truth of supernatural causation? Croesus had a way, but he got it wrong.

Sewell-Rutter traces the influence of generational guilt—the sins of the father visited upon his children, as it were—paying particular attention to the Labdacids (the house of Oedipus), who more than any other blighted family fascinate the tragedians. He asks: Do Oedipus’ sons “inherit from their forebears more than the fact of their inter-necine death? Do they inherit characteristics or propensities to this kind of disastrous behaviour?” (p. 16). Aeschylus’ *Seven Against Thebes*,

which is an essential place to explore inherited guilt, is Sewell-Rutter's paradigm. The central decision-scene of the play, where Eteocles (child of the incestuous union of Oedipus and Jocasta) sets himself opposite his twin brother Polynices in a battle that will result in their mutual deaths, brings Eteocles "into conformity with his supernaturally determined doom" (p. 28). We assume this because the "familial principle is repeatedly appealed to by both Eteocles and the chorus to explain the catastrophe" (p. 27), and because Eteocles invokes his father's curse upon hearing Polynices is behind the seventh gate of Thebes.

Seven deserves more careful consideration than this. What are we to make of the fact that, following his exclamation about his father's curse coming to fruition, Eteocles drops the matter altogether and says instead, "I have faith that justice is on my side and will stand against him myself" (*Sept.* 672–73). Eteocles claims responsibility for the decision to face his brother all by himself, a fact underscored by the emphatic combination of a middle-voiced verb and an intensive/reflexive pronoun (as when Austin Powers says, "Allow myself to introduce myself"). This is Eteocles' choice, not the working of fate. He makes this decision looking toward an open future, not an inexorable past. Eventually Eteocles will succumb to his own fatalistic reading of the circumstances, claiming things like, "My father's hateful, dreadful curse clings to me" (695–96), and "You cannot escape god-give misfortunes" (719). The chorus notably and consistently challenges him on his fatalism: he can simply choose not to go. To their mind the future has not yet been written, not even by Oedipus' curse. But Eteocles cannot be persuaded and thus takes his final decision by surrendering his freedom. Tellingly, it is only after Eteocles has departed, determined to face his brother, that the chorus relates the story of the curse pronounced by Oedipus (720–91). That is, only after Eteocles has sealed his "fate" with blood. So the narrative sequence imposes a greater sense of inevitability than the play really allows. Where Eteocles claims divine causation, Aeschylus shows personal responsibility (even in the moment of surrendering to fate).

Curses are another feature of tragic discourse, and they always seem to find realization. Unlike wishes, curses cannot be undone. To illustrate their power, Sewell-Rutter adduces Euripides' *Hippolytus* (in which Theseus calls a curse upon his son on the false belief he has tried to rape his wife Phaedra), Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* (in which Oedipus unwittingly curses himself in the name of protecting the city of Thebes), and Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (in which the curses of the house of Tantalus, Agamemnon's great-grandfather, come to fruition in Aegisthus'

vengeance). In his zeal to create an overarching thematic connection Sewell-Rutter elides the complex and differing use/representation of curses in these plays. Are the (frankly, vague) similarities between the curses of Theseus and Oedipus (p. 69) enough to assert that the same or a similar type of supernatural causation obtains between the two? Surely the terrifying description of Poseidon's bull rising from the sea and the arrival of the goddess Artemis in *Hippolytus* go a lot further to suggest supernatural causation than the fuzzy warning Oedipus receives to "cast out the pollution in the city." If Apollo, who is believed to be behind the destruction of the house of Oedipus, never shows up to corroborate his responsibility (as Aphrodite does in *Hippolytus*), how can we say in good faith that it was supernaturally determined?⁹ To this end Sewell-Rutter raises a possible objection to his own method: "If we find it tempting to read inherited curses into tragedies, we would do well to ask ourselves why we feel we need them. Are they supposed to provide a more satisfying sense of unity? Or a better explanation for the suffering portrayed? Or a more comforting picture of justice? *Perhaps [our] attempt . . . reveals as much about what we desire to find in the action of a tragedy*" (p. 67, italics added). Yet it is not just what we desire to find in tragedy. It is also, more importantly, what tragic protagonists desire to find in their struggle to understand the uncompromising, unsympathetic world they live in.

The Erinyes, those dread goddesses, receive similar treatment. Like inherited guilt and curses, the Erinyes "work" against tragic protagonists (e.g., Orestes, Eteocles, and Polynices). Sewell-Rutter does not, however, distinguish between the Erinyes as they literally appear in Aeschylus' *Eumenides* and their figurative presence in *Seven* or Euripides' *Phoenician Women*. He claims, for example, that in *Seven* "the prominence of Erinyes in the climactic 'decision'-scene is undeniable" (p. 83). Nothing in the text would suggest their presence (let alone undeniable prominence). They certainly play a role in Eteocles' dramatic *cri de coeur* following the revelation that Polynices is stationed behind the seventh gate, but they are not there physically. (Same goes for *Phoenician Women*.) Helen Bacon once argued that Eteocles' shield, which strangely goes undescribed in a play whose centerpiece is the description of shields, bears the *sēma* of the Erinyes on it.¹⁰ But that was just speculation, and speculation about a representation. So the question is: If the invocation of the Erinyes is only a rhetorical move, then can they really be causal determinants? No.

The heart of Sewell-Rutter's argument is his chapter "Fate, Freedom,

Decision Making: Eteocles and Others” (pp. 136–71). He asks: To what extent does the “constellation of inter-related causal determinants” impinge upon the decisions and, importantly, decision-making ability of tragic characters? Is their freedom imperiled? His ambition is “to compel us to examine the role of fate in tragedy and to ask whether we can justifiably think in terms of a problem of freedom” (p. 137). He distinguishes fate from determinism but in a too-subtle and unhelpful way (pp. 137–39), a distinction in any event that would carry more weight if he had not been conflating inherited guilt, curses and Erinyes all under the banner of “causal determinants” throughout the book. We learn here that sometimes awful things happen for reasons beyond comprehension, and thus are ascribed to fate (e.g., in Euripides’ *Heracles*). This is an important point that needs to be spelled out because it fundamentally challenges the notion of determinism. Tragedy may not enjoy “the benefit of hindsight” because it represents “events in the present tense” (p. 149), but the retrospective ascription of divine influence is profoundly different from proper divine influence. The one is a truth claim, the other a simple truth. Agamemnon’s decision to sacrifice his daughter, for example, is most certainly not “in the present tense” (it is related by the chorus), so their assertion that he put on the “yoke of Necessity”—ten years prior—is very much hindsight, less a statement of fact than a confused and horrified guess. How else to explain Agamemnon’s callous decision except to say he *had to do it*? The assertion, that is, reflects their lack of knowledge, their failure of understanding. Likewise, if Pastor John Hagee declares Hurricane Katrina was God’s punishment for the enfranchisement of homosexuals, does that mean it really was? We are quick nowadays to label such proclamations the baldest, most cynical opportunism, but we genuflect before a Greek tragedy? We cannot, as Sewell-Rutter does throughout, take statements from characters for truths. We may take them for truth claims, but as Nietzsche so devastatingly showed, truth claims spring from the will to power, and thus reflect not realities but desires and interests, fears and malicious hopes.

Consider Agamemnon again. His play gives us precious little insight into his decision to kill Iphigeneia. How does Agamemnon know the omen of the eagles has been interpreted correctly (and is that even possible)? How does he know the injunction to sacrifice his daughter is binding? Why would he need to gag Iphigeneia if her sacrifice is divinely mandated? That hedge means something: Agamemnon is not sure. This both textual and hermeneutic indirection is a precise illustration of the

limitations of human knowledge in a world without gods to underwrite decisions. Unlike Achilles in the *Iliad*, no god is present to disabuse Agamemnon's reading of the "signs." All he is left with is a decision, one that reflects no more than his isolation in a world that refuses to give him straight answers. Any justification he summons—I cannot disobey the gods; I cannot be seen as weak before my troops—is thus a reflection of his fear (gods) and desire (troops). Neither is the truth. Tragedy is thus meant to show how characters acknowledge, confront, and/or attempt to overcome this maddening undecideability, how they come to their decisions without knowing the truth. It is emphatically not a justification or a theodicy.

Looked at under this light, Greek tragedy is a form of philosophy—a philosophy of tragic humanism—that engages ethical questions, more so even than it is the literary trace of a long-lost public theater. This, apparently, is a controversial position. We need to get back, it is argued, to a "na(t)ive" appreciation of public drama. It is quite common to hear, in fact, that certain interpretations of tragedy are "too intellectual" or "too philosophical" for a genre performed before an untrained audience. Sewell-Rutter falls into this trap. But absent any meaningful evidence for ancient performances,¹¹ why do we still bother with tragedy? Precisely because tragedy engages ethical and philosophical questions that transcend the boundaries of performance (and even the Great Dionysia). Bruce Heiden made this point: "Even in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. performances were apparently infrequent, but plays circulated alongside the epics of Homer, the historical writing of Thucydides, and the works of Plato, Aristotle, and other philosophers. All these discourses share an obsession with ethics, which necessarily frames a temporal horizon much longer than that of a performance."¹² Tragedy is a form of philosophy in its very generic construction.

Reading tragedy with the same eye one trains on Plato or Leibniz tends to raise the specter of anachronism. Are we imposing modern preoccupations with, say, fate/freedom upon a literature unfamiliar with them? Sewell-Rutter claims (with Vernant¹³), for example, that the Greeks had no word for free will (p. 151), and thus that our modern fascination with parsing it in tragedy risks irresponsibility. This is sensible but over-cautious, rather like saying because the Greeks lacked umbrellas, they were not aware of the difference between rain and sunshine (or that because they did not have a theory of gravity, they were not subject to it). I agree for the most part with Vernant, though I suspect philology misleads us sometimes, especially when we insist that something cannot

exist without a corresponding signifier. (Here is where positivism and postmodernism curiously come together.) The theological discourse of fate/freedom may not have taken hold until Augustine, but this fact emphatically does not mean that the Greeks, and especially the tragedians, were incapable of posing questions that reflected their interest/fear/curiosity in the limitations of human freedom. Greek tragedy is deeply theological. It concerns itself with gods—was even put on stage in honor of a god—and the humans involved with them. Gods have infinite freedom, humans finite. Tragedy, therefore, addresses the difference between them without having to announce itself. (It is art, after all, not a doctoral thesis.) Tragedy needed no *parabasis* to pedantically or cloyingly signal its message. The medium, the genre, the unself-conscious questioning running through it and animating it—this is the message. So while tragedy may not literally deploy a discourse of fate/freedom, it is assuredly the foundation upon which subsequent theological and philosophical discourses built their edifices. One often hears the objection that Sophocles under this light sounds like Sartre, an anachronistic assertion if ever there was one. But Sophocles did not have to read Sartre: Sartre read Sophocles.

Furthermore, if we are to insist (as Sewell-Rutter does) that the modern sense of agency does not fit with the ancient, then what about the language of freedom? The word *eleutheros* and its relatives do figure prominently in tragedy, but Sewell-Rutter does not chase them down or make a claim for their difference from or similarity to our own. In *Prometheus Bound*, for example, Kratos tells Hephaestus that *eleutheros gar outis esti plēn Dios* (“No one is free except Zeus”). What are we to make of this assertion that only Zeus is free? That it comes from the mouth of a thug who exists solely to personify Zeus’ physical power? What does freedom mean for the king of the gods? Could Kratos possibly mean no one is free except when Zeus provides/guarantees it? These are important questions that need careful consideration because they fundamentally challenge our certainty regarding freedom and necessity—especially for humans, for whom (unlike for gods) freedom is elementally defined and circumscribed by mortality. In a way, then, by not observing his own methodological caution, Sewell-Rutter transposes modern ideas about freedom upon the ancients. So what exactly is freedom for a son of Oedipus? Is it the same freedom we enjoy today to choose between twenty laundry detergents, or—what has really become of modernity—the freedom to kill? If it is not the former, and if by chance it is the latter (as it is in the case of Eteocles), then what do those differences

and similarities mean? These are the very questions of tragedy, and its philosophy is the framing of the questions—not the solutions proposed by characters.

The *opinio communis* has gotten stale. It is time for a systematic reappraisal of determinism, fate, free will, agency, etc. in Greek tragedy. Here is not technically the space to pose a radical challenge to the orthodoxy. But I do have some guiding questions that will hopefully initiate a dialogue about the centrality of determinism in tragedy and, more importantly, in our work on it. My underlying point throughout has been that to a large extent what we identify as fate and determinism in tragedy are retrospective explanations characters use to justify decisions or make sense of their place in the world. The brutal act Agamemnon perpetrates in no way illuminates that his hand was forced. Rather, the play makes possible the identification of his act as overdetermined precisely through the chorus' retrospective point of view. Sewall-Rutter rightly notes that curses, for example, are mentioned at opportune moments and, for the characters mouthing them especially, for self-justifying reasons (like Aegisthus). Perhaps then it would be better to see them not as actual causal determinants but (opportunistic, self-justifying) rhetorical claims on causality. The claim that Aegisthus' murder of Agamemnon is really the curse of Thyestes working itself out is impoverished and cynical logic, a point the *Oresteia* itself makes when Orestes murders him in turn. Though a character invokes fate or causal determinants does not mean he was actually forced. That goes for Eteocles, Electra, Orestes, as well as Croesus.

Tragedy teaches us that when we kill or act brutally, we never really "have to do it." We must never forget choices and decisions. Tragedy dramatizes a tragic humanism, the play and hedge and uncertainty of decision-making, and does so for our readings and re-readings, for our reflection. The reflection it inspires is to ground our ethics. Freedom is in the deliberation, the choice, good or bad. We cannot blame god for the consequences. Perhaps then the ultimate insight of tragedy is that our freedom is only ever imperiled when we believe that is has been imperiled.

1. Arthur Coffin, *The Questions of Tragedy* (San Francisco: Edwin Mellen Press, 1991).
2. Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2002); Terry Eagleton, "Tragedy and Revolution," in Creston Davis, John Milbank and Slavoj Žižek, eds., *Theology and the Political* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), pp. 7–21.
3. Bruce Heiden, review of Barbara Graziosi and Johannes Haubold, *Homer: The Resonance of Epic* (London: Duckworth, 2005), in *Classical Review* 56 (2006): 2–4.
4. *Philosophy and Tragedy*, ed. Miguel de Beistegui and Simon Sparks (London: Routledge, 2000).
5. Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
6. Timothy Reiss, *Tragedy and Truth* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980).
7. See also Michelle Gellrich, *Tragedy and Theory: The Problem of Conflict Since Aristotle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).
8. Karl Reinhardt, *Aischylos als Regisseur und Theologe* (Bern: A. Franke, 1949).
9. See Bruce Heiden, "Eavesdropping on Apollo: Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*," *Literary Imagination* 7 (2005): 233–57.
10. Helen Bacon, "The Shield of Eteocles," *Arion* 3 (1964): 27–38.
11. See, e.g., Graham Ley, *The Theatricality of Greek Tragedy: Playing Space and Chorus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), and David Wiles, *Greek Theatre Performance: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
12. Bruce Heiden, "Dramatic Literature, Politics, and the Present Moment of Performance," *Association of Literary Scholars and Critics Newsletter* 11 (2005): 12–13.
13. Jean Pierre Vernant, "Intimations of the Will in Greek Tragedy," in Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: Zone Books, 1988), pp. 29–48.