

A Genre that Matters: Schopenhauer on the Ethical Significance of Tragedy

A work in progress

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When even the best of us hear Homer or some other tragedian imitating one of the heroes sorrowing and making a long lamenting speech or singing and beating his breast, you know that we enjoy it, give ourselves up to following it, sympathize with the hero, take his sufferings seriously, and praise as a good poet the one who affects us most in this way.

Plato *Republic* 605cd.

One of the most vital areas in contemporary aesthetics concerns the experience of so-called “negative” emotions in an engagement with fiction. One persistent puzzle since the time of Aristotle is the problem of tragedy: How is it that we take pleasure in the inherently unpleasant emotions of fear and pity experienced in a serious engagement with tragic drama? The problem in its Humean formulation is generated by three propositions that seem mutually inconsistent:

1. Many people do enjoy tragedies
2. Typically one experiences unpleasant emotions such as anxiety, sorrow, pity, and fear as part of one’s emotional response to tragedies.
3. Generally those same people who enjoy tragedies do not seek out or enjoy the experience painful emotions in real life (outside of the theater).

The charge is that those who seek out and enjoy tragedies are acting irrationally. If people don’t welcome and enjoy scenes of terrible suffering in real life, then why would

they seek out those scenes and enjoy them in tragic drama? The paradoxical nature of tragic pleasure is heightened by the fact that the tremendous value attributed to tragedy as an art form seems to derive precisely from the suffering it evokes as well as from the serious and terrible events depicted.¹

As is well known, Aristotle, Burke, Hume, Nietzsche (to name just a few of the historical heavy-hitters) and scores of contemporary aestheticians have recognized that the apparent pleasure people derive in the experience of tragedy calls for an explanation. A notable exception to this tradition is Schopenhauer. This philosopher is among those thinkers who value tragedy quite highly, calling the genre “the summit of poetic art,”² both for the significance of the truths that tragedies reveal as well as for the greatness of the effect on the spectator. However, Michael Tanner³ and Alex Neill⁴ have wondered why Schopenhauer does not recognize a paradox, let alone a significant philosophical *problem*, in the idea of tragic pleasure. Indeed, Schopenhauer does not think that tragic pleasure calls for a particular explanation, and in the first part of this paper, after reviewing Neill’s interpretation, I will offer an alternative explanation for why this is the case.

¹ Christopher Williams writes “the exalted claims advanced on behalf of tragic art are surely motivated by the sheer imaginative and expressive power of this art, and that power has to be intimately connected to the dark and serious subjects with which the art deals. It would be an astounding coincidence—too astounding, we should surmise—if tragic satisfaction and the subject matter of tragedy were only contingently related to each other.” (“Is Tragedy Paradoxical?” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 31(1), 1998, p. 48. Similarly, in a prior discussion of Hume’s “Of Tragedy”, Alex Neill argues that “[a]ny plausible account of the paradox of tragedy must involve a recognition that the pleasure and the ‘pain’ that tragedy gives rise to are in some way internally related; that the tragic pleasure lies at least partly *in* the pain” otherwise, “[i]f we construe the pleasure afforded by tragedy as essentially separate from the ‘pain,’ then we pull apart one of the crucial respects in which we value tragedy from the pleasure it affords us.” Quoted from “Yanal and Others on Hume on Tragedy” *JAAC*, p. 153.

² Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 2 volumes, trans. E.F.J. Payne (Dover: New York, 1969) volume I, p. 252. Henceforth WWR, followed by the volume and page number.

³ Michael Tanner *Schopenhauer* (New York: Routledge, 1999) p. 40. Cited in Neill 2003.

⁴ Alex Neill “Schopenhauer on tragedy and value” in J. Bermudez *Art and Morality* (New York: Routledge, 2003) p. 209.

Responding to Schopenhauer's lack of attention to this problem, Neill argues that this problem is generated by the underlying assumption of a "hedonic theory of motivation" and a "hedonic theory of value," assumptions not made by Schopenhauer, and to his credit. If one does assume a hedonic theory of motivation and value, then it does seem paradoxical that persons who typically seek out pleasure and value artworks for the pleasure they provide, would seek out and value an engagement with painful emotions and terrible scenes in tragedy. Although, there is always some degree of the pleasureable tranquility in Schopenhauer's account of all aesthetic experience, for Neill this pleasure is neither distinctive of tragedy nor the source of its high value.⁵ In other words, Neill does not deny that there is an element of pleasure in Schopenhauer's account of the experience of tragedy (a kind of pleasure common to all aesthetic experiences—tranquility), but Schopenhauer, as Neill has argued, makes a distinctive contribution to the philosophical grappling with tragedy by finding the chief and distinctive value of tragedy in the *knowledge* it affords of the real, the "terrible side of life" as Schopenhauer puts it. Neill's reading of Schopenhauer has it that the real value of tragedy, and the reason people seek it out, has much more to do with the knowledge it affords: "the value that is distinctive of, or peculiar to, our engagement with tragedy lies in the cognitive payoff of that engagement—in what, by presenting the Idea in which Will is presented 'at the highest grade of its objectivity' tragedy is able to reveal to us about the 'nature of the world and of existence'."⁶ This line of thought effectively dissolves the paradox insofar as it disputes the first proposition in the Humean formulation.

⁵ Neill 2003, p. 215.

⁶ Neill, 2003, p. 216

While Neill is correct in seeing the high value of tragedy for Schopenhauer as deriving largely from its cognitive payoff (and ultimately from the ethical importance thereof), his account is flawed in that tragic pleasure is not merely a subordinate ingredient of this value. In this paper, I pick up on this exploration of Schopenhauer's account of tragedy, but I will urge a somewhat different interpretation of Schopenhauer's treatment of this genre, which highlights another way in which Schopenhauer can resolve the problem of tragedy. "Our pleasure in the *tragedy*" writes Schopenhauer, "belongs not to the feeling of the beautiful, but to that of the sublime; it is, in fact, the highest degree of this feeling" (WWR II: 433). Schopenhauer's account of the *sublime* pleasure involved in an experience of tragedy is highly suggestive and offers a way out of the problem of tragedy in a way that understands pleasure and knowledge as *integrated* in the experience and value of tragedy. For Schopenhauer, tragic pleasure because sublime is an integral part of the cognitive and ethical payoff.

I. Varieties of response to the problem of tragedy

In order to contextualize my interpretation of Schopenhauer's "implicit" resolution of the paradox of tragedy, below I canvass six major lines which philosophers have pressed to try to resolve the paradox of tragedy (this list is, of course, by no means exhaustive):

1. *Conversion of pain into pleasure.* In part, the fictional nature of the events depicted (even when based on historical events or are verisimilar) as well as the artistry of the language and plot structure of the tragedy enable what would be painful to experience in real life to be

converted into an experience that is pleasureable (Hume). Noel Carroll has defended the similar view that the tragic plot engenders curiosity in the audience, in “how certain forces, once put in motion, will work themselves out.” Thus, we derive pleasure from “having our interest in the outcome of such questions satisfied.”⁷

2. *Enjoyment of intense emotional states (with or without control)*: Some philosophers (e.g., Berys Gaut) have argued that people enjoy intense emotional states such as fear and pity; how else to explain why at least some people seek out the thrill of rock-climbing, free-fall parachuting or are disappointed when a horror film is not sufficiently hair-raising? Some philosophers add a condition on enjoyment of these intense “negative” emotions that subjects must be in control of the situation (thus, subjects enjoy rock-climbing but only with ropes; and many enjoy watching victims being chased by a serial killer, but only while sitting safely in the multiplex theater).
3. *Second-order enjoyment of our painful responses*. On Susan Feagin’s view, though we are indeed pained as we suffer along with the characters in tragic drama, we derive pleasure in reflecting on ourselves as the types of people capable of having such compassionate moral responses. Another variant of a second-order response view is held by Nietzsche in *Beyond Good and Evil*: Insofar as people *enjoy* making

⁷ Noel Carroll *The Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990) chapter 4.

themselves suffer—even while the suffering itself is painful--the experience of tragedy is pleasureable in a second-order fashion.⁸

4. *Pleasure taken in learning profound truths about the human condition.* There is pleasure in gaining knowledge about the world, no matter how awful that knowledge might be (Aristotle). This view is distinct from the Neill/Schier view 6 (below) which makes no assertion that gaining knowledge of terrible truths is pleasureable.
5. *Pleasure gained through emotional catharsis.* The discharge of painful emotions gained through an experience of tragedy is pleasureable, even if the experience of those emotions in engaging the tragedy is not (Aristotle).

Many thinkers combine a variety of these sources of pleasure in their accounts to resolve the paradox and to account for the rationality of tragic pleasure. All of these attempts accept the first proposition—many people do enjoy tragedies--and try to explain how pleasure can be taken either *in* the tragic drama itself (views 1, 2 and 4), as a *result* of the experience (view 5) or in our meta-experience of tragic drama (view 3).

6. *Knowledge over pleasure views.* Another solution proposed by Alex Neill and Flint Schier question the first proposition--how much pleasure people really do take in the experience of tragedy? Neill writes “For surely our response to the depiction of suffering and distress in tragic art does not always involve pleasure. Is witnessing Gloucester’s blinding, or Lear’s disintegration, really *pleasant*? ... isn’t there something more

⁸ This view derives from section 229 of *Beyond Good and Evil*, I am indebted to Amy Price’s essay “Nietzsche and the Paradox of Tragedy” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 38(4), 1998, p. 386, for this reference.

than a little odd about the common philosophical insistence on characterizing the essential character of our experience of tragedy in terms of pleasure?”⁹

According to the last view, the reason why people turn out for tragedies is not for the enjoyment or happiness they’re likely to gain, but rather for the knowledge they’re likely to acquire, i.e. profound truths about the human condition that the genre is especially apt to convey: that terrible misfortunes befall people, and that they suffer out of proportion to their desert; that human lives are vitiated largely by social factors, by chance, by fate or by human evil. Neill credits Schopenhauer with the development of this 6th position, and I believe he is, in part, correct.

However, Schopenhauer’s view also incorporates a notion of sublime pleasure which plays a key role in the enjoyment and value of tragedy, and which has not been sufficiently acknowledged by previous commentators. Insofar as an aesthete recognizes and seeks to account for a distinctive pleasure to be had in an experience of tragedy, it is fruitful to explore Schopenhauer’s account of tragedy, which, in addition to proposing a link to sublime pleasure also incorporates elements of many of the preceding accounts, especially from views 1, 2, and 6, thus positing the important intertwining of pleasure and knowledge.

II. Schopenhauer’s account of the sublime pleasure of tragedy

⁹ Neill, 2003, p. 208. In an earlier paper, Neill faults Hume for his fixation on happiness and pleasure in our experience of tragedy, writing: “How significantly does *happiness* figure in our experience as we watch Lear collapsing into madness, or *delight* in our response to Willy Loman's pain? For how many of us does *enjoyment* capture the flavour of our experience as we observe Oedipus' torment? What is missing from Hume's account is any acknowledgement of the fact that our experience of 'well-written' tragedy—and especially of 'well-written' tragedy—can be far from happy or enjoyable or delightful; it can, on the contrary, be overwhelmingly harrowing and disturbing.” A. Neill, “Hume’s ‘Singular Phaenomenon’” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 39(2):1999, pp. 112-125.

For Schopenhauer, normal, everyday perception is in the service of the will-to-live. In other words, perception is in the service of an individual's egoistic striving. Reminiscent of Hume's idea that the intellect is the "slave of the passions," for Schopenhauer, ordinary perception is the "slave of the will." In this service to the will, ordinary perception individuates things in the world by their particular place in time and space, and in relation to the subject, requiring that the subject be conscious of herself as a discrete body with particular desires of her own (WWR I: 187).

This kind of ordinary perception is contrasted in Schopenhauer's philosophy with another way in which persons may perceive the world, one in which a person's egoistic strivings are set aside for a while. In aesthetic experience, the subject loses her sense of individuality in the contemplation of the object, and thus throws off the instrumental character of perception for at least a short time, where "[we] forget our individuality, our will, and continue to exist only as pure subject ... [and] no longer consider the where, the when, the why and the whither of things, but simply and solely the *what*" (WWR I: 178). Schopenhauer analyzes aesthetic experience into two correlated and jointly necessary components, one objective and the other subjective. The objective side consists in the "intuitive apprehension of the Platonic Idea" (WWR I: 199) which is an objectification of the Will--the ultimate metaphysical substratum of the world, akin to the Kantian thing-in-itself--at a particular grade (something like a natural kind).¹⁰ The subjective side of aesthetic experience, on the other hand, consists in the subject's forgetting for a time his or her own particular interests. This change in the subject consists in "the deliverance of knowledge from the service of the will, the forgetting of oneself as individual, and the

¹⁰ Music constitutes an exceptional case within the arts, for Schopenhauer. Through absolute music one gains an insight into the nature of the Will itself, in a way that bypasses the phenomenal world and the Ideas altogether.

enhancement of consciousness to the pure, will-less, timeless subject of knowing that is independent of all relations” (WWR I: 199). This results in a peaceful, pleasureable tranquility.¹¹

A similar, though much less metaphysically charged, view of the way in which pleasure paves the way for confrontations with ordinarily all-too-disturbing matters is described by David Novitz who tries to explain an interesting observation: Certain works of fiction challenge our deepest commitments, without provoking in us an emotional response to the challenge, a response that one most certainly would have if confronted in this manner by non-fiction; that is to say, “some works of art not only make us susceptible, and with it susceptible, to new values, beliefs, and ideologies, but they also anesthetize us against the pain that often attends such upheavals”¹² so that people who would normally resist such challenges, actually welcome them in art. The explanation for how certain works of fiction pull this off is that they do not try to persuade us rationally, but at an emotional level. More particularly, Novitz explains that in fiction one

¹¹ Schopenhauer writes that the *pleasure* in aesthetic experience arises from both the subjective and objective aspects of aesthetic experience: “the *pleasure* [Wohlgefallen] produced by contemplation of the beautiful arises from those two constituent parts, sometimes more from the one than the other, according to what the object of aesthetic contemplation may be.” (WWR I: 196). Especially with higher grades of the Will (i.e. if human nature is the object of aesthetic contemplation), “the enjoyment [Genusses] will consist rather in the objective apprehension of these Ideas that are the most distinct revelations of the will. For these exhibit the greatest variety of forms, a wealth and deep significance of phenomena; they reveal to us most completely the essence of the will, whether in its violence, its terribleness, its satisfaction, or its being broken (this last in tragic situations), finally even in its change or self-surrender, which is the particular theme of Christian painting...” (WWR I: 213). In these passages Schopenhauer sounds as if he is urging view 4 above, i.e. that there is pleasure in gaining knowledge, even of awful truths. But Schopenhauer does not do much with the notion that the higher the Idea expressed in a work of art, the more pleasure the work affords. Rather, as Neill has argued, the hierarchy of the arts for Schopenhauer (the reason why drama is placed higher than architecture, for example) has more to do with the significance of the Ideas captured in these respective art forms. In order to make good sense of Schopenhauer’s hierarchy of the arts, it would seem that what Schopenhauer means to say when he writes “the *pleasure* [Wohlgefallen] produced by contemplation of the beautiful arises from those two constituent parts, sometimes more from the one than the other, according to what the object of aesthetic contemplation may be” (WWR I: 196) is that the *value* (rather than pleasure) of an aesthetic experience inheres sometimes more in the *pleasure* it affords, and sometimes more in the *knowledge* it yields.

¹² David Novitz, “The Anaesthetics of Emotion” in *Emotion and the Arts* eds. Mette Hjort and Sue Laver (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997) 247.

imaginatively and emotionally engages with characters, putting oneself in their shoes and being absorbed by *their* stories. Such activity on the part of the reader “tends as a result to prevent us from attending to the consequences for ourselves of possible shifts in attitude and opinion.”¹³ This is precisely the kind of process which Schopenhauer sees in the experience of aesthetic will-lessness, which enables a person to confront and consider features of the world objectively without subjective resistance. When one engages a work of tragic drama, for instance, in a way that is detached from one’s own particular will, one witnesses some very harrowing scenes, yet the painful pangs of pity and fear are experienced for others; the action of the drama does not directly affect our own self-interest, and so we may gain insights into the world which may greatly affect our attitudes, in a way that bypasses our ordinary willful resistance.

The source of art, for Schopenhauer, is this disinterested, perceptual understanding of the world available most reliably to the genius. The artistic genius is able to see the essential in things (what Schopenhauer terms, the “Platonic Ideas”) by studying the world, and then employs artistic technique to crystallize these insights into a work of art. The work of art facilitates an understanding of Ideas for the rest of us non-geniuses (who are capable of seeing the Ideas in nature as well, but with less frequency or acuity), provided we approach the work of art distinterestedly.

Interestingly, Schopenhauer does not take it as a special problem that pleasure or enjoyment can be gained from an engagement with tragic drama. This is due to the fact that by the point in his main work at which he discusses tragedy, giving such an account would be unnecessary. Schopenhauer has already offered an account of the type of pleasure he believes is experienced in tragedy: sublime pleasure, which is in tragedy felt

¹³ Novitz, p. 249.

to the highest degree (WWR II: 433). Insofar as there is nothing paradoxical about sublime pleasure, then, there is no special problem with tragedy.

In the case of the feeling of the beautiful, say, in the paradigmatic case of engagement with graceful trees or colorful flowers, the objects as it were *invite* one to aesthetic contemplation (WWR I: 201) insofar as they are objects which lie between those which are hostile and those which are “agreeable” to the will. On either pole (hostility or attraction to the individual’s will) the will-less *contemplation* of the object is more difficult to achieve because a person may be moved either to flee from the object (if it is hostile to the will) or to use it to gratify one’s bodily needs (it is it “agreeable” or “charming” to the will). The objects of aesthetic contemplation in the feeling of the sublime lie at the antipathetic end of the spectrum: they bear a “hostile relation to the human will in general, as manifested in its objectivity, the human body. They may be opposed to it; they may threaten it by their might that eliminates all resistance, or their immeasurable greatness may reduce it to nought.” (WWR I: 201). Sublime pleasure, on Schopenhauer’s account, results when a person is able to achieve calm, contemplation of phenomena *despite* the fact that these same things are quite threatening to the person’s bodily existence or to a person’s psychological well-being.

Following the 18th century discussions of the sublime (in Burke, Kant and others) Schopenhauer sees two main types of the experience: the dynamical and the mathematical. In the dynamical sublime, a person is confronted with forces (such as a raging storm at sea) which threaten bodily harm or even death to the individual; in the mathematical sublime, extreme magnitudes for instance (i.e. the expanse of the heavens, a desert horizon, a towering mountain range) threaten psychologically to reduce the

individual's existence to complete insignificance. When a subject acknowledges the threatening phenomena *qua* threat yet “consciously turn[s] away from it, forcibly tear[ing] himself from his will and its relations, and, giving himself up entirely to knowledge, [he] may quietly contemplate, as pure, will-less subject of knowing, those very objects so terrible to the will” (WWR I: 201). In achieving will-less contemplation via this psychological struggle, the subject thus elevates himself above his own individual body and particular strivings. This elevation of consciousness over one's own willing, striving body, into calm contemplation of those very objects which threaten the individual's existence, yields the pleasureable feeling of the sublime. Schopenhauer further describes this feeling as a “state of exaltation” where one is conscious of being “unshaken” and “unconcerned” while contemplating the “Ideas in those very objects that are threatening and terrible to the will” (WWR I: 204). Ultimately, this pleasureable feeling of exaltation, for Schopenhauer, is due to two different thoughts about our power as subjects, neither of which is made entirely explicit in his work.

First, Schopenhauer holds that we may become conscious of an inarticulate feeling “made clear only by philosophy” (WWR I: 205), that we are exalted beyond threatening nature insofar as we are transcendental subjects of knowledge:

If we lose ourselves in contemplation of the infinite greatness of the universe in space and time, meditate on the past millennia and on those to come ... we feel ourselves reduced to nothing; we feel ourselves as individuals, as living bodies, as transient phenomena of will, like drops in the ocean, dwindling and dissolving into nothing. But against such a ghost of our own nothingness, against such a lying impossibility, there arises the immediate consciousness that all these worlds exist only in our representation, only as modifications of the eternal subject of pure knowing. ... The vastness of the world, which previously disturbed our peace of mind, now rests within us; our dependence on it is now annulled by its dependence on us. All this, however, does not come into reflection at once, but shows itself as a consciousness, merely felt, that in some sense or other (made

clear only by philosophy) we are one with the world, and are therefore not oppressed but exalted by its immensity (WWR I: 205).

The second exalting thought in the feeling of the sublime is of our power as moral subjects. Schopenhauer insists that this is not to be understood in a Kantian sense, i.e., as a consciousness of our moral autonomy even in an environment hostile to duty. Rather, the subject's moral power consists in an ability to make *the* ethical choice, which he describes in idealist terms as the "only event in-itself": "The will alone is; it is the thing-in-itself, the source of all those phenomena. Its self-knowledge and its affirmation or denial that is then decided on, is the only event in-itself" (WWR I: 184).

The subject's moral power, for Schopenhauer, consists in the ability no longer to be a slave of the will-to-live, but to make a choice of how to relate to one's egoistic willing which motivates the subject in ordinary life. The choice is either to affirm the will, which is tantamount to being a willing participant in the "drama of life" with all of its suffering and striving; or to deny the will, and thus to dampen one's own egoistic striving in various ways and degrees: with a response of universal compassion and activism on the part of those who suffer (à la Mother Theresa); or with a response of detachment and resignation (in the way of an ascetic monk). By virtue of Schopenhauer's metaphysically anchored pessimism, he recommends resignation from the world, and complete denial of the will, though he recognizes that this is a path upon which only the few saintly among us will embark.

In order to be in a position to make this ethical choice of how to conduct oneself in the world, a subject must first gain self-knowledge, that is, an understanding (intuitive, not necessarily philosophical) of the way the world really is. Schopenhauer believes that

there is an inborn optimism in people, borne out in the history of Western philosophy which has generally held the unity of the true, the good and the beautiful. In order to understand the full spectrum of life, human beings don't especially need comedy "an invitation to the continued affirmation of the will" which "declares that life on the whole is quite good, and in particular is generally amusing" (WWR II: 437-8). In this regard, people need tragedy, for the "peculiar effect of the tragedy rests ultimately on the fact that it shakes that inborn error [i.e. their optimism], since it furnishes a vivid illustration of the frustration of human effort and of the vanity of this whole existence in a great and striking example, and thereby reveals life's deepest meaning" (WWR II: 635). In addition to the important knowledge tragedy imparts, tragedy also affords sublime pleasure, the pleasure found in the subject's sense of exaltation.

III. Why tragedy matters

Great works of tragedy constitute the "summit of poetic art," for Schopenhauer, both for the significance of the truths that tragedies reveal, as well as for the greatness of the effect on the subject (spectator). What is generally learned from tragedy is the "terrible side of life":

The unspeakable pain, the wretchedness and misery of mankind, the triumph of wickedness, the scornful mastery of chance, and the irretrievable fall of the just and the innocent are all here presented to us; and here is to be found a significant hint as to the nature of the world and of existence (WWR I: 253).

These truths are achieved in three ways: First, there is the "presentation of a great misfortune" due to extraordinary wickedness of a character" (e.g. the King in *Richard III*, Iago in *Othello*). Second, there is the misfortune that is brought about through "blind fate,

i.e. chance or error” (e.g. *Oedipus Rex*). And third, and most powerfully for the average person nowadays, there is the misfortune brought about by the relationships among ordinary people who in the course of leading fairly typical lives do each other great harm:

characters as they usually are in a moral regard in circumstances that frequently occur, so situated with regard to one another that their position forces them, knowingly and with their eyes open, to do one another the greatest injury, without any one of them being entirely in the wrong. (WWR I: 255) [good modern examples of this kind would be *Death of a Salesman*, O’Neill’s *Long Days Journey into Night*].

The scenes with which we are confronted in tragedy may be truly harrowing. And the views of human life presented in tragedy are among the most horrifying one can imagine. Upon learning, say, that there is no ultimate purpose of life, that our lives are filled with meaningless striving and suffering, that the world is profoundly unjust and that chance and evil reign, why would we derive enjoyment from learning such truths?

The Schopenhauerian answer to this question lies in his account of the sublime: pleasure in the face of such terrible truths can be gained with a struggle.

At the moment of the tragic catastrophe, we become convinced more clearly than ever that life is a bad dream from which we have to awake. To this extent, the effect of tragedy is analogous to that of the dynamically sublime, since, like this, it raises us above the will and its interest, and puts us in such a mood that we find pleasure in the sight of what directly opposes the will (WWR II: 433).

With the help of the only semi-conscious thought of our *moral power* to affirm or deny the world as it is, the subject can experience a pleasureable exaltation.

Despite Schopenhauer’s protests to the contrary, the feeling of sublime exaltation he describes is, in fact, reminiscent of Kant’s account of the sublime as a feeling of our superior moral freedom even in a world hostile to our purposes. Although Schopenhauer does not see the sublime exaltation as a result of a glimpse of our ability to obey the

moral law in spite of difficult circumstances, he does characterize the feeling as deriving from an inarticulate sense of human freedom to choose how to respond to the terrible truths with which we're presented experientially in tragedy. And with these intuitively grasped recognitions of the subject's power and freedom comes the notion that subject need not be passive victims of that world. Once they come to understand the true nature of the world objectively, people are in a position to affirm or negate it, through the choice of attitude they take to their own individual strivings.

Insofar as the tragic pleasure is akin to that in the dynamically sublime, one might wonder whether there is anything distinctly valuable about experience with tragedy *per se*. Looked at from a different perspective, if one could gain the ethically powerful insight just as well from having a sublime experience of a stormy sea, why seek out tragedy in particular? Might we gain the same ethical value just as well from experience with sublime nature? Although Schopenhauer does not address this question, I believe he would respond to this worry about the particular value of tragedy—over any other experience of the sublime--in two main ways.

First, Schopenhauer holds that works of art are indispensable for revealing the Ideas. The fictional stance that a subject takes in engaging tragic drama (which helps promote the kind of abstraction away from the individual's own concerns), the invitation extended by the work of art to imagine, and the embodiment of the essential features of the world effected by the genius through the artistry of the language, the plot structure, and development of characters, all serve to impart knowledge of the world, in a way that it is experienced "from the inside," through feeling as well as belief. A sublime experience of a raging storm at sea might awaken a sense of one's own moral power, but

it will do nothing to impart this perceptual knowledge of the terrible side of the human condition in all its variety. Tragedy—not the sublime—offers a metonymy of the terrible side of the human condition (the plot, for instance, of one man’s tragic life, is metonymical to all human misery).¹⁴

Second, tragic drama has the ability to connect a consciousness of sublime exaltation with an enlightened understanding of the myriad ways in which human beings suffer by the “dominion of chance and error, the fall of the righteous, and the triumph of the wicked” (WWR II: 433). Making this connection between consciousness of the subject’s moral power (to affirm or deny a life of egoistic striving) and the “terrible side of life” prods the subject, according to Schopenhauer in the right direction morally speaking: toward compassion and, better still, resignation. Tragedy often awakens compassionate feelings in the face of undeserved suffering. Furthermore, in some cases tragic figures even provide a model for resignation in the face of the vanity of the world (Schopenhauer cites Prince Segismund in Calderón’s *Life is a Dream*,¹⁵ Gretchen in *Faust*, and Hamlet, among those characters who model a resignation of the pleasures and aims of life—and even life itself--after having been “purified by suffering” (WWR I: 253)).

Schopenhauer recognizes that some tragedies “give us the premises” (the nature and sources of human suffering) but they do not yield—in his view—the proper moral conclusion (resignation). Some tragedies steer us toward what he sees as inferior moral conclusions: that the world must contain some poetic justice and so we have good

¹⁴ For a much lengthier exposition of how the metonymy acts as a key leitmotif in Schopenhauer’s philosophy as a whole, see my “Poetic Intuition and the Bounds of Sense: Metaphor and Metonymy in Schopenhauer’s Philosophy” forthcoming in the *European Journal of Philosophy*.

¹⁵ One would have to say that Schopenhauer is highly unusual in treating *Life is a Dream* as a tragedy since the play lacks key tragic elements.

grounds for faith in the ultimate goodness of the world; that one should be defiant in the face of terrible fate; and that one should try to take revenge on those who have caused one to suffer. Given Schopenhauer's metaphysical pessimism, such tragedies are cognitively and morally inferior to those which aim to move us rather toward resignation in the face of the vanity of life's strivings: "the dawning of the knowledge that the world and life can afford us no true satisfaction and are therefore not worth our attachment to them" (WWR II: 433). But it is interesting to note that Schopenhauer had enough sensitivity to the history and variety of tragic drama to see that its lessons are not always pessimistic. In this, he avoids a mistake cited by Arthur Miller in response to reviews of *Death of a Salesman*:

There is a misconception of tragedy with which I have been struck in review after review ... It is the idea that tragedy is of necessity allied to pessimism. ... This impression is so firmly fixed that I almost hesitate to claim that in truth tragedy implies more optimism in its author than does comedy, and that its final result ought to be the reinforcement of the onlooker's brightest opinions of the human animal.¹⁶

Ironically, in Schopenhauer's own theory of tragic pleasure, the sublime exalted recognition of the subject's power of choice of affirmation or denial of the will might be taken to reinforce "the onlooker's brightest opinions of the human animal."

Ultimately, it is the cognitive value intertwined with the sublime pleasure afforded by successful works of this genre that explains the *ethical value* of the genre and why it is the "summit of poetic art" for Schopenhauer. For him, tragedy is the manner, *par excellence*, in which human beings can truly confront the bleaker conditions of human existence in a way that places themselves in the position to develop their own

¹⁶ Arthur Miller, "Tragedy and the Common Man" *New York Times*, February 27, 1949 in *Death of a Salesman* ed. Gerald Weales (New York: Viking, 1996) p. 146.

ethical response to the economy of evil. The choice of how to respond to a world full of suffering, is, for Schopenhauer the only “event in-itself,” the aesthetics of tragic drama (the depiction of significant action, through the artist’s skill with language, plot structure, and characterization) makes it a genre that enables human beings to confront precisely this choice of ethical outlook.

IV. Conclusion

Schopenhauer claims that the high *value* of tragedy consists mainly in the knowledge it affords, but the path for the reception of this knowledge is paved, and in a way that is ethically-salient, by sublime pleasure. The pleasure we take in tragedy comes from an exaltation of the subject in the face of terrible truths, which we achieve only by way of struggle. The feeling of exaltation arises from a consciousness of our human power to respond to those truths with a “different kind of willing” and thus possibly to effect “a different kind of existence” (WWR II: 435). Schopenhauer’s distinctive contribution to thinking about the problem of tragedy as I see it is two-pronged. The first prong of the Schopenhauerian solution is to highlight the high cognitive value of the genre (view #6), as detailed above. People value tragedy in part for the knowledge it affords and seek out scenes of suffering in tragedy which they wouldn’t in real life because life is not structured by an artist to yield something of great cognitive value.

The second prong of the Schopenhauerian solution is to describe how in art these terrible scenes are much more apt to be experienced as pleasureable, in a way that exalts rather than threatens the subject. Given the fictional stance, the invitation to imagine, the artistry of the language, the plot structure and character development, a tragedy allows a

person an understanding of Ideas which can be contemplated as sublime. We seek out this experience of “being already in the midst of hell” in tragedy, though we would not welcome it in real life, in large part because in the tragedy our experience of hell is gained in a way that exalts the subject and which stirs the consciousness “that for a different kind of willing there must be a different kind of existence also” (WWR II: 435). The experience of suffering in tragic drama will not torment the subject to no productive end, rather, it will involve a sublime pleasure which exalts the subject, and to an ethically-salient end. This part of the solution combines elements of view #1, the conversion of pain into pleasure, insofar as the artistic aspects of the tragedy are very important for enabling an experience of sublime pleasure. A Schopenhauerian view also contains elements of view #2—the enjoyment of intense emotional states, so long as these are controlled by a sense a person’s own exalted power over the threatening forces.

One weakness of this proposed solution is its dependence on Schopenhauer’s phenomenology of the sublime. And frankly, in the absence of any good empirical studies on the putative experience of the sublime, it’s not clear how someone who won’t be brought around to experience that phenomenology would be persuaded.

But perhaps the most objectionable parts of the Schopenhauerian solution I have teased out in this paper comes from the many not-well-supported pessimistic metaphysical claims which he makes about the way the world is “in-itself.” No doubt there is much wisdom in tragedy about the nature and sources of human suffering and the “fragility of goodness” (to borrow Martha Nussbaum’s poignant phrase). But must we conclude that this kind of suffering is part of the essential and eternal nature of the world,

leaving our only justifiable response to the world to consist in resignation and denial of the will-to-live within it?

It appears that Schopenhauer gives a contemporary audience no good reason to believe that the world *must* have this eternal hellish structure, nor the conclusion that we really ought to deny the whole cycle of willing. The necessity of the hellish view of the world as will is supported by some very baroque metaphysics that few of us are likely to find plausible. Though admittedly idealistic, Victorian, and to Nietzscheans, hopelessly “Socratic” it is possible that many conflicts among human wills (wars, exploitative social arrangements, etc.) could be avoided through better human institutions.

Nonetheless, so long as there is suffering without any redeeming instrumental value on this earth, suffering caused by ordinary people harming others through ordinary actions, suffering caused by terribly wicked people, or just plain old bad luck, tragedy will remain a deep source of understanding its contours. Imagine that the only experiences of drama we had access to were those with Hollywood happy endings; we all might be comforted by the sight of good always triumphing over evil; of the wicked getting their just deserts. But it would ring false, the world just isn't like that, and we need to be reminded of this fact so long as it remains historically true. To borrow a turn of phrase from feminist discourse: People should only give up tragedies in the post-tragic world!

Schopenhauer sees the sublime experience of tragedy, as providing an intuitive insight into our power as moral subjects, to adopt an attitude of compassion, the basis for ethics according to Schopenhauer, or better still, to become give up a live of striving, in ascetic resignation. But along the way in urging this metaphysically-charged account of

tragedy's ultimate value, Schopenhauer identifies a source of pleasure in the experience which provides an interesting way to resolve the paradox of tragedy in a way that integrates both pleasure and knowledge.