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Research article

Taming the Tragic – Agency and Catastrophe

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Abstract

In this article, some points of contact between tragedy and technology are presented. The main point of contact is the way in which both treat human action and issues related to knowledge, ignorance, responsibility, and tragic error. To define tragedy in general terms, some attention will be devoted to the works of Aristotle. From there, a comparison with our current predicaments can be drawn. We will argue two points. The first is that the tragic spirit that animates representation in Greek tragedies currently arises in various eras under new determinations that have a bearing on human agency. In our era, various events, such as disasters, calamities and catastrophes, attest to the role of technology in structuring, thwarting, and curtailing actions. At first glance, the return of the tragic spirit would seem obvious, owing to errors and the unintended effects of widespread technological use and innovation. The second point draws on the work of various authors in philosophy of technology to argue that it is difficult, if not impossible today for an event to be recognized or represented as tragic. In particular, the Promethean Gap between our faculties of production and our faculties of representation and feeling signifies that we are unable to grasp the effects of our everyday technologically mediated actions. Additionally, the spirit that animates the accelerated adoption of technology shifts responsibility away from human beings and towards a lack of knowledge and optimal planning of technical systems. In the original sense, an event is never acknowledged as tragic since it is never something definite, but a step towards a perfected future state of affairs.

Keywords: Tragic; Technology; Gunther Anders; Promethean gap; Aristotle

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Научная статья

Укрощение трагического: агентность и катастрофа

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Аннотация

В этой статье представлены некоторые точки соприкосновения между трагедией и технологией. Основная точка соприкосновения – это то, как оба явления рассматривают человеческие действия и вопросы, связанные со знанием, невежеством, ответственностью и трагической ошибкой. Для общего определения трагедии будет уделено внимание работам Аристотеля. Оттуда можно провести сравнение с нашими нынешними проблемами. Мы выдвинем два тезиса. Первый заключается в том, что трагический дух, лежащий в основе изображения событий в греческих трагедиях, в настоящее время возникает в различных эпохах под влиянием новых факторов, влияющих на человеческую деятельность. В нашу эпоху различные события, такие как катастрофы, бедствия и катастрофы, свидетельствуют о роли технологии в структурировании, препятствовании и ограничении действий. На первый взгляд, возвращение трагического духа кажется очевидным, обусловленным ошибками и непредвиденными последствиями широкого использования технологий и инноваций. Второй тезис опирается на работы различных авторов в области философии технологии, утверждая, что сегодня трудно, если не невозможно, признать или представить событие как трагическое. В частности, прометеевский разрыв между нашими способностями к производству и способностями к представлению и чувствованию свидетельствует о нашей неспособности осознать последствия наших повседневных действий, опосредованных технологиями. Кроме того, дух, движущий ускоренным внедрением технологий, перекладывает ответственность с людей на недостаток знаний и неоптимального планирования технических систем. В первоначальном смысле событие никогда не признается трагическим, поскольку оно никогда не является чем-то определенным, а лишь шагом к совершенному будущему положению дел.

Ключевые слова: Трагический; Технология; Гюнтер Андерс; Прометеевский разрыв; Аристотель

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INTRODUCTION

This work revolves around two points. The first examines the hypothesis that there is a significant convergence between the tragic spirit and the issues raised by technology today. Specifically, Greek tragedies and the works of Aristotle serve as fertile ground for exploring the dynamics of technology. Not all Greek tragedies align with technological themes, and not all are relevant for understanding and framing technology in the modern world, but many shared affinities exist between the two. Historians and philosophers of technology could gain valuable insights from studying these connections, and specialists in Hellenistic studies would recognize how philosophers of technology address concepts and problems related to human action that are similar to those raised by tragedies. Although I disagree with some of their conclusions, the works of Jos de Mul (2015) and Mark Coeckelbergh (2012) on these topics demonstrate a promising intersection. While Hellenistic studies certainly require a thorough understanding of Greek to interpret the original texts, their overall conclusions still support and encourage fruitful interdisciplinary dialogue.

What explains this convergence between tragedy and technology? The significance of Greek tragedies today lies precisely in how human action becomes a central theme that is continually examined within the specific epistemic circumstances of the characters' contexts when they make decisions and face the consequences. Greek tragedies raise questions about *ananke*, the necessity surrounding human life, as well as freedom and responsibility. They essentially pose dramatic questions that extend the Sphinx's inquiry about what it means to be human. These questions are increasingly relevant today, but they are now influenced by new factors, especially by technology. The link between tragedy and technology is thus connected to the idea that tragic events hold a hidden wisdom that can shed light on aspects unique to our era. In the tragic spirit, there exists a claim to truth that often remains beneath the surface. The second main point of this work is recognizing that, despite a notable convergence between the tragic spirit and technology, this relationship cannot be fully understood in our current historical context. I will outline several reasons for this, mainly relating to the nature of technological mediation, the opacity between users and the effects triggered, and how technology's formal dynamics – its kinetic character beyond mere technical content – prevent the emergence of the tragic spirit in Modernity. Technology is embedded in a secular narrative aimed at fulfilling a redemptive promise, and this faith prevents the reemergence and solidification of the tragic spirit and its representation.

Thinking about the tragic spirit against the backdrop of our era implies thinking about how human action is and always has been intertwined with multiple powers that subordinate and shape it. The reversal of expectations, the unpredictability of the future, and the obsolescence of familiarity and stability make the study of tragedy relevant as a model of human action where harmful consequences, mistakes, freedom and necessity, responsibility, knowledge and ignorance intersect. Even if today we no longer believe in gods as an explanation for the powers that condition and explain the harmful consequences of human action, it is undeniable that human action today seems to be constrained by increasingly narrow limits imposed by powers that only sometimes



manifest themselves. Geopolitical games, market fluctuations, and the turmoil of war shape the everyday lives of ordinary people without them having any say in the matter. García's thesis is that the old gods do not die (2006, p. 26). Regardless of their specific historical origin, gods refer to something transversal and timeless in human lives. Fortuna is one of these enduring symbols, undergoing metamorphoses through which its sphere of influence contracts or expands while it may or may not be recognised as a cultural power. And according to Rosset (1971, p. 16), what defines the tragic thought is the affirmation and acceptance of chance meddling in human affairs.

Similarly, we could say that the tragic spirit does not fade away, but merely recedes, and may or may not retain its transformative cultural power. The recognition of lasting constraints conditions the field of possibilities for action without determining it. Today, technology is, among other things, one of the main factors constraining the field of individual and collective human action. Furthermore, thinking about the relation of technology to human action is particularly acute because its promise is precisely to alleviate and facilitate human life. Recognising this role in technology does not mean demonising or sanctifying it, but rather thinking about its ambiguity. This is, in fact, the tragic worldview, namely, that of seeing in the dependence of human action on multiple powers the possibility of a timeless wisdom that involves the awareness that humans are simultaneously free and determined, knowing how their own actions are grafted onto multiple other chains of events.

WHAT IS TRAGEDY?

It is no easy task to define tragedy. However, some elements seem common to various dramatic works. In a tragedy, it is common for the instability and fragility of human life to lead to the conclusion that the hopes of mortals are just vain illusions that accompany them in their brief existence. The transition from fortune to misfortune of a protagonist who arouses goodwill is easily attributable to tragedy, so is atrocious and undeserved suffering, the impotence of choice in charting a path of escape, or the existence of an insoluble conflict (Lesky, 1978, p. 11 and Mandel, 1961, p. 20). However, tragedy, despite being painted in broad strokes, is one of those notions that “due to its inexhaustible richness cannot be delimited, petrified, conceptualised” (Serra, 2018, p. 24). Rather than asking for a definition of tragedy, it is perhaps more interesting to ask how the tragic reveals itself, that is, what justifies equating an event with a tragedy. The question and answers about “what tragedy is” thus transitions from a substantial concern to an open and dynamic one, alongside the acceptance that the tragic spirit, in what it reveals as paradigmatic of human action, can reveal itself through various forms of expression, that is, through theatrical conventions and dramatic representations, but also through disasters, calamities and catastrophes.

With this reformulation of the question, we can ascertain whether technology lends itself to being framed as a tragic experience. Similarly, knowing whether and how different historical contexts allow or prevent the emergence of the representation of tragedies is central to ascertaining their connection with technology. The tragic, as Max Scheler points out, is not essentially an aesthetic phenomenon, but something more,



something constitutive of the universe itself and to which we have access through the experience or representation of events (Scheler, 1955, p. 151). That Greek tragedies have, until now, been the ideal locus of this revelation is merely a most fortunate historical accident. In this sense, each era is led to an attempt to recognise its own form of the tragic spirit, to define it accordingly to its worldview, and to give it an expression.

TRAGEDY IN ARISTOTLE

If we dwell a little on Aristotle's considerations on tragedy, we can establish a frame of reference that will become all the more visible in contrast and similarity to our own era. To this end, it is important to note that, contrary to the Socratic-Platonic thesis, Aristotle believed that the good exists in the world and is not given in advance in rules or principles, as is mathematical knowledge or the procedures for playing a melody. The good is not a permanent quality, but an action, which is why contextual elements are crucial for the agent to act well (Aristotle, 2011, 1140a20-21).

Furthermore, tragic poetry, for Aristotle, does not respect, as history does, the particularities of human action, but rather expresses the universal, using concrete elements and people for this purpose. Tragedy brings together an accumulation of human experience and knowledge unrelated to any historical individual. It is this tension between the universal and the particular that allows tragedy, through the mimesis of action, to arouse terror and compassion and enable catharsis. Tragedy, as we have said, summons and exposes the audience to a kind of truth that is not immediately accessible, but which relates to praxis. Additionally, this revelation of truth to the public has pedagogical and educational value. Taking these assumptions and the importance of social life for learning how to act well into account, it becomes clear how, through the mimesis of action, tragedy demonstrates its proximity to the question of the ends that guide human life and how it attempts to show the way mortals seek to achieve them (Aristotle, 2013, 1450a16). All this leads to tragedy as confirming, in general, the vulnerability and fragility of human lives (Nussbaum, 1986, p. 20).

In his definition of tragedy, Aristotle also refers to his preference for plots of relative complexity. The reason for this preference is that in such plots there is a change of fortune (*metábasis*) that occurs due to a reversal (*peripéteia*) or a discovery (*anagnórisis*). Discovery consists in the transition from the unknown to the known regarding the identities of the protagonists, while a reversal refers to the shift of actions to their opposite. These are the most effective means of generating the desired emotional effects. For tragedy to be properly understood, the audience must also feel that misfortune does not discriminate against anyone. Aristotle also mentions how tragedy, in order to elicit the aforementioned emotions, must refer to the fall from fortune to misfortune of an individual who, not distinguished by excellence or justice, that is, an ordinary person, suffers the consequences not because of wickedness or perversity, but because of a mistake that causes the tragic change, the *hamartia* (Aristotle, 2013, 1452 b30-1453 a12). *Hamartia* also has the function of ensuring the transition from ignorance to recognition (Kim 2010, 37).



What is meant by this term? Although there are differing interpretations, ranging from ignorance of the facts to moral defect, we adopt the position of authors who emphasize (Kim, 2010, p. 40) that the term does not refer to a moral failing or guilt, but an epistemic error, a mistake or deception about the details surrounding the context of the action. *Hamartia* in tragedy is a cognitive error based, first and foremost, on ignorance of the relevant facts or an incomplete view of them. It is not a generic, universal ignorance, a simple lack of knowledge, but an ignorance relative to the context of the agent, a type of contextual knowledge such as the highly situated *phronesis* (Aristotle, 2011, 1110b28-1111a2). In tragedy, misfortune is therefore caused by blameless errors, that is, by actions that are not attributable to the bad temper of the characters (Aristotle, 2013, 1453a 13-16). The most moving tragedies, for Aristotle, are hence based on a cognitive failure, on this tragic and involuntary error in the face of the density and complexity of the chain of events surrounding the circumstances of the action. The fall is not the result of intentional deliberation but rather presents the precariousness and instability of the circumstances surrounding action.

In order to explore the relationship between tragedy and technology, it is also important to highlight the connection between voluntary and involuntary acts as analyzed by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (2011, 1111a2-3). An act is voluntary if the agent is aware of all the circumstances of the action (2011, 1113a23-24) and involuntary if certain circumstances are ignored. The question remains as to what this awareness consists of. Some acts can be committed out of ignorance of the circumstances, objects, place, or instruments used. In any case, the agent is unaware of the particulars of the context in which they perform their action. They act but are not fully aware of what they are doing and therefore may, in retrospect, regret the act and be forgiven. Tragedy thus immerses us in the very passivity of the protagonist. Innocence in the face of an irreparable mistake and fear in the face of the triggered situation that is hence out of control with destructive effects must be captured (Aristotle, 1998, 1382a 27-30) for there to be terror and compassion. With the help of definitions from *Nicomachean Ethics* (2011, 1135b16-19), the *hamartia* of *Poetics* (2013, 1453a10) is redefined as a dangerous act committed by an agent who is unaware of an essential relevant fact. These agents act out of ignorance, without malice and without being aware of their surroundings, causing damage that can be traced back to their action, yet was not to be expected. Such is their ignorance that agents end up harming themselves and their community. And it is precisely because the error has not been understood as such that the structure of the action leads to a discovery of how the underlying causes lead to a reversal of fortune.

From this perspective, tragedies highlight the extreme nature of a human condition or disposition to act in ignorance of all the relevant facts, which necessarily leads to tragic, i.e., adverse or horrible, incidents. If the *hamartia* of tragedy, according to Aristotle, is a universal element of human action that exposes its limits, one would expect that in the industrial age, this structure would not disappear.



THE PROMETHEAN GAP

Tragedy's reversal (*peripéteia*) and discovery (*anagnórisis*) find echoes in the contemporary performance of technology. Both correspond to the moment of unexpected revelation of technology's unforeseen consequences (Nye, 2006 p. 21) at the ecological or social level, which usually remained hidden until the moment of their belated emergence, out of step with their spatial and temporal origin. It is the moment when we realise that there is a gap between the purposes and intentions of engineers, promoters, and stakeholders and the actual unintended effects. The philosophy of technology abounds in examples and is familiar with these cases of deviation of proper function from the designer's original intentions, as grounded, for instance, on the multistability of artifacts (Ihde, 1990, p. 144). Nevertheless, it is worth exploring more in depth the parallels between the role of *hamartía* in Greek tragedies and involuntary acts in contemporary society. As we have seen, *hamartía* is at the heart of the tragic spirit, rendering agents responsible but at the same time innocent. They are the source of a catastrophe, but without any intention. How similar and relevant are these remarks for thinking about the present day? Are there invariants in the structure of human action that remain regardless of historical and geographical variations?

The scale of contemporary technology, its pervasiveness and omnipresence, has completely altered the unconcerned state of proportionality in which the agent practised voluntary actions. Virtually any human action is now permeated by technology upstream and downstream while implying and being implied by its ubiquitous presence. Every individual is surrounded and dependent, in their work, leisure, and social relations, on technological devices, structures, and mediations whose profound effects and symbolic shifts on the understanding of themselves, others, and nature are not known at the outset.

If the condition for a voluntary act, according to Aristotle, is that the action starts in the agent, that is, in a person who does not act under compulsion and is aware of the particular circumstances in which they act, today this condition seems to be too demanding. Using Aristotelian vocabulary, we would say that the sense of opacity in action, when mediated by technology, is defined by agents being in a permanent state of ignorance, as they find themselves involved in actions that they believe to be their own, that is, voluntary actions, but which often are in fact involuntary. Moreover, agents are not confronted with opportunities to discover and overcome their structural ignorance.

In Günther Anders, we find a theoretical elaboration about the persistence of this structural ignorance and of how action, in contemporary times, is above all involuntary. Anders identified that what we can now do is much greater than what we can imagine. A gulf has opened up between the faculty of production and the faculty of representation, and this gap widens day by day. The objects we create and the effects they trigger are so large and explosive that we can no longer understand them or even identify them as ours. According to him, "the technification of existence is the fact that all of us (without knowing it and indirectly, like parts of a machine) find ourselves involved in actions whose effects we are unable to predict and which we could not approve of. Technology has brought with it the possibility of being innocently guilty in a way that did not exist in our parents' time, when it had not yet advanced so far" (Anders, 2013, p. 3).



Beyond all the historical and geographical specificities of its roots, it was industrialisation which, according to Anders, produced an epoch-making aura which surrounds technology due to the inexorable chain of events that led to the slaughter at Auschwitz and the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. These two events have left their mark on an entire era and herald the possibility of humanity's self-destruction. However, his works offer an account for the fact that the conditions for a tragic spirit are present today, but are not recognised, i.e., such events do not inspire compassion or terror commensurate to their magnitude. There is a discrepancy between, on the one hand, our faculties of making, controlling and producing things and, on the other, our faculties of comprehending, feeling and imagining the consequences of these things. This “Promethean gap” states how “the performance of our hearts – our inhibitions, our fears, our concerns, our remorse – develops in inverse proportion to the extent of our actions” (Anders, 2020, p. 262). This analysis is especially relevant if we want to think about the possibilities of representing the tragic in contemporary times.

Why does this happen? According to Anders, the procedures by which agents adopt self-censorship or refrain from acting due to foreseeable consequences that arise from a certain course of action harmful to others or ourselves are, in our time, fragmented. Thanks to the complexity of administrative or technological structures and the division of labour inherent in them, we can commit atrocities with “hellish innocence” (Anders, 1956, p. 151). Before Hannah Arendt analysed the trial of Adolf Eichmann, Anders had already identified how what characterised the exterminations of the Shoah, the atomic bombings of Japan, and other phenomena in the current machine age as not exactly a monstrosity linked to technological apparatus, but above all the compartmentalisation of awareness due to the complexity of interactions with devices. Human consciousness does not fully grasp everything that it triggers and it does not realise the implications of the circumstances in which it finds itself involved. It is the basic premises of agency and moral responsibility on which any ethical reflection is based that become unsuitable for thinking about human existence in the industrial age. According to Anders, bad faith has been transferred to machines and electronic oracles, so that the most terrifying thing is this disagreement between action and consciousness through machines that relieve us of effort, lamentations, and complaints (*klaglos*) (Müller, 2015, p. 53). The current condition is that we mortals are “smaller than ourselves” (Anders, 2020, p. 272), that we are Titans, but at the same time, due to our blindness, we are also moral dwarves (Anders, 1956, pp. 147-148).

In other words, Günther Anders foresaw how a series of seemingly trivial actions places agents in a causal responsibility detached from moral responsibility while being blind to that condition. The Baconian equation between knowledge and power has shifted, and with it another modern equation that corresponds to the secular faith in the Enlightenment, namely that there is a strong overlap between advances in freedom and advances in knowledge. The equation, a continually postponed promise that illuminated the historical march of the West in search of the realm of freedom, is now being reversed, resulting in ignorance, impotence, and a generalised sense of disorientation. The more knowledge about the world abounds, the faster that knowledge is fed back, through its



technological applications, into social organisation and nature, generating new and pernicious opacities and predicaments.

Anders' *pars construens* proposal aims to expand the imagination in conjunction with a pedagogy of fear regarding the plausibility of an occurring worst-case scenario. In other words, it is about an attempt to overcome the motivation gap by supporting action with emotional and volitional contents about its effects, so that agency can be somewhat regained. The appeal to remedy the Promethean gap focuses on the role of imagination as a form of moral enlargement (Anders, 1961/1983):

Thus your task consists in bridging the gap that exists between your two faculties: your faculty of making things and your faculty of imagining things; to level off the incline that separates the two. [...] you have to violently widen the narrow capacity of your imagination until imagination and feeling become capable to grasp and to realize the enormity of your doings. In short, your task is to widen your moral fantasy. (p. 131)

It remains to be seen whether his proposal is plausible for reinstating the representation of the tragic.

TECHNOLOGICAL Gnosticism AND THE CATASTROPHE

Before addressing the possibility of Günther Anders' proposal to overcome the Promethean gap and thus determine whether it is possible to recognise *hamartía* in the technological age, it is useful to outline, in general terms, the rationale behind the drive for technological innovation as a contemporary article of faith and the role of the pursuit of knowledge in this endeavour. We will thus be able to identify a narrative that, by justifying permanent acceleration, casts doubt on the tragic spirit resurfacing through technology, and whether it can be apprehended and represented as such.

Hermínio Martins described contemporary technology as being driven by a latent Gnosticism. The expression 'technological Gnosticism' refers to

the marriage of technological achievements, projects and aspirations with the characteristically Gnostic dreams of radically transcending the human condition [...] Transcending the basic parameters of the human condition – its finitude, contingency, mortality, corporeality, animality, existential limitation – appears as a motive and even as one of the legitimations of contemporary technoscience, at least in some areas" (Martins, 2011, p. 18).

Similarly, John Gray (2015) points out how the unconfessed creed of contemporary society is imbued with a Gnostic faith (p. 9) that sees in the salvific quality of knowledge the only guarantee of human emancipation from the shackles of the material world.

All these observations translate into the realisation that contemporary life is under the spell of a Promethean rebellion defined as a march to remove all obstacles, an undertaking to correct the world and the human body as evil entities subject to corruption. Transhumanists and other futurists are a case in point. To this end, it is necessary, in other words, to combat ignorance and increase knowledge. The basic assumption is that evil



can be banished and expelled from the world through human action, a task for which science and technology hold the Promethean power to remake the world according to a rational model. By this faith in the liberating power of knowledge, “Gnosticism has conquered the world” (Gray, 2015, p. 165).

When we compare the contemporary narrative framework of technology and related developments to the Gnostic worldview, we encounter distant echoes of the past. Socratic-Platonic philosophy, from the outset, revealed its profound incompatibility with tragedy, as it advocates that knowledge could erect an impenetrable wall around human lives (Nussbaum, 1986, p. 330). The intellectualism of this position shifts responsibility for human unhappiness away from the gods – in accordance to the right use of reason, human action thus becomes appointed to tame external constraints. Just as reason can tame the passions, humans, endowed with knowledge, can impose themselves on chance. The attainment of virtue and happiness is a path that can overcome ignorance. The general adoption of this account is, in our view, undeniable nowadays.

There is a prevailing belief that progress in theoretical and technological knowledge necessarily and spontaneously translates into progress in practical knowledge, that is, an immediate translation between *theoria* and *phronesis*. We therefore live more in the shadow of Platonism than Aristotelianism. The equation between truth and goodness is an ancient premise that is difficult to erase and corresponds to the continuation of an ancient vocation of the West. In fact, according to Edmund Husserl (1954/2008, p. 32), what describes European humanity, in contrast to other humanities, is that it has been forever infected by the appeal of an absolute, universal vocation given by the adventure of knowledge in the search for untimely beauty, goodness, and truth. During the Anthropocene, the underlying logic of such appeals to truth is revealed, whereby knowledge loses its sterile and contemplative character to become the primary and abundant source of domestication of all the powers of nature and chance.

It must be appreciated how the permanent state of catastrophe introduces into contemporary life an echo of the ancient world where tragedy prevailed: things do not happen as planned, and our earthly dwelling is subject to being shaken. The persistence of catastrophe attests to how today's dependence on technology and the accumulation of capital are linked to the reappearance of the tragic, which seemed to have been banished from our culture due to the hypertrophy of optimism and technical rationality (Mul, 2015, p. 62). The combination of various links and entanglements between society, nature, and technology is a fertile ground for brewing future disasters. This provides reasons for enacting a contemporary tragic awareness about the underlying logic that binds the present. Catastrophe is therefore immanent to the dynamics of our tightrope-walking culture, always in search of imminent stabilisation, in the precise sense of its ability to generate catastrophes the more it seeks solutions to stop them. Technology is an epistemic tool for bridging the present to a better world while excluding randomness or chaos (Kurtov, 2023, p. 123)



THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF REPRESENTING THE TRAGIC

As we have pointed out, awareness of the harmful effects of everyday actions is often truncated by technology. This does not mean that technology alone prevents the reappearance of the tragic spirit, but rather that awareness is hindered of the fact that human actions cause unforeseen effects and, in their cumulative banality, constitute a planetary power. According to Anders, due to the mediation of devices and their effects being spatially and temporally at distance, the representation and formation of feelings based on emotionally charged images is not possible, nor do we see or feel ourselves as the source of these unacceptable effects. As technology spreads, the world and the human endure a process of co-mechanisation – (*mitmaschinisierung* – Anders, 2025, p. 60). Climate change, for instance, is a demonstration of how we may even know that we are its source, but not feel responsible for it. As Pulcini (2013) states:

[...] the information that enters our cognitive system can only produce real effects on our behaviour if it manages to create emotionally charged images in our psyche. This means that, although we are perfectly aware of the existence of specific threats, this does not involve our emotions; and only if our knowledge is transformed into the ability to “feel”, react emotionally and imagine the possible effects can we consider ourselves to be truly aware of the risk and therefore properly mobilise ourselves. (p. 135)

By accessing catastrophic events through social or mass media, they are quickly subsumed into the world of entertainment. The very structure present in tragedy, where ignorance and error feature, is hence not seen as paradigmatic of human action. This prevents the emotions of terror and compassion associated with tragic events from being cultivated and from providing clarification on the essence of human beings. The opportunity to understand the tragic fades away and, with it, the resonance of its deeper implications is lost, blurring the opportunity for learning that is intrinsic to catharsis. The educational and pedagogical value of tragedies consists, after all, in providing a view of the naked reality of human beings, a view according to which the concurrence of emotions is indispensable for virtue. Satisfying the desideratum formulated by Anders, tragedy aims, at its core, to broaden imaginative feeling (Serra 2018, 129-130). The Promethean gap then ultimately suggests an irretrievable loss of the tragic spirit. Our actions have become so much greater than ourselves that we cannot even represent them. Tragedies, on the other hand, whether they involved war, plague, infanticide, or regicide, were still commensurate with the horror caused by involuntary actions and human passions. Despite Anders' suggestive attempts at moral imagination exercises, we do not have an aesthetic theory to bridge the gap between our immense powers of making and our stunted capacity for imagining.

The difference between the *peripéteia* of tragedies and the *peripéteia* involved in technology is therefore the way in which the former awakens an acute awareness of the connection between action, error, and consequences. The meaning of action in tragedy, when manifested in all its breadth and incalculable effects, is grasped and felt by the protagonists, who acknowledge themselves to be the involuntary source of the catastrophe



of the events. In tragedy, humans discover themselves to be the unwitting tormentors of themselves and their loved ones and realize that their predictive gaze achieves little, making their actions deleterious to the very end that guided them. As mentioned, *anagnórisis* and *peripéteia* are related as they reveal a new awareness of events not as distant, but as close. In tragedy, through discovery, illusion, and tragic error are revealed.

Moreover, tragedy illustrates, in a way that is immediately grasped by the audience, how issues vaguely orbit around human action that relate to responsibility and guilt, what is attributable to the gods and what to humans. By representing, in its imprecise contours, how human action is extremely fallible and generates monsters whose meaning and genesis were not foreseeable, the *peripéteia* of tragedies differ from the current paltry technological *peripéteia*. Radical discovery, in the latter, is not possible, as catastrophe is embedded in everyday life. The relative autonomy of human action, the way in which events surpass the agent, is called into question in both cases, but only the former represents an awareness of the tragic spirit, laying it bare to the public sphere.

THE TRAGIC AND THE TELEOLOGY OF MODERNITY

The tragic spirit is radically alien to a comprehensive vision of the future and of an agency – divine or eminently Promethean – which, having access to the entirety of temporality, keeps account of all just and unjust acts and can offer final redemption, a kind of promise of compensation for suffering. The postponement of the rational demand for justice to its fulfilment by such an agency somewhere in the course of history deprives catastrophes of their definitive and fatal character. Such events, although tragic, are to be viewed from the perspective of the future and the consummation of justice, whether providential or utopian in nature. By making tragic events dependent on a future resolution, the evidence of their absurdity and irreversibility is diluted.

It is ultimately due to the tragic spirit that Greek tragedy was based on the way in which the circumstances of action are ultimately unfathomable to reason, and also that humans suffer and inflict unintended consequences of their own actions. Recognition (*anagnórisis*) and tragic change (*peripéteia*) occur precisely because of an opacity of the circumstances of the action, which is only clarified in retrospect, after the act. By assuming that there are areas impenetrable to reason and knowledge, by maintaining the existence of a blind and active necessity in human lives whose logic we are entirely ignorant of, the tragic worldview is therefore profoundly alien to the Jewish and Christian worldviews (Steiner, 1980, pp. 4-5). For the believer, we may not understand God's designs, but we know God to be just, and so an infinite hope becomes the formula for believing that no event is definitive and that a new beginning is always possible.

Similarly, the secular transmutations of the Jewish spirit, including Marxism and other eschatological philosophies of history and millenarianism, express their faith in reason to understand and tame the forces of necessity. The past and the present become a preparation, a path towards the future (Löwith, 1949/1991, p. 16-19). Now, even though Marxism has declined today, the function of technology in liberal democratic societies remains animated by a Gnostic spirit, tasked with removing all obstacles that oppress humans and prevent their true emancipation (Jonas, 1984, p. 201). Hence, one of the



premises of Modernity is the profession of faith that ever more science, technology enable control and can remedy the epistemic flaws that have triggered failures or errors. Hence, it is expected that the sources of fragility and unpredictability, namely, nature and ignorance, are likely to be repaired in the near future through advances in knowledge and technology (MacIntyre, 1981/2007, p. 103).

In other words, in Modernity and the modern world, the space for tragedy has been shrinking. Knowledge and technology are embedded in a philosophy of history that sees the future as the space for resolving all the hardships of the present. Since Rousseau, following the Lisbon Earthquake in 1755, nothing is therefore definitive or impossible for human ingenuity (Rousseau, 2020, p. 3): physical evil is reduced to natural evil, and this becomes a matter of improving social organisation, aided by a growing scientific, technological, and administrative arsenal. In attempting to defend the optimism of theodicy, Rousseau ends up including physical evil in moral evil, and this in the sphere of human responsibility. By dethroning God as the source of natural evil, it is humanity that takes his place. For Jean-Pierre Dupuy (2005, pp. 46-57), Rousseau thus leads the conversion of natural evil into moral evil and the entry of theodicy into anthropodicy. The confusion between *being* and *being made* and the exacerbation of humanity's Promethean powers is also the terrible reaffirmation of the term responsibility and the total task it entails (Cera, 2023). Belief in human ingenuity and its power to shape the world according to its own will becomes the basic premise of the contemporary world. The claim that a better world without uncertainty can be made is based on the assumption that nature and society are raw materials and are available to be reconfigured according to human designs.

The causes of human suffering are thus generally conceived as deriving from social and technical malfunctions that are still deficient or incomplete. Each disaster or catastrophe is, of course, dramatic, but its etiologic justification is often attributed to a lack of planning and applied knowledge in technical, social, or institutional areas. Victims and their families may also be compensated legally or materially through monetary equivalence. All the circumstances that justify the causal occurrence are seen as obstacles that justify accelerating the march of human ingenuity towards their elimination, so that the misfortune of some will be reintegrated into the bliss of those to come.

However, the tragic spirit does not empathise with these arrangements and maintains the naked singularity of what has happened as being irreparable. The responsibility of the protagonists in tragedy is always immeasurable and disproportionate to the damage and punishment received. From a tragic perspective, no advance or progress in knowledge or justice can suffice to broaden the human order and eliminate the unknown circumstances surrounding action and its unpredictable consequences. Due to its pre-modern origin, the tragic spirit is thus alien to Prometheism. This is precisely the point. Modernity, with its attempt to emancipate humans from the circumstances that bound them to their lot, established a historical promise to install paradise on earth based on the alliance between knowledge and power as a way out of ignorance. Against the thesis that *hamartia* only occurs due to ignorance, the tragic spirit demonstrates how some errors are not avoidable.



In short, the constant drive to improve technology and create a social system based on efficiency makes it impossible for each mistake to be seen as a human limitation or as something definitive and transcendent. Responsibility for mistakes, powerlessness, and factors beyond control are seen as temporary institutional failures and insufficient technical planning. Terror and compassion are not aroused in this way, as *hamartia* and ignorance are subsumed by always yet another future world in which human ingenuity will nullify the flaws of the present. Aristotle refers to how those who consider themselves above fortune, because they are arrogant and can extinguish the source of all terrors, cannot feel or suffer the emotions aroused by tragedies (Aristotle, 1998, 1382b 34 – 1383a 5). When the public feels terror and compassion for the fate of the protagonists, they will experience, through *mimesis*, the misfortune of others as their own, feeling close to them, and will understand how their own situation is quite as fragile as the one they are watching. In this case, the staging of the tragedy echoes in the spectator. Today, *anagnórisis*, recognition, is refracted, as we have seen, by the Promethean hiatus, distancing the agents from their own actions and making catharsis impossible.

FROM NECESSITY TO CHOICE

Another issue involving the connection between the tragic spirit and technology concerns the nature of necessity and possibility. Technology, in ontological terms, unveils being. Likewise, when the planet becomes the object of human responsibility, the boundaries of nature and necessity recede. What defines the human condition, such as birth, ageing, illness, and death, can now be rewritten according to new determinations. Hence, another of the issues that technology confuses in relation to the tragic spirit is the instability of what was previously considered necessary and immutable. The more technology penetrates everyday life, the more the field of what we consider natural recedes, and the more choice expands, making the identification of necessity a more arduous task. Today, there can be no reliable oracles like those of Tiresias or Cassandra. We have no way of identifying, as fortune tellers did, the fatal necessity or the designs of the gods. This means that every potentially tragic event becomes not something irremediable, but an understandable, manipulable, and, therefore, potentially resolvable issue. The tragic becomes a difficulty to be overcome and not a condition to be endured. For example, until the 1980s, birth was the occasion when the sex of the baby and its possible ailments were discovered. With the availability of various prenatal diagnoses, parents now have the possibility not only to find out the sex of the baby before birth, but also to choose to terminate the pregnancy if congenital malformations are identified. This historical process of rationalising the limits of human action led to the naturalisation of the gods and, later, through technology, to the possibility of choice.

THE WORK OF ART AND THE END OF THE COMMONS

There is yet another issue intrinsic to tragedy in its connection to both technology and the tragic spirit that we should dwell on. In Marxism and Christianity, as well as in the current optimistic utopian-technological thinking of a Gnostic nature, there are



certainly failures and setbacks. However, there is never tragedy, since the respective fatality is reabsorbed by a comprehensive rationality that will one day control nature and other sources of chance. The metaphysical balance is always in favour of humanity, even if evil is not understood. The time of tragedies, in this sense, belongs to the pre-Enlightenment human self-imposed immaturity, just as animism was part of an ancient and remote ignorance. Tragedy, in short, concerns the acceptance of an untameable hidden power, and as a literary form therefore could not withstand Modernity and industrialisation with their domestication of all powers and their disposition to serve humankind.

Literature is a seismograph of social and political energies, attesting to their vigour or decline. The disappearance of tragedy and the tragic spirit may perhaps be an indicator of the withering of the vital forces of social life. In the past, periods of great dramatic richness corresponded to periods of abundant national energy (Steiner, 1980, p. 109). Dramatic arts are the most social literary form because of their public presentation (p. 113). The social and political community is, in turn, inseparable from the conditions of public reception and, therefore, from the nature of dramatic art itself. The possibility of the tragic spirit being widespread in a community is based on the inseparability of its representation in the public sphere. Any community presupposes a minimum implicit agreement on the nature and meaning of human action and the events that affect existence. There must also be, for each community, a tacit and consolidated shared consciousness of the imaginary and criteria regarding virtues and vices and how to praise or censure actions, as well as to attribute agency and responsibility.

However, social fragmentation and the erosion of a vocabulary and common references pertaining to tragic error, evil, human failings, fate and redemption, play a fundamental role in the impossibility of perceiving the tragic in theatres and in everyday life in general. When a citizen goes to the theatre, to the cinema or follows news of a catastrophe far from their whereabouts, they are simply making consumption and entertainment choices as part of their own process of subjectification. They are not immersed in a civil religion, nor are they seeking a catharsis that reconnects them to the worldview of public participation in the polis, as in the era of Greek tragedies. The status of the public sphere in Modernity means that humans no longer consider themselves helpless at the mercy of the natural and social powers that once constrained them (Taylor, 1991, p. 14). They now know that they can make their own history. If there is a limiting condition, it is not due to the fall from the Garden of Eden or to human finitude, to a tragic tension within ourselves, but above all to structural, social, or gender inequalities.

To consider, as Anders does, whether an expansion of moral imagination is feasible in order to fully represent the effects of our actions, we must briefly consider the former role of tragedy and poetry which they have lost in the public sphere. Modernity, to disenchant and mathematize the world of nature had to rely on the creation of subjectivity as a reference for entities. The individual in liberal democratic societies is the result of this process of corrosion of communities, that is, the human configuration of a subjectivity torn from its historical, professional and family ties (Taylor, 1991, p. 3). The individual now becomes free and driven to seek the satisfaction of their desires according to their



particular vision of the good life. The shift of poetry to the private sphere, therefore, echoes the emergence of individualism.

Any understanding of technology in a tragic spirit or its dramatic representation is barred by the narrative of a techno-utopia that disrupts human action and rushes to correct and optimise it through state-of-the-art devices. In other words, in order to be understood, the tragic spirit once required a corresponding worldview that was at home in Antiquity and the Middle Ages, until the Renaissance. At the same time, the power of the word and its spell-binding attention have weakened. The abundance of technological mediations and processes of control to which the word is subject has robbed it of its brilliance and power. By turning it susceptible to manipulation and empty of symbolic meaning, our sensitivity has become increasingly dulled and overcharged by stimuli (Gehlen, 1949/1973, p. 76). At the same time, and here we touch directly on the core of Anders' concerns, the horrors guaranteed and normalised by technology, such as Auschwitz and Hiroshima, Fukushima, the new war involving drones, or climate change, seem, due to their scale and magnitude, to exacerbate and go beyond our expressive capacities.

The very means of disseminating information about technological catastrophes, calamities, and disasters makes it impossible for them to arouse terror or compassion and to convey knowledge about human action in a technological world. It is not just the fact that the events are distant and cannot be lived or experienced. Television and social media are not, like theatres, places for public and face-to-face encounters, but spaces for competing for the minimal attention of users. In the theatre, the spectator knows that they are watching something that is being performed and that, although it is not real, it nonetheless offers a plausible analogy to their own lives. In this way, there is a guarantee of intelligibility concerning something universal about the human condition.

The challenge of art in the Anthropocene is to transcend individual public consciousness toward a shared destination, even when societies are ever more individualized and fragmented, lacking a unifying sense of the common good or shared beliefs. Representing tragedy requires, above all, prior efforts to foster social cohesion and develop a language that enables artists to communicate ideas and implicit references to a common horizon simply by mentioning a word. Whether this is even achievable remains uncertain. The mythologies that Greek and Elizabethan tragedies were based on were not consciously crafted by their creators but inherited from their ancestors and contemporaries. All artists and philosophers tend to be receivers rather more than creators. Myths, images, language, and history – in short, culture – are the products of long histories. They need a lengthy incubation period to take root and flourish through expressive talent.

In short, the playwright and the poet once shared with the public the same life and a broad range of assumptions and expectations about action, belief, and images of existence. Their social lifeworlds were largely the same. Liberal democratic societies, by atomizing subjectivity and separating it from a common whole as a means of human emancipation, make it difficult, if not impossible, to create a work where shared habits and sensibilities can come together. Today, the recreation of a tragedy by Aeschylus or Shakespeare on stage is experienced with detachment by the audience, as the pagan and Christian worlds are no longer obvious or captivate with the same vigour as before. To



revive the tragic spirit, it would seem to need a new mythology that includes and surpasses the redemptive role now given to science and technology. The tragic worldview primarily depends on the understanding that certain powers remain beyond human grasp and that there is no future reward. However, industrial society tends to avoid these powers, even as it constantly deals with the unpredictable consequences of technology. For liberal democratic societies, the future and history are shaped by their own will.

This is why, even if an author today were to craft a tragedy for the Anthropocene era that showed how the catastrophe resides within us and our lifestyles, it would not be perceived as tragic, because in our time, nothing is definitive or fatal. The decline of Christianity and the death of God were not followed by a complete reinvention of culture, but rather by a secular and Promethean transformation of its assumptions about redemption. The point is that the individual will to create and build is largely powerless to determine how the work is received. For art to surpass the barriers of personal vision and connect with something universal to audiences, nothing less than a new mythology and imagination seems necessary. Can we recreate this and make it align with the role of the scientific and technological worldview of our time? Or are we doomed to reuse and renew old myths, knowing that the image of life they present is rooted in a worldview fundamentally different from our own?

CONCLUSION

Tragedy declined as advances in science and the expansion of rationalism into all areas of human activity dethroned an organic view of reality. The cosmos, where being and value, nature and society were aligned and fixed in a preordained harmony, became reconfigurable and subject to design (Taylor, 1991, p. 5). Once, sensitivity and imagination still perceived natural phenomena as the workings of an autonomous power beyond human control. The order of the future was generally inaccessible to ordinary human beings, making *hamartía* the equivalent of something unknown.

In this sense, with the tacit admission that progress in theoretical and instrumental knowledge is moral and political progress, the teleology inherent in Western history subsumes any event in the history of the future to come (Jonas, 1984, p. 163). Just as a compass guide one through space and allows us to conquer it, an eschatological compass guides one towards the Kingdom of God as a final destination (Löwith, 1949/1991, p. 31). Every tragic event is removed from the responsibility of the agent to be explained by causes external to it. By becoming remediable, tragic action loses its weight. In tragedy, precisely, the accidental becomes essential to the outcome of the plot and to the protagonists' new self-understanding. *Hamartía* is the mismatch between action and the world, the indication that human dwelling on Earth is temporary, fragile and that the more familiar world contains unknowable powers that hang over human lives. *Hamartía* is not something that can be banished through knowledge. Similarly, the tragic spirit does not provide answers to inscrutable questions, but thrives in their absence. Applying the principle of sufficient reason proves inadequate because there is no answer. The tragic spirit exhausts the spirit of future justice. There is no compensation, and human beings are reduced to their impotence as a puppet of powers they do not understand. Tragedy



thus resists the accounting of providence in theodicy and anthropodicy, disobeying the logic of compensation to be settled by the reward of paradise to come. Evil cannot thus be accommodated and understood. It simply remains inexplicable.

Following our thesis that disasters, calamities, and catastrophes caused by technology are tragic, but we cannot fully understand them because we are prisoners of Prometheism's desire to fix everything, we can expect future contemporary calamities and disasters to be traced back to a lack of institutional and technical planning rather than an error or fault rooted in necessity. It is also likely that there can be no full acceptance of the tragic dimension because of the strong belief that a tragic event happens not because of the inherent nature of reality and its unstoppable powers, but because of moral or social failure, criminal behaviour, or more often, systemic failure. Today, tragedy is impossible because the conditions to accept it are absent, as progress and the belief in perfectibility are now widespread.

No innovation can address the contingencies or externalities that the tragic worldview recognizes. The tragic is fundamentally anti-progressive, not because it claims progress is impossible, but because the journey toward progress comes with too many unforeseeable harmful effects. In tragedy, there is no forgiveness, no cure, no reform, and no future. It is always too late. Since every rational and moral interpretation is rendered mute, only silence is left (Rousset, 1971, p. 57) Yet, through this silence and an immense and overwhelming suffering, human beings somehow discover their dignity and greatness. Despite being broken by circumstances, they are not defeated. Tragedy conveys a mixture of pleasure and pain that awakens the spirit. Catharsis represents a reconciliation of humanity with itself beyond Promethean constructivism and boundless responsibility for the planet's future.

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