Philosophy, Humor, and the Human Condition

Taking Ridicule Seriously

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To Brendan George
A great human being
with a wicked sense of humor

Acknowledgements

This book has been in the making for forty years. The final stages of its writing were replete with discomforting events, from misfortunes to tragedies, as is fit for a book on the human condition. For these reasons, the outcome may not live up to what I had in mind, exemplifying once one a prevalent feature of our lives.

Were it not for Palgrave Macmillan Philosophy Editor, Brendan George's immediate interest in the topic and sustained support since, this book would not have been written in its present form. With deep gratitude, I dedicate this work to him.

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Adumbrated in the last sixty pages of Amir 2014 and concretized through various issues addressed in Amir 2017 (Chapters 6–8, 12–15)

and Amir 2018 (Chapters 9, 12, 15), *Homo risibilis*, the worldview I am proposing along with its ramifications, is systematically presented here for the first time.[1]

[1]Amir, Lydia. 2014. *Humor and the Good Life in Modern Philosophy: Shaftesbury, Hamann, Kierkegaard*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
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Introduction

This book is about the human condition. Although humor is part of its title, it has little to do with the spontaneously funny. The main theories that explain humor as we know it are ineffective in dealing with the human condition at large. Rather than merely encouraging the development of our funny bone, this study introduces *Homo risibilis*, a worldview that embraces contradictions in order to address effectively the ambiguities of the human condition without losing sight of its tragic overtones. Like the Buddhist's raft, the Taoist fisherman's net and Wittgenstein's ladder, we can dispose of "the ridiculous human being" vision when its benefits are reaped even more easily than these mighty philosophies can get rid of their instruments of deliverance.

Invoking ridicule in the same breath as the human condition seems offensive. Rather than laughing off our ridicule, however, we should take it seriously and own it. Affirming it enables us to reach the highest promises of philosophy and religion, of the East and the West. *Homo risibilis* or the ridiculous human being, the worldview that the following chapters introduce has the epistemological advantage of clearing unnecessary assumptions about our condition. Its soil is our daily experiences as also attested in the grand works of all civilizations. The economy of

its epistemological demands yields plausibility to the ethical results they found. As no certainty is called upon, no doubts are to be overcome, and tranquility is not jeopardized by its dependence on dubious metaphysical and religious claims. The benefits it brings are proportionate to the efforts invested. All can attain to the mastery of the sole tool it systematically uses. The growing pleasure that accompanies its appropriation guarantees its success more easily than the formidable philosophies it seems to emulate.

Homo risibilis answers both the perennial and contemporary requirement for a practical philosophy to use in everyday life. A viable worldview and a workable ideal of wisdom are needed today as much as they have been in the past. While being centered on the individual's reflection, the realistic grasp of his situation and the personal well-being it yields bring about social consequences that fruitfully bear on the globalized world.

Its egalitarian vision bases an ethic of compassion without requiring metaphysical or religious assumptions and liberates the individual for action on others' behalf. Finding its place among the many worldviews that philosophy has offered in view of the good life, *Homo risibilis* is especially apt to express the minimal consensus we need in order to live in our global world. By defining the problem that philosophies and religions attempt to solve in terms we can all relate to, it enables an understanding of the other that surpasses mere tolerance. By being open-ended, it readily forms alliances with all cultures, while its non-dogmatic skepticism calls for scientific discoveries to refute it and for innovative technologies to make it redundant.

The tragic sense of life has been revived through contemporary studies of evil and the renewed philosophic interest in pessimism and the meaning of life. The first chapter addresses this persistent feature of our condition with its contemporary ramifications. It concludes with a formulation that comprehends the content of the human condition found in everyday experience and expressed in the literature: It is defined by a tension between one's desires on all levels, instinctual, emotional, moral, intellectual and spiritual, and the (im)possibility of fulfilling them, either in principle or in practice, brought to us by reason.

Various conceptions of desires and reason flesh out this formula, which identifies the human predicament as a tension that most religions and philosophies attempted to solve. A typology of the various solutions to this predicament according to the nature of their shortcomings comprise the second chapter. It concludes by suggesting that the epistemological price religions and many philosophies make us pay should not be paid. Instead, living with the unresolved tension of our situation is required to preserve our humanity, were it only possible to ease somewhat this tension.

The third chapter indicates how to relieve the characteristic tension of the human condition. It relates the comic to the tragic and provides an account of humor that enables us to forge a taste for reality even though we may not find it immediately funny. The humorous outlook that allows us to comprehend the knowledge that the tragic sense of life reveals and to accept it without perishing from its sting is predicated on self-referential humor. This form of humor is introduced as a conceptual tool that holds contradictions together, enacting a fruitful internal communication that is especially apt for the inner transformation needed for philosophic self-education.

The fourth chapter discloses the humorous outlook's capacity to serve as a novel view of human rationality. It outlines humor's ability to further the realization of various philosophic ideals. It helps attain to self-knowledge of otherwise unrecognized and unaccepted elements of the self, including ambivalence and the liberating impact its awareness has on our actions. It enables more effective rational deliberation while showing humor's influence on emotions such as anger, fear, shame and disgust. It explains how self-changeis facilitated through the compassionate aggression that humor is, and how the relief it brings to the tension created by conflict helps us live with unresolved conflict. The chapter closes by an example of humor's workings on the internalized attitudes toward women from which we, men and women, all suffer.

While the humorous worldview that holds in balance the tragic and the comic aspects of reality is praised for the epistemological and ethical benefits it brings along, its instability and incessant repetition calls for an abiding resolution. This is the topic of the fifth chapter, wherein the

original thesis the book advances, *Homo risibilis*or the ridiculous human being, is compared favorably with its few antecedents and is positioned within the perennial philosophic tradition that seeks to find a harmonious place within the universe for the human being while preserving its uniqueness.

The sixth chapter spells out the personal benefits this worldview brings. It explains how joy is attained; it recommends happiness also for the consequences it has on others and argues in favor of the timeliness that accompanies it.

The seventh and last chapter outlines the social benefits of *Homo risibilis* given the global world we live in. It shows, first, how compassion best answers the need for a shared ethics and argues for the viability of an outlook that founds a morality of compassion without unnecessary assumptions. It evaluates, second, the emotional responses to skepticism and the place it holds in the contemporary world in order to plead for an open-ended approach that can be complemented by various creeds, different customs and unforeseen scientific discoveries. It argues, finally, for the necessity of a lucid and sobering worldview that responds to our shared need for a rational ideal of wisdom, and whose very content embraces its inevitable defeat.

Contents

1

The Human Predicament

The tragic sense of life has been revived by contemporary studies of evil and a renewed philosophic interest in pessimism. The first chapter uses these topics to enlighten persistent features of our condition and to formulate the general terms of the human predicament. Validated by everyday experience and expressed in world literature, various philosophies and most religions, the human condition is defined as a tension between one's desires on all levels (instinctual, emotional, moral, intellectual, spiritual) and the (im)possibility of fulfilling them, either in principle or in practice, brought to us by reason.

1 The Tragic Sense of Life

"Tragedy" refers to a literary form, and to an unfortunate event disrupting the existence of an individual or of an entire people, which violently destroys the possibility of freedom. While the "tragic" refers to both meanings of "tragedy," it also expresses a specific tonality of experiencing and reflecting about reality.

Referring to an unfortunate event as tragic often points to one's experience, understanding and communication of reality.[1] That use of "the

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tragic" or "the tragic vision" is more restrictive than the general use of "tragedy" or "the tragic," which associates these terms with a "catastrophe" or "the sorrowful." Tragedy's definition as a literary form may illuminate the initial meaning of the tragic were it not for the difficulties involved in defining tragedy,[2] and the fact that the tragic vision differs from tragedy as a literary form:

> "Tragedy" refers to an object's literary form, "the tragic vision" to a subject's psychology, his view and version of reality…The tragic vision was born inside tragedy, as a part of it: as a possession of the tragic, the vision was a reflection in the realm of thematics of the fully fashioned revelation of aesthetic totality which was tragedy. (Krieger 1963, 131)

Though the poetics of tragedy can be traced back to Aristotle, Peter Szondi argues that "only since Schelling has there been a philosophy of the tragic."[3] Joshua Billings and Dennis Schmidt reprise Szondi's classic assertion and show how German idealism influences philosophical speculation on tragedy and the tragic.[4] They maintain that philosophic interest in tragedy is to be understood as both a historical phenomenon and a theoretical paradigm: Around 1800 theories of tragedy and ideas of modernity often coincide and establish a pervasive sense of modernity as tragic.[5] Taken as covering post-Kantian thought, idealism in the broad sense of the word invests "a profound meaningfulness in tragedy which remains with the genre, as is visible in scholarship, adaptation, and performance."[6] Following Robert Pippin,[7] Billings argues that

> Appropriations of tragedy around 1800 are efforts to grapple with the question of human freedom, a problem of central importance to post-Kantian thought…. Modernity seeks to understand itself by engaging with the alterity of antiquity. The idealist moment is united by common questions…which make tragedy important to the development of quite disparate philosophical approaches. They attempt to understand both the Greekness of Greek tragedy and its modernity. (Billings 2014, 6–7)

The notion of freedom is contested from philosophical and political points of view, by the Kantian critique and the French Revolution, as both cast doubts on freedom's desirability and viability. Tragedy is newly defined

and particularly valued by some of the most significant figures associated with German idealism, such as Friedrich Schiller, the Schlegel brothers (Friedrich and August Wilhelm), Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, Friedrich Hölderlin and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. A means of producing a certain emotional effect throughout the eighteenth century, tragedy is since 1800 a way of making sense of the world. Thus, Billings argues that "tragedy for moderns is uniquely philosophical."[8]

Schelling inaugurates the philosophy of the tragic, Arthur Schopenhauer, Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche carry it forward in the nineteenth century, followed by Max Scheler and Walter Benjamin in the early twentieth century. The philosophy of the tragic gives a new meaning to Greek tragedy which continues to inform philosophical, literary and historical discussions to this day. Thus, many twentieth-century and twenty-first-century thinkers have engaged with tragedy, including Sigmund Freud, Martin Heidegger, Arbogast Schmitt, Albert Camus, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Luce Irigaray, Slavoj Žižek and Judith Butler.[9]

With Nietzsche as its chief prophet and preacher, "the tragic sense of life" has gained recognition since the nineteenth century as a modern, neo-Christian invention.[10] Modern consciousness has separated the tragic sense of life from its aesthetic origins:

> Fearful and even demoniac in its revelations, the [tragic] vision needed the ultimate soothing power of the aesthetic form which contained it—of tragedy itself—in order to preserve for the world a sanity which the vision itself denied…But what if we should find the Dionysian without the Apollonian? Here we would have life unalleviated, endlessly and unendurably dangerous, finally destructive and self-destructive—in short, the demonical. In effect it would be like tragedy without that moment in which the play comes round and the cosmos is saved and returned to us intact. It would be, in other words, the tragic vision wandering free of its capacious home in tragedy. (Krieger 1963, 137)

"The tragic," liberated from "tragedy," disengages from the therapy that the aesthetic form provides.[11] The *catharsis* that tragedy offers by allowing the subversive elements to be healthily exposed and aesthetically overcome in the theatrical performance, as Aristotle explains in the *Poetics*, is no

longer available to the "tragic sense of life." Wandering freely since their disengagement from the literary form without the cathexis once aesthetically provided, the alienated members that the tragic now discloses turn inward to nourish their indignation in the dark underground.[12]

The tragic tonality of reflection does not concentrate on exploring the world, but on elucidating the realities of the human condition.[13] Rather than being a systematic view of life, the tragic vision allows for variation and degrees. It is a sum of insights, intuitions and feelings, to which the terms "vision," "view," or "sense of life," however inadequate, more readily apply. For Miguel de Unamuno, the tragic sense of life is a sub- or pre-philosophy of which one is not fully aware, hence only partially formulated. De Unamuno views the tragic sense of life as reaching deep down into temperament, not so much flowing from ideas, as determining them. William James's influence on de Unamuno is palpable, as in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* the sick soul's melancholy determines the vision of its world.[14]

Most writers on the tragic sense of life agree on its contents, that it is the sense of ancient evil, the mystery of human suffering, the gulf between aspiration and achievement. Schopenhauer writes of "the unspeakable pain, the wretchedness and misery of humanity, the triumph of wickedness, the scornful mastery of chance, and the irretrievable fall of the just and the innocent."[15] His opinions have inspired similar views, both less and more extreme by comparison, such as those of Julius Frauenstädt, Eduard von Hartmann and his wife Agnes Taubert, Olga Plümacher, Philipp Mainländer and Julius Bahnsen.[16] Among other thinkers who took part in the nineteenth-century pessimist controversy in Germany, Mainländer and Bahnsen are noteworthy in that they offer more unfavorable accounts of the human condition than Schopenhauer did, systematized into full-fledged philosophies.[17] The recent endorsement of a mixture of pessimism and optimism by David Benatar, who follows in this tradition without necessarily acknowledging it, and by Joshua Foa Dienstag, who defends the social and political viability of pessimism, urges us to take these claims seriously.[18]

Nietzsche, whose thought evolves in relation to Schopenhauer's, emphasizes suffering as the outcome of the constant struggle between the irrational, absurd and ecstatic, on the one hand (the Dionysian), and the

rational, intelligible and harmonious, on the other (the Apollonian).[19] His follower, the French contemporary philosopher Clément Rosset describes Being as tragic, that is, illogical, amoral and contradictory. Being tragic in a tragic world, we are "alone, that is, loveless, base, thus valueless, and mortal, therefore, lifeless." We are not accountable for the tension that defines the tragic; we notice this mystery but cannot accept it.[20] Rosset affirms Nietzsche's view of the human predicament: We have ventured on knowing a truth that we are unable to face. This is the truth about our contradictory and tragic destiny—tragic, in the sense that Vladimir Jankélévitch understands it, as "the alliance of the inevitable and the impossible."[21]

For Richard Sewall, the tragic vision is primeval. It calls up out of the depths the first and last of all questions, the question of existence: What does it mean to exist? The tragic vision recalls the original terror, harking back to a world preceding the inception of philosophy, the consolation of later religions, and whatever constructions the human mind has devised to persuade itself that the universe is secure. It recalls the original un-reason, the terror of the irrational. It sees the human being as a bare and lonely questioner, facing the undeniable realities of suffering and death as well as mysterious and perhaps demonic forces in his nature and the external world.[22]

For Oscar Mandel that which tragic art teaches us is not simply that human effort fails, but that "failure lies implicit in the effort."[23] In "Tragic Reality," he maintains that death, with its inevitable victory over effort, is the first tragic fact. The second tragic fact is socio-psychological, as the very act of living in society brings with it, unavoidably and "naturally," friction, hate and misery. The desire or need to live among one's kind is tragic because of the misalliance between human beings. We can list here social and political evils, work conditions and class struggles, human hostility and cruelty, or alternatively, human indifference and ambivalence, the hardships of friendship and the viability of love. Thus, "the very act of birth is tragic not only because it is simultaneously the condemnation to death," Mandel notes, "but also because it fastens on the child the inevitability of suffering among his own species."[24]

We meet these tragic facts at every facet of life. Mandel notes the intricacies of folly in wisdom, doom in success and flaw in every social reform. These are deemed the ambivalence of tragedy by Henry Alonzo Myers and

"the two sides of everything" by Larry Slade, Eugene O' Neill's protagonist in *The Iceman Cometh*.[25] Attraction and repulsion, love and hate, illusion and disillusion, reform and reaction, utopian hope and end-of-an-age despair—these are the well-known elements of modern tragedies which may only end on a note of futility and hopelessness if the artist fails to see the justice in these dualities.[26]

Conrad Hyers formulates "the tragic paradigm" as a view of existence that is individually or collectively structured in terms of colliding polarities, oppositions and contradictions.[27] Tragic opposition may be found within the individual, between persons or groups, in the very nature of things or on all three levels. On the individual level, we partake in a tradition that reads the psyche as characterized by a struggle between conflicting forces. At the heart of the tragic is the divided personality; the theme of the tragic psyche's inner torment has a long history, from Sophocles's King Oedipus to Plato, from St. Paul to medieval playwrights, from Shakespeare to the Romantics and from Fyodor Dostoevsky to Freud.

Oedipus is tortured by the revelations brought about his own actions, the murder of his father and marriage to his mother. Plato sees the soul as captive of the body and the human being torn by upward and earthly desires. St. Paul's "wretched man" in Romans 7 laments, "I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin" (22–24). Many medieval plays represent the inner struggle as a contest between the Seven Virtues and the Seven Deadly Sins. This interplay is portrayed by an angel and a demon giving contradictory advice on the right path to follow. Shakespeare's tragic outlook is repeatedly seen in "equivalence" or the balance of feelings in which the source of pleasure and joy is also the source of anxiety and grief. In accordance with our capacity for feeling, we are fated to enjoy and suffer in equal measures.[28] The Romantics of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries envision the human being as wrestling with irreconcilable passions that tear the psyche asunder, or as hounded by the disparity between the ideal (imagined or professed) and the real. Many of the characters in *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov* exemplify Dostoevsky's conflict between faith and doubt.[29] Freud describes the tension between the *id* and the *superego*,

which accounts for the conflicts within the human being and between the individual and society.

The tragic finds the *par excellence* form of its expression in literature, as evidenced by the variety of literary works exploring the tragic paradigm since the Ancient Greeks. Examples of the tragic sense of life in the literature and drama of the nineteenth and twentieth century abound: Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*, Maxwell Anderson's *Winterset*, Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom*, O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*, Camus's *The Stranger*, Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea* and *No Exit*, and Melville's *Moby Dick* exemplify it, while de Unamuno's *The Tragic Sense of Life* has been a significant part of our modern sensibility.

In contradistinction to literature and drama, philosophy is almost averse to the tragic sense of life. Echoing Nietzsche's claims, Bernard Williams maintains that "moral philosophy is typically attached to the project of giving us 'good news' about our condition—whether in the form of the grand Hegelian narratives of progress or of Leibnizian theodicy. Even the bare Kantian fact of the good will is itself a kind of good news."[30] Along the same lines, William Desmond argues that tragedy reveals being as loss while philosophy strives to overcome this vision by placing reason where tragedy faces rupture and by constructing meaning where tragedy portrays suffering.[31]

Rosset suggests that philosophers generally discard the idea that the tragic sense of life can ever be developed into a philosophy. Philosophy willingly acknowledges that there is some tragic element in existence, literature and art, yet it refuses to admit that philosophy itself can be tragic. Rosset conjectures that a "tragic philosophy" would be inadmissible for it would repudiate all other philosophies, whose goal is to conciliate the human being to existence. Thus, philosophers willingly leave the tragic to art and literature. This explains the difference one often notices between contemporary philosophical and literary traditions of the same civilization, the latter basking in tragic brilliance and the former ignoring the tragic altogether.[32]

This attitude toward the tragic explains why few philosophers can be deemed tragic, and why the philosophical status of those considered tragic is openly disputed. Among the latter, Rosset mentions Michel de Montaigne, Blaise Pascal and Kierkegaard; Schopenhauer is often dismissed as

an unhappy man.[33] Moreover, the prominent tragic philosophers Pascal, Kierkegaard, Lev Shestov and even de Unamuno, to whom we owe the expression "the tragic sense of life," only partly deserve this characterization because they pursue the consolation that the "good news" of religion offer.[34]

Along the same lines, George Steiner points to Christianity's promise of salvation for all repenting sinners as the origin of tragedy's demise. In *The Death of Tragedy*, he identifies the "unfaltering bias towards inhumanity and destruction in the drift of the world" as the foundations of the tragic, which Christianity has undermined. For Steiner, tragedy is predicated on the assumption that there are in nature and in the psyche occult uncontrollable forces able to madden and destroy the mind. A "happy ending" does not await us in some other spatial and temporal dimension beyond the tragic, wounds are not healed, and a broken spirit is never mended. Similarly, Karl Jaspers defends the position that the Christian promise of salvation stands in direct opposition to the unredeemable fatality of the Greek tragic vision: "The chance of being saved destroys the tragic sense of being trapped without chance of escape." To the same effect, I. A. Richards considers tragedy as possible only to a mind that is for the moment agnostic or Manichean, as "the least touch of any theology which has a compensating Heaven to offer the tragic hero is fatal."[35]

To the short and otherwise problematic list of tragic philosophers, we should add Schopenhauer, who sees the eternal strife of will against will as the ultimate nature of things, his followers Mainländer, Bahnsen and Nietzsche, who sees himself as the first tragic philosopher,[36] and a few French philosophers, such as George Bataille, Cioran,[37] and especially Rosset, who considers himself the sole follower of Nietzsche's tragic legacy.[38]

However different the tensions and terrors that each age suffers, they all confront the same abyss: The tragic vision remains constant.[39] The tragic sense of life is attentive to the constitutive contradiction of the human predicament because it recognizes "the inevitability of paradox, of unresolved tensions and ambiguities, of opposites in precarious balance."[40] This constitutive contradiction has been variously described not only by philosophers but also by various other scholars.

For example, Freud formulates the human condition's defining contradiction as a split between the *id* and the *superego*, and between the

individual and society, as noted above. Human conflict is necessary inasmuch as diverse tragedies plague everyone's life: These include the tragedy of becoming an adult given the fate of one's childhood, the life-long "repetition" of childhood scenarios, libidinal contradictions reflecting the wandering nature of human desire which creates the difficulty of loving, and the tragedy of the superego, which leads to the limitations of self-knowledge and of truthful self-evaluation. Evaluating Freud's tragic views, Paul Ricœur emphasizes both the irresolvable situation in which desires can be neither suppressed nor satisfied and the ensuing narcissistic humiliation that even the most lucid awareness of the nature of conflicts cannot diminish.[41] Emile Durkheim believes that the constitutive contradiction is best expressed as the antagonism between the dual aspects of the human being, as an organism and an individual construed by society. Similarly, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann perceive a dialectical process between the biological organism and the social self, while Claude Levi-Strauss and Agnes Heller point to the conflict between nature and culture.[42]

In philosophy, the most widespread view of this constitutive contradiction is between body and soul or mind. As noted above, Plato views the soul as dragged down and clouded by the dense and imperfect world of matter. The soul is torn apart by opposite desires, haunted by a vague recollection of the pure realm from which it has fallen.[43] Pascal's famous description of the human being as a "thinking reed" summarizes the contradictions that characterize humankind:

> What a Chimera is man! What a novelty, a monster, a chaos, a contradiction, a prodigy! Judge of all things, an imbecile worm; depository of truth, and sewer of error and doubt; the glory and refuse of the universe. Who shall unravel this confusion? (Pascal, *Pensées*, VI, 347–8; VII, 434)[44]

Contemporary accounts of tragedy may shed additional light on the tragic. In *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, Martha Nussbaum points to three different themes in Greek tragedies. The first is seen as an undeniable yet ordinary fact of human life: Good people are ruined because of things that are out of their control, which just happen to them. The second theme is more disturbing, but

some cases are alleviated by ignorance and the presence of physical constraint: Tragedy shows how circumstances whose origins are not within good people's control make them do things that are otherwise repugnant to their ethical character and commitments. Finally, the third theme is a more intractable case, which deserves to be characterized as "tragic conflict." It is a case in which "we see a wrong action committed without any direct physical compulsion and in full knowledge of its nature, by a person whose ethical character or commitments would otherwise dispose him to reject the act. The constraint comes from the presence of circumstances that prevent the adequate fulfillment of two valid ethical claims."[45] Here, Nussbaum follows Hegel's view of the tragic as an ethical conflict between two rights[46]:

> We have been considering situations, then, in which a person must choose not to do (have) either one thing or another. Because of the way the world has arranged things, he or she cannot do (have) both…He wants, however, to do (have) both…we have, then, a wide spectrum of cases in which there is something like a conflict of desires…: the agent wants (has reason to pursue) x and he or she wants (has reason to pursue) y; but he cannot, because of contingencies of circumstances to pursue both. (Nussbaum 2001b, 27)

Nussbaum mentions a case in which the motivations driving the pursuit of X are not desire, but moral issues that cannot simply be avoided by eliminating desire.[47]

However, various scholars have criticized Hegel's reading of tragedy because the tragic resists moral interpretation. For example, Ricœur argues that Hegel sees tragedy in moral terms because such reading enables him to rescue free will from the restrictions of circumstances.[48] Nussbaum's achievement lies less in her moral reading of tragedy than in emptying its religious content by deeming it a "questioning and an enacted testing of theodicy."[49]

Accounts of tragedies that emphasize their a-morality (such as Ricœur's) and point critically to their religiosity (such as Nussbaum's) complete the descriptions of the tragic given so far. I do not examine additional attempts to assess the nature of tragedy as the primary concern of this chapter is

the *tragic sense* of life.[50] I attempt now to generalize the various descriptions of the tragic by suggesting an encompassing formula that dispenses with the particulars of each vision and renounces specific metaphysical assumptions.

I suggest that the experience common to human beings is a tyranny of desires, needs and wishes seeking satisfaction on the instinctual, emotional, moral, intellectual and spiritual levels, together with the awareness of the (im)possibility of satisfaction that reason reveals. Not only it is notoriously difficult to know what we really want, not to say, what we really need, but the simultaneous satisfaction of various desires, needs and wishes that seem to be constitutive of the human being is extremely difficult, often impossible, to achieve, particularly if we take into account the epistemological and ethical costs that reason refuses to pay.[51] Such a description of the human predicament can be assessed through three well-known philosophical theories that describe the inherent unsatisfaction of the relationships we entertain with the world, others, and ourselves.

A famous formulation of our predicament is found in Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus*: The "absurd" arises as a result of the world's failure to meet our demands for meaning.[52] We may consider Camus's "absurd" as the tension between our need for value and meaning, on the one hand, and the awareness of the impossibility of fulfilling that need in the world, on the other. This makes the absurdity of our situation an inner situation rather than an objective one and enables to describe it as a case of desires frustrated by one's awareness of the (im)possibility of fulfilling them.

That the world fails to meet our demands for meaning suggests that the world might have satisfied these demands if it were different. Yet Thomas Nagel rightly remarks that what perpetuates doubt regarding the limited aims of individual life also makes difficult to dispel doubt about the very idea that life is meaningful. Once fundamental doubt has begun, it cannot be laid to rest. It is not that desires might have been satisfied under different circumstances, but that there simply does not appear to be any conceivable world in which irresolvable doubts do not arise, at least for human beings. Consequently, the absurdity of our situation derives not from a gap between our expectations and the world, but from a tension within ourselves.[53]

Another view that bears on the suggested description of the human predicament is Sartre's characterization of the clash between the self and the other, between the individual and the group.[54] In *No Exit*, Sartre exemplifies our difficult coexistence by famously declaring that hell is other people. In *Being and Nothingness*, our dependence on, struggle with, and shame in front of the other are described as an undeniable fact of human existence. This is so because I live under the gaze of the other, which objectifies me. Following Hegel, Sartre maintains that the other's judgment of what I am is vital to my self-consciousness. However, he further argues that my freedom ceases with the other's existence as his gaze alienates me and forces me into a particular being. "If there is an Other, whatever or whoever he may be, whatever may be his relations with me, and without his acting upon me in any way except by the pure upsurge of his being—then I have an outside, I have an essence."[55] As the other mediates between me and myself, shame ensues. I am ashamed of the way I appear because being an object under the other's gaze also enables the objectification which is the condition of my own self-evaluation. If the image reflected to me has nothing to do with me I may be irritated or angry by the other's judgment; however, being ashamed of it means that I recognize myself in it: I am as the other sees me.

Sartre's further account recalls Hegel's description in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* of the emergence of self-consciousness in two distinct beings. Hegel sees human desire as fundamentally a desire for recognition, each self-consciousness seeking recognition in the other. This movement taken to extreme is a struggle to death in which the person who is ready to die for this dominance masters the other, who prioritizes life at the expense of abstract self-consciousness. However, the recognition sought is impossible by such lordship, since in this situation the bondsman is not free to offer it. Similarly, Sartre describes human relations as a struggle to annihilate the other's freedom or enslave the another consciousness, a project that backfires if successful. I need a free subject to validate me, an object cannot do; but subjugating the other objectifies his subjectivity. This continual clash of freedoms or self-consciousnesses may be construed as a tension between one's desires, which for Sartre is the impossible project of being God, and one's awareness of other existences, who desire the same and whom one

ought to take into consideration when the problem is formulated in moral terms.

The final theory that bears on the proposed formulation is Immanuel Kant's, who views metaphysical questions as necessarily rising from the nature of reason while transcending reason's power to answer them:

> Human reason has this particular fate that it is burdened by questions which, as prescribed by the very nature of reason itself, it is not able to ignore, but which, as transcending all its powers, it is also not able to answer. (Kant 1929, xviii)

In *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, Kant speaks of "metaphysics, with which, as fate would have it, I have fallen in love but from which I can boast of only a few favors."[56] In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, he maintains that no matter how unsuccessful our metaphysical efforts may be, "we shall return to metaphysics as to an estranged beloved."[57] Kant holds that reason has a proper aim and an internal drive to reach it; because this drive is necessarily frustrated, the internal tension Kant describes is steady and consists of the inevitable quest for metaphysical answers and the simultaneous awareness of the impossibility of satisfying it.[58]

Kant identifies yet another tension, that between nature and freedom, *is* and *ought*, which conditions all human existence.[59] This bears consequence on the relation of virtue to happiness: We may hope for the two to coincide and strive by being virtuous to create a world in which they do, but as the two are distinct their coincidence is out of our cognitive reach. Kant here reprises Augustine and Martin Luther's view of the necessary discontinuity between religious conduct, on the one hand, and reward or salvation, on the other. Young Nietzsche's compliment to Kant, calling him "tragic," may be justified as Kant raises "unresolved tension to something like the fundamental principle of human being."[60]

The three examples that Camus, Sartre and Kant provide help illustrate the heart of human tension as dissatisfaction resulting from the clash between expectations and the perception of reality. Yearning is frustrated by acknowledging the impossibility of its fulfillment. Among the constant sources of frustration, we may count spiritual desires, the need for meaning, the thirst for knowledge, our dreams of happiness and hopes for

immortality, the yearning for homeliness in the world, whether by love or other means, as part of a community, with another human being or with oneself. In certain cases, the frustration arises simply due to practical hindrances. For instance, though I want to see you, I may not be able to because I am blind, or because you are far away, or deceased. Often, the frustration is due to more theoretical reasons that inhibit the realization of desires in principle, because these reasons are inherent either in desires, or cognition, or in the conflict between those two. I may want to see you but also do not want to see you, I may want to see you but you may be invisible (God), or I may want to see you but I am restricted to this spectrum of colors. As Williams puts it:

> The world was not made for us, or we for the world…our history tells no purposive story…there is no redemptive Hegelian history or universal Leibnizian cost-benefit analysis to show us that it will come out in the end….the world is only partially intelligible to human agency and is itself not necessarily well adjusted to moral aspirations.[61]

The way I portrayed the tragic so far lends support to its universality. However, the view that the tragic is accessible to all is controversial. Some thinkers do deem the tragic an essential element of the universe,[62] or a pervasive aspect of it,[63] making it perceivable by all. Others see the tragic as accessible to only a few persons. For example, Scheler argues that some of us are nearly blind to the tragic.[64] Nietzsche and more recently Benatar conjecture that the truth may be too much for many people to bear.[65] Sewall maintains that the tragic sense of life is an attitude toward life with which some individuals seem disposed to a high degree, others less so, but which is latent in every person and may be evoked by experience.[66] De Unamuno finds the variability of the tragic sense of life as characteristic of nations rather than individuals.[67] Americans are considered to be averse to it, perhaps as a consequence of their vision of the "indefinite perfectibility of man" that Alexis Tocqueville noted as early as 1835. Stanley Edgar Hyman exemplifies this claim by appealing to reconstruction undertaken by American psychoanalysts of Freud's views along less "gloomy, stoic, and essentially tragic" lines than his "applied" psychoanalysis. He argues that the effect of this reconstruction "has been to re-repress whatever distasteful

or tragic truths Freud dug out of his own unconscious or his patients' and to convert the familiar device of resistance into revisionist theory."[68] However, Dienstag maintains that there is a respectable tradition of pessimism in America as well.[69]

The controversy over the accessibility of the tragic is related to further debate on whether the tragic sense of life can be taught. Lionel Abel believes that one arrives at the tragic sense of life only after experiencing tragedy: "One does not acquire or develop the tragic sense," he maintains; "it is not realized, but imposed; one never possesses it, one has to be possessed by it."[70] While acknowledging that personal tragedy is one way to arrive at the tragic sense of life, Schopenhauer points to an additional route to it: Appropriating his philosophy arms us with the required knowledge of reality as tragic. However, this knowledge falls short of the denial of Will required for the release Schopenhauer advances.[71]

Whether the tragic sense of life should be enhanced is yet another controversial topic. Various authors believe that a tragic sense of life ought to be fostered,[72] especially because they see "a perhaps unconscious but forceful onslaught on our sense of the tragic that threaten[s] to destroy it utterly."[73] More than one hundred years ago, James worried about the fate of the sick souls in the hands of the happy-minded: "The evil facts which [healthy-mindedness] refuses positively to account for are a genuine portion of reality; and they may after all be the best key to life's significance, and possibly the only openers of our eyes to the deepest levels of truth."[74] The views of the happy-minded do not suffice for a philosophy; the sick souls understand reality more accurately yet at the price of terrible sufferings. However, the happy-minded would do away with the sick souls if they could. James's concern is validated by the views of his colleague, George Santayana. Deeming the existentialists "sick souls," Santayana refuses to engage with their thought.[75] More recently, Robert Solomon objects to Dienstag's characterization of existentialists as pessimists, a lesser insult yet still stigmatizing as well as false.[76]