

Tragedy Without the Gods: Autonomy, Necessity and the Real Self

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The classical tragedies relate conflicts, choices and dilemmas that have meaningful parallels in our own experience. Many of the normative dimensions of tragedy, however, rely critically on the causal and motivational efficacy of divine forces. In particular, these narratives present supernatural interventions invading their characters' practical deliberations and undermining their claims to autonomous agency. Does this dynamic find any analogy in a contemporary, secular conception of moral agency? It does, but it is an analogy that challenges certain standard philosophical accounts of agentive self-governance.

If we ask what sense the tragedies of antiquity may make to us when we consider our ethical lives and our roles, not as tragic people but simply as people, even their supernatural aspects may find some analogy in our experience.¹

1. Introduction

The presence of supernatural forces in the classical tragedies is indispensable to the enduring value of the stories that they tell. This is plainly true of their aesthetic value: the causal powers of the gods, goddesses, oracles, fates and furies are integral to their distinctive narrative structure and dramatic power. Nothing else could intervene in human affairs just as they do, to the same aesthetic effect. The historical and sociological value of the tragedies, too, is owed in part to the insights they offer into Greek theology and cosmology. But these narratives are perhaps valued above all for their enduring psychological and ethical value—for the light they shed on who we are and how we ought to live.

What significance does the supernatural have in the context of our contemporary ethical concerns? Today's readers and spectators of classical tragedy do not engage with divinities even remotely resembling those of antiquity, if they engage with any divinities at all. Neither do such powers find a place within contemporary philosophical ethics. On many levels, these differences need not affect our appreciation of the dramas: we can engage with them as imaginative and aesthetically pleasing narratives, enjoying them as well-crafted fictions and myths. However, it is another matter if we are to regard them as speaking to our own ethical lives—as narratives relating dilemmas, conflicts and choices that have meaningful parallels in our own experience. As Williams suggests, in this context it is natural to look for 'some analogy in our experience' to the supernatural presences in the tragedies. Given the pivotal role taken by the supernatural in constructing the circumstances

1 Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 165

of ethical choice in these works, it is difficult to see what epistemic value they might otherwise have—how they could inform ‘our ethical lives and roles ... simply as people’.²

For this purpose, successful reconstructions of the tragedies will identify some functional counterparts for the roles taken by the supernatural. That much is required to make sense of them—to render them intelligible—as usefully informing our own normative experience. The gods may be eliminable, but the roles they take are not.

The points of analogy one might find are, in fact, almost limitless, for the gods and goddesses (and their supernatural cohorts) play many roles in Greek tragedy. I do not intend to survey all, or even most, of them here. My interest is in the role they take in determining the trajectory of human choices and actions, and in particular how they affect our standing as autonomous or self-governing agents. Even with the scope limited in this way, the possibilities are many. Sometimes the Greek divinities influence a man’s agency by contriving some very difficult (impossibly difficult) circumstances for him, as when Artemis brings it about that Agamemnon must either sacrifice his daughter or abandon the expedition to Troy, on which depends his own and his community’s honour. At other times, supernatural forces simply determine outcomes rather than circumstances of choices, as when Oedipus is fated to murder his father and marry his mother, or when his sons, Eteocles and Polynices, are fated by their father’s curse to die by one another’s hands. (I say that these are ‘outcomes’, because in both cases, what was fated was that, one way or another, Oedipus, Eteocles and Polynices eventually would do these things: the when and how were left up to them.) In a different set of cases, divine forces invade a character’s first-personal psychology, altering his motivating reasons by manipulating his beliefs, desires or intentions.

This last category of interventions are among the most puzzling, and will be my focus here. These are cases in which the supernatural causally intervenes with an agent’s thoughts and feelings, directly altering his practical reasoning. That is what happens to Aeschylus’ hapless Ajax, deluded by Athena into mistaking the Achaeans’ booty of sheep and goats for his murderous target (the Achaean leaders). It is also arguably what happens to Sophocles’ Creon and Aeschylus’ Clytemnestra—at least by their own accounts: when Creon condemns his beloved niece and Clytemnestra murders her husband, they each attribute their motivations in part to divine possession, despite offering many reasons of their own as well. Oedipus, too, in *Colonus*, suggests that he was moved, in part, by the divinities when he blinded himself. Less ambiguously, it is what happens to Euripides’ Pentheus, when his desires are fuelled and unbalanced by Dionysus, although Euripides does not allow Pentheus the dignity of recognizing himself that he may be bewitched. Examples of such internal steering in the tragedies are legion.

2 One might doubt that any such analogy is really required to explain the interest we take in the normative dimensions of classical tragedies. After all, we have learned to elide the scientifically discredited dimensions of historical narratives quite generally, while still finding them a rich source of ethical thought. It is now commonplace to retell and interpret even the sacred texts of our own, more recent theological traditions in secular terms: academic industries, and even much of what survives of Western religious institutions, are constructed on the edifice of that critical practice. This observation, however, evades rather than answers the question of what it is—if anything—in our own experience that functions as the supernatural forces of the tragedies.

One typical function of the divinities in such cases is to explain some piece of extreme and unfortunate behaviour. Why would anyone intentionally do what is done by Oedipus, by his sons, by Agamemnon, Ajax, Creon and Clytemnestra? These are behaviours that demand explanation, and the (or an) explanation given in the poems is that they are driven by causal powers beyond the agents' control; they issue from forces independent of his reasons. As Williams observes, the gods can intervene at many points along the causal chain of human action to explain what would otherwise be beyond comprehension:

When a warrior aims at one man and hits another, he may aim as well as he ever aims, and the god turn his spear aside on its way. Or the god, by a more intimate intervention, may have made him, on this occasion, aim badly. But that, too, is the kind of thing that can happen to anyone, and the point of mentioning the gods in such cases, as in the case of deliberations, is to explain things that have no obvious explanation.³

In looking for what might serve, in modern experience, as a point of analogy to the supernatural aspects of the tragedies, we are looking (in part) for something to fill an explanatory role—for a plausible account of why a character behaves in ways that are not adequately explained by his acknowledged reasons; he may have his own reasons, and those reasons may be motivating, but they do not suffice to make what he does intelligible. In 'the case of deliberations', moreover, this functional equivalent must explain not just what a character happens to do—as, for instance, being in a trance can explain behaviours that fall short of being actions. Rather, it must explain specifically why he *acts* as he does. The intervention of the gods in an agent's deliberations succeeds in doing this: it offers a story that makes sense of how one might act on a reason without that reason counting strictly as one's own. Absent the gods, however, why would one willingly sacrifice one's own daughter's life, or gouge out one's own eyes, or drive one's beloved niece to suicide, or murder one's heroic husband?

2. Clytemnestra's *Alastor*: Agency and Alien Motivators

One candidate, alternative explanation now in common currency is that our personal-level, conscious reasonings are subject to the intervention of subpersonal-level causal forces: our psychological economies are not governed only by the reasons we acknowledge, and those reasons themselves are sometimes constrained and compelled by causes which we do not control and of which we may be unaware. Applying this familiar idea to the tragedies suggests a functional counterpart for the divinities: they are analogous to the various non-rational, psychological motivators that guide our actions, and sometimes do so by shaping the course of our deliberations.⁴ Consider, for instance, Clytemnestra's fanaticism and the ancient spirit to whom she attributes it. As Christopher Gill observes:

Clytemnestra puts it this way, after her murder of Agamemnon: 'You claim that the act is mine; but do not say that I am the wife of Agamemnon. Appearing in the shape of the dead man's wife, the ancient spirit (*alastor*) that takes vengeance for the

³ Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, 54.

⁴ See E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1951).

misdeed of the cruel feaster Atreus has now rendered this full-grown man as payment to the young, a crowning sacrifice'. . . . Clytemnestra's speech is in part self-justificatory, part of a dialogue of accusation and defence with the chorus. But her words also highlight the fanaticism that can make a person identify herself with a spirit of vengeance (*alastor*), even while she recognizes that this spirit causes hideous deaths in successive generations, and is, by the same logic, likely to lead to her own. Aeschylus does not exactly explain this phenomenon, psychologically; his representation seems designed to preserve what is private and inexplicable in such cases.⁵

Aeschylus actually does explain Clytemnestra's behaviour psychologically, to a point—the dialogue tips us to her anger and ambition. But what needs explaining, and is left private and inexplicable, is Clytemnestra's willing identification with the *alastor*. That identification is both astute and just, for the destructiveness of the *alastor* is consonant with much else we know about Clytemnestra: her capacity to harbour bitter resentments over a long period of time, her obsession with revenge, her unwillingness to be appeased. Why represent Clytemnestra's personal motivations, and her desperate acts, as at once her own *and* a vehicle of another, divine will? This is not an exceptional case; such sharing of responsibility with the divinities is endemic to the connections made in tragic narratives. They repeatedly register agential collaborations between the characters' motivating reasons and the non-rational causality of the gods.

All of this suggests that the spectrum of internal psychological determinants is a good place to look for a secular point of analogy with the supernatural.⁶ It is noteworthy, however, that the tragedians themselves clearly recognized such determinants, and yet introduce the gods, furies and so forth as an *independent* force. Both play an explanatory role. The narrative unfolding of disaster in every case has a double-sided causal trajectory: internal *and* external forces drive it forward. Oedipus is ill-fated, to be sure, but he is also too easily offended and enraged and given to impulsive aggression; Agamemnon was put in a bind by Artemis, but he nonetheless is given to fickleness and possesses too little compass for conflict; Ajax may have been deluded by a malicious Athena, but he provoked her hostility in the first place by arrogantly rebuffing her offer of assistance on the battlefield; Antigone and Creon may be vulnerable to divine ill-will, but they seal their fates by allowing their proud battle of wills to distract them from their real purposes. And so forth.

In short, the outcomes of tragic narratives depend on both psychological and divine determinants. Indeed these are precisely stories of the *interaction* of such causes. So are we not left with a significant narrative remainder if we assimilate them both to the psychological?

Gill himself considers this objection, observing that, after all, part of Aeschylus' 'explanation is not psychological but supernatural, having recourse to forces external to the human mind'.⁷ He attempts to respond to the objection:

5 Christopher Gill, 'The Question of Character and Personality in Greek Tragedy', *Poetics Today* 7 (1986), 251–273, at 266.

6 Williams follows a different course, comparing the gods of the ancients to such wider social and institutional causes such as education, government and religion. This is compatible with the account I offer here; Williams is pointing to the more distant environmental origins of the non-rational motivators which directly concern me. See Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, 164–165.

7 Gill, 'The Question of Character and Personality in Greek Tragedy', 266.

[Aeschylus'] recourse to external forces may be designed to bring out the fact the people can sometimes seem to go 'outside' themselves (their normal, rational selves, that is), while still functioning as, in some sense, the people they are. Nor does Aeschylus fail to describe the psychological role of these forces. ... he explores the possible interplay between these forces and men's minds, the way in which the forces can take people over, and, more strikingly, the way in which men can let or make themselves be taken over by them.⁸

Gill is on the right track with these remarks. There is certainly a distinction to be made between those psychological forces with which we identify and recognize as our own, and those that we experience as external and alien. Gill's suggestion is that the interventions of supernatural forces in the tragic narratives serve to mark this difference: while the supernatural finds expression as psychological forces 'within men's minds', it does not signify an arbitrarily selected set of them. Rather, it represents those that are in some (unexplained) sense independent of the agent's 'normal, rational self'. Unfortunately, Gill takes these suggestive remarks no further. Just how should we understand his talk of an agent letting himself be 'taken over' by psychological forces, where those are at once internal to the agent and yet experienced as external and independent to his 'normal' self?

A good place to start is with the familiar thought that ordinary human agency is neither seamlessly integrated nor perfectly coherent. We are subject to various, often conflicting motivations and purposes, and they cannot all be satisfied. Some prevail, others must go, and as they come and go we regularly find ourselves pursuing disparate, incompatible courses of action. Human agency is not neatly unified: while an individual's *capacity* for agential control (however defined) may be all of a piece, his *exercises* of that capacity will often be fragmented, expressing more than one motivational system.⁹ Moreover, our action choices are the product of various causes, only some of which are manifested in our deliberations and expressed in our reasons. Others remain obscure to us and beyond our control: we neither choose nor authorize nor govern them. Among the latter, will be some influences that are at odds with our rational self-conceptions—they may be in conflict with our reasons, or they may not be candidate reasons at all, as when we are driven by irrational associations and compulsions. In certain circumstances—often circumstances of hard choices—these unbidden motivations make themselves manifest, guiding our practical reasoning in unpredictable ways. When this happens, we can feel that our judgement has been invaded by an alien power. Even though the efficacious powers lie within our own natures, they are experienced as something visited on us from without, making our own actions rationally opaque—or even not actions at all.

The subjective sense of externality and the blind causal efficacy of our motivations on such occasions closely parallels the way in which the supernatural powers directly sometimes influence a tragic character's agency. As Gill observed in the case of Clytemnestra's

8 Ibid., 270.

9 The fragmentation of agency is sometimes described in the literature in terms of the various magical entities of depth psychology. One need not go that far; the basic idea is unremarkable and is now a commonplace of everyday folk psychology.

alastor, an agent can even own that she has reasons to act as she does while experiencing her actions as externally driven.

It can also happen that we voluntarily hand ourselves over to an unwelcome force, as when we choose to give way to impulses or habits or passions. This sort of case, too, has analogues in the tragic narratives. Consider Agamemnon, for instance, who famously ‘slipped his neck through the strap of compulsion’s yoke’ when he had finally to decide whether to sacrifice his daughter or his expedition.¹⁰ He is not at that moment yoked by a force: he opts to take on the yoke as his own. He was in a bad spot, to be sure, but in the event he chooses to set his reasoned deliberations aside and resign his agential authority to a less ambivalent, more resolute motivational system. Having stepped aside, he is taken over by a frenzied violence; he proceeds to the sacrifice in an almost bestial manner, graphically described by the Chorus.

To sum: Gill’s proposal is that some of the tragedies illustrate ‘the way in which ... [psychological] forces can take people over, and, more strikingly, the way in which men can let or make themselves be taken over by them’.¹¹ This characterization is particularly apt for cases in which the supernatural intervenes directly in an agent’s deliberations. I have suggested that these narrative episodes are analogous to episodes in our own, everyday experience of choosing and acting—our experience as agents. That is, we sometimes experience our own choices and actions as similarly subject to external powers, while recognizing that the sources of compulsion lie within ourselves. The proposed analogy thus calls attention both to the fragmented nature of human agency and to the psychological forces that can undermine it.

That much seems right, so far as it goes. But I think that it does not go far enough. In particular, it fails to capture the extent to which the tragedies question at a deeper level our ordinary conception of ourselves as autonomous agents. For all that I have said, the supernatural in the tragic narratives may simply represent (in vivid and captivating ways) certain familiar challenges to agential autonomy. We have no reason to suppose that these narratives also have something to say about how those challenges may best be met. However, I believe that, considered more closely, the tragedies make more radical demands on our understanding of ourselves as human agents. Specifically, we can find in the tragic view of autonomy an interesting and important alternative to that delivered by contemporary philosophical theory. Or so I shall argue.

3. Self-Governance and Tragic Necessity

When a tragic protagonist is driven by forces independent of his reasons—whether willingly or not—is this a departure from an otherwise settled and stable condition of self-governance? Is this ‘giving over’ an aberrant disruption of a normally coherent, unified agential self? If so, then the proposed analogy suggests that we standardly function as rational and autonomous actors, and only in very abnormal circumstances find our

10 *Anankas edu lepadnon*. Translation by Gill, ‘The Question of Character and Personality in Greek Tragedy’, 263.

Williams translates this more simply: Agamemnon ‘put on the harness of necessity’. Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, 132.

11 Gill, ‘The Question of Character and Personality in Greek Tragedy’, 266.

agential control undermined. Call this the ‘suspended agency’ view. On the suspended agency view, the analogy proposed between divine interventions (in tragic narratives) and subjection to non-rational determination by psychological causes (in everyday life) does little to challenge our authority over our actions—our claim to autonomous agency.

The suspended agency view cannot be quite right, at least as an interpretation of supernatural interventions in the tragedies. In the universe of classical tragedy, necessities of a cosmic scale frame and pervade both natural and moral explanations. The tragedies are not tales of a world in which individual men and their personal wills are the measures and masters of all things. The characters possess agential powers, true enough: they deliberate, weigh options, make choices, form intentions and perform actions for which they are accountable. They do *have* personal wills.¹² But they also are in *ongoing* interactions with the gods, goddesses and the rest. Engagement with the supernatural is not the exception but the rule. The characters regularly and quite casually explain what they are doing in terms of these interactions. In short, the supernatural forces are ubiquitous in daily life and the explanation of ordinary human behaviour. There are no reassuringly ‘standard conditions’ in which agents freely shape their own destinies. Human experience is not merely punctuated by episodic interferences from external causal determinants: it is largely shaped by them. Quite apart from the supernatural, these narratives also bind the individual actor to a rich network of secular necessities: historical, civic, familial and psychological. Here, a man is born into and lives out his life inexorably bound to inherited circumstances. In so far as he operates as a self-governing agent at all, he does that by continually *negotiating* with forces of necessity surrounding him. He is himself both a product and vehicle of these forces.

Likewise, these figures are driven—and often destroyed—by aspects of their own internal psychologies. Agamemnon might have dealt with his dilemma to better effect had he had less ambition or stronger parental values. Similarly Pentheus, an impetuous, unreflective youth ruled by transitory desires, comes to grief in part because he is unable to regulate his curiosity and sexual dispositions—tempted by Dionysus’ lures, he falls victim to the Bacchantes’ murderous rage. Even Oedipus can be held to account: had he been less arrogant about his ‘right to rule’ (not least, his right to rule himself) he might not have been so slow to discover that he had slain his father and married his mother.

These protagonists operate throughout under the shadow of forces on all sides that lie beyond their understanding and control. Indeed, in literary taxonomies, this dynamic interplay of personal agency and necessity is one of the qualities that sets a tragic drama apart from a mere tale of misfortune. Against this background, the suspended agency view delivers an unpromising picture of what happens when a tragic actor is ‘carried out of himself’, or allows himself to be taken over. These are not episodic deviations from an otherwise stable course governed by his or her decisive, reasoned judgements. The tragic protagonist is not the autonomous, self-determining agent of post-Enlightenment philosophy. Who then is he, and what, if anything, underwrites his claim to self-governance?

12 See Williams scathing criticisms of Bruno Snell’s progressivist account, according to which the ancients do not even possess the concept of a self, let alone a personal will. (Williams, *Shame and Necessity*). Roger Crisp supports Williams on this point, although he is more generally sceptical about Williams’ ethical ‘regressivism’ (Roger Crisp, ‘Homeric Ethics’, in Roger Crisp (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of the History of Ethics* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), 1–20).

It is possible that this question has no answer, at least in terms that map neatly onto our modern conceptions of autonomy and personal responsibility. Perhaps *nothing* in the universe of classical tragedy could count as self-governance as we now understand it. The lesson of the analogy between supernatural and psychological necessities (the thought continues) is that no deep analogy exists between the ancients' understanding of agency and our own. Or rather: if there is any modern analogy to be found with the metaphysical determinism of the ancients, it is with the scientific determinism of today. Is this verdict correct? That depends, of course, on what we now take autonomy to be.

4. Autonomy and the Real Self

Let us briefly set the tragedies to one side and consider the notion of agential autonomy in more general terms—the notion of self-governing actions.

Contemporary theories of agency hold that persons are agents: they initiate and execute actions, as distinct from mere behaviours. The difficulty lies in saying in what that distinction consists. It will suffice here to note that a behaviour is an action only if it was intentional (or 'authorized'), and the agents intentions caused him to initiate and execute it in the way that he intended. This leaves open the possibility that we can sometimes act without being fully self-governing. When a delusional man sets out to walk on water, he genuinely acts—what he does is intentional and self-authorized—but his intention itself is a product of forces that undermine his autonomy. Autonomy-excluding conditions such as this are ubiquitous: hypnosis, amnesia, physical illness, compulsions, addictions and, more recently, a wide range of disabling affective and cognitive disorders. There are also more commonplace ways in which our autonomy can be compromised. We are vulnerable to misguided beliefs, wayward desires, stubborn habits, and self-deception, any of which may prevent us from acting as we judge best. These are all conditions in which a person retains his authority to act intentionally—to be the initiator and executor of his behaviour; his actions remain an expression of his immediate beliefs and desires. Someone afflicted by these conditions is not just making bodily motions—'merely behaving'—as one does when beset by restless leg syndrome or a tic or a seizure. Sarah Buss puts the point well:

Just as a political leader's official status is compatible with her having no real power to call the shots, so too, a person can have an authoritative status with respect to her motives without having any real power over them. Though it is an agent's job to determine how she will act, she can do this job without really being in control. Of course, no one can govern herself without being subject to influences whose power does not derive from her own authority: everything we do is a response to past and present circumstances over which we have no control. But some of the forces that move us to act do not merely affect which actions we choose to perform, nor how we govern ourselves in making these choices. They influence us in a way that makes a mockery of our authority to determine our own actions. They undermine our autonomy What distinguishes autonomy-undermining influences on a person's

decision, intention, or will from those motivating forces that merely play a role in the self-governing process? This is the question that all accounts of autonomy try to answer.¹³

In recent years, this question has come to dominate discussions of agency, autonomy and responsibility. Some have argued that the correct answer hinges on the truth or falsity of determinism. I will not canvass that debate. One or another version of compatibilism is by far the more common view.

Compatibilists conceive of autonomy as freedom from constraint.¹⁴ For an action to be self-governing, it must not be constrained (or compelled) by alien forces, imposed on the agent's will. This way of putting the point transfers the problem of defining autonomous action to that of identifying what counts as an alien or external power, particularly where the power in question is internal to the agent's psychological economy. Which motivators within an individual's psychophysical system count as lying within the agent and which without? The reply given to this typically shifts metaphors: external motivators are those that do not 'belong' to the agent. The proper autonomy-conferring relation between a person and his action motivators is like that between a person and his property: the relation of ownership. Only actions whose motivations are truly an agent's *own* count as autonomous. Other forces within his psychophysical system—the autonomy-defeaters—are not his own: they do not belong to his 'Real Self'. This is, in brief, the sequence of reasoning that has led from compatibilism to the Real Self theories that now largely dominate our philosophical understanding of agential autonomy.

Different versions of Real Self theories are best distinguished by illustration. The most standard illustration concerns the motivator of addiction. What is the difference between the unwilling addict (who wants to resist his drug) and the willing addict (who is equally addicted, but who is satisfied to be an addict, and does not repudiate his condition)? According to an early incarnation of Real Self views, the Real Self is identified with our higher-order desires—what we will to will.¹⁵ On this view, the unwilling addict is not self-governing: he is controlled by his first-order desire to take the drug, while his second-order will (or 'volition') is that he should resist it.

A second version proposes that the Real Self is defined not by a hierarchy of our desires as such, but by the fit or harmony between our 'valuational systems' (as reflected in our all-things-considered judgements about what matters most of all) and our 'motivational systems' (our appetites, desires and other motivators). This view vividly revives Plato's opposition between reason and appetite.¹⁶ It differs from the hierarchy-of-desires view in distinguishing between the different

13 Buss Sarah, 'Personal Autonomy', in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2012 edition), §1: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/personal-autonomy/> (accessed 6 May 2014).

14 It is now a common thesis of compatibilists that, even if determinism is true, we can make a meaningful distinction between genuine actions and mere behaviour and, moreover, between autonomous actions for which we are responsible and other, pseudo-actions for which we are not. The promise of such a distinction has its origins in Peter F. Strawson, 'Freedom and Resentment', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 48 (1962), 1–25. Strawson there argues that moral responsibility is a matter of being an appropriate target of praise and blame, and that this, in turn, is decided by considerations independent of causal control.

15 Harry Frankfurt, 'Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person', *Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1971), 5–20.

16 Gary Watson, *Free Will* (Oxford: OUP, 2003).

systems that can guide action and by taking an internalist view of the motivational efficacy of evaluative and other rational judgements. A free agent is one whose valuational system harmonizes with his motivational one; an unfree agent is one who not only fails to act in accordance with his valuational system, but is *unable* to do so. The willing addict, then, again comes out as self-governing for, if he (really, thoughtfully, on reflection, and *ceteris paribus*) values the pleasures delivered by his drug above all the costs it incurs, then his choice issues from his Real Self.¹⁷

Finally, some have proposed that the Real Self should not be identified with our conscious, deliberated aims (or values, or higher-order desires) at all, but with whatever motivators are in fact both deep and well-integrated with our other deepest beliefs and desires (the Real Self is just a self with internal coherence or ‘integrity’).¹⁸ This seems correct: one can act for reasons that one has not explicitly chosen, endorsed, identified with or even entertained. Indeed, we do this all the time when playing music, driving a car, even making conversation—actions for which the reasons guiding our actions are *non-deliberative* ones. Nonetheless, this view, like the others, identifies the autonomous agential self with the rational self. A non-deliberative reason is still a reason—a consideration in favour of acting in this way or that—in so far as it bears the right sort of logical relation to the agent’s intentions and actions.¹⁹

These are all coherentist or ‘mesh’ views of the Real Self: the criterion for the autonomy of an act or pattern of actions is just whether or not it coheres harmoniously with what the theory claims is definitive of the Real Self. Self-governance is a matter of the different components of an agent’s psychic structure conforming to and harmonizing with the verdicts of what is internal to one, authoritative part of our psychic structures.²⁰ Thus,

17 In a related version, the Real Self is identified with our wider, long-term goals and the plans that underwrite them. If your life plan prioritizes maximizing your longevity and physical health, and you are an addict, then you fail to be self-governing—your action motivator fails to harmonize with your wider goals and your means of achieving them. See Michael E. Bratman, *Structures of Agency* (Oxford: OUP, 2006).

18 Nomy Arpaly and Timothy Schroeder, ‘Alienation and Externality’, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 29 (1999), 371–387; Peter Railton, ‘The Affective Dog and Its Rational Tale’ (unpublished manuscript). This view holds that the Real Self may include motivating reasons—complexes of beliefs and desires—of which we are wholly unaware, and may even disavow, but which nonetheless sometimes trump our decisive judgements. Thus, the Real Self may not always be manifested in our personal-level deliberations. One virtue of this view is that it accommodates the familiar fact that our actions often reflect who we actually are, rather than who we imagine ourselves to be. It allows that we may be responsible for (and praised or blamed for) motives we disavow, if those motives can be reasonably attributed to us on other grounds, typically behavioural ones.

19 This view is owed to Timothy Schroeder and Nomy Arpaly. Michael Brownstein summarizes the claim thus: ‘Reasons are present in the right way, Arpaly and Schroeder argue, only when mental state transitions occur because the content of one state bears a logical relation to the content of the other state. The sort of logical relations they mention are logical entailment, practical entailment and statistical relevance, although this is not a complete list’ (Michael Brownstein, ‘Rationalizing Flow: Agency in Skilled Unreflective Action’, *Philosophical Studies* 168 (2014), 545–568).

20 As Susan Wolf summarizes, all of these versions subscribe to the following general formula—the Real-Self view: an agent is morally responsible for *X* if and only if *X* is attributable to the agent’s Real Self, that is, if and only if (a) the agent has a Real Self, (b) the agent is able to govern *X* on the basis of her will, and (c) the agent is able to govern her will on the basis of her valuational system (David Shoemaker, ‘Moral Responsibility and the Self’, in Sean Gallagher, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the Self*, OUP, 2011, p 503. For the source arguments, see Susan Wolf, *Freedom within Reason* (New York: OUP, 1990), 28–35).

they all share the thought that some subset of an agent's motivating psychological elements is privileged as the agent's own; if and only if one's action is governed by this subset, is it autonomous.

What, however, justifies the assumption that that an agent *has* a 'real self'? Suppose that a person's higher-order desires (or his valuational system, or his wider goals and plans, or his deepest, integral beliefs and desires) are the product of his upbringing in a racist cult or of parenting that undermined any natural instinct for attachment, trust and affection? These scenarios offer paradigms of external control. They also are no theoretical fantasy: there is now no doubt about the power of early experience to shape and deform a child at the deepest levels of his being, rendering him unresponsive to a wide range of natural facts and moral values. These worries have inspired yet another conception of the Real Self. On this (fourth) view, the only self that could count as 'real' is the rational self—one that is sensitive to considerations that bear the credentials of truth and goodness, that is, beliefs informed by the facts, and desires informed by what is actually right. Insofar as one is unreceptive to the reasons that actually back up (or defeat) one's beliefs and desires, or is unable to react to those reasons, one cannot *but* fail to be self-governing. The rational self is that part of our psychological economy that is guided and informed by true beliefs and good desires—not by just any old reasons that happen, by chance, to come our way.

Note that on this view, the autonomous agential self—the part of one's psychic constitution that is capable of self-governance—is no longer defined by any part of a person's *actual* psychic constitution. The empirical self has been displaced by the theorist's epistemic and normative ideals. The Real Self is now almost a transcendental self.²¹ Real Self accounts of autonomy begin as an attempt to exclude those factors that undermine 'normal' or 'properly functioning' agential authority—factors such as delusions, compulsions, addictions and other disorders. But in order to fulfil this ambition, they are transformed into a conception of agency that excludes any non-rational, or rationally unsupported, psychological determinants. Is this a promising strategy for identifying a benchmark against which to measure our own powers of self-governance? That depends on one's aims. It does stand to define an ideal. But it is unlikely to provide any understanding of why we, ordinary and non-ideal agents, sometimes experience ourselves as self-governing and sometimes do not; neither will it help us to better regulate the difference.

5. Autonomy and Necessity

We agents are not our judgments, we are not our ideals for ourselves, we are not our values, we are not our univocal wishes; we are complex, divided imperfectly rational

21 The principle proponent of this view, Susan Wolf, modestly describes this self as 'merely' sane. Can that be right? The conditions of sanity are twofold. First, one's beliefs must be shaped by 'perceptions and sound reasoning that produce an accurate conception of the world'. Secondly, one's values must arise from 'processes that afford an accurate conception of the world'. See *ibid.*, 381. These conditions may sound sensible enough so stated, but they are in fact very demanding—so demanding, in fact, that one wonders how many of our family, friends and colleagues actually satisfy them.

creatures, and when we act it is as complex divided, imperfectly rational creatures that we do so. We are fragmented, perhaps, but we are not some one fragment.²²

I have been pursuing the question of whether and how the role of the supernatural in classical tragedy has a functional equivalent in our contemporary conception of human agency, and of agential autonomy in particular. In so far as that conception is modelled on the theoretical ideal of a Real Self the prospects do not look good. Real Self views all identify the self-governing agent with one authoritative part of the individual's psychological system. Despite their disagreements of detail, they all allow that autonomous action is sensitive to rational requirements: to act at all is to act for reasons, and to act autonomously is to act for reasons that are one's *own*. This is a commitment that Real Self theories share with almost every other modern conception of autonomy. To be self-governing is to be self-justifying: for one's beliefs, desires and intentions to be related logically, as well as causally, in ways that validate them as good exercises of practical reasoning. Actions that are owed to impulses, compulsions, delusions—or to causal interference by a hypnotist, a programmer or a surgeon—are not so related; they are not owned by one's rational self.

The same must be true of actions owed to interventions by the gods and other external, supernatural processes. Hence, if an agent's motivations are subject to causal powers that are functionally equivalent to these, he is not then self-governing. And if, as in the tragic narratives, such powers regularly invade his beliefs, desires and intentions, then he may hardly count as autonomous at all. The contemporary conception of the agential self, it seems, has little or no place within the classical tragedies. In particular, they do not invite a distinction between a Real Self and other systemic features of our psychophysical constitutions. Even if one were able to excavate from these narratives some conception of a Real Self that 'owns' an individual's actions, it would be utterly unlike the reasons-responsive self of contemporary theory. What remains, then, of the proposed analogy between the supernatural and our non-rational internal motivations?

The wellsprings of tragic agency are the non-deliberative, non-rational motivators—the obscure, unconscious aspects of the characters' inner lives that they do not choose and are unable to control. As Gill remarks, a tragedy provides a 'privileged, hermetically closed, context in which we can explore human nature as it really is, and so trace the causes, and see the underlying "logic", of human perversity and irrationality in ways that our conventional, evaluative approach to character makes impossible'.²³ Here Gill's reference to tracing causes rather than reasons, and his qualifying marks around the word 'logic', aptly reflect the contrast he wishes to draw: the classical tragedies precisely are *not* in the

22 Nomy Arpaly and Timothy Schroeder, 'Praise, Blame and the Whole Self', *Philosophical Studies* 93 (1999), 184–5. Arpaly and Schroeder argue that it is integration alone that determines autonomy and responsibility. The integration that matters on their account—the sort that is autonomy conferring—is still rational integration or coherence; they reject the idea that actions could be motivated by a powerful, deeply held conviction or compelling desire that is not 'well-integrated' with one's other convictions and desires. The passage quoted is thus somewhat misleading, for their 'whole self' turns out, after all, to be one fragment of the psychophysical system: the fragment of well-integrated mental states.

23 Gill, 'The Question of Character and Personality in Greek Tragedy', 265.

business of articulating a unified, coherent, intelligible account of human nature. In so far as there are narrative events that reveal who a tragic character ‘really is’, these are events which undermine rather than realize his authority over what he does, challenging rather than confirming the thought that his considered reasons and decisive practical judgements drive his actions. It would follow that tragic agents are, at best, only minimally self-governing, if they are so at all. That conclusion, however, just seems wrong: these characters do not, intuitively, strike us as aliens or automatons or less than fully human. They are not so remote from us as that; indeed, they present themselves within their dramatic contexts as profoundly human. Are our intuitive responses to them just misguided?

Perhaps the question of who or what constitutes autonomy or self-governance in a tragic agent is a bad one, at least if those terms are understood as defined by the contemporary notion of a Real Self. If the question makes sense at all, a credible answer will have to take into account the way in which human agency is essentially fragmented, suspended between, on the one hand, the directives of an ordinary personal will, with purposes and reasons of its own and, on the other, the deterministic causal powers of nature, represented by the supernatural. Vernant and Vidal-Naquet describe this fragmentation in terms of the ‘double-sidedness’ of the tragic psychology:

In the tragic perspective, acting, being an agent, has a double character. On the one side, it consists in taking council with oneself, weighing the for and against and doing the best one can to foresee the order of means and ends. On the other hand, it is to make a bet on the unknown and the incomprehensible and to take a risk on a terrain that remains impenetrable to you. It involves entering the play of supernatural forces ... where one does not know whether they are preparing success or disaster.²⁴

Vernant and Vidal-Naquet’s characterization fits well with the analogy I have been pursuing, according to which the supernatural forces express natural facts about us including, *inter alia*, facts about forces internal to our own natures—motivators that have the power to move us, and do move us, with or without our authorization. Importantly, Vernant and Vidal-Naquet avoid the suggestion that these forces constitute the ‘true self’: they are but one side of our double characters. The other side is the unexotic, familiar personal will—the everyday self that consists in ‘taking council with oneself, weighing the for and against and doing the best one can to foresee the order of means and ends’. This picture captures our intuitive responses to the tragic protagonists. We should reject the ideas that they are alien to us, that their actions are not guided by intentions, or that there is no counterpart in these stories to our familiar, folk-psychological notion of acting for good reasons. It is true that the ancients do not theoretically articulate their characters’ inner lives in the kind of detailed, first-personal terms featured in modern literature. But it does not follow that they are not written into their narratives at all.²⁵ (As Williams remarked in a related context, an absence of theory is not a theory of absence.) The tragedians recognized a

24 Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Mythe et tragédie en Grèce ancienne*, Vol 1 (Paris: F. Maspero, 1972), 37.

25 I follow Williams and Crisp in their puzzlement at Bruno Snell’s claim that the ancients, and especially Homer, simply had no notion of an individual, personal will. See Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, and Crisp, ‘Homeric Ethics’.

distinction between a person's acknowledged desires, purposes, hopes and plans and the necessities that so often stand in the way of their realization.

Consider Oedipus. As well as being a tragic hero, he was an ordinary man with a life to live. He did not *want* to murder his father and marry his mother; that is, after all, why he fled King Polybus' home and set off to build his future elsewhere. He was, so to speak, giving his ambitions a go and attempting to outwit and avoid the oracle's warning as best he could. But there were also other forces defining who he could be and what he must do: his divinely imposed fate. The person he then became—the self that was his own—was created and constructed through the interactions of these components. Oedipus *recognizes* some motivations and reasons as his own, of course, and they conflict with various necessities he confronts. But that does not mean that Oedipus just *is* these reasons. If it did, he would have no cause for regret or shame; he would not need to blind himself to avoid his own image in a mirror. He does feel this regret and shame, and we can see that it is not entirely misplaced. As Williams asks:

What is one supposed to do if one discovers that not just in fantasy but in life one has murdered one's father and married one's mother? Not even Oedipus ... thought that blinding and exile had to be the response. But should there be no response? Is it as though it had never happened? ... Is it as though such things had happened, but not by his agency—that Laius had died, for instance, indeed been killed, but, as Oedipus first believed and ... hoped, by someone else? ²⁶

That Oedipus blinds and exiles himself expresses his recognition that he cannot disown what he has done just because he did not choose it under every description. These things were done under *some* description, and it was he who did them. One might say that what Oedipus has is a practical 'real self'—a profile delineated in actions that occur under the guidance of his everyday, personal will *and* the directives of necessity. If there is anything that is Oedipus' true self, it is this construct, partly of his own making, in which his personal will, with its complex of recognized motivating reasons is of a piece with the non-rational necessities with which it interacts. He is a distinct individual agent, comprising an identifiable and unique psychophysical system; he is this system in its entirety, even if that system has more than one part.

What room does Vernant and Vidal-Naquet's picture of tragic agency leave for our conception of ourselves as autonomous, self-governing agents? It certainly does not promote the *practical* aim that conception is often used to support, namely the aim of assigning responsibility to agents and responding to them with praise and blame.²⁷ Instead, Vernant and Vidal-Naquet's picture invites scepticism about the legitimacy of

²⁶ Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, 69.

²⁷ Do we really need a theoretical account of autonomy to do that much? Our everyday practices rely on flexible, intuitive notions of autonomy and its cognates (responsibility, culpability, negligence and the rest). These change somewhat over times and places, and tend to be adjusted in light of discoveries relevant to our agentic natures, such as the importance of genetic inheritance, of the neurophysiological basis of disorders or the effects of early childhood environment. It is by no means clear that we do better when we try to deepen and render more precise these notions as metaphysical first principles, such as definitions of our real selves. When we make progress in our evaluations of ourselves and others, that is typically because we have discovered some new natural facts in psychology or biology or neuroscience, not because we have articulated some previously undiscovered metaphysical distinction, lurking behind our intuitive responses to, for instance, willing and unwilling addicts.

that aim. It questions whether a self-conception that requires us to extricate ourselves from the necessities of our own inner lives, and indeed the laws of nature, can be sustained. The scepticism is not misplaced. If the project of acting autonomously is just the project of becoming a Real Self, then we are bound to be disappointed—not least because we all must die. Surely what we need more urgently is a conception of self-governance that is consonant with our fragmented natures, and that provides an ideal that can guide us as the imperfect agents that we are.

Such a conception might be found in the tragic narratives themselves. Consider: even in our own, unheroic lives, autonomy does not require the absence of necessity. Indeed, doing as one wills, in many cases, *requires* responding to and affirming certain necessities. The standard conception of romantic love, for instance, is that of a state in which one's attitude to the beloved is non-optional: 'He could love no other', we say, and 'It had to be', and 'It was fated'. Other kinds of love have the same structure: a mother may realize that she has no good reason to love and care for her particular child as she does; he is, in himself, unremarkable enough. But she does love him like no other, she could not do otherwise, she is *compelled* to devote her attentions only to the son that is her own—and she bears no regrets about that. Likewise, creative artists often describe their aesthetic judgements as a response to what the work demands—how the story must unfold, how the legato passage must be played, just which colours the painting requires. Collaborative musical performance offers a particularly vivid case: success in playing a string quartet depends crucially on each party coordinating his actions with and even subordinating them to those of the other players. (I speak as a violist, accustomed to subordination.) This is absolutely necessary to the end of producing a coordinated action of which no one player is capable on his own. Responding to necessity in all such cases is not experienced as a *loss* of self-governance so much as a discovery of how best to exercise it in order to achieve one's aims.

6. Externality, Necessity and Tragic Agency

The tragedies, I aver, illustrate a comparable conception of autonomy and self-governance. To see how, it will be helpful first to step back and consider the phenomenology of cases in which we experience ourselves as subject to external control in ways that are, unlike those just mentioned, threatening or oppressive or just unwelcome. That experience is typically characterized by two features, each of which may occur independently of the other: alienation and repudiation. The term 'alienation', as I mean it here, refers not to the place of a motivation in the structure of an agent's will—its relation to his desires or goals or values. Rather, it refers to a particular way of experiencing such a motivation, and the associated first-personal phenomenology. Imagine Samuel, a committed meat-eater who feels disdain and contempt for vegetarians. Samuel visits a slaughterhouse one day in his capacity as a school chaperone. He is made uneasy by what he sees and finds himself relieved when the tour comes to an end. However, Samuel in no way changes his view of the virtues of his diet, and the disturbing scenes at the slaughterhouse make no difference to his decisive judgement that the very best meals feature a good steak or roast. Afterwards, however, he finds himself experiencing an aversion to these. His aversion

surprises him and feels as if it comes from without; it is strange, unwelcome, incomprehensible. Samuel viscerally *feels* the aversion as if it came from outside himself. It is as if it was visited upon him, unbidden. It is alien.

Repudiation is a quite different phenomenon. Repudiation is not a visceral feeling; it is an evaluative response registering the proper place of the unbidden motivation in one's psychological economy—namely, that it has no place there at all. When we repudiate a motivation, we disavow or disown it; we may form a commitment to repress or defeat it. A repudiated motivation, unlike a merely alienated one, is a property of the structure of a person's desires, values or plans. Imagine now Sarah, a committed vegetarian and animal-rights enthusiast who is well-informed about the procedures by which meat products are produced. Sarah's deliberations have led her to the unequivocal conclusion that meat-eating is wrong, and she acts accordingly. Unfortunately, she is Samuel's daughter, and was raised on a steady carnivorous diet. She often feels a longing for more of the same; the bouquet of a Sunday roast is almost more than she can bear. Sarah is accustomed to these longings; she recognizes that they are a part of who she is and has been since before she can recall. 'It is in my genes', she says. 'I was brought up to eat that way. I never knew anything else.' Sarah's longings do not feel alien or strange to her; they are all too familiar. But she repudiates them: they are contrary to her values and practical convictions, and she refuses to be ruled by them.

The responses of alienation and repudiation are the experiential marks of *externality*, perhaps, but they need not accompany every experience of necessity. When we are beset by motivations that elicit responses of alienation and repudiation, we then are likely to perceive ourselves as compelled or constrained, and our self-governance as threatened. It is not, I think, the other way around. That is, it is not when we *judge* a motivation to be compelled or constrained or imposed by necessity that we experience it as external, as meriting alienation and repudiation. This is evident in the examples of the lover who is compelled to seek out the company of his beloved, or the mother who feels she has no choice but to respond to her child's needs, or the musician constrained by the demands of a composition's style and structure. None of these experiences elicit either alienation or repudiation of the demands made upon them. The lover, the mother and the artist act as free and self-governing agents, *and* do so in response to demands they experience as necessary. Necessity and compulsion are one thing; externality can sometimes be another.

The tragedies present characters responding in very different ways to the necessities they face, and faring very differently. How they fare depends greatly on their attitude to those necessities. Those who fare somewhat better, never do so because they have managed to *defeat* or *dispel* the powers that govern their actions. Rather, it is because they have found a way to free themselves of the feeling that these powers are alien and to transcend the need to repudiate them. If one can get that far, one may be able to reconcile one's personal ends to what must be—to conceive of them in a way that acknowledges one's given necessities too. The tragic agent's outcomes similarly depend on his ability to acknowledge or recognize these powers *as* necessities, on his willingness to accept rather than repudiate them, and finally on his ability to internalize them: to feel them as his own and to defuse their externality.

Nowhere is this dynamic, and the alternative conception of autonomy it embodies, perhaps better illustrated than in Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes*. The drama relates the civil war between Eteocles and Polynices, Oedipus' sons, who were cursed by Oedipus to divide his possessions by force. There is a double meaning to this curse: if Eteocles and Polynices are among his possessions, they too will be divided by force—that is, the curse can only be fulfilled by their deaths, and at one another's hands. The play opens with Eteocles, ruler of Thebes, calling his citizens to defend the city against an attack by the Achaeans led by Polynices. As the play progresses, the plan of battle is revealed: seven Achaean commanders are stationed at as many gates to Thebes. Eteocles appoints different warriors to combat each. For himself, he will fight not only Megarus, but his own brother, Polynices. Six of the gates are successfully defended by their Theban guards. At the seventh, however, Eteocles and Polynices are both slain, as foreseen, each by the other's sword.

The dramatic structure of *The Seven against Thebes* is remarkably simple. Its principal interest lies in Eteocles' interactions with the Chorus as he moves towards his decision to do battle with Polynices. The Chorus desperately pleads against that decision, reminding Eteocles of all the good reasons not to 'shed the blood of [his] own brother' and indeed not to court his own death. Eteocles, throughout, recognizes that he is destined (by Oedipus' curse) to do all of that, and is already committed to following it through: there is no question of the final outcome, only of the right time and course for it. Thus the play *begins* with his practical commitments already responsive to the necessity with which he is burdened. (This in itself displays a measure of self-understanding less evident in characters such as Ajax, Oedipus, Agamemnon and Creon.)

Eteocles' developing relation to his fate is the real focus of Aeschylus' narrative, and what we see is his progression from mere recognition of his situation as something imposed by circumstance, and quite external to him, to a full-blooded identification in which he cultivates his own reasons for confronting his brother—his public standing and honour as a king and a leader, considerations of justice, the shame that would be associated with retreat or evasion. It falls to the Chorus to express the responses of alienation and repudiation, but these are not a mere sideshow: they give voice to thoughts and feelings that would haunt anyone in such circumstances. Thus Aeschylus has Eteocles engage with and respond to them, thereby developing and bringing to consciousness his personal will and negotiating the claims of necessity against the Chorus's rejection of it. In this way, considerations that are *introduced* by Aeschylus as externally imposed, unwelcome necessities (both the immediate need to defend Thebes, and the more remote and ambiguous implications of Oedipus' curse) are transformed into internal ones as Eteocles not only affirms his intentions but creates and refines his own motivations for them. What begins as an external requirement, an alien necessity meriting repudiation, is embraced and realized within his individual will.

At the same time, Eteocles does not deny the considerations adduced against his chosen course: his final words, addressed to the dismayed Chorus are that 'when the gods decree it, you may not escape evil'. Eteocles is not hiding behind the illusion that his choice bears no cost or ethical remainder: he acknowledges this even as he has nothing further to say. But the attitude developed in his interaction with the Chorus is, in the end, absolutely resolute, not resigned: he is not abdicating his self-governance. While his remark carries echoes of Agamemnon's acceptance of the 'yoke of compulsion', Eteocles response is importantly different. He does not abandon the

authority of his own reasons; whereas Agamemnon opts out of his dilemma by giving himself over to an almost bestial, murderous frenzy, Eteocles' progress is calm, sound, considered and reflective. There is no questioning his self-governance.

Eteocles provides a exceptional illustration of what it would be to act autonomously in response to both internal and external necessities, drawing together and enacting Vernant and Vidal-Naquet's 'double sides' of human nature. It is appropriate, too, that one of the non-rational necessities with which he must identify is his own death, for this is a necessity in which we all share. The phenomenology of subjection to external control is nowhere else more familiar nor more vivid: most of us know too well the confusion of attitudes elicited by thoughts not only of our own imminent deaths, but of others whom we love and whose existence is central to our lives. Very often, it is a fact that goes unacknowledged, and even once acknowledged it carries an air of unreality—we believe that it will happen, but the belief has an alienated quality—it is a fact, but one with which we cannot viscerally engage. Death is normally also a necessity we repudiate: very few of us do not do all that we can to resist and defy it, and it is very difficult to integrate our awareness of it into our wider aims and values. Death is not an intelligible event in the meaningful narrative of our lives: rather, it nullifies that narrative and, in Buss's words, seems to 'make a mockery' of our ability to be self-governing. It need not do that, however, if the example of Eteocles is to be believed. If a kind of autonomy can be won by recognition of and reconciliation with necessity, then it is, as it were, up to us to decide what it will make of us.

7. Concluding Remarks

The classical tragedies have been long regarded as providing narrative models of ethical choice and, in particular, of our attempts to master the courses of our lives in the face of events and forces we do not control. I have been tracing one pervasive and central feature of those narratives: the interventions of the supernatural in the tragic characters' deliberations and choices. My aim has been to identify what, if anything, plays an analogous role in contemporary ethical life, and to see how, if at all, the tragedies might now inform our understanding of our agentive natures and limits of human self-governance.

I pursued the familiar idea that the supernatural powers in these works are analogous to unbidden psychological determinant. Many standard theories of agency (Real Self theories) require us to disown such forces as external and hostile to the goal of autonomous self-governance. Such theories conceive of who an agent 'really' is in terms that require him to repudiate those aspects of his character and circumstances over which he has no authority and cannot control. They deny that a genuine exercise of agency (an exercise for which one may be held to account) might lack rational coherence—that it might, for instance, be a composite of conflicting and fragmented motivations, reasons, and other causes.

To this extent contemporary theory fails to reflect an important dimension of agentive experience as it is articulated in classical tragedy. There, an agent's identity is shaped over time in relation to necessities of both circumstance and character. His 'real self' is, so to speak, a negotiated self: he is defined in part by his recognition of and his attitudes to what

must be, and by how these are reflected in his practical judgements.²⁸ Choosing and acting wisely—living well—in the world of the tragedians is less a matter of an illusory freedom from constraint (to be whomever one wills) than it is a positive ability to understand, accept and even esteem what one necessarily is. Does this account of tragic agency undermine its interest and relevance as a model for our own ethical lives? I think not. In daily life, if not in philosophical theory, awareness of the forces of necessity now more than ever inform our self-conceptions, our moral verdicts and our attempts to govern our fortunes. In that respect, the gods of the tragedies are still very much with us today.

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28 *'Es muß sein!*', Beethoven wrote in the final movement of his String Quartet, No. 16 in F Major, op. 135 – a movement bearing the heading *'Der schwer gefaßte Entschluß'* (The Difficult Decision).