

The experience of the tragic: Describing it and responding to it theologically

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Abstract

This article develops a theological account of tragic experience beyond its colloquial reduction to mere misfortune. Starting from real-life situations rather than literary tragedy or philosophical accounts, it proposes a phenomenology in which the tragic arises from specific constellations of contingency and necessity, disrupting expectations and producing meaninglessness. Theologically, it critiques tendencies to marginalize the tragic through triumphalist readings of creation, redemption, and eschatology. Instead, it reinterprets key doctrines – especially original sin – in relational and structural terms to illuminate the entanglement of human action, ambiguity, and fate. Central is the notion of “Holy Saturday” as the existential locus of traumatic experience, emphasizing accompaniment, lament, and gradual healing rather than premature resolution. The article concludes a theological view at the tragic that is grounded in promise: affirming God’s presence in suffering, the possibility of transformative meaning, and an eschatological hope that does not negate the enduring reality of the tragic.

Keywords

Tragic experience; chaos in cosmos; original sin; resilience

Often, when a catastrophe occurs, media coverage describes the event as a tragedy. The notion of the tragic is equated with the horrible, terrible, and dreadful. This reflects the everyday, colloquial use of the term “tragic.” Philosophers such as Hegel have objected to this unspecific and superficial understanding of the tragic, “in which we call every misfortune tragic, as when someone dies or is executed. These events are *sad* but *not tragic*.”¹

1 Hegel, Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Vol. II: *Greek Philosophy*, 126.

According to Hegel, a deeper understanding is required – one that brings out the essence of the tragic. For him, the core of the tragic lies in a collision – or conflict – between two imperatives, as exemplified in Sophocles’ *Antigone*. This interpretation enabled him to emancipate the notion of the tragic from the tragedies: the tragic can be found not only in literary works and tragic drama but also in history and in individual lives – wherever those collisions occur. However, what we experience as tragic today goes beyond collisions of imperatives. How are we to understand experiences we characterize as tragic without falling back on the superficial conception of the tragic that Hegel rightly criticized? What, precisely, renders them tragic? How can we conceptually delineate the notion of the tragic?

I proceed in three steps. First, I examine the sources for engaging with the tragic. Second, I develop a brief phenomenology of tragic experience. Third, I offer theological reflections on the subject.²

Before proceeding along this path, let me offer a preliminary remark on the hermeneutics of the tragic. The “tragic” is a case of “experiencing as.” An inner conflict or a particular occurrence is experienced *as* tragic within the context of a specific situation. The tragic is a predicate of subjective experience, yet it refers to objective reality. It can be neither fully subjectivized (as a pattern of meaning) nor objectified (as a state of affairs). It is an experience of reality: the experience of an actual situation that for the person afflicted by it reveals itself precisely and only in being experienced as tragic. The qualia “tragic” is in the experience; it can neither be reduced to a pure mental state nor separated from the experience and essentialized.

1. The source

The source of my reflection is neither primarily an interpretation of tragedies nor the philosophical discourse on the topic as it developed in German Idealism and its counter-movements since the beginning of the nineteenth century. My starting point is real-life experience. I understand my approach as an *existential hermeneutics of tragic experience*.

2 For a more comprehensive account, see my book: *Die Erfahrung des Tragischen*.

Taking *tragedies* as the material basis for engaging with the tragic can yield valuable insights. Indeed, taking them as a starting point often generates more questions than it resolves. At first, we must clarify what is to be considered a tragedy: Only the ancient Greek tragedies, or also the later ones – such as Shakespeare’s tragedies, or the so called mourning plays (“Trauerspiele”) of the Enlightenment period, or the socially critical plays of Gerhart Hauptmann from the nineteenth century, perhaps even Sartre’s *No Exit*, Camus’s *The Myth of Sisyphus*, or Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*? Sartre did not understand his plays as tragedies, nor did he want them to be understood as such. He regarded this art form as historically obsolete. Nevertheless, both in his dramas and in those of the other existentialists one finds numerous structural elements that – less with reference to classical tragedy and more in relation to contemporary existential experience – can be described as tragic. The second problem of taking the tragedies as a starting point is that they are pieces of art. They present artificial not real experiences. Friedrich Dürrenmatt, the Swiss author and dramatist, once said: “We no longer experience art as tragic, but the world.”³ Thirdly, classic tragedies do not aim to portray “tragic” experiences. Before the nineteenth century, there is no specific notion of “the tragic” that can be identified as the specific content of tragedies. The Greek term *tragikos* simply means “belonging to tragedy” as a form of art.

Taking *philosophical* approaches of the tragic as a starting point for reflections on tragic experiences can also yield valuable insights. They hint at the tension between freedom and necessity, between the spiritual-ethical and the natural realm; in their interpretations they deal with moral conflicts and inevitable failure. For Schelling and Hegel, tragedies depict the dialectical structure of historical development: thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. Some tragedies certainly can be interpreted in this way, but many run counter to it: there is no synthesis, only an unresolved conflict. Even more as a framework for understanding tragic experiences in everyday life, this pattern has limited validity. Such approaches tend to follow their own philosophical agenda and impose it on the tragedies and “the tragic”.

3 Friedrich Dürrenmatt in an Interview, led by Siegfried Melchiner: *Wie schreibt man böse, wenn man gut lebt?*, 8.

In Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, experiences of the tragic are ontologized. The tragic is declared to be the signature of reality as a whole. However, if every experience is basically tragic, the particularity of the tragic is lost. It shifts from being an exceptional case to becoming the norm. This leads to a nihilistic worldview that stands in obvious contradiction to the worldviews of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.

More helpful for developing a phenomenology of the tragic are the phenomenological approaches of Max Scheler, Karl Jaspers, Paul Ricœur. Scheler depicts the tragic as a conflict of values. For Jaspers, the tragic is a fundamental component of existence revealed in and through struggle, guilt, and the inevitability of failure. It represents the ultimate discord in being, where true human greatness is unveiled not in victory, but in how one honestly faces and accepts limitation and failure. Ricœur's interpretation focusses on the fragility of action and the need for practical wisdom. These and other philosophical approaches can be helpful for understanding tragic experiences, but they tend to leave the level of concrete experience too quickly and move into deeper philosophical reflection. This often leads to abstraction. That tendency is particularly evident when tragedies are taken as the primary material, as in the works of Jaspers and Ricœur.

2. Phenomenology

In my own attempt to develop a phenomenology of the tragic experience, I start with presenting three example cases of what I consider such experiences.

(a) When the 59-year-old policeman Carlo L. pursued two gas station robbers with a colleague in a suburb of Brindisi, Italy, on June 12, 2025, he was shot dead. It happened on his last day of work before retirement. The case moved all of Italy. The country's highest political officials expressed their shock and offered their condolences to the widow. The tragic aspect does not lie in the violent death of the policeman itself (that is a crime), but in the timing of the act and in the fact that a representative of the rule of law was killed by a criminal while fulfilling his duty.

(b) A person dies suddenly of natural causes. There is nothing tragic in that. But if death occurs at an inopportune moment – such as shortly before

the deceased could complete a work that was important to them, or before they could move into a house, they had built through years of painstaking effort then it can carry the bitter quality of the tragic. Here too, the tragic is connected to the timing of the event. This event has prevented completion and left the work as a fragment. It is not caused (as in the first case) by human action, but by a “higher” necessity. Depending on one’s worldview, this necessity can be interpreted as fate or divine providence.

(c) On November 11, 2000, a fire broke out in the tunnel funicular in Kaprun, Austria. 155 people lost their lives. The cause was neither human error nor a natural event, but a technical defect. If the fire had broken out not during the ride in the middle of the tunnel, but at the upper or lower station, the passengers could have been evacuated without difficulty. The tragic quality here, too, is connected to the timing and location of the event. Only under the specific spatiotemporal circumstances in which it occurred did this disaster have such devastating consequences.

The tragic does not lie in a particular event as such, but in the situational circumstances of that event. Under different circumstances, we would not regard the same event and its consequences as tragic. The tragic is an experience of a shocking situation. What constitutes this shock?

More or less common to all these examples is that the familiar networks of actions and situational conditions, along with the expectations arising from them, are disrupted. Events catch people “off guard.” Contingent incidents lead to unpredictable developments. Chains of causality overlap with fatal consequences. Good intentions result in disaster. Discrepancies arise between willing and accomplishing, doing and undergoing, purpose and outcome. A course of events derails, unstoppable chain reactions are triggered, domino effects escalate, expectations of continuity and success collapse, and orders of meaning – speaking with Hamlet – fall “out of joint.” Ludwig Wittgenstein characterized the tragic with the words: “Nothing whatsoever would have happened, had not ...” (Had not a corner of his clothing caught in the machine⁴) An action that is in itself entirely harmless, and in other cases perhaps even well-intentioned, can have disastrous consequences.

4 Wittgenstein, *Movements of Thought: Diaries, 1930-1932, 1936-1937*, 87.

For a philosophical analysis of tragic experience, I find it helpful to draw on the notion of “contingent necessity,” which at first appears to be a contradiction in terms. Yet this very tension is characteristic of many tragic situations. The event experienced as tragic does not bear the mark of absolute necessity. Yet it cannot simply be described as blind chance either. In the tragic situation, these two principles – contingency and necessity – overlap. It is the contingency of a conditioned necessity.

Let me take a brief excursion into late antique philosophy. Boethius distinguishes between absolute and conditional necessity. Absolute necessity consists in the fact that something must happen in this way and not otherwise. Conditional necessity, by contrast, pertains to contingent events that could also not have occurred, or could have occurred differently. They occur only under certain conditions.

I give an example of conditional necessity: A student in Basel suffers a serious bicycle accident because, overtired, she wanted to ride home quickly and, on a dark street and wet pavement, got caught in a tram track. Had only one of these conditions been different, the accident would probably not have happened. Looking back on the accident, the student then says: “It had to happen this way.” But this does not imply an absolutely compelling necessity; rather, it means: under these conditions, it had to happen this way. It could indeed have turned out differently, if ...! Such chains of calamity are experienced as unavoidable, yet they occur as the result of a contingent, fatal self-dynamics that must not be confused with determinism.

This is characteristic of many experiences of the tragic. The tragic course of events did not have to unfold as it did if it had not occurred at this particular moment, in this place, and under these specific circumstances. The tragic has a temporal and spatial index and depends on the situational configuration in which it occurs. The tragic event would have been avoidable under different circumstances. This applies even to natural death, if one understands it, for example, as the result of divine action; God, after all, could have acted otherwise.

3. Theological reflections

3.1. Marginalizations of the tragic

Why has the tragic been marginalized so often in theological reflection and in the proclamation of the church. The answer is: because it was regarded as an experience and a dimension of reality that dissolves in the light of the basic beliefs of Christian faith. I give only two examples for such an attitude towards the tragic: In *Church Dogmatics*, Karl Barth wrote 1940: “In the recognition and in the confession of the mercy of God, what we are accustomed to take so seriously as the tragedy of human existence, breaks apart.”⁵ In his book *Beyond Tragedy* (1941), Reinhold Niebuhr states, “that the Christian view of history passes through the sense of the tragic to a hope and an assurance which is ‘beyond tragedy’”⁶

3.2. Anti-tragic interpretations of the three “works” of the trinitarian God

Some interpretations of the three “works” of the trinitarian God – creation including the *creatio continua*, redemption and consummation – make it difficult to give the tragic the weight it has for those who suffer from tragic experiences. They can lead to a kind of triumphalistic attitude towards the tragic.

(a) According to the first article of the Christian creed, the cosmos is, at its core, a good – that is, a rational and meaningful – order of God. Added to this is the conviction of God’s continual sovereignty over history. It is not an impersonal fate that rules the world, but a personal God who is good and just. This conviction stands opposed to an understanding of reality in which hopeless destinies can have the final word. The God who acts powerfully in history can always open up a way out. Therefore, there can be no ultimate hopelessness of the kind that is characteristic of tragic experiences. If God is the ground of all being and thus also the ground of all meaning in being, then there can be nothing that is truly meaningless. However, the tragic experience is an experience of meaninglessness.

5 Barth, *CD II/1*, 374.

6 Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy*, x–xi.

Of course, in the well-ordered cosmos, humans commit sins, evil happens, unjust suffering occurs. But this does not change the fact that the cosmos is fundamentally good and reliable, well governed by God according to his providence and thus meaningful. Emphasizing the goodness of the cosmos can lead to understanding the tragic as *privatio boni*. It is of secondary relevance, not essential, not actual, not authentic (“uneigentlich”).

(b) According to the second article of the Christian creed, the negativity in human’s relation to God and in the cosmos in general has been overcome in Christ’s self-sacrifice. The “powers” of the old Aeon lost their force. A new Aeon has dawned. The basic relations of humans – the relation to other humans, to the non-human reality and the relation of human to his- or herself are healed. In his book “Tragödie und Kreuz” (1920) Hans Ehrenberg wrote: “As the Son of God, Christ overcame tragic history and transformed it into a history of salvation.”⁷ Tragic experiences belong to being under the cross. But Christians, according to Ehrenberg, live in the light of resurrection. That certitude can lead to a kind of *theologia gloriae*.

(c) According to the third article of the Christian Creed, God will lead creation to its consummation. It is not tragic death but fulfilment of life that will prevail. Not the contingencies and injustices of the cosmic process will have the last word, but God’s salvific will. Not only a future-oriented eschatology, but all the more a realized eschatology can tend to marginalize the tragic.

3.3. “Triumphalism-blockers”

Now I will discuss the question of how we can stick to those basic beliefs but prevent them to become triumphalistic, so that tragic experiences can be taken more seriously. I will make three suggestions on how to do that.

(a) With regard to the doctrine of creation, it seems to me imperative not to lose sight of the power of the chaotic that presses in upon the cosmos. The concept of “the chaotic” contains core characteristics of the tragic such as: calamity, contingency, and meaninglessness. The tragic can be understood as an experience of the *tohu wa-bohu* spoken of in Genesis 1:2.

7 Ehrenberg, *Tragödie und Kreuz*, vol. 2: *Die Tragödie unter dem Kreuz*, 250 (Translation: mine).

This expression appears not only in reference to primordial chaos, but also in Jeremiah 4:19.23-25 in a scenario of destruction. The description given there comes close to portraying a traumatic, tragic experience:

“My anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain! Oh the walls of my heart!
My heart is beating wildly; I cannot keep silent, I looked on the
earth, and behold, it was without form and void (tohu wa-bohu); and
to the heavens, and they had no light. I looked on the mountains,
and behold, they were quaking, and all the hills moved to and fro. I
looked, and behold, there was no man, and all the birds of the air had
fled.”

The tragic is experienced as the chaotic, as devastation, as emptiness and abandonment. With a formulation by Franz Rosenzweig, one can speak of the “solitude of disappearance” (“Einsamkeit des Untergangs”).⁸ Inherent in creation is the possibility of (self-) destruction. Structures decay in processes of entropy; what is substantial dissolves; what is living ages, falls ill, and dies. Paul Tillich spoke of an “heritage of nonbeing”⁹ within the creatureliness of being. The chaotic undermines the order of creation. This order is vulnerable – one might also say “fallible.” This is not yet the tragic itself, but it is the context in which the tragic occurs. The *occurrence* of the tragic stands in opposition to God’s intention of creation; yet the *conditions of possibility* for such tragic events and situations are embedded in creation itself – namely, in its ambiguities. The hope of the Christian faith is directed toward the conviction that God can also make the opposite possible: that something new, life-giving, and salvific can emerge even from senseless calamity.

(b) With regard to Christology and soteriology, I suggest to looking (at least awhile) at the passion and death of Jesus from a strictly historical perspective. In that perspective, it can indeed be seen as the result of tragic situational circumstances into which Jesus entered more or less intentionally, but which then, in their own dynamic, had disastrous consequences for him. Some of the aforementioned characteristics of the tragic apply here as well, including that of meaninglessness: In its brutal factuality, this death by

8 Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, 87.

9 Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I, 253.

torture is an utterly senseless event. There is nothing glorious, nothing salvific, and nothing meaningful in it. The path of suffering taken by Jesus is not the result of an absolute necessity ordained by God, but of a conditional necessity. The death by torture was caused by human agents whose interests can be clearly identified. The tragic dimension lies not primarily in the endurance of the individual events along the path of the passion, but in the inner tensions that characterize this path as a whole: the righteous one becomes a scapegoat; his mission turns against him and demands the sacrifice of his life. The “Son of God,” who knew himself to be sent by God, comes, in carrying out this mission, not only into conflict with religious and political authorities, but also into conflict with God. The events unfold within a field of tension between contingency and necessity. Jesus’ actions set this chain of events in motion, but it then overwhelms him in its own momentum and leads to a result whose destructive dimension far exceeds its initial trigger. All of this bears the marks of tragic experience.

A soteriological dimension of the crucifixion comes into view only retrospectively as the disciples began to understand God has taken the one who had to suffer this senseless death into God’s eternal presence – the presence that already had shaped his life. This does not, however, render the death by torture meaningful. The passion of Jesus remains a tragedy; the experience of God-forsakenness is real, and the death on the cross is an event of calamity. In this occurrence, tragedy is not overcome but taken up into God. God makes this meaninglessness present to Godself, endures it, and leads it beyond itself by holding fast to the crucified one even in his death, so that something new can arise from this death. According to this interpretation, this experience – like any experience of senseless tragedy – must not be religiously transfigured, declared inauthentic, or reinterpreted. It can be taken seriously in all its abyssal depth, without that abyss having to be regarded as the final instance. The tragic is not overcome once and for all through Jesus’ suffering and death. It remains powerful and overwhelms human beings again and again.

The symbol of “resurrection” signifies that what is senseless need not remain senseless. Something new and meaningful can emerge from it, as was the case for the disciples after Jesus’ death: they were “raised” to a new orientation toward life, a community of discipleship came into being that developed into a major world religion and has given countless

people support and orientation precisely in experiences of tragedy and meaninglessness. Yet the fact that something new, salvific, and meaningful can arise from experiences of calamity does not change the fact that the calamity experienced is, and remains, senseless.

(c) With regard to the third fundamental conviction – the eschatological hope for the consummation of the work of creation – I argue for replacing the notion of salvation history with the concept of promise. Salvation is the object of a promise not yet fulfilled, not a fact brought about by Jesus' death. Where the promise of salvation turns into an optimism about salvation, the abyssal depth of the tragic is denied. It is by no means guaranteed that something new, or even salvific, will emerge from tragic experiences. Many end in ruin and despair, which may also include despair of God. The psalms of lament bear witness to this. Yet they address their lament to God – as Jesus did on the cross. Job experiences God as his enemy yet threw himself into God's arms. God does not simply overcome the tragic, but in God those affected by tragic experiences can seek and find refuge.

What is the content of the counterfactual promise? I name three dimensions that can be correlated to the three articles of the Christian creed. This threefold promise affirms:

First, that God is present even in tragic suffering; this may be understood as an aspect of *creatio continua*, God's ongoing creative succour;

Second, that what is senselessly tragic can, in retrospect, be given a new meaning, and thus undergo a form of healing; that – even if not within the hopeless situation itself, then after it – unexpected new paths may emerge; this may be understood as an aspect of *creatio nova*, symbolized as “resurrection”;

Third, that the ongoing process of creation will lead to a state of encompassing peace in which no tragic harm will arise from the ambiguities of creation.

Each of these promises must be safeguarded against the danger of softening or trivializing the tragic. I propose the following clarifications:

First: Trust that God is present in tragic suffering – in meaninglessness and desolation – does not make such suffering any less painful or senseless. It does, however, open the possibility of bringing the experience of suffering

before God in lament and of asking for strength to endure the situation. Just as God was present in the suffering and death of Jesus Christ – at the place of utmost God-forsakenness – so God’s presence may also be trusted in every other instance of senseless suffering.

To speak of God’s presence in tragic suffering does not mean that God suffers. Such a claim tends to anthropomorphize God. Where this is further spelled out in trinitarian terms – by speaking of an inner-trinitarian drama of love and suffering between “Father” and “Son,” as found, for example, in Moltmann, von Balthasar, and MacKinnon – the door is opened wide to (romanticizing) speculative projections.

Such attempts to inscribe the tragic into God – to divinize it – ultimately deny that God opposes the tragic like all other forms of suffering. That God is present in the tragic does not justify the inverse conclusion that the tragic is in God. Moreover, God’s presence in suffering is not to be conceived as merely passive, but also as active: it grants strength to endure suffering and, where possible, to resist it – strength both for resistance and for acceptance.

Second: That what is senselessly tragic may, in retrospect, receive a new meaning does not imply that it was meaningful after all or that it becomes meaningful as such. It is and remains what it was and is: senseless harm. Nor is it guaranteed that something new will emerge from it. Yet faith offers a hope grounded in promise that this can happen – analogous to resurrection from death. Where it does occur, it is experienced as grace. The New does not begin only when wounds have healed; it may already consist in being granted the strength to go on living with open wounds without being paralyzed by them.

That faith offers a hope grounded in promise does not mean that this hope will in fact be embraced. Those struck by abyssal suffering may lose their trust in promises and no longer be able to draw hope from them. In such cases, the promise may at best persist in the vicarious hope of others – who hope that those affected may be able to live with their hopelessness and not entirely close themselves off to the possibility that the unexpected might occur and, if not undo the tragic experience, at least carry it beyond itself. Paul’s characterization of Abraham – “hoping against hope he believed” (Rom 4:18) – would then apply, if at all, to these others.

Third: That there will be a redemption of the groaning and laboring creation (Rom 8:22) is an eschatological promise that still awaits its fulfilment. The assurance of a state of salvation must not be reinterpreted as an already existing fact brought about by Christ and certainly must not be translated into a naïve optimism about salvation.

3.4. Original sin as a pattern of interpretation?

In their interpretations of the tragic, some philosophers (like Schopenhauer) and theologians referred to the doctrine of original sin. For example, George Steiner saw the nucleus of the tragic in original sin.

Because of that fall or “dis-grace” [...] the human condition is tragic. It is ontologically tragic, which is to say in essence. Fallen man is made an unwelcome guest of life or, at best, a threatened stranger on this hostile or indifferent earth [...]. Thus the necessary and sufficient premise, the axiomatic constant in tragedy is that of ontological homelessness [...] of alienation or ostracism from the safeguard of licensed being. There is no welcome to the self. This is what tragedy is about.¹⁰

In “Christian tragedies” (such as those of Calderón), the doctrine of original sin has been invoked. Walter Benjamin saw in it a counterpart to non-Christian notions of fate.¹¹ According to Walter Sparn, “original sin” is “the place for working through tragic experiences.”¹²

The theological concept of “sin” is not suitable for describing tragic conflicts and situations if it is understood in the sense of moral wrongdoing. For, as the phenomenology of tragic experience has shown, actions motivated by noble moral intentions can also bring about tragic disaster. If, however, one returns to the original meaning of the Greek word *hamartia*, which Aristotle also used in his interpretation of tragedies, the semantic field broadens. It then denotes more generally a “missing of the mark,” as when an archer misses the target. In a transferred sense, it refers to a failure to achieve the aim of an action. It may even be the case that an action achieves

¹⁰ Steiner, *Tragedy*, 2-3.

¹¹ Benjamin, *Der Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, 308.

¹² Sparn, *Tragik/Tragödie*, 759 (Translation mine).

its intended goal, yet in doing so violates a higher order (as is often the case in Greek tragedies). In Aristotle, *hamartia* designates the “error” by which the tragic hero sets disaster in motion. Not only in tragedies but also in daily life, it often becomes clear only in retrospect that a particular action was a mistake. The statements in which this insight is articulated typically begin with “if only I had ...” or “how could I have ...”

In such a metamoral understanding of “sin,” the subjective dimension of guilt recedes. The agent is not guilty in a moral sense; they have done nothing reprehensible and may even have meant well. And yet harm has resulted, which retrospectively makes the action appear as an “error” (*hamartia*). Objectively, the agent at least shares responsibility for it. In this sense, they are guilty without being culpable.

If “sin” is understood in this broader sense within a theological framework, it denotes not only morally reprehensible action but, more generally, any action that runs counter to the purpose of creation. This purpose consists in providing life-serving structures and establishing orders of life that grant living beings just conditions of existence within God’s “household” (*oikos*) of creation. Sin refers to action that damages these structures and violates these orders. From this arises harm for human beings, but also for other living beings, for society and culture, and for the non-human natural world.

If the concept of “sin” is to be used in interpreting tragic developments, it must first be understood in a broad, metamoral sense that goes beyond culpable wrongdoing. Even in cases where actual guilt can be established, the resulting harm is disproportionate; it has the character of fate. Second, such action must not be considered in isolation but within the context of a complex situation. An “error” may play a triggering role, but the tragic lies in the web of situational conditions and in the subsequent course of events. Third, the idea of a linear sequence of intention, action, and consequence must be broken up: the consequence of an action can pervert its intention. At this point, a distinction must be made between the perspective of the agent and that of the observer. Even if, from the agent’s perspective, there is coherence between intention, action, and goal, from the observer’s perspective the same action may produce harmful consequences that

miss the intention. In retrospect, agents themselves may also adopt the observer's perspective.

Bitter experiences in human history have led to philosophical and theological attempts to search for deeper reasons – an underlying evil. According to Karl Jaspers, in and since what he called the Axial Age, repeated attempts have been made to trace human suffering back to a “fundamental bondage of man as man and of the world (through ignorance, through sin, through disorder).”¹³

“Fundamental sin” does not refer in the first instance to concrete actions, but to basic orientations of action; not primarily to particular states, but to the structures that have produced these states; not primarily to particular factors and developments, but to their initial and framing conditions.

According to the traditional doctrine of original sin, the fundamental orientation of the human will is deformed, which then inevitably leads to sinful action. The evils that arise from deeds presuppose a basic evil that has “poisoned” human nature. It thus affects all humanity. The individual has not caused this condition yet participates in it. Original guilt, therefore, is not guilt in the sense of individual transgression and attribution (“having guilt”), but involvement in a nexus of guilt (“being in guilt”). Within this nexus, the will follows its distorted orientation with relative freedom. Regarding this orientation, however, it has no freedom. It is a servant of original sin and possesses a *servum arbitrium*. Under this yoke, the human being cannot not sin. They are subject to the fatality of humanity's original guilt, which continually generates new guilt. Original sin is concretized in turning away from God (*aversio a Deo*), in excessive self-love (*amor sui, incurvatus in se*), and in the resulting inability to practice love of neighbour. Thus, it leads to a self-alienation of the human being.

Original sin thus designates the “tragic” condition of human existence: subject to divine commandments that cannot be fulfilled, and to a divine vocation that cannot be adequately realized. Even when striving to live in a way pleasing to God, the human being cannot do so. Their sinful drives – of which they are not the cause – prevent it. Dominated by this “natural” necessity, they become guilty without being culpable and yet remain

13 Jaspers, *Tragedy is not enough*, 73.

inexcusable. The tragic element also lies in the fact that the human being perceives this entanglement and yet cannot free themselves from it. They must be redeemed.

In what follows, I will attempt to situate the tragic within the framework of the doctrine of original sin. However, this requires a fundamental reinterpretation of the Augustinian doctrine of inherited sin. The revision I propose concerns the following aspects:

(a) Not substance, but relational event:

The notion of “original sin” has been burdened to the point of unusability by Augustine’s biologicistic conception of it. According to this view, the “virus” of original sin is transmitted through sexual intercourse and implanted in the embryo. In light of the disastrous consequences, that understanding had in the history of Christianity, I regard this conception as a theological dead end.

Building on a relational and actual understanding of sin as an act of disrupted relationship, I interpret original sin (or fundamental sinfulness) as an inclination that produce such disruptions. This concerns not only the relationship to God, but all fundamental human relationships: to oneself, to other human beings, and to the non-human environment. The doctrine of sin and original sin must therefore be developed in anthropological, ethical, social, political, economic, and other dimensions. The same applies to soteriology.

Tragic experiences may originate in – or have their focal point in – a (metamoral) “failure” within the four basic relationships of the human being:

- in relation to oneself, for example when an inner conflict shatters personal integrity;
- in relation to the social environment, for example when a person is torn between conflicting loyalties and the imperatives arising from them;
- in relation to the world, for example when a tragic situation is brought about by a perverted dynamic that destroys something of great natural or cultural value;

– in relation to God, for example when a person who lives in trust in God’s grace experiences abandonment or even betrayal.

Most tragic experiences occur in the zones where these fundamental relationships intersect – for example, as a result of imbalances between ethical demands, external conditions, intentions, actions, and their consequences, or from the incompatibility between what is owed to God and worldly loyalties. The tragic thus concerns the whole of human being-in-the-world and the very constitution of the world as experienced by human beings.

Yet by no means every disruption of relationship is tragic. This is the case only when there is a cumulative presence of the characteristics identified earlier. The condition of possibility for tragic situations lies in the ambiguity inherent in the enactment of these relationships: they can be cultivated in life-serving ways, but they can also generate or produce suffering and harm.

(b) Not temporal event, but structural disruption:

Original sin must not be understood in a temporal sense – as a prehistoric “Fall” at or before the beginning of human history that results in primal guilt and divine punishment. Rather, it refers to fundamental structures that generate harm and that shape and determine human action. These structures may themselves be life-serving yet have destructive effects. Thus: not dualism, but ambiguity.

(c) Not only guilt, but fate:

Just as I do not restrict sin to morally culpable action, I do not understand original sin as an ontological primal guilt. It denotes rather a fateful orientation of the will that largely escapes human self-determination. This makes it suitable for grasping the fatal character of tragic experience: entanglement without culpability, the perversion of action, irresolvable conflicts of orientation, and so on. The framework of guilt, repentance, and atonement is too narrow for this.

(d) Not necessity, but possibility:

Whereas the traditional doctrine linked original sin with necessity, I understand fundamental sinfulness as an ever-present possibility – indeed,

a tendency or potential – to miss the life-affirming purpose of creation. Yet this alone does not constitute the tragic. The tragic emerges where actions aimed at realizing this purpose become counterproductive, where life-serving orders turn destructive, or where irresolvable conflicts arise in attempting to discern and realize that purpose. In this sense, the tragic is a manifestation of fundamental sinfulness.

3.5. Holy Saturday as the existential locus of the tragic experience

Now I go beyond systematic theology and enter the field of practical theology. I propose interpreting Holy Saturday as the existential locus in which tragic experiences are lived and endured. For those affected by a traumatic “Good Friday experience” a post-traumatic “Holy Saturday” is following. Like the disciples after Jesus’ death, they remain entirely under the shock of the calamity they have suffered and have no inkling of a “resurrection” – with no path yet discernible that might lead beyond the trauma, those who are traumatised are exposed to experiences of despair, abandonment, lostness, and meaninglessness. They fall into apathy.

In accompanying people who find themselves in such a Holy Saturday situation, it is crucial to endure this experience together with them and not to abandon the epistemic standpoint of Holy Saturday prematurely in order to adopt an “Easter” perspective, in which the suffering of those traumatized by tragic occurrences is outshined by the light of resurrection. Such a move would not be consolation but can easily become mere appeasement – opium for those affected and, not least, for the comforters themselves. Genuine consolation consists in standing by the traumatized on their Holy Saturday and accompanying them in their post-traumatic attempts to walk again, just as the risen Jesus accompanied the disciples on the road to Emmaus. For those affected, the first task is to emerge from the paralyzing fixation on the tragic experience, to gain distance from it and to accept it as part of one’s own life story. “Nevertheless” (“trotzdem”) is the watchword here: it means defying what has been suffered, moving out of paralysis step by step, and in the process becoming receptive to new perspectives, perceptions, evaluations, and forms of practice. It is a grace if they succeed in gradually freeing themselves from the tormenting “why”-question, which looks back to their Good Friday and (in vain) seeks meaning in the meaningless, and in reversing the direction of questioning:

from the backward-looking “why”-question to the forward-looking “for what”- or “to what end”-question, which looks ahead to what may come of it. This reversal opens the horizon to the possibility of resurrection experiences – that is, to the possibility that something new can arise from what is senseless. Over the course of a long and painful process of working-through, new patterns of meaning can form, into which the tragic experience is woven. In this way, retrospectively – viewed in light of the transformations it has caused – the experience can acquire meaning for those affected, enabling them to say: “Through this, I have gained a new perspective on my life and on what truly matters.”

The existential question of meaning cannot be answered intellectually – neither by identifying a causal explanation of events nor by attributing to them a purpose. What is at stake is not the answering of a question, but the healing of a wound that will likely never fully heal. The experience of the tragic, as an experience of inner rupture or brokenness, calls for healing in the sense of becoming whole, of restoring integrity, of being enabled – if possible – to stand up against the tragic, to straighten oneself, and to find a path into the future. This will only ever succeed gradually with many setbacks and begins with accepting the unacceptable. Believers can walk this path in trust in God’s “Easter” promise.

Shelly Rambo has developed reflections on the interpretation and processing of trauma that are relevant to understanding the tragic.¹⁴ Her approach resonates with my concern not to place traumatic experiences too hastily within a framework of resurrection. Experiences of suffering take place in an “in-between” space between death and resurrection. However strong the desire may be to leave this painful in-between behind, it must be lived through. What is needed here is the support – the staying-with (“remaining”) – of others who are willing to expose themselves to this Holy Saturday experience. It consists in waiting and searching, in uncertainty and disorientation. The previous form of life has been shattered, and a new one is not yet in sight. Rambo sees the Spirit of God at work precisely in this in-between: as a “middle Spirit” who makes God present in this existential space between death and life, counteracts the downward pull,

14 Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*.

directs attention to the seeds of new life, and nurtures them. This spiritual “healing power” works slowly and undergoes many crashes. Yet in its own subtle way, it helps more than promises of salvation that proclaim tragic suffering as already overcome in Christ.

Holy Saturday is a day of darkness, of grief and lament. No “dawn of eternal glory” is yet in sight. Pastoral care must first give uncensored space to lament and despair rather than offering ready-made answers of meaning – just as Job demands of his didactic comforters: “Listen carefully to my words and let this be the consolation you give me. Bear with me while I speak” (Job 21:2–3).

Accompanying those affected by tragic experiences requires empathy – that is, the willingness to enter into the experience of the other in order to understand it as far as possible from within, without being absorbed by it. A compassionate distance on the part of those who accompany them enables those affected, in turn, to gain distance from the tragic experience and thus to relate to it. In this way, resilience can develop.

This occurs through a constructive remembering that is more than merely looking back into the past. It “remembers” what has been, includes unrealized possibilities, evaluates what has occurred, and thereby makes it fruitful for the present and the future. This makes possible a self-distancing from these influences and a self-aware further development.

The more the memory is joined with the capacity for imagination, the more the gaze turns forward – toward transcending a present shaped by the past and opening up spaces of possibility for the future. This makes it possible, step by step, to transcend the paralysis left behind by the tragic experience, which is characterized precisely by a lack of alternatives, by the absence of possibilities for development.

Yet no therapeutic intervention can undo what has happened or fully heal the wounds that have been inflicted. Despite all human care, the post-traumatic scar will remain – just as the risen Jesus still bore the marks of crucifixion. The tragic experience is never entirely overcome. If one can speak of healing at all, it consists in the formation of new foundations of trust, resilient networks of relationships, and an orientation toward a viable path into the future.

4. Closing remark

Theology cannot remain at the level of describing, interpreting, and probing tragic experiences; it must set something against them and thus employ a kind of “yes – but” attitude towards it. Yet the “but” must not consist in asserting a fact – namely, that the tragic has once and for all been overcome in Christ. Such an assurance, as a prematurely claimed fulfilment, takes on the character of an illusion and thereby loses the quality of promise. By contrast, a “faithful realism” consists in facing without illusion the ever-present possibility of falling into tragic abysses and, on the basis of faith in God’s transformative power, activating resources of resilience for dealing with such experiences. Trust that God’s possibilities extend beyond all human possibilities can release a strength that enables one to endure the experience of the tragic, not to perish in or through the experience of failure. The “but” consists in keeping open a possibility: the promise that something new may grow out of it – just as new life in a community of disciples grew out of Jesus’ death, and as Revelation 21:5 holds out: “Behold, I make all things new.”

The Christian “but” encourages a breaking out of the paralysis produced by tragic experience. It is an impulse toward motion in the sense of Matthew 11:5: “the blind receive their sight and the lame walk.” The task of theology and ecclesial proclamation is not to seek meaning within senseless tragedy, but to offer ways of thinking that render the tragic intelligible and to encourage new experiences that lead beyond it.

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