

Implicit Theory of Action in Sophocles' Theban Plays

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis I argue for an existence theory of action implicit in Sophocles' Theban plays and base my claims on the close readings of the tragic texts. I differentiate between non-tragic and tragic actions and spell out the sufficient and necessary conditions for an action to be deemed tragic. Furthermore, I argue that tragic actions, unlike non-tragic ones, are character determined. These claims I base on special employment of literary techniques found in Sophocles' texts. Finally, I explain the relation between Sophocles' views on internal and external necessity and the way in which they relate to tragic actions. I conclude with the demonstration of conceptual coherence of this implicit theory of action.

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INTRODUCTION

Greek tragedies of the 5th BC, at the time when philosophy still does not occupy itself with the following problems, can be thought of as the most relevant descriptions of humans acting in a world populated by other people as well as external forces. This thesis, focusing on Sophocles' Theban plays (*Antigone*, *Oedipus Rex*, *Oedipus at Colonus*),¹ tries to determine to what extent these descriptions present rich accounts of human actions.

In my appraisal of the aforementioned plays I look for an implicit theory of action which focuses on a special kind of actions – tragic ones. Secondly, in the light of dramatic elements of the plays I argue that tragic actions, as opposed to the non-tragic, are necessarily determined by the tragic hero's character – what I refer to from now on as character determinism.² Lastly, I explain how external constraints such as prophecies fit into this schema and argue for conceptual coherence of Sophocles' implicit character determinism. Here, I present a very brief overview of the argument.

First of all, I carve out a special niche of actions Sophocles is concerned with, namely tragic ones. Roughly speaking, Sophocles does not concern himself with everyday actions such as drinking milk or eating apples for breakfast. It is doubtful Sophocles would hold that Antigone could not take up either of the two i.e. that she would be character determined to say, eat an apple, rather than drink a glass of milk. But, as I will show, there are certain types of actions, namely tragic ones, which are character determined. In the first chapter I look at existing accounts of tragic actions and explain why they are not satisfactory for the analysis of Theban plays. Then, I propose my own account. I distinguish between horrendous and tragic acts and identify two necessary and sufficient conditions for an action to be deemed tragic.

In the second chapter I argue for character determinism of tragic actions on the basis of the way in which the characters are described: 1) static value system descriptions, 2) employment of *in medias res* technique, and 3) external necessity lacking conflict generating strength. At least two of these three techniques are present in each of the plays. Then I turn to non-tragic actions, performed by both tragic and non-tragic heroes, and show that they are character undetermined.

¹ The translation used for the first two plays is that of H.D.W. Kitto (1962). Sir Richard Jebb's translation (1912) was consulted for *Oedipus at Colonus*.

² Initially, I termed this notion 'psychological determinism'. After some consideration it became apparent that it was a bit of an unfortunate formulation because of its anachronistic overtones. Moreover, the focus of my argument is not so much on psychological processes as it is on a given protagonist's character and this is the reason for using 'character determinism' instead. Both notions are discussed in more detail in the second chapter. For the analysis of psychological vocabulary employed by Sophocles see S.D. Sullivan (1999).

In the final chapter I deal with two pressing issues. First, following on Kitto's thesis that the Greek gods present no sphere beyond that of human actions³ I argue that external forces such as prophecies can sometimes be seen as articulations of internal necessity. On other occasions, contrary to Kitto, necessity truly proves to be external to the agent. Secondly, I ask whether the kind of theory of action which allows for character determinism in one set of actions and not in the other is conceptually coherent. I finish by concluding that the implicit theory of action found in Sophocles' Theban plays is coherent.

³ Kitto, H.D.W. (1958).

WHAT IS A TRAGIC ACTION?

ARISTOTLE'S *POETICS* AND THE NOTION OF *HAMARTIA*

Before proposing my own account of tragic actions I will briefly outline other views on the subject and note why they generally do not fit my project. When they do, I will show how my conditions for tragic action provide more exact analytic tools for delimiting different types of actions. My hypothesis is that the Theban cycle can be accounted for in terms of tragic actions (as opposed to non-tragic ones) which should in turn be thought of as character determined. In the light of that goal I need to find accounts of tragedy which primarily focus on actions and set some criteria for identifying tragic actions. It is interesting to note that although tragedy has been a (if not *the*) topic of literary criticism since Aristotle, finding precise articulations of what exactly counts as a tragic act in this huge corpus is no trivial matter. In what follows, I survey and criticize relevant aspects of Aristotle's *Poetics*, recent literature on *hamartia*, various versions of double causation, and finally accounts of tragic situations.

Aristotle had famously defined tragedy as an imitation of action arousing fear and pity. Nevertheless, even when this imitated action is broken down into constituent components these parts are not meant exclusively as something pertaining to an agent. Rather, they are in line with a more general notion of an event. Representation of action – the plot – includes incidents as well as actions, and these are not executed by a particular agent (e.g. statue of Mityls falling down on Mityls' murderer). Furthermore, parts of the plot that Aristotle lists – reversal of fortune, discovery (a change from ignorance to knowledge), and suffering (destructive actions such as murders, tortures or wounding) – also prove to be oblivious to this distinction. Reversal of fortune is not an action on its own, rather a product of an action (1452a22-26). Similarly, discovery is also not necessarily an action; it can be a mental event produced by various signs or tokens (*Poetics*, 15). Finally, not all of the sufferings, although obviously actions insofar they are defined as actions “of a destructive and painful nature” (1452b11-12), seem to be of equal importance in Greek tragedies.⁴

⁴ Oedipus interrogates the Theban shepherd in order to find out where he got the child he saved from, and threatens death if he remains silent (1113). It seems that even if Oedipus went through with his threat and executed the shepherd it would not give rise to tragedy in itself. If anything it would keep tragedy at bay (at least a part of it because Iocasta had already learned the truth and left the stage) if the shepherd had remained silent. A similar situation seems to be going on in *Antigone* in the case of the Guard. The only person who would deem the Guard's death tragic would be himself.

The problem with Aristotle's account of tragedy then, at least as far as my project is concerned, is not so much in the lack of a clear distinction between events and actions as it is in the failure truly to give an account of which action inspire fear and pity and which does not.⁵ In chapter 14 Aristotle explicitly turns to deeds inspiring such emotions. He proposes that best effects are produced when the deeds take place within a circle of family or friends (1453b18-21). Furthermore, these deeds "must necessarily be done or not done, and either knowingly and unknowingly" (1453b36-37).

A brief analysis of Aristotle's ideal tragic play – *Oedipus Rex* – proves that neither family relations nor epistemic conditions are crucial for determining whether a deed is a tragic one or not. Consider the following. Iocasta's tells the tale of how Laius' tied his own child by his feet and had him thrown off a cliff. Although Oedipus is shocked after he learns it was in fact she who did it and not Laius (1130), this is not why Oedipus is gripped by terror (698). His terror stems from the clue pointing in the direction that he is Laius' murderer, and not from the lines concerning the child in the same speech by Iocasta, something we would surely deem tragic (679-679). In fact, Iocasta spoke about the child in order to reassure Oedipus i.e. to deny the possibility of tragedy.

Does the key to the question lie in epistemic conditions? It seems that both Creon and Oedipus contributed unknowingly to the death of their kin either indirectly or directly. On the other hand, Laius is fully aware of what he is doing when he is planning the death of his son. Yet, the act is not perceived to be tragic. Nevertheless, although *prima facie* appealing, I would suggest we should not try to explain the tragedy of *Oedipus Rex* in terms of Oedipus not knowing that he murdered his father.

First of all, epistemic conditions play no role in Antigone's tragedy; she is perfectly aware of what the final consequences of performing burial rites for Polyneices are and she goes through with her actions. If we stuck to an explanation in epistemic terms, it would also problematize any attempt of accounting for suicides. Suicides appear to be tragic on their own, or at least with recourse to emotional imprint they leave on other characters, and not only in virtue of the causal impact they might have at the end of the road. It might be the case that Antigone or Iocasta did not know their suicides would lead to more tragic actions –

⁵ If an event can be as tragic, or inspiring as much fear and pity as an action does, then tragic actions alone would fail to account for the whole of the tragedy. Although this might be the case I will show that the tragedy in Theban plays derives exclusively from actions.

The other problem is that *Poetics* concern itself more with ideal tragedy rather than with the usual tragic text. Nevertheless, I will show that conditions for ideal tragedy Aristotle lays out can fall short even of any kind of tragedy.

Heamon's suicide or Oedipus' self-mutilation respectively – but that would not change the fact that even if their causal impact was not as grave as it was that they would still be considered tragic. An even better demonstration of my point is Eurydice's suicide triggered by the death of her son with which the circle of violence closes. Creon, a broken man at the end of *Antigone*, is incapable of committing suicide.

I believe I have shown then how neither murder *per se*, nor the (would-be) victim's inability to defend herself, nor the cruelty of the manner in which the action was (to be) executed, nor the immediate family relation between the (would-be) perpetrator and the (would-be) victim would suffice to call the deed tragic in the dramatic sense. Then it seems it is completely useless to look at the action on its own without resorting to attitudes characters espouse towards a given action (and this is exactly what trying to find necessary conditions for tragic actions exclusively in their dramatic structural properties boils down to). There is no such thing as a tragic action if the action is abstracted away from its perpetrator. An action can become tragic only in virtue of its bond with its executioner. It is tragic only in view of a position held by the agent and an account that the agent or the witnesses of the action might give of it. To illustrate the point even further one should bear in mind that the focus of discussion in the ancient ethics – unlike in modern ethical theories – was not so much on the action but rather on the person performing the action. In other words, ancient ethics does not concern itself so much with what praise- or blameworthy action consists in. Rather, it concerns itself with what the characteristics of a person who is inclined to perform one or the other are.

In Chapter 13 Aristotle turns to “conditions on which the tragic effect depends” (1452b30). These focus on a specific direction of fortune reversal and the famous *hamartia* which will be discussed a bit later on. The ideal reversal for Aristotle is from good to bad. But if we consider *Antigone* it will become apparent that even if we cash out the reversal in terms of an action (performing burial rites) that it is orthogonal to Antigone's situation. Antigone does not fall from good luck to bad luck, nor is the reversal in the opposite direction. From the very beginning Antigone is in a sorrowful situation (Oedipus' discovery, Polyneices' and Eteocles' deaths) and performing the burial does not, subjectively speaking, make the situation any worse. If anything, it improves it, but still not in the sense in which Aristotle

entertains reversal.⁶ To my mind then reversal of fortune is not the bond between the act and the agent I was referring to above.

Perhaps the bond noted above can be found in what has usually been referred to as tragic flaw or *hamartia*. What had traditionally been thought of as a sort of a moral failing on the tragic hero's part has since Van Braam's,⁷ Ostwald's, and Bremer's⁸ work started being interpreted as an intellectual as well as a moral phenomenon.⁹ Ostwald claimed that *hamartia* "denotes in Aristotle a shortcoming inherent in the general disposition . . . of an agent . . . that gives him the capacity of making mistakes."¹⁰ Bremer constrained Ostwald's general claim on *hamartia* to an exclusively intellectual one: "A wrong action committed in ignorance of its nature, effect, etc., which is the starting point of a causally connected train of events ending in disaster."¹¹

It seems that Bremer's et al. take on *hamartia* boils down to nothing more but epistemic conditions which I have already dismissed as possible candidates for conditions of tragic actions. Nevertheless, the definition provided makes a good point that there needs to be an initial tragic action and that the tragedy unfolds in virtue of the outcomes of this initial action. Furthermore, Dawe's discussion of the topic identifies Oedipus' decision to continue with his investigation, in spite of Iocasta's pleas to do otherwise, as the initial tragic action instead of the obvious choice – Laius' murder.¹² Similarly, most of the authors agree on the point that Oedipus, even if preordained for parrincest, was free to find out about the horrendous acts he committed.¹³ I will return to this topic shortly.

In conclusion, it is clear that Aristotle's accounts of tragic actions rely heavily on family relations as well as epistemic conditions. Nevertheless, it has been shown that neither

⁶ In *Oedipus at Colonus* the whole play is about the reversal from good to bad and it cannot be cashed out in terms of any particular action.

⁷ P. van Braam, "Aristotle's Use of Hamartia," CQ 6 (1912) 266-72.

⁸ J. M. Bremer, *Hamartia: Tragic Error in the Poetics of Aristotle and in Greek Tragedy* (Amsterdam, 1969).

⁹ The non-exclusive view is, among others, held by G.M. Kirkwood (review of Bremer's *Hamartia*), T. C. W. Stinton, "Hamartia in Aristotle and Greek Tragedy," CQ 25 (1975) 221-54 and N. Sherman, *Hamartia and Virtue*, in A.O.Rorty (ed). *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics*, Princeton University Press, 1992. For my inquiry it is the intellectual, rather than the moral interpretation which is of more concern. The former points to an action whereas the latter points to a tendency or state.

¹⁰ Quoted in G.M. Kirkwood. Review. AJP 4 (1971) 711-715

¹¹ Bremer (1969) p.63. This purely intellectualist interpretation is followed by E. Schütrumpf "Traditional Elements in the Concept of Hamartia in Aristotle's Poetics", HSCP 92 (1989) 137-156, M. Finkleberg, "Patterns of Human Error in Homer", JHS 115 (1995) 15-28 and O.J. Schrier, *The Poetics of Aristotle and the Tractatus Coislinianus*, Brill, 1998 among others. Schrier also provide an extensive bibliography on Aristotle's *Poetics*.

¹² R. D. Dawe, "Some Reflections on Ate and Hamartia," HSCP 72 (1967) 89-123.

¹³ This view is practically held unanimously among the authors in Bloom's *Sophocles' Oedipus Rex*. See especially papers by Bernard Knox, R.E. Dodds and Pietro Pucci. For an even more recent views on the topic see C. Segal, *Oedipus Tyrannus: Tragic Heroism and the limits of knowledge*, 2nd ed. University Oxford Press. 2001.

of the two is either sufficient or necessary condition for an act to be deemed tragic. I believe the core of the problem lies in Aristotle's search for the tragic effect in the audience rather than in the dramatic text itself. If we just pay close attention to the text the problem of reception can be circumvented insofar the text will provide us with clues which acts are deemed horrendous and which are not. Moreover, Aristotle in chapter 14 conflates what I believe should be treated separately – the tragic and the horrendous.

TRAGIC AND HORRENDOUS

Throughout the chapter I have relied heavily on phrases such as 'perceived as tragic', 'thought to be tragic', and 'considered to be tragic', and have ascribed these perceptions, thoughts and considerations to Greeks. One might rightfully invoke the difficulties pertaining to the analysis of ancient Greek audience reception and ask which Greeks am I referring to here; am I talking about the overall Greek audience, or perhaps only about a privileged part of the audience consisting exclusively of free men?¹⁴ I believe these difficulties can be circumvented if close attention is paid to the texts at hand. It can be seen from the dramas that characters are unanimous as far as the ascription of label 'tragic' is concerned. Although none of the characters use the term 'tragic', the texts are packed with lamentations, curses, reproaches, and remorse. The focal points of these attitudes are the acts I am referring to as tragic.

Here, I would like to make a distinction between the tragic and the horrendous. Something being horrendous is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for something being tragic. Something being tragic, on the other hand, is sufficient but not necessary for something being horrendous. Although insensitive to the distinction between the two up until now, I will employ it from now on. Furthermore, an act on its own cannot be horrendous any more than it can be tragic. Moreover, Laius' attempt on his own son shows that even (would-be) murder within family is not necessarily deemed to be horrendous.

There are two points I want to make here. The first is that most of the modern theories of tragedy consider tragic actions in "essentialist" terms. On these accounts actions are treated qua actions without giving much attention to the way in which the tragic texts treat them. Actions are deemed tragic or non-tragic in virtue of themselves alone. But the example of

¹⁴ For an introduction to these issues see S. Goldhill "The audience of Athenian tragedy" in P.E. Easterling (ed.) *The Cambridge companion to Greek tragedy*.

Laius shows that not only a tragic, but a horrendous action as well, is deemed tragic or horrendous only within the context of a given tragedy. We could easily imagine Sophocles writing a tragedy in which Laius' attempt on his own son is deemed both horrendous and tragic. But this is just not the way in which this particular action is treated in *Oedipus Rex*. This is why it is of outmost importance to turn to textual indicators identifying actions as horrendous. These indicators allow us to focalize on actions that are truly in the center of a given tragic text.

The other point I want to make is that it is not the case that some characters would deem a particular act horrendous whereas some other characters would not. And if that is so it would not be unwise to think that the audience would concur.

Let us consider Antigone performing burial rites. Creon reacts in a dreadful manner and entombs her. Antigone's suicide follows. Haemon finds it horrendous because he has lost his loved one. Eurydice is shattered because it has led to the death of her son. Creon's whole world falls apart because the end result was the annihilation of his family. The Messenger is completely aware of the horror which can be seen in the way he conveys what he has witnessed. The Chorus follows suit. Teiresias, on the other hand, uses the foreknowledge of horrific consequences to reproach the king. In short, the characters may be afflicted by a horrendous act in various manners, the insult may be immediate or it may traverse a longer causal chain, the act might be addressed with special tact or as means of reprimand, but however the characters might be affected by the act they will unanimously recognize it as a horrendous one in its outcome.¹⁵

I consider this awareness to be the first condition for tragic action – **condition A** – and phrase it in the following manner:

For an act to be tragic it necessarily has to be perceived as horrendous and if not on its own, then at least in its outcome, and be so unanimously by whoever addresses it in the play.

The address need not be in words; a reaction in terms of a horrendous action will suffice. This condition discounts the murder of Laius' men, the (would-be) murders of the Theban messenger, as well as the (would-be) murder of the Guard in *Antigone*, and even the

¹⁵ Antigone performing burial rites is the starting point of all (in)direct afflictions in *Antigone*. All other tragic acts are merely a part of the chain. If an account of the first action in the chain is given in terms of condition A below then the same holds for any other action in the chain.

(would-be) murder of the child Oedipus as horrendous acts. None of these inspire horror or woe in characters and even the last one, although evoking a dose of shock and disbelief and spurring attention, is seen, if it were fulfilled, as a way out of tragedy and not horrendous in itself.¹⁶

IOCASTA: "As for the child, it was not three days old
When Laius fastened both its feet together
And had it cast over a precipice.
Therefore Apollo failed; for neither did
His son kill Laius, nor did Laius meet
The awful end he feared, killed by his son." (689-94)

I turn now to additional possible candidates for conditions of tragic action.

OVER-DETERMINATION

It should be noted that both Bremer and Dawe find *hamartia* inextricably bound with the notion of *ate*. Insofar they belong to a group of authors who believe that at the core of tragic action lies what has been called over-determination. In short, *ate* stands for an action committed in folly or blindness and attributed to some external force. This notion derives from Martin P. Nilsson's view on Homeric man,¹⁷ and has been elaborated further by Dodds in *Greeks and the Irrational*. Dodds distinguished between normal actions caused by agents and those actions caused by agents in pair with some external "daemonic" force – *ate*. Although in *Iliad*, according to Dodds, this temporary insanity does not have a common connection to objective disaster, it does so in tragedy.¹⁸ "[T]he Messenger in the *Persae* attributes Xerxes' unwise tactics at Salamis to the cunning Greek who deceived him, and simultaneously to the *phthonos* of the gods working through an *alastor* or evil daemon: the event is doubly determined, on the natural and on the supernatural plane."¹⁹

¹⁶ It is only Oedipus that shows some concern. Theban shepherd quickly rationalizes it in terms of fear of the prophecy coming true (1130).

¹⁷ Nilsson, *A History of Greek Religion*, 2nd edn. Trans. By F.J. Fieldon (OUP, 1952)

¹⁸ Dodds, *Greeks and the Irrational*, pp.5. The most comprehensive study of *ate* is R.E. Doyle *Ate: Its Use and Meaning*. New York 1984. Doyle distinguishes between subjective and objective use of *ate*: "When *ate* affects man's *phren* or his *thumos*, ... , it means 'blindness', 'infatuation', or 'folly'. But when *ate* ... is attributed to the activity of a *daimon*, its meaning is 'ruin', 'calamity', or 'disaster'". (pp. 3). For a more recent discussion of *ate* but focusing on Homer see B. Finkelberg, "Patterns of Human Error in Homer." *Ate's* position within a broader cultural and historical context of representation of blindness is given in M. Barash, *Blindness*. Routledge, 2001.

¹⁹ Dodds, *Greek and the Irrational*. pp.31.

On the other hand, this internal/external over-determination need not be cashed out in terms of *hamartia* and *ate* the proof of which is J.P. Vernant's work.²⁰ Vernant follows Albin Lesky's²¹ and R.P. Winnington-Ingram's²² suit by thinking of double causation in terms of character, *ethos*, and unavoidable divine power, *ananke*. (Although the latter boils down to *daimon*, the former differs from *hamartia*). To illustrate the point Vernant turns to Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*; when the Achaean king is faced with the decision whether to sacrifice his daughter in order to successfully embark on his campaign against Troy, although he is constrained by the external *ananke* to go through with the sacrifice, it is also his intimate desire to do anything necessary for the campaign to start.

According to the authors mentioned above tragic action should be thought of as a focal point of tension between activity and passivity – the tragic action is one which is at the same time initiated by humans and caused by external forces. The problem with this account is the resulting conceptual incoherence. Constantine Sandis rightfully points out that subscribing to over-determination leads to the following problem: "For how can we take seriously the idea that mortals are *dependent* on the gods if the latter are not required for either the occurrence or the explanation of human action."²³

One could turn the tables and say that over-determination, when analyzed in more detail, need not be conceptually coherent in order to serve as a cue for pinpointing tragic actions in the text. As long as the relevant actions in the text can be accounted in terms of over-determination these accounts serve as conditions for the actions we are looking for. Although that might be true, at the same time it holds that another set of conditions will do us much more good if a coherent theory of action is to be founded on those conditions. Furthermore, it is *not* the case that all of the relevant actions can be accounted in those terms. Take Antigone's case for instance – no prophecy impels her to bury her brother or commit suicide nor can her actions be described as caused by some external necessity.

²⁰ J.-P. Vernant, "Intimations of the Will in Greek Tragedy", in J.-P. Vernant and P. Vidal-Naquet (eds.), *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, New York, 1988, 49-84

²¹ A. Lesky, "Decision and Responsibility in the Tragedy of Aeschylus", *JHS* (1966), p. 78-85.

²² R.P. Winnington-Ingram, "Hippolytus: A Study in Causation", in (ed. O. Reverdin) *Euripide, Entretiens sur l'antiquité classique IV* (Foundation Hardt, 1960). R.P. Winnington-Ingram, *Sophocles: An Interpretation*. Cambridge University Press, 1980.

²³ C. Sandis, "Gods and mental states: Causation of action in Greek Tragedy and Modern Philosophy of Mind", http://oxfordbrookes.academia.edu/documents/0001/1454/SANDIS_Ch19.pdf (Accessed May 9, 2009). It should be noted that 'gods' refer to gods, goddesses and daemons. For an argument against conceptual coherence of *hamartia* and *ate* see L. Golden, "Hamartia, Ate and Oedipus", *CW*, 72, (1978), 3-12.

ETHICAL AND POLITICAL THEORIES OF TRAGIC SITUATIONS

Most of the recent literary criticism dealing with tragedy I am familiar with, although continuously producing new definitions and descriptions of tragedy overall, falls short of giving precise definitions of what counts as a tragic action.²⁴ This is why I turn to clear-cut definitions one can find in ethical and political theory.

In *After virtue* Alasdair MacIntyre discusses the possibility of competing claims on what counts as virtue in 5th century Athens. He discusses what he calls 'tragic situation' by resorting to *Antigone* and *Philoctetes*: "Our situation is tragic in that we have to recognize authority of both claims... For to choose does not exempt me from the authority of the claim I choose to go against."²⁵ In *Problems of the Self* Bernard Williams points to Agamemnon at Aulis to identify a tragic situation²⁶ one which political theorist Bonnie Honig explains as "those radically undecidable situations in which there is no right thing to do, in which whatever one does will be horribly, awfully wrong."²⁷ Guido Calabresi and Philip Bobbitt present us with an example of tragic choice: there is only one kidney dialysis machine and two people need to use it – choose.²⁸ Chris Brown also turns to Agamemnon to make his point: "tragedy involves a situation where duties are in radical conflict, such that whatever is done will involve wrongdoing; by definition, this conflict cannot be wished away – the only way to preserve integrity and honor is to accept the tragic nature of one's choice: that is, to acknowledge that to act is to do wrong."²⁹

²⁴ The best articulation I have found is that of T. Gould (1966). According to him there are two things necessary for a tragic action: 1) a character unwilling to compromise, and 2) an universe in which a good action can lead to disaster, whereas a less good one would yield a reward. Condition 1) will be close to my condition B. Other attempts fail in being precise enough. Paradigmatic is O. Mandel (1961), *A definition of tragedy*: "A work of art is tragic if it substantiates the following situation: A protagonist who commands our earnest good will is impelled in a given world by a purpose, or undertakes an action, of a certain seriousness and magnitude; and by that very purpose or action, subject to that same given world, necessarily and inevitably meets with grave spiritual or physical suffering". Mandel wrestles considerably with the notion of a 'certain seriousness and magnitude' insofar he finds counter-examples.

For an erudite insight in the history of theory of tragedy as well as in tragic practice see T. Eagleton, (2002) *Sweet Violence*. For a comprehensive list of approaches to tragedy see S. Goldhill, (1997) "Modern Critical Approaches to Greek Tragedy" in P.E. Easterling, *Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*. For an account of philosophical approaches see M. de Bestugai, and S. Sparks (2000) *Philosophy and Tragedy*.

²⁵ A. MacIntyre, (1981), *After Virtue*. pp. 143.

²⁶ B. Williams, (1973) pp. 173.

²⁷ H. Bonnig, (1994) pp. 572. For more on the topic see G. Browning, (2008).

²⁸ G. Calabresi, P. Bobbitt, (1978). *Tragic choices*, New York: Norton, c1978.

²⁹ C. Brown, (2007) pp.6. Interestingly, Brown disagrees with Calabresi and Bobbitt and finds the choice to be horrendous rather than tragic. Although I agree with him that tragedy cannot be avoided by coming up with some kind of procedure which would determine which patient is more "suitable" or "deserving" of the treatment – something Calabresi and Bobbitt set out to do – I still find that this is a tragic situation. Below, I explain my views in more detail. Here, it suffices to say it is tragic by the very virtue it presents itself as a

The problem with all of these appraisals of tragic actions (situations in which one is forced to act) is twofold: 1) they encapsulate epistemic condition of knowledge and 2) they do not necessarily satisfy condition A. Primarily, their silent premise is that everything that needs to be known is known or, in other words, that the action is tragic only if we are aware of all relevant circumstances and consequences. But the problem is that Creon, for instance, just does not know what the final outcome of his edict will be. And that is not to fall back to *hamartia* as an explanation of tragic actions because we have seen the opposite in Antigone – she *is* perfectly aware of the final consequences of her actions (at least as far as she is concerned).

Secondly, Laius' attempt on the child Oedipus is structurally the same as Agamemnon's act of sacrificing Iphigenia. Objectively speaking, both choices are wrong: if the child is not killed patricide and incest (campaign failure) will ensue, and if it is, then, obviously, Laius (Agamemnon) is killing his own child. Nevertheless, as I have shown in the section on tragic and horrendous', Laius' attempt (even if it were successful) is not seen as horrendous, let alone tragic.

Although this is sufficient to discard standard appraisals of tragic situations as conditions for tragic action they do bring something to the table. If we consider accounts of tragic situations on the one hand, and *hamartia* on the other, we will see that they are opposites as far as epistemic conditions are concerned. In the former case the agent finds herself in a tragic situation only if she is aware that all of her possible choices entail wrongdoing. Calabresi's and Bobbitt's example of tragic choice is tragic only if the agent is aware of all of the relevant circumstances i.e. that there are two and not only one patient in need of dialysis. On the other hand, in the case of *hamartia*, tragedy unfolds exactly in virtue of not knowing the outcomes or true meaning of one's actions. In that sense a doctor who thinks that there is only one patient is not presented with a tragic choice. Of course she will make the dialysis machine available to this patient. But the fact that this means the death for the other patient, the one the doctor is not aware of, means the doctor has acted in *hamartia*. But we have already seen on the cases of Creon and Antigone above that epistemic conditions play no role in determining whether an action is horrendous or not.

choice. Somebody else could have been saved. On the other hand, it would not be tragic if we were not aware of the existence of another patient (and if that lack of awareness was not by some fault or negligence of our own).

What is common to tragic situations and *hamartia* is the notion of choice. In tragic situations we choose between two evils we are perfectly aware of. In the case of *hamartia* we choose in ignorance only for the decision to turn out much worse than we ever thought it would. If we drop epistemic premises tragic situations and *hamartia* integrate respectively, the knowledge of future outcomes of an action in the former case and the ignorance of future outcomes of an action in the latter, we arrive at the notion of choice free of any consideration of its future effects. I believe this is a step in the direction of finding that elusive bond of the agent and executioner, one orthogonal to agent's changeable epistemic positions.

WHY HORRENDOUS DOES NOT SUFFICE FOR TRAGIC

If we consider Laius' murder it clearly satisfies condition A. His murder is the focal point of characters' concerns throughout the whole of the play and everybody agrees that this act is utterly deplorable and deserves the direst of condemnations. Although it is true that the murder is lambasted from the very beginning, at that point it is certainly not deemed tragic. It is only after Oedipus is discovered to be the killer that tragedy befalls him. But this is not to say that Laius' murder has become a tragic action all of a sudden. My suspicion against such a view lies in the way in which the murder is treated after the discovery. For instance, the Chorus and its leader address Oedipus' tragedy only in general terms and the only action they pay special attention to is his self-mutilation (1274-5). Likewise, no reference to Laius' murder is made by Creon after he had found out the identity of the killer.

References made by the Messenger and Iocasta are inconclusive. When the Messenger addresses patricide and pollution, either conveying Iocasta's words or saying his own, it is not so much that these actions are singled out as tragic ones. Rather, it is Oedipus who is singled out as the bearer of this tragedy and the perpetrator of both patricide and incest. It is not the deeds which are ruminated over:

MESSENGER: "She made her way
 Straight to her chamber; she barred fast the doors
 And called on Laius, these long years dead,
 Remembering their by-gone procreation.
 'Through this did you meet death yourself, and leave
 To me, the mother, child-bearing accursed
 To my own child.' She cried aloud upon
 The bed where she had borne a double brood,
 Husband from husband, children from a child." (1192-1200)
 ...
 "Not on his head alone, but on them both,

Husband and wife, the common storm has broken.
 Their ancient happiness of early days
 Was happiness indeed; but now, today,
 Death, ruin, lamentation, shame – of all
 The ills there are, not one is wanting here” (1231-6)

This is quite unlike the finale of *Antigone* in which the Messenger pays a lot of attention to the execution of Haemon’s³⁰ and Eurydice’s³¹ suicide, and Creon describes himself as the sole perpetrator of those acts: “’Twas I who dealt the blow!” (1268). Although these words are metaphorical, they nevertheless express concern not only with personal tragedy, but with the tragic act as well. In *Oedipus Rex* the Messenger does talk about particular acts in great detail – Iocasta’s suicide and Oedipus’ self-mutilation (1219-21, 1227-8, 1274-9) – ones which are, I will claim, more than simply horrendous. Furthermore, Oedipus’ self-mutilation, as is the case when the Chorus examines it, is described by the Messenger as though it could have been otherwise (1274-5). Although Messenger’s words do not constitute a full post hoc account of consideration of different options, the Messenger clearly points out that Oedipus’ initially strived to kill himself with a sword (1205).

Oedipus’ own words appear to be the most problematic ones. When he laments the patricide and incest he discusses them in a manner similar to Creon’s take on his son’s and wife’s deaths. Personal tragedy is elaborated through those horrible acts:

OEDIPUS: “The forest – you, through my own hands, did drink
 My father’s blood, that was my own. – Ah! Do you
 Remember what you saw me do? And what
 I did again in Thebes? You marriages!” (1339-43)

But, unlike Oedipus, Creon is not the only one discussing the proclamation which led to tragedy. When Creon’s decision to entomb Antigone is discussed by Haemon (688-709) or the Chorus (710-11) it is not presented as set in stone. They try their best to dissuade Creon from the stance he had taken. It is in this way, in the absence of identification of alternatives, that Oedipus’ words above present horrendous actions in a manner different than Haemon’s or the Chorus’ accounts of Creon’s actions do. Similarly, in *Oedipus Rex* patricide and incest are described as necessary outcomes of the Theban shepherd taking pity on the child Oedipus,³²

³⁰ MESSENGER: “Then in remorse he leaned upon the blade
 And drove it half its length into his body.” (1190-1)

³¹ MESSENGER: “She took a sharp-edged knife ... stood by the altar she closed her eyes in death” (1253, 1257)

³² OEDIPUS: “No thanks I owe him,
 For had I died that day
 Less ruin had I brought on me and mine.” (1295-7)

whereas self-mutilation is presented as an act that inherently belongs to Oedipus and perhaps as one which might not have been executed:

CHORUS-LEADER. O, to destroy you sight! How could you bring
Yourself to do it? What god incited you?

OEDIPUS [*sings*]. It was Apollo, friends, Apollo.
He decreed that I should suffer what I suffer;
But the hand that struck, alas! was my own,
And not another's. (1274-9)

I believe this distinction between perception of necessity on one hand and perception of agency as something open to alternative possibilities on the other, is at the heart of the distinction between a horrendous and a tragic act. Thus, I see no way of keeping the nature of the prophecy outside of this discussion any longer. Although prophecy served merely as external informant in *Antigone* and was not crucial for determining whether a particular action is tragic, its function seems to differ in *Oedipus Rex*. Let us finally investigate how it relates to the question at hand. I believe the best way to go about it is to consider how knowledge of the prophecy bears on actions the goal of which is to deny the prophecy's fulfillment. Perhaps, latter actions become tragic only if steps against the prophecy's fulfillment are taken. It could be argued that if Oedipus did not run away from Corinth after learning about the prophecy it might not have been fulfilled. If that is the case structurally similar situations should also become tragic in virtue of their failure. But there seems to be a structurally similar situation which is orthogonal to this kind of argument.

Laius also learned about the prophecy but it is not the case that his unsuccessful attempt to do away with the child has any bearing on whether his murder is deemed tragic or not. Then, according to the argument above, both Laius and Oedipus try to avoid their prophesized fates and both of them fail but it is only Oedipus' failure that turns Laius' murder into a tragic act. But if the same antagonistic stance is taken towards the same prophecy why would only one and not the other contribute to the reinterpretation of an act as a tragic one? It is not sufficient to say that it is Oedipus, and not Laius, who eventually kills Laius because in virtue of the causal chain (condition A) Laius' failure could be deemed horrendous. But, unlike the following action, it never is.

Another argument for treating Laius' attempt on his child and Oedipus' flight from Corinth similarly, is the fact that Oedipus never refers to the two in "if only" terms. Oedipus never reprimands himself for not staying in Corinth nor does he chastise Laius' for not being successful in his attempt on his son's life. It is true that Oedipus wishes he died that day but it

is not Laius who he condemns for that not taking place, rather Oedipus blames the Corinthian shepherd for taking pity on him and saving his life (1295-7). Arguably, Laius' could have made sure that the deed is done by doing it himself and not relegating it to his proxies. Why does Oedipus then employ "could have done otherwise" rhetoric for the shepherd but not for his father nor for himself?

What is important for us to note here is that in the case of this particular prophecy "could have done otherwise" rhetoric is employed only for the agent whose actions or fate is not referred to in the prophecy.³³ When the investigation is drawn to its horrific ending it seems that in Oedipus' mind, unlike himself or his father, the aforementioned agent still retains autonomy in the face of prophecy. Once that autonomy is exercised in a direction opposite to Oedipus' liking his actions necessarily enact the unfolding of the prophecy. In other words, there is not a single character in *Oedipus Rex* who refers to Laius' attempt on the child Oedipus or to Oedipus' patricide and incest in terms of "could have done otherwise" rhetoric. To put it in Aristotelian terms, this would suggest that nobody regards Oedipus' or Laius' actions as up to them but rather as actions executed in virtue of external necessity.

To my mind this very perception of the necessity of patricide and incest by Oedipus, the only character who discusses these acts after the revelation, is the reason for omitting these acts from the tragic set. Although they are horrendous and play a significant role in Oedipus' tragedy I believe they should be dismissed from the list because they come to be regarded as necessary. Before the truth is dragged out in the light Laius' murder is considered shameful but not tragic, and Oedipus taking Iocasta's hand in marriage neither of the two, rather a very fortunate thing. Afterwards, they both become horrendous almost beyond words but they are, I repeat again, when discussed, exclusively presented as necessary. It is never the case that Oedipus employs "could have done otherwise" rhetoric for his actions at the crossroad – e.g. I could have spared those people's lives – or for marrying Iocasta – e.g. I could have thought twice before marrying a woman considerably older than me.³⁴

This brings me to the formulation of the second condition for tragic action. I will refer to this action as a CDO ("could have done otherwise") action from now on.³⁵

³³ This is not the case for Teiresias' oracle prophesized to Creon and Oedipus in *Antigone* and *Oedipus Rex* respectively, or for Oedipus' curse spoken to Polyneices in *Oedipus at Colonus*. In the last chapter in which I discuss the relationship between external and internal necessity I show why these prophecies are substantially different from the prophecy I am considering currently.

³⁴ In *Oedipus at Colonus* it is also the case that Oedipus does not discuss parricide in "could have done otherwise" terms.

³⁵ I borrow the term from Dennett (1984).

*If a character considers and act and that its executioner could have done otherwise in the immediate presence of the action then the action satisfies **condition B**.*

And finally:

*An action is a **tragic action** if and only if it satisfies both condition A and B.*

In other words, conditions A and B jointly present sufficient and necessary conditions for an action to be deemed tragic. An action can satisfy condition A without satisfying condition B, and it can satisfy condition B without satisfying condition A. Whenever the action satisfies both conditions, and only then, is the action deemed tragic in a text. Furthermore, the act need not be violent in order to satisfy any of these conditions.

It should also be noted that condition B does not depend on the knowledge a character might or might not have of the outcomes of her action. Nor does it depend on whether or not she later finds out about the outcomes or the true meaning of her action. Condition B does not discount the possibility of a prior action becoming tragic after new information has been revealed. If Oedipus had initially conveyed the incident at the crossroads in “could have done otherwise” terms then Laius’ murder would become tragic after the reappraisal in spite of Oedipus’ insistence on its necessary nature. But, as Oedipus’ account clearly shows, it was an act in which no consideration of different options was taking place. Similarly, although a complete account of Oedipus’ and Iocasta’s wedding is nowhere to be found, it is reasonable to conclude that, if there were one, Oedipus, or anybody else, would not cast it in CDO terms. What else was he to do than marry the Queen after he had defeated the Sphinx and had been awarded the rule over Thebes? It is not clear how any other action would seem reasonable at all. “If only I had considered her age” objection is viable only after Oedipus had discovered the truth. At the time of marriage he is certain his mother is in Corinth.

It is also important to note that the condition B is not the same as true post hoc accounts in CDO terms such as Antigone’s account of Polyneices’ burial or Oedipus’ account of self-mutilation which practically spell out both alternatives. The latter are subsumed under the former when the character considering the act is also its perpetrator. When that is not the case it is sufficient for some other characters to deem the execution of the act not necessary for the act to count as tragic. Of course, that act should be deemed horrendous under condition A.

Furthermore, it has already been noted that what counts as a tragic act depends on the context of the play and the specific attention that is given to the act. Oedipus' investigation is not in the focus of *Antigone* or *Oedipus at Colonus* nor is Polyneices' decision to continue with his campaign against Thebes – the only truly tragic action in *Oedipus at Colonus*³⁶ – given much attention in *Antigone*. I believe this contextual constraint has been explained earlier on and need not serve as a formal condition.

Let us return to *Antigone* briefly and check whether actions I have talked about – burial of Polyneices, Antigone's, Haemon's, and Euridice's suicides – satisfy both of the conditions. In virtue of their causal connection and direct or indirect personal affliction I have already shown how all of the suicides satisfy condition A. As far as the burial is concerned it could be argued that it is horrendous only for Creon, and even that only initially. But that is to regard the act only on its own without recourse to the characters; something I have shown should not be done. Condition A concerns itself with forward causation and the perception of an act in terms of (in)direct personal affliction inflicted on the characters. In those terms Polyneices' burial satisfies the condition as much as Antigone's suicide does. Both are horrendous insofar their fallout is deemed to be horrendous.

The question now is whether they satisfy condition B. Burial presents no problem at all: whoever directly refers to it as Antigone's act – Ismene, the Chorus, Creon, the Guard, and Haemon – finds it to be problematic just because they find that Antigone could have not done it (and should have not done it in order to save her life). Moreover, Antigone herself gives a CDO post hoc account of the burial. What about the suicides? As far as Antigone's suicide is concerned, Creon makes a point of the fact that she can choose how to die.

CREON: "Her home shall be her tomb; there she may live
Or die, as she may choose: my hands are clean" (862-3).

The Chorus and Antigone mention only death in the tomb, not suicide *per se*, but they are certainly made aware of the possibility by Creon. In Haemon's case, the Messenger conveys Creon's words directed at Haemon by which he implores him to exit: "What is this madness? O come out, my son, come, I implore you!" (1185-6). Creon obviously finds that

³⁶ Oedipus' curse depicts the horror of Polyneices' campaign as well as Polyneices' and Antigone's responses to the curse. Condition B is satisfied by Antigone imploring Polyneices not to do it (1416-7). *Oedipus at Colonus* is a peculiar tragedy insofar it is not tragic action that is at the core of it. It is apotheosis rather than disaster that it concerns itself with. Its most interesting aspect for theory of action is that it provides great examples of non-tragic character undetermined actions. Moreover, it discusses Oedipus' responsibility for parricide. Unfortunately, I am limited in space to provide a detailed analysis of moral responsibility in Theban plays. It could be a topic of a separate thesis.

Haemon could have done otherwise. Finally, the Chorus-leader and the Messenger discuss Eurydice's action moments before her suicide claiming that she would never do something unseemly. They are proven wrong moments later (1199-211). Thus, both conditions A and B are satisfied by all of the actions I have identified as tragic in *Antigone*.

Still, by this line of reasoning the only tragic acts in *Oedipus Rex* are Iocasta's suicide and Oedipus' self-mutilation. (By now, I have still not shown that Iocasta's suicide satisfies condition B. That that is the case is implied in the exchange between Oedipus and Chorus-leader after Iocasta has fled the scene (1035-9).) But that just does not feel right. In *Antigone* there was an initial tragic act which led to all of the other ones. Iocasta's suicide does not fit this role, and if patricide and incest are not to be considered as tragic then there seems to be none which would fit the role.

Here it might serve us well to put in another way why a horrendous act is not necessarily a tragic one. Imagine Oedipus never learned about the prophecy or that when he did he did not try to escape what it spelled out but accepted it as his fate. And imagine that the prophecy got fulfilled. This would be a horrible thing indeed. But would not this lack of knowledge on Oedipus' part or his coming to terms with what he is to do somehow evoke less tragic outcomes than it does now? Moreover, if the latter was the case Oedipus would surely not stab his eyes out, rather, he would be at peace as he is in the final part of the cycle.

THE INITIAL TRAGIC ACT³⁷

What then is the initial tragic act in *Oedipus Rex*? According to Bernard Knox: "Oedipus did have one freedom: he was free to find out or not find out the truth".³⁸ E.R. Dodds also agrees on the point that Oedipus was free to find out about the horrendous acts he committed.³⁹ Although I do not agree that the action at hand is free in the sense that it is not determined, I will argue that the initial tragic act indeed is Oedipus' unfaltering insistence on taking his investigation to the very end. An objection might be made that, unlike other acts deemed tragic by now – murders, suicides, burial, and incest – this act seems to be more of a course of acts rather than a single act. It could be argued that Oedipus decides over and over

³⁷ There is no problem of the initial tragic act in *Oedipus at Colonus* because the only tragic act is not, as I have already noted, the true focus of the drama.

³⁸ Knox, B. (1966).

³⁹ But Dodds does not stop at that; in his interpretation it is also quite clear that Oedipus chooses to blind himself on his own accord. I will argue that he could not have chosen otherwise.

again to follow through with the investigation. If that is the case, then I would have to account for every instance of acting on the desire to resolve the case in terms of conditions A and B.

I believe this is not necessary because the crucial action, one which finally reveals the truth and which can be deemed tragic in the sense analogue to Antigone performing burial rites for Polyneices, can easily be identified – cross-examination of the Theban shepherd. Therefore, it is not only the case that Oedipus does not deliberate⁴⁰ whether or not to make another step in the investigation (summoning Teiresias or sending for the Theban shepherd) because he is already decided that nothing will stop him, but it is also the case that there is a particular act which is perceived to be crucial for the revelation of truth and one from which could be backed away. In Iocasta's mind Oedipus could (and should) do otherwise: "O, I beseech you, do not! Seek no more!" (1026). The Theban shares her opinion: "No, I implore you, master! Do not ask!" (1120). Clearly then, condition B is satisfied.

These same words also serve to satisfy condition A. Both Iocasta and the Theban shepherd are terrified more of this revelation than they are of their own deaths (1022-23, 1114). Moreover, immediately after the truth had been learned the Chorus is horrified by this revelation (1146-9). The same is true of the rest of the characters: the Messenger, Oedipus, and Creon. In the end, it is in the virtue of the revelation of the truth that Iocasta's suicide and Oedipus' self-mutilation takes place. Were it not for Oedipus' unshakeable resolve to get to the bottom of this affair none of this would have happened.

⁴⁰ It should be noted that, generally speaking, deliberation is not the same as weighing different options during a decision-making process. Aristotle's practical syllogism for instance presents a different kind of reasoning in decision making – means-ends reasoning. Whenever I use 'deliberation' it will be clear that I mean it in CDO terms.

CONTROL GROUPS

After securing conditions of tragic actions, in this section I aim to elaborate the sense in which tragic actions in Sophocles' Theban plays count as character determined ones. As I have already noted this idea owes much to the notion of psychological determinism.⁴¹ According to J.R. Lucas "psychological determinism maintains that there are certain psychological laws, which we are beginning to discover, enabling us to predict, usually on the basis of his experiences in early infancy, how a man will respond to different situations throughout his later life."⁴² Another way of putting it, with more stress on the agent's character, is that "an agent's action is psychologically determined if his action is determined by his interests that is, his values or desires, and his interests are determined by his heredity or environment."⁴³

It is the hero's inability to break away from character, much more than the implications of social construal present in the second definition above, which I find to be crucial for tragic actions in Theban plays. I will use character determinism to denote a stance which holds that a person of a particular character, when confronted with a situation in which a decision is needed, will always choose one and the same course of action if the external circumstances do not vary extremely. More specifically, in the Theban cycle it will mean that the tragic hero, when confronted with a situation demanding decision the outcomes of which can be deemed tragic, will inevitably embark on a given and not on another route and do so in virtue of his character.

In this chapter I will argue that only tragic actions are character determined. Furthermore, I will demonstrate that it is not only the non-tragic heroes who are not character determined in their actions, but that even characters like Oedipus, Antigone or Creon perform character undetermined non-tragic actions.

Although it might be thought that condition B is indicative of tragic action being character undetermined rather than determined insofar the condition identifies alternative possibilities for the agent, the criteria proposed for determining tragic action are not the criteria for determining whether an action is character determined or not. The fact that a particular action is *perceived* by characters as one that could have happened otherwise (or not have happened at all) is not the same as claiming that the play overall *presents* the action as

⁴¹ See footnote 1.

⁴² Lucas, J.R., (1970) pp. 78.

⁴³ Wolf, S, (1980) pp. 152.

one that could have happened otherwise (or not at all). This overall presentation includes literary techniques other than explicit character utterances including employment of *in medias res* as well as articulation of the general attitude espoused by characters towards a particular action. I turn to *Antigone* in order to explain these two crucial techniques.

LITERARY TECHNIQUES OF CHARACTER DETERMINISM

The drama opens with Antigone asking her sister Ismene whether she will help her in burying their brother. Obviously, this implies Antigone is quite aware that Ismene can reply either ‘yes’ or ‘no’. It is no less obvious that Ismene’s efforts to dissuade her sister articulate Ismene’s stance towards Antigone’s action as one which can be left unperformed. Nevertheless, at no point throughout the whole of the play is there a shred of doubt in Antigone’s mind what the right and thus the only truly possible route for her is. In fact, it is quite clear that her decision has been made earlier on – outside of the play’s timeframe. The same holds for Creon’s competing decision to publicly convey his proclamation once again⁴⁴. In that sense, the employment of *in medias res* technique has allowed for both Antigone and Creon to lay out their competing claims on Polyneices’ body well in advance of the time at which the play starts. Their minds are already made up by then.

As far as my other point is concerned it might be best to present it in opposition to Martha Nussbaum’s view. In her erudite reading of *Antigone*, Nussbaum discusses different deliberative strategies of values simplification employed by Creon and Antigone in order to rid themselves of the practical conflicts occurring in the world. Furthermore, she implies that these processes which include the weighing of alternatives are actively engaging and that they develop throughout the whole of the play.⁴⁵ I do not deny the general character of these simplifications – for Creon the city presents the highest value, whereas for Antigone it is the duty for the family dead. What I deny are their dynamic properties.⁴⁶ These values simplifications are already prefixed; by the time the play starts, they are already in place. What happens throughout the play is not a further deliberation on them; rather it is the description of one’s own fixed value system to the other. Both Creon and Antigone describe

⁴⁴ We find out about the proclamation from Antigone even prior to Creon publicly uttering it.

⁴⁵ M.C. Nussbaum, (1986) “Sophocles’ *Antigone*: conflict, vision and simplification”, ch.3 from *The Fragility of Goodness*, 51-83.

⁴⁶ Here I am prone to agree with Bernard Williams: “We are not shown her deciding; she [Antigone] is another one who arrives decided.” *Shame and Necessity*. (pp.86)

their static value systems to the other. Although it is apparent that they recognize two possibilities of dealing with Polyneices' corpse, for there would be no need for any kind of value descriptions if the converse was the case, it should also be clear that each of them finds the other's system to be flawed. Moreover, each of them finds that there is only one true course of action if their own value system is to be upheld. The flaw of their systems is not one of reasoning; both systems are logically speaking valid. If one believes in a given initial premise i.e. what counts as the supreme value then one is bound to perform one action and not the other. Antigone is bound to bury Polyneices whereas Creon is bound to outlaw any such attempt with the harshest of sanctions. The problem is in the premise, and the early exchange between Creon and Antigone (498-515) shows not only how incompatible their premises are but also the lack of criteria in deciding between the two because they use the same words with distinctly different meanings.⁴⁷

On the surface of it, it seems then that there are two opposing takes on tragic actions. The first, contained within condition B, suggests *prima facie* that the tragic action need not have taken place. It could have been otherwise, and presumably, it was up to the agent to do it one way or the other. The second, exemplified by the use of *in medias res* and the description of characters in terms of static values, implies that irrevocable decision had been made according to the hero's character earlier on and one that could not have been other than it is. I believe this predicament can be resolved in the favor of the second viewpoint.

Antigone's account of her action after the deed presents a special instance of satisfying condition B: the character discussing the action is no other than the agent who performed it. When Creon confronts Antigone with the decision she made her answer is the following:

"But when my mother's son lay dead, had I
Neglected him and left him there unburied,
That would have caused me grief; this causes none." (457-9)

This rebuttal is structurally no different than Daniel Dennett's argument in *Elbow room*.⁴⁸ At the core of both Dennett's and Antigone's claims is that there are certain situations in which an agent can identify alternative possibilities – whether or not to perform a particular action – but can seriously entertain only one of them. It is preposterous for Antigone not to

⁴⁷ For more on ambiguity in Greek tragedy see J-P. Vernant and P. Vidal-Naquet (1988).

⁴⁸ D.C. Dennett, (1984) "Could have done otherwise?" ch.6 from *Elbow room*. Although Dennett's stance on determinism in this chapter is neutral and although his argument is employed only in order to eliminate the notion of "could have done otherwise" as a prerequisite for moral responsibility, it is clear that this course of action is due to his character.

bury Polyneices as much as it is absurd for Dennett to torture somebody for a thousand dollars. Furthermore, Dennett points out that he would stay firm in his decision even in “any roughly similar case”.⁴⁹ Antigone is no different.⁵⁰ Thus, Antigone’s post hoc account of the action is not really an account of deliberation, weighing two options with a true possibility in deciding for either of the two as Nussbaum implies; rather it is a description of a decision that finds only one possibility viable.⁵¹

It could be said that both Antigone’s and Dennett’s character disables them from pursuing a particular course of action and that is different from simply not being able to identify alternative possibilities. What is more, it could be argued that Antigone’s account of a tragic action, insofar it is the agent’s appraisal of one’s own action and not an account that one might have about some other person’s action, presents a more privileged description of a particular tragic action.⁵² Then, insofar it identifies alternative possibilities condition B proves to be opposed to the overall presentation of tragic actions as character determined only superficially. In any case, at the very least, Antigone’s account shows that satisfying condition B is not to describe the action as character undetermined. On the other hand, the use of *in medias res*, the description of characters in terms of static values, and an interpretation of Antigone’s account along Dennettian lines favor deeming tragic action as character determined.

⁴⁹ D.C. Dennett, (2002) “I Could Not Have Done Otherwise – So what?” in Kane, R. (ed.) *Free Will*.

⁵⁰ In fact, having in mind that Antigone is prepared to sacrifice her own life for the decision to bury Polyneices it is unclear how radically the circumstances should change in order for her to reappraise the decision. Polyneices’ attitude in *Oedipus at Colonus* is the same. He has learned about the disastrous future outcome of his campaign but still presses on. It is similar with Oedipus. Presumably, the only way to stop his investigation is to tell him who the culprit is. (And even that is not enough if he does not believe in it – consider Teiresias’s speech). Finally, Creon’s example might be the best case study for determining how much the circumstances have to change in order to (unsuccessfully) try to reverse a tragic action. This happens only when Teiresias prophesizes the death of his son.

⁵¹ Here, I would have to agree that the first part of Rivier’s formulation on Aeschylus applies to Sophocles also: there is decision but there is no true choice. As far as the second part is concerned, ‘responsibility without intention’, I consider intentions to be clearly present. Antigone’s intention is to honor the god below, whereas Creon’s is to uphold the supremacy of the city. Furthermore, although responsibility is obviously attached to the characters in the play, its mechanisms are outside the scope of this paper.

⁵² It is only a relatively recent development in epistemology which finds that the subject has no privileged access to her own mental states. Furthermore, this epistemic access is substantially different from the epistemic position discussed earlier on – whereas the latter deals with (the lack of) knowledge of (the final) causal effects of the action, the former relies exclusively on the information available at the moment of execution. For instance, Oedipus still has privileged epistemic access to the account of the incident at the crossroad and his mental states during the encounter in spite of Shepherd having a privileged epistemic position insofar he knows that the new king of Thebes murdered Laius, whereas Oedipus does not. For a support of the claim that agents’ articulations in tragedies do have privileged access to the meaning of the words or actions performed by that very agent see C. Gill (1990).

It is similar with Polyneices in *Oedipus at Colonus*. Ismene reports of Polyneices decision to reclaim the throne of Thebes once he had been ousted by Eteocles as preceding the whole of the play (375-80). When Polyneices finally appears near the end of the play to ask his father's support only to be denied he is brief in his response to Antigone of why he nevertheless continues his campaign: "No, it is not possible. For how could I lead the same force again, when once I had shrunk back?" (1418-19) and "It is shameful to be in exile, and to be mocked in this way by my brother, when I am eldest-born" (1422-23).

Similarly to Antigone – Polyneices is not moved by the external necessity of Oedipus' curse. He knows that he will die but it is still impossible for him to yield in his effort to reclaim the throne. Furthermore, the motives he gives – shame of exile and the right of primogeniture – are practically those implied by Ismene's speech. Then, it is safe to conclude that his motives are the same as those from before the beginning of the play and that his character disables him to decide otherwise in spite of the impending doom.

To further illustrate the employment of the two techniques outlined above I briefly turn to *Oedipus Rex* and their connection to his initial tragic action. It becomes apparent that Oedipus had made the decision to help his people even before they have come to his doorstep lead by the priest (66-72). His commitment to finding Laius' murderer in a proclamation later on (132-4) is nothing more but an expression of the decision made earlier. Moreover, Oedipus, Teiresias, and the Chorus alike describe Oedipus in terms of his riddle-solving abilities practically to a point in which they becomes the single most important character traits of his. Oedipus solves riddles – that is what he does – and it brings him fame as well as leads him to disaster (431-433). Finally, when implored by both Ioacasta and the Theban shepherd not to press further with his investigation his answer is unequivocal and reminiscent of Luther at the Imperial Diet of Worms.⁵³

THEBAN: God! I am on the verge of saying it.
OEDIPUS: And I of hearing it, but hear I must. (1124-5)

In that sense, Oedipus is much like Antigone insofar he is merely expounding on his static and pre-established character properties whenever he is insisting on the completion of his investigation.

⁵³ According to the legend Luther exclaimed: "Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise."

NON-TRAGIC ACTIONS

In order to substantiate my point further and fill in the gaps I turn first to non-tragic heroes and actions they perform. The manner in which the Guard from *Antigone* is presented provides a great illustration of an indecisive agent seriously considering alternatives and weighing outcomes of different actions. The Guard who was unlucky enough to draw the equivalent of the shortest straw and whom the unfortunate duty of making a report to Creon has befallen knows quite well that it is not uncommon for the messenger delivering bad news not to return alive. In his own account of the deliberation process on his way to the palace:

“... My mind had much
To say to me. One time it said ‘You fool!
Why do you go to certain punishment?’
Another time: ‘What? Standing still, you wretch?
You’ll smart for it, if Creon comes to hear
From someone else.’ And so I went along
Debating with myself, not swift nor sure.” (224-30)

What is more, the Guard is notoriously inconsistent in the rationalizations of the outcome of his decision as well as the need to make one. In order to come to terms with his decision he initially invokes fate (234-5), only to blame chance some lines later for bringing him in this accursed position demanding decision in the first place (274-5). But this does not mean that the Guard sees human life as an existence in which a decision has no bearing on the outcome. That the assertion of one’s own decision whatever chance might bring is possible is clear in the Guard’s vow not to stand in front of Creon ever again:

GUARD: “... But whether he
Be found or not – for this must lie with chance –
You will not see me coming *here* again.”

The fact that he breaks his oath later on means that, unlike for Antigone, Creon, Oedipus, or Polyneices his *ethos* does not harbor some developed static value system. In the lack of any articulated internal constraints, the change of external conditions plays a significant role in the Guard’s decision making. In other words, however we interpret the Guard’s self-contradictory views on how the events in the world unfold (by chance or fate) the fact that one occasionally finds oneself in a position of decision remains. That much is clear from the account the Guard gives of his decision to break the vow he had made: “This time no lot was cast” (388-9). I take it then that this reversal on the Guard’s part is not due to any weakness of character i.e. that the Guard was not character determined to go back on his

words because his character was of poor stature. It is only a symptom of a deliberative reappraisal of the situation which is not constrained by some fixed value system.

This might be a good place to return briefly to tragic actions in order to show how deliberative reappraisal can be constrained by a strong value system. I do not use deliberative reappraisal as a synonym for deliberative account. Whereas the latter provides a description of how the initial tragic decision was made or a how a tragic action was executed (e.g. Antigone's account of burying Polyneices), the former signifies a situation in which the action is reexamined, new one (either truly novel one or just coming to the same decision once again) is made and an action is taken accordingly. The fact that a deliberative reappraisal of a tragic action can occur, as it does with Creon, does not mean that either the initial or the later decision are character undetermined. They both are. The difference is that in the light of Teiresias' prophecy the external conditions have changed in such a way that the internal constraints, which up until now played no role, become relevant.

Teiresias' prophecy introduces what seems to be an inconsistency in Creon's actions. How can he pardon a traitor of the city in order to save his son if the city is Creon's highest value? The point is that the conflict is not between saving his son who is outside of the polis boundaries and punishing the traitors of the polis, but between saving his *polis*-son and punishing the traitors. Creon can still hold the civil view of family, because although Haemon did side with Antigone he did so only in words. Thus, unlike Antigone, Haemon is still within the boundaries of the family that is the polis (as is the case with Ismene). Therefore, Creon can be deeply worried about his son's wellbeing and at the same time hold the view of the polis as a family. The fact that Creon acts as he does only suggests that there is an implicit internal constraint in Creon's value system which holds the life of his polis-son dearer than the death of the polis-enemy, not unlike the constraint Antigone explicitly makes public (a brother's corpse is to be honored even prior to husband's or son's). Insofar, Creon is impelled to this action as much as Oedipus is compelled to find out the truth. The necessity from Oedipus' and Polyneices' exclamations quoted above is echoed in Creon's:

"How hard it is! And yet one cannot fight against
Necessity. – I will give way." (1070-1)

Although not a tragic action on its own right, because it fails to satisfy condition A, deliberative reappraisal of a tragic action is nevertheless a character determined action. I believe this does not hurt my case that only special kinds of actions are character determined.

The deliberative reappraisal of a tragic action is (at least) as special as the tragic act itself. First of all, it occurs only when the tragic action, and not only the tragic decision, is made. Secondly it does not divert the outcomes of a tragic action. Finally, external conditions need to change radically in order for a reappraisal with a different outcome to take place at all.⁵⁴

After this digression by the way of Creon's reappraisal let us return to other non-tragic heroes and their actions. Ismene's case provides another good illustration of a character undetermined action. Although initially resolved not to have anything to do with Polyneices' burial from fear of Creon's edict (79-80), when Antigone is caught Ismene is quick to claim (falsely) that she was an accomplice and practically forfeits her life. Ismene twice gives the same reason for doing so: she cannot live if her sister dies (538, 556). This might be an additional internal constraint then, similar to Antigone's or Creon's. Nevertheless, after both sisters are escorted to the palace we hear nothing more of Ismene. She is neither sentenced as Antigone is, nor does she take her own life. But if the reason stated above was truly compelling in the sense Antigone's values were, Ismene would commit suicide. Insofar she refrained from doing so not even the decision to present herself as an accomplice can be seen as character determined because the same value yields two different decisions without any change in external circumstances.⁵⁵

I do not have space to go into more detail but I believe the Guard's and Ismene's case suffice in showing that there are relevant actions performed which are neither character determined nor tragic. Furthermore, I have no illusions that I could prove beyond doubt that every least important non-tragic action is character undetermined. But the same would hold for trying to prove the opposite. The reason for that is that there are just no available clues when we are dealing with agents such as Messengers, or the Corinthian shepherd. The text does not concern itself in detail with their characters and why should it. On the other hand, once when it does resolution can be made, and I believe I have done that on paradigmatic cases. Now, I finally turn to tragic heroes and character undetermined actions they perform.

Again, what needs to be shown is that a reversal of a decision takes place without any significant change in external conditions. Oedipus' behavior in *Oedipus at Colonus* is exemplary of that on more than one occasion. On three counts Oedipus clearly reverses his decision. Twice the Chorus asks of him to tell his tale, and on both occasions Oedipus finally

⁵⁴ See footnote 7 for more details.

⁵⁵ To make my point it is unnecessary for me to provide an exact reason for why Ismene now behaves as she does. Many critics have tried to do that only to agree in the end with G. Steiner that the debate persists. I only needed to show that the same situation yielded different actions.

grants them their wish after initial refusal (208-18, 510-20). The Chorus merely pleads with him and Oedipus eventually gives in. (Remember how impossible it was for Oedipus to yield to Theban shepherd or to Iocasta). It is similar with Antigone's and Theseus' pleas for Oedipus to talk with Polyneices (1175-1203). Their words do not change the situation in any significant way; Oedipus is as scornful of his son as ever (the proof of which will be the curse/oracle he will shortly reveal to Polyneices) and this was the initial reason given for refusing to speak with him (1174). Nevertheless, Oedipus yields (1205).

I believe these examples together suffice in showing that I have not cast my net too widely. I have delimited non-tragic actions from tragic ones and shown that the latter, when dealt with in detail, come out as character undetermined. Furthermore, I have also demonstrated that tragic heroes can perform actions which are also character determined and non-tragic. Now I turn to the final argument for my take on the view implied by Theban plays.

A CASE FOR CHARACTER DETERMINISM

A ROLE FOR EXTERNAL NECESSITY

It has been noted earlier that not all tragic actions can be cast in terms of over-determination regardless of the term's conceptual (in)coherence. That is why over-determination could not have been the criterion of tragic action. Nevertheless, the fact that a number of tragic actions can be cashed out in those terms suggests that there is necessity beyond that of character which plays a role in human actions.⁵⁶ To insist on an exclusive role for character determinism in accounting for tragic actions without explaining (away) external necessity is surely to commit a fallacy. Even in *Antigone*, in which prophecies do not play a crucial role, prophecies are present. Then, it is clear that we need to figure out what the status of external necessity in connection with internal necessity is. If a given action is both externally and internally necessitated then – as it is *prima facie* not unreasonable to think of Polyneices' tragic action – we need to resolve incoherence stemming from the notion of over-determination.

Sandis identifies two ways out of this predicament by claiming that either: 1) double causation does not necessarily imply over-determination, or 2) actions are not doubly caused, rather merely doubly motivated.⁵⁷ In the latter case external factors merely play a motivational role and the final action is up to the character. Then, there could be no necessity beyond that of character compulsion which always values one set of motives over the other.⁵⁸

The problem with this solution is that it does not consider an important articulation of external necessity – prophecy. There are instances in which we cannot simply translate external necessity of an event to motivation of an action leading to that event.⁵⁹ Take Teiresias prophecy in *Antigone*. It is an unconditional prophecy about the impending disaster. It is true that it is a motivational trigger for tragic reappraisal but that is not the relevant action here. The relevant action is Creon's proclamation. But, from this point of view the prophecy

⁵⁶ Vernant (1988) made a move in which internal necessity was added next to the external one.

⁵⁷ A similar view is espoused by Williams (1993): "[W]hen the gods do intervene, they do not standardly do so by simply making people do things—winding them up, so to speak, and pointing them in a certain direction". (p.29)

⁵⁸ It should be noted that Sandis argues for facticity rather than psychological or character determinism. He maintains: "Doods et al. are conflating the motivation and/or enablement of action with its actual production". (pp. 363). I believe I have not conflated the two by the very fact that I have distinguished between character determined and undetermined actions.

⁵⁹ And this is not to be unable to do the opposite i.e. to translate internal motivation into external necessity as I will show below.

fails to play any kind of motivational force for the initial tragic action. Insofar, the feeling of external necessity lingers on.

As far as the former case is concerned there are two possibilities. One is to deny that there are ontologically distinct causes and to claim that sphere of gods is merely a dramatic description of a singular natural sphere as does H.D.F. Kitto.⁶⁰ The other is to stick with double causation and hold that one agent would not suffice for the execution of an action.⁶¹ The problem with the latter solution is that it is simply not true that a single agent is not sufficient for performing an action. The act of self-mutilation (1276-9) is obviously that kind of an act.⁶² No deity is helping Oedipus in his act. This is why I turn to Kitto's account.

Although none of the authors like Nilsson, Dodds, or Winnington-Ingram would ever think of tragic heroes as puppets in the hands of destiny, Kitto's original contribution to this claim was eliminating over-determination. He saw the Greek gods – *theoi* – as “the natural order of events; they are not ‘supernatural’ at all, except that they are immortal and omnipresent.”⁶³ Insofar, they are exactly like the laws of nature which operate within the natural sphere and are morally neutral. They exercise the original meaning of *dike* – the reestablishment of disturbed equilibrium through retribution and do so in the physical world as well as the world of human actions and passions. Thus conceived, *dike* is an immanent and not transcendent principle of human actions.

From this perspective the prophecy of the misfortune that will befall Creon is for Kitto merely shorthand for saying that none of this happened by chance. It happened according to the law of retribution.⁶⁴ And I add that the initial imbalance was produce by another law-like behavior – character determinism – that when confronted with a particular action a person of strong character is bound to perform a tragic action.

What Sandis objects the most to this notion, is that it eliminates alien forces that are out of one's control – something crucial to Greek tragedy. Although a valid point, Sandis' objection can be made compatible with Kitto's idea (to an extent). If Kitto is read together

⁶⁰ Kitto (1958).

⁶¹ This view is presented shortly in A. Poole (2005). Sandis compares it to two people moving a car. It would be too difficult for only one to do it.

⁶² Vernant (1988) is wrong to conclude that this action is doubly caused. Even if we consider Apollo as an external force he only decreed suffering for Oedipus, not suffering by way of self-mutilation.

⁶³ Kitto (1958), pp.40-42.

⁶⁴ Kitto is clear in saying that Sophocles was not aware of the free will/determinism dichotomy and that he was concerned with another debate – chance versus all-governing law of things. My notion of *character determinism* is still in perfect accord with his stance on the debate insofar it pertains to the domain of human action.

with my claim about character determinism then the alien forces are still beyond our control only now they come from within and not from outside.⁶⁵ Moreover, Kitto's leveling of the ontological field enables us to account for the problematic Teiresias' prophecy in terms of character motivation.⁶⁶ The prophecy is now merely an articulation of the outcome of Creon's initial tragic action necessarily performed in virtue of his character. In the same manner in which the tragic action was necessary (in virtue of character determinism) Heamon's death is also necessary (in virtue of the law of retribution).

It should also be noted that the prophecy above shares a crucial common feature with Teiresias' oracle prophesized to Oedipus in *Oedipus Rex*, as well as to Oedipus' prophecy revealed to Polyneices in *Oedipus at Colonus*. All of these prophecies are announced only after the tragic act had already been decided and serve as a reprimand against it. The fact that the prophecies come out as reactions to a deed already committed (or at least decided on without a chance of reappraisal which would avoid tragedy) suggests that the oracles are not so much articulations of external necessity as they are articulations of the outcomes of actions performed due to internal necessity. In *Antigone* Creon had already necessarily decided to entomb Antigone and now Teiresias spells out the outcomes of his action: his son will die. In *Oedipus Rex* Oedipus is already necessarily determined to solve the riddle of pollution and Teiresias reveals to him the dreadful outcomes of his action. In *Oedipus at Colonus* Polyneices is necessarily unmoved in his campaign against Thebes and Oedipus merely tells him how catastrophic an end that will have.

Although the prophecies discussed above fit perfectly well with Kitto's scheme we should feel uneasy with a project that tries to articulate every prophecy in terms of internal necessity i.e. character determinism. There are prophecies which just do not fit this scheme. One revealed to Laius and Oedipus is exactly of that sort. And the way in which the execution of the prophecy is accounted for proves to be very informative for the relation between external and internal necessity. I have already noted that Oedipus' parrincest is never discussed in CDO terms by anybody. This strongly implies that, to put it in Aristotelian terms, these actions are never considered as being up to Oedipus but rather as products of external compulsion. This, in turn, allows us to articulate the distinction between a tragic and a

⁶⁵ Furthermore, Kitto's account does not eliminate those external forces such as family relations or money which have received much attention in Nussbaum (1986, 1994) and Lear (1998).

⁶⁶ Sandis had to translate external necessity into internal motivation but following Kitto we only need to do the opposite.

horrendous action in another way. If the action was not up to the character then, although it can be deemed horrendous, it cannot be deemed tragic.

I believe then, it has been made clear that Sophocles depicts a world in which actions can be either undetermined or determined and the latter either externally or internally so. I turn now to one last remaining issue.

FINAL ARGUMENT FOR CHARACTER DETERMINISM

Here, another question of conceptual coherence needs to be addressed. First, let me remind again that character determinism as I have been using it does not apply to all agents and all actions. It is particular insofar it concerns only tragic actions and tragic heroes – those strong characters unyielding in the face of extreme dissuasions. Such an idea in itself is not problematic – there are laws which hold for certain kind of entities and not for others (Pythagoras's theorem holds only for right angle triangles). But, it is still one thing to identify tragic actions on a structural or narrative level of the drama, and quite another to articulate how exactly a mechanism of character determination is operational for one set of actions, and not for the other.

For this I again turn to Dennett's example. It is indeed a special kind of case Dennett addresses. And the 'special' I am driving at here is his general inability to torture someone for thousand dollars. So it is in fact a special kind of action he is unable to perform under considerable number of variations. Furthermore, it is in virtue of his character that he is unable to do it. Although his character might not be that special it is certainly not universal – there are people who would torture someone for thousand dollars and there are people who would torture someone for zero dollars. The point here is that the action relates to him in a way that he is strongly biased towards (or against) it and is so in the virtue of his character. And his character is something we have no problem understanding insofar it is normal. He could not have said that he could not do otherwise but refuse to eat an apple when offered one and expect us to comprehend what he is claiming (at least not without giving qualifications of the sort that he is allergic to fructose and that he would surely die if he took a bite). We see no way in which this action is constrained by his character, appetites, or some special conditions and that is why we say, and he would agree, that he could decide either way.

What is important to have in mind with Theban plays is that they do not really concern themselves with actions such as choosing between eating an apple and drinking milk. The

non-tragic actions we have identified are not trivial at all; they usually entail considerable worries. But imagine if Dennett found himself in the place of the Guard from *Antigone*. He could not say that he would be strongly biased towards one action or the other without giving strong reasons why. These reasons would have to boil down to some crystal clear internal constraint; they should spell out some feature of Dennett's character in virtue of which he is bound to act in one way or the other. It is exactly that kind of constraint that the Guard does not have and that is why he is character undetermined in his action. In the absence of specific internal constraints there is no reason why an action would be character determined.

Nothing seriously changes if we take the tragic hero. There is nothing in Oedipus' character in *Oedipus at Colonus* – a special drive to hide his shame or a pre-articulated desire to exonerate himself – that would urge him to tell or to refuse to tell his tale. This action is completely different from stopping his investigation. That he cannot do because he is the one who solves riddles. On the other hand, telling his tale, or not, is open to him. To put it differently; to argue that some agent actions cannot be character undetermined if others are, is to claim that we can easily understand Dennett in saying that he is strongly biased towards any action without explaining why.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis I have aimed to reconstruct a theory of action which I believe is implicit in Theban plays. I have done so by specifying two types of actions: tragic and non-tragic ones. The former I have identified with recourse to two conditions which pay close attention to the text. Furthermore, I have argued that the dramatic manner in which the characters performing those actions are described strongly suggest that these actions are character determined. Similarly, on the basis of character descriptions, I have demonstrated that non-tragic actions are character undetermined. Finally, I have tackled issues of possible conceptual incoherence. I have presented two types of prophecies and the ways in which they relate to tragic actions; one fitting Kitto's thesis and the other functioning as true external necessity. In the end, I have explained why this implicit theory of action is conceptually coherent.

I would like to end on a following note. It has to be said that any task dealing with a literary text inevitably must significantly rely on interpretation. Someone might not agree with the picture I have painted here, but nevertheless, as Stanley Cavell points out,⁶⁷ to give a reading of a text is only to give a complete, coherent and particular interpretation and not to provide every possible interpretation. As long as there are no gaps or inconsistencies within the account I have laid out here, this thesis should be regarded as a viable reading of Theban plays.

⁶⁷ Cavell, S. (1969)

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