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Tragedy, Ethics and International Relations

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Is the notion of tragedy one that students of international ethics ought to take seriously? I pose the question against the following background: Some time ago James Mayall, now Emeritus Professor of International Relations (IR) at Cambridge University, challenged my general approach to international ethics as being too progressive, optimistic and teleological. He claimed that constitutive theory, a position within normative IR theory on which I have been working for some years now, failed to take account of the tragic dimensions of international relations and that this was a weakness of the theory. I took him to be making a point about normative IR theory more generally. In this chapter I wish to evaluate these charges. What I wish to explore in this chapter is not merely the narrow charge against constitutive theory, but the wider question about the pertinence of tragedy for those concerned with ethics in international relations.

In this chapter then, I wish to consider whether the failure to deal explicitly with tragedy is a weakness of present day approaches to international ethics in general. The same question may be raised in a number of different ways: Ought those who confront ethical issues in international relations, whether as practitioners or theorists, to take account of tragedy? Is there a case to be made that books on ethics in international relations should include, as a central component, a section on tragedy? Should key decision-makers in international relations (presidents, foreign secretaries, diplomats, citizens) be given an education that includes in it the study of tragedy?

Friedrich Gutbrod completed a doctoral dissertation in 2001 titled *Irony, Conflict, Dilemma: Three Tragic Situations in International Relations* in which he made out a case for the importance of tragedy for the discipline of IR.¹ He pointed out that several of the great scholars in IR explicitly maintain the importance of an appreciation of tragedy for

those seeking to understand and act in the field of world politics. Those whom Gutbrod discusses are Herbert Butterfield, Reinhold Niebuhr and Hans Morgenthau.² I believe that many in the so-called English School (like Mayall) would support this position, as would most realists.

The potential for tragedy in international relations, according to these authors, arises from the fact that we live in a plural world in which different states (and the nations and peoples they contain) are guided in what they do, internally and externally, by a wide range of different ethical, religious and cultural codes. In this plural world there is no overarching set of values to which all subscribe. There is also no clear goal towards which these diverse states, nations and peoples are moving. Where any particular state sets out to implement its preferred set of values in the world, it is likely to come up against resistance. It will encounter a world in which its own power confronts that wielded by other actors. The reality of power politics might in turn bring about consequences far removed from those originally sought; it might bring about tragic consequences. E. H. Carr warned of the dangers of attempting to impose our own ideas of how the world ought to be on the world as it really is. On his view we require some 'utopian' ideas about how the world ought to be, but these need to be tempered by a close study of power relations as they exist. Underlying these and determining them is a human nature that is unchanging, one which is, among other things, fuelled by egoism and the passions. It is not wholly governed by reason. Given this, we need to take note of the essential tension between realism and idealism.³ A failure to do this may have tragic consequences.

Hans Morgenthau, for whom 'all foreign policy is a struggle for the minds of men',⁴ put it as follows:

Political realism refuses to identify the moral aspirations of a particular nation with the moral laws that govern the universe ... The light-hearted equation between a particular nationalism and the counsels of Providence is morally indefensible, for it is that very sin of pride against which the Greek tragedians and the Biblical prophets have warned rulers and ruled. That equation is also politically pernicious, for it is liable to engender the distortion in judgement which, in the blindness of crusading frenzy, destroys nations and civilizations – in the name of moral principle, ideals or God himself.⁵

For realists such as Morgenthau, tragedy is what follows from a 'blindness to the realities of international affairs'.⁶ He claims that there is a 'tragic presence of evil in all political action'.⁷ For Reinhold Niebuhr,

human action in both the public and private spheres is often both tragic and worthy of pity. Any analysis which did not take note of this he would consider flawed.⁸

Before I turn to consider the worth of the notion of tragedy, let me make some general points about ethics in IR. In recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in the academic study of ethics in international relations. Where once the discipline eschewed ethics and focused on the study of power in world politics, since the end of the Cold War there has been a remarkable growth in what has come to be known as normative IR theory. A host of books have been written, new journals have emerged, and most departments that teach IR have at least one or two modules that deal with ethical issues.⁹ Typical topics which are covered in the literature and in the specialized modules are: justice in international relations, human rights in a world of states, intervention, the right to self determination, secession, justice in war, governance, democratization of international institutions and many others. A quick glance through some of the module outlines, journal articles and monographs will reveal that 'tragedy' has not been a focus of attention in any of this work. Ought it to have been?

Typically scholars and practical politicians concerned with ethical issues in international relations have sought answers to the general question: What from an ethical point of view would we be justified in doing under the circumstances? The kinds of circumstances in which this question comes to the fore might include those where a decision has to be made whether it would be ethical to go to war or not, whether it would be ethical to intervene in the domestic affairs of a sovereign state, whether power should be deployed to promote human rights in cultures and places where they have not traditionally been respected. A full list of ethical questions that face actors in international relations today would be much longer. This is but a small sample from a long list. Is there reason to suppose that those seeking answers to these questions should devote time and energy to the study of tragedy?

Many people have devoted considerable effort to the study of tragedy. Their work is part of a tradition that spans two-and-a-half-thousand years. Those in this tradition have not primarily been concerned with 'tragedy' understood in its colloquial sense in which it is used as a synonym for 'disaster'. The writers in this tradition focus on tragedy as a specialized notion, which is both complex and contentious. The focus of the tradition has been on a set of plays. This is the art form which has been used to exemplify tragedy and which has provided the material for much of the philosophical discussion surrounding it.

Prima facie tragedy as it has come down to us in the plays of the Greek playwrights such as Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, and subsequently and most famously in the plays of Shakespeare, seems to be directly pertinent to ethics and pertinent to those seeking answers to the questions mentioned. This would seem to be the case because the very stuff of tragedy is ethics. In the great tragedies the audience is always presented with a set of ethical problems of a certain kind. At the core of every tragedy is an ethical struggle. There are many forms that the ethical drama in tragedy takes, but there can be no doubting that the tragedies turn on ethical matters. In the great tragedies the audience is presented with protagonists such as Oedipus, Antigone, Agamemnon and Hamlet, who are shown to be enmeshed (whether they know it or not) in ethical webs that are particularly excruciating for the characters and, of course, for the audience insofar as it empathizes with what is being presented. The same applies to the romantic tragedy *Romeo and Juliet*.

At a very abstract level one may say that in these plays 'tragedy' identifies a dramatic rendering of a story in which the audience is confronted with protagonists, portrayed as worthwhile and praiseworthy people, who, when confronted with a particular problem, act in accordance with what for them are core ethical principles. Yet by so doing, they bring about consequences that cause great suffering both to themselves and others and which undermine key ethical principles which they themselves hold dear. What makes the action in the plays 'tragic' is that the protagonist is shown in situations where doing the ethically right thing brings about harm and suffering to himself (or herself) and those affected by the deed. In tragic stories what was done was not a mistake. The audience is invited to appreciate how actors with moral stature cannot but do what is ethically required of them; to do otherwise would be perfidious indeed. But in doing what is required of them they bring about painful consequences. In some cases the protagonist only comes to see with hindsight how his/her own action, which he/she had thought ethical, was the cause of great suffering. Here the protagonist does not see the tragic consequences at the moment of action, but the audience sees them (or anticipates them). In others, the tragic dimension may be seen at the moment of decision and action.

The background against which tragedies emerge is one in which we the audience can see the protagonists embedded in a world of conflicting and contradictory ethical practices. This is a world in which actors are simultaneously participants in different practices that are contradictory from an ethical point of view. Choosing to follow the ethic of

one practice brings the actor into conflict with the ethic of another practice to which he/she is also committed. Doing the right thing in the one involves doing wrong in the other.

If the very stuff of tragedy is ethics, it seems puzzling, to say the least, that normative IR theorists have not paid more attention to it. This puzzling *lacuna* is not only to be found in the field of ethics in IR, but is also found in the wider field of Political Studies (within which IR is a constituent subfield). Undergraduates in the English-speaking world who have read Politics at university are not required to cover the topic of tragedy. Typically they will be required to have studied some of the works of Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Kant, Hegel, Locke, Bentham, Mill and Rawls. The key concepts which students are required to analyse include, among others, justice, equality, liberty, democracy and human rights, but tragedy does not feature on their curriculum. Why not? Is this a shortcoming in Political Studies as it is presently taught?

In what follows I shall be considering whether the absence of an interest in tragedy has indeed been a flaw in Political Studies and IR.

Tragedy: What is it?

As indicated above, the idea of tragedy has been the subject of a long and distinguished scholarly tradition. I am not intending to make a substantive contribution to this literature (and I am also not qualified to do so). What I aim to do is to set out in a crude form some of the main features of tragedy as they have emerged from the tradition. Having done this I shall then attempt to determine how, if at all, knowledge of this specialized tradition could make a contribution to those seeking answers to the pressing ethical questions in contemporary international relations.

What are the identifying features of tragedy? I take this question to be applicable to tragic plays, novels, films and, of course, to tragedy as it occurs and is told of in everyday life whether it be at the micro level of the family or the macro level of world politics. Of course not all the things we refer to as 'tragic' exhibit exactly the same features. Not all the events we would label 'tragic' exhibit all the characteristics that I mention below. The term is flexible and evolving. Cataloguing the details is, and always will be, an ongoing task as new forms of tragedy appear. Nevertheless, there is a core set of meanings to our use of this term. There are family resemblances between the different uses and definitions of the term. Many of the core meanings derive from the ancient Greek tradition of tragic drama.

In order to bring the features of tragedy into focus let me set out a tragedy in the realm of international relations that never occurred but which might well have. The characters are real, but the particular tragic event I recount is hypothetical. In the time of *apartheid*, Breyten Breytenbach was one of South Africa's internationally acclaimed authors. He was a radical critic of the regime and as such became a member of a secret opposition movement that aimed to destabilize the government. His account of his efforts in this direction is presented in his book *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*.¹⁰ His brother Jan Breytenbach was a General in the South African Defence Force (SANDF) operating in Angola. He was a charismatic leader seen by right wing whites as a hero of the struggle against communism. It might well have happened that the General's forces came face to face with a group of insurgents lead by his brother, the 'Albino Terrorist'. One or both brothers might have faced the choice to advance 'the cause' and risk killing his brother or to protect his brother and undermine 'the cause'.¹¹ For the sake of this illustration let us suppose that Jan, the General, ordered his helicopter gunships to locate and destroy a 'terrorist' column in transit through the bush of Angola without knowing at the time that his brother was in it. In this action his brother is killed. Or we can imagine the other brother, Breyten, setting off a landmine to destroy a column of soldiers without knowing that his brother was leading it. What marks out both these accounts of an act and its consequences as tragic? It seems to me that the following cluster of features is crucial. In looking at this what must be kept in mind at every point is that we are discussing representations (plays as written or performed, stories as told or written) and what ethical configurations these present to us, the audience, of such representations.

I have presented to you, the audience, an account (a tale, a story, a description of a set of events) which shows the protagonists (Jan and Breyten) each acting for the strongest of ethical reasons, but bringing about consequences which are painful to them (and us) when judged by a rival ethic which itself has a claim on the protagonists in question. In this story as I have set it up, we take it that both brothers are bound by the ethic of family life. But each is also linked to a military organization (the SANDF in Jan's case and The Liberation Movement in Breyten's). The story indicates that in the circumstances portrayed, each brother would have had to choose to act in accordance with *either* the ethic embedded in that social practice we know as the family *or* in accordance with the ethic embedded in their respective military institutions. No compromise was possible. What the military institutions demanded of

each was diametrically opposed to what the family demanded of them. For Breyten the choice was between what was required of him as fighter for a liberation movement and what was required as a brother. For Jan it was the competition between what was required of him as a soldier in a standing army and as a brother.

What makes the story tragic is the conjunction of the ethical choice made with the consequences of that choice. The particular link that 'tragic' accounts make between act and consequence is to show, with the benefit of hindsight, that the protagonists were in a 'lose/lose' predicament. If General Jan Breytenbach had decided to uphold the ethic of family life by not attacking the enemy he would have dishonoured himself as a soldier and citizen of the *Apartheid State*. He would have lost something that was valuable to him. Given that he was constituted as a soldier in the SA Defence Force this loss would have been an ethically painful thing for him to suffer. But in the event, as we have imagined it, he chose to uphold the military ethic. This too was a losing manoeuvre, for by doing this he undercut the ethic associated with the other institution he valued, the family. A similar set of permutations can be constructed for Breyten, the freedom fighter. In this imaginary example we see both actors situated in circumstances in which each would have had to decide what to do, and whichever choice he made it would have consequences that would have been painful in terms of the ethic not chosen.

As indicated in the previous point, 'tragedy' is a term used to refer to a special relationship between an act undertaken for ethical reasons and its negative/painful consequences. A tragic account is thus a consequence-driven one. It invites an ethical evaluation of a series of events consisting of an act and its consequences. This kind of thinking is to be distinguished from forms of consequentialist thought, such as standard utilitarianism, however. Unlike utilitarian thought, the negative consequences we encounter in tragedies are not read as showing the original act to have been a mistake. For writers in the tragic tradition, the original act, even though it might have resulted in negative consequences, is still judged to have been an ethical thing to have done given the circumstances. For a utilitarian, in contrast, a set of negative consequences would show that the original action was based on a miscalculation. The original act would be judged to have been a mistake, in that it was not utility maximizing, and thus not ethical.

At the heart of all tragedy is an ethical *agon* (the metaphor refers to a duel or competition). In our example the *agon* is between the ethic associated with the social practice we refer to as the family, on the

one hand, and the ethic associated with the practices of military life, on the other. Another example might have as the *agon* the tension between family life and the ethical requirements of a polity such as a state. A famous example of this dilemma is to be found in Sophocles' play *Antigone*. Antigone's brother turned against his own state, Thebes. He was killed beyond the walls of the city. His sister Antigone says that the ethics of family life demand that she bury him. The ruler of Thebes, Creon, who is also Antigone's uncle, insists that the ethics of the polity demand that, as a traitor, Antigone's brother be left unburied outside the walls of the city. In the play the audience is exposed to the arguments of Antigone giving primacy to the ethics of the family, and to those of Creon spelling out the duties citizens owe to the state. The protagonists and the audience agonize about the conflicting requirements of each of these social practices. As always, a key feature of the *agon* is that no compromise is possible. In this case either one obeys the ethic of the family or that of the polity. There is no middle way. No harmonization of the ethics is thought possible. There is simply a tragic conflict between the two.

The *agon* reveals the element of *conflict* that is central to tragedy. The conflict with which tragedy concerns itself is that between two ethical forms both of which have a valid claim on the actor or actors involved.

In tragedy the conflict in the *agon* is not between a protagonist who is taken to be good and an antagonist who is understood to be the ethically unacceptable 'other'. These are not fights between good and evil, between the foreigner and us, or between friends and enemies. What gives tragedy its edge is the way in which the ethical positions in conflict are positions understood and endorsed by both the parties involved and by the audience. Tragedy, one might say, involves a conflict within our own ethical space. 'To agonize' is to be engaged with an internal ethical conflict.¹²

In some tragedies, at some point it dawns on the actor, the audience, or both, *post hoc*, that the deed which was done brought about *unanticipated consequences* which reveal the *agon* involved in the sequence.¹³ In such cases the unanticipated consequences that resulted from the course of action taken are a source of great and ongoing sorrow to the actor(s) in question. Aristotle referred to this moment of recognition as *anagnorisis*.¹⁴

In those series of events that are construed as tragic there is often an element of *irony*. What the actors intend does not come about and quite often their acts cause an outcome antithetical to their own judgement

about what would constitute a good ethical result. If it could be shown that General Breytenbach's military campaign in Angola hastened the end of *apartheid* instead of protecting it (which had been the original ethical justification for it), this would be a tragic irony. This indeed was the tragic irony for those many staunch Afrikaner nationalists who gave their lives for the ethic of 'separate development'. The *preipeteia* of tragedy shows how people, through actions performed with the best of intentions, destroy that which they would have protected.

At the heart of the tragic tradition is the belief that our ethical commitments cannot always be brought into harmony with one another in some overarching ethical architecture at the point of action, and that they do not result in the emergence of an ethically harmonious whole over time. Often we, just like the Breytenbach brothers in the example, find ourselves, embedded in ethical arrangements that are contradictory, conflictual and ambiguous. In the tradition of tragedy this is taken to be part of the human condition.

At a fundamental level those who write on tragedy (whether they be playwrights or IR scholars) wish to make it clear to us that it would be wrong to think that were people to act ethically, humankind's condition would progress or improve. For tragedy teaches us that even good people acting in ethically sound ways cannot be assured good outcomes, and, indeed, may themselves cause negative consequences through their ethical acts. If such tragic outcomes are possible among those close to us in our own families, churches, states and so on, it follows that the chances of progress will be even slighter when we encounter people with ethical systems sharply opposed to ours. 'For it is the perpetual tragic irony of the Tragedy of Life that again and again men do thus laboriously contrive their own annihilation, or ill the thing that they love.'¹⁵

In summary then, what we encounter in tragic accounts are good people striving to act ethically but discovering, either at the point of decision or after the event, that they are located in an ethical *agon* that shows their own deeds to have been ethically hurtful to them and to those to whom they feel themselves ethically accountable. With hindsight the actors or the audience might come to see ironic results flowing from the protagonists' deeds. A modern example in international relations is the United States (US) intervening in Somalia (operation 'Restore Hope' December 1992) for the best of ethical reasons, only to find that the consequences of this action were such that the war took on new and more destructive forms. The *agon* in this case would be between a view which advocated the primacy of the system of sovereign

states governed by the non-intervention rule, and a view which stressed the primacy of international civil society with its embedded ethic about individual human rights. The latest US intervention (with Britain) into Iraq started out with the best of ethical intentions, but turned into a tragedy.

Tragedies also occur when international organizations, like the United Nations (UN), set up structures to provide humanitarian aid to people in need and find that these structures themselves become central to elements in an escalating conflict. The UN attempted to create safe havens in Bosnia. Far from providing safety, these ended up trapping people in locations within which they could easily be targeted by the Serbian forces. Here again the *agon* would be between intervention and non-intervention. A final example might refer to the refugee camps in Zaire, set up for the soundest of ethical reasons to cope with the refugees fleeing conflict in Rwanda and Burundi in 1994, themselves becoming safe havens for the training of Interahamwe soldiers committed to continuing the genocide in Rwanda.

Possible benefits which the study of tragedy might provide for normative theorists

In this chapter I am exploring whether or not the study of tragedy is important/useful for those having to make difficult ethical decisions in the domain of international relations. For example, I have in mind those citizens who are trying to decide whether on ethical grounds they would be justified in participating in some specific war, or, whether they should refuse to do so. I am addressing statesmen and women who have to decide whether to commit resources to an intervention in a sovereign state with a view to protecting individual human rights there, or who have to make decisions about how to treat migrants, and so on through the many examples of ethical questions which confront all of us in international relations today. What has the tradition of tragedy to offer that may be of use to us in thinking about such matters?

There is a plausible response to the question that would bring this chapter to a speedy conclusion. This is that tragedy has nothing whatsoever to contribute to answering ethical questions, because ethical questions are about what to do in the future, whereas, tragedy is always a tale told about what happened in the past. The tragedian always uses hindsight to link an ethical act with a set of negative, often ironic, consequences. As we have seen, the punch in tragic stories, plays and real-life dramas comes from the link made between an actor's deeds,

their consequences and an *agon* (a conflict between rival ethics both considered to be binding on the protagonist(s)). Crucial to the tragic view is the conviction that even if the actor had had full knowledge of the consequences of his action, he or she would still have had to make an agonizing choice between the practices concerned. In some strong sense the negative consequences could not have been avoided, given the ways in which the actors in question were constituted in the conflicting practices. Thus, from the point of view of the tragic tradition it could not be useful for a person on the point of a decision to be told: 'Before making your decision be careful to avoid tragedy.' Those who argue from the tradition of tragedy do not believe that it is something that can be eradicated by simply taking more care about one's decisions. For it is precisely the consequences which an actor does *not* have in mind which could turn what seems to him or her an ethically sound course of conduct into a tragedy. It is precisely the unavoidable aspect of the ethical conflict (or *agon*) that besets the protagonists which produces the series of events (act and its consequences) as tragic. Another way of making this point is to note that it is precisely not the point of tragic accounts to highlight how the protagonist failed in his or her estimation of the consequences which would flow from a given course of action or to highlight how he or she failed to appreciate a way out of the *agon* confronting them. Aeschylus, Euripides, Sophocles and Shakespeare were not writing accounts which could be read as criticisms of their protagonists for failing to predict the likely consequences of their actions. In these plays the protagonists are not shown up as hapless social scientists. Quite the contrary, they are shown as having done their best to anticipate the future. But in spite of their best efforts, ironically, their ethical conduct backfires on them in unintended ways. This is what makes a tragedy of this particular series of acts and sequences. Furthermore, even had the protagonists known what the outcome of their action would be, they would still have regarded themselves as ethically bound to do what they did. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare is not to be understood as criticizing Hamlet for not making what was clearly the right choice. Instead, in the great tradition of tragic writers, he shows in this play how complex and contradictory the ethical imperatives that make their demands on us are. For these writers there is something tragic about the human condition both at the individual level and at the political one.

The conclusion indicated in the previous paragraph must be that if the writing of tragedy, and writing about it, is a backward looking enterprise, then it clearly cannot have anything to offer those worried about

forward looking questions such as, 'What is to be done?'. Knowledge of past tragedies cannot prevent new ones from happening. The injunction 'Act so as to prevent a tragedy' is nonsensical. It displays a misunderstanding of what tragedy is about. The only way in which tragedies could be avoided would be if actors had perfect information about the future, and if all the social practices within which we participate could be shown to be in perfect harmony with one another. Neither of these is plausible or even possible. Therefore, tragedy is always a possibility. 'Act so as to avoid tragedy' is a pointless command. It might even be a comic one.

In the light of the above, it would seem as if we must conclude that the study of tragedy is useless to those facing decisions with an ethical dimension. This conclusion is not warranted. For although the injunction 'avoid tragedy' cannot guide us to ethically sound decisions, there are ways in which knowledge of tragedy may have something to contribute to the solution of ethical problems. *An education in the tragic tradition can help us identify ethical problems and may help us understand certain key features of these problems.* It alerts us to the relationships that hold between an actor, the wider society within which he or she is constituted as an actor of a certain kind, ethics and the consequences of his or her acts.

By reading, watching and studying tragedies what is brought home to us are the ways in which the protagonists are constituted as the people they are within specific social practices, each of which has an ethic embedded in it. Thus, in the hypothetical example that I deployed above, we saw how each of the Breytenbach brothers was constituted in two social practices.¹⁶ Each was located in the family and in a military formation. In like manner in the play *Antigone* that I outlined above, we understand Antigone's decision as one that is guided by principles that are internal to the structure of family life within which she understands herself (and is recognized by others) as a daughter who has certain obligations to her brother. Similarly, we understand that Creon in his capacity as ruler within the polity has certain obligations which both he and others in the polity expect him to honour.

Tragedy reveals to us how being an actor under a certain description requires of us that we take the ethic of the practice in which we are established as such seriously. In reading tragedies (or watching them) we come to see that what is to count as ethical behaviour is not a free choice for the actors concerned. It is imposed on them by the practice within which they are constituted as the actors they are – brother, daughter, general, freedom fighter or king. For example, in *Antigone*, the

play makes it clear that *qua* daughter and *qua* King, Antigone and Creon are not free to choose whether or not to obey the ethical principles of family life and of the polity, respectively. Insofar as they occupy these roles, each is required to obey the dictates of the ethic embedded in these practices. This is not to deny that a specific interpretation of the ethic might be a contentious one arrived at only after much struggle. But this in no way diminishes the central point which is that as actors of a certain description they are required to attempt an interpretation of the ethic embedded in the constituting practice in question. Failure to do so would result in their having their status as actors of this kind put into question. The threat of being de-constituted, expelled or excommunicated from the practices in question acts as the imperative that forces actors to be in earnest about the ethic embedded in the practice.

Tragedy reveals to us how we are constituted as actors in a whole range of different social practices, each with its own ethic. It is this fact that makes tragedy possible. For a tragedy is what occurs when, through our simultaneous participation in several different social practices with conflicting ethics, a set of consequences arises which, from an ethical point of view, is extremely painful for us. Thus tragedies occur through our being simultaneously participants in families and in military formations, churches and states, nations and states, and so on. Antigone was a sister and a subject at the same time. Creon was King and an uncle. Tragedy reveals how each of the practices within which we are constituted as actors of a certain kind imposes on us a set of ethical imperatives. It shows how it often happens that these come to clash with one another. It shows how we as actors can be torn apart by this kind of ethical clash within, as it were, our own plural, contradictory and conflictual ethical universe.

Tragic stories demonstrate how certain kinds of ethical dilemmas do not merely involve a decision-maker choosing between rival ethical principles – do not merely involve him or her choosing whether to commit to this or that principle – but involve a decision which, either immediately or in its consequences, causes the decision-maker to undermine his or her own ethical standing in some practice which was/is important to him or her. For example, a state may choose to intervene in the domestic affairs of another in order to protect human rights. If it does so, it undermines its standing in the practice of states, which has as a central component the non-intervention rule. If it fails to do so, it undermines its standing within the international practice of rights (global civil society). Another way of putting this is to say that tragedy reveals to us how by acting in terms of the ethic internal to one practice

an actor undermines his or her ethical standing in another. For what tragedy purports to show is that our ethical commitments sometimes do not cohere, and, sometimes, positively conflict. The tragic view throws doubt on any suggestion that our ethical commitments can be brought into harmony.

Central to the tradition of tragedy is the importance which writers in it attach to the unanticipated consequences that may follow even the most ethical of actions. The tradition shows how unexpected consequences can thoroughly thwart the intention of the actor(s). These unexpected results arise because there are so many forces operative in the world in which we live. In the natural world our scientific expertise is simply not good enough to enable us to predict everything that will come about. In the social world, though, things are far more difficult in that what we do often causes reactions from other actors. How they will react to what we have done depends on their interpretations. Different actors will interpret what we have done in different ways. It is difficult if not impossible to predict them all. What someone does in the belief that it was the ethically right thing to do, might, in some broad sense, cause misinterpretations of the act in question that in turn bring about tragic consequences. Thus, for example, where the US intended to get aid to those who needed it in Somalia, what they did was (mis)interpreted by many in Somalia who saw the 'aid' as a strategic resource to be used in the political struggles within the region. The outcome was tragic – not at all what the US had intended.

Tragic accounts reveal the complexity of our own ethical practices and the relationships that hold between them. In much recent writing on ethics in international relations, attention has been paid to the problem of 'other cultures' with their associated ethical commitments that are different from ours. There is no doubt that this is a very real problem for ethical theory. But the tragic tradition highlights an equally important and possibly even more difficult class of ethical problem which is the one we encounter *within* ourselves as individuals, and *within* those social practices (families, churches, states and international organizations) that constitute who we are.

What emerges from the foregoing discussion is that *an education in the tradition of tragedy makes explicit the form* of some of the more intractable ethical problems we encounter in the course of our lives. But making explicit the shape of a problem is still far removed from solving it. As an actor with an understanding of tragedy stands before an ethical problem, he or she will know that, through no fault of his or her own, it may come about that his or her action could bring about what he or

she specifically seeks to avoid. The actor knows that were this to happen this would cause him or her long lasting unhappiness. Furthermore, he or she knows that he or she might at some future stage in life be forced to make a tragic choice in the context of some *agon* that has not yet occurred to him or her.

In the previous paragraphs I have outlined some of the features of the circumstances of ethical choice that are highlighted in the tradition of tragedy. But while knowing what these are gives us a sense of the social circumstances in which our ethical decisions will have to be made, this knowledge still does not guide us to any particular ethical decision.

Tragic accounts reveal to us how actors from time to time become victims of the complex ethical arrangements within which they (and we) live. Besides revealing these to us, accounts of tragic events also put major ethical questions to us. This, I wish to argue, is the greatest contribution which the tradition of tragedy has to make to contemporary normative IR theory. Those who produce tragic texts challenge us (the audience) to consider whether the ethical arrangements that gave rise to the tragedies ought to be reformed or whether they ought to be changed. In other words they invite us to consider the overall ethical architecture of the multiple social practices within which we are constituted as the actors we are. They invite us to consider the relationship between the social practices that produced the *agon* which led to the tragedy. This level of ethical evaluation is, of course, not available to the protagonist(s) in any particular tragedy. The Breytenbach brothers, Antigone, Oedipus, Agamemnon, Creon, Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet and all the other famous victims of tragedy had to make difficult decisions within the practices within which they were constituted as brothers or sisters, generals, freedom fighters, kings, princes or princesses. Given that these practices were constitutive of whom they were, they had no option *qua* brothers, sisters, generals, kings or princes but to take the ethic embedded in these practices seriously. But we as the audiences of such tragic stories are not faced with this imperative. In the light of what we have seen and heard, we can, at our leisure, consider the practices which produced the *agon* and can give careful consideration to the relationships which hold between them and between the ethical codes embedded in them. We do this with a view to the consideration of the eradication of the antagonistic relationship between them through institutional reform.

In traditional societies where the institutional structures are thought to have been put in place by gods (or a god), by nature, or are thought of simply as 'the given' which cannot be changed, it may well have been

the case that viewing tragedy did not lead to thoughts about institutional reform. But we no longer think of social practices as being static, stable and given for all time. Instead, we are well aware of the possibilities of transformation. In short we are well aware that existing social practices are in a broad sense social constructs. This point is a constant refrain of almost all post-positivist approaches to social theory.

How might a tragic account lead us to consider social transformation? Let us consider Breyten Breytenbach, the freedom fighter. We have seen how a conflict between what was required of him as a brother and what was required as a member of the liberation movement might have led him to make a tragic choice. We can see how, for him, his simultaneous membership of both practices might have landed him in the classic tragic lose/lose position. But we the audience are in a position to evaluate the *agonistic* practices in their interrelationship to one another. Are the ethics of these two practices fundamentally at odds with one another, such that people who participate in both will inevitably find themselves in tragic circumstances? Or are they related to one another in such a way that a tragic outcome will be the rare exception? How important is membership of these practices for our own sense of ourselves? From our point of view, do the claims of family always trump those of liberation movements? It might be thought that a liberation movement is a public institution designed to pursue a just cause and that claims made in its name should prevail over those made in the name of a private institution such as the family. Others might argue that a liberation movement that did not take family values seriously would not be one for which it would be worth fighting. In the audience of the original tragedy we might find some who would argue one way and others who would put forward the contrary point of view. I am not concerned with taking sides on this matter. All I wish to point out is that for many people in the contemporary world tragic stories raise the possibility of changing, reforming or transforming the social institutions under consideration. At its most general, the question posed to us by all tragic stories is: Are there good reasons to maintain and nurture the social institutions that produced this tragedy? In answer to this question some Marxists have argued that the family is not an institution worth preserving (or not in its present form) because it is a patriarchal and bourgeois institution. They would advocate reconstituting our social institutions to do away with the family in its bourgeois form. Others might take the family as the primary social institution and argue that only those institutions that protect and nurture it should be preserved. On this view, liberation movements and armies that do not have as a primary goal

the preservation of family life do not deserve our support. Such people would argue that military organizations should be so organized that the soldiers in them always recognize the primacy of family loyalties. The Mafia and some of the ruling families in the Middle Eastern states make just such a case. Where there is a conflict of loyalty between state and family, family wins. Here again I do not wish to enter into this particular debate. My concern once again is to point out that all tragic stories raise such questions for modern audiences. Let me discuss in more detail one contemporary *agon* which is global in scale and which creates the conditions for any number of tragedies. I shall briefly indicate some of the questions about social transformation that it raises.

A modern tragedy and the constitutional questions it raises

Many of us have found ourselves to be the tragic victims of what appears to be an agonistic relationship between the two most powerful global practices of our time. We consider ourselves to be rights holders in the global society of rights holders. For the purposes of this chapter let us call this 'global civil society'. In this society, we regard ourselves as rights holders and recognize all other people as holding equal sets of rights to those that we claim for ourselves. Quite often we refer to this set of rights as 'natural rights' in order to indicate that having these rights does not depend on the *largesse* of the state within which one finds oneself. As members of global civil society, we criticize all individual and collective actors who do not respect people's civil society rights like the right to life, the right not to be assaulted, tortured, imprisoned without a fair trial, the right to freedom of association, freedom of speech, conscience and the right to academic freedom. But, and here the potential for tragedy emerges, all of us who consider ourselves to be rights holders in global civil society simultaneously consider ourselves to be the bearers of citizenship rights within the society of democratic and democratizing states. As such, we expect others to respect the rights of the sovereign states within which we are constituted as citizens. We expect others to recognize our state's right to non-interference in its domestic affairs and so on.

Our simultaneous membership of these two social practices regularly puts us into predicaments in which whatever we do will have tragic consequences. For example, as members of global civil society we recognize other people as holders of the same set of fundamental human rights that we claim for ourselves. Within global civil society we, as individual rights holders, ought to be free to make use of our basic rights

as we see fit. We ought to be free to move about seeking our fortunes, making friends, studying, praying together, participating in sport, and so on, at will. In this social formation we ought to be constrained only by the general rule that in what we do we should not abuse the rights of others. However, as citizens of sovereign states we are often called upon to put impediments in the way of rights holders who are not members of our own state. We are called upon to do this in order to secure advantages for our own state and our own fellow citizens. In pursuit of national self-interest we are asked to agree to policies which hinder the free movement of migrants across our borders, to policies which tax goods produced abroad, and to many other kinds of regulations which discriminate against outsiders with a view to benefiting our own people. In every case in which we are confronted with a choice that asks us to choose either in favour of our state or in favour of individual human rights, we are confronted with what is at base a tragic choice. We find ourselves in the classic 'lose/lose' dilemma. If we choose to support our fellow citizens, we undermine the ethical commitments we have as members of global civil society, whereas, if we choose to uphold the individual rights which civilians have as members of global civil society, then we may rightly be criticized for ignoring the best interests of our fellow citizens. Governments and the citizens that support them regularly have to make decisions about policies imposing tariffs on foreign imports (thus supporting their fellow citizens) or opposing the imposition of tariffs (thus letting down their fellow citizens, but standing up for rights holders everywhere in the global free market). This is a classic tragic choice. Whichever way an individual chooses he or she ends up undermining his or her commitment to a set of values embedded in the other institution involved in this particular *agon*.

There are many different policy areas in contemporary international life in which individuals are finding themselves plunged into this particular tragic dilemma, a dilemma in which they confront an *agon* between the ethic embedded in global civil society on the one hand and the society of democratic states on the other. Let me briefly list a few of these.

This tragic dilemma is encountered with regard to problems associated with refugees in many different parts of the world. As members of global civil society, refugees have the same rights and freedoms as anybody else and ought to be able to move about freely. But wearing our hats as citizens of this or that state we come to see refugees as foreign invaders who threaten the national interest of our state. The tragic dilemma is also encountered with regard to free trade issues. As members of global

civil society we recognize that all people everywhere have the freedom to own property and to trade with it as they see fit. But as citizens of particular states we consider ourselves bound to curtail foreign traders insofar as they disadvantage our fellow citizens.

A similar tragic dilemma confronts us with regard to the intervention/non-intervention debate. As members of global civil society we recognize that all people everywhere have the same set of basic rights. Where these are infringed, as fellow members of global civil society, we ought to do what we can to protect their rights. This might require of us that we intervene in certain conflicts where rights are being abused. But doing this might require of us that we undermine the 'respect the borders of sovereign states' norm that is fundamental to the practice of sovereign states within which we enjoy citizenship rights. Whichever side we choose to support in this debate will require of us that we do things contrary to the requirements of the other practice. We shall be required to take a tragic choice.

Yet another tragic choice faces us when contemplating issues to do with distributive justice in international affairs. Here, a fundamental part of the *agon* is once again as follows: our membership of global civil society requires of us to regard all people everywhere as having the same basic set of individual rights. This has huge implications for questions to do with international distributive justice. But opposing this is the requirement imposed on us as citizens of a sovereign democratic and democratizing state which requires of us that we do what we can to advantage our own state even where this has to be done at the expense of other states (and at the expense of the citizens in them).

My central point raised in all the examples mentioned above is that in the modern world we repeatedly come up against many different forms of one specific modern *agon* that generates tragedies again and again. The basic form of this tragedy-inducing social conflict turns, we might say, on an ongoing *agon* between what is required of us by the ethic underpinning global civil society, on the one hand, and the ethic underpinning the society of democratic and democratizing states, on the other. We repeatedly have to choose on which side of this *agon* we wish to stand. Having chosen we then have to suffer the consequences of having undercut our commitment to the practice on the other side of the divide. We have to suffer the remorse involved in being the victim of a tragedy. But as I have already pointed out, once we characterize the relationship between these two practices as one that has already led to tragic outcomes and which will continue to do so, this is not the end of the matter. For we, as modern men and women, no longer consider the

social formations within which we live to be given for all time. These practices are not, metaphorically speaking, 'set in stone'. We do not have to shrug the dilemma off with, 'It cannot be avoided, life just is tragic'. Instead, we can consider changing them.

I find it difficult to find any reason for not asking big questions about the relationships which hold between major social practices which we, with hindsight, can see as practices that repeatedly produce tragic outcomes (that is, outcomes where protagonists end up having to act against what is required of them in one social practice by obeying the ethical imperatives of another). If it were the case that transformation of one practice (or the other) was not possible, then, by definition, our response to tragedy would simply have to be a stoic one. We would have to say to ourselves, 'This is just how the world is, it is filled with conflict and contradictions which we simply have to accept.'

But this is not how matters stand. Today we are well aware of the possibilities of transformation and we devote a lot of time and energy to thinking about it. Here are two recent examples of transformations successfully completed. For more than 40 years, the Republic of South Africa was constituted according to the principles of *apartheid*. The juxtaposition of this social form with Christian religious formations worldwide and with the global practice of human rights placed many people in the position of tragic victims. The articulation of such tragedies in books such as Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country*, and in many other books, films, plays and poems, over time, brought people to question the constitution of South Africa.¹⁷ The questioning of the ethics of this practice led people to political action that in turn led to a political transformation. There are no longer new tragic victims of that particular tragedy-producing *agon*.

In a similar vein, the conditions for tragedy that prevailed in Europe during the two World Wars of the twentieth century produced tragic victims who had to choose between an ethic of nation and one of European civil society. Tragic instances of these times have been written about in countless texts. These in turn led to a re-evaluation of these practices and to a process of transformation that has produced the European Union. The particular kinds of tragedy that the earlier institutions produced are no longer likely in Western Europe although they have arisen in a vigorous way in Central and Eastern Europe. It seems to me that nowadays people who are confronted with tragic accounts of acts and their consequences must proceed to the next step. This step requires an evaluation of the practices that produced the tragedies in the first place, with a view to transforming them in ways that will avoid

these particular tragic outcomes in the future. The Balkan states have been engaged in just such an exercise.¹⁸

Concluding remarks

I set out to find an answer to the following question: Is the study of tragedy useful to those seeking to answer pressing ethical questions in international relations today? In order to do this I produced a rough and ready account of certain core features of tragedy as it has been used in the tradition of writing on tragedy. I argued that tragic accounts display for an audience an actor who is enmeshed in a specified social context, who confronts an ethical conflict, and who acts out an ethical imperative that leads (often ironically) to an outcome that from an ethical point of view is hurtful to the actor him- or herself. At the heart of the tragic sequence – from ethical struggle, to act, to negative consequences – is an *agon* which is a conflict between the ethical values embedded in rival practices, both of which are fundamentally constitutive of the protagonist as he or she values him- or herself to be. In what followed, I argued that in a world in which we are all constituted as actors under any number of descriptions, in a range of different social practices, in a world in which we cannot possibly foresee all the consequences of our actions, it is always possible that what we do will have tragic consequences. But knowing this does not provide us with any guidance when we seek to answer the question: What would be ethical for us to do in these circumstances? This is the first major conclusion of this chapter. Tragedy does not offer any direct guidance to those seeking answers to ethical questions.

However, later in the chapter I argue that although the tradition of tragedy is not directly of use to those interested in international ethics, it is indirectly useful, in that tragic stories (what I have called ‘tragic accounts’) highlight the social constitution of actors in a diverse range of social practices. They make it plain how within such social practices the participants are compelled to comply with the internal ethics of the practices in question, and they make it plain how actors who are located in multiple practices will have to wrestle with conflicts and contradictions as they emerge. In a sense then tragic tales present us with a useful picture of the circumstances of ethical choice within which individuals find themselves. More important though is the way that tragic accounts bring to the attention of those who are the audience of such tales (in other words, bring to *our* attention) questions about the ethical *raison d’être* of the social practices which give rise to the tragedies

presented to us. For we are nowadays constituted as people who can contemplate the transformation of the social institutions within which we live. (As an example, I have offered what is arguably the greatest tragedy-producing conflict in our contemporary world: that between global civil society on the one hand and the society of democratic and democratizing states, on the other).¹⁹ Tragedy asks us to consider the possible transformation of the social formations that provided the *agon* that produced the tragedy. Tragedy does not solve ethical problems, but, rather, poses them to us.

Notes

1. H. F. Gutbrod (2001) 'Irony, Conflict, Dilemma: Three Tragic Situations in International Relations', Unpublished Dissertation, London School of Economics.
2. H. Butterfield (1931) *The Whig Interpretation of History* (London: Bell); R. Niebuhr (1938) *Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History* (London: Nisbet and Company); H. J. Morgenthau (1958) *Dilemmas of Politics* (Chicago: Chicago University Press).
3. E. H. Carr (1946) *The Twenty Years Crisis*, 2nd edn (London: Macmillan), p. 12.
4. H. J. Morgenthau (1948) *Politics among Nations* (New York: Alfred Knopff), p. 341.
5. Morgenthau (1948) *Politics among Nations*, p. 11.
6. H. J. Morgenthau (1948) 'The Political Science of E. H. Carr', *World Politics*, 1 (127), 127–34.
7. H. J. Morgenthau (1946) *Scientific Man Versus Power Politics* (Chicago: Chicago University Press), p. 203.
8. Niebuhr (1938) *Beyond Tragedy*.
9. To mention but a few books in this area: K. Booth, T. Dunne and M. Cox (eds) (2001) *How Might We Live? Global Ethics in the New Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press); J. H. Rosenthal and C. Barry (eds) (2009) *Ethics in International Affairs: A Reader*, 3rd edn (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press); M. Lensu and J. -S. Fritz (2000) *Value Pluralism, Normative Theory and International Relations* (London: Macmillan in Association with Millennium: Journal of International Studies); K. Hutchings (1999) *International Political Theory: Rethinking Ethics in a Global Era* (London: Sage); C. Brown (1992) *International Relations Theory: New Normative Approaches* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf); M. Cochran (1999) *Normative Theory in International Relations: A Pragmatist Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
10. B. Breytenbach (1985) *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* (London: Faber).
11. 'The Cause' for the one would have been national liberation and for the other the maintenance of the Afrikaaners' right to self-determination.
12. In the account that I gave above, had I left out the Breytenbach brothers, it would simply have been a standard story about an encounter between

- enemies. What changed the account into a tragic one was the introduction of an *agon*.
13. This would have happened in our example had Jan Breytenbach unwittingly had his brother killed. When this unanticipated consequence came to light it would have caused him sorrow in terms of the ethic associated with family life.
 14. F. L. Lucas (1981) *Tragedy* (London: Chatto and Windus), p. 110.
 15. Lucas (1981) *Tragedy*, p. 112.
 16. In what follows I am taking it as given that we are always constituted as actors of a certain kind (soldier, lecturer, husband, president) in the context of social practices/institutions the rules of which specify what is to count as appropriate conduct by those constituted as actors of the specified kind. The relevant practices for the examples I have given are, of course, armies, universities, marriages and states.
 17. A. Paton (1958) *Cry the Beloved Country: A Story of Comfort and Desolation* (Harmondsworth: Penguin).
 18. I shall not, in this chapter, go into what might be involved in the ethical evaluation of practices that give rise to tragic outcomes; I have attempted this elsewhere. See M. Frost (1996) *Ethics in International Relations: A Constitutive Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
 19. I have written more about this elsewhere; See M. Frost (2002) *Constituting Human Rights: Global Civil Society and the Society of Democratic States* (London: Routledge).