

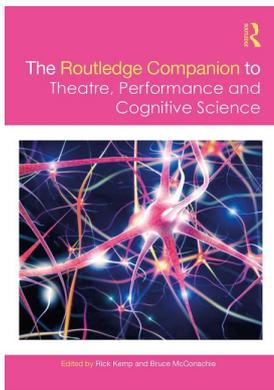
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THE SELF, ETHICS, AGENCY AND TRAGEDY

David Palmer

A consequence of the Darwinian revolution is the enhancement of a materialist theory of the universe. Darwin showed that order can arise simply from the interaction of physical elements within a system. A conscious designer with a teleological plan is not needed to explain the evolution of species any more than a conscious designer is needed to create the recurring patterns in a stack of marbles that have been run down an inclined peg board: the pattern is a function simply of the interaction of the physical elements of the system, such as the diameters of the marbles and the arrangement of the pegs. Physical systems can order themselves driven completely by laws of cause and effect (Dennett 1995, 125–33; Richards 2000, 11–18).

Extending this view, the brain is merely one more bodily element, like the stomach or the foot, that takes its current form from the evolutionary history of how individuals with particular physical traits engaged with their environments. People's minds, their personal experience of themselves and the world, are simply the mental phenomena that emerge from the physical brain/body system's interaction with the environment. Human experience and action result strictly from physical interactions and the laws of cause and effect. This has led many people to argue that free will – commonly understood as action initiated by the person – is an illusion along with the notion of a self as the experiencer of the environment and the guiding agent of our actions (See Hood 2012; Wegner 2002; Wegner & Gray 2016).

These general ideas are not new. Similar ones were expressed by William James at the end of the nineteenth century in his chapters on the stream of consciousness, the self and the will in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) and *Psychology: Briefer Course* (1892). For James, the self is not a mental entity having our experiences and directing our actions but a character in a narrative our brains create as a way of giving our sensations meaning so that they are not, as Kant said, merely a chaos of disjointed experiences but rather a coherent context to which we can respond. As James says in *Psychology: Briefer Course*, 'the thoughts themselves are the thinkers' (1892, 209. See also James 1890, 401).

Contemporary psychological research supports these views. Many animals have what Daniel Kahneman has called System 1 thinking: a kind of automatic response to the environment that is either innate or developed through learning. These creatures function primarily by instinct rather than deliberation. Compared to other animals, humans are especially good at deliberative System 2 thinking: conscious analysis of a situation and the weighing of options. This allows an ability to plan rather than merely to react automatically on instinct,

which gives humans an evolutionary advantage. System 2 thinking requires a narrative brain where the human imagines various scenarios for the future and selects the one that appeals most strongly. (2011, 19–30. See also Seligman, Railton, Baumeister & Sripada 2016.)

This selection process, however, does not involve free will. Consider David Eagleman's example of choosing one flavour over another when ordering an ice cream cone (2015, 104–18). The brain creates competing anticipatory narratives of possible future experiences: how will having chocolate feel, strawberry, macadamia nut ...? These narratives are built on memories of past experiences along with imaginings of what future situations might be. However, what we experience as a free choice is in fact the result merely of chemical reactions in the brain/body physical system to these competing narratives constructed in the brain as temporary connections of neurons: the neural connection that gives rise to the greatest release of dopamine, a neurotransmitter associated with pleasure, wins and drives our action. This is a completely physical process in the brain; there is no space here for free choice as we commonly understand it (Eagleman 2015, 114–18; Frith 2007, 92–100; Sripada 2016, 91–206).

Given this materialist account of brain functions and the mind, how are we to understand the human experience of agency, of being in control and responsible for what we do? Further, what does this account of agency mean for our understanding of tragedy? In 'Tragedy and the Common Man' (1949), Arthur Miller drew the distinction between tragedy and pathos by invoking the difference between being an agent and being a mere sufferer of external circumstances. Tragedy for Miller requires at least the possibility of warring against and defeating the forces seeking to drive us (10). But the accounts of deliberation in recent neuroscience make it seem that no such freedom and rebellion are possible.

Have psychological theory and recent findings in neuroscience shown our concepts of character, freedom and tragedy to be so confused that they must be abandoned? I think not, but these concepts do need to be re-examined and reconfigured in light of clearer ideas that have emerged following William James's insight into the nature of the self and its role in organising our experience.

One of James's central insights is the difference between experiencing the self as an 'I' or a 'Me.' We experience ourselves as an I when we conceive of the self as a subjective entity having the experience of thought or directing the action. This is the self James has in mind when he says the thinker itself is a thought: in this conception, the self is a thought we have, not an actual mental entity the brain creates that then has thoughts and experiences. The Me, on the other hand, is presented to this subjective I as an object for examination, like other objects in the world outside the I that the I experiences. The Me is a narrative we tell ourselves and other people about who we are and how we fit into the world. It is our way of understanding ourselves, of making our experience of ourselves coherent (James 1892, 174–84). Samuel Beckett depicts the interplay of these two aspects of the self vividly in his play *Ohio Impromptu* (1981), where he has the subjective I (the Listener) confront itself as an objective story (the Me) being presented back to the I as a book of memories read aloud by the Reader as the I listens.

The Me is the foundation of our sense of dignity. As the story of who we are, the Me must stay intact – seem true and real – or it ceases to function and the person goes into crisis, losing his or her sense of direction in life. Miller, again in 'Tragedy and the Common Man,' makes this notion of dignity central to his conception. According to Miller, the distinctive element in tragedy, what captures our interest and 'shakes us,' is our 'underlying fear of being displaced, the disaster inherent in being torn away from our chosen image of what and who we are in the world' (9). Tragedy for Miller depicts people's responses to assaults on their dignity, assaults on the narrative Me that is essential to how we direct our actions in life. To

understand both the experience of agency (freely chosen action) and the nature of tragedy we need to understand how the Me is constructed and the way in which it contains a moral vision of what is valuable. This takes us to Plato and his invention of virtue ethics in *Republic*.

Republic as a continuous dialogue properly begins at the start of Book 2, where Glaucon and Adeimantus challenge Socrates to show that a rational person would follow the precepts of morality if these precepts could be avoided without harm to oneself. The key point to note is that Glaucon and Adeimantus assume morality is a system of rules that prohibits people from pursuing their self-interest and directs them towards the interests of others (357a–367e). The central move in Plato's argument here is to reject that conception of morality and to consider instead the view that ethics is the study of what genuinely is in a person's self-interest and the types of beliefs, attitudes and traits of character a person needs in order to pursue this genuine self-interest effectively. In making this move, Plato rejects common conceptions of morality, conceptions that dominated Western moral theory from the Hebrew's commandments from Yahweh, through the Middle Ages, into the Enlightenment, and beyond. Plato invents a different conception that has come to be called 'Virtue Ethics' because of its focus on the virtues: the traits of character that lead a person to a flourishing human life, which the Greeks called a state of *eudaimonia*, a word we translate as 'happiness.' Although people choose different personal paths for their lives, the goal of every human life is the same: people seek lives that will enable them to have a sense of *eudaimonia*, a sense that they are doing a good job of living a human life. *Eudaimonia*, then, can perhaps best be understood as the particular kind of happiness or satisfaction that accompanies a person's feeling of self-respect. The opposite of *eudaimonia* is not unhappiness but shame: a pervasive sense of having betrayed something that was essential to the person's understanding of her Me, her proper place in the world and the values that give her life meaning.

In this approach, the construction of a self requires a moral vision, a set of personal values. Glaucon and Adeimantus had argued that people pursue only the appearance of being moral, a reputation for moral uprightness. People, they claim, have no interest in morality itself and no motivation to pursue it if morality inhibits pursuit of their own self-interest. Socrates's reply is that this is a wrong-headed approach to ethics. In order to act in the world, people require a vision of what is valuable and worthwhile, which Plato calls their 'vision of the Good.' People want this vision to be grounded in reality; they want to have a correct vision of what actually is in their self-interest. They do not want to pursue a false vision only to discover later that their vision has been misguided, that their actions have in fact been destructive and that they have wasted their lives (*Republic* 504e–506c).

What James calls the Me must involve some vision of the Good, of what is valuable, if this self-narrative is to function as a guide for action. Initially, my personal vision may be misguided; the goals I value may change as I try following them and learn the ways they must be re-envisioned so that they will lead me to a genuinely flourishing life. This is how Plato gets from this section of the *Republic* on the Good to the Cave Parable (514a–518b), his discussion of the importance of being willing to 'turn around' and examine the concepts we use to guide our lives in an attempt to be certain they are correct.

Plato's ideas here are supported by recent research into the role of emotion in decision-making. Emotions provide our psychological connection to what we value. People who have damaged the neural connections between emotion and reasoning have difficulty making even simple decisions: they have no bodily feeling of what is good to guide them. (For a vivid and poignant account of this, see Eagleman 2015, 110–14.)

These ideas about the role of values in constructing a Me also underlie Harry Frankfurt's conception of personhood, and Frankfurt's ideas enable us to understand how our experience

of agency, of acting with a free will, is possible despite the materialist consequences of Darwin's theory and the recent findings of neuroscience about decision-making as a strictly physical process.

Frankfurt distinguishes between first-order and second-order desires (1971, 11–25). First-order desires are desires for particular outcomes; for example, in Eagleman's case of the person ordering ice cream, each of the possible flavours has some first-order desire attached to it. Each of these first-order desires is represented in the brain by particular temporary connections of neurons, and the connections that lead to the greatest release of dopamine drive us to select that flavour. This is a strictly physical process; there is no room for an experience of agency or free will at this first-order level.

However, Frankfurt argues, humans, unlike other animals, have not only first-order but also second-order desires. A second-order desire is a desire to have a certain first-order desire win the battle for dopamine release with other first-order desires and actually drive us to action. To understand this, consider Frankfurt's account of a drug addict who wants to end his addiction. When the addict is tempted to take the drug, he has conflicting first-order desires: take the drug, do not take the drug. His action will be driven by whichever of these first-order desires turns out to be the strongest. There is no place for a concept of agency or free will here. He simply will do whatever the physical systems of dopamine release in his brain drive him to do.

But this addict also has a second-order desire not to take the drug, to have that particular first-order desire be the one that wins the battle. Therefore, if this addict takes the drug, he has the experience of being overwhelmed by his addiction. If he does not take the drug, he has the experience of having acted freely, of being an agent who is guiding his own actions. Our second-order desires embody our conceptions of what Plato calls 'the Good' and James calls 'the Me': these are the narratives we live by, the stories of what we think is valuable and whom we want to be. The addict who has the second-order desire to end his habit and nonetheless takes the drug experiences his action as something shameful, a betrayal of the values that make him who he really is, a betrayal of his Me. That is why this addict experiences his act not as an act of agency but as a shameful experience of being overwhelmed by temptation, a weakness of will. The interrelation between first- and second-order desires creates the psychological space in which agency and free will can be experienced.

The interrelation between these two orders of desire also creates the psychological space in which we can understand the concept of tragedy and see the way it differs from melodrama. Plato shows this in *Symposium*, which I suggest is more than a dialogue about love. Plato uses love (*eros*) here as a way of exploring how values (what we love) are endemic to a person's sense of self, to what James calls 'the Me': quite literally, we are what we love; we are constructed as particular people by the values that drive us. Tragedy, as opposed to melodrama or the absurd, occurs when people are forced to confront the fact that they irreparably have betrayed their Me, their second-order desires.

Symposium was written in the late 380s BCE and is set roughly 35 years earlier in 416. It portrays a small dinner party in celebration of Agathon's winning a prize for tragedy that year. The dialogue has three major sections: the introduction and opening speeches about love by Agathon and his dinner guests (172a–198a), Socrates' speech about love based on his lessons from Diotima (198a–212c) and Alcibiades' speech about Socrates, a topic he chooses to speak on instead of love (212c–223d).

Alcibiades was a brilliant Athenian general who had spent time in his youth as a follower of Socrates. He was driven from Athens by political rivals in 415, one year after the date in which the dialogue is set, and then betrayed his city by colluding with the Spartans against

Athens in the Peloponnesian War. These events would have been familiar to Greek readers of the dialogue, and Plato is using this third section of *Symposium* to explore Alcibiades' character.

Alcibiades enters the party late and drunken. Seeing Socrates, he immediately feels ashamed, and rather than continuing the earlier speeches on love, he speaks about this shame: shame being the opposite of *eudaimonia*, a feeling that can be attained only by fulfilling what we love, the vision we have of our better Me. Plato presents Alcibiades as a man whose actions are driven by uncontrolled first-order desires that take him away from his second-order desires of the Me he wants to be. Confronting Socrates, Alcibiades recognises this failure and expresses remorse (216b–c), which for Plato is the emotion central to tragedy.

Remorse is not disappointment, which arises when things go wrong for reasons we cannot control, such as when a friend cancels a visit to which we had been looking forward for reasons that have nothing to do with us. Nor is remorse anger, which is directed outwardly at forces that we feel thwart us unjustly. Anger, directed at these external forces, often is depicted in melodrama. Remorse, the tragic emotion, turns inward. It arises when we must admit that we in some way colluded with the forces that undermine us. We may have been overwhelmed by these forces, but we are not merely innocent victims. We had a role in our own destruction.

This Platonic approach to tragedy, and its similarities to ideas about the self found in James and Frankfurt, can be seen explicitly in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606). Sometimes commentators see the tragic moment in this play in act 5, scene 5, when Macbeth is told that Birnam Wood is moving towards Dunsinane and he must confront the fact that he has been deluded by the witches' prophecy. These commentators claim this is Macbeth's moment of recognition and reversal. But on the view of tragedy presented here, the tragic moment occurs much earlier. In Act 1, scene 7, Macbeth has told Lady Macbeth of the prophecy that he will be king, has discussed with her the possibility of murdering Duncan (act 1, scene 5) and now is weighing how to proceed. In the language of Frankfurt and recent neuroscience, he has conflicting first-order desires – seek the kingship or maintain his dignity and sense of self as a loyal vassal – each represented by a different neural network leading to a release of dopamine:

If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly. If the assassination
Could trammel up the consequences and catch
With his surcease, success, that but this blow
Might be the be-all and end-all ...
We'd jump the life to come. But in these cases,
We still have judgement here that we but teach
Bloody instructions, which being taught, return
To plague the inventor ...
... I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition which o'erleaps itself
And falls on th'other.

(act 1, scene 7, lines 1–28)

Macbeth's action will be driven by strictly physical events in his brain as the neural networks incorporate various elements building their narratives of the future based on each possible path, leading to varying releases of dopamine. This physical process in his brain at this point leads him to decide against the murder: 'We will proceed no further in this business' (line 31),

he tells Lady Macbeth when she enters. Note that this is not an act of free will as that term normally is understood. There is no choice here by a self; this is merely a physical process in a bodily organ, the brain, analogous to any other bodily action, such as the stomach's action in digesting food.

Lady Macbeth, however, chides Macbeth for the cowardliness of this decision (lines 35–44), and he replies: 'I dare do all that may become a man; Who dares do more is none' (lines 46–7). This may seem to end the question, but the possible cowardliness of this action had not been factored into the competing neural networks in Macbeth's earlier decision, and its addition now tips the dopamine releases from the network representing remaining loyal to the one depicting pursuing the kingship. Macbeth is a warrior; he does not want to consider himself a coward, so he now experiences this new most-powerful first-order desire to pursue the kingship as fitting with his second-order vision of the Me he wants to be. He experiences himself as acting freely.

By act 2, scene 2, however, all this has changed. Macbeth now has murdered Duncan and emerged from the royal bedchamber holding the bloody daggers. Lady Macbeth tells him he must return the daggers so that Duncan's attendants can be framed for the crime, but Macbeth refuses to go. Lady Macbeth wrongly thinks this again is an instance of cowardice, but Macbeth explains, 'I'll go no more. I am afraid to think what I have done; Look on't again, I dare not ... To know the deed, 'twere best not know my self' (lines 53–5, 76). Macbeth had thought that in killing Duncan he would fulfill his second-order desires: he did not want to be seen as a coward. But that is not the experience he now has. He feels his Me, the narrative he wanted to tell about who he is, has been destroyed. His Me had been that of a loyal vassal and valiant warrior, and now he is neither. He has lost his self and will have no way to go forward in the world until he finds another as a compass to guide him. The action of the last part of the play depicts Macbeth's struggle to find that self, a struggle that leads him only into more venal pursuits.

The story of that loss of self and the struggle against shame is the essence of tragedy. It is what Arthur Miller meant in saying that tragedy is 'the disaster of being torn away from our chosen image of what and who we are' (1949, p. 9). Tragedy depicts the irreparable collapse of the characters' sense of dignity: the realisation that the Me expressed in their second-order desires never will be actualised. Tragedy is experienced in the discontinuity between our second-order desires expressing who we think we are and want to be and the first-order desires that we are forced to admit actually have driven our actions. The distinction between those two orders of desire also explains the human experience of free will or agency. Like tragedy, our experience of agency arises from humans' need to incorporate a vision of the Good in their construction of a self, all of which is grounded in the evolution of the narrative brain in humans as a way of organising our experience and interaction with the world.

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