Tragedy, World Politics and Ethical Community

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In the preceding chapters of this book, an engaging debate has been conducted that concerns the place of tragedy and the tragic in world politics and its theorization. The question has been whether tragedy brings specific insight to our understanding of the relation between international politics and ethics. Since much of the discipline of International Relations (IR) hinges on how this relation is theoretically and empirically conceived, the debate is important. Does tragedy have something to say to international relations, its future conceptualization and practice? To provide the theoretical context for my own thoughts on this issue, I wish to first summarize the three fundamental positions underpinning the preceding arguments made by Richard Ned Lebow, Mervyn Frost, James Mayall, Nicholas Rengger, Chris Brown and Peter Euben. I will then argue that the tragic reveals the immanence of the ethical to the political in a specific, but irreducible, manner. This immanence undermines any theoretical distinction between the normative and the positive in social scientific thinking of international political reality.

The first position concerns Lebow, Euben and Frost: the tragic dimension of international political life involves the internal development of hubris among international actors, which cuts them off from international society and leads to tragic consequences (Lebow), and/or the hard ethical dilemmas within such life that are negotiated for better or worse (Euben, Frost). For all three, this tragic dimension is transformative. They maintain that deepening our sensibility to this tragic dimension leads to greater recognition of the aporias of world politics and to a more searching and wise political practice of them, with Euben stressing more than the other two how problematic tragedy shows this practice to be. The second position is shared to greater or lesser degree by all six authors, but is privileged by Mayall, Rengger, and Brown in
their criticisms of idealism (and the ‘idealist’ side to Frost and Lebow’s very apology of tragedy). Tragic fate and tragic insight lie in the discrepancy between moral understanding and volition on the one hand, and political practice on the other. The discrepancy comes to the fore in the unintended consequences that necessarily arise in this gap between ethics and politics. Tragedy is, therefore, most useful as a realist category of thought that moderates wishful thinking in the political domain. The third position is held by Rengger alone: tragedy and the tragic are not useful categories for world politics since they organize political life in terms that are no longer pertinent to the non-normative structure of modern and contemporary life. Tragedy is an art-form, predicated on a normative notion of humanity; it is not a form of life as such.

This delineation does scant justice to the range of thought within, and between, the previous arguments. It does, however, catch the problem which interests me, one that comes to the fore in the specific differences between Lebow, on the one hand, and Rengger, on the other. Does the Western tragic condition enable us to perceive political life, at an international or global level, from a tragic perspective? This perspective reconfigures given relations between individual and community through the tragic agent’s patterns of emotion and reason and of excess and recognition. And, can this perspective, in turn, say something about the immanence of ethics to politics? Or has tragedy, as Rengger argues contra Lebow, become an obsolete category of thought that depends on pre-existing structures of substantive community and consensual norms that political modernity and world politics leave behind? In the following pages I will argue a position close to that of Lebow. I wish, however, to make the notion of community with which tragedy is concerned more theoretically precise so as to eschew both the realist-informed responses of Mayall, Rengger and, in part, Brown (second position: ‘this is idealist pie in the sky’), and the final Rengger-type stricture (third position: ‘this is art, not life’). Indebted to the methodology of post-Kantian German thought, my take on tragedy, like Lebow’s, shows how ethics is always already immanent to politics, but needs to be recognized as such. Tragic fate reveals this ethical immanence and explores its recognition. My question is: What kind of immanence and what kind of community does tragic fate connote and what is the specificity of this community in modern life?

To answer this question, I will first rehearse Lebow’s argument in his important book, *The Tragic Vision of Politics: Ethics, Interests and Orders*, with the hope of teasing out the notions of immanence and recognition and suggesting why a more theoretically precise concept of ‘community’