Carl Humphries
Jesuit University Ignatianum in Cracow
ORCID: 0000-0003-0331-3179

TRAGEDY AND THE LIMITS OF PESSIMISM IN ANCIENT AND MODERN REALIST POLITICAL THOUGHT

1. Introduction

In this article I aim to explore at a fairly general level the question of what we might discover about the nature and significance of contemporary forms of so-called "political realism" – particularly with regard to their relationship to pessimism – from a philosophical consideration of Ancient Greek tragedy on the one hand, and of such supposed ancient precursors of this way of thinking about ethical and/or political matters as Thucydides on the other. My principal thesis is that Greek tragedy can prompt us to notice a revealing equivocation within the thinking of prominent recent and contemporary exponents of such realism, connected with what it means in practice to *withhold assent* from forms of morality-centred optimism on the grounds that they are perceived to be dogmatic or speculative. Such political realism, I conclude, when thus formulated, implicitly involves elements that are *dogmatically pessimistic*, even when expressly aspiring to be anti-dogmatic themselves. In order to clarify the significance of this equivocation, I draw a parallel with some issues that have emerged in the context of the reception of Wittgenstein's later philosophy.

The more particular context in relation to which the questions addressed here acquire relevance is that furnished by the kind of political realist approaches we encounter in the work of such philosophers as Bernard Williams and Raymond Geuss – approaches which may be broadly characterized as aiming to set out a critique of what we shall loosely refer to here as "political normativism". By this latter term I have in mind, above all, the kinds of political thinking advocated by such thinkers as John Rawls[1] and Robert Nozick[2] – though Jürgen Habermas[3] is a well-known and influential thinker who comes to mind as falling quite naturally into this category as well. For such "realists" about political matters as Williams and Geuss, what is most

---

[1] J. Rawls, *The Theory of Justice*, Cambridge, MA 1971; *idem*, *Political Liberalism*, New York 1993; *idem*, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, Cambridge, MA 2001.
[2] R. Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, New York 1974.
[3] J. Habermas, *The Concept of Human Dignity and the Realistic Utopia of Human Rights*, "Metaphilosophy" 2010, vol. 41, No. 4, pp. 464-480.

distinctive about such "normativists" is that they embody a longstanding tendency within Western intellectual culture (stemming above all from Plato and Kant, but also heavily mediated and reinforced by Christianity) towards *dogmatic optimism* when it comes to assessing the possibilities for an overarching convergence, at the level of the *polis*, between human beings' ethical concerns on the one hand, and their practical political reality on the other.[4] What is especially significant for our purposes is the fact that in putting forward their positions, both Williams and Geuss follow the example of Nietzsche in appealing to pre-Socratic Ancient Greek thought and culture as an alternative to what they regard as the simplistic optimistic moralism inherited by the West from Plato (via Christianity and Kant).[5] It is, I will argue, this common feature that, when juxtaposed with a more properly reflective engagement with what ancient tragedy amounts to, reveals their own approach to involve an equivocating stance of sorts.

2. The "Realist" Position in Contemporary Political Philosophy

In "Thucydides, Nietzsche and Williams" Geuss follows Williams and Nietzsche in advocating the sort of critique of *political* normativism (Rawls, Nozick, Habermas) that purports to draw on a deeper and broader critical rejection of the whole underlying current of optimistic ethical normativism regarded by them as prevalent (chiefly thanks to Plato and Kant, but not without substantial help from institutionalized Christianity) in Western thought.

Such a current corresponds to what Williams, in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, sought to pick out with his references to "the morality system", construed as a system that affirms the possibility of a universally regulative, systematically rational moral framework for assigning responsibility, culpability, etc. to autonomous human agents. However, in his subsequent *Shame and Necessity*, the same author goes on to contrast this at length with the ethical culture of the pre-Socratic Ancient Greeks, as exhibited in Greek literature and, especially, in ancient tragedy. For Williams, Greek tragedy reveals a recognition of the *unavoidable pluralism* of ethical perspectives brought into play once we acknowledge the situatedness of actual instances of human agency;

---

[4] B. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Cambridge, MA 1985; R. Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*, Princeton, NJ 2008.

[5] B. Williams, *Shame and Necessity. (Sather Classical Lectures, Volume 57)*, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London 1993; R. Geuss, *Thucydides, Nietzsche and Williams*, [In:] *idem, Outside Ethics*, Princeton, N.J. 2005, pp. 219-233; also [In:] *Nietzsche on Time and History*, ed. M. Dries, Berlin 2008, pp. 35-50. This particular text by Geuss, which, as its title suggests, discusses Williams in relation to Nietzsche and Thucydides, furnishes one of the principal points of departure for the discussion here. (Subsequent page references are to the 2005 edition).

it explores the complex and varying ways in which human beings find themselves subject to external and internal forces beyond their own control or impervious to rational comprehension – as dramatically exemplified, for instance, in the fate of Oedipus (Sophocles), or in Agamemnon's tragic dilemma in relation to his daughter Iphigenia (Aeschylus).

Geuss seizes on this as an attempt by Williams to further develop the line of thought expressed in Nietzsche's preference for Thucydides over Plato as a "guide to human life".[6] According to him, Nietzsche opted for Thucydides for two sets of reasons:

1) he exhibits a richer, more factually informed account of human ethical/agential psychology than is theoretically endorsed in Plato's writings – because there is no "antecedent moralization of basic categories";

2) he has a view of human affairs that is undistorted by the dogmatic optimism concerning morality prevalent in Western culture thanks to Plato and Christianity.[7]

What is significant for our purposes here is that given that the moral optimism of (2) can also be regarded as motivating Plato's "antecedent moralization" of agent psychology in (1), it can reasonably be concluded that it is this optimism that is the ultimate target of Geuss's intended critique of the ethical basis of political normativism. For Geuss, moreover, this optimism reflects five assumptions:

1) that "the world could be made cognitively accessible to us without remainder",

2) that "when the world was correctly understood, it would make moral sense",

3) that "this would show it to have some orientation toward the satisfaction of some basic, rational human desires or interests" (e.g. happiness),

4) that "[it] is set up so that for us to accumulate knowledge and use our reason as vigorously as possible will be good for us, and will contribute to making us happy",

5) that there is "a natural fit between the exercise of reason, the conditions of healthy individual human development, the demands of individuals for satisfaction of their needs, interests, and basic desires, and human sociability. Nature, reason, and all human goods, including human virtues, formed a potentially harmonious whole".[8]

At the same time, we should note that if we seek to compare Nietzsche, Williams and Geuss with respect to the varieties of political realism they endorse in the light of their respective rejections of this sort of optimism, we encounter some divergences. Nietzsche, for one, advocates a radical political pluralism in which the exemplary status

---

[6] R. Geuss, *Thucydides...*, p. 220. For the original source text upon which Geuss draws, see F. Nietzsche, *Daybreak, Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, Cambridge 1997, §168. (Geuss himself refers directly to the corresponding passage in the German edition of Nietzsche's collected works). For a perceptive consideration of the references to Thucydides scattered throughout Nietzsche's writings, see B. Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality*, Oxford 2002/2014, pp. 37-42 (page nos. refer to the 2nd edition).

[7] R. Geuss, *Thucydides...*, pp. 220-224.

[8] *Ibidem*, p. 223.

of the nation-state is put in question in order to open up possibilities for exceptional individuals whose 'nobility' lies in their ability to seize the transformational opportunities furnished by great events.[9] Williams, on the other hand, moves in a somewhat different direction, eventually coming to endorse the minimalist model of political liberalism put forward by the American political theorist Judith Shklar (as a contrast to Rawlsian and Nozickian liberal projects), known as the "liberalism of fear". Though motivated by rather different driving concerns, this is also pluralistic on some level, inasmuch as it asserts that for each society or community, an appropriate conception of the protective role of the state will emerge in the light of particular antecedent historical events.[10] Significantly, Williams does not view this as entailing radical and total pluralist relativism: instead, he interprets it as both leaving room for, and opening up a space for, the recognition of a "universalism of negative capacities" associated with such human traits and reactions as fear, power, powerlessness, and cruelty.[11] Geuss, meanwhile, views Rawlsian and Nozickian liberal projects through an Adorno-inspired Marxian lens, as masking concrete forms of social exploitation and impoverishment behind a cultural superstructure of emancipatory rights-based rhetoric that he takes to be illusory (because meaninglessly abstract).[12]

3. The Appeal to Ancient Greek Tragedy

At first sight, the role played by invocations of Greek tragedy and Thucydides in the structure of thought broadly shared by these thinkers seems fairly straightforward and uncontroversial: after all, Thucydides surely did mean his historical writings to have an instructional value for his readers, and it is widely accepted that performances of Greek tragedy were invested with some sort of instructional significance by the Greeks, inasmuch as they were held to facilitate the ethico-political discourse of the *polis*.[13] So if Greek tragedy possessed such a value for the ancients themselves, it seems reasonable to extend this – as Williams seeks to do – to encompass the thought that it also has relevance for our own contemporary ethical self-understanding. Moreover, we can grant that Williams' own work to this effect has certainly succeeded in showing that

---

[9] G. Shapiro, *Nietzsche's Earth: Great Events, Great Politics*, Chicago 2016.

[10] J. Shklar, *The Liberalism of Fear*, [In:] *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, ed. N. Rosenblum, Cambridge, MA 1989, pp. 21-39.

[11] B. Williams, *The Liberalism of Fear*, [In:] *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*, ed. G. Hawthorn, Princeton 2005, pp. 52-61.

[12] R. Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*.

[13] For discussions of the political significance of the reception of tragedy in Ancient Greece, see: C. Meier, *The Greek Discovery of Politics*, Cambridge, MA 1990; *idem*, *The Political Art of Greek Tragedy*, Cambridge 1993; D. Carter, *The Politics of Greek Tragedy*, Bristol 2007.

it can furnish the basis for, at the very least, a line of thinking about the relationship of ethics to contingency in human affairs (pertaining to such concepts as "moral luck") that is sufficient to call into question the five optimistic assumptions rejected by Nietzsche in the context of his embrace of Thucydides at the expense of Plato.

Nevertheless, there is another question waiting to be raised here. It is that of whether the human (ethical and/or poetic) significance of the events dramatized in Greek tragedy is in fact *exhausted* by this sort of consideration of how such dramatic depictions figure – hypothetically or actually – in either the ethico-political discourse of the Greeks or some modern equivalent (as proposed by Williams and Geuss). Here, moreover, we should remind ourselves that unlike Thucydidean history-telling, tragedy *shows* (upto a point) how certain sequences of events look and feel as they unfold, rather than merely recounting them in words. It thus brings the spectator into a relation of contemplative immediacy to the *dramatized events themselves*: we are affected by them not just in the light of the framing responses supplied by others, but also more directly – as having witnessed them ourselves (in a state of suspension of disbelief). The reason why this could matter can, I think, be brought into the spotlight by considering a little more carefully the line of thought connected with tragedy that we encounter in the ethico-political reflections of Williams and Geuss.

For both of these philosophers, Greek tragedy highlights the *unavoidable pluralism* of ethical perspectives brought into play once we acknowledge the situatedness of actual human agency and choice, and this then in turn brings with it a recognition of the "universal negatives" of the human condition that are to be taken account of politically (in respect of the identification of the appropriate ethico-political imperatives arising from human relationships driven by relations of fear, powerlessness, exploitation, etc.). Yet claims about unavoidable complexities for human agents and universal negative possibilities for human beings presuppose that the events of a tragic unfolding reveal just the sort features of reality that could ground a meta-normative critique of normative ethics and political theorising themselves. This way of understanding, I wish to argue, is problematic, because it closes off access to another important sense in which Greek tragedy could be considered relevant to our contemporary ethico-political situation.

On the alternative reading of tragedy's contemporary ethico-political significance that I wish to promote here, we begin from asking what the events occurring within a tragedy reveal *in and of themselves* that might be ethically consequential. (What we then discover is something that turns out to go beyond the ethico-political implications Williams and Geuss find in either tragedy or in Thucydides.) What surely ought to strike us most potently in seeking an answer to this question is the observation that

the fate of the tragic subject (e.g. Oedipus, Agamemnon), qua its being a *tragic* fate, emerges in the light of particular events as *utterly unique*, and so radically unanticipatable and unpreemptable. This quality of unanticipatability and unpreemptability associated with a tragic fate is, moreover, itself something we only witness *ex post factum* with respect to particular unfoldings of events – not a reflection of any general or unchanging facts about the human condition. Hence it is not in itself a "universal negative" of the sort that could ground a meta-normative critique of normativistic ethico-political optimism.

Now such an alternative reading of tragedy may, to be sure, seem at first glance politically inert. Nevertheless, I would venture to suggest that it can have an ethical (and, by extension, a political) significance for us, if it just so happens that, in some respect or other, we take our own personal or collective situation to actually itself be an instance of this same kind of outcome. The obvious line of appeal here is to instances of such a tragic unfolding of events in one's own life, or in those of others whose lives are intertwined with one's own, but this does not furnish what would typically be regarded as useful examples in the field of philosophically reflective discourse, as it is open to anyone who has not so far experienced anything comparable within their own contingent life-experience to dismiss such cases as parochial or subjective, and thus as not constituting anything that could meaningfully ground claims whose significance is supposed to carry over into a collectively defined arena of political concerns. Another possibility would be to appeal to thinkers specifically concerned with reframing our understanding of large-scale philosophical, ethical and cultural issues in such a way as to allow these to speak to a set of concerns about modern life, understood as something exhibiting a radical form of historical embeddedness that brings it – at the very least – into close proximity with the experience of the tragic that we have just been seeking to underline here. (The example that comes most immediately to mind would be Walter Benjamin, with his conception of modernity as an irreversible ongoing catastrophe[14]). However, there are dangers associated with such a move, too, inasmuch as it can foster the impression that the only way to think of such a conception of the tragic as taking on ethico-political relevance is to tie it to some sort of historical overview of the fate of human civilization generally – one that some might well be inclined to regard as speculative, or as being infused with religious undertones, in ways that bespeak its ultimate origins in a subjectivistically personal response to events in the world.

---

[14] W. Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, [In:] *Illuminations*, ed. H. Arendt, New York 1969, pp. 253-264.

This does not exhaust the options, however. Between the personal and the universal lie many more concrete areas of collective concern for politically oriented communities that would seem to benefit from being understood in terms of commonalities that they exhibit with the tragic as construed here. In this regard, I think it will suffice to point to just two examples of what I have in mind here. Even if it should be the case that global warming does not justify the most ultra-pessimistic end-of-the-world diagnosis of its environmental implications, it is already clear – at least if one accepts the empirical data as interpreted by scientists – that it has serious negative implications for some aspects of some people's lives, making it an irreversible fact of a kind that is, for the people affected, inescapably tragic. Likewise, contemporary trends towards emotive forms of political populism, manifested in protest votes for non-mainstream political parties and/or protagonists that in turn carry far-reaching practical-political implications, are hard to understand without reference to the idea that significant groups of voting citizens in modern societies have come to see their own situations as moving inexorably in a negative direction, if not as more or less hopeless – and therefore, by implication, as also tragic. I would argue that for an audience composed of individuals whose view of reality is already informed by such experiences, the encounter with ancient tragedy can be a politically and ethically significant one, in that it opens up possibilities for raising and exploring in more explicit terms the issue of just what political stance is ethically coherent (with respect to its grounding) once a tragic outcome has *already* occurred, as something final and irreversible that bears in some way on our individual and/or collective existences.

We can be brought to see that this potentially important line of thinking about the political value of tragedy is not properly allowed for in the approach of realists like Williams and Geuss by asking what formulation of their position *would* be consistent with it, and then realizing that this would lead them into territory that they themselves clearly would not be prepared to inhabit. To be sure, there would be *no* conflict of interpretations if their presupposition to the effect that the events depicted in tragedy can ground a meta-normative critique of mainstream morality and political thinking could be understood in ontologico-metaphysical terms – i.e. as treating those events as *ontologico-metaphysically revealing* of some truths about the human condition as such. On such a reading, Greek tragedy might be seen as presenting certain chains of events (conceived as instances of certain sorts of cumulative structure involving events) that reveal a reality which, *by virtue of its very structure*, is indifferent to human hopes and concerns – thus validating political realism as a form of metaphysically warranted pessimism. (The unique unpreemptability of the individual fate might then be considered to be just a more specific aspect of some instances of this.) Yet this, perversely, would

require Williams and Geuss to embrace at least a minimal version of precisely the kind of dogmatic optimism they follow Nietzsche in rejecting: that is to say, it would require them to accept at some level the thought that grasping the essential structure of things through reason could be relied upon, after all, to converge with what is required to make human beings less deluded or unhappy. Since this would be anathema to them, their position must instead be understood as generating pessimism about the human condition by a different route – from mere *scepticism* about the dogmatic claims of moral optimism, rather than by proceeding on the basis of a previously established certainty to the effect that such claims are wrong. To see what is problematic about such an approach, it can be helpful to draw a comparison with some not unrelated disputes concerning the proper reception of Wittgenstein's later philosophy.

4. Wittgenstein and the Anti-Dogmatic Withholding of Participatory Assent

What are sometimes referred to as "orthodox" readings have attributed to the later Wittgenstein a theory about language-acquisition and language-use that "grammatically" restricts the intelligibility of concepts by making them *always* dependent on specific contexts.[15] From such a theory, it was supposed, it would then follow that there can be no concepts whose purpose would be to express truths not limited to such contexts – i.e. no concepts with absolute generality of scope. This was taken to have significant consequences for philosophy: for example, given that metaphysical claims purport to express precisely such truths, the concepts they use would be required to have general and unconditional applicability of precisely the sort denied by the theory, so as such they could not ever count as intelligible at all, rendering the claims that required them to be thus deployed themselves problematic and, in effect, meaningless. The problem with such an interpretation of the core features distinctive of the later Wittgenstein is that it appears deeply uncharitable, since it attributes a position to him that ends up being self-refuting as soon as we attempt to state it. This is because the view it ascribes to him itself implies that *what* he was seeking to convey in respect of his thinking about language – namely, that it is subject to certain inescapably contextual limits on what can be meaningful – itself transgresses those very same limits.[16]

---

[15] P.M.S. Hacker, *Insight and Illusion: Themes in the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, Oxford 1986.

[16] Put bluntly, on such a reading Wittgenstein's position requires that the claim of universal context-dependence itself be invested with a non-context-dependent validity, which is patently absurd in that it renders that claim unintelligible. The problem is not resolved by arguing that this is "shown" rather than "said", since the interpreter who ascribes such a stance to Wittgenstein must himself or herself state *that* this is indeed what is "shown", and the resulting implicit affirmation of the possibility of

It is now a well-known fact about the subsequent reception of Wittgenstein's philosophy that the concern to avoid such problems led some interpreters to put forward more robustly anti-theoretical readings, according to which he was not seeking to negate the truth or correctness of anything in theoretical terms when putting in question the legitimacy of using words and concepts in certain putatively non-context-dependent ways. On such a radically quietist interpretation, most closely associated with such advocates of a so-called "new" or "resolute" approach to reading Wittgenstein as Cora Diamond and James Conant, the Austrian philosopher only sought, for purposes that are ultimately therapeutic rather than descriptive-theoretical, to withhold *participation* – and, one may reasonably add, *participatory assent*, insofar as this may be taken to be presuppositionally implied by any such participation – in respect of the discursive practices associated with any such potentially problematic uses of words and/or concepts[17]. At the same time, what is significant for the comparison that we are aiming to make here is that proponents of this kind of approach to interpreting the later Wittgenstein tend to construe its distinctively therapeutic moves as leaving no space for metaphysical claims to still be made at all in philosophy – on the assumption that such claims depend on an adherence to doctrines that commit one in a *general* way to the possibility of using concepts to express such truths, where this is taken to be exactly what has been put in question by the later Wittgenstein in a way that then requires one to steer clear of the discursive practices associated with such doctrinal commitments. In short, such a construal assumes that one could not suspend such doctrinal commitments, only to discover, quite independently of whether one has embraced them or not, that some individual metaphysical claims are valid and meaningful anyway.

---

making such a statement meaningfully will inherit that same problematic feature, this time as a meta-level claim about what is being "shown" vis a vis language generally, so that it, too, would then have to be thought of as transgressing those very limits if it were to itself count as meaningfully asserting anything. (A similar problematic will then arise all over again if we take this, too, to be a case of "showing" rather than "saying" – and so on, *ad infinitum*.) Similar issues arise in relation to Wittgenstein's earlier work, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, though not in respect of notions of context-dependence with respect to linguistic meaning. This has encouraged commentators to look for some other way of reading Wittgenstein that might avoid such problems in a manner consistent across the various stages in the development of his thought.

[17] Cf. L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford 1953, §§499-500: "To say 'This combination of words makes no sense' excludes it from the sphere of language and thereby bounds the domain of language. But when one draws a boundary it may be for various kinds of reason… So if I draw a boundary line that is not yet to say what I am drawing it for". "When a sentence is called senseless, it is not as it were its sense that is senseless. But a combination of words is being excluded from the language, withdrawn from circulation". For early examples of the "resolute approach" to interpreting earlier and later Wittgenstein, see C. Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit. Wittgenstein, Philosophy and the Mind*, Cambridge MA 1991, and J. Conant, *Throwing Away the Top of the Ladder*, "The Yale Review" 1991, vol. 79, No. 3, pp. 328-64.

Certainly there are contexts in which it would make intuitive sense to embrace such an assumption. If, for example, one thinks of metaphysical understanding as expressing a conception of things generally that by its very nature is required – as a condition of our accepting it at all – to frame our experience of everything by default (as, in effect, also furnishing what Wittgenstein himself, in *On Certainty*, calls a "world-picture"),[18] then from the perspective of the community for which this is the case, not assenting to that default is tantamount (in performative terms) to a rejection of any claims associated with it (i.e. to a kind of practical negation). In such cases, the performative consequences of withholding participation (and participatorily constituted assent) could be legitimately construed as entailing a general commitment to the rejection of metaphysical claims as such. What is important to note about this, however, is that it requires one to first inhabit the perspective of the community whose default world-view one is seeking to distance oneself from. This feature emerges as significant for our purposes, because when a similar construal of the logic of the withdrawal of participatory assent is applied to the stance which Williams and Geuss adopt towards what they regard as dogmatically optimistic in respect of traditional forms of morality, it shows them to be embroiled in an unavoidable element of equivocation about where they themselves stand.

To the extent that Geuss and Williams argue for a categorical rejection of optimism in favour of a "realist" acknowledgement of "universal negatives" informed by Greek tragedy, purely on the grounds that such optimism is dogmatic, they do indeed seem to be pursuing a similar course to those who equate an anti-dogmatically anti-theoretical reading of the later Wittgenstein of the kind put forward by quietists with a principled anti-metaphysicalistic stance. And if we apply a similar logic to their line of thinking to that which has just been unfolded with reference to the latter, we are surely then obliged to say that just like with a wholesale and principled rejection of metaphysics arrived at from that direction, treating one's *anti-dogmatic scepticism* where forms of moral optimism are concerned as automatically providing grounds for flipping over into principled pessimism will only make sense when seen from the perspective of a community whose supposed bedrock commitments stand to be undermined by doing so. If that is correct, then such an appeal to a pre-existing default commitment to morality-related optimism as a basis for generating a pessimistic counter-perspective could be persuasive for us, but only if it were really to be the case that our own essentially modern world-view uniformly endorses such moral optimism by default. The problem, however, is that Williams himself, in critiquing such forms of optimism,

---

[18] See L. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, transl. D. Paul, G.E.M. Anscombe, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, Oxford 1969, §§93-95 and §§162-167.

actually makes a highly convincing case – in terms equally pertinent to Geuss – to the effect that in respect of our actual concretely situated life-practices, intuitions and ethical decision-making we are far more similar to the Greeks than is generally admitted in our overtly moral and political forms of discourse.[19] In such circumstances, it is hard to see how Williams and Geuss could also be justified in thinking it acceptable to apply such a logic of negation through the mere withholding of assent, as a basis for assigning essentially pessimistic implications to what apparently purports to be just an anti-dogmatically motivated stance towards traditional moral assumptions. In short, either their position is genuinely anti-dogmatic, but falls short of motivating flipping over from such optimism to an equal and opposite pessimism, or it must have arrived at such a pessimism from some quite other direction – one whose anti-dogmatic credentials have, in fact, yet to be established at all.

5. Conclusion

As regards the overall potential for ethico-political significance of ancient tragedy, there are, I think, useful lessons to be learned from what we have just encountered in connection with attempts by contemporary thinkers such as Williams and Geuss to recruit the likes of Sophocles and Aeschylus, alongside Thucydides, to their cause of mounting an ostensibly Nietzschean anti-dogmatic critique of traditional forms of optimistic moralism. Above all, I would say that the juxtaposition of optimistic and pessimistic world-views as alternative framing perspectives that this encourages obscures the alternative reading of the potential import of tragedy that we have sought to draw attention to here, since it implies that everything of ethico-political significance can be captured at the level of a discourse about how one should construe, or re-construe – albeit without any overt reference to metaphysics, and rather in the spirit of Thucydides – the *unchanging* character of reality in the light of tragic events, be they depicted (through dramatic enactment or dramatizing forms of poetic narration) or actual. In so doing, it suggests that the question of how tragic events might irreversibly *change* the character of reality itself for some given individual or community affected by them is simply not worth considering, even though this sort of change to *reality-as-something-shown-to-have-been-changed-by-events* seems to be exactly what an actual tragic fate, construed as something that has revealed itself ex post factum to be unpreemptable and unanticipatable, implies.

 If this is right, then while it may indeed be a worthwhile aspiration to be more alive to our similarities to the Greeks where ethical matters are concerned, this should

---

[19] B. Williams, *Shame and Necessity*…, especially p. 10, p. 166.

not be thought of as licensing us to think in terms of "flipping a switch", in some crudely binary sort of way, between ethico-political optimism and pessimism. If such lessons are taken on board, then it is to be hoped that this could open the way to a broader understanding of the potential connections between politics and tragedy than that which has been evinced to date, by making it possible for us to acknowledge the possible relevance in some scenarios of the alternative reading of tragedy's ethical implications sketched here – one which, if current developments in the world are accorded due seriousness, may well turn out to be politically relevant too.

Bibliography

Benjamin W., *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, [In:] *Illuminations*, ed. H. Arendt, New York 1969, pp. 253-264.

Carter D., *The Politics of Greek Tragedy*, Bristol 2007.

Conant J., *Throwing Away the Top of the Ladder*, "The Yale Review" 1991, vol. 79, No. 3, pp. 328-64.

Diamond C., *The Realistic Spirit. Wittgenstein, Philosophy and the Mind*, Cambridge MA 1991.

Geuss R., *Philosophy and Real Politics*, Princeton, NJ 2008.

Geuss R., *Thucydides, Nietzsche and Williams*, [In:] R. Geuss, *Outside Ethics*, Princeton, N.J. 2005, pp. 219-233; also [In:] *Nietzsche on Time and History*, ed. M. Dries, Berlin 2008, pp. 35-50.

Habermas J., *The Concept of Human Dignity and the Realistic Utopia of Human Rights*. "Metaphilosophy" 2010, vol. 41, No. 4, pp. 464-480.

Hacker P.M.S., *Insight and Illusion: Themes in the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, Oxford 1986.

Leiter B., *Nietzsche on Morality*, Oxford 2002/2014.

Meier C., *The Greek Discovery of Politics*, Cambridge, MA 1990.

Meier C., *The Political Art of Greek Tragedy*, Cambridge 1993.

Nietzsche F., *Daybreak, Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, ed. M. Clark, B. Leiter, Cambridge 1997.

Nozick R., *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, New York 1974.

Rawls J., *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, Cambridge, MA 2001.

Rawls J., *Political Liberalism*, New York 1993.

Rawls J., *The Theory of Justice*, Cambridge, MA 1971.

Shapiro G., *Nietzsche's Earth: Great Events, Great Politics*, Chicago 2016.

Shklar J., *The Liberalism of Fear*, [In:] *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, ed. N. Rosenblum, Cambridge, MA 1989, pp. 21-39.

Williams B., *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Cambridge, MA 1985.

Williams B., *Shame and Necessity. (Sather Classical Lectures, Volume 57)*, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London 1993, pp. 75-102.

Williams B., *The Liberalism of Fear*, [In:] *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*, ed. G. Hawthorn, Princeton 2005, pp. 52-61.

Wittgenstein L., *On Certainty*, transl. D. Paul, G.E.M. Anscombe, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, Oxford 1969.

Wittgenstein L., *Philosophical Investigations*, transl. G.E.M. Anscombe, Oxford 1953.

TRAGEDY AND THE LIMITS OF PESSIMISM
IN ANCIENT AND MODERN REALIST POLITICAL THOUGHT

S u m m a r y

This article explores the question of what we might discover about the nature and significance of contemporary forms of so-called "political realism" – particularly with regard to their relationship to pessimism – from a philosophical consideration of Ancient Greek tragedy on the one hand, and of such supposed ancient precursors of this way of thinking about ethical and/or political matters as Thucydides on the other. The principal thesis put forward here will be that Greek tragedy can prompt us to notice a revealing equivocation within the thinking of prominent recent and contemporary exponents of such realism, connected with what, in practice, it means to *withhold assent* from forms of morality-centred optimism on the grounds that they are perceived to be dogmatic or speculative. Such political realism, I conclude, when thus formulated, implicitly involves elements that are *dogmatically pessimistic*, even when expressly aspiring to be anti-dogmatic themselves. In order to clarify the significance of this equivocation, I draw a parallel with some issues that have emerged in the context of the reception of Wittgenstein's later philosophy.

Keywords: Tragedy; pessimism; political realism; Geuss, Nietzsche, Williams, Wittgenstein

TRAGEDIA I GRANICE PESYMIZMU W STAROŻYTNEJ
I WSPÓŁCZESNEJ REALISTYCZNEJ MYŚLI POLITYCZNEJ

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Artykuł ten porusza kwestię tego, co możemy odkryć o naturze i znaczeniu współczesnych form tak zwanego „realizmu politycznego" – zwłaszcza w odniesieniu do ich związku z pesymizmem – z jednej strony poprzez filozoficzne rozważania na temat starożytnej greckiej tragedii i z drugiej poprzez takich rzekomych starożytnych prekursorów tego sposobu myślenia o sprawach etycznych lub politycznych jak Tukidydes. Główna teza, którą tu postawiono, jest następująca: tragedia grecka może nas skłonić do zauważenia ujawniającej się dwuznaczności w myśleniu wybitnych niedawnych i współczesnych przed-stawicieli tego realizmu, związanej z tym, co w praktyce oznacza powstrzymywanie się od przyzwolenia na formy moralnego optymizmu, postrzegając je jako dogmatyczne lub spekulatywne. Dochodzę do wniosku, że taki realizm polityczny, gdy jest tak sformułowany, zawiera w sobie implicite elementy dogmatycznie pesymistyczne, nawet jeśli same aspirują do statusu antydogmatycznego. Aby wyjaśnić znaczenie tej dwuznaczności, przedstawię paralelę z niektórymi kwestiami, które pojawiły się w kontekście recepcji późniejszej filozofii Wittgensteina.

Słowa kluczowe: tragedia, pesymizm, realizm polityczny, Geuss, Nietzsche, Williams, Wittgenstein