

Attending to adolescent experience: Tragic drama as a stimulus and a model

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Abstract

This article argues that the Community of Philosophical Inquiry (CPI) can productively use tragedy as a stimulus. We do this by following Ann Margaret Sharp's interest in Simone Weil and supplementing it with Iris Murdoch's writing on art and literature. Weil and Murdoch provide accounts of the moral value of attention that are both timely and enriching for the practice of philosophy for and with young people.

This approach hinges on (i) an understanding of the particular affordances of tragedy as attention-based literature and (ii) an attentive approach to stimulus presentation and exploration. Thus, we propose reading tragedies for neither their philosophical nor their cultural authority but rather because of the genre's unique affordances in relation to adolescents.

Beginning by tracing Weil's own educational practises (as a philosophy teacher in schools, and when instructing fellow workers), where she made extensive use of this genre, we move on to a broader exploration of the potential for attention Weil and Murdoch recognised in literature's stimulation of imaginative exploration. With this in mind, we advocate for the pedagogical use of tragedies as a medium instructive in the limits of individual agency and the richness of reality. For to be moral, for Weil and Murdoch, means to be open to reality, and so to approach other people with attention. In our view, the moral values that inhabit tragedies are best explored through the community of philosophical inquiry, which can facilitate attention to the structure of adolescent experience; in particular, the conditions of adolescents who are in a moment of inheritance of a world beyond their control but in need of their care, experiencing a moment phenomenologically akin to Aristotle's reversal and recognition.

Therefore, tragedies, rather than speaking to us about the ancient past, can, in the CPI, meaningfully orient young people and those who work with them towards their present.

Keywords

adolescents, attention, Iris Murdoch, P4C, Simone Weil, tragedy

1. Introduction

The community of enquiry allows for thinking together as a process of gathering up the fragments of broken traditions and old worldviews and reassembling them anew, imaginatively creating a new worldview that all can share to some degree. (Sharp 2009, p. xvii)

Young persons today face increasingly thorny sets of inherited problems. Fractured politics, the urgency of the climate crisis, pressures of the attention economy¹ and economic instability are all problems that adolescents are forced to contend with in their current lives and which they will inherit once they reach adulthood (Best & Kellner 2003). These position adolescents today against a rising tide of difficult choices between personal freedom and the good of others remote from them either geographically—workers oppressed by fast fashion, for example—or temporally; future generations that will be impacted by our lack of action in the face of the climate crisis.²

Literature has long been proposed as a forum for developing an understanding of our moral faculties due to its ability to present a richer account of moral choice and moral conflict through narrative (Nussbaum 2001). These claims have been applied to the Community of Philosophical Inquiry (CPI) as an approach where literature is often used to provoke philosophical reflection and questioning (D'Olimpio & Peterson 2018; Malo-Fletcher 2018). In the CPI, the provocation to questioning that is offered to the classroom or community is referred to as a stimulus.³ Greek myths have been

¹ With 'attention economy' we refer to the idea that in our technological era, human attention is continuously fragmented, and commodified. As Timothy Wu (2016) writes, 'This exploitation of human attention is in some deeper way the exploitation of our persons' (p. 32).

² By adolescents, we intend those between 10 and 19 as per the WHO (2024) definition.

³ Stimulus is the common term used by practitioners in P4C. However, as Murriss (2008) states, 'provocation' might be a term that captures the function of this founding moment more aptly. Certainly, in our case, we hope that the use of tragedy will prompt young persons to explore the phenomenology of their lived experience, so this moment might also be described as one of recognition in the sense of *anamnesis*. Here we've used the term 'stimulus' since (i) it is most widely used in the literature and (ii) it is not so much the case that the facilitator will 'provoke' their community through the presentation of tragic

proposed as stimulus materials for children and young people due to their engagement with contestable concepts central to human life (Worley 2012, 2013). Yet the tragedy specifically has features which should make it an ideal stimulus for philosophical inquiry with and about the experience of adolescents.⁴ This article contributes to the under-researched area of stimulus selection in Philosophy for and with Children and young people (P4w/C) specifically in relation to adolescents.

This article attempts to provide a theoretical justification for the use of tragedies with adolescents as the Stimulus for Philosophical Inquiry. Philosophical Inquiry is the structured dialogue that unites practices in P4C (Philosophy for Children) and PwC (Philosophy with Children).⁵ Stimuli are intended to provoke a group toward philosophical reflection. Defence of, or resources focused on, ancient texts, often appeal to their centrality in the Western philosophical canon, arguing that the use of these texts to provoke inquiry will both inspire philosophical thinking and provide contact with texts that are a part of academic philosophy. Here, however, we take a different route. First, we address the use of tragedies by Simone Weil in her philosophical and pedagogical work, especially its non-didactic features. From this description of the tragedy as a means of exploring suffering, a difficult reality that is marginalised within our quotidian lives, we progress to a discussion of Murdoch's development of the Weilian account in more secular terms. Having established tragedy's general educative function, we move to a discussion of the CPI and why the tragedy constitutes an effective stimulus. Finally, we focus on adolescents themselves and the way that the structure of events within a tragedy reflects the phenomenology of the experience of adolescence. In closing this article, we explore the future

materials since the facilitator as co-inquirer in the sense Lipman intended could also stand to learn much from the use of these materials as a starting point for inquiry that centres adolescents experiences.

⁴ There are current projects focused on theory-building with adolescents through inquiry, such as the RADICAL project, where the CPI method is being used to re-appraise existing conceptualisations of respect through inquiry (Cassidy 2024). However, in this paper, we advocate for the use of tragedies as stimuli to explore the experiences of young people because the structures within which adolescents find themselves are similar to those of a tragic hero. Furthermore, it may be the case that in such an inquiry, the need for new conceptual language to explain these experiences becomes evident.

⁵ In this paper, we imply both forms of practice where we reference the CPI (the Community of Philosophical Inquiry) unless otherwise specified.

investigations needed to test what has been mapped here theoretically, and the potential challenges this proposal might face in practice.

2. Weil's tragedy as pedagogy

Simone Weil gave crucial importance to the role of tragedy as a practical form of moral inspiration for the way it is deeply connected to suffering. Weil's life was fully dedicated to the analysis of *le malheur*, which she defines as a state of physical suffering, distress of the soul, and social humiliation felt when the human being is reduced to an object. To share the experience of oppression alongside the oppressed, Weil went to work in the Alstom factory for two years in 1934 to 1935. There, she notes, is where humans play the role of things, and things play the role of humans, and there, she notes, lies the root of evil.

Tragic drama is emblematically about extreme suffering, and great tragedies such as Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, *Antigone*, or Shakespeare's *King Lear* can, in Weil's view, allow what she called 'the miracle' or 'the mystery' of sustaining our attention on the most difficult thing—suffering—which we usually eschew in our everyday lives in order to make them liveable. Indeed, human thought, Weil claims is ordinarily unable to acknowledge the reality of *le malheur*. To acknowledge the reality of *le malheur*, explains Weil, means saying to oneself:

I may lose at any moment, through the play of circumstances over which I have no control, anything whatsoever that I possess, including those things which are so intimately mine that I consider them as being myself. There is nothing that I might not lose. It could happen at any moment that what I am might be abolished and replaced by anything whatsoever of the filthiest and most contemptible sort. (Weil 2015b, p. 27)

Although Weil did not write extensively on her idea of literature⁶ (unlike, for example, Murdoch), it is impossible not to notice, for instance in her notebooks, her extensive use of literature to think philosophically or to convey philosophical ideas. She used literature, and especially tragedies, in her lifelong educational practises which were not limited to her classroom⁷ but were happening anywhere she would go, whether

⁶ One fundamental essay explicitly on literature is her 1941 essay 'Morale et littérature' now included in her *Late Philosophical Writings* (2015c).

⁷ She became a professor in 1931 and taught philosophy first in Le Puy, in Auxerre (1932/33), and then in Roanne (1933/34).

the factory, the mines, or trade union meetings. She would read ancient Greek tragedies to the workers, with the belief that the afflicted of her time could be receptive to their condition being narrated (or better, translated) through literature. This paper occupies a similar position in relation to the recognition of one's experience in stimulus materials being a powerful beginning to its exploration in thought.

Weil's idea is that great art, such as tragedies, hints at a good beyond the distinction between good and evil while at the same time affirming this distinction. The good, in Weil's view, is on the level of what she calls *le surnaturelle*. As Weil writes, great art shows 'the true relation of good and evil' (2015c, p. 134). That is:

A harsh necessity, quite like gravity, condemns humans to evil, forbidding them all good except a strictly limited good that is obtained only with difficulty, and that is mixed and soiled with evil. Except, that is, when the supernatural that suspends the effect of earthly necessity appears on earth. (Weil 2015c, pp. 145–146)

Katherine T Brueck, in her *The Redemption of Tragedy: The Literary Vision of Simone Weil*, compares tragedy in the light of Weil's metaphysics with dramas such as Camus' *Caligula* or Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, where suffering is presented, in its essence, as meaningless. She explains that, differently from the modernist, the classical tragedian 'posits the existence of supernatural forces'. While this on the one hand does not alleviate the suffering, 'it often imbues pain with meaning' where 'affliction can afford meaning on a level above the rational' (Brueck 1995, pp. 2–3). Tragedies, for Weil, display the suffering of the innocent (like that of Antigone or King Lear) which, as Brueck explains, can lead to 'an apprehension of the transcendent' and therefore to a sort of redemption for the character. The matter of tragic art is not suffering or evil made more bearable, but the bringing about to the reader/audience the harsh reality of suffering while hinting at the transcendent good. As we will discuss in the penultimate section of the paper, it is our hope that using the tragedy as a stimulus is one method to avoid conventional responses to what is often called (or better, dismissed as) 'teenage angst'. These can be understood as a belittling of these feelings as simply a phase an individual is going through or something that is 'difficult for everyone'. These responses, however, do little to *examine* these real moments, those experiencing them, or the structures in which they are embedded. As such, this paper is in part concerned with the more radical possibilities for understanding made possible when the experience of young people is taken seriously. This will be discussed further in Section 5 below.

3. Tragedy and attention

Iris Murdoch can help us account for this role of tragedies in a more secular language. She suggests that great literature is able to show ‘the only sense in which the permanent and the incorruptible is compatible with the transient’ (Murdoch 1999, p. 372). On the level of the transient, good and evil relate to the good, to the incorruptible, in the same way as Plato explains in the *Timaeus*, that the Demiurge shapes chaos and moves it towards the good which implies that the good can only be approached by the experience of everyday necessity. This is what we learn when we read of Antigone burying her brother following an unwritten, divine law which is above human laws. As Weil (2015a) recalls, ‘The good begins at a point beyond the reach of will, as truth begins at a point beyond the reach of intelligence. Beyond the intelligence, and therefore beyond the law. The true law is an unwritten law, as Sophocles knew. For the letter kills’ (p. 262).

The mediocre artist, Murdoch observes, fails to justly take into account necessity itself, the *Ananke* (necessity and inevitability) of the world. Acknowledging the *Ananke* teaches that every human being is equal in misfortune. One great tragedy, for both Weil and Murdoch, that teaches this is Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. As Brueck observes:

Lear says, ‘Thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare forked animal as thou art’ (III.iv.1057). Affliction teaches Lear that the distinctions the world makes between human beings, high and low, king and outcast, are meaningless; all persons are but two-legged beings exposed to forces indifferent to the good; variations between them are the result of pure accident. This understanding evokes not cynicism but compassion. (Brueck 1995, p. 103)

In tragedies like these, we feel compassion for the characters because what is transmitted is not a judgement on the wrongdoing of the character, of an evil choice for which they are punished, but their suffering follows the entirety of what they are. They act according to what they are, defined by circumstances beyond their control. This means that they cannot do differently and often act without full knowledge of a wider context, and because of this, they inspire compassion. Tragedy makes us face the idea of ‘a realm where unmerited misfortune is a universal and serious possibility’ (Brueck 1995, p. 63) and the fact that morality is not only about rational choices but that there are other subterranean forces that come into play when we act, and which come to constitute the background against which we make decisions. For Weil and

Murdoch, this background is constituted by what and how we pay attention to, for 'our ability to act well "when the time comes" depends partly, perhaps largely, upon the quality of our habitual objects of attention' (Murdoch 1999, p. 345).

In this article, we suggest that great art, like tragedies such as *Antigone*, or *King Lear*, are educational but non-didactic in the sense that they evoke attentive compassion. Meeting young people with compassion can be rare in popular discourse. Adolescents are frequently presented in the tired tropes of antisocial gangs or as isolated and apathetic.⁸ In this sense, we say with Murdoch (1999) that art is 'the most educational thing we have' in facilitating a moral outlook (p. 461). In the case of the tragedy, we propose that it is something that can facilitate attention to elements of adolescent experience in a manner that can support exploration, discussion and acceptance of this important and delicate phase of human living.

When we (i) rule out the idea of art for art's sake, and (ii) do not reduce the moral to the didactic, and (iii) envision literature as preoccupied with morals, we understand how the level of absolute exemplarity that characterises tragedy can be educational and yet non-didactic; education in that it reveals something to us about the world, but non didactic in that works of tragedy do not point explicitly to a 'moral of the story'. This exemplarity is achieved by the fact that the single events and characters are put against a background that transcends them. Indeed, the fruition of tragedy 'must be connected to, enlightened by, seen in the light of, something good (pure, just)' (Murdoch 1994, p. 140). In this sense, tragedy can teach by revealing that '[w]e are all mortal and equally at the mercy of necessity and chance' (Murdoch 1999, p. 360). These commonalities are, for Murdoch, 'the true aspects in which all men are brothers' (1999, p. 360). The sensitivity of all persons to the changeability of fate shows that 'all is vanity', exposing the hubris of our attempts to control the world exhaustively which is, in Murdoch's words 'the beginning and the end of ethics' (p. 358).⁹ The good can

⁸ It may indeed be that attentive compassion is a more effective means not only of exploring their experience but also of welcoming them into civic society. But this is a matter for another paper.

⁹ This claim in terms of how tragedy exposes hubris has Aristotelian connotations and, of course, *does not* entail a kind of nihilistic view. Rather, it exposes the fact that analytic ethics, in its attempts to uncover fixed rule making, can overlook the particularity of discrete situations. However, the appeal of the good, as evident in our love of tragedy despite the suffering it exposes us to, shows that, for Murdoch, all persons may possess the faculties for acting well.

be approached through what these authors call selfless attention¹⁰ only if we accept the fact that we live in a world ruled by chance and necessity, where force, suffering, and illusions are the fabric of ordinary life, where fragility and the possibility of calamity are not obscured by comforting fantasies.

But how does the revealing that happens in tragedy work? Tragedy disturbs us, it shocks us. Sudden changes of fortune happen to characters not only despite their effort to live well, but in the face of their seeming excellence. In our everyday lives, our attention gets attracted and sometimes sustained, for instance, in our encounter with beauty or when we experience a big enough shock which throws us for a moment outside of our habitual thinking. For Weil, in these moments of attention, which resemble the cathartic ending moments of tragedies, we are able to sense ‘the horrible monotony of evil or the unfathomable marvel of goodness’ (Weil 2015c, p. 147). These are aptly described only as moments for Weil, because we ‘soon enough we fall back into the half-dream peopled by our narrational fancies’ (p. 147). Through tragedies, our attention can be engaged in the direction of suffering, and the traumatic essence of this literary genre allows its cathartic affordances.

In everyday life, instead, when we encounter suffering we either look the other way or try to give meaning to it; for example, suggesting that ‘all things happen for a reason’ or reassuring ourselves that good outcomes that follow a tragic event justify that event. However, explaining suffering, as Weil observes, can be a fool’s errand. It entails either offering empty comfort, or covering suffering with sadomasochistic illusions. Weil notices that it is this difficulty in attention that gets in the way of compassion, she writes:

It is the refusal to accept for oneself the possibility of suffering which places an obstacle in the way of compassion. It is the refusal to recognize oneself in the misery of others—which necessarily wears an ugly appearance ... Compassion implies acceptance. (Weil 1956, pp. 284–285)

Compassion follows attention, it implies accepting that we are all kin at the mercy of chance and necessity, it implies a step back from our egos. If tragedy allows us ‘to see misery and evil justly’, then this will allow a space for attentive compassion. It is in

¹⁰ ‘Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty and ready to be penetrated by the object’ (Weil 1951, p. 56). For a thorough analysis of the differences between Weil’s and Murdoch’s accounts of the role of the Self in attention, and of their different accounts of transcendence, see Caprioglio Panizza (2022).

this sense that Murdoch can say that literature, among other forms of art, is the richest source for morals, for, as in the case of tragedy, it creates a space where virtues can be portrayed against a background that transcends the individual characters and encompasses them with compassion. As Murdoch (1999) herself stated, 'if stories are told, virtue will be portrayed' (p. 233). The use of tragedy as a starting point for wondering in the CPI can allow teenagers to think about virtue in a way not often provided for in virtues education. They are not prompted to analyse whether a character 'reaped what they sowed' since in many cases this is irrefutably not the case; rather it can facilitate a deeper meta-reflection on human life and living and indeed on our motives for acting well.

How suffering becomes beautiful in great literature yet without comfort or exaggeration or aggrandisement (what Murdoch calls the 'mystery' of great art) is connected to the fact that 'the utter chanciness of human life and the fact of death make virtue always, really, perhaps, when the illusory backgrounds [placed by religion and society] are removed, something gratuitous, something which belongs in the absolute foreground of our existence' (Murdoch 1999, p. 233). Echoing Weil's studies contained in the collection *Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks*, Murdoch refers, for example, to 'the gentleness of Patroclus in the middle of a ruthless war, the truthfulness of Cordelia in a flattering court' or Antigone in her respect to the divine law, in order to stress how we still, nowadays, 'have no great or essential difficulty in understanding plays written by Greeks in the fifth century BC [and that] we make, in many respects though not in all, the same kinds of moral judgements as the Greeks did' (p. 229). This, writes Murdoch, 'when one reflects on it, is a remarkable testimony to the existence of a single durable human nature' (p. 229). In fact, for Murdoch, virtue 'can be portrayed independently of precise social background through some more general appeal to our knowledge of man and his frailty' (p. 233), as virtue is always essentially connected to the ultimate idea that 'all men are brothers' and that the logic of power and force that rules among human relationships is merely a dream:

Tragedy, which deals with what is most difficult, is dense non-generalised non-abstract work, herein resembling states of absolute pain in real cases where generalities are irrelevant; the tragic vision of such pain is condensed and non-discursive as is the condition itself. We are placed, as it were, right up against it; close to a real awareness of death, of the senseless rubble aspect of human life which is concealed under

grand illusory names such as fate, destiny, history, providence.
(Murdoch 1994, p. 142)

By engaging with tragedies, we are 'placed right up against' death, and so our conditions as mortal beings with any egoistic striving loses its salience. We are confronted by the fact that our efforts to completely control our lives can come to nought without warning. Allowing space to engage with materials that do this can provide an important relief from future planning, which is a consistent part of young people's lives, especially in school (choosing subject options, thinking about careers and university applications). When we realise this, we also realise how the fabric of our lives is made of fantasies (both those that comfort us and those imposed by others) that we cling to and that prevent us from seeing reality as it is. This is the beginning and the end of ethics, writes Murdoch, and what makes great art 'a clue to morals' (Murdoch 1999, p. 202). It can be a clue to those features of human life that unite us across differences by stressing that very difference through the interpretive act of reading and exploration that they require from us. Identifying adolescent experience in the structure of great works of art indicates that their experience is being taken seriously, a prerequisite for genuine philosophical inquiry.

Weil, following Plato's concerns in Book X of the *Republic*, warns about the role of artists in her society, yet she does not advocate for what could sound like a moralistic view of art.¹¹ In fact, she suggests:

Writers do not have to be professors of morals, but they do have to give expression to the human condition. For nothing is so essential to human life, for all people and at every moment, as good and evil. When literature becomes deliberately indifferent to the opposition of good and evil, it betrays its function and has no pretence to excellence. (Weil 2015c, p. 154)

Weil's idea of tragedy and Murdoch's theory of literature help to counteract the value-neutral nature of contemporary relativism, and theories of art. Indeed, for both Weil and Murdoch, there is an absolute value of truth and reality. There is a reality that we can approach through selfless attention, and this reality, which transcends the ego and its projections, is ultimately good. Goodness is then found in this type of Platonic

¹¹ Murdoch discusses Plato's ban of the artist in her famous essay 'The Fire and The Sun', now included in *Existentialists and Mystics* (1999).

realism, from appearances and illusions to reality outside the cave. Truth is beyond the structure of discursive reason, nonetheless, it can be evoked in literature, and especially, in tragedies: 'Art, like (in Plato's view) philosophy, hovers about in the very fine air which we breathe just beyond what has been expressed' (Murdoch 1999, p. 461). Thus, the use of tragedies as stimuli in the CPI can permit an experience of great art supported by a discussion of the ineffable features essential to human living. In the following two sections, we discuss briefly the tragedy as a stimulus material and then specifically the structural similarities between the plight of the tragic hero and the phenomenology of adolescent experience.

4. The tragedy as a stimulus

Starting from the tragedy's ability to evoke that which lies 'beyond' expression, we suggest that the discursive thinking together that happens in the CPI can capitalise on unique features of the tragedy. These features make it a good means of provoking philosophical curiosity, especially for adolescents who appear to stand in a particular relation to the forces of fate. It is to the former claim, namely, that the tragic text makes a productive stimulus, that we now turn. There are two key features we will focus on here: (i) the non-didactic nature of the tragedy and (ii) interpretative distance.

Tragedies are non-didactic. This means that they do not attempt to convey explicit moral instruction, in that the characters are not presented as ones that perhaps 'ought' to have reacted differently to the events as they unfold, or that they somehow 'earned' their tragic fate due to some previous wrongdoing. As such, it meets the criteria of openness that supports effective philosophical exploration.

Like the Lipman novels, the *structure* of tragic drama is the mechanism through which thinking occurs, as opposed to the character constructs or the dramatic nature of the events (Aristotle 1997; Di Marzio 2011, p. 32). For facilitators offering this form of literature to their community, this provides a valuable opportunity to reflect not only on the contestable concepts at work in the narrative but the structure of the events themselves. This hermeneutic skill, the ability to think not only in relation to single concepts emergent from experience, but also to understand and explore the relationships between discrete events in experience, is necessary both in and beyond the CPI. For instance, within an inquiry, understanding shared elements of existential problems can bring co-inquirers closer together and see the relationships between experiences that may emerge from very different contexts.

Research on the CPI as a space where attention can flourish extends Ann Margaret Sharp's interest in Weilian concepts and explicit references to communal inquiries' ability to displace the individual ego's 'self-referencing' in order to appreciate the richness of the worldviews of others (Sharp 1996, p. 37). As texts that focus squarely on suffering, for young persons engaged in serious philosophical inquiry, tragedies can provide a useful challenge to the 'false vision of just how difficult things are "out there"' (Hannam & Echeverria 2009, p. 37).

Confronting unavoidable suffering provides young people with an opportunity to reflect on suffering itself, rather than on potential solutions to its amelioration. This may be important for two reasons. First, if we want to empower young people to respond meaningfully to a given state of affairs (in this case, the suffering of themselves and of others very different from them) a 'real' confrontation with that suffering may be necessary. Secondly, as we will note in the following section, suffering or undergoing experience simply *is* a necessary feature of being an adolescent. In the account described above by Weil and Murdoch, confronting suffering is essential to any moral action and because of this, art occupies an essential role in ethical choosing.

Prior to concluding, we'll focus on the role of fate in tragedy. We compare the situation of the adolescent and the tragic hero to complete this theoretical reflection on the efficacy of tragic texts in reflecting on contemporary lives.

5. The adolescent as a tragic figure

The power of the Lipman novels as stimulus rests on their role as a model of inquiry in practice (Tibaldeo 2023, p. 73). This brings us to the final sense in which the tragedy might operate as an effective form of literary stimulus. We opened this article by considering the gathering storms—economic, political and existential—that face adolescents today.

Increasingly, students learn about these problems through curriculum subjects but do not yet have sufficient agency to influence these crucial matters that are already shaping the world they will inherit and inhabit. Both climate change and citizenship are cases in point here. While it is important that students understand the complex issues the world is facing, and we do not oppose this provision in the curriculum, we suggest that the tragedy and an understanding of a world beyond our control, when used in the CPI, can be a moment to acknowledge the pressure young people face when educated about the problems created and/or exacerbated by previous

generations. This article does not question the value of teaching information about these issues in order to resource understanding and future action. It does ask, however, what form of literature can speak to adolescents in their present moment, rather than focusing on the people they may become. The way in which the protagonist in a tragedy exhibits a lack of control over the events of their lives means that we can think about the tragedy as what Gareth Matthews termed: 'philosophical story realism' (Gregory & Lavery 2022, p. 14).

Of course, the realism in tragedy lies not in the kinship between the characters' lives and the lives of adolescent readers but in the *similarities of structure* between the seeming helplessness of the protagonist in relation to the greater forces of fate and the situation of young persons today. As such, for adolescents, tragedies 'highlight a philosophical dimension of ordinary experience with which the reader is likely familiar' (Gregory & Lavery 2022, p. 15). This being the case, the CPI, when using tragedy as a stimulus, can become an occasion to explore the phenomenon of the adolescent experience. It can make the CPI an opportunity for authentic expression of the phenomenon of adolescence, thus inviting adolescents to create the conceptual tools to navigate their experiences together.

The role of fate in the tragedy shows the limits of an individual's control over the world and the inescapability of experience. Unexpected outcomes beset the protagonist in tragedy despite their best efforts to live well or nobly. In a world where individuals are frequently cast as successes or failures on social media or given strong messages of self-optimisation, the tragedy's unique ability to show the limit of our control over events can provide a form of reassurance that may at first seem counterintuitive. The solace it provides lies in its ability to confront reality unflinchingly in a manner not often afforded to young persons today. This may enhance the capacity of inquiry to support adolescents to 'develop a greater capacity to handle ambiguity' (Hannam & Echeverria 2009, p. 42).

In this sense, the situation of the protagonists in the tragic drama resonates with the situation of the adolescent. As not-yet-adult, they find themselves caught between forces beyond their control placing them in a position akin to the tragic hero, moved as they are by the forces of fate (Oedipus), loyalty (Antigone), and love (Lear). These tensions between the individual and events that emerge beyond their control are only made greater by the everyday ways in which adolescence is talked about as a transitory period in which childhood is left behind and adulthood is realised. Empty promises to young persons that emphasise the way they might look back on their

teenage years as 'the best years of their lives', or ones that frame adolescence as a necessarily difficult period, do little to attend to the young person in their present.

P4C practitioners can inadvertently become part of this rhetoric if they frame inquiry as solely a preparatory tool for young persons' future civic lives. On these accounts, philosophical inquiry is something that will help young people to acquire skills of 'critical, creative and caring thinking' that are essential if they are to participate fully in the world they stand on the cusp of joining (Lipman 2003, p. 199).¹² In contrast to this, attention requires a focus on the reality of the present, in a way that supports the affective elements of thinking that Lipman emphasised (Lipman 2003 p. 147).

6. Conclusion

This article has provided a theoretical justification for the use of tragedies as a stimulus in P4C. This justification is based on the tragedy as a form of literature that (i) mirrors the structure of the phenomenology of the adolescent experience as one in which greater forces beyond the control of an individual come to significantly influence and dictate that experience, and (ii) can enhance our attention to suffering by representing it as a fundamental feature of human existence.

The justification offered here is perhaps preferable to calls for the integration of canonical texts out of reverence for their role within the philosophical canon or as a means of transferring authority to the practice of P4C via the use of respected materials as a stimulus. With Weil, we can claim that understanding the tragedy as a resource for developing attention allows the texts themselves to function as living resources for the interrogation of our lives today rather than as atrophied artefacts of the past. This progresses the view present in the work of Lipman and Sharp that P4C is a vehicle through which young people can acquire foundational cultural artefacts, ideas and ideals through critical reflection (Tibaldeo 2023, p. 20).

This account serves a temporally liberatory function for the adolescent too. Where the tragedy itself is mired in history, the adolescent appears to be positioned with the

¹² Of course, thinking about adolescents as 'not yet' members of society is something the authors of this paper do not endorse. Further, it is not clear Lipman himself would endorse a form of thinking that limits civic participation and membership to the enfranchised since, with Dewey, he understood the expression of democracy to expand far beyond the act of voting (for example). Gregory (2000, p. 459) describes these expanded notions of care and democracy as essential to values education that does not recourse to didactic endorsement of the values considered useful by the current adult generation .

future in mind. Proponents of P4C with adolescents frame this as a preparation for their lives as engaged adult agents in a globalised world, and everyday rhetoric around adolescence still frames it as a period of life to be 'gotten over.' In bringing adolescents together to think philosophically in response to the tragedy as understood above, opportunities are created to think about themselves in their present moment and situation. This opens up exciting new possibilities for practice using the tragedy as a stimulus with adolescents, with reflection on this experience to test these theoretical claims more fully.

In designing sessions in P4C, facilitators can consider the tragedy as something that might support authentic engagement with adolescents. Sessions would need to focus not on conceptual analysis, but rather on structural features at play. This might also require an intervening step within the process of inquiry. This would entail brokering connections between the structure of the narrative and the experiences of those in the community, perhaps prior to question-making, and would need careful debriefing or reviewing. It might also be beneficial to move away from common practices of limiting an inquiry to one single session (that is, engaging with stimulus, questions, inquiry and debrief in one limited session), and rather interrogate a chosen question in order to map initial hypotheses and then return to it in the light of some further experiences.

Aside from this, such an approach also demands that facilitators consider their own conceptualisations of adolescents. This might be challenging for adult facilitators who are distant from this experience and might demand transparency from the facilitators themselves in relation to ways they may have subjected adolescents in their lives to a certain kind of epistemic injustice. These are preliminary accounts of potential practice interventions and challenges that we hope to explore in a future article. Connecting to the longer inquiry described above, facilitators making plain how the thinking in the community was resonant for them (something distinct from the addition of content to the inquiry space and thus maintaining the 'philosophically self-effacing' character of the facilitator). This reimagining of the tragedy as something deeply connected to the reality of the adolescent can contribute to a 'renunciation of condescension' in favour of 'a celebration of the humanity we share with our children' (Matthews 1998, p. 1). Such a reflective approach to stimulus selection is imperative if those developing and delivering philosophy for and with adolescents wish to meet them with seriousness and authenticity.

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