

Abraham's Dice in the Flow of Life.

The experience of the Tragic and its theological interpretation

Reinhold Bernhardt

In the framework of the Abraham's Dice project my paper is somewhat exotic. It does not deal – like most of the other papers – with chance and providence in the *world*, i.e. in nature and history, but in the experience of life. In the flow of our life we experience chance, randomness, and contingency all the time. As a pastor I often got involved in life-stories of parish members who were afflicted with a sudden disruption of their flow of life. In funeral-services I sometimes quoted the verse from the Book Jesus Sirach 18:26: “From the morning until the evening the time shall be changed.”

In my paper I will deal with such experiences of existential contingency. I single out a specific type of those experiences: the one we use to call “tragic”. In the first part of my paper I try to describe it. In the second part I ask for a theological interpretation referring to the belief in the providence of God.

If we assume that God's providence is reigning over the life of each individual, how can there be contingency in general and tragic contingency in particular? I will show that divine providence need not be understood as theological determinism; on the contrary it can be understood as opening new possibilities for dealing with situations which seem to be desperate and dead-ended. Providence then means: God breaks open the crusted earth so that the seeds of new life would be able to sprout! Providence is the field of force of God's spirit which can become experienced in various forms: as spiritual guidance, as the power of resurrection in the midst of life, as a vigour of resilience, as the growing of new confidence and hope, and so on – especially in situations that are experienced as tragic. I intend my reflections to be a contribution to the perennial discussion on theodicy and as relevant for pastoral care.

What does it mean to experience something as “tragic”?

The notion of the tragic is not an *empirical* category which is located on the level of facts but a *hermeneutical* category which is located on the level of understanding and interpretation. It is a pattern of meaning – but a pattern of meaning which paradoxically qualifies an experience as meaningless.

Not everything that is described in everyday language as tragic can be considered as tragic in a philosophical reflected way. The common use of the word “tragic” is too focused on the horror of an event. We need to clarify the concept first. I suggest to differentiate between three dimensions of the tragic: The tragic as a certain experiencing of an external event; an internal conflict, and an unavoidable failure.

The tragic as an external event

A tragic situation can be experienced as a deeply shattering *external* event. We apply the notion of the tragic to those events which burst the regularities of our ordered flow of life. One could call them disruption-events, which break in the more or less coherent nexus of experi-

ences and expectations. They are contrary to what – on the basis of previous experiences – could be expected. But tragic is not an event as such but the event as embedded in a specific situation at a certain time and place in which the event occurs without necessity and has unpredictable destructive effects. At another time or place it would not have those consequences. In that situation it becomes experienced as an avalanche of sheer contingency, without it being possible to ascribe any meaning to it. The concept of the tragic refers to those entanglements in sinister complex constellations of events that are experienced as a painful falling into meaninglessness and hopelessness. The disruption of a so far ordered situation can be caused by natural disasters but also through the devastating effects of human actions, even actions motivated by good intentions.

I give three examples:

- That death overtakes a person cannot be described as tragic. But we can call it tragic if it does so while that person is for instance in the process of completing his/her life's work, finishing the last chapter of a book which was meant to summarize all of his/her lifelong collected knowledge. It is not tragic to die, but to die at the wrong time can be described as tragic.
- The bursting of a truck tire is a purely physical event to which nothing tragic can be ascribed. However when it bursts just before the exit to the St. Gotthard's tunnel in Switzerland and thus causes an accident that results in the gruesome death of eleven people (as it happened in 2001), that is tragic.
- An exchange of gunfire between rival youth gangs in a poor neighborhood of Chicago can and ought not to be interpreted as a tragic event. But that in this exchange of fire an innocent passerby, a pregnant mother of a little child, dies, that has the bitter quality of the tragic.

The three examples show that the tragic does not lie in the event itself, but rather in the situational setting: In the first case the tragic relates to the *time* of the occurrence. In the second case it is the *place* of the occurrence. In the third case (as in the previous two examples) it is the un-necessitated connection between purposeful actions, unintended accompaniments and their contingent devastating effects.

The notion of the tragic, however, is not exhausted in the dimension of *external events* which befall a person. It can also be attributed to the impact of a *conflict* that lies *within a person*.

The tragic as an irresolvable inner (moral) conflict

An inner conflict which is to be qualified as tragic can be either an insolvable inner conflict between contradictory external demands that cannot be followed at the same time, or it can be a conflict between internal intentions and external compulsions to act in a particular way, or it can be a conflict between two or more opposing internal intentions. The external compulsion can be grounded in a natural necessity, a ruler's decree, a sacrosanct moral norm or a political law. The internal intention can be rooted in our values, or passions, or ethical responsibilities. In such cases the tragic is constituted by a disastrous antagonism, an antinomy or aporia that places before the affected person the choice between two disastrous solutions and is thus experienced as irresolvable.

We find that understanding already in the Greek tragedies. In Sophocles' *Antigone* for instance Creon's law not to bury her brother Polynices brought Antigone into a conflict with the

law of the gods. No matter which of the conflicting commands she would follow, she would be guilty either against Creon or against the gods. A present example could be the burial of a person's father who died of Ebola. According to the cultural rules the father has to be buried in a dignified way, conducting certain rites, which take a few days. But the health administration of the district – informed by the WHO – requires that the corpse must be buried immediately by trained case management professionals using strong protective clothing and gloves.

The tragic as disruptive *external event* is experienced as powerless passivity, as getting overrun, while the tragic as an *inner conflict* is felt as being paralyzed in face of decision and action. While in the first case it has to do with suffering and mourning, in the second case the courage to incur guilt and sacrifice is required.

Especially those conflicts are experienced as tragic in which contradictory equivalent goods or equivalent evils are clashing, so that it is not a conflict between good and evil but between good and good, or between evil and evil.

The tragic as unverifiable failure

The notion of the tragic comprehends not only the particular experiential quality of an external event and not only the experience of an inner conflict, but also the disparity between willing and execution, purpose and means, doing and consequence. In the above mentioned inner conflicts, the tragic was consisting in the paralyzing alternative of two contrary imperatives, here it consists of the crucial connection of intention, action, and effect.

Yet not every form of failure can be described as tragic, rather only that which arises out of one's own will and action and which leads to unintended destructing effects on oneself or on others. It is tragic when the well-meant intention gives rise to a devastating damage; when the means that are used not only fail to meet the goal, but rather achieve the opposite of what was intended, when actors make themselves the prisoners of their own freedom, when one destroys one's beloved out of love, or one restricts freedom in order to protect freedom. The striving for the good brings about disaster as much as the renunciation of such striving. "A trivial mistake has horrible consequences; that is to say, there is a crass incongruity between a definite guilt and indefinite suffering."

It is tragic when out of a banal mistake, out of a misunderstanding, or out of an unlucky chain of individually harmless causes, catastrophic damage arises. It is virtually impossible to ascribe responsibility for such damages. Ludwig Wittgenstein sees in this an attribute of tragedy. "A tragedy could always, after all, begin with the words: 'Nothing whatsoever would have happened, had not ... (had not a corner of his clothing caught in the machine).'"¹

Tragic and fate

Tragic experiences can be caused by a catastrophic breaking in of contingent external natural and historical events that crush the human will to act. They can arise out of the conflict between contradictory ways of ordering life, supra-individual values, conflicting duties and contesting morals. And they can finally be the result of the unstoppable internal dynamic of ac-

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Public and Private Occasions*, ed by James C. Klagge / Alfred Nordmann, Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2003, 87.

tions, which are experienced as fateful, because they overrun the human will to assert oneself and to strive for integrity.

The idea of *fate* has been and will again and again be drawn upon to interpret the experience of the tragic. But the notion of fate should not be simply identified with the tragic. The tragic is constituted not in the sheer necessity and passivity, as “fate” implies; rather it is located in the intersection of act and effect, of guilt and disaster. It is the being drawn guiltless-guiltily into the disastrous breaking open of human insecurity; the abysmal experience of the fragility of one’s life and the sensation of an ultimate loneliness in the world. It has to do with the fundamental experience of the loss of control and meaning and with the desperate struggle to find meaning.

Theological interpretation of the “tragic”

The notion of the tragic was and is a challenge for theology. It became more or less sharply rejected. A reason for this is, on the one hand, that the concept of the tragic originates from the Greek theatre (more precisely from the ritual festival plays of Dionysus and probably the Eleusinian Mysteries). The tragedy was originally a song of gladness and dance in honor of Dionysus, the god of the ecstatic celebration of life and sexuality and the enjoyment of wine. On the other hand – and this seems more important – the notion of the tragic seems to give the polarity of contingency and necessity a large space and thus could be considered as reducing the sovereignty of God.

The Jewish, Christian, and Islamic understanding of reality sees the fundamental orderliness, rationality and proportionality of the world as grounded in God’s act of creation and preserved in the acts of providence. Even when this order is considered to be disturbed by sin, the belief in the graciously granted forgiveness and with this the restoration of the order of creation prevails (compare the end of the Book of Job). In contrast to this the understanding of reality embodied in the tragedy could be described in the words of Ludwig Wittgenstein as the experience that the tree does not bow, it breaks.² The tragic event is *devastating*, the inner conflict is *irresolvable*, and the failure is *unavertable*. Thus in the notion of the tragic breathes an Unjewish, Unchristian, and Unislamic spirit.

“Tragic” and “providence” seem to refer to worldviews which have different roots. According to the Greek roots the tragic doom leaves those entangled within it without any recognition of a solution, an overcoming and a way out. Even if there is a concept similar to “providence” like the notion of “*pronoia*” in the Stoic school of philosophy, the difference is significant. “*Pronoia*” is more like an inescapable fate. In contrast, the Abrahamic religions hold fast to their hope in the will and power of God which can influence the flow of events, inspire decisions in the face of seemingly unresolvable inner conflicts, and can help to cope with failure.

That discrepancy of the worldviews in which the tragic and the belief in God’s providence are rooted, however, needs not lead to excluding the notion of the tragic from theological reflection and pastoral practice. “The ‘tragic’ ... is one of those words, in which the suffering of

²Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed by Georg Henrik von Wright, Oxford: Blackwell 1998, 1/3: “Tragedy consists in the tree not bending but breaking. Tragedy is something un-Jewish”.

humanity comes to expression”³ and it is also used by many Christians to interpret crucial experiences in their existence. Therefore this theme cannot be irrelevant for a theology which intends to address the experiences of human beings. It is necessary to draw the notion of tragedy into theology and to provide a space for it there.

In the next step of my reflections, I will review the main theological interpretations and critically discuss them. In one way or another they attribute a divinely ordered meaning to the tragic suffering. I will reject such an endowment with meaning and will plea for using the tragic as a mere descriptive notion which brings a particular situation and its consequences to the fore. But it does not give meaning to it. It describes a meaningless experience which cries out for healing. Thus the description points beyond itself. Using it provokes a search for meaning.

A person who was afflicted with a tragic experience will ask for explanations for such an occurrence. “Why did that happen to *me*?” If he/she feels that the determining physical causes and/or moral reasons are insufficient to explain the experience, they may be inclined to look for ‘metaphysical’ explanations, be it fate or the constellation of the stars or the effect of evil powers or of the divine providence. In the formulation of the question the assumed answer can be implicit.

- If he/she asks: “What have I done wrong, so as to deserve suffering so much?”, he/she assumes that his/her own behavior caused the suffering. That may resonate with the basic conviction that there is a necessary connection between deed and consequences: sin causes suffering.
- If he/she asks: “Why did God have such a mischief happen to me?”, the underlying assumption is that an act of God caused the tragic situation and the resulting suffering. The two questions – “What have I done wrong, so as to deserve suffering so much?” and “Why did God have such a mischief happen to me?” – once being combined would lead to the explanation: “God did it to punish me for my sinful behavior”. But the reasons for God’s acting can also be irrespective of the human’s behavior, so that no necessary connection between deed and consequences is insinuated. The Book of Job circles around that question.
- If he/she adopts a more general view, he/she might ask: “Why is there so much suffering in the world? Especially suffering of the innocent? Why do such bad things happen to good people? How long will it last?”, he/she looks for an explanation which in the last instance does not refer to contingent human and/or divine action but to the basic structure of the world as a whole.

Those three ways of asking resonate with three theological approaches to explain suffering in general and tragic suffering in particular. In the reservoir of theology we find attempts to predicate meaningless experiences as meaningful by relating them to God’s providence: understood either in terms of a divinely ordered general principle according to which suffering is the result of sin, or in terms of special divine acts or as the consequence of original sin. I will point at those approaches, discuss them briefly, reject the first and the second completely and modify the third.

³ Wilhelm Grenzmann, *Über das Tragische*, ed. by Volkmar Sander: Tragik und Tragödie (Wege der Forschung CVIII), Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1971, 166 (my translation).

I think that theology has to be cautious about giving such explanations, which interpret the meaningless experience in terms of a ‘higher’ necessity or a hidden divine purpose. All too easy that can lead to what I would call a pious cynicism. If theologians like Laurence Michel proclaim with a view to the redemption in Christ: “the Gordian knot of the tragic has been cut”⁴ and infer from this that a Christian tragedy is a self-contradiction, then tragic experiences cannot be taken seriously.

(a) I reject the *moral solution*, that means a theological interpretation of the tragic as sin (understood in moral terms as guilt) or as the immediate consequence of sin. Such an interpretation claims the tragic to be rooted in human action or at least in the freedom to act.

A theological interpretation, which considers tragic experiences as the consequence of a misconduct – be it a contravention of a divine command or of a human moral (or even legal) imperative – misses the complex structure of tragic experiences with its diversely shaped overlapping of situational contexts, in-breaking experiences, and human guilt. As the analysis of the tragic situation and experience showed, the tragic is a complex interference of behavior and doom. It cannot simply be accounted to the misconduct of the person afflicted with it nor explained as resulting of the wickedness of other people. All that can play a role, but it cannot become singled out as one and only, sometimes not even as the main, cause. Tragic situations do not have a single cause, they emerge out of an opaque network of different causes embedded in complex constellations of conditions, which altogether are not able to explain it fully. The notion of “emergence” as opposed to “causation” is appropriate to understand them. At best they become understood but not explained.

Thus, in contrast to the “moral solution”, the tragic is to be more deeply anchored in the constitution of human existence in the world. It cannot be interpreted as the result of a free act of humans. Tragic experiences mirror deep rooted tensions of human life within this world – tension between freedom and compulsion, between contingency and necessity. The anthropological condition of humanity has to be taken into account in order to understand them theologically.

Because tragic experiences of conflict and suffering are experiences of brokenness which cannot and may not (at least not completely) be traced back to a guilty behavior against fellow human beings or against oneself or against God, the appropriate soteriological category is not forgiveness but rather redemption, salvation, and healing. If there is guilt or at least a sense of guilt involved (attributed to God or to other humans or to oneself) forgiveness can be an appropriate way to achieve healing. But it remains *one* aspect in the complex therapeutic process. Thus it would be a ‘category-mistake’ to apply the correlating concepts of reconciliation – repentance, atonement, liberation of guilt, forgiveness and so on – to suggest a way of coping with the tragic experience. The entrapment in a tragic situation and the wounds caused by it cannot be forgiven, they need to heal in sense of being made whole – and that takes time and care. That healing process may lead to an empowerment in coping with the tragic situation itself or with its traumatic outcome, to a restoration of integrity, to gaining a new foundation of trust, and to redirect oneself to a meaningful life. Salvific healing does not simply

⁴ Laurence Michel, *Die Möglichkeit einer christlichen Tragödie*, in: Volkmar Sander (ed), *Tragik und Tragödie*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1971, 208 (my translation).

mean leaving behind the tragic experience as if it had not happened – restoring the “status quo ante” –rather it means becoming able to integrate it in the whole of one’s life-interpretation and life-orientation. As reconciliation with one’s own past in which the tragic situation happened, that term can be meaningful but not in terms of reconciliation with God after a sinful behavior. Reconciliation with one’s own past can go together with gaining new trust in the future.

(b) I reject secondly the *divine-causation solution*; that means interpreting the tragic as the result of a specific act of God: the tragic as ordered by God for a certain purpose. The purpose can consist in *disciplining*, *punishing* or *reprobating* a person for his/her sinful conduct, but also in *educating* him/her for instance to get mature by coping with suffering or by developing deeper trust in God, *testing* a person, for instance his/her moral strength or the strength of his/her faith in God.

Explaining the tragic as resulting from God’s punishment can be easily combined with explaining it as a result of human sin. But the “moral solution” can also become spelled out in terms of an inner dynamics of the sinful behavior itself which harms the actor, instead of a reacting act of God. Paul for instance indicates that suffering may be the result of a sin which the sinner draws upon oneself (Gal 6:7-8). There is no action of God involved.

If the tragic experience becomes explained in the pattern of freedom, sin and guilt – like in the “moral solution” – the responsibility for the tragic situation is put on the sinful person. In this model, however, the responsibility is ascribed to God. This is also the case when the divine punishing and rejecting action is interpreted as a reaction to human sin; for God would be free to act in another way.

The interpretation of tragic situations as caused by special divine acts refers to many biblical narratives, for instance those in which the motif of God decreeing obstinacy, hardening hearts, blinding and reprobation play a central role. God obscures the human’s view of what is right, puts within them the test of an inner conflict or an external experience of disaster. God himself orders men’s / women’s sinful aversion to him and thus makes them guiltlessly-guilty. Job finds himself in a God decreed entangling network that places him in an unresolvable, or only by God resolvable, tension to his own creaturehood – an experience that can truly be described as tragic.

The biblical traditions of the educating, disciplinary, testing and punishing acts of God are attempts to interpret the tragic in the light of the omnipotence and omnicausality of God. They make a direct inference from the tragic situation to its cause in God’s purposeful intervention. The divine causality can be thought of either as a direct intervening act or as an indirect ordering act, with which God constitutes the structural conditions for the occurrence of the tragic situation (in the Book of Job, God acts *mediated* by Satan). In both cases the tragic becomes elevated into the divine will. God becomes declared as the author of evil and suffering.

At least three objections I want to raise against the explanation of the tragic as caused by an act of God. At first it implies a too anthropomorphic understanding of God and his activity. God acts like a pedagogue (of former times), like a judge, or like a strict father. In contrast to such an understanding, in the last chapter of my paper, I will suggest an approach for conceptualizing divine action which refrains from being anthropomorphic. Secondly, I reject the “intervention-model” of God’s action in general. The assumption of specific divine acts leads into serious theological problems. One is the question of theodicy. If God is considered as

being able to intervene in a specific situation and to change the state of affairs by performing a specific act why did he not prevent all the horrors in the history of humanity and in the lives of individual human beings? Almightyness ought not to be understood as omnicausality but as universal empowerment of the created beings. Thirdly, I object the belief that God is the author of evil and suffering. I find enough evidence in the New Testament, testimonies for claiming that God's very being is unconditional and universal grace. Therefore God cannot be accounted for the suffering of the creatures. If suffering is attributed to God as a use of painful means in order to achieve good aims, then the suffering cannot be seen as an aim in itself.

In the Book of Job, all those interpretations are rejected. The three friends of Job suggest to understand the misery of Job as a result of God's punishment (for example 8:20), education (33:14-25), or testing (36:21). Job protests in the name of God's justice against all those attempts to interpret his unjust suffering along those lines. He discovers that God's purpose for afflicting that misery to him is to show him the unfathomable mystery of God's being and will.

In contrast to the "divine-causation solution" I will argue that the tragic ought to be described primarily in its 'secular' interaction between the external conditions of the situation and the active and passive reaction of the person involved in this situation. Humans are guiltily-guiltless victims of the disastrous experiences and entangling networks within their own world. God's providential activity is not the *cause* of the tragic but comes in as the power which heals the wounds of those who were afflicted with tragic experiences.

(c) I reject thirdly the *ontological solution*; that means an interpretation of the tragic as the unavoidable consequence of the constitution of human being: the interpretation of the tragic as an essential characteristic of the 'fallen' creation as a whole and the God created human nature. Such an 'essentialization' or 'ontologization' of the tragic can also be found in philosophy; for example in Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. In their pessimistic ("pan-tragic") world view they see the tragic lying at the very foundation of being in general and human being in particular. Humans are condemned to tragic failure. Miguel de Unamuno spoke of a "tragic sense of life".

According to Schopenhauer, the tragic cannot be reduced to definable relationships of events primarily related to human challenges and failures; it is rather to be understood as the immediate outflow of the conflicted constitution of reality. There is an irreconcilable cleavage running through every being. In his major work, "The World as Will and Idea", he wrote; in tragedy "lies a significant hint of the nature of the world and of existence"⁵. And he continues: "It is one and the same will that lives and appears in them all, but whose phenomena fight against each other and destroy each other."⁶ Schopenhauer sees how close this philosophical interpretation of reality comes to the traditional theological doctrine of original sin: "The true sense of tragedy is the deeper insight, that it is not his own individual sins that the hero atones for, but original sin, *i.e.*, the crime of existence itself: 'Pues el delito mayor / Del hombre es haber nacido' ('For the greatest crime of man is that he was born')."⁷

⁵ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea I*, translated from the German by R. B. Haldane and J. Kemp, 7. ed, London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co. 1909, § 51, quotation: p. 326.

⁶ Ibid. 327.

⁷ Ibid. 328.

Such an apotheosis of the tragic constellation of experience to a tragic world view in which the meaningfulness of being is denied may find its confirmation in the multiplicity of meaningless suffering in human history. But it declares the deficits to be the essence, and in the end, there remains only a resigning aversion to this world, as Schopenhauer proclaimed it. It is not possible to bring such a “pan-tragicism” into harmony with the fundamental convictions of the Christian belief in creation. The same applies to an understanding of original sin as ontological defect of the reality as a whole. The original goodness of creation which reflects the goodness of God becomes obscured.

As opposed to such philosophical and/or theological ‘ontologization’ of the tragic, we should remind ourselves of the analysis of the tragic experience. It refers to a contingent event or series of event, or to an inner conflict which cannot be seen as the necessary expression of an original sin. The non-necessity cannot be ruled out by interpreting it as the result of human ignorance of an underlying cosmic necessity. It has to be taken seriously as contingency. Just as the tragic is not to be understood as moral evil or physical evil, it cannot be interpreted as metaphysical evil in terms of a cosmic doom either.

But while I rejected the ‘moral solution’ and the ‘divine-action solution’, more or less emphatically, I take up the ‘ontological solution’ and develop it further. Especially the feature of necessity – the tragic as *necessary* and thus unavoidable feature of the fallen creature – seems to be problematic. In contrast to that assumption I will argue that the tragic is not an ontologically anchored in necessity but rather in an *omnipresent possibility*. Tragic situations can occur in every moment, but need not occur. The tragic is encountered paradoxically as non-necessary necessity. It is always possible for a disastrous situation – in which one’s own misconduct, disorders of inter-human relationships, and disastrous external events interact with each other – to lead into an experience of contingent brokenness. At all times it is possible that a disastrous situation – in which one’s own misconduct, disorders of inter-human relationships, and disastrous external events interact with each other – breaks in and leads to an experience of contingent brokenness.

How can we understand that contingent necessity of tragic (and other suffering causing) entanglements? Already in mediaeval times, philosophy and theology developed a distinction which is helpful for answering that question: the distinction between absolute and conditional necessity. The necessity inherent in tragic experiences cannot be conceived of as inevitable in terms of an *absolute* necessity – be it the corruption of the human nature (which would correspond with an anthropological pessimism), be it a God decreed necessity (which would correspond with a theological determinism), be it a friction inscribed in the substance of reality (which would correspond with an ontological fatalism). The tragic is inevitable in terms of a *relative* or *conditional* necessity. According to an *absolute* necessity, it is to be assumed that the chain of events inevitably leads to the tragic constellation because it is determined by fate or the world order, or because it is decreed by God, or because the human nature is defective. According to the *conditional* necessity, the tragic situation is not in *principle* but in *fact* inevitable. The necessity grows out of an increasing intensification arising out of the interaction of influencing factors that work together in different chains of actions and events. The interaction of those chains is contingent. In looking back at the dynamics of the process it can be described with the words: “it could not have happened differently”. However that does not mean that there is an absolute determination. Rather it points at a retrospectively perceived insight that under the given circumstances it “must” occur. The determination of a *conditional*

necessity includes the awareness that in the case of catastrophic results it is in no ways an *absolute* unavoidability but rather a disastrous experience that could have been hindered if the originating conditions had been altered at the right time. It could have been different *if* ...

Thus on the one hand in a tragic experience there is a necessity, which is rooted in an unstoppable dynamic within a process or conflict between opposing imperatives. On the other hand it is precisely the non-necessity which qualifies the experienced situation as tragic. If the necessity was to be conceived of as an absolute one, grounded in a metaphysical causal network or in the action of God, humans would be released from their possible co-responsibility for the event (in case that personal guilt is involved) and perhaps also from their responsibility for coping with the effects of it. They needed to be called rather to defer to it than to struggle for 'resurrection'. It would be almost impossible to avoid ethical and existential indifference, i.e. fatalism.

The doctrine of original sin as an interpretative framework

After having indicated some lines along which I would theologically interpret the experience of the tragic, now I ask more basically for a conceptual framework which allows for an interpretation that accounts for the complexity of guilt and disaster; freedom, contingency and necessity described above. How can we view the tragic darkness without, on the one hand, allowing it to fade in the light that shines from God, that is without denying, marginalizing or assimilating its reality into a higher purpose and taking not seriously enough its experiential quality as meaningless suffering; and on the other hand without hiding it from this light and thus to explain tragedy as, or declare it to be, the necessary expression of a metaphysical principle, and thus to elevate it into a tragic worldview? The appropriate theological interpretative framework for the experience of the tragic that can meet this challenge appears to me to be indeed the doctrine of original sin. However, this will require a radical reinterpretation of that doctrine. In what follows I do not try to integrate the experience of the tragic into the traditional doctrine of original sin but – the other way round – indicate some features of an understanding of original sin which would result from my reflections on the tragic. I suggest a two-fold revision:

At first, I would like to propose substituting the *ontological* with a *relational* understanding of original sin: It is not a defect of the human nature but the permanent possibility of disastrous destructions in the four fundamental relationships in which humans live: the relationship with oneself, with the social world, with the natural environment and with the divine ground of all being. The traditional understanding of original sin, which originated from the theology of Augustin, described a corruption of the human nature as a result of the sin of Adam and Eve according to Gen 3. Based on the proposed relational understanding tragic situations can be seen as specific instances of such destructions and thus as an appearance of "original sin" in this broader meta-moralistic and relational meaning of the concept. They can affect one or more of those four fundamental human relations: A tragedy caused by a catastrophic experience mainly affects the human relationship with the world; the ruin caused by an inner conflict mainly relates to the relationship with one's self; when a person is torn by the conflict of loyalties and the imperatives that flow from them, then the tragic happening mainly afflicts the relationship to the social world. All of those experiences can and probably will have an impact on the believer's relationship to God.

A second reflection refers to the nexus of sin and guilt which is deeply rooted in Western Christianity. According to the traditional understanding, original sin is a notorious aversion to God, which through “the fall” came into the human nature and caused a defect there. The aversion to God and the inability to live according to the will of God is not subject to the will of human beings but governs their will so that they are unable to get into a salvific relationship to God. Only through God’s redemption such a relationship can get established. Even if individual persons have not made themselves guilty, they participate in this guilt, rooted in the nature of humanity. Even new-born babies are involved in it before they can perform any act. That assumption provided the basis for the practice of infant baptism. Traditionally it was understood as washing away the original sin by participating in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

According to that doctrine, guilt cannot be restricted to individual transgressions of a norm and hence to be understood as committing an offence (in terms of “having guilt” – in a particular way). In a broader and deeper sense it concerns the involvement of the whole species in a collective guilt (in terms of “being guilty”- in a general way). In contrast to individual acts of sin, this “being guilty” refers not only to the *acting* but to the *being* of humans in which their willing and acting is rooted. It is superior to the freedom of the individual.

The guiltless-guilty entanglement within a complex event-and-action-network, that is characteristic of the experience of tragic situation, lies close to this meta-moralistic understanding of guilt that describes more of a disaster than an individually attributable guilt. Without denying the (possible) active participation of the person in a ‘tragic’ event and hence not obscuring the dimension of personal responsibility, the theological interpretation must take into account this disastrous character and speak of guilt in a supra-individual sense. But in contrast to an ontological understanding of an essential guilt I suggest to spell it out existentially: less in the sense of “having guilt” or “being guilty” rather in the sense that a person is always somewhat guilty (in terms of: to owe someone something) in that humans can never fulfill their relationships with the fellow humans, with the non-human creatures, with themselves, and with God. Even if they intend to do so, they are unable to completely do justice to these relationships. They are always in someone’s debt.

Understood in this way the tragic is the expression of the finitude and limitedness of human possibilities – however not in an abstract or ontologically interpreted finitude as an attribute of human nature, but as factual conditions of the boundaries of historical existence. These are boundaries of the foundational relationships which determine what it means to be human. In such a relational way I suggest to employ Leibniz concept of the metaphysical evil.

This supra-individual and meta-moralistic understanding of guilt opens up the possibility of understanding “guilt” as a complex experience which can be seen from two perspectives: not only from the perspective of what a person remains guilty of in relation to God, other people, the natural environment and themselves, but also what life-possibilities are being withheld from that person in these relationships, that means: what can he/she as a human being expect to receive from God, from other people, from the natural living-conditions and not the least from him/herself. The Psalms of lament in the Old Testament articulate such a reversal of the attributing of “guilt” in an impressive form.

Original sin is accordingly understood as the interrelated complex of guilt and disaster in which human beings can be trapped time and time again and which brings with it deep inci-

sions into the consummation of their existence. It is understood as a disturbance of the possibilities of their life that transcends their power to act; as a failure of projects that one cannot avoid with the best will and cleverest actions. It is experienced and conceptualized as a *power*, because it really exercises power over humans. But that does not allow to demonize, objectivize, or personalize it as a metaphysical satanic force. In this perspective “original sin” describes the destructive power inherent in the structures, conditions, relations, situations of the particular “world” in which a human being lives. It can be understood as the collision of the consummation of human existence with the basic internal and external conditions of life. Guilty-guiltless human beings are victims of a disastrous negative experience and entangling networks that give rise to painful and divisive experiences. Some of them we call “tragic”.

In a quasi-demythologized form, it is possible to theologically re-appropriate the concept of “fate” and fill it with meaning when it is used as a description of the situational circumstances, the basic conditions and the developmental dynamic that to a large extent debilitates the individual praxis, and significantly influences and limits the possibilities for action. With this meaning the concept of “fate” can be a helpful interpretation of the experience of the tragic. But as I said before: “Fate” cannot be identified with “the tragic”. It can be considered as an aspect of it: the aspect of necessity.

In such a modified understanding, original sin refers to the structural possibility of a deep shaking of the four constitutive relationships of humanity. It lies within the constitution of human existence – not in the human nature but in human’s being in the world and not as a divinely ordered necessity but as an omnipresent possibility. This omnipresent possibility is ultimately unexplainable and cannot in any way be referred back to an act of the divine will. It is a characteristic of the imperfection of creation which according to Paul is still in the state of birth (Romans 8:22-25) and stands as such under the promise of being overcome eschatologically.

Freed from all moralistic connotations, original sin can be understood as the always and everywhere available possibility within creation of the guilty-guiltless transgression of the purpose of creation. The tragic is portrayed as one mode in which this disruption is experienced. It is not simply the absurd (that is the absolute *meaningless*), rather that which is “empty” of meaning but longs for establishment of meaning. It *has* no meaning, but meaning *can grow* toward it.

Understanding the providence of God in the light of the tragic

I understand God’s providence as God’s operative (or active) presence in the power of his spirit. In inter-personal relations we have analogies for the energy of pure presence. Without performing any specific actions at all, a person can alter a situation by simply being there. This can be experienced particularly in situations marked by suffering, mourning, and grief, or alternatively in situations wherein love, compassion and caring predominate. Not only external actions, but also enacted relationships (for example by spending time with a person) have an effect on those who are afflicted with the situation. I apply this analogy to the understanding of God’s providential activity.

God’s activity in the world is not to be depicted as a series of personal acts but as a spiritual influence. It accommodates in the circumstances of each creature and occasion so that there is

no competition between God's activity and human action. The creatures do not act together with God's action. They perform their free actions within a spiritual field of force that nonetheless has an influence on them. The Holy Spirit comes to be "the agent of providence" (*effector providentiae*) – as (following the convincing interpretation of Werner Krusche) Calvin had already put it.⁸ Calvin wrote: "Whatever happens in the world can quite rightly become attributed to the spirit of God".⁹ That sentence can but need not to be understood in terms of a theological determinism.

God's activity is *intrinsically* involved in human action, it does not go side by side with it. There is not a relation of cooperation between them, but of participation in the divine life. The whole creation *exists* within - and humans *act* within the activity of God - in the field of force of God's Spirit - being more or less affected by it. „In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). I can summarize this position by saying: God acts by inspiration.

"Inspiration" cannot be assumed to *force* anything or anybody with irresistible power; its power is the "power of weakness", but there is the promise that this power will succeed in the end, because of its everlasting durability. In 1 Corinthians 1:25 Paul says: "The weakness of God is stronger than man's strength". – The proof of this, however, is eschatological. Therefore we cannot expect that reality as a whole is in accordance with God's providing and guiding activity. Events we experience as tragic happen. The spiritual field of force of God's providence cannot prevent them. But it can help to cope with their effects. It does not make the meaningless as such meaningful but creates new seeds of life and new patterns of meaning – seeds of resurrection in dead-end-situations. God's operative presence has transforming effects on the awareness of people and communities, on their attitudes and on their behavior. As the experience of the tragic is an omnipresent possibility, the power of God's spirit is an omnipresent healing power.

If the category of causality can be applied at all to the divine activity, the broader understanding of causality as Aristotle had developed it should be taken into account. The modes of formative and final causality should be given priority over the mode of effective causality. God's spiritual field of force has a formative, though not a coercive, impact on processes in nature and history and especially on human's consciousness (or: spirit).

The spiritual field does not exert an undirected energy but a purposive influence – aiming at the promised fulfillment of creation. The analogy of a magnetic field in which iron particles are getting directed according to the field lines can be applied to illustrate it. But that analogy should not become stressed too much because it is too technical. It needs analogies of the social realm, like the milieu in which a person's character develops. That can be seen as a social field of force which exerts a directing but non-coercive influence. But it still is not more than an analogy.

⁸ Werner Krusche, *Das Wirken des Heiligen Geistes nach Calvin*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1957, 14; Reinhold Bernhardt, *Was heißt „Handeln Gottes“? Eine Rekonstruktion der Lehre von der Vorsehung Gottes*, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 1999. 2.ed. Berlin: LIT-Verlag 2008, 77.

⁹ Calvin Opera 44,206 (my translation).

In God's spiritual field of force a new life-orientation in the face of tragic experiences can emerge. It can lead to an attitude of "faithful realism" (to use a term of Paul Tillich¹⁰) which at first in no ways attempts to deny the reality of the tragic or to idealize it by attributing a metaphysical meaning to it; a realism which does not take seriously the inscrutability of human's existence in the world and their subjection to the omnipresent possibility of failure; a realism which secondly feels sympathy (in the deepest sense of the word) and solidarity with the suffering who can be seen as getting trapped by the omnipresent possibility of the tragic; a realism which, however, also – thirdly – takes into account the reality of the transforming power of God; which is powered by the hope that God's healing and meaning creating presence encompasses the tragic experience and places it in the light of his promise that all suffering will eschatologically come to an end. Believing Realism, which is confident that God's possibilities reach wider than human possibilities, provides the energy to look realistically at the inscrutability of the tragic experience, but also is carried by a contra factual confidence that the tragic disruption will not be or lead to an ultimate failure. In such an attitude a healing power in the processing of tragic experiences is at work that helps to withstand the tragic experience and its effects.

The "why" question seeking a causal explanation ("why did it happen?") provides no help in coping with tragic experiences, it paralyzes, neither does the "what for" question in the sense of its subordination to an ultimate purpose of this (like all) events ("what was it good for?"). Meaning neither lies in the event itself nor in its effective or proposed final cause. However, the tragic experience can *gain* meaning when in the course of time it becomes possible to integrate it into a new pattern of meaning: when the affected person sees for instance a tragic accident retrospectively as causing a rearrangement of his/her life-orientation or his/her value-priorities, so that he/she experiences a disclosure of what seems to be *really* important in his/her life. Not as a general metaphysical explanation of the evil but only in the retrospective interpretation of the affected person him-/herself can the "what for" question become a means of healing the inflicted wounds. It is then not an attempt to *find* meaning in the past event, but to *attribute* meaning to it and to be open for a future creation of meaning. The question is not: What *was/is* the meaning of the tragic experience, but which meaning did and can grow out of it.

"Faithful realism" takes into account the reality of the healing and transforming power of God. It trusts that those who were afflicted with tragic experiences will become empowered to cope with their suffering, to gain new hope, and so can master the traumatic tragic experience and the wounds it has inflicted.

¹⁰ Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, ed. by James Luther Adams, 2. ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1957, 67. Other translations are: "believing realism" or "belief-ful" realism. James Luther Adams uses the term "self-transcending realism" as opposed to "self-sufficient realism".