

The Tragic Sense and Its Dissolution in Therapeutic Culture

by [Albert Norton, Jr.](#) (July 2024)



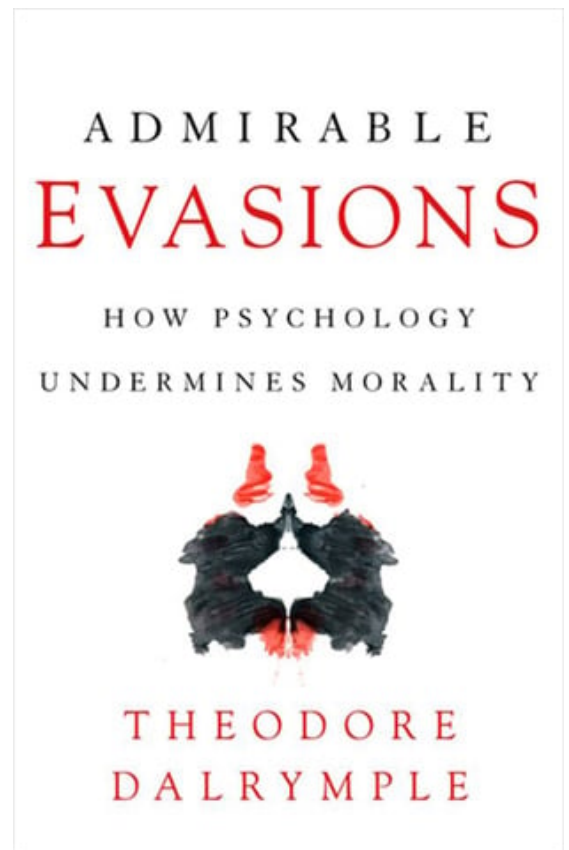
Clytemnestra from the Battlements of Argos Watches for the Beacon Fires which are to Announce the Return of Agamemnon, Sir Frederic Leighton (1874)

Agamemnon, the king of Argos, has been away for the whole of a ten-year siege of Troy, and is now returning victorious, with a captive Trojan princess, Cassandra. Waiting for him is his wife Clytemnestra. Imagine her looking out to sea from the battlements of Argos, watching for the beacon fires of his return. Her hands are clenched before her, grasping and knotting her garment. She wears a sorrowful expression and far-off gaze, combined with a resolute aspect. Is she wondering what the lapse of years will mean? No, it's worse than that. Before Agamemnon departed, he sacrificed their daughter, Iphigenia, to the gods for fair winds to Troy and victory. For ten years, Clytemnestra has nursed a resolution to kill Agamemnon in retribution. She's anticipating that moment come at last.

This is the subject of a Greek tragedy by Aeschylus, c. 500 B.C. Vengeance is not the way, but I can certainly put myself in Clytemnestra's sandals. Agamemnon's murder has long been decided. She's not nervous about what she's about to do. She's sorrowful, because of what she's suffered for the last 10 years, combined with the tragic inevitability and necessity (in her mind) of Agamemnon's death and her impending hand in it.

In a [recent article](#) in the *Hedgehog Review*, Martha Bayles writes that the emotions associated with dramatic tragedy were traditionally pity and fear, but with the important distinction that the emotions in play are not those of the characters in the drama, but yours as you watch. You're meant to feel what the characters do. In this example you feel pity for Clytemnestra but, also, because of your mimetic appreciation of her plight, a kind of fear at what you yourself are capable of in like (tragic) circumstances.

In those pagan times a sense of fate ruled, it was the heavy sense of inevitability. The pagan sense of fate was among the subjects of Boethius's 523 A.D. *Consolation of Philosophy*, in which, among many other things, he's trying to shake loose the lingering pagan notion of fate in contrast to Christian *faith*. We often think of the pagans' sense of fate as meaning they were bobbing along as playthings of the gods, with no say in events, but that's not exactly right. There was still a sense of personal responsibility. In fact, the Greek tragedies typically turn on the moral failing of a prominent character, one for whom we nonetheless feel some sympathy.



The subject matter of tragedy was on my mind when I encountered Bayles' article because, in my reading in preparation for my next book. I came across Theodore Dalrymple's [*Admirable Evasions*](#), on the subject of, as the subtitle reads, *How Psychology Undermines Morality*.^[1] I was curious because Dalrymple describes himself as "not religious," so what's behind the self-responsibility he advocates? At a few points he speaks of the "tragic sense" as opposing the perspective of psychological man caught in the cult of the therapeutic worldview. He quotes portions of Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*, in which Rasselas is forced to face the dichotomy of high-minded rational principle, on the one hand, and the just-as-real realm of intuition and emotion and irrationality, on the other. In this way Dalrymple takes us back to an aspect of "tragedy" as meant by the ancient Greeks: the understanding that rationality (Apollo) stands in juxtaposition to irrational or subconscious instincts of eros

and death (Dionysius), including potentially destructive instincts to intoxication and even insanity—pertinent especially in the context of our mental health crisis that is caused by therapy rather than cured by it.

The religious point of view similarly takes the Dionysian disposition into view—not intoxication and insanity, but the emotional, instinctual, dream-like sense of something beyond rationality, like where music takes you. It is the source of the “numinous” religious impulse, charisma, the felt sense that there’s more mystery than you think; indeed, God stands outside the beingness of all things, encompassing even the sense of irrationality and mystery and lyricism and a child’s giddy sense of inexplicable glee. He is ineffable, a rational word to describe the irrational also within His remit.

Dalrymple’s thesis is that the person lost in the cult of the therapeutic lacks a tragic sense. Mine is that his self-absorption erases his God-given moral agency. Are these the same thing? Another form of the word “fate” is “fatalism,” meaning a sense of inevitability, as exemplified in the Greek tragedies. In pagan times there were thought to be gods pulling levers to direct this rainfall and that birth, but with no overarching telos to human life. People were expected to follow the social prescriptions of tradition, and that was what “honoring the gods” meant, as we can see in Plato’s telling of the trial and death of Socrates.

The “tragic sense” means sensitivity to what can happen when we depart from what we understand as morality. In the “immanent frame” of both paganism and postmodernism, our understanding of morality is formed more from society than from the conscience. Social formation of what we regard as morality is therefore common to both paganism and postmodernism, but there are at least a couple of important differences.

One, psychological man does not acknowledge the social mores

he absorbs as a result of his desire for acceptance and communitarianism. Instead he believes himself to be acting on the agency of his inner-formed Identity. He expresses his individualism by following the herd, ironically enough. The pagans were not burdened with the faux-individualism of the postmodern. Their lives were circumscribed by social convention, reinforced by placation of the gods.

Two, in postmodernism, there is no sense of a moral authority above people or societies, God having been dismissed in the imagination, and the all-too-human state/Machine having been given power formerly reserved to individuals. This is new in the history of the world. Even the pagans had some sense of an overarching non-human moral authority. Here for example is Antigone, rebuking Creon the king who sentences her to death for violating his decree that no one bury her brother:

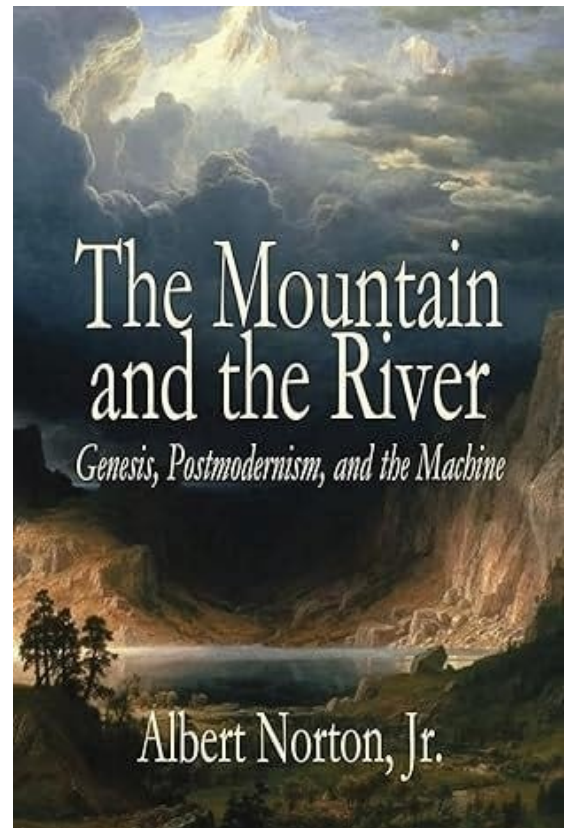
Creon: *Tell me, ... Had you heard my proclamation touching this matter?*

Antigone: *It was public. Could I help hearing it?*

Creon: *And yet you dared defy the law.*

Antigone: *I dared. It was not God's proclamation. That final Justice that rules the world below makes no such laws. Your edict, King, was strong, But all your strength is weakness itself against The immortal unrecorded laws of God. They are not merely now: they were, and shall be, Operative for ever, beyond man utterly.*

She's saying the king's decrees do not trump the natural law. The pagan gods did not hand down anything like the ten commandments, and they were more idiosyncratically goofy than people. And yet, there is somehow a logos in the universe occupied by them and by us, and the moral law cannot be traduced by anyone, even a king, without consequence. That isn't true for psychological man. He follows the dictates of imagined and felt Identity, and his sense of right and wrong lacks universality.



There is something that exposes in sharp relief all the petty cruelties and inanities of the world. It's the reason we see evil for what it is. That something is perceptible in the "tragic sense" that has always been with us. But why do people still use the phrase "tragic sense" in contradistinction to whatever postmodernism leaves us with? How does the lingering tragic sense help us understand the feeling of being hollowed-out of meaning in the postmodern era, with its attendant turn inward to psychological self-care? Why now the rise of the "rough beast" Identity in place of external source of meaning?

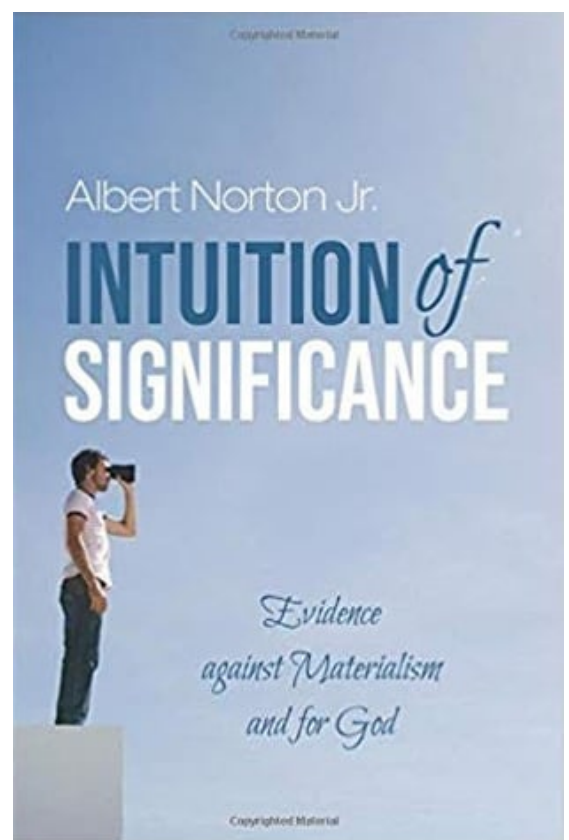
Freud mostly made things up, but he wasn't wrong in placing instinct in the subconscious. Indeed, it might be said that the root-level axioms for our outlook originate there. That was the supposition for example of Miguel de Unamuno in his *Tragic Sense of Life*. [\[2\]](#)He starts by observing that a person's subjective intuitions inform his outlook on life, which in turn informs his intellectual convictions. The subconscious in a sense authors the conscious. In my own work on this subject, I've concluded something similar, that our inner, axiom-

forming subconscious is in turn formed either in the Spirit of God, or in the spirit of self alone, and the latter is the source of the therapeutic worldview.

For de Unamuno, we don't "merely" exist, instead we have "a furious hunger of being that possess, an appetite for divinity."[\[3\]](#) This is an interesting way to phrase it. In my own work I've pointed out the alienation from God as a diffuse and dissonant sense of yearning, citing Alvin Plantinga.[\[4\]](#) This sense we all have, whether we tie it to separation from God or not, is the tragic sense.

De Unamuno writes that we wish never to die and this longing is our true essence. But we do die, and this is the tragedy. It's not tragedy for a lion or a dandelion, but it is to metacognitive mankind, bearer of the tragic "I" of consciousness. "If consciousness is, as some inhuman thinker has said, nothing more than a flash of light between two eternities of darkness, then there is nothing more execrable than existence."[\[5\]](#) Metacognition is self-awareness, but also mutual other-awareness, intersubjectivity, which produces our sense of society as a "being" unto itself in which we participate. The Fall is the event of metacognition in mankind, our eyes opened to sin, and to death in sin unless redeemed.

The tragic sense could be written as "the hunger of immortality." It arises from this phenomenon of fullness of conscious self-awareness particular to human animals: consciousness of the possibility of absence of consciousness. We cannot really conceive ourselves as not existing but we try



anyway, and in the imagination balance on that bubble of existing/non-existing, and this creates the tragic sense. The tragic sense drives us to contemplate religion, but persists even if we remain irresolute concerning it. "The problem of the duration of my soul, of my own soul, tortures me." [\[6\]](#)

With consciousness of our mortality and of existence/non-existence, we go about devising immortality-alternatives: fame, or Nietzschean eternal return, or dissolution into world-soul and reincarnation. Or else we push past the inconceivability of non-existence, to pretend we conceive it anyway, a leap of faith to annihilation that is the photographic negative of religious faith. In Jewish or Christian terms, the tragic sense is explained in the primeval story: knowledge that all passes because we have not eaten of the tree of immortality, yet we are God-breathed, and so consciousness of our mortality presses upon us as the aberration that it is. The tragic sense is religious despair, the seed of faith.

The thirst of eternity drives love, in people. Love is the manifestation of our hunger of immortality, the sense that nothing is truly real unless it be eternal, and love is eternal, while indifference and hate are the hallmark of the temporal and fleeting and dying. Love drives sacrifice: giving today for a better tomorrow, and not just for ourselves, but for our progeny and even for the abstraction of society, that attenuated sense of fellow-feeling. Upon crossing over we desire that others, too, would open their eyes and see God, the reason for our hunger for immortality, the reason for our discomfort in the sense of tragedy.

[\[1\]](#) New York: Encounter Books, 2020.

[\[2\]](#) Transl. J.E. Crawford Flitch, SophiaOmni Press 2014 (first published 1912).

[\[3\]](#) Ibid., p. 30, citing San Juan de los Angeles.

[\[4\]](#) *Intuition of Significance*, Eugene, OR: Resource Publications 2019.

[\[5\]](#) *Tragic Sense of Life*, p. 33.

[\[6\]](#) *Ibid.*, p. 55.

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Albert Norton, Jr is an attorney and author. His most recent book is [*The Mountain and the River: Genesis, Postmodernism, and the Machine*](#) (New English Review Press 2023).

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