

Andrew Cooper, *The Tragedy of Philosophy: Kant's Critique of Judgment and the Project of Aesthetics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016).

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Kant mentions tragedy—he uses the German term “Trauerspiel”—but once in the *Critique of Judgment*. Yet, as anyone familiar with the vast secondary literature on the third *Critique* would confirm, more than a few commentators have found the term “tragic” to be apt in describing the problematic (if not the outcome) of the work. The French scholar Lucien Goldmann, for example, in his 1948 *Introduction à la philosophie de Kant*, goes as far as to provocatively group Kant together with Racine and Goethe as the figures who have made tragedy into the highest expression of classicism (Goldmann 1967: 62–63).¹ Andrew Cooper is, therefore, not the first author to detect the tragic problematic in Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*. But Cooper’s is the first attempt to undertake a “tragic” reading of Kant’s third *Critique* (along with some post-Kantian philosophers) systematically. It is a project long overdue.

In Cooper’s account the problem that gives rise to Kant’s third *Critique* is philosophy’s failure to master what is contingent and radically singular in the world. Indeed, this is what Cooper identifies as the tragedy of philosophy: “the inevitable failure of the understanding to legislate the whole of nature” (66). Kant’s third *Critique* articulates for Cooper “the proximity of tragedy to every philosophical endeavor” (7). This tragedy of philosophy results from hubris, from philosophy’s ambition to master nature without remainder. As Cooper suggests, however, the *Critique of Judgment* is also Kant’s ingenious attempt to respond to the tragic failure of philosophy by transforming philosophical thinking itself. In his third *Critique* Kant articulates a different way of philosophical thinking, which Cooper—following Arendt—calls an “enlarged way of thinking” (see Arendt 1992: 71–72). This “enlarged” thinking refers to the activity of meaning-making that is interpersonal (it takes into account the thoughts of others) and continually open to revision. It recognizes the complexity and contingency of the world. And it relies on a new, interpersonal understanding of universality. Cooper associates this “enlarged” way of thinking with the aesthetic judgment of reflection which Kant presents in the Analytic of the Beautiful of the *Critique of Judgment*.

Cooper's tragedy of philosophy unmistakably alludes to Kant's discussion of empirical knowledge in the Introduction to the *Critique of Judgment*. In the Introduction Kant shows the existence of another nature, nature under empirical laws, for which the transcendental laws of nature (or the categories) established in the first *Critique* do not provide sufficient explanation. Human understanding recognizes that it is at least possible that "the specific diversity of empirical laws of nature together with their effects could nevertheless be so great that it would be impossible for our understanding to discover in them an order that we can grasp."² The possibility that nature under empirical laws might be refractory to the understanding, which would be nothing short of a tragedy, pervades the unfolding of the Introduction to Kant's third *Critique*. Given Cooper's characterization of tragedy in terms of a failure of the understanding to legislate the totality of nature, it is highly surprising that he pays almost no attention to these sections of the *Critique of Judgment*. Neither does he discuss Kant's ingenious solution to the dreadful threat of the infinite diversity of nature: the concept of the formal purposiveness of nature. The principle assumes *a priori* that nature under empirical laws is structured as a system and thus fitted for the human understanding. But nature can only be conceived as fitted for the human mind if it is taken to be designed at large, to wit, if it is taken to be designed for the benefit of cognition.

It is equally surprising that Cooper overlooks Kant's discussion of the question of nature's hospitability to morality. In the final section of the Introduction to the third *Critique* Kant recognizes that it is possible that nature might not be in harmony with the human moral vocation (which consists in producing the union of morality and happiness in the world). This possibility, too, if realized, would be nothing short of a tragedy, in this case a moral tragedy. Kant's solution, which is equally his moral proof of the existence of God in the Appendix to the Critique of the Teleological Judgment, assumes *a priori* that a benevolent creator controls the natural world and guarantees that the moral vocation of human beings will be fulfilled in history. All in all, while Kant does not find the possibility of a tragic world to be unthinkable, he finds science and morality alike to be incompatible with the tragic worldview. Tragedy must in Kant's account give way to moral and epistemic optimism.³

While I find the idea of reading Kant's third *Critique* in "tragic" terms very promising and while I do not disagree with Cooper's interpretation of the judgment of the beautiful in terms of an "enlarged way of thinking," I fail to see a substantial link between beauty and tragedy in Kant. As Kant makes clear in the Preface of the third *Critique*, his account of beauty responds not to a tragedy but to an "embarrassment" ("Verlegenheit") concerning whether aesthetic judgments are subjective (private) or objective. If the tragic problematic is to be found anywhere in the *Critique of Judgment*, as I have shown above, it is in the Introduction and the Appendix to the Critique of the Teleological Judgment, where Kant raises the question of nature's susceptibility (or lack thereof) to cognition and morality. Kant's

response to tragedy is an overcoming of it, one that is accomplished with reference to the principle of purposiveness and, more importantly, the moral argument for God's existence. Consider Kant's response to Moses Mendelssohn's pessimism about progress in human history, which is one of the very few places that Kant uses the term "Trauerspiel" in his corpus. Kant writes: "To watch this tragedy [*Trauerspiel*] [i.e., of human history] for a while might be moving and instructive, but the curtain must eventually fall. For in the long run it turns into a farce; and even if the actors do not tire of it, because they are fools, the spectator does."⁴ Does not Kant appear as a deeply and explicitly anti-tragic thinker judging by this passage?⁵

In the Part II of his *Tragedy of Philosophy*, entitled "Tragedy after Kant," Cooper moves to consider Hegel's, Nietzsche's, Heidegger's, and Castoriadis's views on tragedy (he devotes a chapter to each philosopher). There is also a considerable discussion of Benjamin and Rosenzweig in Part II of Cooper's work. I found Cooper's discussion of Benjamin and Castoriadis especially excellent and innovative. However, while the author frames Part II of his book as a series of philosophical responses to Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, the connection with Kant is not always evident. For example, in the chapter on Heidegger, Cooper insists that "Heidegger increasingly drew from Kant's account of reflection in *Critique of Judgment*" (162) and that Heidegger's understanding of nature "clearly builds on Kant's enlarged conception of nature in *Critique of Judgment*" (171). Yet Cooper does not provide a single reference to a text in which Heidegger actually engages (or even mentions in passing) Kant's third *Critique*. In the absence of such references, Cooper's claims concerning the importance of the third *Critique* for Heidegger appear groundless. Indeed, judging by what has been published in the *Gesamtausgabe* so far, Heidegger never seriously engaged with Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. The only place in which Heidegger talks about the third *Critique* at some length that I am aware of is his 1936–1937 (winter semester) undergraduate lecture course on Schiller's *Aesthetic Letters*.⁶ So, Cooper does not succeed in showing that Heidegger is a thinker of tragedy "after Kant," except in a purely nominal or chronological sense.

On the whole, Cooper's *Tragedy of Philosophy* does not fulfill the promise of reading Kant's third *Critique* and the post-Kantian thinkers who were influenced by the third *Critique* from the standpoint of tragedy. First, Cooper overlooks those moments in the *Critique of Judgment* that appear to best lend themselves to a "tragic" reading and instead focuses on beauty and sublimity, neither of which seems to have much to do with tragedy. Second, while Cooper's discussion of Hegel, Benjamin, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Rosenzweig, and Castoriadis is focused on tragedy, their connection with Kant's third *Critique* is not always evident or sufficiently thematized. Although Cooper promises us a work on the tragedy of philosophy in Kant and some post-Kantians in two parts, Part I seems to be about Kant but not about tragedy, whereas Part II appears to be about tragedy but not about Kant's legacy (at least, not always).

NOTES

1. For a more recent discussion of the tragic undertones of Kant's philosophy, see, for example, Sweet 2013: 142.
2. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 5:185. All of Kant's works are cited according to volume and page from the Academic Edition of Kant's works, edited by the Berlin Akademie der Wissenschaften (29 vols., Berlin: de Gruyter, 1900–). For English translations, I use The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1992–).
3. For an “optimist” interpretation of Kant's morality and philosophy of history, see, for example, Lloyd 2008: 279–301.
4. “On the Common Saying: That May Be Correct in Theory, But It Is of No Use in Practice,” 8:308.
5. In the *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* Arendt (1992) argues, on the other hand, that the “curtain” of Kant's providential history is actually never supposed to “fall” (77). Kant's conception of history, according to Arendt, is that of an endless wait, which is only a different sort of suffering.
6. See Heidegger 2005. See also Heidegger 1996: 106–14. For a recent attempt to interpret Heidegger's short interpretation of Kant's aesthetics, see Torsen 2016.

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