he asks what difference the efforts of an individual can make. Small actions make large differences, he argues, not only cumulatively, but also by developing one's virtues and helping to change the moral culture. He offers a range of practical suggestions for assessing and modifying our daily habits. Erin Lothes Biviano looks at the social and political responsibilities of individuals, to inform themselves about the political and technological options, and to work with church and other groups to advocate sustainable policies.

Occasionally, the collection betrays its North American context: the Catholic understanding of creation, for example, is set between creationism and scientism. Some of the authors tend to optimism about technological solutions but cautiousness about deep-rooted economic reforms or social changes. For example: Annett touches on the need for a new understanding of progress, but the volume lacks a penetrating critique of the meaning of 'economic growth'; there is no mention of 'circular production' (cf. *LS* 22); while DiLeo makes suggestions for more radical reform of transport, Lothes simply recommends electrifying cars. Given the hugely disproportionate levels of energy use in the US, and the authors' proper concern for global justice, less caution is probably needed. At the same time, however, there is a need to engage in dialogue with politically conservative Catholics, to persuade them that their faith demands that they take seriously the message of *Laudato Si'*. In any case, Europeans are not in a strong position to criticise Americans: we too tolerate a huge gap between our ideals and our practice in environmental matters. These essays repeatedly remind us of the need for awareness, and, as Douglas Christie among others insists, awareness begins at home.

The comprehensive, balanced and readable coverage of key areas, supplemented by helpful questions at the end of each chapter, make this text very suitable for a discussion group or introductory academic textbook.

MARGARET ATKINS CRSA

THE TRAGIC IMAGINATION by Rowan Williams, *Oxford University Press*, Oxford, 2016, pp. viii + 168, £14.99, pbk

The Tragic Imagination is a compact and penetrating study of tragedy in its political, literary, philosophical and theological dimensions. The power of Williams's approach lies in its disciplined unrest in accepting the 'tragic' as confined to a kind of static, artistic representation of suffering, even if the genre implies some sort of claim about the human condition or the nature of existence. Instead (and following his Wittgensteinian roots), Williams proposes that 'tragedy' ought to be foremost regarded as a human activity – an insight which challenges the

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https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12428 Published online by Cambridge University Press

nature of textuality itself (as it did for Wittgenstein). Accordingly, *The Tragic Imagination* is a text which seeks to enact the drama of thinking the tragic – it is self-aware that the activity of thinking contains vulnerabilities by which it might, at its own risk, cheat itself from those most confronting of existential questions: the proclivity of the human being towards violence, the reality of collective inaction in the face of injustice, and the ways in which the traps of human selfhood can preclude reconciliation. (Williams lends credence to Hegel's account of *Antigone* here).

If thinking can, in a sense, produce blind spots in our commitment to confronting the tragic for the benefit of our humanity, then like the blinded Gloucester in *King Lear* (4.6.153), Williams would have us 'see it feelingly'. In exploring the tragic imagination in this manner, Williams takes seriously the transformative possibilities of art (as would, say, Nietzsche) while also holding to the more sober and constructive view that the tragic drama has the capacity to lend us powerful – if shocking and disturbing – accounts of our ethical agency (via his reading of Hegel). The tragic drama surpasses its cathartic power and its ambiguous aesthetic combination of terror and exhilaration to promise meaningful insights into one's humanity the more a spectator invests their compassion into dramatic action. Such ethical growth is often (to reference the title of another of Williams's works) at the edge of words: that is, we should not be surprised that the cruel and shocking darkness which the tragedian plumbs tends to produce a kind of affective silence. The tragic is not so much discursive as experiential; it prefers to evade objectivity and conceptuality in favour of imparting intimate (if shared) truths.

That tragic imagination, then, is uniquely bound up in the dramatic. As a participative activity, the drama opens increasingly complex questions about the significance of an actor assuming the mantle of suffering in her dramatic enactment, about the centrality of the spectator as a powerless witness whose compassion is nevertheless absorbed in the unfolding of plot, and of the confusing array of conclusions we might then reach about the purpose of embroiling ourselves aesthetically in those most violent and treacherous aspects of life – something Williams considers through the Greek tragedians as much as Shakespeare and recent playwrights such as Sarah Kane. Indeed, in its dramatic form, tragedy becomes a living revelation of human vulnerability and failure, but it also performatively embodies an overriding and self-empowering human desire for honesty – being able to confront life in its ugliness and yet affirm one's agency as meaningful. This is because, Williams notes, the tragic drama, by its very nature as re-presentative and inclusive of an audience, renders its subject matter as something we are emboldened to narrate and thus transform by the aesthetic problematising of questions concerning responsibility, compassion and justice.

The tragic is a topic close to the heart of Williams's intellectual and spiritual interests, and so his attention understandably turns specifically

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to a consideration of how the tragic imagination might find an affinity with the Christian faith. This question among philosophers often provokes a kind of *de rigueur* recitation of Nietzsche; Williams is not goaded into tackling the charged nature of Nietzsche's claims, however. Instead, he considers Hegel's claims that Greek tragedy is specifically historical to antiquity (and thus the divine in Greek consciousness), while arguing that the dialectic nature underpinning Hegelian thinking shares formal similarities with the tragic more generally, and which allows us to imagine and represent suffering with a profoundly ethical (rather than essentialist) interest when turned to Christian theology.

The question of whether Christian hope allows an adequate space for the tragic was challenged more soberly than Nietzsche by philosophers such as Steiner and Kaufmann (though Kaufmann later reconsidered his position after Hochhuth's 1963 play *Der Stellvertreter*). Yet philosophical approaches have tended to emphasize the existential impacts of divinity considered onto-theologically, and to contrast an irreducible, pessimistic brand of the tragic against the teleological nature of the eschatological. Williams's study has already significantly challenged the presumptions underlying such contrasts, and he swiftly moves to combine his own insights in reply, asserting that the Christian faith indeed shares a narrative quality with the tragic – if by 'tragic' we conceive of an empowering form of witnessing suffering as the means of imparting an urgent truth about our ethical makeup. Here, Williams proposes that Balthasar's theology of the Cross integrates the tragic as essential to the Christian narrative and faith. He elaborates on Balthasarian Christology through the language of his study of tragedy as an activity, exploring the ways that the liturgy of the Eucharist shares something of the power of the Greek theatre in its capacity as a public ritual. This indeed goes a long way to challenging the presumption that Christianity and the tragic are exclusive.

Although Williams's methodology might risk inviting an unwieldy sprawling as much as a meaningful search, it is employed with economy and surgical accuracy, often arriving at a tightknit weave of the dramatic, political, ethical and theological in a manner which enriches our appreciation of tragedy well beyond considering these aspects more narrowly (as is the hazard with specialist accounts). A slender volume such as *The Tragic Imagination* cannot, naturally, comprise an exhaustive survey of thinkers for whom the tragic is central. The work is not presented as such. Rather, its methodological unrest implies that there is a danger in thinking that the exploration of the tragic imagination is properly complete with its final page. Hence, *The Tragic Imagination* beckons further research: what can now be said about Nietzsche's labyrinthine polemics on Christianity and the tragic? Does Williams's study allow for Balthasar's bolder claims that Greek (and Jewish) tragedy anticipates Christ as the *eschaton*, and that the crucifixion and resurrection are a kind of *Aufhebung* of tragedy? Certainly, if anything, it beckons a

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renewed consideration of the theology of suffering, and the possibility of reading the divine ecstasy of trinitarian kenotic love as the form of human relationships in general (per Lossky, for instance).

PAUL DANIELS

ETHICS IN THE CONFLICTS OF MODERNITY: AN ESSAY ON DESIRE, PRACTICAL REASONING, AND NARRATIVE by Alasdair MacIntyre, *Cambridge University Press*, Cambridge, 2016, pp. xiii + 322, £28.99, hbk

How much does the average undergraduate remember of the lectures and classes she sits through? Perhaps a few illustrations stick in the mind. At an undergraduate lecture I attended on Plato's *Meno* the lecturer described how Plato had appeared to him in a dream and resolved a key question for his Ph.D. thesis. Philosophers rarely divulge such visions, but the vision works on several levels in a commentary on a text which is about recalling lost knowledge. As moderns we immediately dismiss the notion that there could be any communing with the dead going on here, and look for naturalistic explanations. Yet even if we think the unthinkable, it is not obvious that Plato is the best interpreter of Plato.

Memory, what we remember and what we have forgotten, plays an essential role in Alasdair MacIntyre's influential study in moral philosophy and social theory, *After Virtue*. We may expect therefore that his latest book, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, written in his ninth decade, would provide a summation of his work: tying up the loose ends, clarifying questions of interpretation. On one level this expectation is met. Attentive readers of MacIntyre will detect ideas and themes reaching back to his early writings and moving through his philosophical development with his adherence to Aquinas and Aristotle. The essay is structured as a discourse which engages his principal opponents; seeking to represent the most cogent elements of their theories, while showing their limitations and how the Thomist Aristotelian account of practical reasoning he espouses overcome those limitations. As such it is a fitting summation of his life's work.

There is, however, another and deeper level at which MacIntyre is operating. The most engaging (and purposely so) part of the book comes in chapter five when MacIntyre provides a narrative of four disparate twentieth century individuals (the Russian author Vasily Grossman, the US Supreme Court judge Sandra Day O'Connor, the Trinidadian journalist C.L.R. James and the Irish priest Denis Faul). He does not provide standard biographies, but analyses how these four individuals acted as practical reasoners. MacInyre's purpose is to connect the general with the particular, so that the more abstract reflections which occupy the first four chapters are given flesh in the lives of these individuals. This

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