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Original Paper

Goodness and Emotions in Fragility: Nussbaum on Tragic Ethics

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Abstract

Nussbaum argues that divergent attitudes toward the influence of luck on the realization of Goodness constitute the fundamental divide between the ethical conception of Greek tragedy and philosophy. Philosophical ethics attempts to exclude the influence of luck through reason in order to establish the self-sufficient good, whereas the ethical conception disclosed by Greek tragedy acknowledges and embraces the fragility of the good, regarding emotions as a necessary condition for ethical practice. Based on Nussbaum's interpretation of ancient Greek tragedy, the core views of tragic ethics can be revealed. The fragility of goodness is interwoven across dual dimensions: external circumstances and internal character, and is rooted in the universal presence of contingency, human finitude and relationality, and tensions among plural good values. Fragility, as the realistic premise of ethical practice, does not necessarily lead to the failure or disappearance of the good; rather, it reveals the virtue and dignity that individuals demonstrate in confronting fate. Emotions, as the medium for perceiving fragility, play an irreplaceable cognitive and practical role in the realization of the good.

Keywords

Fragility, Goodness, Emotions, Tragic Ethics, Martha Nussbaum

1. Introduction

The central concern of Martha Nussbaum in The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy (Nussbaum 1986; 2001 Updated ed.) is "the gap between being a good person and a good living", in other words, the extent of luck's (*tuchē*) influence in the process of a person becoming excellent and realizing a good life. This question stems from her profound reflection on the modern moral philosophy. Against this backdrop, Nussbaum further investigates what exactly is the goodness that we pursue? Or rather, what kind of goodness should we pursue? From ancient Greek philosophy's emphasis on the realization of absolutely internal and self-sufficient virtue to the latent

"control principle" (Nagel, 1971) in modern moral philosophy, the rationalist tradition has, to varying degrees, evaded the ineradicable luck and contingency of life, establishing a self-sufficient and idealized concept of the Goodness. Within this tradition, emotions are generally regarded as obstacles to the realization of the good, requiring reason (*logos*) to rational reform and constrain them.

However, through careful readings of classical Greek tragedy texts, Nussbaum identifies a distinct ethical conception in Greek tragedy that flourished in Ancient Greece. Tragedy confronts the complexity of the lived world and the finitude of human agency, acknowledging the indelible impact of luck and the deep involvement of emotions in the pursuit of Goodness. By placing the fragility at the heart of its understanding of goodness, it reveals the inherent ethical significance and function of emotions. It is on this point that the tragic poets and the philosophers fundamentally diverge. While philosophical ethics seeks to eliminate the fragility of goodness revealed by tragedy in pursuit of rational self-sufficiency and control, Nussbaum advocates for a re-attunement to the ethical voice conveyed by tragedy, seeking to re-understand the intricate interaction between luck, goodness, and emotion.

Accordingly, this paper aims to explore the distinctive ethical conception, tragic ethics (Note 1), based on Nussbaum's interpretation of Greek tragedy and to examine whether tragic ethics can effectively respond to the fundamental challenge that "the fragility of goodness" poses to the realization of a goodness. The article will develop three lines of argument: first, clarifying the relationship between tragic ethics and philosophical ethics and its theoretical positioning; second, analyzing the core concept of the fragility of goodness and its ethical value; finally, discussing the function and significance of emotions in tragedy and tragic ethics.

2. Tragic Ethics and Philosophical Ethics

In the history of philosophy, the quarrel between poetry and philosophy involves the oppositional relationship between "truth and mimesis" and "reason and emotion". The most famous instance of the dispute between the two is perhaps the long-standing quarrel between poets and philosophers described by Plato through the mouth of Socrates in the Republic and his ultimate verdict banishing poets from the ideal city-state. This "event" not only established the divergence between poetry and philosophy but also marked the transfer of ethical discourse authority from tragic poems to the philosophical system.

However, such "opposition" did not always exist in the whole Ancient Greece. Around the fifth century BCE, before philosophy had been systematically constructed, ancient Greek myths, epics, and tragedies had already been formed and popular. For the Athenian city-state, tragedy was not merely a form of art or literature. As John H. Finley says, "the Greeks of that time, like earlier Greeks, did not expect their poets to depict individual portraits but rather to provide universal analysis of the people and society" (Finley, 1942, p. 287).

Tragic poets, much like early philosophers, were tasked with public reflection on the good and way of life, sharing the functions of moral and political cultivation. As Nussbaum observes, "Plato regards the poets

not as colleagues in another department, pursuing different aims, but as dangerous rivals" (Nussbaum, 2001a, p. 12). Both were regarded as the educators of humanity in Greek society, each responding in different ways to public inquiries regarding Goodness and human destiny. Tragedy, by presenting the cruelty of fate, the trials of virtue, and the tragic consequences of human action, reveals a world full of conflict, uncertainty, and ethical tension. Importantly, even in the face of destruction and failure, the virtue, responsibility, and dignity exhibited by tragic figures do not become invalidated by the fickleness of fate; rather, they acquire a profound radiance.

Tragic poets, through dramatic form, profoundly express the complex interweaving of virtue, choice, suffering, and responsibility through concrete character portrayals, situations, and emotional structures. In tragedy, the audience gains profound understanding of contingency, conflict, and ethical complexity in life not through abstract rational argument but through emotional engagement with and resonance toward character dilemmas, experiencing "learning through suffering" (pathei mathos) (*pathei mathos*) (Nussbaum, 2001a, p. 45). It is in this sense that tragedy becomes a medium of ethical cultivation in the Greek city-state, parallel to philosophy.

Meanwhile, philosophy shifted the subject from natural philosophy to human life and ethics, beginning to construct a rational theoretical system about "how should one live," defining **ethics** as a rational inquiry into the good. This process gradually transformed ethics into philosophy's exclusive domain, that is, within the philosophical framework, ethics was given a system of judgment grounded in universality, certainty, and self-coherence. In other words, ethics, or ethical questions about humanity, was not from the outset philosophy's exclusive monopoly; rather, philosophy staked out ethics as its proprietary field of study and invested it with a specific ethical conception. Yet human ethical inquiry does not depend on the prior formation of a philosophical system; it emerges not because it falls under philosophical propositions but because it arises first from the fundamental experience of human life: in a world replete with luck, conflict, and the possibility of failure, how should we live? With respect to this origin, Nussbaum argues that the ethical conception in tragedy and philosophical ethics display a strong **continuity**.

Nussbaum observes a verse by the Greek poet Pindar (*Πίνδαρος*), "But human excellence grows like a vine tree, fed by the green dew, raised up, among wise men and just, to the liquid sky" (Nussbaum, 2001a, p. 1). There lies an implicit insight into the influence of luck, if human life and the good we seek depend upon external nourishment and are subject to luck and contingency, what portion of human nature merits praise? By the same token, philosophy's initial inquiry into the good confronted the same problem posed by uncontrollable luck.

Plato's early dialogue Protagoras narrates a progression from human control's gradual over the influence of natural contingency, to human rational art's (*technē*) conquest of luck in society, culminating in a practical science that attains precision in control. In Nussbaum's interpretation, the fundamental problem underlying Plato's philosophy remains consistent throughout, that is human life is subject to the luck and

contingency, and philosophy's primary task lies in reducing or even eliminating the influence of the ungoverned luck to the goodness through rational *technē* (Nussbaum, 2001a, p. 90).

It is evident that tragic poets and philosophers confront the same ethical reality; the inquiry into the good already existed among the tragic poets, while philosophical study endowed it with a different form and methodology. Once ethics became an exclusive philosophical pursuit, its connotation underwent a significant transformation. Philosophical *technē*, as a rational, scientific path, "saves" us from a life of luck while simultaneously transforming us and reshaping the goal itself (Nussbaum, 2001a, p. 91).

Although different philosophers define the good in various ways, they inherit a basic purpose: the good is self-sufficient, universal, and achievable through the dominance of reason. Only in this way can humans, when facing a world full of luck, acquire the capacity to realize the good. This approach delimits human problems as reasonable only when unfolded through reason alone. Moreover, this framework ultimately directs the realization of the good toward thoroughly internal activity, excluding emotions in the soul, contingency, circumstances, and other non-rational factors as components of internal luck from the constitution of the "ethical ideal."

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche offered a profound and tension-filled observation of this historical divergence. He noted that, starting with Socrates, the victory of the Apollonian rational spirit over the Dionysian irrational spirit marked a turning point. From Socrates and Plato onward, Western culture gradually suppressed the tragic consciousness—the recognition of irreconcilable tensions and conflicts in human life, the uncontrollability of fate, and the dilemmas of choice. This acceptance and expression of the irrational dimensions of life were progressively obscured or even negated within philosophical systems. With Plato's banishment of the poets, tragedy was excluded from civic education, and poetry and philosophy officially parted ways. Ethics was subsequently co-opted as a philosophical problem and assigned an explanatory framework centered on rational norms.

Therefore, from a broader perspective, tragedy is not the antithesis of ethics but rather another form of ethical inquiry. It carries a tragic ethics that does not pursue systematic moral codes or behavioral rules, but rather presents human feelings, judgments, and struggles within moral predicaments. It does not rely on the self-sufficient Goodness defined by philosophy but focuses on how the Good becomes fragile in reality due to emotions, fate, and relationships. In sum, although tragedy and philosophy differ in form, they both originate from a response to the same ethical reality: the attempt to answer how should one live in a world of luck and uncertainty. Through concrete situations, images, and emotions, tragedy accepts and displays the complex face of real ethical life, providing an essential supplement to ethical reflection. In this sense, tragic ethics is not the opponent of philosophical ethics, but the necessary Other, i.e., an irreplaceable way of awakening us to reconsider the complexity of human life.

3. The Ethical Conception of Tragic Ethics

3.1 The Fragility of Goodness and the Reality of Vulnerability

The core of the tragic ethical conception lies in acknowledging the fragility of goodness. An ethical conception is the fundamental stance toward the good upheld by an ethical system, which concerns what kind of life we pursue and how we practice and realize this goodness. In philosophical ethics, this conception typically manifests as an emphasis on the highest happiness, virtue, or morality, with the idealized goal of achieving a self-sufficient good under the governance of reason through appropriate choices and actions, thereby attaining virtue, happiness, or moral character.

However, the tragic ethical conception is fundamentally different. Tragedy does not regard the good as self-sufficient or fully controllable through reason; rather, it reveals the fundamental fragility of the good in reality. Through her analysis of paradigmatic tragedies such as Agamemnon, Antigone, and Hecuba, Nussbaum demonstrates that even when individuals act from good motives and possess noble character, they are often drawn into unavoidable conflicts and tragic ethical dilemmas, resulting in a complete divergence between reality and the aims and expectations of the good. This is precisely the tragic poets' fundamental insight into the human ethical condition and the starting point of their ethical conception, that is the gap between being good and living well may even lead to the dissolution of virtuous character, which Nussbaum terms the fragility of goodness.

Fragility of goodness manifests in two dimensions. First, from the external dimension, the fragility of the good arises from circumstances and fate beyond individual control. In such predicaments, although individuals possess moral motives and noble character, they are constrained by fate, institutions, social structures, or environment, and forced to choose among conflicting goods, falling into a tragic ethical impasse—where any choice entails a betrayal of some value. For example, when Agamemnon faces the choice between the army's interests and paternal love, he falls into a dilemma of love and piety, unable to escape moral culpability regardless of his choice. According to Nussbaum, in situations beyond an agent's control, what one encounters is a form of non-voluntary moral constraint and ethical failure. "The special agony of such a situation lies in the fact that none of the available options is even harmless" (Nussbaum, 2001a, p. 35).

Second, from the internal dimension, the fragility of the good is rooted in the structure of virtue itself. Even when individuals have clear recognition of external circumstances and possess judgment and practical wisdom, their actions may still violate their ethical intentions and result in the dissolution of virtue due to one-sided value systems or internal tensions within the constitution of virtue. For instance, Creon loses practical wisdom due to a rigid ordering of values, while Hecuba, driven by dignity and emotion, reduces reason to an instrument of revenge.

Therefore, the fragility of goodness stems not only from the uncontrollability of external circumstances but is also inherently rooted in the complexity of human virtue structure and the tensions among plural values. In other words, the human ethical predicaments revealed by tragedy arise both from the contingency and unpredictability of fate and from the finitude of human nature itself and the internal

conflicts within the constitution of virtue. It is in this sense that the tragic ethical conception acknowledges and embraces the fragility as both the realistic premise and the real possibility of human ethical practice.

By appealing to Aristotelian philosophy, Nussbaum offers an analysis of the reasons underlying the fragility of the good. First, the universal presence of contingency renders the realization of the good uncertain. Our reality is never entirely foreseeable or calculable. Broadly speaking, luck can be distinguished into good fortune and misfortune, both referring to events that occur in human life yet lie beyond individual control. In a world that cannot be fully predicted, the unexpected and the controlled occur in alternation, and even what is controlled often contains contingent disruptions. It is precisely within this structure of reality that ethical judgment and moral consciousness are continually provoked and challenged.

Second, the embodiment and relationality of human existence constitute the ontological foundation of the fragility of the good. As embodied and finite living beings, humans fundamentally depend on external conditions such as the body, environment, others, and luck. In his theory of the soul, Aristotle points out that the human soul possesses a nutritive (vegetative) part, which means that humans inevitably depend on the body to sustain life, and the body itself is fragile, finite, and vulnerable. As Pindar stated earlier, human life is like a vine—its growth, maintenance, and even initial survival all depend on external conditions and the care of others.

Besides, human finitude is manifested not only in bodily vulnerability but is more deeply rooted in the relational nature of human existence. Humans are not isolated selves but are embedded in networks of relationships—in groups, society, nature, and emotions. Our ethical life unfolds precisely within this relationality and is sustained by it as a condition. Core goods such as justice, friendship, kinship, love, and virtue cannot be self-sufficiently realized through individual internal resources alone; they necessarily depend on external environment and the responses of others: justice requires institutional support and enforcement, friendship requires mutual response and commitment, and love depends on the existence, giving, and acceptance of others. To be human is precisely to exist within these vulnerability and open relationships.

Furthermore, Nussbaum also points out, the plurality and incommensurability of the good itself make moral conflict unavoidable. Tragic predicaments reveal this reality: we cannot construct a thoroughly consistent, stable, and complete moral system. In concrete situations, goods may be plural and incommensurable, and the values of different virtues may themselves conflict and contradict one another. Therefore, in reality there arise moral choices in which one must abandon one good in order to realize another, and such choices themselves constitute a kind of damage to human goodness.

Precisely because the realization of the good inevitably faces this reality of vulnerability, tragedy becomes an indispensable resource for ethical reflection. Tragedy presents conflict or catastrophe through narrative, conveying a profound ethical conception. First, the “goods” we choose and pursue cannot always coexist harmoniously, nor can they always be reconciled through reason. Second,

individuals in practice may encounter conflicts between goods, rather than merely a binary opposition between good and evil. Third, human virtue cannot always withstand the impact of fate; rather, in specific circumstances it may be shaken, altered, or even destroyed by external fate.

Texts often employ the chorus to comment on and summarize events. These commentaries do not directly render moral judgments of right or wrong, but more often express sympathy and reflection on the human condition through metaphor, allegory, and collective wisdom. This form further reinforces a fundamental stance of tragic ethics: human moral life does not simply involve choosing between clear-cut good and evil, but rather involves the difficult maintenance of self and responsibility amid plural values, complex circumstances, and uncontrollable fate.

However, from the perspective of philosophical ethics, this awareness and presentation of the universal fragility is often regarded as a primitive, pre-rational thinking, and misguided logical contradiction, and the behavioral choices within it are seen as manifestations of a lack of rational handling. (Nussbaum, 2001a, p. 25; p. 50) in response, Nussbaum asks, does this truly accord with the intuitive sense of our practice? “We have not fully understood the ‘tragic view’ if we have not understood why it has been found intolerably Painful by certain ambitious rational beings” (Nussbaum, 2001a, p. 50). To regard tragic predicaments as logical errors of the poets means denying the real tensions into which humans may fall when facing moral conflicts—this is precisely a kind of misunderstanding that over-rationalizes ethical experience and divorces it from practical reality.

Compared to the philosophical ethical vision that pursues rational governance and self-sufficient virtue, tragic ethics brings us back into the genuine complexity of the lived world, acknowledging the constitutive role of situation, conflict, emotion, and non-rational factors in moral life, and advocating acceptance of the finitude, tension, and imperfection of human moral life. What tragic ethics presents is not abstract principles of “ought,” but moral reflection in the face of irreconcilable reality. Genuine ethical practice lies not in eliminating conflict and avoiding tragedy, but in confronting the reality of conflict and continually exploring the possibility of the good amid imperfect circumstances.

3.2 The Ethical Value of the Fragility and Vulnerability

However, when we acknowledge that the good is fragile rather than self-sufficient, that is, when we acknowledge that there exists a gap between rational choice in ethical action and the good life—this seems to touch upon the deepest anxiety of ethics: if the good transcends human capacity, why should we still pursue it? If the outcomes of moral actions often depend on uncontrollable factors such as contingency, others, or environment, is moral effort ultimately futile? Does “the fragility” fundamentally undermine the value of the good? As expressed in Pindar’s questioning lyric: since human virtue depends so heavily on the external world, to what extent is human nature worthy of praise?

Tragedy responds to this challenge in a way different from philosophy: even though human virtue is influenced by various contingent factors such as fate, luck, and environment, even given the fragility of the good, humans have never abandoned the pursuit of goodness and virtue. In Nussbaum’s view, this is

precisely what makes tragedy moving and endows it with ethical force; this is also the manifestation of the ethical value of fragility.

Firstly, fragility does not signify ethical failure but rather constitutes a precondition for ethical judgment. In other words, precisely because the good is not a goal that can be fully controlled and planned by reason, human choices carry moral weight and require judgment, emotion, wisdom, and courage. What tragedy displays is precisely humanity's adherence to virtue amid the vicissitudes of fate. Although Agamemnon's choice is destined to lead to a certain moral failure, his anguish and hesitation arise not from weakness but from his continued effort to remain faithful to moral commitments. Similarly, in the conflict between power and faith, Antigone persists in fulfilling kinship obligations, demonstrating that human nobility lies precisely in the willingness to do good and uphold virtue even when fate cannot be fully controlled.

Tragic figures are not immoral because their actions fail; on the contrary, their moral choices, often made amid unavoidable conflicts, reveal profound human values—loyalty, love, responsibility, dignity. It is precisely in choices that uphold rightness while facing inevitable loss that the meaning of virtue is manifested. Tragic ethics that accepts fragility may not provide us with a universally verifiable moral algorithm, but it does offer a more authentic picture of human morality. It is not a negation of rule-based ethics but rather a supplement and correction to moral reality, displaying genuine emotional responses in complex situations—compassion, shame, guilt, pity—which are part of moral perception and the premise for practical wisdom to move into practice.

More importantly, it is precisely this persistence in pursuing the good amid fragility that highlights human ethical value and dignity. If virtue were completely self-sufficient as claimed by the philosophical tradition, unaffected by external conditions, ethical choice would seem to involve no risk or cost. In tragedy, however, humans must make choices amid pain, loss, and even failure, and this situation imbues moral action with struggle and weight. The good is worthy of cherishing precisely because it may falter in the storm yet is still persistently pursued. In other words, fragility is not a defect of virtue but a reality associated with its deeper value. Nussbaum acknowledges that we can use reason to minimize such conflicts, but this also means choosing fewer values. "a life designed to ward off this possibility may prove to be impoverished" (Nussbaum, 2001a, p. 7). For this also means limiting our connection with the external world. Therefore, in tragic ethics, we see not only human limitation but also humanity's capacity to respond to limited circumstances.

It's worth clarifying that the fragility is not what tragic ethics, or Nussbaum, celebrates or prizes; however, it is humanity's choice to remain upright in this contingency-laden reality, to continue safeguarding kinship amid suffering, and to appeal to justice amid loss of control that constitute the very possibility of moral nobility.

Nussbaum believes that the fragility reminds us the reality of vulnerability, and morality is not just a reward for the perfect but "up to a point, a necessary background condition of certain genuine human goods" (Nussbaum, 2001a, p. xxx). In other words, although luck can decisively ruin action, it cannot

completely strip away virtue. Therefore, tragic ethics does not lead to moral nihilism; rather, in the face of failure and loss, it upholds the dignity of ethical life. Within it, morality is not merely the execution of rational regulations and behavioral norms but a sensitivity to and fidelity toward human finitude and the circumstances of others. In situations where the good is uncertain, consequences uncontrollable, and moral conflicts difficult to resolve, the willingness to take responsibility and make choices itself constitutes the meaning of ethical life.

4. Tragic Ethics and Emotions

4.1 Emotions and Ethical Cultivation in Tragedy

As an important medium of ethical cultivation in the ancient Greek, tragedy's distinctive feature lies in achieving ethical education through arousing the audience's emotional experience. Socrates in *Republic* says that the most praiseworthy poets are those who can stimulate people's emotions through mimetic means (*Republic* 605c-d).

Aristotle further explains in the *Poetics* that "tragedy's mode of imitation is through the actions of characters" (*Poetics* 1449b5-10), and characters in action link together the plot elements, bearing such key tragic components as thought and diction (Note 2). These characters are not perfectly invulnerable paragons of virtue but ordinary people caught in ethical conflicts and human contradictions. Precisely because they too are subject to the influence of fate and luck, displaying genuine struggle amid complex plots, the audience can be moved to authentic emotional experience through the actions of tragic characters, thereby breaking through the inertia of everyday life and reflecting on their own ethical situation through emotional upheaval.

In this regard, Nussbaum distinguishes three ideal levels at which tragedy elicits emotional experience in the audience. First, at the most direct level, the audience develops emotional resonance with tragic characters, experiencing and responding to the characters' emotions. Second, at a higher level, the audience responds to the emotional structure of the entire work, examining it through sympathy or critique. Finally, this emotional experience extends to the audience's own life circumstances, prompting universal reflection on the human condition and moral possibilities (Nussbaum, 2001b, p. 242). These three levels can be summarized as: immediate feeling, reflective emotion, and universal ethical insight. Thus, the emotions evoked by tragedy are not mere emotional manipulation but a process of moral perception.

Nussbaum focuses particularly on Aristotle's theory of tragic emotions concerning "pity and fear." She points out that the pity and fear evoked by tragedy are not aimed at producing mere emotional expression but at achieving catharsis (*katharsis*) (Nussbaum, 2001a, p. 390). This *katharsis* is a clarification and reorganization of emotions. Through empathizing with the circumstances of tragic characters, the audience can reflect on their own value judgments and moral positions, thereby attaining clearer ethical consciousness. What is involved here is a kind of practical perception, or rather, the foundation of practical wisdom. In this sense, tragedy achieves a unique mode of ethical cultivation. It does not aim to

transmit normative moral propositions but rather guides the audience to perceive the complex relationships among the good, fate, and action through the resonance of emotional experience.

As Hume revealed in *Of Tragedy* with the paradox of tragedy, that is "an unaccountable pleasure" (Hume, 1987, p. 216). Tragedy on the one hand exposes the inescapability of human fate and the predicament of existence, expressing profound pessimism; on the other hand, it nevertheless evokes sublime and heroic life passion amid suffering, enabling people to feel strength and beauty. This is precisely why tragedy can fulfill the function of ethical education: it is not merely a literary genre or performative form but an ethical practice realized through the experience of watching and performing, enabling people to confront life's tensions and moral complexity directly.

The ethical educational function of tragedy is essentially an internal reflective process triggered by emotions. Through the unfolding of plot and the presentation of characters' fates, tragedy makes people aware that virtue is not established on absolute reason or fixed norms but exists in a state full of conflict, contingency, and tension. It reveals the conditionality and fragility of the good, and through emotional resonance, enables people to perceive the complexity and limitations of moral judgment. The power of tragedy lies precisely in allowing people to enter ethical reflection through emotional engagement. Through the intertwined experience of emotions such as pity and fear, the audience not only passively feels the fate of others but also, through emotional participation, gains a clarified understanding of their own circumstances and moral life, understanding the good amid the fragility and suffering of fate, and thereby reaffirming human dignity and the meaning of action.

4.2 The Function of Emotions in Tragic Ethics

The ethical cultivation of tragedy is manifested not only in its artistic structure that evokes and guides emotions but also in revealing emotions as an indispensable resource in ethical practice. If the self-sufficient good means the suppression of emotions by reason, then tragic ethics, which acknowledges the fragility of the good, provides a new perspective for understanding the function of emotions in ethical life.

First, Nussbaum interprets the tension between emotions and virtue in extreme circumstances as displayed in tragedy. The "tragic error" embodied by certain tragic characters stems not from an overflow of emotion but precisely from their suppression, neglect, or refusal of normal emotional expression. When Agamemnon makes his choice between paternal love and the duty of commander, he suppresses paternal love on grounds of rational consistency, ultimately cutting off the possibility of another good. Antigone clings to kinship and sacred duty, while Creon upholds civic order; their conflict is not a rebellion of passion against reason but rather their respective emotional orientations lead them to refuse to acknowledge the legitimacy of the other, thus causing reason to become rigid. Hecuba, in the extreme circumstances of losing her country and children, transforms from a symbol of maternal and queenly dignity to calculated revenge; her actions are both rational and emotionally driven, revealing that emotions can both support the desire for justice and erode the human foundation of morality.

In these tragic situations, it is not emotions disturbing reason that leads to the failure of the good but rather reason's suppression and misuse of emotions that creates tragedy. When emotions are rejected, distorted, or extremized, the subject loses comprehensive understanding of the good, leading to the loss of virtue and deviation in action. Here, emotions are not obstacles to the good but rather important forces through which the good can be perceived, pursued, and even protected.

Pity and fear are paradigmatic emotions of this ethical cognition; they enable people to confront life's contingency and the finitude of the good, perceiving the uncontrollability of action's consequences. Through emotions, individuals become aware that moral decisions are not completed in abstract reason but are generated through observation of concrete circumstances and empathy with others' fates. Here, emotions are pathways to ethical cognition, not obstacles to reason.

Second, tragedy's artistic structure, through the empathetic quality of its plot, reshapes humanity's shared experience of fragility, enabling the audience to recognize through emotional participation the fateful connection of this tragedy could happen to any of us. If the cognitive function of emotions lies in enabling people to perceive the fragility of the good and the complexity of ethical situations, then emotions' role in experiencing the ethical connections between people manifests their relational function.

Nussbaum believes that emotions are the core medium through which humans generate moral relationships. For example, the experience of pity enables people to transcend self-centered positions. When we pursue the realization of the good, we become aware of the damage tragic circumstances inflict on the good and cannot ignore others' painful experiences, thus generating empathy and understanding, which in turn awakens a sense of responsibility toward others and the will to act. Therefore, emotions are the mode of human connection with the world and with others, the channel for revealing value and fragility. A person who refuses to feel pity or fear simultaneously loses the capacity to understand others' suffering and their own finitude. Thus, the tragic predicament of ethics may also lie in: denying emotions and thereby losing the depth of moral understanding and interpersonal connection.

Thus, emotions in tragic ethics possess both the cognitive function of revealing actual ethical situations and the relational function of constructing connections between people through empathy. In Nussbaum's view, this is precisely the foundation that guides and propels ethical practice. The role of emotions revealed by tragic ethics transcends the binary division between rational and irrational. Emotions are neither enemies of reason nor mere psychological reactions but rather a force of understanding and action, prompting people to rediscover the possibility of the good through empathy and reflection and to maintain commitment to and practice of the good amid finite and fragile circumstances.

It is in this sense that emotions become a legitimate resource toward the good, not because they can ensure correct action outcomes but because they sustain the depth and tension of human moral life, enabling the concept of the good to be embedded in concrete human experience, thereby endowing ethical practice with practical feasibility.

5. Conclusion

By examining Martha Nussbaum's interpretation of Greek tragedy, this paper elucidates the core connotations of tragic ethics as a distinct ethical view. The fundamental divergence between tragic ethics and philosophical ethics lies in the former's recognition of the influence of luck on the realization of the Good, thereby establishing a conception of the fragility of goodness.

The fragility is not a deficiency of value but a necessary projection of human vulnerability which is rooted in external contingency, human finitude, and the primordial tension between plural values. Rather than evading this reality, tragedy demonstrates that virtue and dignity flourish precisely through the courageous confrontation of fate's uncertainty. Within this framework, emotions are reconfigured not as obstacles to reason, but as cognitive hubs for perceiving value-fragility and dynamic media for ethical practice. By invoking pity and fear, tragedy guides subjects to discern the intricate interplay between goodness, fate, and action through embodied emotional experience.

Ultimately, tragic ethics leaves us with a profound philosophical task: constructing a framework of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) that can navigate life while embracing emotional vulnerability. Nussbaum's contribution lies in opening a new theoretical horizon for modern ethics by returning to tragedy. Addressing this challenge requires us to contemplate how, upon the foundation of acknowledged finitude, we may still resolutely practice the Good and safeguard human dignity in a world of contingency.

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Notes

Note 1. Tragic ethics, refers to the ethical views in Greek tragedy. While Nussbaum uses "ethical views" for comprehensive ethical perspectives and "tragic view" for general outlooks on Greek tragedy (particularly its ethical dimensions). "Tragic ethics" in this paper to emphasize an ethical conception within Greek tragedy that differs from philosophical ethics, i.e., the ethical conception of Greek tragedy itself.

Note 2. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle identifies six constitutive elements of tragedy: plot (*mythos*), character (*ethos*), thought (*dianoia*), diction (*lexis*), melody (*melos*), and spectacle (*opsis*).