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Aeschylus at the Origin of Philosophy: Emanuele Severino's Interpretation of the Aeschylean Tragedies

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Abstract: The late Emanuele Severino (1929–2020) was an Italian philosopher whose work on Aeschylus has not yet been made available in English. In *Il giogo: alle origini della ragione: Eschilo* (*The Yoke: At the Origins of Reason: Aeschylus*, 1989), Severino seeks to demonstrate that Aeschylus belongs amongst the founders of philosophy, i.e., that Aeschylus was the first to set down some of philosophy's most fundamental principles, including that ontological becoming produces unbearable suffering and that the only remedy to suffering is knowledge of the truth. Thus, by introducing readers to Severino's interpretation, and by translating various passages of his work, this article aims to enlarge Severino's readership and spread his argument for the philosophical stature of Aeschylus.

Keywords: God; ontology; science; *téchne*; technology; truth



Citation: Pitari, Paolo. 2022.

Aeschylus at the Origin of Philosophy: Emanuele Severino's Interpretation of the Aeschylean Tragedies. *Literature* 2: 106–123. <https://doi.org/10.3390/literature2030009>

Academic Editor: Marco Corradini

Received: 2 May 2022

Accepted: 2 June 2022

Published: 4 July 2022

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1. Introduction

The late Emanuele Severino (died 17 January 2020) was an Italian philosopher, arguably the most influential of the twentieth century. He was awarded the Golden Medal of the Republic for Cultural Merits by the President of the Italian Republic and in 2019 was visited by the Prime Minister for a long interview. Massimo Cacciari (2001) famously wrote that twentieth century philosophy is an either-or between him and Heidegger.

Severino gained notoriety through his uncompromising defence of eternalism, founded upon a reformulation of the principle of non-contradiction that aimed to exhibit the logical foundation of its incontrovertibility. From this grounding argument, Severino developed a full description of the nature of Being. His work is appreciated by both followers and critics for its relentless rationality; his philosophy was developed through dozens of books as he sought to ground every one of its theses on a clear foundational logic that would respond to all doubts.

In 1970, when Severino put forth his defence for the eternity of all beings, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith declared his philosophy incompatible with Christianity. Severino thus left the Catholic University of Milan and founded the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Venice. His career led him to notable international debates with the likes of Graham Priest and Roger Penrose among others.

Most importantly for the purpose of this article, Severino was also an historian of philosophy. He wrote a history of philosophy in four volumes that surprisingly presents Aeschylus as one of the first and most significant philosophers in the west. This history is, of course (as all histories are), framed within a specific theoretical understanding of its subject.

In Severino's philosophy, *poiesis* and *philosophía* appear as both united and separated by an infinite distance. *Poiesis* is a kind of *téchne*. It creates myths to establish an image of the world to make life meaningful. This image of the world seeks to elevate humanity above suffering: it portrays suffering and, in portraying it, transcends it. Its goal is to save humanity from suffering precisely by transcending suffering. On the contrary,

philosophía is born in opposition to *téchne*. *Philosophía* affirms that *poiesis* is unable to offer the concrete remedy to suffering, because *poiesis* cannot ground its promise of salvation in truth. Accordingly, *philosophía* wants to let itself be guided by the *Ananke* of the *Lógos*. *Philosophía* is thus the act of letting the truth unveil itself. Rational argument is how truth shines, and knowledge of the truth is the ultimate gift.

Philosophía is thus born by explicitly distancing itself from *poiesis*. Likewise, *poiesis* openly disregards the ideal of pure rational argumentation. The two practices hence seem to exist in opposition. Yet, they are also essentially united. First, they both originate in the will to salvation (*philosophía* inherits it from *poiesis* and perpetuates it). Second, *philosophía* too constitutes itself as a kind of *téchne* (albeit one that seeks to transcend itself as *téchne*) precisely by *wanting* to let the truth speak for itself, and *poiesis* too seeks knowledge of the truth (albeit not through rational argument) by wanting to establish an image of the world that can *truly* transcend suffering (if there were no truth in its representations, then *poiesis* would be entirely unable to *truly* transcend true suffering).

Poiesis and *philosophía* are thus also united, and their essential unity resides in their will to true salvation. This foundation constitutes the final word in the long-standing quarrel between *poiesis* and *philosophía* opened by Plato in the *Republic*. In this sense, Severino shows that the Aeschylean tragedies are the first texts where this unity becomes apparent.

Severino's interpretation of Aeschylus is set down at length in *In Il giogo: alle origini della ragione: Eschilo (The Yoke: At the Origins of Reason: Aeschylus, 1989)*. In this book—on which our analysis focuses—the poetic works of Aeschylus shine as texts that set down the origins of philosophy, its principles and goals. Aeschylus sees that the terror of becoming is the cause of humanity's erring. He sets down that the only remedy to fear is the knowledge of absolute truth. That truth saves us from suffering not because it eliminates suffering, but because it shows the Principle that governs Being and saves the eternal essence of all beings. That Meaningfulness is forever safe from Nothingness. That everything is governed by the Necessity of Being (what our cultures often called God). That knowledge of Necessity makes angst, suffering, and terror of annihilation bearable.

All these ideas, and the arguments behind them, are constitutive of the origins of philosophy. Severino shows that they first appeared in Aeschylus. Aeschylus was writing around the same time as Parmenides and Heraclitus, and long before Plato and Aristotle. This makes Aeschylus one of the greatest philosophers ever, as well as one of the originators of philosophy.

The Aeschylean tragedies thus inaugurated the long history of philosophical literature that characterizes our civilization. The aim of our greatest poets has always been to let the truth shine. Aeschylus shows that it is possible to be both one of the greatest poets ever as well as one of the greatest philosophers ever. And looking at Severino's interpretation can contribute to enlarge our understanding of the eminence of the Aeschylean tragedies. The sole purpose of this article is thus to present Severino's case for the philosophical magnitude of Aeschylus' works. It is not to engage in its critical analysis, nor to endorse it. Doing so would require a completely different approach, precisely the one that this article seeks to enable other scholars to pursue by presenting to them Severino's unprecedented reading.¹

2. A Hymn to Zeus to Truly Cast Away the Pain

In the beginning of *Agamemnon* (the first tragedy in *The Oresteia* trilogy), Aeschylus sets down one of the essential principles of philosophy in the "Hymn to Zeus" (verses 160–66):

Ζεύς, ὅστις ποτ' ἐστίν, εἰ τόδ' αὖ-τῷ φίλον κεκλημένῳ, τοῦτό νιν
προσεννέπω./οὐκ ἔχω προσεικάσαι/πάντ' ἐπισταθμώμενος/πλήν Διός, εἰ τὸ
μάταν ἀπὸ φροντίδος ἄχθος/χρὴ βαλεῖν ἐτητύμῳς.

Severino translates the hymn as follows:

Zeus, whoever he may be, I call upon him by this name, if he holds dear to be so called. If the pain that hurls into madness must be cast away from the spirit

with truth, then, pondering all things with a knowledge that is firm and won't let itself be denied, I cannot but think of Zeus. (Severino 1985, p. 22)

The hymn leads to Zeus, but begins in suffering. Suffering is the burden (ἄλθος) that dominates the spirit, the mind, the thought (φροντίς) of mortals, and which condemns them to madness. Mortals can be saved from madness only by turning to Zeus, but Zeus here is not one of the gods: he is the truth. This is the core of the revolution introduced by Aeschylus in this passage: “the pain that throws into madness” can be “cast away” only “with truth” (ἐτήτυμος). In other words, only the truth can save us.

Knowledge of the truth is “the knowledge that is firm and won't let itself be denied”. Severino included this explicit affirmation of the nature of the truth in his translation to make clear that, in the philosophy of *Agamemnon*, Aeschylus presents the “pondering of all things” as the contemplation of incontrovertible truth. This is because the truth must be absolute and incontrovertible; otherwise, it cannot be the truth at all. And this is precisely the meaning of *epistémē* that philosophy brings to light. In the hymn, the chorus sings that Zeus is the *epistémē* and that only the *epistémē* can truly cast away the pain of mortals and, for Severino, this is exactly why this song “expresses the original meaning of philosophy” (Severino 1989, p. 24), because it sets down one of its fundamental principles: “if one does not want liberation to be illusory” (ibid.), then suffering must be cast away with absolute truth and certainty.

Verses 536–37 of *The Eumenides* reiterate this concept in stating that “Happiness comes from health of mind” (Eschilo 2003, p. 635). The healthy mind in this context is the mind that knows the truth and is therefore happy. Salvation then consists in the transformation of the content of thought, in the appearance of “salvific thought” (ἐλθε σφρονεῖν—*Agamemnon*, verse 181). And this appearance cannot be the product of human initiative. It must be a gift (*cháris*—*Agamemnon*, verse 182) bestowed by Dike, who governs all things and sits (*heménōn*) firmly and immutably (*biaíos*) on its sacred throne.

Zeus is then the absolute, incontrovertible truth, and Dike its manifestation in the world. In this sense, Severino insists that “right after having pronounced this central word of Greek mythology [Zeus], the Hymn leads beyond the religious dimension by adding ‘whoever he may be’” (Severino 1989, p. 25). Again, Zeus here is not the god of Greek mythology, but something else. Accordingly, “the first three verses of the Hymn speak within the atmosphere of Heraclitus’ fragment 32: ‘The one, who alone is wise, is unwilling and yet willing to be called by the name of Zeus.’ The Hymn says: ‘Zeus, whoever he may be, I call upon him by this name, if he holds dear to be so called’” (Severino 1989, p. 25). The similarity with Heraclitus is evident and manifests Aeschylus’ reference to the first words of philosophy and to the *Lógos*, whose manifestation constitutes the *epistémē*, the absolute truth brought to light by the birth of philosophy.

The Aeschylean tragedies thus confirm their philosophical essence as their affirmation of the *epistémē* also entails the rejection of religion. In them, the gods of Greek mythology “are negated as forms of myth” (ibid., p. 251), and almost always, “Zeus appears ‘the supreme remedy’ to suffering” (ibid.); that is, as a representation of the absolute truth in opposition to mythic beliefs. For example, verse 594 of *The Suppliants* says “τέκτων, τὸ πᾶν μῆλαρ οὖριος Ζεύς”: “remedy to every pain, propitious Zeus!” (Tonelli 2011, p. 205). Again, the remedy to all pain here is the absolute truth: “the identical in the diverse, the unity that surrounds all things, the principle to which all of the first Greek thinkers turn to” (Severino 1989, 26). This is most explicit in fragment 105 of Aeschylus’ lost dramas, which reads: “Zeus is ether, Zeus is earth, Zeus is sky, Zeus is everything and more than that” (van der Toorn et al. 1999, p. 938).

Aeschylus thus aligns with Heraclitus in equating Zeus with the *Lógos*, but in the hymn he also does much more. He expresses something unprecedented, that only knowledge of the truth can save from unbearable suffering: “the Hymn affirms something that Greek thought had not yet expressed: to Zeus, that is, to the principle of all things, one must turn to in order to cast away the pain with truth” (Severino 1989, p. 27).

The Hymn also specifies that to gain knowledge of the truth one must ponder *πάντη* (verse 164)—*pánta*: all things, everywhere, all around, from every direction, in every way. This too is a new and original principle of philosophy: knowledge of the truth must be knowledge of the whole. This verse says specifically: *πάντ' ἐπισταθμώμενος—pánt' epistathmomenos*, which Severino explains “indicates the firm knowledge that imposes itself upon all things (*pánt' epistathmomenos*) and which, imposing itself upon them, gathers things and holds them firmly under itself and dominates those that wish to escape it and jeopardize its firm and stable gathering” (Severino 1989, p. 29).

The truth dominates Being and all things therein. Therefore, to know the truth is to understand the principle that imposes itself upon Being. This is why “thought, *phrontís* (v. 165)—to cast away with truth the madness of suffering—must . . . *stay firm* above all things, gathering the Whole and dominating everything” (ibid.).

We commonly translate *ἐπιστήμη*—*epistémē* as “science”. However, Severino argues that this translation loses the original meaning of the Greek term. *Epistémē* is constructed on the lexemes *stémē* (to stand still, firm, upright, to establish) and *epí* (on, upon). Thus, it indicates what stands still, firm, and upright upon the world. The expression *pánt' epistathmomenos* (the *epistémē* of *pánta*) exhibits the essence of *epistémē*: knowledge of the truth is the thought that stands firm and upright upon all things, because it knows the principle that establishes itself upon all things. Severino writes that “this sense of the *epistémē* belongs to the essence of the truth, which philosophy was born to testify” (ibid., p. 30). This is because philosophy was founded upon the recognition that the truth, if it is to be truth at all, must be incontrovertible.

Aeschylus was the first to set down that knowledge of the truth is necessary for salvation. Precisely for this reason Severino writes that the hymn to Zeus is where “at the initial and highest point of tragic thought, Aeschylus pronounces an unprecedented ‘no’ to suffering” (ibid., p. 31). And that this hymn “says something that neither Greek thought nor any other form of thought had ever expressed: that to truly cast away the pain that hurls into madness, one must think with truth—in the *epistémē*—the Principle of the Whole” (ibid., p. 79).

3. The Extreme Suffering of Becoming

Severino continues: “Aeschylus said not only that [only the truth can save us]; he also explained *why* one must say that” (Severino 1989, p. 79). With the birth of philosophy, human beings became mortals, and so suffering became extreme, and angst, madness, and folly came to dominate the human mind. This extremity originated in the philosophical creation of the ontological meaning of becoming. The Greeks were the first to think that becoming is the passage of things from Nothingness to Being and from Being to Nothingness. They were the first to think that life is a short span of time between eternities of Nothingness. Only after and because of the Greeks did our entire civilization come to hold the same belief. Now we feel certain that ontological becoming is the truth. However, this is just a theory, and one invented by Greek philosophy.²

With the Greeks, life came to mean becoming in the ontological sense. This entails absolute unpredictability. By definition, Nothingness is what cannot be predicted. If it could, it would be something, but it is not. Nothingness also makes death annihilation (instead of rebirth, for example). This is why Nothingness is the absolute danger, the cause of unbearable despair. The ontological meaning of becoming establishes that each passing moment is a perpetual annihilation of every state of the world, destroyed into eternal Nothingness by the passage of time. With the birth of philosophy, this became the fate of all actions, all unfulfilled possibilities, all human beings, and all things. Everything is destined for annihilation.

This is the ultimate source of unbearable suffering: the belief that you and everything around you are destined to annihilation, that this brief span of life is meaningless precisely because it originates from Nothingness and is destined to Nothingness, and that this

meaningless life is also subject to unpredictable terrifying events, unpredictable precisely because they too originate from Nothingness. By establishing this interpretation of the world, Greek philosophy caused the most extreme form of suffering. Philosophy invented death as we know it. Terror as we know it. Ontological suffering is more extreme than pre-ontological suffering because it believes in Nothingness, the absolute void from which all things come and to which they are destined.

Aeschylus was more or less a contemporary of Heraclitus and Parmenides. It appears unlikely that he studied their philosophies and chose to represent them.³ His tragedies are made of his own thoughts, and these remind of theirs, and so testify to the fact that certain ideas were “in the air” at the time. Aeschylus, Heraclitus, and Parmenides thus constitute a trio at the beginning of philosophy. And among them, Aeschylus was the first to “bring to light for the first time the extreme and unprecedented suffering that is unleashed by our relationship to the nothingness from which things come, and to which they return” (ibid., p. 90).

Severino highlights how Aeschylus was the first thinker to make explicit the cause of our extreme ontological suffering. The Aeschylean tragedies leave no doubt regarding the faith of mortals: verse 96 of *The Suppliants*, for example, states that to die is to be *πανώλεις*—“completely destroyed”. That is: death is annihilation, there is no coming back, nothing of human life will be saved.

Unless the *epistème* can establish so, and this is the key to our traditions, to how philosophy conceived the truth and monotheistic religions God. And Aeschylus was the first to dramatize the extreme suffering of becoming and that only the *epistème* can establish “the supreme prediction that shelters from the unpredictability of becoming and from angst” (Severino 1989, p. 90).

Only the *epistème* can save from Nothingness. The principle that stands firm above all the things and governs becoming must be eternal; otherwise, it would not be an absolute truth. And if there is such a thing as knowledge of said principle, then, said knowledge must itself be knowledge of the eternal: i.e., what is forever safe from Nothingness. This is why the principle can show that all things—and most importantly, all mortals—possess an eternal essence that is forever safe in the Meaning of the Whole. To know the *epistème* is to know this Meaning. Hence why the *epistème* can save mortals from the madness of unbearable suffering. Only if they see the *epistème* can mortals feel that there is salvation. Otherwise, they are doomed to see everything as destined for annihilation. When mortals catch sight of the *epistème*, “annihilation is accepted and borne because they see the incontrovertible evidence of the truth and therefore that, even in the annihilation of things, the Principle—the unchanging Being wherein the essence of every being destined to come out of nothingness and return to nothingness remains forever safe—is eternally safeguarded” (ibid. 80).

4. The Light of the *Epistème* Shines over the Darkness of Becoming

εἴ δ' εἴη Διόθεν παναληθῶς./Διὸς ἥμερος οὐκ εὐθήρατος ἐτύχθη./παντᾷ τοι
φλεγέθει/κᾶν σκότῳ μελαίνῃ ξὺν τύχῃ/μερόπεσσι λαοῖς./πίπτει δ' ἀσφαλὲς
οὐδ' ἐπὶ νώτῳ,/κορυφᾷ Διὸς εἰ κρανθῇ, πρᾶγμα τέλειον./δαυλοὶ γὰρ
πραπίδων/δάσκιόι τε τείνουσιν πόροι/κατιδεῖν ἄφραστοι.

Oh if truly perfect fulfilment could arise!/But it is not easy to apprehend the will of Zeus,/even if it shines everywhere,/even in blackness,/dark fate for the ancestries of mortal men./It does not sway, nor fall on its back/the concluded event/when the mind of Zeus governs it:/in the shadow, in the unruly/extend the paths of his thoughts/impossible to understand, unspeakable”. (Tonelli 2011, pp. 176–77)

These are verses 86–95 of *The Suppliants*. About verses 86–90 (“Oh if truly . . . mortal men”), Severino writes that they anticipate the Hymn to Zeus. Yet, here the will of Zeus appears impenetrable (“his will not easily traced” in the English translation of verse 87 in

Greene and Lattimore eds.), but even if it seems impenetrable, it remains possible to turn to Zeus in παναληθῶς (verse 85), *pan-alethos*. This corresponds to the *pánt'epistathmomenos* of verse 164 of the Hymn to Zeus. In other words, both tragedies tell us that, even in blackness, we can “remain within the highest truth” (Severino 1989, p. 44).

Those who truly know how to look can see that the will of Zeus—the absolute truth—“shines everywhere” (παντῷ φλεγάθει v.88), even in blackness, even in the dark fate of mortals (“fleeting”, “passing”, “evanescent”, “ephemeral”). The truth shines in the eyes of those who know the *epistème* (the *epistème* knows what is “not easy to apprehend”, what is “not easily traced”), and it comforts the mortals even in the recognition of the reality of suffering and death, because the *epistème* exhibits both the blackness that awaits everything and the comforting eternal principle that governs becoming and saves the eternal essence from annihilation. As Severino writes: “the true light of the *epistème*—the appearance of the truth of God—illuminates and warms they who know. It allows them to bear the darkness and suffering in which they find themselves. It allows them to cast away the meaninglessness of darkness and suffering” (Severino 1989, pp. 44–5). In other words, the *epistème* imbues darkness and suffering with meaningfulness and, in so doing, it redeems them and makes them bearable.

This section of *The Suppliants* opens with the chorus singing for salvation (“Oh if truly perfect fulfilment could arise!”). The chorus beseeches perfect fulfilment and knows that this coincides with the ability to apprehend what is not easy to apprehend, to see the light even in blackness. Only the *epistème* can truly (“Oh if truly . . .”) save mortals. The drama reiterates the same concept in verses 407–9: “We need profound, salvific thought/an eye that, like a diver deep in troubled seas/plunges with keen and unblurred sight” (Tonelli 2011, pp. 194–95).

This is another metaphor to indicate that knowledge of the *epistème* is like an eye that sees clearly even in the worst depths of suffering, and that such profound thinking is necessary for salvation. Not only that, verse 409 explicitly says that knowledge of the truth can arise only if one plunges deep into suffering; that is, it is only possible through the experience and recognition (“plunges with keen and unblurred sight”) of extreme suffering (“deep in troubled seas”). These verses thus set down yet another principle of philosophy, and an overarching principle of the Aeschylean tragedies: *páthei máthos*—through suffering, wisdom.

This principle is reiterated in verses 174–83 of *Agamemnon*:

Ζῆνα δέ τις προφρόνως ἐπινίκια κλάζων/τεύξεται φρενῶν τὸ πᾶν:/τὸν φρονεῖν βροτοὺς ὁδῶ-/σαντα, τὸν πάθει μάθος/θέντα κυρίως ἔχειν./στάζει δ' ἔν θ' ὕπνῳ πρὸ καρδίας/μνησιπήμων/ πόνος: καὶ παρ' ἄ-/κοντας ἦλθε σωφρονεῖν./δαιμόνων δέ που χάρις βίαιος/σέλμα σεμνὸν ἡμένων.

But he will reach the summit of knowledge,/who joyously celebrates the victory of Zeus,/of Zeus who leads mortals/on the road to knowledge/and proclaimed the sovereign principle:/“through suffering, wisdom”./Instead of sleep, it drips in front of the heart/the tormented memory of pain,/and knowledge reaches/even those who reject it./This is the violent grace of the gods/enthroned upon their sacred magisterial seats. (Tonelli 2011, p. 247)

Here the chorus sings again that the Law of Being, the Principle of absolute Truth (Zeus), establishes the universal principle “through suffering, wisdom”. Mortals can see the truth only if they experience suffering first hand. True salvation is not a flight from suffering. Rather, it is the ability to bear suffering and to see the light in suffering: “who can truly see, at the summit of knowledge, in suffering, is illuminated by God” (Severino 1989, p. 45).

The truth saves from suffering not because it eliminates it, but because it affirms the salvation of the eternal essence from Nothingness. The Principle saves the essence of the Whole from annihilation, thus making it meaningful. This essential Meaningfulness governs everything and therefore ties each thing to everything else and to the Necessity of

Being. This is why knowledge of the truth comforts our angst and suffering. It saves from madness because it makes suffering and annihilation bearable.

Verses 92–4 of *The Suppliants* read: “it does not sway, nor fall on its back/the concluded event/when the mind of Zeus governs it”. When one knows the truth, the events of one’s life (“the concluded event”) appear as governed by the Principle of the Truth (“the mind of Zeus governs it”). Therefore, they cannot be contingent, random, or meaningless (“it does not sway, nor fall on its back”). In the *epistème*, “the events of the world are safe, stand upright, don’t fall on their back, and are therefore *predictable*” (Severino 1989, p. 47). Thus, they satisfy our desire for meaningfulness and salvation.

Verses 101–3 of *Agamemnon* communicate the same idea: “sometimes the propitious hope that illuminates ahead—rising from the sacrifices—wards off the thinking that can suffer limitlessly, the catastrophe that devastates the mind” (Eschilo 2003, p. 403). Here, “hope” (ἐλπίς) indicates knowledge of the truth as the prevision that illuminates ahead because it knows that the future will occur under the Law of the absolute truth. This knowledge wards off unbearable suffering.

The chorus is now thinking of old age and the war that is destroying both Greeks and Trojans. Yet, death is not what brings the catastrophe of the mind upon them. Clytaemestra, the queen of Argos, enters the scene and asks what *unexpected, new*, terrifying event may occur next. This is what terrifies: the unknown. Predicted suffering and death can be born with honour, but unpredictable suffering makes *the present* unbearable: without knowledge of the truth, the present is pervaded by the knowledge that the very next unpredictable moment may bring unbearable suffering and annihilation. This imbues the present with terror (the catastrophe of the mind).

Hence why the chorus’s prayer for salvation is a prayer for knowledge, not for the negation of suffering. The chorus prays *for answers* from the queen of Argos (verses 99–100): “speak and cure me from the anguish/that now arises in sinister thoughts” (Tonelli 2011, p. 243). In this song of sorrow, the chorus prays for elevation to the highest summit of knowledge, where the absolute truth of the Meaning of the Whole shines, where Dike, Justice, the Law that governs everything shines: “the essential Meaning of the Whole anticipates the essence of every future event, i.e., of everything that will be born, and preserves the essence of every past, i.e., of everything that had to die” (Severino 1989, p. 64).

The absolute Truth reigns upon time and endows becoming with meaning, thus comforting the mind of mortals. The chorus prays because it knows that when the light of absolute Truth shines upon the mind, then mortals can see the meaningfulness of all things. This is why the *epistème* saves from unbearable suffering and why mortals sing the victory of Zeus. The victory of Truth is also the salvation of the mind.

5. The Eternal Return of Suffering and the Definitiveness of Death

In a late passage of *Agamemnon*, the chorus wonders why it still cannot find liberation from unbearable suffering even when it has seen the light of the truth. Verses 975–83 say:

τίπτε μοι τόδ’ ἐμπέδως/δεῖμα προστατήριον/καρδίας τερασκόπου
ποτᾶται/μαντιπολεῖ δ’ ἀκέλευστος ἄμισθος ἀοιδά,/οὐδ’ ἀποπτύσαι
δίκαν/δυσκρίτων ὄνειράτων/θάρος εὐπειθὲς ἴ-/ζει φρενὸς φίλον θρόνον.

why must this unmovable dread stand before me, and twirl against my mantic heart? Why must this song, unbidden, unrepaid, pronounce prophecies? Why can’t I spit out this dread, this dark nightmare, and why can’t serene certainty sit on the intimate throne of my mind? (Severino 1989, p. 68; Tonelli 2011, p. 289; Aeschylus 1959, p. 65)

That the chorus wonders *why* certainty cannot pervade the mind entails that it sees no tangible explanation that can account for what is happening. Here again the dread is insurmountable because it is unexplainable, generated by the unknown, unseen, and unpredictable. The terror is chaos, and chaos ensues from ontological becoming: the coming out of Nothingness and going back to Nothingness of things. In this sense, Severino

writes that in Aeschylus “the vision of suffering is the vision of becoming and death (verses 1019–24), ... the anguish for what might unpredictably burst into the visible” (Severino 1989, p. 71).

The Aeschylean tragedies show that to live is to exist in ontological becoming and therefore in terror. Both those who see the truth and those who do not live in fear; the only distinction regards whether the fear is bearable or unbearable. For those who do not know the truth, “precisely because the appearance of becoming and suffering is the original evidence, the ‘vortexes’ of suffering ‘find realization’ (*telesphóroi*, verse 996)—that is, they have the power to dominate the mind and to sit on its throne” (Severino 1989, p. 72). Thus, for mortals, suffering is the originary and undeniable evidence that cannot be escaped: ever since the birth of philosophy, we see the abyss of nothingness and are burdened with terror.

The Aeschylean tragedies also represent how “the inevitability and finality of death shows the vanity of the remedies with which we try to survive” (ibid., pp. 73–4). Not even the truth has power over death, let alone our actions. Mortals have no choice but to accept the certainty of death because “the evidence and undeniability of becoming” (ibid., p. 74) is obvious even to “the ‘mind that is in the truth’ (*éndikoi phrénēs*)” (ibid.). Thus, Aeschylus makes the certainty of bodily annihilation explicit, and in so doing dramatizes the truth of Greek ontology and the futility of our attempts to escape death and suffering. This alone would make Aeschylus one of the great philosophical founders of our civilization, according to Severino:

... all the religious forms that precede Greek thought understand death as the passage to another form of life. Aeschylus, instead and for the first time, understands death as the complete and definitive destruction of life; that is, as the definitive destruction of the “firmness” of being: death as annihilation. Aeschylus brings to light the extreme form of anguish, the ‘anguish’ (*μέλειν*, *Ag.*, v. 569) of not being able to come back to being: “Affairs (existence) of the mortals! (*βρότεια πράγματ*, verse 1327); if they are prosperous, a shadow can overthrow them, if they are hostile, one stroke of a wet sponge destroys the picture” (verses 1327–30) (ibid., pp. 117–18).

To be mortal is to see annihilation as the end, either through the eyes of ignorance—which see only annihilation, isolation, and becoming—or through epistemic grace—which shows that becoming is governed by Dike, which saves the eternal essence of all things from Nothingness and makes life meaningful. Aeschylus sees the extreme anguish of annihilation and “wants to save us from this extreme form of anguish by turning to the extreme form of knowledge and to the divine legislation of the Whole that comes to light therein” (ibid., p. 118). Yet, “almost always his characters and chorus remain in non-truth” (ibid., p. 116). That is, the non-truth is represented as “the customary abode of” (ibid., p. 117) mortals: mortals can reach the summit of knowledge, but very few succeed, and even those who succeed get only glimpses of light in blackness.⁴

6. The Yoke of Necessity

If one does not stand at the summit of knowledge, then the “impossible to understand, unspeakable” paths of the mind of Zeus of verses 86–95 of *The Suppliants* become the “doubled, unspeakable dread” of verse 165 of *The Persians*. This “doubled, unspeakable dread” destroys all mortal hopes. *The Suppliants* expresses this in verses 96–98: “Down from hopes as high as towers, he hurls mortals into annihilation” (Eschilo 1994b, p. 11). In this regard, Severino writes that “if one does not see the truth of the highest Knowledge, then the shadow of the incomprehensible paths of Zeus appears as the shadow of Nothingness, and the darkness wherein mortals fall in complete destruction, when they fall from the towers of hope, too appears as Nothingness” (Severino 1989, p. 123).

Yet, when mortals do see the truth, then their knowledge comforts them:

The highest knowledge, on the one hand, sees the Law and the inevitability of the coming out of nothingness and returning to nothingness of all things, and on the other hand, sees that nothingness does not seize the immutable divine Essence of

the Whole. The highest knowledge sees both that mortals are not annihilated by an unpredictable event but by the Law that legislates the becoming of all things and that this Law is the divine dimension where the essence of the world and humanity endures, eternal and unchanging. This is why philosophy, the *epistème*, the highest vision of the Meaning of reality, is the *prediction* of the essence of the unpredictable and therefore liberates from the anguish of the unpredictable (ibid.).

In dramatizing these ideas, “the thought of Aeschylus” expresses that “of the Greeks and of the entire Western tradition” (ibid., p. 124). Verse 218 of *Agamemnon* says that salvation can come only “under the yoke [λέπαδνον] of necessity [ἀνάγκας]” (Tonelli 2011, p. 249). Verse 594 of *The Suppliants* reiterates that Zeus (truth) is “‘the highest remedy’ (*tò pân mechar*) against the anguish of becoming” (Severino 1989, p. 258). *Prometheus Bound* then adds that only the *epistème* can stop mortals from practicing the violence of *téchne*, which makes them guilty of *hýbris*: “Under the yoke of the truth and of true awe, humankind abandons the terrible privilege of being, among the things that terrify, the one that terrifies most” (ibid., p. 269)⁵.

The Oresteia (Aeschylus 1984) ends with Zeus and the Moira (the incarnation of Destiny) moving forward together. They represent the absolute truth governing the becoming of the world. The trilogy’s end continuously summons the whole and refers to Zeus as he “who sees everything”. In this sense, verses 1044–47 of *The Eumenides* read: “Truce under the light of the torches in the houses,/in eternity for the citizens of Pallas./Zeus who sees everything/and the Moira thus agreed./Elevate cries of joy to our songs!” (Tonelli 2011, p. 455).

On this point, Severino writes that “the torches of the houses of Pallas show the alliance that exists in the Whole” (Severino 1989, p. 300). *The Oresteia* “begins with the anguished wait for the ambiguous lights of night and ends with the jubilation for the light of truth—the jubilation for the shining yoke of truth that liberates from the anguish produced by the Disputes of the Night”. (ibid., p. 301). The celebratory torches are “sacred” (*hierón*, *The Eumenides*, verse 1005), because they represent the light of the truth, and because the truth saves. The truth shows that the Necessity of Destiny governs all things and saves their essence, eternally. It shows that the disputes of the night are, in truth, bound under the yoke of Necessity.

In becoming, the things of the world try to escape Dike. Here resides their *hýbris*. *Hýbris* is their will. The will to escape Destiny. The will that causes violence and unbearable suffering. Yet, the truth shows that this escape is impossible. The final celebration of *The Oresteia* continuously calls upon the *pro-horân*: the prediction that sees the Whole (*es tó pân*) and comforts mortals even as it recognizes “the danger that is destined to rule all human affairs” (Severino 1989, p. 307; on *The Eumenides*, verses 930–5). Even if the war of becoming is real and destined to forever reign upon mortal life—with all its suffering, terror, and madness—the *epistème* can still comfort mortals with the knowledge of the truth, of “the remedy and the shelter” (ibid.): the yoke of Necessity that governs becoming and saves the essence of all things, eternally.

7. *Téchne* Is Far Weaker Than Necessity

When mortals do not see the light of the truth, they live under a delusion: they believe that they can alter fate and build mortal remedies to suffering. They call *téchne* their ability to transform the world, and their belief in *téchne* generates their *hýbris*. *Prometheus Bound* is one of the few Aeschylean tragedies where Zeus represents not the truth, but one of the gods of myth, a force of becoming, and a *téchne* guilty of *hýbris*. Severino writes that in Aeschylus, the gods of myth “are the original possessors of *téchne*, with which they produce and control the becoming of the world” (Severino 1989, p. 252). Aeschylus represents mortals who live in the non-truth as beings that strive to become gods by gaining possession of *téchne* themselves. The illusion of mortals is that by gaining *téchne* they will be able to overcome suffering.

Prometheus Bound (Aeschylus 1961) is where Aeschylus addresses these problems directly. Here, fire symbolizes *téchne*, and the tragedy shows that the delusion of *téchne* is the essence of violence from which only double suffering can arise. And in fact, this is true in all Aeschylean tragedies: “the different possessors of *téchne* want to prevail over one another” (ibid.), and in this will “they express their specific *hýbris*” (ibid.). The Aeschylean dramas are tragedies precisely because they represent why *téchne* turns mortal life into war, into a place where “the winning *hýbris* chains down the losing *hýbris*, which itself had tried to chain down the force that subjugated it. One force of becoming chains down another, annihilating what of it she finds useless” (ibid.).

War pervades life because life is lived in the non-truth of *téchne*. This happens on all levels: “between gods, between mortals, and between mortals and gods” (ibid.). The existence of each *hýbris* is the attempt to chain and annihilate others, and each *hýbris* will itself be chained and annihilated in the end. This occurs because living beings are terrified by suffering and annihilation and, as a result, they attach their hopes to the delusion that, by altering the course of events, they could save themselves: “by chaining down and annihilating what threatens it, each force attempts to devise its remedy against the anguish of becoming” (ibid., p. 253).

Aeschylus shows that to attempt to alter becoming is to engage in war, but he also shows that there is another option: to submit to Dike, the Justice of Being, and consciously let the *Lógos* govern one’s being. Here again Aeschylus recalls Heraclitus and his fundamental opposition between *hýbris* and *Lógos*, *téchne* and the Necessity of the *epistéme*. Heraclitus wrote that those who do not know the *Lógos* live as if asleep, in a dream of *ιδίαν φρόνησιν* (*idia phrónesis*)—“private knowledge”. This false wisdom shuts one off in one’s own *hýbris* and leads one astray. Aeschylus adds that someone in this condition will mistake their own *hýbris* for the truth, and this will lead them to the “blasphemous and impure change of spirit”, or the “thought ready to challenge anything” that instantiates the worst possible form of *hýbris* (*Agamemnon*, verses 218–21).

In this sense, from Severino’s point of view, verse 514 of *Prometheus Bound* might be the most important verse of the Aeschylean tragedies. It states that “*téchne* is far weaker than necessity”—*téchne d’anánkes asthenestéra makrôî* (Severino 1989, p. 179). Prometheus himself is the character who states as much after having gifted fire (*téchne*) to human beings and having incurred punishment for it. And not only that, when the chorus asks him whether Zeus too is weaker than Necessity, Prometheus answers: “Of course, he cannot avoid what Fate has decreed” (verse 518, Eschilo 1994a, p. 99). And what Fate has decreed is that Zeus (verse 929) “will suffer punishments far heavier than these” (ibid., p. 121).

Prometheus is the one who sees ahead (pro-metheus). Prometheus can *predict* because he now sees the truth, and the truth is the Law of Necessity. Prometheus now knows that his gift of fire was a mistake (a false hope), that his punishment is just, and that Zeus will be subjected to an even greater punishment because his *hýbris* was even more at fault.

This tragedy thus dramatizes how mortals illusorily confide in their arts (*téchnai*) as remedies to suffering, how such hopes are doomed to failure, and how mortals will suffer the consequences for their *hýbris*. Prometheus steals the *téchnai* from the gods and gives them to mortals so that they can be godlike and gain autonomous power. However, the tragedy explicitly says that when “Prometheus gave mortals their arts [*téchnai*]” (verse 506; Tonelli 2011, p. 487), he committed a grave ἀμλακημάτων (verse 112) mistake, error, fault, or sin, for which he must pay the penalty.

Prometheus gave *téchne* to mortals so that they could save themselves from suffering. However, in doing so, he turned mortal existence into war, all in the name of an illusion. *Téchne* cannot save suffering because “*téchne* is far weaker than necessity”. Now, chained in punishment, Prometheus knows the truth. When the chorus asks him *why* he is being punished, he replies that that is because he gave mortals fire, i.e., “blind hopes”.

8. Prometheus's Mistake

Prometheus now knows that he is justly bound because he gave mortals “blind hopes”. In verse 112, he admits: “this is the fault for which I pay the punishment” (Tonelli 2011, p. 467). In verses 267–8, he takes full responsibility for this wrongdoing: “of my own will, I transgressed. Of my own will. I do not deny it./To help the mortals I procured this suffering for myself” (ibid., p. 475).

Thus, Prometheus now knows the truth and reflects on his mistake. Aeschylus here represents the passage “from the Prometheus who believes in the salvific character of *téchne* to the Prometheus who—at the summit of knowledge—*knows* that every event of the world, human and divine, is produced in the necessary Law of the Whole” (Severino 1989, p. 184), the passage “from the Prometheus of *téchne* to the Prometheus of the *episteme*” (ibid.).

Prometheus gave mortals *téchne* to divert their gaze from the truth of death. He himself says so in verse 248: “I diverted humans from staring fixedly at their destiny of death” (Tonelli 2011, p. 475). He offered *téchne* as a *pharmakon* against mortal sickness, but now he sees that there can be no remedy for mortality, and in verses 249–50, the chorus asks him, “what medicine did you discover against this sickness?” (ibid.), and he answers, “I gave them blind hopes” (ibid.).

The gift of fire represents the “persuasion of having the ability to defeat death. The prevision of *téchne* keeps death at distance (ἔπαισσα, verse 248) and intends to falsify the prevision of death as annihilation, thus opposing the immutable Law of Dike” (Severino 1989, p. 184). With the gift of fire, Prometheus hoped to give mortals “capabilities that they can, or at least believe they can, autonomously command” (ibid., p. 191) in order to overthrow destiny. This gift of *téchne* is thus fundamentally synonymous with the gift of free will: the ability to decide destiny. In stealing fire from the gods, therefore, “Prometheus intended to give the capability of free action” (ibid.) to mortals. It is this gift of free will that he thought could make mortals godlike.

In verse 50, Kratos said “no one is free except Zeus” (Tonelli 2011, p. 463). Prometheus wanted to change that. This is the central meaning of the tragedy: mortals want to become godlike by gaining the power of free will and alter the course of events to escape suffering and death, but these are “blind hopes” that only cause war between mortals, and between mortals and gods (nature), i.e., further suffering and death. Prometheus now knows the truth and understands that giving mortals this illusion was a sin. The only possible remedy to unbearable suffering is knowledge of the truth, and not because knowledge negates suffering and death, but because it understands them. Verses 698–99 say that “For those who suffer, it is of relief to foresee, incontrovertibly, the pains that await them” (Severino 1989, p. 192).

The destiny of pain and annihilation is incontrovertible, and free will is an illusion. Pain and angst cannot be cured by diverting one's eyes from the truth. The only remedy is to see the truth, face it, and embrace it. This is terrifying, at first. Through endurance, the Meaning of the Whole appears and manifests the eternal salvation of all things. The only remedy is to suffer “with the truth of the mind” (ibid., p. 185). Pain does await, but foreseeing it is a relief.

Those who know the truth of destiny can thus bear suffering and not sin in *hýbris*. Verses 550–52 of *The Eumenides* say that “Who is right . . . will not be unhappy [οὐκ ἄνολβος ἔσται]”. Agamemnon says that one who knows the truth is content (ἄπαρκεῖν, v. 379) in limitation and does not need any “defence” (ἐπαλξίς, verse 381) against suffering because they know that “every remedy is entirely vain” (ἄκος δὲ πᾶν μάταιον, verse 387)—that is, that no *téchne* can undo suffering and death—and therefore they live a temperate life and do not become a “destroyer of cities” (πτολιπόρθης, verse 472), nor a slave of others (verse 473). Who lives according to the truth prefers “the happiness that is not envied” (ἄφθονον ὄλβον, verse 471).

9. Life, Suffering, Injustice, Madness

Life itself is the tragedy. Life is suffering, and no human action can remedy the pain. Verses 580–81 of *Prometheus Bound* say that to live is to be consumed “in the terror of the torment that aggrieves” (Tonelli 2011, p. 491). The only possibility is to bear suffering, but when mortals live in non-truth, suffering is unbearable, and mortals live in non-truth most of the time.

Unbearable suffering is dramatized, for example, in the king of Argos in *The Suppliants*. The king is paralyzed with “indecision” (*améchanô*—verse 379) because he cannot conceive of an action that will not bring misfortune. He cannot see how suffering can be borne because he does not possess “profound, salvific thought” (verses 407–8). For this reason, he cannot see that action is not the point. He cannot understand that no action can save him. It is this absence of knowledge that condemns him to unbearable suffering: “I am at a loss. Terror owns my mind [φόβος μ’ ἔχει φρένας]. To act or not to act?” (verses 379–380).

Ignorance condemns the king to conclude that “there is no escape”, that we can never be “free from pain” (verses 440–42). His faith in the non-truth of *téchne* leads him to believe that only becoming is true. He is thus unable to see that “good Fate” (γένοιτο δ’ εἶ—verse 454) is the fundamental truth. This is why—similarly to Iò, who commits suicide in *Prometheus Bound*—he finally deduces that it is “better to be ignorant (ἄιδρις) rather than an expert of evil” (θέλω δ’ ἄιδρις μάλλον ἢ σοφὸς κακῶν, verse 453): when the truth of Necessity does not shine upon the mind, one believes that the only truth is evil, and therefore that ignorance is bliss.

Ontological becoming condemns mortals to terror. Thus, when becoming appears as the only truth, mortals seek escape in ignorance and delusion. Then, if they still cannot divert their eyes from becoming, they ultimately seek death as liberation. When the “blind hopes” of *hýbris* of *téchne* inevitably fall from the precipice and mortals experience double punishment for their double injustice (*adikía*), then mortals can wish only for freedom from life. Mortals hope there is power in *téchne*, but *téchne* only leads to double unbearable suffering. This is the inevitable outcome of mortal life in the non-truth.

In *Prometheus Bound*, Iò cries (verse 751) that it is “better to die once and for all than to suffer day after day” (Tonelli 2011, p. 501).⁶ Similar to the King of Argos, she lives in non-truth. However, Prometheus, who is now in chains and has learned the truth, this time offers her not *téchne*, but a glimpse of the truth itself (verse 596), i.e., of the same “age-old principle” of verse 314 of *The Libation Bearers* and of verse 1564 of the *Agamemnon*: “who acts must suffer”.

To this, Iò replies: “you have spoken words so true to her who suffers” (Tonelli 2011, p. 493). Here, the truth shows that acting (i.e., trying to evade destiny through *téchne*) can only lead mortals to double unbearable suffering. Mortals are condemned to pay retribution for the injustice of their attempts. Yet, to live *is* to act, and this is why life is suffering, constitutionally. This is *the* tragedy. All we can hope for is to understand this tragedy rather than be ignorant about it. Because those who do not realize the injustice of their actions commit double *hýbris* and *adikía* and are thus condemned to double unbearable suffering, while those who know the truth can bear suffering by living a temperate life, knowing that destiny is justice and that *téchne* is always unjust.

Thus, to live is to act, and to act is to suffer: “this is the principle that Aeschylus shares with all the other original Greek thinkers” (Severino 1989, p. 192). In the first fragment of the history of philosophy, Anaximander wrote that “the things that are perish into the things from which they come to be, according to necessity, for they pay penalty and retribution to each other for their injustice in accordance with the ordering of time” (Curd 2011, p. 17).⁷

Accordingly, Aeschylus dramatized precisely how “to every force that is born, Dike (Necessity) charges the penalty for the injustice of its birth, and the penalty is constituted by the *hýbris* of a new force that, when born, ignores its being a new injustice as well as

its being in the hands of Dike (Necessity), and thus deludes itself with vain hopes into believing in its ability to dominate things" (Severino 1989, p. 253).

Verses 1341–42 of *Agamemnon* ask: "who, ever, of the mortals (τίς . . . βροτῶν) can boast that he was born from a demon that does not inflict misfortune?" (Severino 1989, p. 233). Likewise, verses 1018–19 of *The Libation Bearers* state: "none of the mortals (οὐτις μερόπων) goes through life without grief" (Severino 1989, p. 233). The Aeschylean tragedies often reiterate that everyone suffers, life is suffering for everyone because everyone acts, and what makes suffering unbearable is double *hýbris*, i.e., our faith in our ability to act, such as the double *hýbris* of the unknowing Prometheus who stole fire because he thought that "no human life exists before and without *téchne*. Without *téchne* men are 'feeble ants'" (verses 452–53), "akin to the shadows of dreams" (verses 448–49), "beings who look and listen 'in vain'" (verse 447), "randomly" (verse 450), and "without discernment" (verse 456) (Severino 1989, p. 229).

In Severino's interpretation, Prometheus's mistake was to inaugurate our technological interpretation of the world, our belief that life can be meaningful only if mortals have the power to dominate the world. This is the meaning of our belief in *téchne*, which still constitutes the foundation of our civilization. However, Severino also insists that the tragedy makes clear that Prometheus erred, that in ignorance he did not know that Dike is the "cause of All" (*panaitios*, *Agamemnon*, verse 1486), and that omnipotent eternity "stands under no one's power" (*The Suppliants*, verse 595).

Mortals oppose Dike by pursuing *téchne*, and this condemns them to a destiny of ruin. They will inevitably fall from the "high towers of false hope", and only then will they have a chance to see that "every remedy is completely vain" (*ákos dè pammátaion*, *Agamemnon*, verse 387) and that suffering has no end. This punishment is an "inevitable destiny" (*λάχος διανταία*/Μοῖρ, *Eumenides*, verse 334) assigned "immutably" (*ἐμπέδως*, verse 335: "according to necessity") by the Moira. Those who "without justice" (*ἄνευ δίκας*, *Agamemnon*, v. 464) "overstep all bounds" (*ὑπερκόπως*, *ibid.*, verse 467) with time (*chrónoi*, *ibid.*, verse 463) will be brought to ruins by the Erinyes. Then they will "not have any power anymore" (*amaurón*) and "there [will be] no remedy left" (*oútis alká*, *ibid.*, verse 466). Only then will it be possible for them to see the light of the truth ("through suffering, wisdom"). Only they who live according to the law of Dike will be able to bear suffering.⁸

10. The Light of the Epistème Shines on Prometheus

In verses 98–105 of *Prometheus Bound*, Prometheus says:

φεῦ, φεῦ, τὸ παρὸν τό τ' ἐπερχόμενον/πῆμα στενάχω, πῆ ποτε μόχθων/χρὴ
τέρματα τῶνδ' ἐπιτεῖλαι/καίτοι τί φημι; πάντα προυξεπίσταμαι/σκεθρῶς τὰ
μέλλοντ', οὐδέ μοι ποταίνιον/πῆμ' οὐδὲν ἤξει. τὴν πεπρωμένην δὲ χρὴ/αἶσαν
φέρειν ὡς ῥᾶστα, γινώσκονθ' ὅτι/τὸ τῆς ἀνάγκης ἔστ' ἀδήριτον σθένος.

Woe, Woe, I cry /the present suffering and the suffering to come./Will the destined day ever rise /that will see the end of my agony?/What am I saying? I know in advance, in every detail,/all that will happen. No calamity /will catch me by surprise. In the best of ways /must bear the decreed fate /who knows that the power of necessity is invincible. (Tonelli 2011, p. 467)

Prometheus is bound, but now he sees the truth and so knows that Dike is invincible. Thus, he can suffer with a healthy mind and bear the decreed fate in the best of ways. This does not mean that he will be free from suffering. That is the false hope of *téchne*. It means that he will be able to bear suffering because he will recognize the meaningfulness of justice in every event.

Knowledge of the truth enables one to live in accordance with justice and bear the burden of existence. In the absence of knowledge, existence appears meaningless, chaotic, and unpredictable, and this leads to the unbearable agony that condemns to madness. The unknown and unintelligible terrify mortals. Only the certainty of necessity can comfort that terror. In the light of the truth, mortals can see the eternity of all things. This is the

sense in which Prometheus asks (verse 933): “What should I fear, I who am not destined to death?” (Tonelli 2011, p. 511). Prometheus now sees the incontrovertible “Meaning of the Whole, the gathering-together of all things (ether, water, earth, fire) in the immutable unity of the divine” (Severino 1989, p. 188).

11. Criticisms and Conclusion

Aeschylus and Plato. Severino opposes the common reading whereby we think of Greek tragedy as the place where suffering, angst, and contradiction remain unresolved, unreconciled, impossible to overcome. In this sense, he specifically objects to Goethe, Hölderlin, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche, and argues that Plato and Aristotle are the originary guilty parties who led future interpretations astray and that the mistaken interpretation of tragedy is tied to the erroneous postulation of the opposition between philosophy and poetry: “the paramount responsibility of this alteration is Plato’s, and then Aristotle’s. They have explicitly brought to light the ‘ancient discord’ (*palaià diaphorá*, Plato 1941, p. 607 b) between philosophy and poetry” (Severino 1989, p. 323).

Severino argues that Plato misunderstood the Aeschylean tragedies, losing sight of how they dramatize the fundamental principles of philosophy to which Plato himself adhered: “Plato *rehashes* the fundamental theme of Aeschylus: the truth of the highest knowledge is the true (‘the most effective’) *remedy* against anguish (‘turmoil’ and ‘suffering’). However, Plato not only does not see that this is indeed the fundamental Aeschylean theme, he also claims that tragic poetry—and therefore the thought of Aeschylus—strives toward precisely *the opposite* of this theme” (Severino 1989, p. 329).

Thus, Plato originated both misinterpretations: (1) that tragedy is the representation of the impossibility of salvation; (2) that poetry is the realm of non-truth opposed to philosophy. Severino holds the exact opposite in both cases. Through poetic art, Aeschylus said what is philosophical in the highest sense. His thought “is one of the first majestic expressions of what they [Plato and Aristotle] think of as ‘philosophy’ . . . If one knows how to listen to what Aeschylus says, the content of his language powerfully anticipates—and to an extent that remains unsurpassed—what will later be said by Plato and Aristotle. Aeschylus is one of the first great sowers of Western civilization” (ibid., p. 324).

Aeschylus and Aristotle. Aristotle’s interpretation deviates greatly from Plato’s in that Aristotle argues that Aeschylean poetry can lead mortals to *kátharsis*. Yet, what remains unaltered is their understanding of tragedy as opposed to philosophy. For Aristotle too, then, *kátharsis* differs from the *epistémē* and therefore cannot establish the true remedy to unbearable suffering:

Like Plato, Aristotle sees the essential relationship between tragedy and suffering. The *mythos* imitates (and unifies, *Poet.*, 1450 a 4–5) the ‘terrible’ actions of life and ‘those that induce compassion’ (φοβερώων καὶ ἐλεεινῶν, 1452 a 2–3). Actions occur in the most anguishing form when they burst into being ‘against every expectation’ (παρὰ τὴν δόξαν, 1452 a 4), and therefore as something that is *thaumastón* (1452 a 4–5), i.e., ‘surprising’ and ‘unpredictable.’ ‘This (that is, the unpredictability of the anguishing event) is the tragic’ (τραγικὸν γὰρ τοῦτο, 1456 a 21). (Severino 1989, p. 337)

Similarly to Plato, Aristotle thinks that, in Aeschylus, tragedy is insurmountable. *Kátharsis* is only emotional and not epistemic-philosophical. Therefore, it cannot establish a remedy founded upon determinate content that shows why *kátharsis* redeems suffering. The poetic remedy is thus insufficient and must be abandoned in favour of philosophy. The production of an “image” (eikón: the poet is eikonopoiós, Aristotle 1932b, p.1460 b 9) of the world differs from, and is inferior to, the *epistémē*, and so it cannot save from *thauma*.

To this, Severino replies that Aristotle forgot that the poetic *téchne* of Aeschylus does not consist merely of the production of an image of the world, but also of the thought that emerges through and beyond said production. Through his tragedies, Aeschylus created an image of the world *and* illuminated the essence of philosophy. His tragedies *are* the product

of poetic *téchne*, but through them shines the *epistéme*: the distinction between the falsehood of *téchne* and the shining light of the truth. This is what makes Aeschylus the first great poet-philosopher: Aeschylus “*avails himself* of a device (a *téchne*) . . . that consists in the *drawing-near* of the world to the sight of the Truth of philosophy” (Severino 1989, p. 335).

The goal of the Aeschylean tragedies is not to imitate reality, but to exhibit the truth. In Aeschylus, salvation is not *kátharsis* but the *epistéme*. *Kátharsis* is the means; the *epistéme* is the goal. Both Plato and Aristotle failed to see that they inherited their conception of the *epistéme* as the only remedy to suffering from Aeschylus. In this sense, Severino explains that the great Aristotelian theme that happiness (the good toward which human beings incline) is *contemplation*—i.e., “*theoreîn*” (*Eth. Nic.*, 1177 a 33), the “*theoría*” (ibid. 1178 b 29–32) in which “the wise” (*sophós*, ibid. 1178 b 32) contemplates “the divine and beautiful things” (ibid. 1178 b 15) “according to knowledge” (κατὰ τὴν σοφίαν, ibid. 1177 a 24)—originated with Aeschylus. When Aristotle wrote that the truly happy human being will be “truly good and strong” (ἀληθῶς ἀγαθὸς καὶ τετράγωνος, *Eth. Nic.*, 1100 b 21) and “will beautifully bear misfortune” (τὰς τύχας οἶσει κάλλιστα, 1100 b 20), he reiterated the words of Aeschylus.

And in the famous Aristotelian maxim commonly translated as philosophy is born “from wonder”, ἀπὸ τοῦ θαυμάζειν (*Metaph.*, 983 a 13; 982 b 10–13), according to Severino, the word “wonder” actually indicates our fear (*thaumázein*) of *becoming* (περὶ τῆς . . . γενέσεως, ibid. 982 b 16–17). The original Greek term that we commonly translate as “wonder” is *thaûma*, but *thaûma* indicates first and foremost “terror”, and only then the “wonder” that terror incites—the kind of “wonder” that overwhelms mortals when they face terrifying power. In Hesiod’s *Theogony* (2008), for example, the giant Thaumás is one of the Chthonic deities, the dark, subterranean, terrifying spirits of the underworld.

Aristotle does not say that philosophy is born from wonder, but that philosophy is born from terror.⁹ And this too is a principle he inherits from Aeschylus. This is also why Aristotle argues that we feel *thaûma* when philosophy has not yet shown the “principles” (*archaí*) and “causes” (*aítia*) of becoming. When one does not know their cause (τοῖς μὴ πω τεθεωρηκόσι, 983 a 14–15), things appear as *autómata* (983 a), i.e., as what rises from absolute nothingness, meaningless and separate from everything else and therefore chaotic and unpredictable: “*autómata* are the fearsome and anguishing things” (τῶν θαυμάτων ταυτόματα, 983 a 14).

And *autómata* are fearsome and anguishing because they appear as meaningless, unpredictable, and destined to annihilation, when the light of the *epistéme* does not shine upon them. Thus, Aristotle also inherited from Aeschylus the argument that the *epistéme* saves from *thaûma* because it explains the principles and causes of becoming, thus infusing becoming with meaning, making it predictable, quieting our anguish, and making suffering bearable. Similarly to Plato, then, Aristotle is both deeply indebted to Aeschylus and unaware of his debt.¹⁰

Aeschylus and Nietzsche. In “An Attempt at Self-Criticism” (1886 addition to *The Birth of Tragedy*), Nietzsche writes that Greek tragedy stages the approval of suffering as the expression of the power, health, overflowing wellbeing, fullness of existence, and overabundance of life. Nietzsche argues that suffering is approved in tragedy as necessary for the will to life. There can be no life without suffering; therefore, one must approve suffering to approve life. He reiterates this concept in “What I Owe to the Ancients” (a chapter of *Twilight of the Idols*): “the psychology of the *tragic* poet [is the] Dionysian . . . will to life rejoicing in its own inexhaustibility through the *sacrifice* of its highest types, [and] saying yes to life, even in its strangest and harshest problems” (Nietzsche 2005, p. 228). For Nietzsche, then, you must rejoice in suffering “so that *you yourself may be* the eternal joy in becoming” (ibid.), “that joy that also encompasses the *joy of destruction*” (Nietzsche 1998, p. 81), or better said, the “joy in destruction, extermination, annihilation”—Nietzsche’s original words are “*Lust am Vernichten*”.

To this, Severino replies that Nietzsche sees in tragedy his own psychology. Nietzsche wants to say yes to suffering because, to him, the “eternal joy of becoming” can arise only when “the will to power” (ibid., p. 226) pronounces its thunderous yes to life, including suffering, war, and annihilation. This was not so for Aeschylus. Aeschylus saw becoming, annihilation, and suffering and uttered a thunderous *no!* to them. He *opposed* the Dionysiac. He did not want “an eternal ‘agony of the woman in labour’ so that there can be an eternal joy of creation” (ibid.). Nietzsche misinterpreted Aeschylus just as he reduced Heraclitus to Heraclitism, as if these thinkers only affirmed becoming. Yet, both Aeschylus and Heraclitus affirmed that above becoming stands the *Lógos*, Dike, the Necessity that forever guides all the things that exist in *pólemos*, the *epistémē* that governs Being and saves everything eternally.

Thus, Nietzsche was wrong in opposing Aeschylus and Heraclitus to Plato and Aristotle. When he denounced that “Plato is a coward in the face of reality” (ibid.), because he affirmed the *epistémē* as the remedy to unbearable suffering, he should have denounced Aeschylus in the first place.¹¹ Aeschylus was the first to establish the “metaphysical solace” (Nietzsche 1999a, p. 11) denounced by Nietzsche as the escape of cowards: the escape of metaphysics, religion, science, reason, and morality. Nietzsche should have called Aeschylus the original coward, just as Aeschylus would have surely condemned Nietzsche as a victim of blind hopes and a perpetrator of double injustice due to his unshakable faith in *téchne*.

In *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Nietzsche writes that tragedy offers “the solace that in the ground of things, and despite all changing appearances, life is indestructibly mighty and pleasurable” (Nietzsche 1999b, p. 39). That is, for Nietzsche, the solace is the free creation of *téchne*. When a human being “has gazed with keen eye into the midst of the fearful, destructive havoc of so-called world history, and has seen the cruelty of nature, and is in danger of longing to deny the will as the Buddhist does, art saves him, and through art life saves him—for itself” (ibid., p. 40).

Nietzsche’s is the Dionysiac vision in which art appears as the eternal renovator of the will to power, which saves itself by lying about the nature of existence. The only truth is suffering and annihilation—the *epistémē* is the delusion of cowards—and because the truth is pure negativity, then “knowledge kills action” (ibid.). When human beings “have gazed into the true essence of things” (ibid.), when “they have *acquired knowledge*” (ibid.), they cannot but go mad and wish for death.

Art then saves not by illuminating the truth, but by hiding it: “action requires one to be shrouded in a veil of illusion” (ibid.). Art provides illusions that divert our eyes from “the terrible truth” (ibid.). The sight of the truth is the “moment of supreme danger for the will” (ibid.). In that moment, “*art* approaches as a saving sorceress with the power to heal. Art alone can re-direct those repulsive thoughts about the terrible or absurd nature of existence into representations with which man can live” (ibid.).

This is Nietzsche’s Dionysiac philosophy, but Aeschylus stands in direct opposition to it. As we have seen, for Aeschylus only the truth saves and, accordingly, art is salvific only when it illuminates the truth. The infinite opposition between Aeschylus and Nietzsche is metaphysical-ontological before it is aesthetic. Nietzsche thinks that “humanity achieves the best and highest of which it is capable” (ibid., p. 49) in *téchne*. Aeschylus condemns *téchne* as the illusion that creates double *hýbris* and *adikía*. Their positions could not be more irreconcilable. Nietzsche thought he found an ally in Aeschylus, but Aeschylus was in truth one of his worst enemies.

Conclusion—Aeschylus at the Birth of Philosophy. As we have seen, Anaximander said that “whence things have their origin, there they must also pass away according to necessity [κατὰ τὸ χρεών]; for they must pay penalty and be judged for their injustice, according to the ordinance of time” (Nietzsche 1962, p. 45). Likewise, Heraclitus wrote that (fragment 80): “we must know that war is common to all and strife is justice [*dike éris*], and that all things come into being and pass away through strife and necessity [κατ’ ἔριν καὶ

χρεών]” (Burnet 1920, p. 102; Curd 2011, p. 47; Severino 1989, p. 188). In his tragedies, Aeschylus represented the fundamental principles of Anaximander and Heraclitus and, most importantly, he took philosophy further: he established that the knowledge of the *epistème* is the only true remedy to suffering and he explained why.

For all these reasons, Severino argues that Aeschylus stands at the origin of philosophy. Aeschylus dramatized why suffering becomes unbearable when it ensues from the unknown, unpredictable, and meaningless; why becoming is, in itself, suffering; why becoming entails annihilation; why meaninglessness is what mortals truly cannot bear; why Meaning is the salvific content of the Truth; why *téchne* is blind hope and double *hýbris* that can only lead to double suffering; and finally, why only knowledge of the *epistème*—the incontrovertible truth—can lead mortals to live the temperate life in the best of ways, and to truly bear suffering by leading a just life. The profundity of his thoughts makes Aeschylus one of the great founders of philosophy. This is Severino’s interpretation of the Aeschylean tragedies. I deem this original argument worthy of critical engagement and hope readers think the same.

Funding: This research was funded by Ca’ Foscari University of Venice, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), and the JFK Institute of Freie Universität Berlin.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ The translations presented in what follows serve to exhibit evidence in support of Severino’s interpretation in *Il giogo: alle origini della ragione: Eschilo (The Yoke: At the Origins of Reason: Aeschylus)*, 1989). The following editions were consulted to ensure accuracy in translation: (1) (Eschilo 1951). *Oresteia*. Mondadori; (2) (Severino 1985). *Interpretazione e traduzione dell’Oresteia di Eschilo*. Rizzoli; (3) Tonelli, Angelo. *Eschilo, Sofocle, Euripide: Tutte le tragedie*. Bompiani, 2011; (4) Aeschylus. *The Complete Greek Tragedies: Aeschylus*. University of Chicago Press, 1959; (5) Oates, Whitney J., Eugene O’Neill, Jr. (eds.). *The Complete Greek Drama*. Vol. 1. Random House, 1938; (6) (Eschilo 1994b). *Supplici*. Mondadori (Oates and O’Neill 1938); (7) (Eschilo 1994a). *Prometeo incatenato*. Mondadori; (8) Eschilo. *Le tragedie*. Mondadori, 2003; (9) (Untersteiner 1955) *Le origini della tragedia e del tragico: dalla preistoria a Eschilo*. Einaudi.
- ² For Severino, Ancient Western and Eastern wisdom are irreconcilable because, in the East, becoming was not ontological. Yet he does recognize great similarities. In the *Majjihima Nikaya*, Buddha teaches that everything in this life of becoming is always “impermanent” and “subject to change” (Nanamoli and Bodhi 2005, i, 90) and that this impermanence causes inescapable, unbearable suffering. Likewise, *The Upanishads* (Easwaran 2007) teach that awakening is to see that the true self is the *atman*: the eternal, unmovable, unchangeable which coincides with Brahman, the Whole. Awakening is the experience of eternity, i.e., of the illusoriness of becoming. Suffering is the product of ignorance (*avidya*), and ignorance is the absence of “science” (*vidya*), the knowledge of the true eternal self (similar to *epistème*). Similarly, the *Tao Te Ching* (Lao Tzu 1964) indicates that salvation is the way of the *wu-wei*, “non-doing”. This concept too indicates the recognition of eternity, of necessity, of the illusoriness of becoming. In all these philosophies too, then, becoming means unbearable suffering and salvation resides in the knowledge of eternity.
- ³ Severino does present an argument to defend this thesis, but outlining this too would take us too far out of the main topic at hand.
- ⁴ This reveals an essential connection between Aeschylus and Parmenides who, in “On Nature”, wrote that mortals live in non-truth and that Dike bestows light only upon the few. When Dike greets Parmenides, she speaks the following words: “it is necessary that you shall learn all things, as well the unshaken heart of well-rounded truth as the opinions of mortals in which there is no true belief” (Tarán 1965, p. 9).
- ⁵ As Sophocles would later say in *Antigone*: “many are the terrible things/but nothing is more terrible than human beings” (Sophocles 2000a, verses 332–33).
- ⁶ This recalls the principle established by Silenus (as later recounted in Plutarch’s *Moralia* (1989)) that “the best thing for a man is not to be born, and if already born, to die as soon as possible”. Sophocles too will reiterate it in *The Women of Trachis* and *Oedipus the King*, see (Sophocles 1994, 2000b).
- ⁷ The fragment is as reported in Simplicius’ Commentary on Aristotle’s *Physics* (Simplicius 1982, 24.13–21).
- ⁸ Euripides too will write in *Heracles*: “I think that it is atrocious to die./But I also think that he is a fool, the mortal who/opposes the course of necessity” (Euripides 1998, verses 282–84).
- ⁹ For more on the double meaning of *thauma* see John Llewelyn’s essay “On the Saying that Philosophy Begins in Thaumazein” (Llewelyn 2001), which recognizes that “*thaumazein* is one of those wonderful words that face in opposite directions at one and the same time” (1), and that the term “both opens our eyes wide and plunges us into the dark” (ibid).

- ¹⁰ Aristotle is indebted to Aeschylus even for the language he uses. For example, verse 88 of Aeschylus' *The Suppliants* says that the "beauty" of the truth φλεγγέθει, "flares", "shines", "blazes forth". Likewise, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (1100 b 30) says that the truth διαλάμπει, "shines through", "dawns" (Aristotle 1932a). For a deeper analysis of Plato and Aristotle's relationship to literary truth see (Pitari 2021).
- ¹¹ Nietzsche says that the "scientific method", i.e., the *epistémè*, is "no more than fear of and flight from pessimism", "a subtle defense against truth", "a form of cunning" that originates in "cowardice and insincerity" (Nietzsche 1999a, p. 4) against the "hard, gruesome, malevolent, and problematic" (ibid.) truth of existence.

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