Explaining Evil in Plato, Euripides and Seneca

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Abstract: Plato distinguishes two kinds of explanation: rational explanation of an agent’s practical reasoning leading to the selection of an action as a reasonable means to a good end, and dispositional explanation, given in terms of the agency that is such as to bring about an action of a given sort. Rational explanation seeks completion in the explainer’s recognition of the agent’s end as a good and the agent’s means as reasonable, which confers intelligibility on the action; dispositional explanation is a fallback when the explainer cannot see the agent’s end as good or means as reasonable—as is the case with evil. This claim is illustrated in Euripides’ and Seneca’s Medea plays.

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1. Introduction

Not only is evil hard to explain, it’s hard to understand why evil is so hard to explain. In this paper, I draw on Plato’s discussions of the explanation of action for

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understanding why, but we will appreciate Plato better if we first consider where a
thoroughly-researched and thoughtful contemporary account falls short. Roy
Baumeister’s Evil: Inside Human Violence and Cruelty\(^2\) seeks to explain (1) what makes
it possible for people to knowingly harm others when they need not, and (2) why the
explanation that the perpetrators of such acts are evil people is so popular. In answer to
(1), Baumeister finds that most perpetrators do not see their actions as hurtful to the same
extent as do their victims; while committing hurtful actions, perpetrators focus on the
mechanics of their actions rather than reflecting on their significance\(^3\); many view their
acts as instrumental to other ends such as material prosperity or power\(^4\) or to a great cause
such as national independence.\(^5\) The Socratic character of these explanations for (1) is
striking: perpetrators are in some way ignorant of the badness of their actions as they
commit them.

Baumeister opposes his answer to (1) to what he calls a ‘myth of evil’, i.e., the
explanation of harmful actions by the badness of the agent who did those actions. In
answer to (2), why the myth of evil is such a popular explanation, Baumeister says: ‘the

\(^2\) Roy F Baumeister, Evil: Inside Human Cruelty and Violence (New York: Holt
Paperbacks, 1997).

\(^3\) Baumeister, Evil, 12.

\(^4\) Baumeister, Evil, 99-127.

\(^5\) Baumeister, Evil, 169-202. The disposition Baumeister finds most correlated with
knowing and avoidable harmful actions is high self-esteem, which seems to incite such
actions when it is threatened. Baumeister, Evil, 25, 128-68.
question of evil is a victim’s question\textsuperscript{6}, and the victim of suffering, seeking ‘a meaningful explanation’ for his suffering, settles on ‘evil agent\textsuperscript{7}, an explanation that is simple, that facilitates the victim’s opposing the perpetrator and seeking help, and that preserves the victim’s sense of his own innocence\textsuperscript{8}. In fact, only rarely are acts of knowing and avoidable harm committed by evil agents such as sadists\textsuperscript{9}—usually, they are committed by (1)’s ordinary people who somehow don’t fully register the harm they are causing. The very same thing that makes the knowing perpetration of avoidable harm possible also makes the myth of evil plausible: a gap between perpetrator and victim in their perceptions of the how bad the action is. Baumeister’s account of the difference in the psychologies of victims and perpetrators recalls Nietzsche’s account in \textit{The Genealogy of Morals}\textsuperscript{10} on two points: evil is a theoretical entity posited by its victims (Nietzsche’s ‘slaves’) to make sense of their suffering, and perpetrators (‘masters’) are somewhat oblivious—because indifferent—to the harm they are inflicting.

But the Nietzschean answer to (2), that attribution of harm to wicked agency comes out of the victim’s perspective, cannot be right. Consider a case in which you knowingly and avoidably hurt someone—perhaps you made a cutting remark to a child in a moment of frustration—and so were yourself the perpetrator. What other than your

\textsuperscript{6} Baumeister, \textit{Evil}, 1.

\textsuperscript{7} Baumeister, \textit{Evil}, 2.

\textsuperscript{8} Baumeister, \textit{Evil}, 81-89.

\textsuperscript{9} Baumeister, \textit{Evil}, 17, 60-96.

badness can explain why you committed this hurtful action when you needn’t have? You needn’t abandon your agent’s perspective or take up the victim’s in order to conclude that the hurtful action was due to your cruelty, or insensitivity, or irritability and lack of self-control. The myth of evil seems to be an instance of this kind of explanation, and so to answer Baumeister’s (2), we need to understand how this kind of explanation works. Enter Plato.

In this paper I first (section 2) distinguish two kinds of explanation described and used by Plato: (a) rational explanation of an agent’s practical reasoning leading to the selection of an action as a reasonable means to a good end;\(^{11}\) and (b) dispositional explanation, given in terms of the agency that is such as to bring about an action of a given sort (e.g. the boy broke his brother’s birthday present, a spiteful act, because of his spiteful character). Rational explanation seeks completion in the explainer’s recognition of the agent’s goal as a good, either because the explainer believes that it really is good, or, by the explainer imagining the agent’s perspective from which it appears good. This (apparent) goodness of the goal confers intelligibility on the action taken to procure it if the action really is, or to the extent that the explainer can imagine it appearing to be, a means to the goal. If neither of these is possible, the explainer may default to a dispositional explanation, of which, I’ll argue, the myth of evil is an instance. I then (section 3) examine the extent to which Euripides’ Medea engages in and refrains from rational explanation of Medea’s reasoning to give her actions a limited intelligibility. Finally (section 4), I show how Seneca’s Medea uses dispositional explanations

(representing Medea’s crimes as expressions of her character rather than as responses to appearances of goodness), in order to arouse fear of her and her passions. Medea’s crime is ultimately incomprehensible in Euripides, and Seneca explains it only by appeal to the ‘myth of evil’, but these are not failures on the poets’ parts: as we learn from Plato, when it comes to explaining the knowing choice of the worse, these are our alternatives.

2. Ways of Explaining

In their joint investigation of the nature of love in the Symposium, Diotima and Socrates observe that we love beautiful things, and what we want when we love these beautiful things is to have them. But when Diotima asks, What is the point of loving and having beautiful things?, Socrates is stumped. She nudges him:

Suppose someone changes the question, putting ‘good’ in place of ‘beautiful’, and asks you this: ‘Tell me, Socrates, a lover of good things has a desire; what does he desire? [Socrates answers that the lover wants to have these good things as his own]. . . And what will he have, when the good things he wants have become his own?’ . . . [When Socrates easily answers, ‘He’ll have happiness’, Diotima concludes] ‘There’s no need to ask further, ‘What’s the point of wanting happiness?’ The answer you gave seems to be final. (Symposium 204d-5a)\(^{12}\)

According to Diotima, we understand the point of anyone’s desire once we see how its fulfillment (directly or indirectly) brings them happiness—she does not say whether this is because we share that desire,\(^{13}\) or because its goodness is self-evident. Such an explanation of their desire is final (or complete): once we are able to see it as aimed at

\(^{12}\) Translations of Plato are all from John M. Cooper and D. Hutchinson, eds. The Complete Works of Plato (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997).

\(^{13}\) At Gorgias 481d, Socrates says that our common experiences, such as our experience of love, are what enable us to communicate with one another.
something we too can see as good, we do not need to ask any further ‘why’ questions. That Plato is not interested in the weak claim that as a matter of conceptual truth what we desire appears good to us;\textsuperscript{14} (and so not to be criticized for making ‘good’ tautologous for ‘desired’ or ‘attractive’ in whatever way one’s end has to be in order to be an end\textsuperscript{15}) can be seen in Socrates’ explanation elsewhere, in reply to the claim that the things people desire are sometimes in fact bad, that we desire those things believing them to be good, \textit{because} we desire what really is good (\textit{Meno} 77b-e). While it may be true that the things we desire are in fact bad, it is not explanatory, for what explains our desiring them is their apparent goodness; but neither is apparent goodness by itself explanatory; what explains our desire for apparently good things is our desire for really good things. Evidence of our desire for the real good is our lack of satisfaction with appearances, and our concern to

\textsuperscript{14} cf. G. E. M Anscombe, \textit{Intention} (Oxford, 1957), 75f. But Anscombe goes on to remark, ‘But the good (perhaps falsely) conceived by the agent to characterize the thing [desired] must \textit{really} be one of the many forms of good’ (Anscombe, \textit{Intention}, 76-77) perhaps points in Diotima’s direction. I can’t claim to have explained anything by saying (Anscombe’s example), “She wants a saucer of mud because that appears good to her.” An explanation of this form satisfies only when I have shown how the saucer of mud seems (correctly or incorrectly) to be really good: useful (I can sprout the beans in it), or beautiful (I can complete my shocking still life with it), etc.

find out what is truly good—which Socrates contrasts with our satisfaction with what appears beautiful and just (Republic 505d-e).

A rational explanation renders the action it explains intelligible not only by showing how the action’s aim is or appears to be good, but also by showing how the action is a means to realizing this aim. If it isn’t in fact a means, Socrates argues in the Gorgias, the action isn’t one the agent wants to do (467b-c), and so is involuntary (509d-e). Attributing to ignorance the choice of an action that does not in fact realize the agent’s end (Protagoras 357d-e) accords the chooser and his act a second-rate intelligibility: on the one hand, it allows us to conceive of any putatively irrational motivations in the agent as due to false appearances of goodness (Protagoras 354e-58d, esp. 356d); on the other hand, why the agent has these false appearances now calls for explanation.

In addition explaining by rational explanation, Socrates sometimes explains actions using dispositional explanations, e.g., a temperate act is done by the agency of temperance in the agent, and a foolish act by the agency of foolishness (Protagoras 332a-33a). These explanations are incontrovertible and not very informative. (There is a fuller story to be told here that draws on the parallel between rational explanations and dispositional explanations of actions, on the one hand, and teleological and formal causal explanations of natural phenomena, on the other, but telling this story here would take us too far afield.) At times, Socrates or another speaker translates dispositional explanations into rational terms. For example, in the Republic Socrates describes the just person as such as not to (toioutos . . . mê toioutoi) perform unjust actions (442e-43a). But he subsequently explains why: the reason a just person won’t engage in unjust actions is
that each part of his soul does its own work (443a-b); the work of reason, which rules in
the just person’s soul, includes learning the truth, and the effect of desiring one thing is
that one loses interest in the things that typically cause people to act unjustly, like wealth
and status (485d-e). Again, to explain why a god cannot be the cause of bad but only of
good things, Socrates argues that god is good, that the power of goodness is to benefit,
not to be harmful, thus not to do harm, thus not to cause anything bad (Republic 379d).
But Timaeus replaces this dispositional explanation with an rational one: god (the
demiurge), being wholly good, has no envy, and so no reluctance to make the world as
like himself, that is, as good, as possible (Timaeus 29e-30b). The treatment of god as a
power ‘such as to cause’ only good things is here translated into a craftsman’s technical
motivation: to produce the best product his craft is capable of, given the materials. In
these cases we are initially given dispositional explanations because of our lack of access
to god’s or the just person’s perspective, and then given enough insight into that
perspective for a rational explanation.

On occasion, Plato supplements incomplete rational explanations with a genetic
account. For example, in the Republic Socrates says the oligarchic character steals from
widows and orphans because in dealings with them, his (standing) belief that wealth is
the ultimate good operates unchecked by caution about detection and punishment (554a-
d). The historical explanation Socrates provides for how this man has come to believe
that wealth is the ultimate good--as a young man, he saw his father dashed down from
high office into poverty, exile, or death, and has decided to secure himself by amassing
wealth (553a-c)--may enable us to imagine the narrowing of perspective that would result
in wealth appearing to be a good great enough to commit injustice for; alternatively, it
may be a platitude that the experience of poverty usually leads an uneducated person to overvalue wealth (cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* i.4 1095a22-26).

The idea that rational explanation seeks completeness in the explainer seeing the agent’s end and the action that is a means to it as good sheds light on Plato’s concern that the audience of tragic theater is corrupted by the experience of watching a tragedy (*Republic* x 595a-606d). Although Socrates describes the effects of tragic poetry in terms of the strengthening of the audience’s nonrational soul-parts over reason (606d), he characterizes those parts, the ‘pitying part’, and the ‘lamenting part’ (606a), as having beliefs formed on the basis of appearances (602c-e). If the audience of a play reconstructs the characters’ reasoning to their actions, and if a rational explanation is only complete when we see how the agent’s aim and so action appear good, and tragic actors typically do bad things and have bad outlooks, the audience risks taking on their view of things.\(^{16}\) This might suggest to a Socratic-Platonic playwright that audiences would be

\(^{16}\) The flip side of Plato’s worry is ‘imaginative resistance’, described by Tamar Szabó Gendler, "The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance," *The Journal of Philosophy* 97, (2000): 55-81, as our inability or unwillingness to imagine false moral propositions to be true within the world of a fiction, which seems to call for explanation because we seem to have no corresponding resistance to imagining false factual propositions. Gendler argues that such resistance is due to false moral propositions seeming to us to offer unacceptable ways of looking at the actual world; they seem to do this because the fact of widespread moral disagreement makes it the case that we cannot comfortably restrict moral propositions to their fictional contexts as we can factual propositions (Gendler, ‘Puzzle’, 77-79). It’s worth noting that fiction is not a category we can assume Plato or the
better served by being encouraged to give dispositional explanations of bad characters’ actions, and in section 4 I’ll argue that this is just what Seneca tries to do, but for now, note that saying of a bad action that it was due to some badness in the agent is just giving a dispositional explanation—it is no more or less of a myth than is any dispositional explanation, and it is no more or less informative.

Next, in order to illustrate the power of Plato’s account of the relationship between rational explanation and goodness, I turn to two plays that use rational explanations and dispositional explanations of a paradigmatically evil action. Medea’s murder of her children as revenge against her unfaithful husband is a paradigmatic case of knowingly doing a great and avoidable harm. Euripides’ Medea explains Medea’s action by taking us into the first-personal perspective from which the revenge she seeks to secure appears good to us—as a result threatening to make the murder that is her means also appear good to us unless we break out of the mode of rational explanation... By contrast, Seneca’s Medea explains her action as due to her being of a character such as to murder them—because ruled by her passions—thereby creating in us an aversion to her and her defining passions.

3. Why Does Medea Kill her Children?: Euripides

I begin with a sketch of the myth and cult on which Euripides and Seneca draw. This is because, since the Medea story is not entirely the tragedians’ creation, knowledge of the myth and cult helps us to identify which elements of their Medea plays are tragedians had; and the audience of a tragedy might have imported and exported factual as well as moral propositions drawn from myth in and out of a play.
Euripides’ and Seneca’s particular contributions, and so helps us to identify what Euripides and Seneca are trying to accomplish in their plays. Ancient Corinth had a cult of Medea’s children, which performed funerary rites and consecrated seven boys and seven girls of noble birth to serve in the temple of Hera each year. Different versions of the myth of Medea explain the reason for the existence of this cult in different ways. On some versions, Medea killed her children, on others the Corinthians did. Among the former versions, some say she secretly buried her children in the temple of Hera thinking they would thereby become immortal, but in fact they died; when Jason found out he would not forgive her. On the versions according to which the Corinthians killed Medea’s children, some say it was in an act of rebellion against Medea as queen of Corinth, others that it was in revenge for her murder of their king. A variant of the second version of the myth had Medea leaving her children in Hera’s temple when she fled Corinth, and the Corinthians killing them and then starting a rumor that Medea had killed them herself.\(^\text{17}\) In many versions of the myth (and in many visual depictions), the children were killed at the altar of Hera, in violation of this sacred space. Such transgression would demand a compensatory ritual such as was observed by the Corinthians.

On Euripides’ retelling, Medea has come to Corinth as an exile with her husband Jason after helping him to win the Golden Fleece from her own father, which involved

dismembering her own brother in order to delay her father’s pursuit of Jason. Jason had
brought the fleece back in order to regain his throne from the usurper king of his native
Iolcus, Pelias, but in his absence Pelias had killed Jason’s family and enthroned his own
son; when once again Jason had turned to Medea for help, Medea had tricked Pelias’
daughters into chopping him up and boiling him in the belief that this would restore his
youth. The couple had then fled to Corinth, but here, where the action of Euripides’ play
begins, Jason has left Medea to wed the daughter of the king of Corinth. Medea grieves
for her friendless plight and rages against her traitorous husband, plans and then executes
a plan to kill his bride, and concludes her revenge by killing his (and her own) children,
finally leaving Corinth in Helios’s chariot. In her final speech in the play, Medea speaks
from atop the méchanê, usually reserved for the appearance of gods, establishing the cult
to her children.

Although he does not change the basic tradition that Medea had children who
were killed in some way that requires expiation, Euripides reworks the traditional
material in a way that makes Medea fully responsible for murder: it is Medea (not the
Corinthians) who kills the children, and Medea kills the children deliberately (not in
ignorance that the children will die). Nor is there any act of a god, madness, or willing
victim to mitigate her responsibility as in Euripides’ other plays.

18 As Aristotle acknowledges a poet might, Poetics 1453b20-30

19 Euripides’ plays explore the relationship between agency and responsibility with a
systematicity any philosopher must admire. (On his philosophical outlook, Diogenes
Laertius’ Life of Socrates (II.18) reports that the comedians Mnésilochus, Callicles and
Aristophanes lampooned Euripides for being helped by Socrates to write his plays. On
In arousing sympathy for the barbarian, sorceress, and repeat kin-killer Medea despite the fact that there is no god or madness or factual ignorance to mitigate her responsibility, Euripides’ Medea one-ups Gorgias’ famous Encomium to Helen, which argues that Helen is not to be blamed for her destructive adultery because any of the

Plato’s extensive quotations from Euripides see D. Sansone, "Plato and Euripides." Illinois Classical Studies 21, (1996): 35-67.) There is in each case some bad action (indeed, a superlatively bad action, the killing of a kinsman), and from play to play the circumstances surrounding the commission of that action vary so as to bear on the agent’s responsibility in different ways. This can be seen from even a brief summary of his presentation of the theme of responsibility for bad actions in a few of the extant plays. In the Orestes, Orestes kills his mother because commanded to by Apollo and to avenge his father, and appears on stage afflicted by bouts of insanity as the Furies plague him. In the Heracleidae, Heracles kills his wife and children just after having saved them because Hera sends Madness upon him and he does not know what he is doing. Agavê likewise decapitates her son Pentheus while in a Dionysian frenzy in the Bacchae. In the Alcestis, Admetus lets his wife Alcestis die in his stead; however, she does so voluntarily and on the grounds that their children stand to lose more without a father than without a mother; Admetus is palpably pained at this forced choice. In the Hippolytus, Theseus puts a death-curse on his son Hippolytus because he wrongly believes his wife’s accusation that Hippolytus raped her. These plays introduce mitigating conditions for the kin-killer’s responsibility—ignorance, madness, a god’s command, the victim’s willingness. In this they differ from Medea, for Medea chooses to kill her children, without coercion, in full knowledge of what she is doing, and after long deliberation.
forces that could have led her to it—fate, the gods, persuasion, love—are so powerful that they would have compelled her.\textsuperscript{20} In the Poetics, Aristotle says that tragedies are supposed to arouse pity and fear,\textsuperscript{21} preferably upon some reversal of fortune\textsuperscript{22} from good to bad\textsuperscript{23}, which is due to a fault (hamartian tina) of the character rather than to vice.\textsuperscript{24} In the Rhetoric, Aristotle defines pity as a feeling of pain at an apparent evil which befalls one who does not deserve it and which we might expect to befall ourselves or some friend.\textsuperscript{25} But Medea is vicious, and her misfortune not obviously undeserved.

\textsuperscript{20} Thanks to Stephen Menn for the parallel.

\textsuperscript{21} Poetics 1452a2-3, 1452b32; cf. Plato, Republic X.605a-606d on how tragedies produce pity and self-pity.

\textsuperscript{22} Poetics 1452a21-b2

\textsuperscript{23} Poetics 1452b34-35, 1453a14-17

\textsuperscript{24}Poetics 1453a6-12, 15-16

\textsuperscript{25}Rhetoric 2.8, 1385b11-15. Aristotle also says that tragedy is primarily an imitation of action, and that character matters to a tragedy insofar as it reveals the agent’s choice (1450b2-9). An agent’s action should be the probable or necessary outcome of his character (1454a35-36). The overall action of the play must be one complete whole (1451a31-34) in which the component incidents must be so connected that none can be removed without spoiling the whole. For these incidents to arouse fear and pity, they must be undeserved ills suffered by the neither vicious nor virtuous and be brought on by some fault, but not by vice or depravity (1453a6-17). The tragic deed/fault that moves the action of the play ought to be some harm inflicted on a friend or family-member
Euripides arouses our sympathy for Medea by means of three techniques: (1) he shows how she is like us and we like her; from our similarity, (2) he moves to the justice of her cause; finally, (3) he makes us privy to her deliberations. These are ingredients of rational explanation, full-blown in (3).

(1) First, Euripides has Medea’s Nurse and the Chorus of Corinthian women liken her situation to that of women in general. In the informative stage-setting speech with which the play opens, Medea’s Nurse puts Medea’s current friendless plight into the context of women’s general subordination to and dependence on their husbands’ goodwill:

. . . For her part, she complied
with Jason in all things. There is no greater
security than this in all the world:
when a wife does not oppose her husband.
But now, there’s only hatred. What should be
most loved has been contaminated, stricken
since Jason has betrayed them—his own children
and my lady, for a royal bed. (ll. 16-23/13-19, tr. Aronson-Svarlien)26

The Nurse’s presentation of Medea’s resourceless plight and its resemblance to the plight of any woman who has been mistreated by her husband prepares the audience to respond sympathetically to the storm of grief and rage of Medea’s offstage cries for her own death and the death of her children. Our own knowledge of the plight of women in bad marriages (if we are the male theatre-goers of a Euripidean play, then those of our, or our neighbors’, mothers, daughters, sisters, wives) enables us to fill in the details of occasion (1453b19-37). Although overall, Aristotle’s agenda is prescriptive, I think the claim that tragedy aims to produce pity and fear is descriptive.

26 I give the line numbers of the translation used first, followed by the line numbers in the Greek text of Page 1938.
and justification for such emotions. When the Nurse is shocked at Medea’s feelings
about her children, the Chorus comes in to pity her death wishes:

I heard someone’s voice, I heard someone shout:
the woman from Colchis: poor thing, so unhappy.
Is her grief still unsoftened? (ll. 135-37/131-33)
. . . Do you hear, O Zeus, O sunlight and earth,
this terrible song, the cry
of this unhappy bride?
Poor fool, what a dreadful longing,
this craving for final darkness.
You’ll hasten your death. Why do it?
Don’t pray for an ending.
If your husband reveres a new bed, a new bride,
don’t sharpen your mind against him.
You’ll have Zeus himself supporting
your case. Don’t dissolve in weeping
for the sake of your bedmate. (150-60/148-59)

While the Chorus gently chides Medea, they also console her that Zeus is on her side—
which he must be, because Jason has broken the marriage vows he took before the gods.

If Medea were to step out raving at this point, the audience, primed by Nurse and
Chorus, might pity her grief and anger. But instead, overturning expectations, the Medea
who emerges briefly acknowledges that as a foreigner she must adapt to the city, and then
delivers a thoughtful speech pleading the case of women:

Of all the living creatures with a soul
and mind, we women are the most pathetic.
First of all, we have to buy a husband:
spend vast amounts of money, just to get
a master for our body—to add insult
to injury. And the stakes could not be higher:
will you get a decent husband, or a bad one?
If a woman leaves her husband, then she loses
her virtuous reputation. To refuse him
is just not possible. When a girl leaves home
and comes to live with new ways, different rules,
she has to be a prophet—learn somehow
the art of dealing smoothly with her bedmate.
If we do well, and if our husbands bear
the yoke without discomfort or complaint, our lives are admired. If not, it’s best to die. A man, when he gets fed up with the people at home, can go elsewhere to ease his heart—he has friends, companions his own age. We must rely on just one single soul. They say that we lead safe, untroubled lives at home while they do battle with the spear. They’re wrong. I’d rather take my stand behind a shield three times than go through childbirth once. (ll. 231-54/230-51)

Having made common cause with the women of Corinth as women, when Medea returns to her special situation as a friendless, homeless, foreigner (256-63/253-58) she has our sympathy.

(2) In addition to familiarizing us with Medea, Euripides underscores the justice of her cause. He stages a contest (agon) in which, responding to Medea’s accusation that it is because she gave up everything for him that she is now so destitute, Jason tells her how fortunate she is to be living in Greece:

\[
\ldots \text{you/ received more than you gave, as I shall prove.}
\]
\[
\text{First of all, you live in Hellas now}
\]
\[
\text{instead of your barbarian land. With us,}
\]
\[
\text{you know what justice is, and civil law:}
\]
\[
\text{not mere brute force. (549-52/534-38)}
\]

But these claims are undercut by Medea’s actual circumstances, for Greek justice and law did not enforce Jason’s oaths or prevent the tyrant from banishing Medea from Corinth just so his daughter could take her place as Jason’s bride. The Chorus briskly judges:

Jason, you’ve composed a lovely speech. But I must say, though you may disagree: you have betrayed your wife. You’ve been unjust. (596-98/576-78)

As the play unfolds, not only are Medea’s grief and anger at Jason shown to be justified, but also her desire for revenge. Her desire for revenge begins as a desire that Jason recognize and pity her lonely suffering as do Nurse, Chorus, and audience.
Because he refuses to pity her, she is led to inflict the same condition of friendlessness on him, so that he can finally feel what it’s like to be her. At the end of her first speech Medea asks the Chorus not to betray her confidence if she manages to avenge herself, and in response, their pity for her plight modulates to a judgment that revenge would be justified:

    I’ll do as you ask. You’re justified (endikôs), Medea, in paying your husband back. I’m not surprised you grieve at your misfortunes (271-74/267-68)

No longer chiding Medea to moderate her grief and take comfort in the belief that Zeus will recognize the justice of her cause, the Chorus now supports her claim to act as the agent of justice herself by taking revenge.

    As the play progresses, however, Medea’s atavistic motive for revenge (feel my suffering!) is replaced by a loftier motive, a hero’s concern for reputation and honor.

When Medea tells the Chorus her intention to use the time before banishment that she has won from the king to work vengeance by killing Jason, his bride, and the bride’s father, King of Corinth (372-419/364-409), the Chorus not only approves, but expresses hope that her act will also avenge the honor of all women:

    The tidings will change, and a virtuous reputation will grace my name. The race of women will reap honor (tima), no longer the same of disgraceful rumor. (424-26/418-20)

But Medea’s concern has in the meantime shifted away from her honor as a woman betrayed to the peculiar concern that even if she succeeds in killing the three but is discovered and put to death, her enemies will laugh at her (390-91/383; 817-18/796; 831-833/809-10). It is noteworthy that while a triple murder is by any standards an excessive
repayment for betrayal, the Chorus does not find it excessive as a means to restoring honor.

Many scholars have noted the similarity between Medea’s concerns and the concern with honor of Homeric heroes.\(^{27}\) Perhaps translating her grievances into the language of honor makes it easier for Medea’s male audience to recognize her desire for revenge as a noble end than if she persisted in terms of the indignities especially familiar to women, who, as Jason dismissively puts it, care only about what happens in the bedroom (585-90/569-75). On the other hand, if taking up the heroic stance is a precondition of Medea’s killing her children—and she herself calls her motive to do so, her anger and sense of honor (*thumos*), the source of the greatest miseries for human beings (1104/1080)—then perhaps Medea is a reminder that this supposedly noble motive is supremely destructive.\(^{28}\)

(3) This brings us to Euripides’ third technique, which is to expose to us Medea’s deliberations, from her own point of view, making us highly aware of where we can and can’t see things as she does. The first clear instance of this comes when the Chorus, despite its approval of Medea’s end of revenge, and even of her killing Jason’s bride to achieve it, recoils from her announcement that taking revenge will include killing the children:

Since you have brought this plan to us, and since


\(^{28}\) Helene P Foley, *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy* (Princeton University Press, 2001), argues that the play as a whole presents a critique of the heroic ethic.
I want to help you, and since I support
the laws of mankind, I ask you not to do this.

To which Medea replies

There is no other way. It’s understandable
that you would say this—you’re not the one who’s suffered. (834-38/811-15)

It’s noteworthy, on the one hand, that disapproval of Medea’s murderous plan
does not prevent the Chorus from pitying her, either before or after she kills her children:

I cry for your pain in turn, poor thing; you’re a mother, yet
you will slaughter them, your own children,
for the sake of your bridal bed,
the bed that your husband now shares with someone else (1020-23/996-1001).
Poor thing: after all
you were rock, you were iron:
to reap with your own hand
the crop that you bore (1317-20/1279-81)

The Chorus finally pities her for having repressed her maternal love: poor thing that she
had to turn herself into something inanimate to do this deed. On the other hand, while we
may feel pity for this self-steeling mother, we have by this point lost access to the
perspective from which her actions make sense.

In my view the reason the Chorus and we the audience no longer have access to
her perspective is that we cannot see her action as either good or a necessary or
reasonable means to the good of end of revenge. To see this, we need to set aside the
other ways in which the play alienates us from her perspective: her emerging duplicity—
begging Creon for time to prepare for her children’s journey, securing Aegeus’ oath to
protect her in Athens, recanting her anger before Jason and asking that he plead with his
bride to keep the children—and her final semi-divine appearance. We need, instead, to
focus on the way in which she reveals her plan to the Chorus and thereby to us:

not that I would leave them in this land
for my enemies to outrage—my own children (802-3/781-82)

. . . the next thing I must do
chokes me with sorrow. I will kill the children—
my children. No one on this earth can save them.
I’ll ruin Jason’s household, then I’ll leave
this land, I’ll flee the slaughter of the children
I love so dearly. I will have the nerve
for this unholy deed. You see, my friends,
I will not let my enemies laugh at me.
(811-18/791-97).

How has Medea come to the conclusion that she must she kill her children? Her thought
that the Corinthians would kill her children if they were to remain in Corinth is plausible,
given their role in carrying poisoned gifts to the king’s daughter (and knowledge of the
version of the myth according to which the Corinthians do kill the children might have
primed the audience to accept this thought). But what is the obstacle to her taking the
children with her when she escapes (she momentarily thinks, ‘I’ll take the children with
me when I leave’, 1067/1045; and she takes their bodies to the temple of Hera Akraia for
burial at the end of the play, 1427-29/1378-79)? Still, even if their death is unavoidable,
there is no doubt that she does not kill them in order to spare them death at the hands of
the Corinthians, but in order to hurt Jason (1409/1360, 1419/1370, 1447/1396,
1450/1398) by completing the ruin of his household (cf. 840/817, 1068-69/1046-47,
1409-11/1360-62). But if her end is revenge, why does revenge require that she complete
the ruin of Jason’s household? And if we must complete the ruin of Jason’s household,
why not do so by taking the children away after she has killed his bride and father-in-
law?\textsuperscript{29,30}

Compare another story in which a mother murders a child because of her terrible circumstances: in Toni Morrison’s novel \textit{Beloved}\textsuperscript{31} (based on the so-called ‘Modern Medea’ Margaret Garner, the fugitive slave woman who in 1856 killed her two year-old daughter rather than give her up to slave-catchers) Sethe kills her daughter, because she is ‘mine’ (200), and so she can be ‘safe’ (164) from the degradations of slavery:

Whites might dirty \textit{her} all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing—the part of her that was clean. . . \textit{She} might have to work the slaughterhouse yard, but not her daughter. And no one, nobody on this earth, would list her daughter’s characteristics on the animal side of the paper. (251)

Morrison’s novel shows us both how a mother might murder her child in order to protect her and how shallow are the moral outlooks that criticize—Sethe is too proud (as the townspeople see it); she acted like an animal rather than a human being (as her lover Paul

\textsuperscript{29} Page proposes that the appearance of childless Aegeus on the scene (681ff.) suggests to her not only a refuge (in Athens) but also a terrible enough punishment for Jason (p. xxix)

\textsuperscript{30} But the necessity of her action depends on how we characterize her end. Christopher Gill, \textit{Personality in Greek Epic, Tragedy, and Philosophy: The Self in Dialogue} (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 168-172, suggests we might be able to follow her reasoning further than I have said: Medea, he argues, kills her children in order to repudiate Jason’s conception of his life and plans as no longer connected to hers. The children’s death forever binds Jason and Medea together.

D. puts it)—rather than attempting to understand how the murder was the better choice. When Paul D. says to Sethe, ‘There could have been a way. Some other way.’ (164), we can see there was no other way for Sethe to protect her child from the degradation guaranteed by the return to slavery. Yet in her self-reckoning, Sethe wears herself out trying to justify her act (both to the ghost of her child and to herself); she ultimately achieves peace only by forgetting. In Euripides, however, Medea’s murder of her children is no expression of maternal love; it is opposed by it...

Nowhere do we see the power and limits of rational explanation more clearly than in Medea’s famous monologue as she struggles over the murder of her children, her resolve alternating with the feeling that she cannot go through with it.

The heart goes out of me, women, when I look at my children’s shining eyes. I couldn’t do this. Farewell to the plans I had before. (1064-66/1042-45) . . . But wait—what’s wrong with me? What do I want? To allow my enemies to laugh at me? To let them go unpunished? What I need is the nerve to do it. I was a weakling . . . (1071-73/1049-51) Aah! Oh no, my spirit, please, not that! Don’t do it. Spare the children. (1079-81/1055-57) I cannot look at them. Grief overwhelms me. . . I know that I am working up my nerve for overwhelming evil (kaka), yet my spirit is stronger than (or: is master of) my mind’s deliberations (thumos de kreissôn tôn emôn bouleumatôn): this is the source of mortals’ deepest grief (kakôn) (1100-04/1076-80).

32 I’m grateful to Christia Mercer for the suggestion that I think about Beloved in conjunction with Medea.
Although many readers have supposed these lines to illustrate a conflict between reason and passion that challenges the ‘intellectualist’ Socratic view of choice, the line

33 C. Wildberg, "Socrates and Euripides," in *A Companion to Socrates*, edited by Sara Ahbel-Rappe and Rachana Kamtekar. (Blackwell Companion to Philosophy: John Wiley & Sons, 2006), 21-35, proposes that in *Medea*, Euripides doesn’t so much reject Socratic intellectualism (why should Medea’s say-so be any evidence against Socrates’ thesis?) but rather shows that in Socrates’ world, Jason would get away with perjury because reason would prevent victims from following the impulse of their outrage. This depends on identifying Jason’s self-serving sophistry with Socrates, but I do not see this except at *Republic* X (604b-d), where Socrates gives four reasons to moderate one’s emotional responses to misfortunes: (1) who knows these whether things will turn out good or bad in the end? (2) it won’t make the future any better to take it hard what has happened, (3) human affairs aren’t important, and (4) emotion prevents deliberation from coming into play—and so the right attitude is: accept what happens as due to fortune; don’t waste effort lamenting it; instead, reason out what is best. And tragedy is dangerous because it encourages emotion (-4), treats human affairs as all-important (-3), is not particularly forward-looking (-2), and assumes that things have turned out badly (-1). Socrates’ reasoning here sounds rather like Jason’s when he argues that he is marrying Creon’s daughter for the sake of their children, to obtain advantages for them that they cannot have as the children of exiles; that Medea’s words of hurt and anger are just ‘foolish words’ because spoken against the royal family, which has brought on her banishment (454/450); and that her accusation that he has been unjust and impious to betray her and their marriage vows is just a woman’s obsession with the bedroom (585-92/568-75). She
thumos de kreissôn tôn emôn bouleumatôn is better taken as Medea’s report that in the conflict she is experiencing between two passions, anger and maternal love, her deliberations are in the service of her anger.\textsuperscript{34} For Medea’s deliberations or plans (bouleumatôn) are all about how she will get revenge by killing the children; there are no deliberations at all on the side of sparing them. Earlier, too, when Medea thinks love for

\begin{quote}
would be wiser if she didn’t ‘consider what’s useful painful.’ (623-24/601). Jason’s denial of the validity of Medea’s emotions is importantly different from that of the Nurse and the Chorus, who also call upon Medea to moderate her response and think of the consequences. Perhaps they would agree on what, all things considered, would be the most prudent, forward-looking, thing for Medea to do. But while the Nurse and Chorus recognize that forbearance, or silence, require her to set aside her legitimate grievances, Jason never acknowledges these grievances—his prudence involves ignoring their existence.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{34} This is how it is taken by H. Diller, "THUMOS DE KREISSON TON EMON BOULEUMATON," Hermes 94, (1966): 267-75, and before him, apparently, the Stoic philosopher Chrysippus. For the latter, see Christopher Gill, "Did Chrysippus Understand Medea?" Phronesis 28, (1983): 136-149. Gill’s source is Galen, who is criticizing Chrysippus, for he thinks that as a Stoic, Chrysippus must believe that emotions are the judgments of a simple rational soul, in which case, their irrationality must consist in their non-conformity to right reason, viz., they must be mistakes; Galen also thinks Chrysippus gets Medea wrong, for Medea is describing a conflict between two opposing forces in the soul, reason and anger.
her children will prevent her from killing them, she bids her plans (bouleumata) farewell (1066/1045, 1070/1048).

Medea’s anger and her love may be seen ‘from the inside’ as successive contradictory appearances of the great evils, of Medea’s humiliation if Jason’s betrayal goes unpunished on the one hand, and of her killing her children, on the other. But seeing these evils (or the corresponding goods, revenge, on the one hand, and her children alive, on the other) does not confer intelligibility on her preference for dead children over being laughed at by her enemies, and so on her murder. As long as we can

Christopher Gill, "Two Monologues of Self-Division: Euripides, Medea 1021-80 and Seneca, Medea 893-977." In Homo Viator: Classical Essays for John Bramble, edited by Michael Whitby, Philip Hardie and Mary Whitby (Bristol/Wauconda: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 25-37, describes Medea’s monologue as going through four stages: from (1) complex and conflicted self emotionally engaged and in dialogue with the children who are to be affected by her decision (1042-60/1021-39) to (2) maternal self disowning her avenging motives to the Chorus (1061-70/1040-48) to (3) avenging self rejecting the maternal self as weak (1071-91/1049-55) to (4) complex, conflicted, regretful self once more (1093-99/1069-76). Gill presents all this as evidence that we do better to think of Medea’s conflict in terms of possible selves rather than thinking of it in terms of conflicting motivations (This is also the claim of Gill, ‘Chrysippus’), but I think this misdescribes the character of the deliberation, as if it is about what Medea wants to identify with or be, rather than about she what is to do. We don’t deliberate in terms of possible selves (usually), and neither does Medea. Euripides is (as far as possible) giving us the perspective(s) that informs her choice of an action.
see this act as neither good nor necessary, we are with the Chorus in having to describe Medea as having become rock and iron. Consider her last speech before going offstage to kill the children:

My friends, it is decided: as soon as possible
I must kill my children and leave this land
before I give my enemies a chance
to slaughter them with a hand that’s moved by hatred.
They must die anyway, and since they must,
I will kill them. I’m the one who bore them.
Arm yourself, my heart. Why am I waiting
to do this terrible, necessary crime?
Unhappy hand, act now. Take up the sword,
just take it; approach the starting post of pain
to last a lifetime; do not weaken, don’t
remember that you love your children dearly,
that you gave them life. For one short day
forget your children. Afterward, you’ll grieve.
For even if you kill them, they were yours;
you loved them. I’m a woman cursed by fortune. (1260-75/1236-50)

Recall Baumeister’s observation that perpetrators of violence often do not think of their actions in their full significance, but instead concentrate on the technical details (in one of his examples, soldiers shooting children concentrate on the head as a target to hit). In her monologue, Medea instructs her hand to be the agent of the killing, as if to remove herself from the crime. Twice in the speech she reminds herself that the children are hers, as if bearing them and loving them gives her a right to kill them, or as if killing them confirms what bearing them and loving them meant: that they are hers (and not Jason’s?). She also instructs herself to forget her children. Earlier, when the Chorus pleads with her that she will make herself miserable by killing her children, she silences them, ‘Let it go. Let there be no more words until it’s done.’ (842/819). But Medea’s direction of her own attention away from the significance of her killing her children, has
the effect of reminding us of what we must set aside if we are to see her decision as she sees it. It is not her desire to kill her children that makes Medea’s perspective inaccessible in her decision (as the case of Beloved shows), but rather that her decision is the conclusion of deliberation that favors the worse over the better. Apparently it appeared better to Medea to kill the children rather than to leave with them, because that alone would leave Jason childless and not only deprived of the children’s presence in his life, and only then would her enemies be forced to say, “Medea won”. While we can say this about Medea’s appearances, those appearances seem neither intelligible nor imaginable.

4. Why Does Medea Kill Her Children?: Seneca

Unlike Euripides, Seneca makes Medea, and the passions that drive her, objects of fear. And the lesson, consonant with Seneca’s Stoicism, seems to be: whoever you are, having seen how the passions make people commit acts of unspeakable evil, eradicate your passions! The Stoics see the passions as impulses following from false beliefs about the goodness or badness of things that are in fact indifferent to happiness. More precisely, an emotional episode involves two dispositional beliefs—(1) that such-and-such is good or evil, and (2) that it is appropriate to respond with desire or elation, or fear or pain, if a good or evil is in prospect or is present—and one occurrent belief (3)—that such-and-such is in prospect or is present. However, Seneca does not conclude from a passion’s being due to false beliefs that efforts to eradicate the passion must take the form of argument designed to change the beliefs. In On Anger, Seneca defines anger, denies its

naturalness and usefulness and place in a virtuous life, recommends its total eradication, and then proposes techniques for eradication: because anger is so ubiquitous and destructive every device should be used to push it out; depending on a person’s character and quality of mind, this might be entreaty or fear (rather than argument) (III.1, 39, cf. II.14, 5). A tragedy that arouses horror may be an appropriate first intervention in the case of the unapologetically angry or in the case of those who believe that to be virtuous one must have a disposition to grow angry in certain circumstances. In any case, the end of arousing horror at the passions, far from requiring sympathetic identification with Medea, would be undermined by identification; what is needed instead is a convincing causal connection between Medea’s passion-prone character and her horrifying actions.

Let us, then, turn to Seneca’s techniques for producing fear without sympathy. Seneca’s Medea opens with Medea herself (rather than a sympathetic Nurse or Chorus), alone, invoking the gods and Furies, recalling her descent from the Sun, fantasizing in some detail about the ruination of Jason through the murder of his bride and her father, and spurring herself on to evil deeds given her barbarian nature.

Kill his new partner, kill his new father,
snap all the royal family’s living shoots.
For the groom, may something worse remain.
I want him to live: to wander through
cities as yet unknown, his confidence,
his livelihood destroyed; a refugee,
frightened and with nowhere to call home . .
I pray he’ll wish we were together still (17-24/17-23, tr. Ahl)\textsuperscript{38}

. . . Sol, the Sun himself, 
sowed my family’s seed . . . Shining father, give me control, 
let me drive the coupled power of fire. 
Then Corinth’s Isthmus, double boundaries
of land dividing seas, delaying ships
could be consumed with flames, the twin seas joined. (30-38/28-36)
Take on your native mind, . . .
that hates all foreigners.
Whatever criminal acts the Crimea, 
Rioni River, and Black Sea have seen
the Isthmus soon will see. (44-48/43-45)

In Euripides, Medea’s first wishes are for her own death; they express her grief and
together with her we explore the reasons for that grief before the desire for revenge ever
comes up. It is only when her desire for revenge coalesces into a plan to kill her children
to ruin her husband that we recoil. In Seneca we see her anger first, and it comes from
such a height and with such purposive focus that it occasions fear rather than sympathy.

Medea even expresses her grievances against Jason in a way that alienates us:

How did Jason
find the power to do it? First he took
my father and the country that we ruled
away from me . . .
I have earned better than this.
He’s seen me mastering the energy
of fire and water, yet he despises me.
Can he suppose my power to inflict
evil is totally burned to ash? (116-22/117-22)

While Euripides’ Medea is aggrieved at Jason’s injustice--betrayal, broken promises, and ingratitude, circumstances to which we can all relate, and in which we feel the desire for revenge is justified--Seneca’s Medea focuses on Jason’s non-recognition of who she is. At the end of the play, as she kills their second child before his eyes, she asks Jason, ‘Ungrateful Jason, do you now know your wife?’ (1021). It is not in virtue of their oaths, or their history, or her dependence on him, that Jason should not leave her, but in virtue of her status (in Baumeister’s terms, she is a person of high self-esteem whose self-esteem is threatened.) This sets her apart not only from Jason, but also from her audience.

Whereas Euripides’ Medea seeks revenge to avoid humiliation and restore her standing, Seneca’s Medea seeks an act of revenge that will bring her glory, featuring in the tales told of her life (53). Once she has decided to kill Jason’s bride, she brags

\[
\ldots\text{this day}
\]
\[
\text{will brand its face of fire upon the world}
\]
\[
\text{so man will never lose its memory.}
\]
\[
\text{I shall attack the gods, and I shall shake}
\]
\[
\text{the elements. (ll. 424-27/423-24)}
\]

Seneca’s Medea is so alien that her own Nurse, whose loyalty to Medea manifests in counseling silence and restraint until Medea is in a position to avenge herself (150-57/150-54), fears her:

Like a woman
who has taken god into herself . . .
she cannot
dam the madness, dashing to and fro,
a wild beast in her movements . . .
Where will the crushing force of her intent strike? . . .
Like the sea her madness swells. . .
What she turns over in her mind will be
no ordinary deed; she will surpass
her median of crime . . .
Some enormity looms over us,
some bestial act of inhumanity... 
I hope to god I’m wrong. (381-95/382-96)

In her mounting fear as Medea begins to prepare the poison for the gifts she will send to
Jason’s bride, the Nurse describes Medea’s thoughts in terms of the growth and violence
of wild animals and monsters:

My soul quivers in terror; a hideous act
of savagery impends. Some monstrous thought
has taken root and grows, her anguish fuels
itself and gathers its spent violence.
I’ve often seen her rage, claw down the sky,
attack its deities; yet now Medea
readies for us some huger spectacle... (670-75/670-75)

Creon himself wants to keep Medea at bay, seeing her as ‘beastlike, aggressive,
threatening’ (188/186-87). And the Chorus compares her to flooding rivers, fires,
windstorms (580/579ff.) Rather than familiarizing us with the inside of Medea’s
emotions and plans, Seneca treats Medea’s actions like natural disasters caused by
passions that are uncontrollable forces of nature.

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39 Euripides’ Medea too is fearsome and frequently characterized in non-human terms:
she glares like a bull, says the Nurse (92); she is like a stone or the sea (35/28) or a
lightning cloud (109/107); Jason likens her to a lion and the monster Scylla (1390/1342).
But that characterization is offset by her own perspective from the inside, which
sometimes she need only mention to remind us of how much we have sympathized with
her: when she says to the messenger who is surprised at her pleasure upon hearing of the
King and his daughter’s deaths, ‘I could tell my side’ [1148/1132-33], we could tell it
too).
But after all what drives this very alien force, what is destructive and frightening in Medea, is also very familiar: we are all prey to anger. And anger is not the only cause of destruction, as Medea observes: in the past she killed for love rather than anger (135/135-36). Whereas Euripides pits Medea’s love and anger against each other, Seneca’s chorus brings them together:

Medea does not know how to rein in love or anger. Now love and anger couple in common cause (864-5/866-69). 40

Seneca represents Medea not only as having excessive passions, but also as defending their excess. When her Nurse tells her to refrain from shouting out her anger when she is so powerless, she retorts,

40 Martha C. Nussbaum, "Serpents in the Soul," In The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics, (Princeton University Press, 2013), 439-83, argues that in Medea Seneca confronts the Stoic view of the passions—they are due to overvaluing externals and they make us out of control—with the Aristotelian view that externals do make a difference to our happiness so that the (moderate) passions are appropriate responses to our gaining or having or lacking or losing externals. I do not see the Aristotelian position represented in the play; I do not see the play as engaged in argument against a philosophical alternative at all, or even as presenting the passions as due to overvaluing externals. In any case, while Nussbaum’s account of how genuinely valuing externals and then losing them makes sense of the love-grief-anger progression in many cases, it leaves out facts about Medea that Seneca is at pains to emphasize, like the fact that she initially murdered her brother and Pelias for love.
Your pain has little bite if it retains
the power to reason and conceal itself.
Great sufferings do not lurk in disguise.
It is a pleasure to retaliate (155-57/155-57)

Medea’s retort gives voice to the second dispositional judgment that the Stoics say is involved in an emotion in addition to the false judgment that some indifferent is bad: the judgment that it is appropriate to respond with this excessive emotion to one’s situation.\(^{41}\)

In *On Anger* Seneca describes savagery, a condition in which the agent actually takes pleasure in causing harm, as a result of anger having been indulged and sated (II.5). It is perhaps this consequence that makes him deem it worse to praise a crime than to commit it (III.14).

Seneca uses the Stoic idea that an episode of an emotion includes approval of that emotional response to represent Medea as shaping her character by her acts. Thus when Medea disdains her Nurse’s admonitions to suffer in silence, or run to safety, she promises that by her vengeance, ‘I shall become Medea’ (172); later, when she hears that her poison has succeeded in killing Jason’s bride and the king, she says,

Now I’m indeed Medea. My genius
has grown with all these evils (*malis*) I have done.
I’m pleased I killed my brother, took his head,
and sliced his limbs. I’m glad I tore away
my father’s secret source of potency,
I’m glad I armed old Pelias’ daughters,
had him killed (909-14/910-914)

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\(^{41}\) Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* III.61: But when our belief in the seriousness of our misfortune is combined with the belief that it is right, and an appropriate and proper thing, to be upset by what has happened, then, and not before, there comes about that deep emotion which is distress.
Never regretting her crimes for a moment, Medea instead sees them as preparing her to commit further crimes, making her who she is.

The idea that Medea is making herself by her passions and actions makes sense of Seneca’s version of Medea’s monologue (counterpart to the one that revealed the conflict between her maternal love and anger in Euripides). It might seem that in such a monologue, Seneca cannot but show how things seem from Medea’s point of view; however, the monologue shows Seneca to be up to something quite different.

. . . you do withdraw, my soul. Why? Your attack has just paid off. Follow it up! You take delight in such a tiny fraction of your vengeance. If it’s enough for you, demented mind, that Jason not remarry, then you still love him. Try to find some novel way to penalize him, and prepare yourself. Your sense of sin, of shame, must be expelled; it is what must get out, withdraw, not you . . . Aggression, which has penetrated deep, lurks at the bottom of your heart. Suction it out, be violent, (895-906/895-904) . . . Children, once mine, you pay the penalty for father’s crimes (sceleribus). My heart has missed a beat, my limbs are cold. I feel a shiver in my breast. Anger in me has gone, the wife in me has been expelled, the mother has returned. How can I shed the blood of my children, my own flesh? (925-29/925-30) . . . Mind, you vacillate so much. Why do tears dampen your face, why does anger tear you one way now and love another? Passion’s fierce swell controls me but cannot decide which way to toss me. It is as if I were the sea. . . (936-40/937-943)

42 Instead, she implicates others in her crimes: Jason, Creon, and the Greeks in general have benefited from them (225, 499) and so are not innocent either.
In these lines, Medea describes her passions as forces and captures their identity by their phenomenology: her soul shrinks (at the prospect of killing the children) (895), and so she tells it to suction out her aggression; when ‘the mother returns’, Medea’s heart skips a beat, her limbs are cold, she shivers (926); finally, she says passion tosses her about as if she were the sea (938/941). These phenomenological descriptions enable us to identify feelings like anger and dread (as much in Medea as in ourselves)—from the inside, but

43 Gill, ‘Two Monologues’, 25-37, observes that Seneca’s Medea is engaged in self-incitement in the monologue, and that Seneca’s Medea is concerned more with her character and her past than with Jason and her children. These are significantly different from Euripides’ Medea. However, the difference Gill sees with Euripides’ Medea is that she engages in genuine dialogue and is emotionally engaged while Seneca’s Medea engages in soliloquy and is solipsistic; further, while both are detached from themselves as a result of their conflict, Euripides’ Medea’s conflict is between two passions whereas Seneca’s Medea’s is a choice between moral and immoral responses to her situation—with her plan of infanticide resolving the conflict by being at once both an evil done for evil’s sake and self-punishment. I do not believe Seneca’s Medea chooses evil for evil’s sake, unless we understand that claim as ‘that’s the sort of thing evil people do.’

Christopher Gill, The Structured Self in Hellenistic and Roman Thought (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 421-35, cf 248, furthers his account by arguing that Seneca uses Medea to show how surrender to passion, an inherently unstable state, results in psychological disintegration, even madness; an important element of this treatment is the judgment of appropriateness of the passion.
without in any way sympathizing with their cognitive content. Describing the passions in terms of their occasions and objects, would have introduced questions about whether the passions were correct or incorrect assessments of the evils Medea suffers. Identifying them by their feel, and then describing the magnitude of their destructive effects, on the other hand, neatly side-steps that issue. Medea horrifies us, and so should the passions that make her who she is.

Seneca’s Medea explains Medea’s actions as the product of her passions and her character; following this explanation we may recognize the passion-action connections to which her story points, and we may recognize them even in ourselves. What the work discourages—and I hope to have shown, Seneca has every reason to intend this—is the adoption of Medea’s point of view and thus the exercise in seeing things as good or evil as Medea must have done. Unlike Euripides, Seneca does not bring us face to face with the incomprehensibility of a knowing choice of the worse over the better, because comprehension was never his goal.

5. Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that Baumeister’s two questions (1) what explains the commission of evil actions? and (2) why is the explanation, ‘evil agent’, so popular? receive a deep and compelling answer from Plato’s reflections on what is involved in explaining actions in the first place. The connection Plato identifies between complete rational explanation and the appearance of goodness to the explainer of both end and means has the consequence that actions the explainer judges to be chosen in full knowledge of their relative badness and avoidability will turn out to be unintelligible, and
will call for some other kind of explanation, such as that it is the product of an evil disposition, a disposition such as to cause evil actions. I have argued that these constraints on explanation are reflected in the two distinct attempts, in the plays of Euripides and Seneca, to explain Medea’s paradigmatically evil act of murdering her children for the sake of revenge.
Bibliography


