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ON MAKING SENSE OF ONESELF: REFLECTIONS ON JULIAN BARNES'S
THE SENSE OF AN ENDING

Abstract. Life can be awful. For this to be the stuff of tragedy and not farce we require a capacity to be more than we presently are. Tony Webster, the narrator of Julian Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending*, poses a challenge to this commitment of ethics in his commentary on the instability of memory. But Barnes leads us past this difficulty by showing us that Tony's real problem is his inability to make sense of himself—a failure of self-knowledge. Tony's past is tangled up with others he can scarcely see as people. Let us hope we can do better.

I

What is tragic about human life? I want to ask this question first in order to see how the answer might bear on the question of how we might go about living well. For tragedy seems to represent the negation of the possibility of living well. In a particular human life, tragedy at minimum mars and perhaps even destroys whatever goodness might have been achieved—practical success, reputation, and the possession of a good character alike. If human life itself is inevitably tragic, then perhaps we are fooling ourselves by adhering to a certain kind of moral philosophy, one dedicated to showing that such good lives are possible not only for the saint or the fakir but also within what we take to be ordinary circumstances and the ambit of ordinary choices, even if extraordinary effort or a goodly amount of luck is also required. But addressing the question of tragedy is not merely a propaedeutic to moral philosophy, but rather itself constitutes a certain beginning of it, a path into considering what we take to be valuable and how we are to go about achieving it.

There are some obvious candidates for what makes human life universally tragic: our mortality, of course, and, near enough to it, our vulnerability to disease and decay; our dependence on and need for one another and the suffering—grief, hatred, guilt—that inevitably comes of it; our folly, the distinct ability we possess to act against our own interests. Each of these candidates can be described in a perfectly naturalistic way, and I am quite consciously excluding any notion of a Fall that provides a metaphysico-historical grounding for these aspects of human frailty, though we ought to share with those who propose such notions the desire to have some explanation for these seemingly intrinsic features of our lives.

It will help in evaluating these candidates to think, for a moment, like the ancient Greeks: unlike both beasts and gods, they thought, we alone have the capacity for happiness—that is, for becoming more than we presently are. What a farce it would be, then, if we were uniquely unsuited for it. I say “farce” and not “tragedy” because with the candidates for the source of human failure I have so far mentioned, we are not yet in the space of tragedy, which is sublime, but only teetering on the edge of the absurd, confronting a profoundly unfunny cosmic joke.

Let us return to the Greek thought, then. For here there is something sublime: we alone have the capacity for becoming more than we presently are. This seems quite compatible with mortality, with vulnerability, with need, and with folly. It may even be compatible with a certain kind of futility.

A more determinate case will help to show why tragedy depends on this balancing act between the distinctively human phenomena of aspiration and abject failure. Consider Sophocles’s *Women of Trachis*.¹ At the play’s end, we see the great warrior and tamer of the wilderness Heracles dying on a litter, brought low, in his eyes, by his jealous wife Deianeira. No, the play teaches us in its stunning first half, she is not jealous, only desirous of reunion with her beloved, once-loving husband. But she errs not in passion but in calm calculation; the cloak she sends him to win him back is smeared not with a love philter but with

poison, and the centaur Nessus thereby achieves from the grave his vengeance on the warrior who slew him. Deianeira kills herself in horror, leaving Heracles to rage as he slowly dies, ashamed of his own weakness and his total incapacity. In the play, the logic of action is horribly perverted: the dead achieve a success they cannot enjoy; the living suffer inexplicably from what they cannot foresee.

In the old story, Heracles achieves his apotheosis on the funeral pyre, at the last obtaining the glory he deserves.² Sophocles is too good a tragedian to give us such satisfaction. All we see in the long final scene is Heracles overcoming his blind fury and maddening pain to tell his son Hyllus how he wishes to die. In the play's last lines, Hyllus tells his companions that the gods should be ashamed of their disregard for human suffering and so asks them to have compassion and fellow feeling in the face of this divine indifference. The reader of the play can easily imagine the actor playing Hyllus speaking these words bitterly, but this would, I suspect, risk lowering the play's achievement to the level of farce. For we would be left to think only what a cruel joke has been perpetrated on Hyllus, on Heracles and Deianeira, and generally, in less grand and awful ways, on each of us. And all this is the work of a divine creation? Tosh. But in Hyllus's anger and vulnerability, there is yet a kind of reverence: he concludes by saying, "And nothing in this is not Zeus." These are words of recrimination, clearly, but also words of awe. How much room there is between "All this is god's work" and "None of this, the world as it is, could possibly be god's work"!

But in either case, we strive. For without the gods' help we must act—whether they are merely indifferent or nonexistent or even if there is some higher purpose to which our lives are put that we cannot understand. In the end, Heracles and Deianeira both choose to act in accordance with who they are. Heracles overcomes his infirmity to dispose of his final moments as he sees fit, and likewise Deianeira rejects the fetters of convention and duty to kill herself when her life is, in her view, no longer worth living. That is how these characters manage to be tragic and not absurd or farcical, even in the face of the principles

of action breaking down. What is tragic about them is how events constrain and determine their actions, how the consequences of their actions outstrip their intentions, and how suffering yields them no recompense. We, too, are bound to act in the face of our intrinsic finitude, our personal limitations, and circumstances not of our making. But on this understanding of tragedy, the conditions of human existence still offer up the hope of acting purposively, and of making sense of oneself in so acting. Another, blunter way of putting the point: our fight with fate had better be in some sense a fair one, even if we always lose in the end. Equally, there must be space for becoming more than we are, despite the “changes and chances of this fleeting world.”

II

That is why, though I must postpone the explanation, I have never been so troubled by a book as I am by Julian Barnes’s novel *The Sense of an Ending*. I chose the slim volume as a distraction from thinking about the viability of the neo-Aristotelian program in ethics. I made a mistake. I’ll now try to quickly summarize as much of the plot as I think will be helpful before trying to explain my mistake in the remainder of this essay.

Tony Webster remembers meeting Adrian Finn at school, a new boy who joins his philosophically minded circle of friends despite being cleverer and more serious than they are. While at school, a previously undistinguished boy, Robson, kills himself because he impregnated his girlfriend. The boys take note, and wonder how to make sense of Robson’s story in the absence of more information. Adrian’s cleverness takes him to Cambridge, while Tony goes to Bristol. There, Tony continues to lead an unexceptional life, academically and otherwise, though he goes out for a time with Veronica Ford, who remains a mystery to him and at times seems to disdain him. Tony spends a particularly uncomfortable weekend with Veronica’s family in the countryside of Kent, where Mrs. Ford cautions him against letting her daughter get away with too much. Things begin to fall apart, and after meeting Tony’s friends in London,

Veronica ends up with Adrian, who writes to Tony to explain. Tony responds with a vitriolic and abusive letter casting imprecations on them and an imagined child. After wandering America for a time and finding a carefree romance, he returns home to find out that Adrian has committed suicide, apparently on the basis of his rational convictions.

After a quiet career and a peaceful marriage, a child, and an equally peaceful divorce (his wife Margaret leaves him for a restaurateur), Tony is now an old man. His unremarkable retirement is interrupted by a letter from Veronica's mother leaving him £500 on her death, which he discovers, to his great surprise, was formerly attached to Adrian's diary. The diary is now in Veronica's possession, and after a long and indirect campaign of irritation, Tony is sent a single page of the diary, with some of Adrian's abstract reasoning in numbered propositions on it, tantalizingly ending "So, for instance, if Tony," but with no further insight into why he killed himself. When Tony finally secures a meeting, Veronica tells him she's burned the diary and instead gives him the abusive letter he once wrote, which has the intended effect of appalling him.

Undeterred, Tony continues his campaign, and after a further uninformative lunch meeting is taken by Veronica to a remote part of north London, where from her car they quietly observe a group of disabled adults in community care. The group recognizes Veronica when she goes to greet them, and though Tony remains confused, she offers nothing more. He then takes it upon himself to discover on his own who these people are, waiting for them each week in the nearby pub and shop. When he next sees them and tries talking to them, he finally realizes: one of them is Adrian's son. Tony infers that Veronica must be his mother and that this child and not any rational conviction must have precipitated Adrian's suicide. Tony finds some relief in the thought that Adrian, who in his life and death served as a reminder of the littleness of Tony's own life, is no more than another Robson. He writes to apologize to Veronica, who replies only that he still doesn't get it.

Tony nevertheless feels that he has finally found some purpose in his life and returns frequently to the pub. When he sees the community care group again and tries to make contact, Adrian's son and namesake is clearly distraught. Their carer explains to Tony that Veronica is not this Adrian's mother but his sister, and that his feelings are a result of the recent death of his mother – that is, Mrs. Ford. With the knowledge of this affair and its consequence, bits of the diary page make more sense to Tony, as well as why Mrs. Ford had the diary in the first place. Nevertheless, in reflecting on what else he might have done wrong now that the possibility of change is past, he is left only with the unsettled thoughts that in life there is accumulation and unrest.

III

There is nothing especially troubling in the content of Tony's existential musings, either at the end of the novel when the mystery of Veronica is unlocked for him or near the beginning when he recalls discussing Robson's suicide with his school friends. His evident if perhaps transient horror at outward events seems justified, of course: Veronica, Mrs. Ford, Adrian, and Adrian's son have all suffered mightily. Even if Adrian's suicide must now be understood not purely as a rational departure from an unchosen life but as an act of desperation, there is nothing farcical about the decision and its circumstances. Rather, it is Tony's fantasy that he can understand his and others' lives in terms of the historiographical debates he used to have at school that seems to descend into absurdity. The novel's final words, "There is great unrest," are the words of the dullard in their history class who cannot remember anything more to say about the reign of Henry VIII. The suggestion is that there is nothing more to be said; nothing, at least, that is true or illuminating. But that is difficult to take seriously, especially given the narrative coherence of the plot itself, which Tony himself has retold. Indeed, the story both uncovers and makes sense of Tony's confusions and misguided assumptions.

Barnes is, of course, seriously interested in memory and its unreliability, a theme explored in many of his novels and perhaps especially vividly in his meditation-memoir on aging and the fear of death, *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*. We lose hold of what happened, who we were, what it was like to be in a particular moment; and we supplement, build narratives from the materials we have to hand, accommodate sudden upwellings by neatly assigning predetermined categories. From my casual survey of reviews of *The Sense of an Ending*, it seems that readers have generally taken Barnes to here be working out this same theme in a particularly vivid way.³ But that is, I think, to take Tony's schoolboy musings about memory and history, his own commentary on how he is unreliable, as we all are (one more feature of his dedication to being unremarkable), too much at face value.

Instead, it seems to me that the novel poses a subtler and more profound challenge, and that in it lies the possibility of an understanding of the tragedy of human life that is different from those I surveyed earlier. And that challenge is in the difficulty of a particular kind of self-knowledge, which I have glossed in my title in order to bring out the way in which that can be understood as a process and not an achievement, as "making sense of oneself." Barnes's title already suggests the topic, since it is borrowed from Frank Kermode's famous book of the same name, a set of lectures that attempt the "feat of making sense of the ways we try to make sense of our lives."⁴

First, something about this locution: notice the grammatical and logical difference between the expressions "making sense to oneself" and "making sense of oneself." They suggest, I believe, two different forms of self-understanding. "My making sense to myself" suggests a kind of reflexive and synchronic relation, a psychic state that requires that I understand what it is that I am up to. I can, in this particular moment, endorse and know what I am doing or striving for, and thereby make sense to myself. "My making sense of myself," by contrast, suggests a more reflective and active posture and an intrinsically diachronic phenomenon, one that is perhaps parasitic on making or not making sense to

myself at various other times. I look back—I wonder—at what made sense *to me* at the time. Does it make sense now? Or, less solipsistically, do I make sense *to others*? Does this narrative add up? Am I fooling myself now? Was I fooling myself then? Can I make sense of all this that is mine?

Each of these two types of making sense of oneself or self-understanding corresponds to a type of alienation. Alienation can arise from my not making sense *to myself*, from a practical disruption of some kind where I am drawn up short and must attend to something I do not immediately recognize from my ordinary practical standpoint.⁵ Alternately, it can arise from not making sense *of myself*, where I cannot understand what it is that I have been up to all this time, where I lose sight of my ordinary practical standpoint itself, for it is this that is ultimately called into question. The first kind of self-knowledge or self-understanding is needed just in order for me to act in a coherent way, to have what I do guided by a dim but ever-present sense of what is good or worth pursuing, or to do what I believe I have to do in a given circumstance. There is not much more to this than simply acting in the way that we understand adult humans to act. It is what one needs to get by in a practical sense. Yet it presupposes a certain freedom from disruption nevertheless.

By contrast, the second kind of disruption or alienation that stems from not being able to make sense *of myself* is much harder to achieve, and indeed is, unlike the first, a genuine achievement. It is plausible to think that there are certain narrative junctures at which it is natural to reflect, as I described above, on whether I can make sense of myself: traumatic events, passage from one culturally demarcated life stage to another, and in approaching death. We can act coherently, decide coherently, strive coherently, either without reflecting in this way, or, even when we do so reflect, without coming to the right answers, or to any answer at all. Nothing about practical life itself requires such answers, or, to put it more pointedly, requires that we not be deluded about the urgency of the question in our particular case. Yet such self-understanding seems just as

requisite for a certain diachronic coherence; that is to say, for our lives to bear a narrative imprint that is ours.

IV

With the distinction between these two forms of self-understanding in mind, we can reframe slightly the problem posed by Tony Webster, as he poses it to us as a narrator in his musings and as he poses it as a character through his retold actions and understandings and misunderstandings. For, although the fragility of memory is evidently a threat to each of these kinds of self-understanding, it cannot account entirely for our failures, especially in making sense of ourselves.

Imagine someone – you probably won't need to reach far – who finds that he has developed a characteristic habit of a parent, one that he vowed never to acquire. Suddenly, he finds himself acting it out, somewhat to his horror. We can imagine him wondering, "Is this me? Is this mine?" This is an alienating experience, of course, and so may prompt reflection. However, the alienation does not stem *from* a reflective act on his part but from an ordinary action or expression. In these cases, what he expresses does not seem to express him – seem *to him* to express him, that is, since any of his friends could have told him long ago that he does it. An important part of this phenomenon, no doubt, is failing to remember all the individual times at which the behavior used to rankle, and thereby to keep vivid the vow he made not to be that way. Our patchwork of memories is certainly the cause of inattentiveness, and thereby the enemy of consistency.

I think we often suppose that the crucial feature of these cases is that we don't always notice what it is that we're doing. That's true enough, but not yet an explanation. If I am to be the author of the action, satisfying whatever conditions differentiate an action as being mine and as something happening to me, I certainly must know what I am doing, in some sense. I just don't always realize how what I am doing is related to certain other normative judgments I also have.

And in cases like the one I'm imagining, the source of the failure seems to be a matter of not knowing something about myself rather than not knowing something about my action taken in itself, even if it is a habitual one.

Now imagine someone else who is wondering whether she made the right choice of career years ago. She finds the work satisfying, to be sure. Moreover, there is not any question for her of conflicting priorities or sacrifices made: her life is full in other respects and to her mind well balanced. Yet there is still a question to be asked. "Does it all add up?" "Is this me?" "Is this mine?" Things begin to look less simple when she looks forward from the point of view of her younger self. There were options then, lives vividly imagined and left unlived. This life or something quite like it was one of them, to be sure, but far from the only one. Those unremembered lives have faded with time, and even though there was nothing purely arbitrary or ultimately dissatisfying about her choices, nothing to occasion regret now, she nevertheless feels something has been lost.

Here, too, memory is inevitably selective. For, in general, we are much better at remembering what happened than at remembering what didn't. But in this second case, the fallibility and fabrication of memory seem less like a direct source or cause of falseness and more like a further complicating factor. The real difficulty in the case I sketched lies in occupying a standpoint from which our narratives, as opposed to the past itself, do not have the force of necessity. If I find that I am not making sense to myself, as our earlier example illustrated, then there is something I can go about doing about it. In fact, I am pressed to do something or other—even if, for instance, what I choose to do is to give in and live with the fact that I'm more like my parents than I care to admit. There is no such demand to make sense *of myself* when I look back, nor is there any easy way to go about doing anything about it. In the most extreme case, I can repudiate my past selves in a way I cannot repudiate my actions here and now. But barring some extraordinary feat of self-transformation—and these are, to be sure, possible—I cannot simply render consistent the various parts of my narrative identity by an act of will.

The failure of self-understanding demonstrated by Tony Webster is, I think, a case of the second kind. He is wrong that his problems stem from the fragility of memory, which would have the happy consequence that his problems would then be universal. He reports being satisfied with his life as a near-constant refrain during the narrative, even when that beggars belief. The fact that he discovers a sense of purpose when he's on the cusp of solving the mystery certainly suggests a lack of one beforehand. Yet, as he demonstrates in his lunchtime meeting with Veronica, he has the kind of story about himself that can fill an hour without pauses, a historical narrative with facts and interpretations self-consciously interwoven. Tony is an accomplished historian of himself, an expert curator. His unreliability (as a narrator and as a person) does not stem, certainly not entirely, from a failure to remember.

V

The façade seems to slip toward the end of the novel, as Tony avows a certain kind of uncertainty. This looks like the fruit of sustained reflection, the one to which we have been privy in his narration. After obtaining the diary page and marveling (this being before he knows all the facts of course) at how courageous Adrian's suicide was, Tony is led to see his own comparative smallness:

We muddle along, we let life happen to us, we gradually build up a store of memories. There is the question of accumulation, but not in the sense that Adrian meant, just the simple adding up and adding on of life. And as the poet pointed out, there is a difference between addition and increase. Had my life increased, or merely added to itself? This was the question Adrian's fragment set off in me." (pp. 96-97).⁶

In the space of these sentences, Tony manages, quite promisingly, to move from broad generalizations about most people, who he imagines are like him in lacking Adrian's moral strength, to a question about his own life.

He continues, shading into self-recrimination, "Yes indeed, if Tony had seen more clearly, acted more decisively, held to truer moral values, settled less easily for a passive peaceableness which he first called happiness and later contentment" (p. 97). Barnes, for a moment, gives his readers the hope that Tony, by better understanding the events of his life, will be shaken out of his complacency. But this hope is swiftly dashed: "If Tony hadn't been fearful, hadn't counted on the approval of others for his own self-approval ... and so on, through a succession of hypotheticals leading to the final one: so, for instance, if Tony hadn't been Tony" (p. 97). In the end, Tony's reflection leads him only to the conclusion that while certain things are perhaps to be regretted about the way he has led his life, they were the unavoidable consequences of being the person he is. The mental contortions needed for Tony to perceive so clearly how his own dearly held values are a self-serving fantasy and then to endorse them all the same seems deeply implausible when we abstract away from the situation. But when we attend more closely to his style of reflection in the musings and commentary he offers throughout the novel, these contortions instead seem perfectly appropriate to him.⁷

Tony's problem isn't that he's blind to himself. Take his self-described peaceableness. He recalls how he first came to identify himself this way, in response to Veronica calling him a coward in the conversation that he takes to have signaled the beginning of the end of their relationship. He doesn't want complications, and he freely admits—at least to himself—to not being "much good at discussing this stuff" (p. 37). This doesn't, however, bother Tony in the slightest. He's not interested in talking to Veronica about "this stuff" because he's not really interested in what she thinks or feels. He's much more interested in his own version of what she thinks or feels, and most of the time, he can't tell those things apart. As he himself later says, "When we are young, we invent

different futures for ourselves; when we are old, we invent different pasts for others" (p. 88).

That thought doesn't stop him from so inventing. Because Barnes invites us to share in Tony's perspective so fully, it can be difficult to notice the extent to which Tony lives alone in the world. In other words, it's hard to differentiate his solipsism from his narration. His astonishingly detached discussion of his relationship with his daughter and grandchildren is helpful in this regard (pp. 112-13). As far as they are concerned, he is clearly driven by a sense of *comme il faut*, and not love or even curiosity. Living alone in this manner is the only way of living peaceably of course.

In his reflective self-recrimination, Tony can see that his peaceableness is a kind of passivity, of cowardice, but I'm not sure that he can see just how far it involves a disinterest in other people. His self-conception involves what he takes to be a concern with others: his volunteering at a hospital, his cordial relationship with his ex-wife Margaret, and, of course, his renewed obsession with Veronica. But the more one looks into his talk about others, on the one hand, and his interactions with them, even filtered through his perspective, on the other, the further these two frames of reference appear to drift apart. One of his most savage reflections on Veronica, as being one of "those whose main concern is to avoid further damage to themselves, at whatever cost, ... who are ruthless, and the ones to be careful of" (p. 48), turns out over the course of the novel to describe himself rather well. Nowhere, I think, does Tony see just how ruthless his peaceableness is—as opposed, for instance, to the evident and acknowledged spite of the letter he sent Adrian and Veronica, which horrifies him when Veronica sends it back to him.

It would be easy to take the stance of a moralist—a label Barnes has applied to himself—and find some satisfaction in this analysis of Tony's failings. I want to emphasize, therefore, that though spending time with *The Sense of an Ending* has given me more than a passing distaste for Tony Webster, this alone would likely have the effect of boring rather than disturbing me. Tony isn't

exactly an evil person, after all. As he tells us over and over again, he's like the rest of us: average. And he's right, I think. What he demonstrates so vividly and troublingly is a problem inherent in trying to achieve a clear-sighted consciousness of what one is up to in life.

Loose ends bother Tony. Recall, once again, his discovery of a sense of purpose when he's trying to demystify Veronica. For *that* – demystifying her – is evidently still his purpose, even after she disappears as a genuine presence from the novel. As he says, “The only possible witness, the only corroborator, was Veronica” (p. 119). In my way of putting things, Tony thinks he needs something from her in order to make sense of himself, to achieve a certain kind of narrative satisfaction in his own life. (We can expand this in various ways: perhaps he wants her approval; perhaps he wants the “full sex” he never got when they were together; perhaps he wants an apology for what he sees as her contempt for him, for the discomfiting weekend with her family in Chislehurst, for leaving him in favor of Adrian. But he never really decides what he wants from her, of course.) But, while Tony's need for such satisfaction from Veronica demands that he tie up the loose ends, the materials are simply not there. Life outstrips him; his own smallness undoes him.

VI

This, according to Tony, is the stuff of tragedy. Dare we agree? Tony wonders,

Does character develop over time? In novels, of course it does: otherwise there wouldn't be much of a story. But in life? I sometimes wonder. Our attitudes and opinions change, we develop new habits and eccentricities; but that's something different, more like decoration. Perhaps character resembles intelligence, except that character peaks a little later: between twenty and thirty, say. And after that, we're just stuck with what we've got. We're on our

own. If so, that would explain a lot of lives, wouldn't it? And also – if this isn't too grand a word – our tragedy." (p. 113)

Here, in this thought and not in the awful revelations of the plot, is the real source of my terror. Tony's words aren't so different from a familiar and commonsense sort of thought about character: we grow into ourselves, and that's who we then are. Most of the neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists I've read think this way too.⁸ When they talk about moral development, they tend to talk about children, or perhaps adolescents. That's the stage at which Tony and his friends used to imagine they were waiting to enter into life; but, as he rightly points out, their "lives had in any case begun" (p. 10). Equally, it seems to me, Tony's commitment to the thought that he is "not odd enough not to have done the things" he ended up doing is itself a kind of moral commitment, a commitment to life being already over (p. 71).

For, if Tony were right about character not developing in life, the whole project of our trying to make sense of ourselves would be doomed from the start. This project does not require, as Tony imagines, the stuff of what he calls "Literature" – grand emotions and grand events, the tragic stage (p. 16). (How marvelous that Barnes convincingly portrays someone who can think without irony in capital letters!) What it does require, however, is the possibility of what I called "aspiration," or becoming more than we are. The call to make sense of ourselves is, I suggested, not a call often, or perhaps even ever, demanded simply by our practical circumstances. "We muddle along," says Tony.

What would it be not to muddle? It is one of the tasks of moral philosophy to offer some kind of answer to this question, but it is not one that is often asked in this form. We are all muddlers, in some sense, after all, struggling to keep pace with the most basic features of our practical existence: that our desires are not always satisfied, that we find ourselves confronted by the eternal mystery of other people, that we must work even to know what we ourselves want. You don't need to be an Aristotelian or even a moral realist of any stripe to worry

about these problems, at least the way I've framed them. But they are perhaps especially pressing for those who think there's some good way of being for creatures like us, independent of any of our thoughts about the matter, that would in itself constitute not muddling. For it's hard enough to imagine doing justice even to these basic demands in an internally coherent way; that is, a way that holds off our not making sense to ourselves.

While I cannot fully argue for the position here, it is natural to suppose that those who take us to be called upon to develop excellence of character and to become wise are thereby imposing a kind of reflective demand not only to make sense *to ourselves* on any given occasion but also to make sense *of ourselves*. We might expand that as follows: there is a certain practical requirement to consciously integrate one's character and one's manner of living, since this is a crucial part of knowing what one is up to in a practical sense. How else are we to negotiate competing demands or to weigh carefully how we might be best placed to live well and rightly? But it is an easy step from aiming to satisfy this demand to achieving a complacency of the sort Tony Webster exemplifies. Reflection might take us no further than our preexisting fantasies, and engaging in it seems, at least sometimes, to conflict with the kind of vulnerability to events and people that might allow us to escape from those fantasies.

VII

Is this some kind of tragic bind? I don't think so, but it does point to just how difficult it can be to make sense of ourselves and of the events of our lives. The beginning of a proper answer would have to say something about good and bad sorts of muddling and good and bad sorts of reflection. Perhaps the most crucial lesson in all this—the lesson I drew from the novel, which was therefore not a respite from my thoughts about moral education—is that our lives are *not* simply our own as if we were the authors of a story. That, and not the scale of emotion or the possibility of development in character, is the most important difference between Life and Literature. Tony needs Veronica to corroborate his

story – to corroborate his memory, he thinks, but as I have been trying to argue, what he is after is in the now and not in his hazy recollection. There is more to this than the desperate seeking after of approval that even he can see lies behind some of his behavior. There is also the need to make sense of Adrian’s suicide. Isn’t it surprising that Tony never tries talking to Veronica about that, the one event that most inextricably links them together, the reason she has the diary and he wants it back? “If Tony hadn’t been Tony,” perhaps it would be.

Another part of the answer – or perhaps this is simply another reflection of what I’ve already said about vulnerability – will involve the need for us to accept loose ends. Life being untidy, we should hardly expect that we will live tidily. And though this thought might well be in tension with some of the pretenses of moral philosophy, it is not, I think, in tension with the demand to make sense of ourselves or to strive to do more than muddle along. Neither of these requires that we take the historian’s attitude to our past or the curator’s attitude to our present.

Should we begin to take these attitudes, we will be brought to think, along with Tony, in terms of mere accumulation and vague unrest. At this point, the specter of tragedy already looms, and not far behind it, that of farce. If there is nothing we can do about who we have become, then the kind of aspiration that can lift us above circumstances is a false hope. It is not enough to say, as perhaps a caricature of the virtue ethicist might, that we should pray for a good upbringing and then hope for the best thereafter. We need ways of learning to be good that respect the tragic character of human life, which is not to say its awfulness or its misery. Otherwise, there will be no sense to be found in events like those Barnes has Tony retell. After all, there is no sense in the mere ending of life, nor much to be found in ourselves in our steadily drawing nearer to it.

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1. Compare the treatment of the play given by Bernard Williams, “*The Women of Trachis: Fictions, Pessimism, Ethics*,” in *The Greeks and Us*, ed. Robert B. Loudon and Paul Schollmeier (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 43–53; reprinted in *The Sense of the Past*, ed. Myles Burnyeat (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 49–59. Williams conceives of the play as the bearer of a sort of unrelenting bad news that moral philosophy is unwilling to provide. By Williams’s standards, no doubt, my take on the play is just more good news.
2. Richard C. Jebb surveys the various mythic traditions and the creative use to which Sophocles puts them in the introduction to his *Sophocles: The Plays and Fragments, Part V: The Trachiniae* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1892), pp. x–xxv.
3. See, for instance, Colm Tóibín, “Going Beyond the Limits,” *The New York Review of Books*, May 10, 2012; and Justin Jordan, “*The Sense of an Ending* by Julian Barnes—Review,” *The Guardian*, July 26, 2011. A notable exception to this tendency is Michael Woods, “Stupidly English,” *London Review of Books*, September 22, 2011.
4. Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 3.
5. My notion of practical disruption is related to the one found in Jonathan Lear, *A Case for Irony* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 61. I do not, however, share the psychoanalytic assumptions of Lear’s moral psychology.

6. Page numbers are taken from the American paperback edition: Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending* (New York: Vintage International, 2012).
7. On the delusive power of self-reflection, see Iris Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" in *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), pp. 65-67. I have profited from the work of my colleague Santiago Mejía on this topic.
8. For a representative example, see Nancy Sherman, "The Habituation of Character," in *The Fabric of Character: Aristotle's Theory of Virtue* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), pp. 157-200. There is much that Sherman says about habituation and moral education with which I agree, but I believe her near-exclusive focus on the education of children leaves out some of the most interesting features of Aristotle's account, especially when it comes to developing deliberative capacities.