the consequences was that American conservatism became inextricably linked with anti-Communism—and Ronald Reagan came to power. He adds that there was during the Cold War,

...(and still is) so much in American “conservatism” that was (and is) not conservative at all. Plainly, the United States was not a conservative influence in the world during the past sixty years. Well before the revolutionary...1960s there was nothing conservative in American mass entertainments, in American art, in American literature (well, save for a few eccentric and valuable exceptions), in the American cult of youth, in American rock music, in American films, in American manners, in American behavior, in the sexual and radical changes that actually preceded 1960, during what thoughtless historians and political scientists still describe as the “stuffy” Eisenhower decade.

Democracy and Populism is part of a growing body of literature that aims to follow Tocqueville’s lead and warn of democracy’s dangers. Lukacs ends on a hopeful note, with the reminder that history is complex and unpredictable. While the democratic age seems to be degenerating into an age of nationalist populism in which the standards of civility and civilization have been lost, resistance to democratic disorder is evident in the appearance of Democracy and Populism (and its publication by a leading academic press) and in Lukacs’ work generally. In that sense he can write with the hope that his readers will understand the nature of the current Western and American crisis and heed the call to restore Western civilization by rejecting fear and hatred and embracing a quality of love and friendship advocated by authentic Christianity.

German Philosophy and the Ethical Life
Charles Bambach


At the very beginning of L. P. Hartley’s novel The Go-Between (1953), an elderly narrator, about to take up a story from his youth, cautions his readers that what they are set to hear may prove difficult to comprehend. “The past is a foreign country,” he admonishes, “they do things differently there.” Hartley’s caveat concerning the hermeneutic limits of historical comprehension offers a warning to all who would precipitously embark on a journey to recover the past. Every relation to the past, Hartley seems to say, needs to be rethought ever more cautiously in terms that make us aware of our own situation as historical inquirers.

Before we can even begin to understand the temporal barriers, the cultural differences, the linguistic strangeness of another historical epoch, we need to reconsider our own reasons for undertaking such a venture. Finitude in this sense does not designate something “negative” however; it is precisely in the confrontation with the limits of our knowledge that the possibilities of creative transformation lie. Kant knew this as well as any thinker and made from his critique of the limits of human reason a revolution in the

Charles Bambach teaches the history of philosophy at the University of Texas at Dallas. His most recent book is Heidegger’s Roots: Nietzsche, National Socialism, and the Greeks (2003).
modern metaphysics of nature. As a starting point for both philosophical and historical reflection, an awareness of limits can help us to understand the problems of our own age in all their hermeneutic complexity, thereby allowing for the “positive” possibility, not only of the creative change and transformation of a tradition, but also for its vital preservation.

Dennis Schmidt has written a deeply thoughtful book on the problem of traditions and on the productive possibilities of limits, focusing on the recovery of the Greek tragic tradition by post-Kantian German philosophers. For Schmidt, trained as a continental philosopher, the very possibility of philosophical reflection rests upon its relation to the tradition. Only in historical engagement with the tradition of Western thinking, its insights as well as its aporias, its productive possibilities as much as its limits, can we hope to think through what he calls “the wider cultural questions of the present age.” In concrete terms that means for Schmidt that the contours of ethics must be sought in a philosophical encounter with the roots of Western tradition. But what makes Schmidt’s book so compelling is that he finds the sources for such a critique not merely in the history of philosophy itself, thought as an insular conversation about metaphysics, but in the philosophical discussion about the ethical meaning of tragic art.

Focusing on the fate of Greek tragic thinking throughout the last two and half millennia, Schmidt argues that centuries after the death of Aristotle the question of tragedy will be palimpsestically submerged under the dual influence of Christian values of good and evil and the metaphysical speculations of early modern philosophers such as Descartes. “Nothing in the conception of philosophy, namely as metaphysics, which guides Descartes and his age would leave room for the idea of asking about tragedy as a philosophical matter.” Though tragedy would flourish in Elizabethan England and in artists like Molière, Ibsen, and O’Neill, Schmidt will claim that the way that each of these writers constructs tragedy remains profoundly different from the singular experience of Greek tragic art. Only in the Greek tragedies, those that refuse to present the enigmas of human existence in the form of a “morality play,” do we find ourselves confronted with a world of irreconcilable oppositions, what Nietzsche comes to call the realm “beyond good and evil.”

Most modern attempts to take up the problem of tragedy are already overdetermined by ethical presumptions about the nature of good and evil that shape the way we read ancient texts. Schmidt wants to challenge our understanding of ethics by turning to works such as Sophocles’s Oedipus Tyrannus or Antigone that offer ethical riddles and enigmas that do not easily fit into the Christian metaphysical categories of good and evil. The modern approach to tragedy, he will claim, is marked by its focus on the interior life of its characters. Not in the psychological reflections of a subject (alienation, loneliness, guilt, remorse, jealousy) but in the ontological conditions of existence itself as what is “strange,” “monstrous,” “uncanny,” “terrible,” “dangerous,” and “violent,” does Greek tragedy take up the problems of an individual in a world marked by fate and destiny (although not in a mechanical sense as what is preordained or decided in advance). In Sophocles’s definition of the human being as deinon, as that being who is both “wonderful” and “terrible” at the same time in a way that can not be resolved, Schmidt locates the essence of Greek tragic insight.

As beings who seek to break out of the limits assigned to us by biology, history, and the forces of circumstance, we humans (like Antigone and Oedipus) seek to overcome the “strange and uncanny doubleness [that] haunts the relation of
the human being to the city,” even as it haunts our relations to ourselves and to other beings in our community. Throughout the history of Western metaphysics, Schmidt contends, we can find diverse efforts to flatten out, bracket, or resolve this doubleness and ambiguity by bringing it into line with our reigning ethical categories derived from theology, literature, social inquiry, and science. But it is in the work of art fashioned by the Greek tragedians that Schmidt finds the deepest challenges for ethical inquiry. His hope, expressed in both his opening and closing remarks, is that by working through the ethical enigmas presented to us in these Greek tragedies—and taken up again in the philosophical work of the Germans—we can begin to prepare the way for “an overture to a new relation to culture.”

Given his own sense of the hermeneutic complexity of tradition, Schmidt does not imagine that we are in a position to overcome the historical distance of 2500 years that separates the Athenian agora from the American campus. He begins rather by reflecting on what he sees as the only serious attempt within the Western tradition to think through the problems of tragedy and this he finds in the post-Kantian German philosophical tradition. It was in Germany during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that there flourished the most sustained and penetrating engagement with Greek tragic art that the Western tradition has ever seen. That this philosophical engagement with the past would, simultaneously, be experienced as a way of coming to terms with Germany’s failed political incursions into modern European life is not lost on Schmidt. On his reading, it was the violent excesses of the French Revolution that posed to German thinkers ethical challenges on questions of cultural identity, freedom, politics, and the renewal of national life.

In the irresolvable tensions, paradoxes, agonies, and conflicts of Greek art, these German thinkers and poets found a model for coming to terms with the enigmas of German culture. The turn to Greece signified for them not the recovery of an an-
cient tradition; it provided, rather, a way to configure their concealed hopes for an as yet unrealized vision of German political and cultural freedom. In this way, the topic of “Greece” became a way for them to reflect on their identity as Germans. By assessing this movement of cultural retrieval in and through an historical engagement with the meaning of tragedy, Schmidt hopes to find textual sources for an American cultural renewal through a reappropriation of the German appropriation of Greek tragedy. These hopes underlie On Germans and Other Greeks. And yet Schmidt does not dwell long or often on the ways of carrying out such an ambitious project. Instead, he offers a careful, text-focused study of six major figures in this tradition: two Greeks (Plato and Aristotle) and four Germans (Hegel, Hölderlin, Nietzsche, and Heidegger).

It would be difficult to do justice here to the careful hermeneutic approach to text and authors that Schmidt undertakes. Each chapter provides a rich philosophical harvest for those willing to attend to its particulars. Schmidt makes a compelling case that the work of each thinker needs to be considered as an attempt to work out the problems of tragedy, even if by other means than as drama or as literary works of art. This is no mere nod to the centrality of tragic reflection in the work of these philosophers. Schmidt boldy makes the claim here that for Nietzsche and Heidegger, Hegel and Schelling, the problems of tragedy—of existence as inward contradiction, of justice as irreconcilable with goodness, of language as incommensurable with truth, of art as irreducible to beauty—come to shape the very forms and contours of modern German thinking in ways that have gone unnoticed by many philosophical scholars. Nowhere does this overarching thesis seem more appropriate than in Schmidt’s interpretation of the later Heidegger.

In a brilliant reading of Heidegger’s turn to National Socialism as a way of engaging the depths of Greek tragic experience, Schmidt show how Heidegger’s work from the years 1933-1946 was dominated by a discussion of Sophocles’s Antigone and by Hölderlin’s attempts to translate Antigone into the frame of a German work of art. As part of his reading, he also shows how, after 1946, Heidegger would no longer take up the theme of tragedy in any explicit or formal way. But this turning away from a direct encounter with Greek tragedy, Schmidt contends, should not be read as a rejection of tragedy’s relevance for coming to terms with Germany’s postwar problems. On the contrary, in Heidegger’s discussions of language, destiny, art, technology, and the meaning of the homeland, Schmidt finds a reframing of tragic experience on philosophical lines.

As he brings his work to a close after addressing the cultural dialogue between Germans and “other” Greeks, those ancient writers whose work, in Hölderlin’s words, would always demand of the Germans “an experience of the foreign” that would simultaneously bring them into confrontation with what is one’s own, Schmidt puts forward a speculative recounting of the fate of tragedy in the West. Until Schelling, he will claim, no one truly develops a “theory” of tragedy, and until Hegel, no one sets forth a systematic effort to “take up the question of tragedy as an essentially philosophical question.” Not in Descartes or Locke, Rousseau or Mill does the question of tragedy come to play a determinative role. The effect of Enlightenment thinking in Britain and France would banish the enigmatic insights of the Greek tragedians by resolving them into a metaphysics of clarity and light modeled on the optimism of Christian theodicy. As Schmidt will have it, “Greece marks the last moment in which what has come to be the Western world has a contact with forms of thinking that are not defined by metaphysics or by the polarities of good and evil.”
Schmidt’s fantastical elegy of (and for) Western history can hardly withstand the rigors of critical analysis, however. His overarching scheme of the history of the West, engaged as a conversation between Germans and “other” Greeks, has far too many lacunae and far too exclusive a focus to provide a convincing narrative for 2500 years of a tradition. Schmidt avoids any discussion of the German-Jewish dialogue on Greek tragedy, evident in the work of Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Leo Strauss, and others, that poses the question of the relationship of Athens to Jerusalem within the Western tradition. Nor does he even acknowledge the fascination with Greek tragic thinking in the work of National Socialist philosophers like Alfred Baeumler, Kurt Hildebrandt, and Hans Heyse.

Despite this reticence to take on the question of tragedy in the German relation to the Shoah, Schmidt has fashioned a deeply thoughtful work that will both stimulate and confound all who have an interest in Greek and German culture and in issues of politics, ethics, and the history of the Western tradition. In his willingness to think through the impossible irreconcilability of the Greek condition—that tragedy has no resolution, that history defies sublation, that ethics poses problems to which reason alone can not find answers—Schmidt has helped to clear a path of questioning that makes us ever more aware of our finitude and limits. It is with this insight that “in tragedies we are reminded that we live in a world not of our own making or control, and yet a world to which we are answerable,” that genuine ethics begin, Schmidt’s work helps to reclaim the primacy of ethical thinking as a model for politics, philosophy, and art. Against the limits of his own attempt, he challenges us to situate our thoughts in a centuries-long conversation that promises not certitude but enigma, not a self-congratulatory re-confirmation of our own values, but a dialogue and engagement that helps us to understand our own freedom as a necessary prerequisite for ethical reflection. Such a work helps us to remember in a fundamental way the genuine experience of thinking that Aristotle, in the *Metaphysics*, put so simply: “Philosophy begins in wonderment.”