

# Fatal Resignation

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**Abstract:** This paper introduces a unique response to tragedy called “fatal resignation”, according to which one resigns oneself to the tragic events that occur in one’s life upon coming to believe that these events could not have been otherwise. It goes on to argue that the most plausible metaphysical foundation for fatal resignation is a view called superessentialism, according to which every event that occurs in the life of a person is essential to that person. This paper concludes that, as a response to tragedy, superessentialism-supported fatal resignation is both plausible and virtuous.

## I. Introduction

None of us is immune from tragedy. In our post-pandemic, war-torn world, tragic events (deaths and diseases, acts of violence and violation, failures and betrayals, disillusionments and disappointments) are so common as to appear unavoidable. It seems that no matter what we do, no matter how hard we try, no matter how much care, attention, and preparation we exercise in our lives, we cannot protect ourselves and our loved ones from every possible tragedy. Indeed, it is easy to see tragedy as an essential and ineliminable feature of human life. But when particular tragedies occur in our lives, how do we respond? How should we respond?

When tragic events occur in our lives, there are several ways in which we can respond, some of them healthy and constructive, others unhealthy and destructive. We can lash out in anger or shut down in despair. We can try to ignore or deny the reality of what has occurred. Or we can try to learn from the experience and consider it an opportunity for personal growth. But how does one come to finally accept what has occurred? How does one finally come to terms with the tragic events that have occurred in one’s life?

One way of coming to terms with the tragic events that occur in our lives is to come to believe or accept that those events could not have been otherwise. This is importantly different from coming to believe or accept that there is right now nothing that could change those events.

It is also importantly different from coming to believe or accept that there was at the time nothing that I could have done to prevent them from happening, that these events were, and remain forever after, beyond my control.<sup>1</sup> The sort of belief of which I am speaking is the belief that the tragic events that have occurred could not have failed to occur. Those events were, in some sense, *unavoidable* or *inevitable*. They *had* to happen. They were *fated* or *determined* or *destined* to occur precisely as they did.

Coming to believe that the tragic events that occur in our lives could not have been otherwise allows us to respond to tragedy in a unique way. For if it is true that the tragic events that have occurred really could not have been otherwise, then this would seem to make certain negative reactive attitudes, such as regret or disappointment, inappropriate, even irrational. For, to regret one's own actions or to regret that certain events have occurred is to wish that things had gone differently. And to be disappointed in something presumes that it could have been better.<sup>2</sup> The belief or realization that the tragic events that have occurred in one's life could not have been otherwise might, then, allow one to more capably avoid or resist such negative reactions, at least insofar as one can reason oneself out of them. One might, by means of such a belief, be able to better come to accept those events and their consequences. I would like to propose that we call this sort of response to tragedy, and the particular belief on which it is based, "Fatal Resignation". It is a kind of resignation because when one comes to believe that the tragic

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<sup>1</sup> This is what makes the current proposal different from some popular conceptions of "Stoic acceptance." What I think we often mean by "Stoic acceptance" is the practice of accepting those events over which one has limited or no control. I am reminded here of Reinhold Niebuhr's famous Serenity Prayer, one popular rendition of which reads: "O God, give us the serenity to accept what cannot be changed, the courage to change what can be changed, and the wisdom to know the one from the other." According to the current proposal, I am not merely accepting what is beyond my control, I am accepting what cannot be otherwise, what is beyond *anyone's* control. For more on Stoic responses to tragedy, see Nancy Sherman, "Tragic Lessons in Moral Suffering and Healing" (Chapter One of this volume).

<sup>2</sup> We could also include here the negative reactive attitude of "mourning", at least as Eleonore Stump understands it. According to Stump, mourning has an essential modal component: one can only mourn what could have been otherwise. For more on this, see Eleonore Stump, "The Problem of Mourning" (Chapter Nine of this volume). I think that what Stump means by mourning is very close to what I mean here by regret.

events that have occurred in one's life could not have been otherwise, one lets go, one ceases combatting or resisting, even in one's imagination, their occurrence. The fatal aspect of the name for this sort of response has a double meaning. What one is resigning oneself to is one's own fate, and the tragic events that one has come to believe or accept could not have been otherwise are often ones in which a loved one has died.

## **II. Metaphysical Foundations**

But how could such a belief be true? How could it be the case that the tragic events that have occurred in my life could not have been otherwise? One possibility is if some kind of determinism is true, either of the causal or theological variety. By causal determinism I mean the view that every event that occurs is a necessary result of the prior conditions of the universe and the relevant laws of nature. And by theological determinism I mean the view that every event that occurs is the necessary result of the particular decisions, decrees, or actions of an omnipotent deity. For, if the occurrence of any of those tragic events is simply a function of the prior conditions of the universe and the relevant laws of nature, or if they are simply a function of God's inexorable will, then that would seem to make those events necessary in the requisite sense, that is, not able to be otherwise.

The problem with trying to build fatal resignation upon some variety of determinism is that most varieties of determinism only make particular events *conditionally* necessary. Those events must happen *given* certain prior conditions, or certain laws of nature, or certain Divine volitions. But, plausibly, these prior conditions, or these laws of nature, or these Divine volitions could have been otherwise: perhaps the world could have featured entirely different creatures or laws, or perhaps God could have freely chosen to enact an entirely different plan for creation. And, if any of those other possible scenarios had transpired, then all subsequent events would

have been different as well, and the tragic events that have occurred in my life might have occurred differently, or might never have occurred at all. Even in a deterministic world, then, one might still regret or be disappointed in the occurrence of tragic events, due to the fact that it is still possible that things could have gone differently. We need something stronger.

One stronger option is necessitarianism. By necessitarianism, I mean the view that every event that occurs in the history of the universe and every aspect of every event is entirely necessary. There is no possible way that any of those events could have failed to occur, and there is no possible way that any of those events could have been in any way different. For, on necessitarianism, not only are all subsequent events a necessary result of the prior conditions and the laws of nature or God's initial volitions, those prior conditions and laws or nature or Divine volitions are also necessary. They also could not have been otherwise. As a result, the exact history of our universe, down to the smallest detail, is the only history that it ever could have had, the only history that there ever could have been. If necessitarianism is true, then this gives us a firm metaphysical ground for fatal resignation. For, if necessitarianism is true, then none of the events that occur in our lives could have been in any way different. And because none of the events that occur in our lives could have been in any way different, it would be inappropriate and even irrational to respond to any of those events, even the tragic ones, with regret or disappointment. For, once again, regret and disappointment only make sense if there is in fact some other way that things could have gone. However, I want to propose that we need not go full necessitarian to reach that conclusion. There is a weaker view in the vicinity that can do all of the same work while still preserving a robust degree of contingency in the universe: superessentialism.

Superessentialism is the view that every property possessed by a person is an essential property of that person. Now, that doesn't mean that every property that you possess right now is a property that you have always had and will always have. The view isn't that persons never undergo any sort of change in any of their properties. Rather, the view is that for any property that you possess at any time, it is essential to you that you possess that particular property at that particular time. If we understand an event as the possession of a property by a substance at a time, then we can state the thesis of superessentialism more clearly in terms of events: every event that occurs in the life of a person, everything that happens to her, every decision that she makes, and every action that she performs, is essential to that person, is constitutive of that person's identity.<sup>3</sup>

According to superessentialism, it is metaphysically impossible for a person's life to have gone any differently than it in fact did. And this is so because persons are defined by their life histories. You are the sum total of the events that comprise your life. Your name rigidly designates the one, very specific person who experiences all and only those events. According to superessentialism, for every different way that your life could have gone, there is another person (possible or actual) whose life is essentially constituted in precisely that way. As a result, whenever you think about how your life could have gone differently, whenever you imagine yourself making different choices or taking advantage of different opportunities or avoiding certain tragedies, you are actually thinking not about your own life, but the life of some other possible person who could have existed in your stead. Some of the lives of these other possible

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<sup>3</sup> We owe the name for this view to the seminal work of Fabrizio Mondadori on the thought of Gottfried Leibniz (see his "Reference, Essentialism, and Modality in Leibniz's Metaphysics", *Studia Leibnitiana*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (1973): pp. 74-101; "Leibniz and the Doctrine of Inter-World Identity", *Studia Leibnitiana*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (1975): pp. 21-57); "Understanding Superessentialism", *Studia Leibnitiana*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (1985): pp. 162-190; and "On Some Disputed Questions in Leibniz's Metaphysics", *Studia Leibnitiana*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (1993): pp. 153-173).

persons are very different from your own, but some of them are almost exactly like yours, perhaps only differing by one or two very specific events.

Superessentialism is a difficult view to fully grasp. And it is often mistaken for other views in the vicinity. To help us get a better idea of what exactly superessentialism is saying, let me briefly compare and contrast superessentialism with some of these nearby views.

First, superessentialism is neither the same as, nor entails, necessitism. By necessitism, I mean the view according to which every existing thing exists necessarily, that nothing that exists could have failed to exist. Superessentialism is different from necessitism in that it claims only that every event that happens to you, and every decision and action that you perform, is essential to you, is constitutive of your identity. It makes no claim about whether you or any other persons (possible or actual) exist necessarily. It is perfectly compatible with superessentialism to say that every event in your life is essential to your identity and also that you could have easily failed to exist. Indeed, according to superessentialism, your existence is extremely fragile: had things gone any other way, had even the slightest detail about your life been different, you would not have existed. Some other possible person would have.

Second, superessentialism is also neither the same as, nor entails, a view discussed earlier: necessitarianism. Once again, by necessitarianism, I mean the view that every event that occurs must necessarily occur, that nothing in the history of the universe could have gone differently than it in fact did. Superessentialism is different from necessitarianism in that it claims only that every event in your life is essential to *you*, that nothing in *your* life could have gone differently than it in fact did. It does not claim that, necessarily, you exist. According to superessentialism, the particular events that comprise your life are conditionally necessary: if you exist, then, necessarily those particular events occur. But they are not absolutely necessary,

since you could have easily failed to exist. Now, if you exist, then it might also follow that necessarily, several other persons exist. For if certain events in your life essentially include certain other persons, and the participation in those events is essential to the lives of those persons, then necessarily, if you exist, then those other people exist too. We might worry that this result will have a cascading effect: if your existence entails the existence of other people as well, does not your existence entail the existence of absolutely everything else? And so, would not necessitarianism follow after all? Not necessarily. It might be that you and any other persons who play an essential role in the events of your life come as package deals: none of you can exist without any of the others. But it is perfectly compatible with this claim to say that some other package could have existed instead of this one, or perhaps no package at all. And so, for that reason, superessentialism does not entail necessitarianism.

Finally, superessentialism is neither the same as, nor entails, neither causal nor theological determinism. Superessentialism claims that every decision or action that you perform is essential to you, is constitutive of your identity. But it makes no claim about how those decisions or actions come about. Superessentialism is certainly *compatible* with causal or theological determinism: it could be essential to you that your actions are entirely determined by prior causes (either of the terrestrial or the divine sort). But superessentialism in no way entails that conclusion. It is also perfectly compatible with superessentialism to say that you and nothing outside of you is the cause of your actions. All that superessentialism says is that however it is that you come to decide or act in the way that you do, that particular way in which you decide or act is essential to you, it is what makes you *you* rather than some other possible person.

Superessentialism, then, is weaker than both necessitism and necessitarianism in that it holds that whether you or anyone else exists at all is a contingent fact. It is also weaker than

causal and theological determinism in that it remains neutral on how it is that you come to perform the particular actions that are constitutive of your identity. But superessentialism is also stronger than causal and theological determinism in just the right way: there is no possible way that any event in *your* life could have gone differently. And, thus, superessentialism provides a suitably moderate metaphysical foundation for the unique response to tragedy that I am calling fatal resignation.

### III. In Defense of Superessentialism

Superessentialism is bound to strike many readers as deeply implausible. Surely, I could have made slightly different decisions or had slightly different experiences at some point in my life and still have been me! Nevertheless, there are a handful of metaphysical packages that entail superessentialism: Spinoza's necessitarianism will certainly get you there<sup>4</sup>, but so will Leibniz's theory of complete individual concepts<sup>5</sup>, perdurantism paired with mereological essentialism<sup>6</sup>, and, without supplementation, plenitudinous possible worlds paired with the denial of transworld identity<sup>7</sup>. And there are elements of superessentialism that many of us already accept. For

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<sup>4</sup> See Samuel Newlands, "Spinoza's Modal Metaphysics", in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2022 edition) (available at <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/spinoza-modal/>).

<sup>5</sup> See Brandon C. Look, "Leibniz's Modal Metaphysics", in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2022 edition) (available at <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/leibniz-modal/>), as well as the earlier references to the work of Mondadori above.

<sup>6</sup> By perdurantism I mean the view that persons are extended across time and possess temporal parts. By mereological essentialism I mean the view that no object can survive any loss in any of its parts. For an example of someone who holds both and acknowledges the superessentialist implications of this pairing (though not as such), see Mark Heller, *The Ontology of Physical Objects: Four-Dimensional Hunks of Matter* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>7</sup> Famously, David Lewis circumvents superessentialism by supplementing his plenitudinous possible worlds with a counterpart theory of modality (see David K. Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986); more on this later). Nevertheless, some superessentialist elements remain. On the one hand, according to Lewis, individuals are world-bound: no individual exists at more than one world. And so, none of the possible worlds in which things occur differently than they do in this world are worlds in which you yourself are present. For every way we can imagine your life having been different, there is world in which a life unfolds in precisely that way, but it is the life of someone else, someone very much like you, yet someone who is not you. There is no possible world in which you yourself, the very person that you are, enjoy a life that is in any way different from this one. And so, in that sense, every event in your life is essential to you. On the other hand, Lewis also holds that your counterparts at those other worlds, those individuals whose lives are relevantly similar to your own, can represent or stand in for you at those worlds. And, indeed, their doing so is what makes it true to say that your life could have been different. Nevertheless, strictly speaking, none of those counterparts is you. Each one is a numerically different person whose



example, many philosophers find origins essentialism, the thesis that the circumstances of a person's initial moments of existence are essential to him or her such that he or she could not have originated from different parents or from a different sperm or egg or begun to exist at a different moment in time, to be quite plausible.<sup>8</sup> And I think that many of us commonly take certain dramatic, impactful, or defining events in our lives, such as a serious accident or professional setback, the moment we first met the person with whom we would fall in love and spend the rest of our lives, or the loss of a parent or sibling at a young age, to be part of what makes us the particular persons that we are. Had those particular events not occurred in my life, I would not be the person that I am today.<sup>9</sup> Superessentialism simply expands these commonly held views to include not only the circumstances of a person's origins, or particular dramatic, impactful, or defining events, but every event and every decision in a person's life.

Perhaps the biggest remaining concern for superessentialism is that it seems to undermine our ability to act freely. If every decision that I make and every action that I perform over the course of my life is essential to me, is constitutive of my identity, such that it is metaphysically impossible for my life to have gone any differently than it in fact did, in what sense are my

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identity is fixed by the particular events that unfold in its life. For more on the complicated relationship between superessentialism and Lewis's modal realism, see Mondadori, "Reference, Essentialism, and Modality"; Leopold Hess, "Superessentialism and Necessitarianism: Between Spinoza and Lewis", *Polish Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Spring, 2011): pp. 79-95; Chloe Armstrong, "Leibniz and Lewis on Modal Metaphysics and Fatalism". *Quaestiones Disputatae*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Spring 2017): pp. 72-96. I explore Lewis's theory of counterparts in more detail below.

<sup>8</sup> For a helpful discussion of origins essentialism, its intuitive pull, and the various arguments that can be offered in its favor, see Ishii Robertson, Teresa Atkins, and Philip Atkins, "Essential vs. Accidental Properties," in Edward N. Zalta (ed), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2020 Edition) (available at <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/essential-accidental/>).

<sup>9</sup> Although we often say things like this, there is an obvious deflationary reading available (see, for example, Chris Tweedt, "Suffering We Would Choose (So God Would Choose for Us)" (Chapter Twelve of the present volume). Perhaps all that we mean when we say things like this is that, had these events not occurred, I would be a very different sort of person. Had these events not occurred, I would still be me, but I would possess very different qualities or attributes than those I currently possess. But I think that we sometimes really do have the stronger sense in mind. I think that for at least some of the dramatic, impactful, or defining events in our lives, when we think about the persons who would be here today if those events had not occurred, we honestly do not recognize those persons as ourselves. Those persons would be so radically different from how we are today that we have trouble thinking of them as the same persons as us, just living different lives.

choices and actions free? Earlier I explained that superessentialism is neither the same as, nor entails, neither causal nor theological determinism, in that it remains neutral on how it is that you come to perform the particular actions that are constitutive of your identity. Superessentialism does not entail that any event, or any action you perform, is determined to occur, that that event or action had to occur given the prior conditions and the relevant laws of nature (or given the relevant Divine decrees). Superessentialism is only committed to the claim that whichever events or actions occur, the occurrence of those particular events or actions and not any other events or actions is what determines which persons exist. It is perfectly compatible with superessentialism, then, to say that you are the ultimate source or determinant of your actions, that nothing outside of you determines how you act.

Nevertheless, we might still wonder whether superessentialism preserves genuine alternative possibilities with respect to how we think and act. Many philosophers hold that in order for an individual to act freely or be morally responsible for his or her own actions, it must have been possible for that individual to have done otherwise than he or she did, either by deciding at just that moment to do so, or by making an earlier decision that would have produced a different outcome.<sup>10</sup> But if every event that occurs in the life of a person, everything that happens to him or her and every decision and action that he or she performs, is essential to that person, is constitutive of that person's identity, does it not follow that for every action that I perform, it was not in fact possible for me to have done otherwise, either by deciding at just that moment to do so, or by making an earlier decision that would have produced a different outcome?

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<sup>10</sup> For an excellent overview of this debate, see Kevin Timpe, *Free Will: Sourcehood and its Alternatives*, Second Edition (London, Bloomsbury, 2013).

One might just say that this is precisely the point of superessentialism. It is precisely its rejection of the principle of alternative possibilities that allows superessentialism to serve as a metaphysical framework for the response to tragedy that I am calling fatal resignation. That it is metaphysically impossible for our lives to have gone any other way is precisely why it is inappropriate, even irrational, to respond with regret or disappointment to the tragic events that occur in our lives. And it is the particular way in which superessentialism rejects the principle of alternative possibilities that allows it to provide a unique and suitably moderate metaphysical foundation for that sort of response.

There is, however, another response available to the superessentialist. I think that a superessentialist can preserve a sense in which for any action you perform you could have done otherwise. And there are two strategies for pulling this off, both of which can be derived from important insights from the work of David Lewis.<sup>11</sup>

First, we could bring in Lewisian counterparts.<sup>12</sup> Even if there is no possible world at which I do anything other than what I do at this world, a superessentialist could propose, with Lewis, that I possess an array of counterparts, individuals existing at other worlds who are similar enough to me to stand in for me at those worlds, but who do and experience different things at those worlds. In such case, the superessentialist could say that even though there is no possible world at which I do anything other than what I do at this world, I possess various counterparts at other worlds who do in fact make different choices and perform different actions at those worlds, perhaps even in the very same situations with the very same prior conditions. And the existence and behavior of those counterparts could be what makes it true to say of me

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<sup>11</sup> Both of these ways of making room for alternative possibilities within Leibniz's superessentialist system are discussed in Armstrong, "Leibniz and Lewis on Modal Metaphysics and Fatalism". Armstrong argues that although Leibniz has the resources to make use of the first strategy, he actually never pursues that one, preferring a version of the second strategy instead (though not one making any kind of reference to time travel).

<sup>12</sup> See Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds*, especially Chapter 4.

that I, in some sense, could have done otherwise, even if there is no possible world at which I myself do.

The second possible way of making room for the ability to have done otherwise would be to borrow from Lewis's solution to the grandfather paradox.<sup>13</sup> The grandfather paradox is a paradox that arises when discussing the possibility of time-travel, in particular, the possibility of travelling back to the past. Consider Tim. Tim harbors a grudge against his paternal grandfather. Tim invents a time machine and travels back to kill his grandfather in his youth. He makes all of the necessary preparations. He gathers all of the necessary supplies. He hides atop his neighbor's roof and waits patiently for his grandfather to step out into the light. He loads and aims his weapon. Despite all of Tim's training, despite all of his preparations, despite his clear intention to kill his grandfather, Tim cannot kill his own grandfather. However hard he tries, and however many times he tries, Tim will fail. And this is so because it is logically impossible for Tim to kill his own grandfather. If his grandfather were to be killed in his youth, this would contradict things already true of Tim, including Tim's own origins.

And yet, there is a clear sense in which Tim, having travelled back in time and staring down his grandfather with a loaded weapon, certainly can kill his grandfather. As Lewis explains,

Tim can kill Grandfather. He has what it takes. Conditions are perfect in every way: the best rifle money could buy, Grandfather an easy target only twenty yards away, not a breeze, door securely locked against intruders, Tim a good shot to begin with and now at the peak of training, and so on. What's to stop him? The forces of logic will not stay his hand! No powerful chaperone stands by to defend the past from interference. (To imagine such a chaperone, as some authors do, is a boring evasion, not needed to make Tim's story consistent.) In short, Tim is as much able to kill Grandfather as anyone ever is to kill anyone.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> See David K. Lewis, "The Paradoxes of Time Travel", *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (Apr., 1976): pp. 145-152)

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

What is the lesson here? As Lewis goes on to explain, the lesson here is that whether someone can do something, including doing otherwise than he or she does, depends on which set of facts we consider.<sup>15</sup> If we consider just the “local” facts of Tim’s situation, which include facts about the particular abilities and resources at his disposal, then he certainly can kill his grandfather. But if we consider the “global” facts of Tim’s situation, which include facts about Tim’s own origins, then he certainly cannot kill his grandfather. The superessentialist can pull off a similar move with respect to the essential facts about ourselves and our ability to do otherwise. In many of the situations in which I find myself, if we consider just the local facts, which include facts about the particular abilities and resources at my disposal, then it is certainly possible for me to do otherwise. I have the relevant responsibility-conferring faculties and dispositions, the very same faculties and dispositions that others use to make different choices in the same or very similar situations. In Lewis’s words, I have “what it takes” to do otherwise. But, if we consider the global facts of my situation, which include facts about which particular actions and decisions are constitutive of my identity, then I cannot actually do otherwise.

There are, then, two ways, both derived from important insights from the work of David Lewis, for the superessentialist to preserve some sense in which each of us possesses the ability to do otherwise, even though there is no possible world at which any of us do.

#### **IV. In Defense of Fatal Resignation**

At the beginning of this paper, I introduced a unique response to tragedy that I am calling fatal resignation. I spent the middle of the paper articulating and defending what I see as the most plausible metaphysical framework upon which that sort of response might be built: superessentialism. In concluding the paper, I would like to return to fatal resignation as a response to tragedy. Fatal resignation is certainly one way of responding to the tragic events that

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 149-152.

occur in our lives. But is it the right response to tragedy? Is it a healthy and constructive response? Or, on the contrary, does it undermine or discount any of what we take to be valuable in our lives? Does it encourage or promote any vicious, destructive, or unhealthy behaviors or attitudes?

The first thing to be said on behalf of fatal resignation is that, if what I have said above is correct, it in no way undermines or discounts our ability to act freely or to take responsibility for our actions. For even though it is true that for every choice I make or every action I perform, there is no possible world at which I make a different choice or perform a different action, this is perfectly compatible with maintaining that I made those choices, that I performed those actions, that I alone, and nothing outside of me am their cause. I exercised the relevant responsibility-conferring faculties and dispositions in coming to make these choices or perform these actions. I used the same sorts of faculties and dispositions that others, including many of my own counterparts at other worlds, use to make different choices and perform different actions. And so, in that sense, I can, and should, take full responsibility for the actions that I could not have not performed.

Another thing to be said on behalf of fatal resignation is that it in no way undermines or discounts our ability to recover from our mistakes, to strive for redemption, or to hope for a better future.<sup>16</sup> When understood correctly, it should in no way result in any kind of feelings of futility or defeat or hopelessness. Fatal resignation is not the same as learned helplessness, nor does it reduce to any form of “quietism”. It is important to understand that the sort of resignation that fatal resignation advocates is not a forward-looking resignation, one that involves giving up and giving in to what must inevitably occur, but a backward-looking resignation, one that

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<sup>16</sup> For more on the importance of hope in coping with tragedy, see Aaron Cobb, “Hope for Others as a Good Common Project” (Chapter Two of this volume).

involves letting go of the past and coming to accept what could not have been otherwise. While it is true on this view that the particular choices that you will make and the particular actions that you will perform in the future are just as essential to you as any past choices or actions, such that whatever you end up doing is the only thing that you could have done, we are not in an epistemic position to know what those choices or actions will be. Your story might be one of surrender and defeat or it might be one of inspiration and redemption. Yet, whichever story it is, your decisions and actions determine its content. And so, it would be wrong to think of your actions as futile or your hopes of living a better life as defeated. And it would be wrong to simply surrender to the future that awaits you as if you have no part to play in it.<sup>17</sup>

According to the response to tragedy that I have outlined here, because there is no other way that my life could have gone, certain negative reactions to the tragic events that have occurred in my life, such as regret or disappointment, are misplaced. It would be inappropriate and, indeed, irrational, to regret what could not have gone differently, or be disappointed in what could not have gone better. But is that right? Is there no room for regret or disappointment within this framework?

Consider Joseph, a middle-aged man who loses his father to a farming accident when he is a boy. Is it not possible for Joseph to look back on the tragic event of the death of his father with regret or disappointment, wishing that his father had somehow survived, thinking about how much better his own life would have been had his father been there to guide and protect him? According to superessentialism, the tragic death of Joseph's father is an essential element in Joseph's story. It is constitutive of his identity. That event, and every other event that takes

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<sup>17</sup> Fatal resignation, then, undercuts certain negative reactions to tragedy, such as regret, disappointment, and mourning (in Stump's sense of the term), since each of these has an essential modal component. But it is perfectly compatible with many positive reactions to tragedy, such as hope, optimism, and aspiration, and also certain "negative" reactions that can be understood to be perfectly appropriate, and, indeed, virtuous, in certain circumstances, such as feelings of guilt, grief, and lament. For more on grief and lament as virtuous responses to tragedy, see Chapters Three and Ten of this volume.

place within Joseph's life, is an essential part of what makes Joseph the particular person that he is. And so the only scenario in which Joseph's father survives is a scenario that unfolds in the context of someone else's life, in the life of some other possible person who might look and act a lot like Joseph, but who, nonetheless, is not him. According to superessentialism, the tragic death of Joseph's father could not have gone differently for Joseph. For Joseph, that event could not have failed to occur, and it could not have failed to occur in precisely the way that it did. And so, it seems that Joseph cannot rationally regret the death of his father, assuming that one cannot rationally regret what could not have been otherwise. Joseph cannot wish that that particular event, or any other event in his life, had gone differently. Because, for him, it could not have been any other way.

Nevertheless, according to superessentialism, there is still one crucial way in which things could have been different. Joseph could have failed to exist and some other person could have existed in his stead. For, as I explained earlier, superessentialism is neither the same as, nor entails, neither necessitism nor necessitarianism. No person exists necessarily on this view. It is only the case that, necessarily, if some person exists, then all of the events that are constitutive of his or her identity occur. So, is it consistent with fatal resignation, then, to regret not just the particular actions or events that have occurred in one's life but the totality of one's life, one's very existence? On superessentialism, is it possible for Joseph to wish that he had never been born?

This sort of regret is indeed possible within the framework that I have introduced. It is possible for Joseph to wish that he had never been born. Yet, according to superessentialism, it is not possible for Joseph, or anyone else, to wish that *only* he had never been born. Recall that, according to superessentialism, if you exist, then necessarily, several other persons exist. For, if



certain events in your life essentially include certain other persons, and the participation in those events is essential to the lives of those persons, then necessarily, if you exist, then those other people exist too. The reverse also holds. If you had never existed, then necessarily, many other persons would have never existed either. Indeed, any persons that made even the slightest impact on your life, and any persons for whom you made even the slightest impact on theirs, would necessarily fail to exist if you did. So, for example, the tragic death of Joseph's father is an essential element in Joseph's life. But, importantly, it is an essential element in the life of Joseph's father as well. His own untimely death, and each of the other events that comprise his life, is an essential part of what makes Joseph's father the particular person that he is. And so, really, there is no possible scenario in which Joseph's father survives. There is a possible scenario in which someone very much like Joseph's father survives, but that scenario is a scenario that includes neither Joseph nor Joseph's father. It is a scenario that unfolds in the context of the lives of two entirely different persons.

As I explained above, I think superessentialism entails that we come as package deals. What is contingent is not your existence in particular, but the existence of the metaphysical package that our intertwining lives compose. And so, while it is compatible with superessentialism for Joseph to regret his own existence, to wish that he had never been born, the only way that he can consistently hold that regret or make that wish is to regret the existence of everyone else, to wish that none of the other people who have ever lived had ever existed.

The sort of regret just mentioned is indeed possible within the framework that I have introduced. In the face of widespread or recurring tragedy, it is possible for someone to regret the whole history of humanity, to wish that none of us had ever been born. In the depths of despair, it is easy to think that it might have been better for God to scrap the whole thing and instead create

an entirely different world with entirely different inhabitants who enjoy better, more peaceful lives. This wish comes from a position of deep despair. And it goes far beyond the everyday sort of regret with which we began. There is indeed room within the framework that I have introduced for world-level regret. But if what I have argued is correct, then there is no room for individual-level regret. When confronted with the tragic events that occur in our lives, the only consistent form of regret is to regret the whole history of humanity. And if what one is confronting are only particular tragic events in the lives of particular people, to wish that all of us had never been born, to be willing to sacrifice the whole lot in order to prevent some particular tragedy or some particular handful of tragedies, seems surely vicious.

There is one final issue worth discussing: the framework that I have developed here assumes that one cannot regret or be disappointed in what is necessarily the case. Is this assumption correct? Couldn't one regret or be disappointed in what is necessarily the case? What about a mathematician who is excited about the possibility that she has just discovered a new prime number, only to be disappointed to learn that the number is in fact not prime?<sup>18</sup> And what about the Pythagoreans, who were devastated to find out that the square root of two is an irrational number?<sup>19</sup> Both of these mathematical truths are necessary truths, they are essential to the numbers that they concern. But it still seems possible, indeed, perhaps even perfectly appropriate, in these cases to be disappointed in the discovery of such truths. And so if it is possible and perfectly appropriate to be disappointed in these necessary truths, truths that cannot be otherwise, could it not also be possible and perfectly appropriate to be disappointed in discovering essential truths about yourself, such as that performing some particular foolish,

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<sup>18</sup> Thanks to Larry Masek for raising this possible counterexample to me in conversation.

<sup>19</sup> Derek Parfit discusses the case of the Pythagoreans as one of wanting something to be true even if one knows that it is necessarily false in his *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984): p. 172. See also, Roy Sorensen, "The Symmetry Problem", in Fred Feldman and Ben Bradley (editors), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Death* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013): p. 245.

embarrassing, or vicious action, or experiencing some particular tragedy, is constitutive of your identity, is part of what makes you who you are?

What I think is going on in these sorts of cases is that the individuals involved are not disappointed in the relevant necessary truth. Our mathematician is not disappointed that the number that she has discovered is not prime, and the Pythagoreans were not disappointed that the square root of two is irrational. Rather, the individuals involved are disappointed in various things about themselves: that they did not actually discover a new prime number, or that they made a mistake, or that they wasted their time, that they got excited over nothing, that they had dedicated their lives to a worldview that turned out to be inconsistent with other things we know to be the case. In short, they are disappointed that they did not make better choices, or have better insights, or spend their time in better, more productive ways. If what I have argued in this paper is correct, once the relevant parties realize that even the aspects of themselves in which they find themselves disappointed are, in some sense, just as necessary as the mathematical truths they have discovered, that they could not have made better choices, or have had better insights, or have spent their time in better, more productive ways, then any sense of disappointment or regret should fade away. They should resign themselves to their fate.

## **V. Conclusion**

In this paper, I have discussed a unique response to tragedy that I am calling “fatal resignation”, according to which one resigns oneself to the tragic events that occur in one’s life upon coming to believe or accept that they could not have been otherwise. I argued that the most plausible metaphysical framework that can serve as a foundation for fatal resignation is a view called superessentialism, according to which every event that occurs in the life of a person, everything that happens to him or her and every decision and action that he or she performs, is

essential to that person, is constitutive of that person's identity. I argued that fatal resignation, and the superessentialist framework on which it is built, is neither vicious nor as implausible as it initially seems. It captures the idea that many of the events that occur in our lives are defining moments for us. It preserves the idea that, even in the face of tragedy, we remain free and responsible agents. But it also makes certain negative reactions to tragedy, such as regret and disappointment, inappropriate, and, indeed, irrational. I do not claim to have shown here that superessentialism is true or that fatal resignation is the correct response to tragedy. I mean only to have proposed that, in the midst of tragedy, when we are searching for answers, searching for meaning, searching for ways to come to terms with the tragic events that have befallen us, there is at least one additional strategy available, one that, I think, has been too often overlooked or underappreciated.

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