

Necessity and Deirdre McCloskey;
notes on *Crossing*¹

“What the tragedies demand is that we should look for analogies in our experience and our sense of the world to the necessities they express.”

Bernard Williams²

In an interview with *The Guardian* in 2002 Williams (who died the next year age 73) said of his philosophical career,

“The whole thing has been about spelling out the notion of inner necessity. That someone who has to do something, has to live in a certain way or discover something is really him, what he belongs to, what is his destiny – I’m drawn to all that.”³

As far as I know Williams never referred to McCloskey⁴, although her story is a clear instance of “someone who has to do something;” for inner necessity compelled McCloskey to change – at age 53 – from man to woman. **That** may be as radical as inner necessity gets this side of tragedy, so *Crossing* is a document of great value for the project of understanding necessity.

One kind of necessity manifests in the agent’s recognition of what she must do. In tragedy this is sometimes marked by the Greek verb’s inflection for the impersonal imperative. The Ajax of Sophocles, intent on suicide, says *poreuteon* – ‘the way must be taken.’ Williams argues that this imperative is not the Kantian sort – neither categorical, a matter of duty to the moral law, nor hypothetical, “hanging from an ‘if,’” a matter of means to an end. Ajax is “**identified** with,” Williams writes, “the standards of excellence represented by his father’s honours.”⁵ The

¹ Deirdre N. McCloskey, *Crossing: A Memoir* (University of Chicago Press, 1999).

² *Shame and Necessity* (1993) 19.

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/nov/30/academicexperts.highereducation>

⁴ All about her: <http://www.deirdremccloskey.com/>

⁵ *Shame and Necessity* 85.

aristos either lives finely or dies finely; continuation of life with honor having been excluded by the circumstances Ajax must die.

McCloskey, a renowned economist, says that “My gender crossing was motivated by identity, not by a balance sheet of utility. . . . It was a matter of identity, not cost and benefit.” “Economists,” she writes, “whether conservative or radical, think the answer to a ‘why’ question is always ‘some material advantage.’ Economists don’t seem too smart about identity.”⁶

What McCloskey means by identity most closely resembles what Heidegger meant by *Eigentlichkeit*, usually translated as ‘authenticity;’ better maybe as ‘ownness.’ ‘Ownness’ is achieved through struggle with ‘thrownness,’ *Geworfenheit*. On the content of this latter notion Thomas Sheehan writes, “We are already thrown into a family, a language, a social structure, the whole panoply of things and situations which we did not choose and which condition our actions and choices. From the first instant of our lives we are already confronted by a history as long as our gene-structure.”⁷ We are ‘thrown’ before we ever get the chance to make our lives our own.

Chance is the right word here, for access to ownness, identity in McCloskey’s sense, is a matter of ‘constitutive’ luck. The achievement of ownness is itself a function of thrownness, and thrownness is constitutive luck, good and bad.⁸

⁶ *Crossing* xiii, 92, 198.

⁷ Thomas Sheehan, *Karl Rahner: The Philosophical Foundations* (1987) 296; http://religiousstudies.stanford.edu/WWW/Sheehan/karl_rahner_and_transcendental_thomism.html

⁸ Williams’s phrase ‘constitutive luck’ first appears in this passage: “There has been a strain of philosophical thought which identifies the end of life as happiness, happiness as reflective tranquility, and tranquility as the product of self-sufficiency – what is not in the domain of the self is not in its control, and so is subject to luck and the contingent enemies of tranquility. The most extreme versions of this outlook in the Western tradition are certain doctrines of classical antiquity, though it is a notable fact about them that while the good man, the sage, was immune to the impact of incident luck, **it was a matter of what may be called constitutive luck that one was a sage, or capable of becoming one:** for the many and vulgar this was not (on the prevailing view) an available course.” Bernard Williams, “Moral Luck,” repr. in *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973-1980* (1981) 20 (my emphasis). One way or another it comes down to fortune. As Williams writes

During her transition McCloskey wrote letters explaining “what is going on” to certain friends and colleagues:

“In brief: I’ve always felt more female than male. What you have observed in my tough-guy mode was acted, though not recognized very clearly by the person doing the performance. I think most women can understand this better than most men.”⁹

In another letter to colleagues she wrote,

“my lifelong identity has been split, and is more fundamentally female than male. I learned the male presentation with difficulty, against my character. (I know the many victims of Don’s male aggression will smile at this news!)”¹⁰

There are two necessities at work in McCloskey’s explanation, two components of thrownness bearing on gender identity. There was the throw into life with an idiosyncrasy – a personal mixture – more female than male. And the throw into what Heidegger calls *das Man* – ‘the one,’ ‘the they’ – the agglomeration of conventions which demands that among countless other things a person sexed one way must live as gendered that same way. Heidegger writes of *das Man*,

“We take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as *they* [*man*] take pleasure; we read, see, and judge about literature and art as *they* see and judge; likewise we shrink back from the ‘great mass’ as *they* shrink back; we find ‘shocking’ what *they* find shocking. The ‘they,’ which is nothing definite, and which we all are, though not as the sum, prescribes the kind of

elsewhere, “Most advantages and admired characteristics are distributed in ways that, if not unjust, are at any rate not just, and some people are simply luckier than others. The ideal of morality is a value, moral value, that transcends luck. It must therefore lie beyond any empirical determination. It must lie not only in trying rather than succeeding, since success depends partly on luck, but in a kind of trying that lies **beyond the level at which the capacity to try can itself be a matter of luck.**” *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985) 195 (my emphasis). And in Williams’s view there is no such beyond.

⁹ *Crossing* 91.

¹⁰ *Crossing* 89.

being of everydayness. . . . The self of everyday Dasein is the *they-self* . . . As they-self, the particular Dasein has been *dispersed* into the 'they,' and must first find itself."¹¹

That 'boys/girls don't do that' is a clear injunction of *das Man*; **why** they mustn't is opaque. And if you turn to ask *das Man*, no one is there: "The 'they' is there alongside everywhere," Heidegger notes, "but in such a manner that it has always stolen away whenever Dasein presses for a decision."¹²

In recounting an episode which took place after Donald McCloskey's epiphany¹³ in 1995 that "I am a woman," Deirdre uses the image of putting on a uniform for submitting to *das Man*'s necessity:

"Donald went to the year's first faculty meeting in the Department of History and found himself playing his usual role as smart aleck, pushily male, presuming to take up emotional space the way men do. He found he still liked doing it, or maybe by now it was automatic. He was angry at himself: **Jesus, what a stupid performance. I don't deserve to be a woman. Could I absorb the 'dose of humility' for a woman's role?**¹⁴ **Yes, by recovering the character I had as a child.** He did not mean being childish, but being as he had before putting on manhood like a football uniform."¹⁵

Williams instances a similar metaphor in tragedy for the submission to necessity. The Chorus of Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* tells how the King came to sacrifice his daughter Iphigeneia. Artemis had becalmed the Greek fleet at Aulis, and the prophet makes it known that only sacrifice of the royal maiden can rouse the winds needed for the voyage to Troy.

"Agamemnon is described by the Chorus," says Williams, "as having considered, on the one hand, the horror of what he was asked to do, and on the other side, his responsibilities to

¹¹ *Being and Time* (tr. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson 1962) 167.

¹² *Being and Time* 165.

¹³ McCloskey's word. Lionel Trilling discusses varieties of epiphany in *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972) 89-92.

¹⁴ Sounds a bit off. What I think she means is restraining self-assertion-for-the-sake-of-pure-**self**-assertion; a masculine trait in McCloskey's view.

¹⁵ *Crossing* 53-54; bold italics in the original.

the expedition and his own position as its commander: 'How could I become a deserter?' he asked ([line] 212). Neither course was without evils. He decided in favour of sacrifice: 'May it be well,' he desperately said. When he had decided and, as the Chorus says, '**put on the harness of necessity**,' *anankas edu lepadnon* (218), a violent frenzy overcame him, and he changed to a state of mind in which he could dare anything (221); in this state of mind he carried out the sacrifice Whatever it is exactly that the Chorus reports Agamemnon as saying as he reaches his decision, they make it entirely clear what then happens: the father slaughters his daughter in a state of bloody rage."¹⁶

"Putting on manhood like a football uniform" the child McCloskey sacrificed the "more fundamentally female" to *das Man's* necessity. And not, *Crossing* makes painfully clear, once and for all and done, but by a necessary and continuous throttling of the "more fundamentally female;" if not in a state of bloody rage at least in a simmer of male hostility. The indicia of maleness are, in McCloskey's telling, egoism, aggression, and violence: "He learned in graduate school to be a tough-guy economist, as tough as professors get, anxious in America about their masculinity."¹⁷ Later he had a ferocious professional reputation, developed in a dozen years of harsh seminars as a faculty member in economics at the University of Chicago."¹⁸ Tough, ferocious, harsh; Donald was "not easygoing;" rather could be "implacable," "a jerk."¹⁹ And the "more female" in McCloskey all the while dislikes this male. In transition

¹⁶ *Shame and Necessity* 132-133; bold emphasis mine.

¹⁷ McCloskey notes in a diary entry during the transition: "Men seem worried about holding it together, staying men, as though they were threatened with slipping down into womanhood." *Crossing* 79. See Joseph A. Vandello and Jennifer K. Bosson, "Hard Won and Easily Lost: A Review and Synthesis of Theory and Research on Precarious Manhood," 14 *Psychology of Men and Masculinity* 101 (2013): "The precarious manhood thesis has three basic tenets: First, manhood is widely viewed as an elusive, achieved status, or one that must be earned (in contrast to womanhood, which is an ascribed, or assigned, status). Second, once achieved, manhood status is tenuous and impermanent; that is, it can be lost or taken away. Third, manhood is confirmed primarily by others and thus requires public demonstrations of proof."

¹⁸ *Crossing* 10.

¹⁹ *Crossing* 15, 92, 146.

McCloskey complains to a woman friend, “I am so *sick* of being treated as crazy because I dislike my gender.”²⁰

“The last bit of male behavior [his wife] can evoke in Donald is angry shouting . . . She has become the masculine force in the house, brimming with aggression, unwilling to talk.”²¹ McCloskey’s wife could not bear the change and got a divorce; they no longer communicate. So also with the son and daughter of the marriage. McCloskey has a grandson whom she cannot see because the child’s parents won’t allow it. It’s not hard to guess that her deepest hope is that this boy, now 18, will seek her out. In reckoning the cost of her transition she writes, “But the biggest cost to Deirdre, not to be measured, was the sacrifice of wife and son and daughter.”²²

A double sacrifice, then, from two necessities. First the forty years’ sacrifice of the ‘more female;’ second “the sacrifice of wife and son and daughter” for the sake of the transition.

What is the source of the necessity of the transition? Why did she have to do it? “It was a matter of identity, to say it again.” But what does that mean?

The key is to take *Crossing* as a text of Romanticism, that movement of thought which Isaiah Berlin, among many others,²³ labored to understand and expound. Three principal motifs of *Crossing* are recognizable as three doctrines in the thought of Johann Gottfried Herder, who was in Berlin’s view one of the “true fathers of Romanticism.”²⁴ Herder’s three teachings are: the notion of expressionism, the notion of belonging, and “the notion that ideals – true ideals – are often incompatible with one another and cannot be reconciled.”²⁵

²⁰ *Crossing* 125.

²¹ *Crossing* 81-82.

²² *Crossing* 225.

²³ See the ‘catalogue of interpreters’ in Arthur O. Lovejoy, “On the Discrimination of Romanticisms,” 39 *PMLA* 229 (1924); repr. in A. O. Lovejoy, *Essays in the History of Ideas* (1948).

²⁴ Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism* (2d ed. Henry Hardy 2013) 66. The other was Kant; and ‘the Magus of the North,’ Johann Georg Hamann, was grandfather.

²⁵ *Roots of Romanticism* 67.

On belonging: McCloskey is relentlessly gregarious, a serial joiner: co-captain of the high school football team; a contributing member and sooner or later presiding officer of a number of professional academic organizations; convivial diner in faculty eating clubs; participant in various cross-dressing conventions and clubs; nowadays never long between flights to speaking engagements around the world. But what Herder had in mind was a deeper sense of belonging: as Berlin describes it, “the notion that every [person] seeks to belong to some kind of group, or in fact does belong to it, and if taken out of it will feel alien and not at home. The whole notion of being at home, or being cut off from one’s natural roots, the whole idea of roots, the whole idea of belonging to a group, a sect, a movement, was invented largely by Herder.”²⁶ McCloskey’s transition was a departure from her former “tribe” (the *io-io*) and a joining of “the tribe of women;” where she **must** dwell in order to feel at home, not alien. “It was about living as who she wished to be.” At a professional conference “She talked with old male friends to reassure them and with new female friends to make contact. Not ‘contacts,’ plural, the utilitarian male idea of friendship, but ‘contact,’ singular, affirming an identity. ***The women’s luncheon out on this pool veranda is charming,*** Deirdre thought as she sat placidly in the sun, trading minor confidences, laughing at herself, allowing for the needs of other women, dissolving into we. *Noi, noi.*”²⁷

On incompatibility of ideals, values: the sacrifices were noted above. Of these McCloskey writes, “economics correctly teaches that ‘cost’ is not . . . money costs. It is what you sacrifice by taking the path. Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, and you chose one at the sacrifice of the other.”²⁸ She observes also that, “The notion that two people in a relationship can hurt each other without intent or blame, because they feel they must be themselves,” was not one McCloskey’s wife was ready for.²⁹ Williams’s comment is apt here: “the idea that the relations of human beings to society and to each other, if properly understood and properly enacted, can realize a harmonious identity that involves no real

²⁶ *Roots of Romanticism* 70.

²⁷ *Crossing* 211, 203.

²⁸ *Crossing* 225.

²⁹ *Crossing* 80.

loss” is an **illusion**.³⁰ The fact is rather that “we have no coherent conception of a world without loss, that goods conflict by their very nature, and that there can be no incontestable scheme for harmonising them.”³¹ The degree to which harmonization is possible in a given case is, once more, a matter of luck: “His wife touched a psychological truth when she complained about Donald’s ‘going too fast.’ He did and would go fast. Many [gender-crossers] went slower and saved their families. . . . Yet many went slowly and did not in the end save anything.”³²

On expressionism: “Herder believed,” Berlin recounts, “that one of the fundamental functions of human being was to express, to speak, and therefore that whatever a man did expressed his full nature; and if it did not express his full nature, it was because he maimed himself, or restrained himself, or had some kind of leash on his energies.”³³ McCloskey interprets the epiphany “I am a woman” in a quite similar way: “That’s what the crossdressing since age eleven had been about, closeted over four decades, confined within marriage. And the open dressing in clubs and at home during the eight months past, more and more. The womanhood was there beneath the surface and yearned to take form.”³⁴ That is: to express itself, articulate itself, embody itself.

Yet McCloskey denies any essentialism implied by this way of putting the matter.

“The separatist feminists regard male-to-female crossers as not, in essence, women. That means they are to be excluded, though feminists of the first wave, among whom Deirdre counted herself, or of the third, would say on the contrary that the Essential Woman is itself the problem. If women are essentially this or essentially that, by a biology

³⁰ *Shame and Necessity* 162.

³¹ Bernard Williams, Introduction to Isaiah Berlin, *Concepts and Categories* (ed. Henry Hardy 1999) xviii. This theme was the main concern of Berlin’s work and the greater part of his philosophical legacy: “What above all concerns Berlin . . . is the tension between conflicting values in one consciousness. Again and again . . . Berlin warns us against the deep error of supposing that all goods, all virtues, all ideals are compatible, and that what is desirable can ultimately be united into a harmonious whole without loss.” *Ibid.*

³² *Crossing* 62.

³³ *Roots of Romanticism* 67.

³⁴ *Crossing* 51.

locked in at birth, it is hard to see how feminism or anything else can ameliorate their condition. It would be nature all the way down, or so the radical separatists seemed to be supposing.”³⁵

Womanhood would in such case be, as Williams puts it, “a necessary identity, a role dealt out to an individual by nature speaking a social language.”³⁶ Williams and McCloskey are in apparent accord that, in his words, “Modern liberal thought rejects all necessary social identities.” Williams goes on to remark:

“Modern liberalism already stands at some distance from the ancient world not only in rejecting altogether the idea of a necessary identity, but in setting this problem. It has given itself the task of constructing a framework of social justice to control necessity and chance, in the sense both of mitigating their effects on the individual and of showing that what cannot be mitigated is not unjust. It is a distinctively modern achievement to have set the problem.”³⁷

Herder pioneered the way toward this modern stance of unprecedented individualism. As Charles Taylor tells it,

“Herder put forward the idea that each of us has an original way of being human. Each person has his or her own ‘measure’ is his way of putting it. This idea has entered very deep into modern consciousness. It is also new. Before the late eighteenth century no one thought that the differences between human beings had this kind of moral significance. There is a certain way of being human that is *my* way. I am called upon to live my life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else’s. But this gives a new importance to being true to myself. If I am not, I miss the point of my life, I miss what being human is for *me*.”³⁸

³⁵ *Crossing* 223.

³⁶ *Shame and Necessity* 128.

³⁷ *Shame and Necessity* 128-129.

³⁸ Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (1991) 28-29. Cf. Berlin: “[Romantic] Idealism means that you respect people for being prepared to give up health, wealth, popularity, power, all kinds of desirable things which their emotions demand, to relinquish that which they cannot control themselves, what Kant called the external factors, emotions which are themselves part of the psychological or physical world, to lay that aside for the sake of something with which they truly identify themselves,

This way of understanding human being raises the general question, Who is the 'I'? Berlin writes that "existentialism seems to me the truest heir of Romanticism;" the existentialists, he says, "reject . . . the attempt to say that certain things have essences (which merely means that things are what they are of necessity)."³⁹ So, for example, Ortega y Gasset avers of human being,

"Freedom is not an activity pursued by an entity that, apart from and previous to such pursuit, is already possessed of a fixed being. To be free means to be lacking in constitutive identity, not to have subscribed to a determined being, **to be able to be other than what one was**, to be unable to install oneself once and for all in any given being. The only attribute of the fixed, stable being in the free being is this constitutive instability."⁴⁰

Jacques Derrida, glossing Heidegger, says it briefly: "That the self projects itself does not mean that this self exists first and then projects itself or not, but that the self constitutes itself in projecting itself. The self is this projection."⁴¹

"The womanhood was there," McCloskey tells us. "Was there": it all comes down to thrownness. Our thrownness is our ground (*Grund*). We cannot go behind our thrownness, Heidegger says:

"As existent, it never comes back behind its thrownness Although it has *not* laid that basis [*Grund*] *itself*, it reposes in the weight of it The Self, which as such has to lay the basis for itself, can *never* get that basis into its power; and yet, as existing, it must take over Being-a-basis [*das Grundsein*]. To be its own thrown basis [*eigene geworfene*

no matter what. . . . Sincerity becomes a virtue in itself. That is at the heart of the whole thing." *Roots of Romanticism* 161-162.

³⁹ *Roots of Romanticism* 160, 165.

⁴⁰ José Ortega y Gasset, *History as a System and Other Essays Toward a Philosophy of History* (tr. Helene Weyl 1941; trans. of 'History as a System' is by William C. Atkinson) 203 (my emphasis).

⁴¹ Jacques Derrida, *Heidegger: The Question of Being and History* (tr. Geoffrey Bennington 2016) 186.

Grund] is that potentiality-for-Being which is the issue for care.”⁴²

Cannot get **behind** its thrownness because there is nothing **there**; nothing **beneath** our thrown ground. The self begins and ends as thrown being. “It is never existent *before* its basis, but only *from* it and *as this basis*. Thus ‘Being-a-basis’ means *never* to have power over one’s ownmost Being from the ground up.”⁴³

He goes on: “This ‘*not*’ [*dieses Nicht*] belongs to the existential meaning of ‘thrownness.’ It itself, being a basis, is a nullity [*eine Nichtigkeit*] of itself.” And this *Nicht* is “constitutive for this *Being* of Dasein—its thrownness.”⁴⁴

That we are each a ‘thrown nothing’ is the condition of the possibility of such freedom as finite beings can achieve. It’s a Kantian move: Kant says if the face of God were present to us we would obey the moral law sure enough, but from feelings of coercion; fear, for example. So it’s a good thing, Kant assures us, that we **don’t** know God, otherwise we would be no more than puppets. Our ignorance is the condition of the possibility of our freedom to be moral beings.⁴⁵ The existentialists go Kant one better: the nothing that is our ground is the condition of the possibility of our freedom to be in any way at all.⁴⁶ Our null ground is the dimension of what Nietzsche calls our “plastic power,” *plastische Kraft*.

⁴² *Being and Time* 330.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ See Hilary Putnam, *The Many Faces of Realism* (1988): “To be blunt, we are called upon to use reason and free will in a situation which is in certain important respects very dark. The situation is dark because reason does not give us such a thing as an inclusive human end which we should all seek What Kant is saying, to put it positively, is that we should think for ourselves . . . and that fact is itself the most valuable fact about our lives. *That* fact is the characteristic with respect to which we are all equals.” 49-50. Again Williams’s point: the capacity to think and decide for ourselves **must**, on Kant’s view, lie beyond the level at which having or gaining or using such capacity can itself be a matter of luck.

⁴⁶ David Farrell Krell: “for Heidegger, nihilation is the possibility of experience as such.” “Analysis” in Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche, Volume IV: Nihilism* (tr. Frank A. Capuzzi; ed. David Farrell Krell 1982) 248 fn. 48.

Ortega once more: “Man is an infinitely plastic entity of which one may make what one will, precisely because of itself it is nothing save only the mere potentiality to be ‘as you like.’”⁴⁷

So final point: the notion of plasticity links Romanticism and its descendant existentialism with Darwinism, where it’s ‘variation all the way up’: from the gene level, to the epigenetic, to the behavioral, to what evolutionists are recognizing as ‘the symbolic.’⁴⁸ The continued thriving of the one and only life on the planet depends on its ability to generate different forms of itself. Variants are plasticity’s sole feedstock.

Williams remarks of the supernatural in tragedy that there is a “special indeterminacy” about its workings “and the ways in which it can generate necessities and suppress possibilities.”⁴⁹ With something of the like in mind about freedom Heidegger claims the human essence (*Wesen*) is “uncanny” (*unheimlich*);⁵⁰ “nothing human” (*Dieses Wesen ist nichts Menschliches*).⁵¹ By the line of thought just reviewed it is a mechanism for producing variant necessities and possibilities.

“if we ask what sense the tragedies of antiquity may make to us when we consider our ethical lives and our roles, not as tragic people but simply as people, even their supernatural aspects may find some analogy in our experience.”⁵²

We owe thanks to Deirdre McCloskey for enriching our experience with her frank witness to the range of human variation.

DCW 12/6/2016

⁴⁷ *History as a System* 203-204.

⁴⁸ Eva Jablonka and Marion J. Lamb, *Evolution in Four Dimensions: Genetic, Epigenetic, Behavioral, and Symbolic Variation in the History of Life* (illustr. Anna Zeligowski; rev. ed. 2014). See also Mary Jane West-Eberhard, *Developmental Plasticity and Evolution* (2003); and Marc Kirschner and John Gephart, “Evolvability,” 95 *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. USA* 8420 (1998).

⁴⁹ *Shame and Necessity* 145.

⁵⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics* (tr. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt 2000) 156-175; analysis of the choral ode in *Antigone*.

⁵¹ At least twice. “On the Question of Being,” repr. in Martin Heidegger, *Pathmarks* (ed. William McNeill 1998) 300; and *Nietzsche, Vol. IV: Nihilism* 282-283.

⁵² *Shame and Necessity* 165-166.