

Katharsis

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I

1. Tragedy, says Aristotle, is a mimesis of a serious and complete action, having magnitude, which through pity and fear brings about a katharsis of such emotions.¹ But what Aristotle meant by what he said, in particular, what he meant in claiming that tragedy produces a katharsis, is a question which has dominated western philosophy and literary criticism since the Renaissance.² In the last hundred years it has been widely accepted that by katharsis Aristotle meant a purgation of the emotions.³ Now there is a sense in which the interpretation of katharsis as purgation is unexceptionable: having aroused the emotions of pity and fear, tragedy does leave us with a feeling of relief; and it is natural for humans to conceive of this emotional process in corporeal terms: as having gotten rid of or expelled the emotions.⁴ But at this level of generality, the interpretation is as unhelpful as it is

¹ See *Poetics* 6, 1449b22-28.

² See Baxter Hathaway, *The Age of Criticism: The Late Renaissance in Italy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962), pp. 205-300.

³ This is largely due to Jacob Bernays' influential *Zwei Abhandlungen über die aristotelische Theorie des Drama* (Berlin, 1880, first published Braslau, 1857). A chapter of this book has been translated as "Aristotle on the Effect of Tragedy" by Jonathan and Jennifer Barnes in *Articles on Aristotle*, v. 4 (J. Barnes, M. Schofield & R. Sorabji eds., London, 1979). Bernays' interpretation had a wider influence than on Aristotelian scholarship alone; for Bernays was Freud's wife's uncle and it seems that Freud and Breuer were aware of the interpretation and relied on it when formulating his conception of catharsis in the early stages of the formation of psychoanalytic theory. (See Bennett Simon, *Mind & Madness in Ancient Greece* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978, pp. 140-143).) The katharsis-as-purge metaphor is used by Plato in the *Sophist* (230C-231E) where the Socratic *elenchus* is represented as purging one of false beliefs.

⁴ See e.g. Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, (London: Hogarth Press, 1981), X:233-34, XII:218-26; XIII:78-90; XIV:73-102, XIX:235-9; Wilfrid Bion, *Learning From Experience* (London: Karnac, 1984) and *Second Thoughts*, (London: Karnac, 1984); Melanie Klein, *Narrative of a Child Analysis* (London: Hogarth Press, 1961) pp. 31ff, *Contributions to Psycho-An-*

unexceptionable. For what we wish to know is how Aristotle conceived of the process of katharsis as it occurs in the performance of a tragedy. Even if we accept that Aristotle drew on the metaphor of purgation in naming this emotional process “katharsis”, what we want to know is: did he really think that this process was an emotional purgation or did he merely use the metaphor to name a process that he understood in some different way? At the level of mere metaphor there seems little reason to choose between the medical metaphor of purgation and its traditional religious competitor, purification, not to mention more general meanings of “cleansing”, “separation” etc.⁵ In fact, the preponderant use which Aristotle makes of the word “katharsis” is as a term for menstrual discharge.⁶ As far as I know, no one in the extended debate about tragic katharsis has suggested the model of menstruation. But why not? Is it not more compelling to think of a natural process of discharge of the emotions than of their purging?

It is only when we shift from the question of what metaphors Aristotle might have been drawing on to the question of what he took the process of katharsis in tragedy to be that there is any point in choosing among the various models. Of course, the task of figuring out what Aristotle meant by katharsis is made all the more alluring, as well as frustrating, by a passing remark which Aristotle makes in the *Politics* while discussing the katharsis that music produces: “the word ‘katharsis’ we use at present without explanation, but when later we speak of poetry we will treat the subject with more precision.”⁷ We seem to be missing the section of the *Poetics* in which Aristotle explicitly set out what he meant.⁸

alysis (London: Hogarth Press, 1948), pp. 140-151, 303, *Developments in Psycho-Analysis* (London: Hogarth Press, 1952); W.R.D. Fairbairn, “Schizoid Factors in the Personality”, in *Psychoanalytic Studies of the Personality* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984); Richard Wollheim, “The Mind and the Mind’s Image of Itself”, in *On Art and the Mind* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), “Wish-Fulfilment”, in *Rational Action* (ed. Ross Harrison, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), *The Thread of Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

⁵ The idea that purgation and purification need not be treated as contraries is argued by Humphrey House, *Aristotle’s Poetics* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1956), p. 104-111, and by Stephen Halliwell, *Aristotle’s Poetics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), pp. 184-201.

⁶ See e.g. *Generation of Animals* I.20, 728b3, 14; IV.5, 773b1; IV.6, 775b5; *History of Animals* VI.18, 573a2, a7; VI.28, 578b18; VII.2, 582b7, 30; VII.4, 584a8; VIII.11, 587b2, b30-33, 588a1. For the use of “katharsis” to describe seminal discharge, *Generation of Animals* II.7, 747a19; for the discharge of urine: *History of Animals* VI.18, 573a23; for birth discharge: *History of Animals* VI.20, 574b4.

⁷ *Politics* VIII.7, 1341b37-39.

⁸ Aristotle uses the word “katharsis” only twice in *Poetics*: once, as we have seen, in the

In this paper I will first isolate a series of constraints which any adequate interpretation of katharsis must satisfy. These constraints will be derived from a consideration of Aristotle's extended discussion of the emotions, of the effect of tragedy, and of how tragedy produces this effect. The constraints may not be tight enough to delimit a single acceptable interpretation, but I shall argue that they are strong enough to eliminate all the traditional interpretations. Second, I will offer an interpretation of tragic katharsis which satisfies all the constraints.

2. Let us begin with the suggestion that a katharsis is a purgation of the emotions. To take this suggestion seriously one must think that, for Aristotle, katharsis is a cure for an emotionally pathological condition: tragedy helps one to expel or get rid of unhealthy pent-up emotions or noxious emotional elements.⁹ The only significant evidence for this interpretation comes from Aristotle's discussion of the katharsis which music produces in the *Politics*:¹⁰

definition of tragedy and once to refer to the ritual of purification at which Orestes is recognized by his sister, Iphigenia, *Poetics* 17, 1455b15).

⁹ Bernays is explicit that katharsis is a cure for a pathological condition.

¹⁰ See *Politics* VIII.5-7. Bernays argues persuasively that to understand the concept of tragic katharsis, we must look to Aristotle's discussion in the *Politics* of the katharsis which music produces; though, as we shall see, he is less persuasive in his interpretation of that discussion. G.R. Else and, following him, Leon Golden have argued that one should not look outside the *Poetics* for the meaning of tragic katharsis. (G.F. Else, *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957) p. 439ff; Leon Golden, "Catharsis", *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, 1962; and "Mimesis and Catharsis", *Classical Philology*, 1969.) This, I believe, is a misapplication of a principle from new criticism. The *Poetics* was not meant to be a self-contained universe; it was an integral part of Aristotle's philosophy. If, for example, we were trying to determine what Aristotle meant by art (*techne*) or poetry (*poiesis*) in the *Poetics*, there would be no plausibility to claiming that we should completely restrict ourselves to the *Poetics*' discussion. Of course, Aristotle does use "*poiesis*" in a special way in the *Poetics*: it is to be translated as "poetry" rather than as a "making" which is the appropriate translation in the *Metaphysics*. However, if we ignore all other Aristotelian works we remain blind to the philosophically important fact that, for Aristotle, poetry is a special type of making. There is no doubt that we must approach other texts with care, for, to return to our current concern, Aristotle's use of "katharsis" when discussing medical purging may be different in significant respects from his use of the term when discussing tragedy. But such interpretive difficulties are not sufficient grounds for ignoring other texts altogether. (Indeed, Else's and Golden's stricture led them to formulate a highly implausible account of katharsis, in which katharsis is not an effect on the audience of tragedy, but a resolution of the events in the play. This implausible interpretation depends upon an even more implausible translation of Aristotle's definition of tragedy. For an excellent criticism of this interpretation, see Stephen Halliwell,

We accept the division of melodies proposed by certain philosophers into ethical melodies, melodies of action, and passionate or inspiring melodies, each having, as they say, a mode corresponding to it. But we maintain further that music should be studied, not for the sake of one, but of many benefits, that is to say, with a view to education, to katharsis (the word katharsis we use at present without explanation, but when hereafter we speak of poetry we will treat the subject with more precision) – music may also serve for intellectual enjoyment, for relaxation and for recreation after exertion. It is clear, therefore, that all the modes must be employed by us, but not all of them in the same manner. In education the most ethical modes are to be preferred, but in listening to the performances of others we may admit the modes of action and passion also. For emotions such as pity and fear, or again enthusiasm, exist very strongly in some souls, and have more or less influence over all. Some persons fall into a religious frenzy, whom we see as a result of the sacred melodies – when they have used the melodies that excite the soul to mystic frenzy – restored as though they had found healing and katharsis. Those who are influenced by pity or fear, and every emotional nature, must have a like experience, and others in so far as each is susceptible to such emotions, and all receive a sort of katharsis and are relieved with pleasure. The kathartic melodies likewise give an innocent pleasure to men. Such are the modes and melodies in which those who perform music at the theatre should be invited to compete.¹¹

It does seem that Aristotle distinguishes kathartic melodies from those “ethical melodies” which help to train and reinforce character – and thus that the point of katharsis cannot in any straightforward way be ethical education.¹² But the only reason for thinking that katharsis is a cure for a pathological condition is that Aristotle’s primary example of katharsis is as a cure for religious ecstasy.¹³ However, even if we accept that religious ecstasy is a pathological condition, the idea that katharsis is meant to apply to a pathological condition can only be sustained by ignoring an important claim which Aristotle makes in the quoted text. Having begun his discussion of katharsis with the example of those who are particularly susceptible to religious frenzy, Aristotle goes on to say that the same thing holds

Aristotle’s Poetics Appendix 5, esp. pp. 354-356.)

¹¹ *Politics* VIII.7, 1341b32-42a18. Here I have made a few changes in the revised Oxford translation: I use “ethical melodies” rather than “melodies of character” for “*ta ethika*”; I use a transliteration of “*katharsis*” rather than translate it as “purgation”; I translate “*pathos*” as “emotion” rather than as “feeling”; and I translate “*kouphid-zesthai meth’ hedones*” as “relieved with pleasure” rather than as “lightened and delighted”.

¹² Bernays makes this point. Halliwell interprets this passages so as to diminish Aristotle’s apparent contrast between education and katharsis. For a criticism of this interpretation, see section 4, below.

¹³ See esp. *Politics* VIII.7, 1342a4-11. Bernays takes religious ecstasy to be a pathological condition.

for anyone who is influenced by pity and fear and, more generally, anyone who is emotionally influenced by events.¹⁴ In case there should be any doubt that Aristotle means to include us all under that category he continues: “and a certain katharsis and lightening with pleasure occurs *for everyone*”.¹⁵ But everyone includes virtuous people and it is absurd to suppose that, for Aristotle, virtuous people were in any kind of pathological condition.

Nor does the idea of a purgation seem like a plausible analogue for tragic katharsis. In a medical purge, as the Aristotelian author of the *Problems* says, “drugs are not concocted – they make their way out carrying with them anything which gets in their way: this is called purging”.¹⁶ The idea of a purgation seems to be that of the introduction of a foreign substance, a drug, which later gets expelled from the body untransformed along with the noxious substances. But the idea of a purgation as it is suggested by the commentators is of a homeopathic cure: we introduce pity and fear in order to purge the soul of these emotions.¹⁷ The problem is that though the idea of a homeopathic cure was available in Aristotle’s time, there is no evidence that he was aware of it and lots of evidence that he thought that medical cure was effected by introducing contraries.¹⁸ But once we abandon the idea that for Aristotle a medical purgation was a homeopathic cure, there seems to be little to recommend the medical analogy. What foreign substance is introduced to expel what contrary noxious substance in the soul? Why should one think that the virtuous man has any noxious elements in his soul which need purging?

Indeed, if we look to Aristotle’s account of the emotions, they do not seem to be the sort of things which are readily conceived as purgeable. Fear, for example, is defined as a pain or disturbance due to imagining some destructive or painful evil in the future.¹⁹ That is, the emotion of fear is not

¹⁴ 1342a11-13: *tauto de touto anagkaion paschein kai tous eleemonas kai tous phobetikous kai tous olos pathetikous*.

¹⁵ “*kai pasi gignesthai tina katharsin kai kouphidzesthai meth’ hedones*” 1342a14-15; my translation and emphasis. (By the way, this statement seems to me to provide absolutely conclusive evidence against Humphrey House’s claim that, for Aristotle, a phronimos at the theatre would experience no katharsis. See his *Aristotle’s Poetics*, op.cit., chapter VIII.)

¹⁶ *Problems* 42, 864a34.

¹⁷ See e.g. Franz Susemihl and R.D. Hicks, *The Politics of Aristotle* (London: Macmillan 1894, p. 651, n.1), who along with Humphrey House (op.cit. p. 110) quote Milton’s preface to *Samson Agonistes*. Cp. Halliwell, op.cit., pp. 192-4.

¹⁸ Halliwell is aware of this: op.cit., p. 193, n. 37. See *Nicomachean Ethics* 1104b17 f, *Eudemian Ethics* 1220a36.

¹⁹ *Rhetoric* II.5, 1382a21ff.

exhausted by the feeling one has when one feels fear. In addition to the feeling, the emotion of fear also requires the belief that one is in danger and a state of mind which treats the danger as worthy of fear. All three conditions are required to constitute the emotion of fear.²⁰ If, for example, one believes one is in danger but one's state of mind is confidence in being able to overcome it, one will not feel fear.²¹ An emotion, then, is not merely a feeling, it is an orientation to the world. But if an emotion requires not merely a feeling, but also a belief about the world one is in and an attitude toward it, then it is hard to know what could be meant by purging an emotion. An emotion is too complex and world-directed an item for the purgation model to be of significant value.

3. I do not wish to spend time on the idea that tragic katharsis effects a purification of the emotions, for though this view has had proponents since the Renaissance, it is not seriously held today.²² The major problems with the idea of purification are, first, that virtuous people will experience a certain katharsis in the theatre, but their emotional responses are in no sense impure; second, it is not clear what is meant by purifying the emotions. One possibility was suggested by Eduard Muller: "Who can any longer doubt that the purification of pity, fear and the other passions consists in, or at least is very closely connected with the *transformation* of the pain that engendered them into pleasure?"²³ The fact that we do derive a certain pleasure from the pitiable and fearful events that are portrayed in tragedy is, I think, of the greatest importance in coming to understand tragic katharsis. However, it is a mistake to think that, in tragedy, pain is *transformed* into pleasure. Pity and fear are not abolished by the tragedy; it is just that in addition to the pity and fear one feels in response to the tragic events, one is also capable of experiencing a certain pleasure. Moreover, even if there were a transformation, to conceive of it as a purification is to assume that the original emotional response of pity and fear is somehow polluted or unclean. But this isn't so. Aristotle makes it abundantly clear that pity and fear are the appropriate responses to a good tragic plot.²⁴ The

²⁰ See *Rhetoric* II.1 and II.5. In addition, Aristotle believes there are certain physiological changes which accompany an emotion. *On the Soul*, 403a16-19.

²¹ *Rhetoric* II.5, 1382b30ff.

²² See Hathaway op.cit.

²³ Eduard Muller (*Theorie der Kunst bei den Alten*, Vol. 2, pp. 62, 377-88) quoted by Bernays, op.cit., p. 156.

²⁴ See e.g. *Poetics*, 13-14 where plots are evaluated on the basis of the type of emotional response they tend to evoke in an audience. Those that do not produce pity and fear, but, for example, disgust are rejected as inadequate for tragedy.

pain of pity and fear is not an impurity which needs to be removed, it is the emotional response which a virtuous man will and ought to feel.

4. Perhaps the most sophisticated view of katharsis, which has been powerfully argued for in recent years, is the idea that katharsis provides an education of the emotions.²⁵ The central task of an ethical education is to train youths to take pleasure and pain at the right sort of objects: to feel pleasure in acting nobly and pain at the prospect of acting ignobly.²⁶ This is accomplished by a process of habituation: by repeatedly encouraging youths to perform noble acts they come to take pleasure in so acting. Virtue, for Aristotle, partially consists in having the right emotional response to any given set of circumstances: feeling pain at painful circumstances, pleasure at pleasurable ones, and not feeling too much or too little pain or pleasure, but the right amount.²⁷

Tragedy, it is argued, provides us with the appropriate objects towards which to feel pity and fear. Tragedy, one might say, trains us or habituates us in feeling pity and fear in response to events that are worthy of those emotions. Since our emotions are being evoked in the proper circumstances, they are also being educated, refined, or clarified. By being given repeated opportunities to feel pity and fear in the right sort of circumstances, we are less likely to experience such emotions inappropriately: namely, in response to circumstances which do not merit pity and fear. Since virtue partially consists in having the appropriate emotional responses to circumstances, tragedy can be considered part of an ethical education.

There are two overwhelming advantages to this interpretation which, I think, any adequate account of katharsis ought to preserve. First, this interpretation relies on a sophisticated, and genuinely Aristotelian, conception of the emotions. Tragedy provides (a mimesis of) certain objects toward which it is appropriate to form certain beliefs and evaluative attitudes as well as feel certain pains. Second, this interpretation offers an account of the peculiar pleasure we derive from a performance of tragedy.²⁸

²⁵ See Humphrey House, *Aristotle's Poetics*, Stephen Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics*, Leon Golden, "Catharsis" and Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*. Golden and Nussbaum speak of a "clarification" of the emotions.

²⁶ *Nicomachean Ethics* II.

²⁷ *Nicomachean Ethics* II.6, 1106b6-28. This is Aristotle's famous doctrine of the mean.

²⁸ Aristotle is clear that one need not actually see a performance on stage in order to experience the effect of tragedy; simply hearing it read out loud is sufficient. See *Poetics* 14, 1453b4-7; 6, 1450b18-19, 26, 1462a11-12. For Aristotle's mention of the peculiar and appropriate pleasure of tragedy, see *Poetics* 14, 1453b10-14; 23, 1459a17-24; 26, 1462b12-

Aristotle, as is well known, believes in an innate desire to understand, and a special pleasure attends the satisfaction of that desire.²⁹ If tragedy helps to provide an ethical education, then in experiencing it we come better to understand the world, as fit object of our emotional responses, and better to understand ourselves, in particular, the emotional responses of which we are capable and which the events portrayed require. It is because we gain a deeper insight into the human condition that we derive a special cognitive pleasure from tragedy.

This interpretation does have a genuinely Aristotelian ring to it: it is a position that is consonant with much that Aristotle believed and it is a position he might have adopted. But I don't think he did. First, as we have seen, a virtuous person will experience a certain katharsis when he sees or hears a tragedy performed, but he is in no need of education.³⁰ Second, the *Politics*' discussion of music clearly distinguishes music which is educative of the emotions and should be employed in ethical training from music which produces katharsis.³¹ The best attempt I have seen to meet this problem is by arguing that the type of katharsis which Aristotle is contrasting with ethical education is only an extreme form derived from orgiastic music:

"Once attention is shifted to types of katharsis connected with more common emotions and with those who do not experience them to a morbidly abnormal degree (and both these conditions are true of the tragic variety), it is possible to discern that katharsis may after all be in some cases compatible with the process which Aristotle characterizes in *Politics* 8 as a matter of habituation in feeling the emotions in the right way and towards the right objects (1340a16-18) . . . Simply to identify tragic katharsis with a process of ethical exercise and habituation for the emotions through art would be speculative and more than the evidence justifies. But to suggest that these two things ought to stand in an intelligible relation to one another (as the phrase 'for education and katharsis' at *Pol.* 1341b38 encourages to see them), is only to argue that tragic katharsis should be capable of integration into Aristotle's general philosophy of the emotions, and of their cognitive and moral importance, as well as into the framework of his theory of tragedy as a whole."³²

Of course, tragic katharsis and ethical education might stand in an "intelligible" relation to each other even if they served completely different purposes, but when one sees the phrase 'for education and katharsis' quoted out of context, it is tempting to suppose that education and katharsis

14, cf. 1462a15-17.

²⁹ *Metaphysics* I.1.

³⁰ Nor, contra Golden and Nussbaum, do his emotions need to be clarified.

³¹ *Politics* VIII.7, 1341b32-1342a18 (quoted above).

³² Halliwell op.cit., pp. 195-6.

are part of a single project. Unfortunately, the text will not support this supposition. Aristotle explicitly says that although one should use all the different types of melodies, one should not use them for the same function.³³ And when he says that music may be used “for the sake of education and of katharsis”,³⁴ he is unambiguously listing different benefits that may be derived from music.³⁵ Nor is it true that, in this passage, Aristotle is only contrasting education with an extreme orgiastic form of katharsis. For although, as we have seen, he begins by talking about the katharsis of religious frenzy, he very quickly goes on to mention a certain katharsis had by everyone, and the fact that two lines before he explicitly mentions those who are susceptible to pity and fear suggests that he had tragic katharsis in mind.³⁶ Thus the contrast which Aristotle draws between ethical education and katharsis cannot easily be brushed aside.

Moreover, Aristotle continues by saying that vulgar audiences will have vulgar tastes and that professional musicians ought to cater to those tastes, since even vulgar people need relaxation.³⁷ But if even some melodies are ethically educative, why doesn't Aristotle insist that the vulgar be confined to such uplifting tunes? The answer, I think, is that it's too late. Aristotle contrasts two types of audience: the vulgar crowd composed of artisans and laborers on the one hand, and those who are free and *have already been educated* on the other.³⁸ In each case the characters of the audience have been formed and ethical education would be either futile or superfluous.

Aristotle clearly thinks that tragedy is among the highest of art forms. Aside from the fact that tragedy is the culmination of a teleological development of art forms which began with dithyrambs and phallic songs,³⁹ and aside from the fact that Aristotle explicitly holds it in higher regard than epic, notwithstanding his enormous respect for Homer, Aristotle criticises certain forms of inferior plots as due to the demands of a vulgar audience.

³³ 1342a1-2.

³⁴ My translation of 1341b38.

³⁵ This is made clear by 1341b36-38: . . . *ou mias heneken opheleias tei mousikei dein alla kai pleionon charin (kai gar paideias heneken kai katharseos . . .)*. But in case there is any doubt, it is settled by “triton” at 1341b40: clearly, education, katharsis, and intellectual enjoyment are being listed as three distinct benefits obtainable from music.

³⁶ 1342b11-15.

³⁷ 1342b18-29. This passage is also cited by Bernays as part of his argument that katharsis is not meant by Aristotle to be morally educative.

³⁸ *ho men eleutheros kai pepaideumenos* (1342b19). Cp. also *Poetics* 26 (esp. 1461b27-28) which suggests that tragedy will be appreciated by a better sort of audience.

³⁹ *Poetics* 4, 1449a10-15.

For example, Aristotle criticizes those allegedly tragic plots which end with the good being rewarded and the bad being punished.

“It is ranked first only through the weakness of the audiences; the poets merely follow their public, writing as its wishes dictate. But the pleasure here is not that of tragedy . . .”⁴⁰

This would suggest that a proper tragic plot would be appreciated and enjoyed above all by a cultivated person. It is hard to escape the conclusion that, for Aristotle, education is for youths, tragic katharsis is for educated, cultivated adults.

The third reason why the education-interpretation of katharsis ought to be rejected is that there is a fundamental sense in which tragedy is not evoking the proper responses to events portrayed. Should we be spectators to tragic events which occur not in the theatre but in real life to those who are close to us, or to those who are like us, the proper emotional response would be (the right amount of) pity and fear. To take any kind of pleasure from these events would be a thoroughly inappropriate response. Thus there is a sense in which tragedy provides a poor training for the emotional responses of real life: first, we should not be trained to seek out tragedy in real life, as we do seek it in the theatre; second, we should not be trained to find any pleasure in real life tragic events, as we do find pleasure in the tragic portrayals of the poets. Although a mimesis of pitiable and fearful events must to a certain extent be like the real life events which they represent, the mimesis must, for Aristotle, also be in an important respect *unlike* those same events. For it is precisely because the mimesis is a mimesis that a certain type of pleasure is an appropriate response to it. Were it not for the fact that Aristotle recognized a salient difference between mimesis and the real life events it portrays, Aristotle would have had to agree with Plato that poetry should be banned from the ideal state. Aristotle disagrees with Plato not over whether tragedy can be used as part of an ethical education in the appropriate emotional responses, but over whether a mimesis is easily confused with the real thing. Aristotle's point is that although the proper emotional response to a mimesis would be inappropriate to the real event, a mimesis is sufficiently unlike the real event that there is no danger of it having an improper educational effect on the audience. From the point of view of ethical education alone, poetry is allowed into the republic not because it has any positive educational value, but because it can be shown to lack any detrimental effects. If poetry has positive value, it must lie outside the realm of ethical education.

⁴⁰ *Poetics* 13, 1453a33-36.

“There is not the same kind of correctness in poetry,” Aristotle says, “as in politics, or indeed any other art.”⁴¹ The constraints on the poet differ considerably from the constraints on the politician. The politician is constrained to legislate an education in which youths will be trained to react appropriately to real life events; in particular, to feel the right amount of pity and fear in response to genuinely pitiable and fearful events. The tragedian is constrained to evoke pity and fear through a mimesis of such events, but he is also constrained to provide a katharsis of those very emotions. It is in the katharsis of those emotions that the emotional response appropriate to poetry goes beyond that which is appropriate to the corresponding real life events. Thus in coming to understand what katharsis is, we will be approaching an understanding of the special contribution poetry makes to life.

The final reason why the education interpretation of katharsis ought to be rejected is that in the end it does not explain the peculiar pleasure of tragedy.⁴² Of course, a proper appreciation of tragedy does require a finely tuned cognitive appreciation of the structure of the plot and there is no doubt that the exercise of one’s cognitive faculties in the appreciation of tragedy does afford a certain pleasure. But the pleasure we derive from tragedy is not primarily that which comes from satisfying the desire to understand.

In fact, there is little textual support in the *Poetics* for the hypothesis that the peculiar pleasure of tragedy is a cognitive pleasure. The main support comes from *Poetics* 4, where Aristotle explains the origins of poetry:

It is clear that the general origin of poetry was due to two causes, each of them part of human nature. Imitation [*mimesis*] is natural to man from childhood, one of his advantages over the lower animals being this, that he is the most imitative creature in the world, and *learns at first by imitation*. And it is also natural for all to delight in works of imitation. The truth of this second point is shown by experience; though the objects themselves may be painful to see, we *delight* to view the most realistic representations of them in art, the forms for example of the lowest animals and of dead bodies. The explanation is to be found in a further fact: *to be learning something is the greatest of pleasures not only to the philosopher, but also to the rest of mankind, however small their capacity for it; the reason of the delight in seeing the picture is that one is at the same time learning and reasoning [sullogidzesthai] what each thing is, e.g. that this is that*; for if one has not seen the thing before, one’s pleasure will not be in the picture as an imitation of it, but will be due to the execution or coloring or some similar cause.”⁴³

⁴¹ *Poetics* 25, 1460b13-15.

⁴² Here I am particularly indebted to Giovanni Ferrari.

⁴³ *Poetics* 4, 1448b4-19, my emphasis. I have altered the revised Oxford translation of 1448b14-15: *sullogidzesthai ti hekaston, hoion hoti houtos ekeinos* which is rendered

It is important to note that Aristotle is here concerned with the *origins* of a process which culminates in the development of tragedy. Children begin learning by their early imitations of the adults around them, and in learning they derive a rudimentary form of cognitive pleasure: but this is only an explanation of how elementary forms of imitation naturally arise among humans. It is not an explanation of the peculiar pleasure of tragedy.

One must also be cautious in interpreting Aristotle's claim about the pleasure in learning. Aristotle is trying to explain why we take pleasure in viewing imitations of objects that are themselves painful to look at. Now it is tempting to assimilate this passage with Aristotle's admonition in the *Parts of Animals* that one should not shy away "with childish aversion" from studying blood and guts and even the humblest of animals: for the study of even the lowest of animals yields a pleasure which derives from discovering the intelligible causes of its functioning and the absence of chance.⁴⁴ For Aristotle there contrasts the cognitive pleasure derived from coming to understand causes from the pleasure derived from an imitation:

For even if some [animals] are not pleasing to the sense of sight, nevertheless, creating nature provides extraordinary pleasures for those who are capable of understanding causes and who are by nature philosophical. Indeed, it would be unreasonable and strange if mimetic representations of them were attractive, because they disclose the mimetic skill of the painter or sculptor, and the original realities themselves were not more interesting, to all at any rate who have eyes to discern the reasons that determined their formation.⁴⁵

Aristotle is saying that there are two distinct pleasures to be derived from animals that are in themselves unpleasant to look at: a cognitive pleasure in understanding their causes, and a 'mimetic pleasure' in appreciating an artist's skill in accurately portraying these ugly creatures. It is this distinctively 'mimetic pleasure' that Aristotle is concentrating on in *Poetics* 4. The reason why he focuses on the artistic representation of an ugly animal is that he wants to be sure he is isolating the pleasure derived *from the mimesis*, rather than the pleasure one might derive from the beauty of the animal itself. In explaining this 'mimetic pleasure', Aristotle does allude to the pleasure derived from learning. But that Aristotle has only the most rudimentary form of 'learning' in mind is made clear by his claim that this pleasure in learning is available not only to the philosophically minded, but

there as "gathering the meaning of things, e.g. that the man there is so-and-so". My translation is more literal which I think is important to the interpretation of this passage.

⁴⁴ *Parts of Animals* I.5, 645a4-37.

⁴⁵ *Parts of Animals* I.5, 645a8-15.

to all of mankind *however small their capacity for it*. What one is 'learning' is that *this is that*: i.e. that *this* (picture of a dead mouse) is (an accurate representation of) *that* ([a] dead mouse). The 'reasoning' one is doing is confined to realizing that one thing (an artistic representation) is an instance of another. The pleasure, Aristotle says, is precisely that which would be unavailable to someone incapable of formulating this elementary realization: that is, to someone who had never seen a mouse.⁴⁶ Such a person would not be able to recognize representation *as a representation*, and thus his pleasure would be confined to appreciating the colors and shapes in the painting. Thus it is a mistake to interpret this passage as suggesting that the reasoning is in any sense a reasoning about causes. *Poetics* 4, then, is about the most elementary pleasures which can be derived from the most elementary of *mimeseis*. Although this is a first step towards an understanding of tragic pleasure, it does not lend support to the thesis that tragic pleasure is a species of cognitive pleasure.

Now Aristotle does repeatedly insist that a good tragedy must have an intelligible plot structure. There must be a reason why the tragedy occurs: thus Aristotle says that the events must occur plausibly or necessarily,⁴⁷ that the events must occur on account of one another rather than in mere temporal succession,⁴⁸ and that the protagonist must make a certain mistake or error (*hamartia*) which is responsible for and explains his downfall.⁴⁹ And I think there is no doubt that the proper effect of tragedy on an audience is

⁴⁶ *Poetics* 4, 1448b17-19. Such a person, presumably, would not have heard a sufficient description to recognize a mouse: the person Aristotle has in mind, I think, is someone who has *no idea* of a mouse: so he is in no position to recognize of any painting that it is a painting of a mouse.

⁴⁷ See e.g. *Poetics* 9, 1451a37-38; 10, 1452a17-21; 15, 1454a33-36; 16, 1455a16-19; 25, 1461b11-12.

⁴⁸ E.g. *Poetics* 9, 1452a3-4; 10, 1452a20-21.

⁴⁹ *Poetics* 13, 1453a8-30. Nussbaum argues that the point of a *hamartia* is to render the protagonist sufficiently like us that we can identify with him to the extent required to experience the tragic emotions of pity and fear (op.cit., pp. 382 ff.). Her reasoning is based on her more general interpretation that, for Aristotle, the point of tragedy is to explore the gap which inevitably exists between being good and living well. I do not think that the general interpretation can be correct. Although Aristotle does accept that being virtuous is not sufficient for happiness and that external misfortune can ruin a thoroughly good man (*Nicomachean Ethics* I.10), it is quite clear that Aristotle does not think that such an event could be the basis for a tragedy. Consider for example *Poetics* 13, 1452b30-36, where Aristotle says that tragedy cannot portray the fall of a good man from good to bad fortune, for such an event does not arouse the tragic emotions of pity and fear but a thoroughly non-tragic emotion of disgust. Aristotle does reluctantly admit that a virtuous man can be destroyed *for no reason at all*, that is, through misfortune, but he denies that this is the stuff of tragedy. Tragic events always occur for a reason.

brought about via the audience's cognitive appreciation of the intelligible plot structure. The question, then, is not whether an audience must exercise its cognitive faculties, nor whether it may find pleasure in so doing; the question is whether this cognitive exercise and its attendant pleasure is the proper effect of tragedy. Is this cognitive pleasure the pleasure appropriate and peculiar to tragedy? To see that the answer is "no", consider one of Aristotle's classic statements of the demand for intelligibility:

"Tragedy is a *mimesis* not only of a complete action, but also of fearful and pitiable events. But such events occur in the strongest form when they occur unexpectedly but in consequence of one another. For the events are more marvellous (*thaumaston*) when they occur thus than if they occur by chance . . ."⁵⁰

Aristotle's point is that a plot structure in which the events do not merely succeed each other in time, but stand in the relation of intelligible cause to intelligible effect, albeit a relation in which the intelligibility only comes to light with a reversal and recognition, is the best plot structure for portraying truly pitiable and fearful events. What it is to be a pitiable and fearful event is to be an event capable of inducing pity and fear in the audience. But pity and fear is clearly not the proper effect of tragedy: it is merely a necessary step along the route towards the proper effect. For Aristotle says that it is *from* pity and fear that tragedy produces a katharsis of these emotions.⁵¹ Therefore, the audience's cognitive appreciation of the plot's intelligible structure and attendant pleasure are important, but they are *causal antecedents* of the proper effect and proper pleasure of tragedy.

Aristotle does say that events are more marvellous (*thaumaston*) when they occur unexpectedly but in an intelligible relation to each other. And this fact is invoked by those who wish to argue that tragic pleasure is a cognitive pleasure. For in the *Metaphysics* and *Rhetoric*, Aristotle links the wondrous or marvellous with our desire to understand.⁵² It is owing to wonder, Aristotle says, than man first began to philosophize: the rising and setting of the sun, for example, provokes man's wonder and this wonder sets him on a journey to explain why this phenomenon occurs.⁵³ Thus it is suggested that the wonder that is produced in a tragedy provokes the

⁵⁰ *Poetics* 9, 1452a1-6 [my trans. except for two phrases from Oxford].

⁵¹ *Poetics* 6, 1449b27-28. Literally, Aristotle says a "katharsis of *such* emotions" (*ton toiouton pathematon*), but Bernays has argued convincingly that "such" should be understood demonstratively, as referring exclusively to pity and fear.

⁵² *Metaphysics* 982b12ff, 983a12ff; *Rhetoric* 1371a31ff.

⁵³ *Metaphysics* 982b12ff. I discuss this at some length in *Aristotle: The Desire to Understand* (Cambridge, 1988).

audience to try to understand the events portrayed and the pleasure that attends coming to understand is tragic pleasure.⁵⁴

If there were already a strong case for thinking that tragic pleasure was cognitive pleasure, then the link between the marvellous and tragedy, on the one hand, and with the desire to understand, on the other, would be suggestive. However, in the absence of a strong case, there are three reasons why Aristotle's remarks on the marvellous cannot be used to lend any significant support to the idea that tragic pleasure is cognitive. First, in the *Poetics* passage just quoted Aristotle seems to be suggesting that the relation between wonder and understanding is precisely the opposite of that suggested by the *Metaphysics*: it is by cognitively grasping that the events, though unexpected, are intelligibly linked to one another that wonder is produced in us. So while in the *Metaphysics* wonder provokes us to understand, in the *Poetics* understanding provokes us to experience wonder. Second, although in the quoted passage Aristotle associates intelligibility with wonder, towards the end of the *Poetics* Aristotle also associates wonder with irrationality.⁵⁵ One advantage of epic over tragedy, he says there, is that it is better suited to portraying irrational events (*to alogon*). For since the audience of an epic narrative does not actually have to see the irrationality acted out on stage, it is less likely to notice it as irrational. However, Aristotle says, it is the irrational which chiefly produces wonder (*to thaumaston*). And he says that *the experience of wonder itself is pleasant*.⁵⁶ So in this case it cannot be that wonder provokes understanding which is pleasant – for irrationality ultimately resists understanding. And at the end of the *Poetics*, Aristotle suggests that the pleasure proper to epic and the pleasure proper to tragedy are of the same type,⁵⁷ even though tragedy is a higher form of the art. Yet if the pleasure proper to epic can be derived from a plot containing irrationalities, it hardly seems that this pleasure can be cognitive. Finally, even if one grants a link between wonder and cognitive pleasure, this in itself does nothing to support the thesis that tragic pleasure is cognitive. For an anti-cognitivist like myself does not believe that there is no role for cognition and its attendant pleasure in the appreciation of a tragedy; he only denies that cognitive pleasure is to be identified with tragic pleasure. For the anti-cognitivist, cognitive pleasure is a step that occurs en route to the production of the proper pleasure of tragedy.

⁵⁴ See e.g. Halliwell, *op.cit.*, pp. 70-74.

⁵⁵ *Poetics* 24, 1460a11-17.

⁵⁶ *Poetics* 24, 1460a17.

⁵⁷ *Poetics* 26, 1462b13-14. See the note on the passage in D.W. Lucas, *Aristotle's Poetics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), p. 257.

The final text which is cited in support of the cognitivist thesis is Aristotle's claim that poetry is "more philosophical" than history:

Poetry is more philosophical and more serious than history: for poetry speaks more about universals, while history speaks of particulars. By universal is meant what *sort of thing* *such a sort of person* would plausibly or necessarily say or do – which is the aim of poetry though it affixes proper names to characters; by a particular, what Alcibiades did or had done to him.⁵⁸

Of course, philosophy is an exercise of man's cognitive faculties and, as is well known, Aristotle repeatedly insists that it is universals which man understands.⁵⁹ However, even if we interpret this passage just as cognitivists would like us to – as suggesting an intimate link between the appreciation of tragedy and the exercise of our cognitive abilities – nothing in this passage would help us decide between the cognitivist and the anti-cognitivist theses. For, as we have seen, the anti-cognitivist does not deny that a cognitive understanding of the plot is essential to the proper appreciation of a tragedy, he only denies that tragic pleasure can be *identified* with the pleasure that attends understanding.

But, more importantly, I don't think we should interpret this passage as the cognitivists would like us to. There is a certain plasticity in the idea of a universal which facilitates the transition from poetry to cognition. The true objects of knowledge, for Aristotle, are essences and these essences are 'universal' in the sense that two healthy human beings will instantiate the same essence: human soul. But the reason that essences are linked with knowledge is that in coming to understand a thing's essence we come to understand what that thing is *really* like. In coming to understand human essence, we come to understand *what it is to be* a human being. Now when Aristotle says that poetry is "more philosophical" than history because it deals with universals, it is tempting to read him as saying that poetry provides us with deeper insights into the human condition. This is a temptation which ought to be resisted.⁶⁰ If we look to what Aristotle means by "universal" in the passage under discussion, it is clear that he does not mean 'universal which expresses the essence of the human condition', but some-

⁵⁸ *Poetics* 9, 1451b5-11.

⁵⁹ At *Metaphysics* XIII.10, 1087a10-25, Aristotle does qualify his claim that episteme is of universals. See my "Active Episteme" (in *Mathematics and Metaphysics in Aristotle: Proceedings of the Xth Symposium Aristotelicum* (A. Graeser ed., Bern, 1986)) for an analysis of this passage.

⁶⁰ Although I am certainly willing to accept that Aristotle thought that tragedy provides deeper insight into the human condition than history does, I don't think that is the immediate point he is making in the passage under discussion.

thing much less grandiose: that poetry should refrain from describing the particular events of particular people and instead portray the *sorts* of things a given *type* of person might say or do. Aristotle gives an example of what he means by the universal element in poetry later on:

The following will show how the universal element in *Iphigenia*, for instance, may be viewed: a certain maiden having been offered in sacrifice, and spirited away from her sacrificers into another land, where the custom was to sacrifice all strangers to the Goddess, she was made there the priestess of this rite. Long after that the brother of the priestess happened to come; the fact, however, of the oracle having bidden him go there, and his object in going, are outside the plot of the play. On his coming he was arrested, and about to be sacrificed, when he revealed who he was – either as Euripides puts it or (as suggested by Polyidus) by the not improbable exclamation, ‘So I too am doomed to be sacrificed as my sister was’; and the disclosure led to his salvation. This done, the next thing, *after the proper names have been fixed* as a basis for the story, is to turn to the episodes.⁶¹

Aristotle’s point is simply that poetry deals with types of actions and type of persons, even though the poet, after having constructed the ‘universal’ plot later assigns names to the characters.⁶² Aristotle does say that such a universal plot is “more philosophical” than history, but by this he did not mean that poetry gives us ultimate understanding of humanity. Rather, he meant that it has emerged from the mire of particularity in which history is trapped and thus has taken a step along the way towards philosophy. Whether fairly or unfairly, Aristotle had a very low opinion of history (he seemed to hold history in the same regard as we hold newspapers) and thus something doesn’t have to be very philosophical to be more philosophical than history.⁶³

What then is the point of Aristotle’s requirement that poetry deal with universals if it is not to insist upon poetry’s ultimate cognitive value? If we read *Poetics* 9 through to the end it becomes clear that Aristotle’s overall concern is with the formation of a plot that effectively produces pity and fear in the audience.⁶⁴ But in order for an audience to feel pity and fear they must believe that there is a certain similarity between themselves and the character in the tragedy: and the reason they must believe in this similarity

⁶¹ *Poetics* 17, 1455b2-13 (Oxford trans.). See also Aristotle’s description of the plot of the *Odyssey* at 1455b16-23.

⁶² *Poetics* 17, 1455b, 12-13; cf. 9, 1451b8-16.

⁶³ Aristotle does not seem to have been familiar with Thucydides. One cannot but wonder how Aristotle would have changed his mind about history if he had carefully read the *History of the Peloponnesian War*.

⁶⁴ As we have seen, that is why Aristotle says at the end of Chapter 9 that the events in a tragedy should occur unexpectedly but on account of one another.

is that they must believe that the events portrayed in the tragedy might happen to them. For a person to feel pity and fear he must believe that he himself is vulnerable to the events he is witnessing. That is why Aristotle says that the poet's function is not to portray events that *have* happened, but events that *might* happen – and that these possible occurrences seem plausible or even necessary.⁶⁵ The point of portraying plausible events that might happen is that the audience will naturally come to believe that these events might happen *to them*. And this is a crucial step in the production of pity and fear in their souls. Poetry uses universals for the same purpose. Because poetry is not mired in particularity, but concerns itself with types of events which occur to certain sorts of people, it is possible for the audience to appreciate that they are the sort of people to whom this sort of event could, just possibly, occur. The universality Aristotle has in mind when he talks about the universality of poetry is not as such aiming at the depth of the human condition, it is aiming at the universality of the human condition.⁶⁶

Enough has been said, I think, to make it clear that the education-interpretation, however attractive it is, must be rejected as an account of what Aristotle meant by tragic katharsis. But having already rejected the purgation- and purification-interpretations, we have abandoned all the important traditional accounts. What, then, did Aristotle mean by tragic katharsis? It is to this question that I now turn.

II

5. Although the work so far has been largely critical, I think something of positive value has emerged. For in seeing how previous interpretations fall short, we have isolated a series of constraints which any acceptable interpretation of katharsis must satisfy. These constraints may not be so constraining as to isolate a single, definitive interpretation, but they at least set out a field in which the truth must lie. In this section I would like to state the constraints on any acceptable interpretation of katharsis and I would like to offer an interpretation which fits those constraints.

One of the major constraints on any interpretation is:

- (1) There is reason for a virtuous man to experience the performance of a tragedy: he too will experience a katharsis of pity and fear.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ *Poetics* 9, 1451a36-38, repeated again at 1451b4-5, just before Aristotle claims that poetry is more philosophical than history because it deals with universals (1451b5-7).

⁶⁶ Among humans, that is.

Precisely because of (1), it follows that

- (2) Tragic katharsis cannot be a process that is essentially and crucially corrective: that is, it cannot be a purgation, insofar as purgation is of something pathological or noxious; it cannot be a purification of some pollution; it cannot be an education of the emotions.

This is not to deny that a cathartic experience may be corrective. Aristotle, as we have already seen, thought that cathartic melodies can help to restore those who are particularly susceptible to religious frenzy; and one might similarly suppose that a tragic katharsis could restore those who are particularly susceptible to the tragic emotions of pity and fear. Nor do I mean to deny that a virtuous person may experience relief in a cathartic experience – a relief that it is natural to conceive of in terms of the release of pent-up emotions. However, the virtuous man is not in a pathological condition, nor is he polluted with some impure element which needs to be removed. Nor is he in need of any further training of the emotions: indeed, it is because he is already disposed to respond appropriately to the situations of life, both in judgement, action and emotion, that he is virtuous. The idea that provides an education of the emotions suffers further from the fact:

- (3) What one feels at the performance of a tragedy is not what one *would* or *should* feel in the real life counterpart.

For although tragedy provokes pity and fear in the audience, it also elicits an appropriate pleasure: this pleasure would be thoroughly inappropriate to real life tragic situations. But the fact that a good person (at least) feels pleasure in the performance of a tragedy, but would not do so in real life, suggests

- (4) A proper audience does not lose sight of the fact that it is enjoying the performance of a tragedy.

Although the audience may identify emotionally with the characters in the tragedy, this identification must remain partial. Throughout its emotional involvement, the audience keeps track of the fact that it is an audience. For in a real life tragedy a person would feel fear and, if he stood in the right relation to the tragic event, pity, but he would derive no pleasure from the tragic event. This implies:

- (5) The mere expression or release of emotions is not in itself pleasurable.

⁶⁷ See *Politics* VIII.7, 1342b14; and the numerous references in the *Poetics* in which the plot of a good tragedy is distinguished from that which will appeal to a vulgar audience: e.g. *Poetics* 13, 1453a30-36 (cp. 9, 1451b33-1452a1 and 6, 1450b16-19) and *Poetics* 26, in which Aristotle seems to accept the principle that tragedy is a higher art form than epic precisely because it appeals to a better audience.

For Aristotle, pity and fear are unadulterated pains.⁶⁸ The mere opportunity to feel these painful emotions does not in itself provide relief: everything depends on the conditions in which these painful emotions are to be felt. Those who have assumed that a katharsis, for Aristotle, was a release or discharge of pent-up or unexpressed emotions have assumed that the mere experience of emotions, even painful ones, has a pleasurable aspect to it. There is pleasure to be had in a good cry. Such an idea may have a certain plausibility to it, but it is foreign to Aristotle. For him, it depends on what one is crying about. If one is crying in the theatre, a certain pleasure may ensue, but there is, for Aristotle, no pleasure to be had in crying over real life tragic events. This is the problem with taking katharsis to be the mere release of emotion. For Aristotle there is nothing pleasurable about experiencing pity and fear *per se*.

These conditions under which we can derive pleasure from pity and fear and the conditions under which a katharsis of pity and fear occurs are intimately linked, for

(6) Katharsis provides a relief: it is either itself pleasurable or it helps to explain the proper pleasure that is derived from tragedy.⁶⁹

Constraints (3)-(6) together suggest that if we are to understand tragic katharsis, we should look to the special ways in which tragedy produces its emotional effects.

Aristotle, as we have seen, defines tragedy in part by the effect it has on its audience: it is a mimesis of an action which by arousing pity and fear produces a katharsis of those emotions.⁷⁰ It might seem odd to a modern reader to see Aristotle *define* tragedy in terms of its effect, for in a modern climate we tend to think that a work of art should be definable in its own terms, independently of whatever effect it might have on its audience. But it would be anachronistic to insist that Aristotle could not have been defining tragedy in terms of its effect on the audience. Poetry (*poiesis*), for Aristotle, is a type of making (*poiesis*), and the activity of any making occurs *in* the person or thing towards which the making is directed.⁷¹ For example, the activity of the teacher teaching is occurring, not in the teacher, but in the students who are learning; the activity of the builder building is occurring, not in the builder, but in the house being built. It stands to reason that, for

⁶⁸ See *Rhetoric* II.5, 8; cp. the account of anger as a composite of pain and pleasure: *Rhetoric* II.2.

⁶⁹ Aristotle, as we have seen, says that everyone undergoes a “certain katharsis and lightening with pleasure”: *Politics* VIII.7, 1342b14-15.

⁷⁰ *Poetics* 6, 1449b24-28; see p. 297 above.

⁷¹ *Physics* III.3.

Aristotle, the activity of the poet creating his tragedy occurs ultimately in an audience actively appreciating a performance of the play.⁷²

Not only does Aristotle define tragedy in terms of its effect, he thinks that various tragic plots can be evaluated in terms of their effects on an audience.

“We assume that, for the finest form of tragedy, the plot must be not simple but complex; and further, that it must imitate actions arousing fear and pity, since that is the distinctive function of this kind of imitation. It follows, therefore, that there are three forms of plot to be avoided. A good man must not be seen passing from good fortune to bad, or a bad man from bad fortune to good. The first situation is not fear-inspiring or piteous, but simply disgusting. The second is the most untragic that can be; it has no one of the requisites of tragedy; it does not appeal either to the human feeling in us, or to our pity, or to our fears. Nor, on the other hand, should an extremely bad man be seen falling from good fortune into bad. Such a story may arouse the human feeling in us, but it will not move us to either pity or fear; pity is occasioned by undeserved misfortune, and fear by that of one like ourselves; so that there will be nothing either piteous or fear-inspiring in the situation.”⁷³

The important point to note about this passage is that Aristotle is evaluating plots not on the basis of *feelings*, but on the basis of the *emotions*. The reason we do not feel pity and fear in witnessing the fall of a bad man from good to bad fortune, is because pity requires the *belief* that the misfortune is undeserved, fear requires the *belief* that the man who has suffered the misfortune is like ourselves.⁷⁴ (Presumably Aristotle assumed that the proper audience of tragedy would not believe themselves to be sufficiently like a bad person to believe that the things that befall him (most likely as a consequence of his badness) might befall them.)

Similarly with the disgust we feel when watching a good man fall from good to bad fortune: such disgust isn't a pure feeling which can be identified on the basis of its phenomenological properties alone. Disgust requires the belief that there is no reason *at all* for this good man's fall. It is sometimes thought that Aristotle contradicts himself for he elsewhere seems to suggest that tragedy is paradigmatically about admirable men falling to bad for-

⁷² I say “ultimately” because there is a two step process involved: (1) the poet's creating the *muthos* and writing the play, (2) the performance of the play before an audience. I am using the word “performance” widely to cover both the enactment of the play on stage by actors and the simple reading or recital of the play out loud. Aristotle is explicit that a tragedy can have its proper effect even when it is not acted out on stage: a person who merely hears the tragedy read out loud will experience pity and fear. See *Poetics* 14, 1453b3-7; 6, 1450b18-19; 26, 62a11-12, a17-18.

⁷³ *Poetics* 13, 1452b30-1453a8 (Oxford trans. except that I use “disgusting” for “*mia-ron*” rather than Oxford's “odious”).

⁷⁴ *Poetics* 13, 1453a4-6.

tune.⁷⁵ But if we take the rest of Chapter 13 as explicating what Aristotle means when he denies that the fall of a good man can be the basis of a properly tragic plot, I think we can see a consistent point emerging. In tragedy, Aristotle insists, the central character must make some mistake or error (*hamartia*) which leads to his fall.⁷⁶ The *hamartia* is a mistake that rationalizes the fall. So what Aristotle is excluding when he prohibits the fall of a good man is a totally irrational fall: one that occurs through no fault of the good man at all. Aristotle certainly does allow the fall of a good man to be the subject matter of tragedy: but not of a man who is so good that he has made no mistakes which would rationalize his fall. This distinction illuminates what is meant by disgust: disgust is an emotion that is partially constituted by the belief that there is no reason at all for the misfortune. Disgust is something we feel in response to what we take to be a total absence of rationality.

Aristotle thinks that the mere fact that tragedy must arouse pity and fear in the audience justifies him in severely restricting the range of tragic plots.

“It is not necessary to search for every pleasure from tragedy, but only the appropriate pleasure. But since it is necessary for the poet to produce the pleasure from pity and fear through a mimesis, it is evident that he must do this in the events in the plot. We should investigate, then, what sorts of events appear to be horrible or pitiable. In respect to such actions, it is necessary that the people involved be either friends with each other or enemies or neither of these. But if enemy acts on enemy, there is nothing pitiable about this – neither in the doing of the deed, nor in intending to do it – except in relation to the terrible event itself (*kat’ auto to pathos*). The same is true when the people stand in neither relation. But whenever the terrible events occur among loved ones [friends, kin], for example if a brother should kill or intend to kill or do some other such thing to a brother, or a son to a father, or a mother to a son, or a son to a mother: we should search for these things.”⁷⁷

Aristotle is clear that the peculiar pleasure of tragedy is produced by evoking pity and fear in the audience and that this is accomplished by constructing a mimesis of a special type of terrible event (*pathos*). Aristotle uses the same word, “*pathos*”, both to signify a terrible event, catastrophe or serious misfortune and to signify emotion. When, for example, Aristotle cites *pathos* as one of the three ingredients needed in a plot, along with reversal and recognition, in order to produce pity and fear, he is not requiring a certain motion to be portrayed on stage, he is requiring that there be a destructive act.⁷⁸ So one might say that, for Aristotle, there is an

⁷⁵ See e.g. *Poetics* 15, 1454b8-13.

⁷⁶ *Poetics* 13, 1453a8-17.

⁷⁷ *Poetics* 14, 1453b10-22 (my trans.).

objective *pathos* and a subjective *pathos*: and the two are related. For what Aristotle is trying to do in this passage is delimit the precise type of objective *pathos* which is adequate to bring about a particular type of subjective *pathos* – pity and fear – in response.⁷⁹

The objective *pathos* required to produce the tragic emotions is a terrible deed done between kin or loved ones. That is why the great tragedians have correctly focused in on just a few families, the families of Oedipus, Orestes, Medea etc., for these are the families that have been ripped apart by terrible deeds.⁸⁰ But what is it about the portrayal of a terrible deed done *among kin* that makes it particularly well suited to evoking pity and fear?

Perhaps a start may be made in answering this question by recognizing that at least a necessary condition for the audience feeling pity and fear in response to such terrible deeds is that they believe that such events could happen to them. For fear this is obvious. Aristotle, as we have seen, defines fear as a pain due to imagining some painful or destructive event befalling one. And he further requires that the fearful event be both imminent and capable of causing great pain.⁸¹ For we do not fear distant pains, for example death, nor do we fear imminent but minor pains.

“From the definition it will follow that fear is caused by whatever we feel has great power of destroying us, or of harming us in ways that tend to cause us great pain.”⁸²

Aristotle is explicit that we feel fear only when we believe that we are ourselves vulnerable to an imminent and grave danger: “we shall not fear things that we believe cannot happen to us”.⁸³ A further condition on fear is that we must believe that there is at least a faint possibility of escape from the danger.⁸⁴

⁷⁸ *Poetics* 11, 1452b10-11. For other ‘objective uses of “*pathos*” in the *Poetics*, see e.g. 13, 1453b18, b19-20, b39, 54a13. See also *Rhetoric* II.5, 1382b30; *Metaphysics* V.21, 1022b20-21; *Nicomachean Ethics* I.11, 1101a31.

⁷⁹ It is tempting to speculate that, for Aristotle, there is also an objective as well as a subjective katharsis. For the katharsis referred to in the definition of tragedy is clearly subjective – i.e. something that goes on within the souls of the members of the audience; while the katharsis at which Orestes is saved (17, 1455b14-15) is clearly objective: viz. a ritual sacrifice. It goes beyond the evidence of the texts to construct a theory of the relation of objective to subjective katharsis. But it is worth noting in passing that if Aristotle believed that a subjective katharsis occurs in response to an objective katharsis, then the entire debate over where the katharsis is occurring, within the play itself or in the audience, would be idle. It would be occurring in both places (albeit in different forms).

⁸⁰ *Poetics* 13, esp. 1453a17-22; 14, 1454a9-13.

⁸¹ *Rhetoric* II.5, 1382a22-30.

⁸² *Rhetoric* II.5, 1382a28-30.

⁸³ *Rhetoric* II.5, 1382b31-31; cp. b28-1383a12.

At first sight, it appears that pity is the paradigm of an other-regarding emotion. We feel pity for others when they suffer what we believe to be undeserved pain.⁸⁵ However, Aristotle makes it clear that in order to feel pity for others we must also believe that the terrible event which has befallen them might befall us or our loved ones and, moreover, might befall us soon. Thus in order for us to feel pity for others, we must believe that the others' situation is significantly similar to our own. One might at first think that pity can be felt for those who are in some relevant respect like us – either in social standing, character, or age – even though we do not believe we could end up in their situation, but Aristotle denies this. We do feel pity for those who are like us, but the reason we do, Aristotle thinks, is because in such cases we think it more likely that the misfortune that has befallen them can befall us.⁸⁶ This explains Aristotle's otherwise puzzling remark in the *Poetics* that we fear for someone who is similar to us.⁸⁷ Why, one might ask, should one fear for someone else – even if he is like us? The appropriate emotion to direct towards another, especially toward another who is similar to us, should (we might think) be pity. Aristotle's point is that fear is an appropriate emotion to feel in response to a similar person's misfortune: for through his similarity we recognize that we stand in the same danger he did.

Likewise with pity. Aristotle's only caveat is that the perceived danger cannot be too immediate: for in that case fear (for oneself) will drive out pity (for others).⁸⁸ Pity will also be driven out of the souls of those who, already ruined, believe that no bad can further harm them, and of those who believe themselves omnipotent and impervious to harm.⁸⁹

Those who think they *may* suffer are those who have already suffered and have safely escaped from it: *elderly men, owing to their good sense and their experience; weak men, especially men inclined to cowardice; and also educated people, for they are able to reason well.*⁹⁰

Aristotle clearly recognizes pity as a reasonable emotion for an educated and thoughtful person: and since good tragedy is ideally for an educated

⁸⁴ *Rhetoric* II.5, 1383a5-8. Those who have lost all hope of escape grow resigned and callous.

⁸⁵ *Poetics* 13, 1453a5; *Rhetoric* II.8, 1385b14ff.

⁸⁶ *Rhetoric* II.8, 1386a24-27.

⁸⁷ *Poetics* 13, 1453a5-6.

⁸⁸ *Rhetoric* II.8, 1386a24-25.

⁸⁹ *Rhetoric* II.8, 1385b19ff.

⁹⁰ *Rhetoric* II.8, 1385b23-27. Cp. *Politics* VIII.7, 1342b19, where an educated audience (*hoi pepaideumenoi*) is contrasted with a vulgar one.

audience, it follows that, for Aristotle, the pity which good tragedy evokes is a reasonable emotional response to the events portrayed.

6. It follows that a normal, educated audience, going to a performance of a good tragedy, believes that the terrible events portrayed – infanticide, parricide, matricide, the tearing apart of the most primordial bonds of family and society – could happen to them. Had they lacked that belief they would, in Aristotle's eyes, be incapable of experiencing the tragic emotions. This allows us to impose a further constraint, at least upon the emotions from which a tragic katharsis is produced:

(7) The events which in a tragedy properly provoke the pity and fear from which a tragic katharsis occurs must be such that the audience believes that such events could happen to them.

Before proceeding, I would like to dispose of two objections which might be raised against this conclusion. The most serious objection is that the audience need not believe that the terrible events could happen to them: they are able to experience the tragic emotions because they are able to identify imaginatively with the central character and thus empathically feel what he feels. Within Aristotle's world, it is clear that the objection has the situation the wrong way around: for Aristotle, it is only because we think ourselves to be sufficiently like another that we can identify with him.⁹¹ For Aristotle, we cannot identify with the very bad or with the gods: it is precisely because we are so distant from such beings that our emotions must retain a similar distance from theirs. That is why, for Aristotle, there is no important distinction to be made between our feeling our fear and our feeling Oedipus's fear. The very possibility of our imaginatively feeling Oedipus's fear is grounded in the recognition that we are like him: that is, it is grounded in the possibility of our fearing for ourselves.⁹² Moreover, this objection does not take seriously the emotion of pity. We cannot feel pity in imaginatively identifying with Oedipus: part of what makes Oedipus such a remarkable and admirable figure is his lack of self-pity, his willingness to accept responsibility for his acts. But if our pity isn't an imaginative re-enactment of Oedipus's self-pity, then it must, as we have seen, be grounded in the belief that his fate could be ours.⁹³

⁹¹ Since it is an incredibly complicated subject, I would like to reserve for another occasion a discussion of the general conditions required for emotional identification.

⁹² *Poetics* 13, 1453a5-6; *Rhetoric* II.5, 1383a10-13.

⁹³ One might lamely try to keep the objection alive by saying that when we feel pity we are identifying with the chorus. But then the question arises: why should we identify with the chorus? The only plausible answer is that the chorus is in some way expressing our

The less serious objection is that the audience doesn't come to the performance believing that the terrible events portrayed in the tragedy could happen to them: they are persuaded that this is so by the performance itself. The shortest answer to this objection is also the best: tragedy is not rhetoric, it is poetry. Because fear sets us thinking about how to escape from the perceived danger, an orator may wish to persuade his audience that they are in danger,⁹⁴ but a tragedy doesn't try to persuade its audience of anything. The only effect on the audience that a tragedy aims to produce is a certain emotional response (the content of which we are trying to uncover). Of course, if tragedy is to succeed in this, it must portray events which are convincing, plausible, events which plausibly could occur.⁹⁵ But Aristotle's point in insisting that the poet construct plausible, convincing plots is not so that he may persuade the audience of anything but so that he may portray an event which the audience can recognize as one that could, just possibly, happen to them.

Now if a normal, educated audience, going to the performance of a good tragedy, believes that the terrible events to be portrayed could, just possibly, happen to them, there *seems to be* a striking fact which is true of them both before they enter and after they leave the theatre: they are missing the feelings which together with their beliefs would constitute the emotions of pity and fear. One might like to say that they are cut off from their emotions, but that can't be quite right. Since, for Aristotle, emotions are partially constituted by beliefs, it is more accurate to say that the distinct elements that conjointly constitute an emotion – belief and feeling – seem split off from one another. Another way of putting it is to say that normal educated people in normal circumstances and outside of the theatre seem to have certain beliefs that they do not feel.⁹⁶

A misleading way of putting an important truth is this: that when a normal, educated person experiences a performance of a good tragedy, he is able to unify certain beliefs he has with feelings that are appropriate to those beliefs. He came to the theatre believing that he could commit or suffer terrible deeds. In the theatre he is able to feel those beliefs. But before we jump to the conclusion that katharsis is a unification of belief and feeling, a unification of the tragic emotions, let us stop to consider why this

views. And if that is so, we are again led back to the conclusion that we believe that what happened to Oedipus could happen to us.

⁹⁴ *Rhetoric* II.5, 1383a7-12.

⁹⁵ E.g. *Poetics*, 9, 1452a36-38, b5-7, b15-19.

⁹⁶ I use "outside the theatre" in the widest possible way: even the oral recitation of a tragedy counts for the purposes of this essay as going on "inside the theatre".

mode of expression is misleading. It is misleading because it suggests that what we feel in the theatre is what we ought to feel in real life: that in real life the appropriate feelings are somehow kept at bay from the beliefs which would rationalize them.

But this cannot be right. For constraint (1) requires that the virtuous person experience a katharsis in the performance of a tragedy, but his emotional reactions are already appropriate to the real life situations in which he lives; and constraint (3) requires that our emotional response to tragedy is not what we would or should feel in response to real life counterparts. Tragic pleasure depends crucially on the belief that one is emotionally responding to a *mimesis* of tragic events.⁹⁷ Without this belief, tragic pleasure is impossible. Therefore, constraint (7) – that the audience believe that tragic events could happen to them – must be interpreted in a way which does not suggest that the virtuous person, in not feeling pity and fear in ordinary life, is somehow cut off from a proper emotional response to his situation. It is completely unAristotelian to suppose that what we feel in the theatre is what we ought to feel in real life, but for some reason do not. In real life the virtuous man feels just what he ought to feel. But, then, how could he believe that terrible, tragic deeds could, just possibly, befall him and not feel fear and dread?

Everything depends on the strength of the modal operator. The virtuous man believes that terrible, tragic events could happen to him, true, but the possibility of those things happening is, in his opinion, too remote for the actual feeling of fear to be warranted.⁹⁸ Although a tragic breakdown of the primordial ties of human life is possible, the virtuous man also recognizes that this is less likely to happen to him than almost anything else. That is why it is misleading to say that tragedy restores the appropriate feelings to our already existing beliefs. Our belief that tragic events could, just possibly, befall us already has the appropriate feeling attached to it outside the theatre. No unification is needed for, at least in the case of the virtuous person, there is no split that needs to be overcome.

And yet the belief that tragic events could, *just possibly*, happen to us does exert some pressure on our souls – even on the souls of us virtuous

⁹⁷ See constraints (3)–(6).

⁹⁸ If I may for a moment indulge my desire to be droll, let me put this in the language of modal semantics: In the virtuous man's opinion (and thus: in truth) the worlds in which he kills his mother, is killed by his mother, etc. are possible worlds and thus stand in an accessibility relation to the real world. All tragic worlds are possible worlds. However, all such tragic worlds are sufficiently removed from the actual world of a virtuous person (in ordinary circumstances) that they do not fall within the set of legitimately feared worlds.

people. This is precisely the pressure which takes us to the theatre. For in the theatre we can imaginatively bring what we take to be a remote possibility closer to home. As Aristotle himself said:

“ . . . those who heighten the effect of their words with suitable gestures, tones, appearance, and dramatic action generally, are especially successful in exciting pity: they thus put the disasters before our eyes, and make them seem close to us, just coming or just past.”⁹⁹

The tragic poet, for Aristotle, plays a role in the world of emotions somewhat similar to the role of the skeptic within the world of beliefs. The skeptic awakens us to the fact that we ourselves believe in certain epistemic possibilities which in ordinary life we ignore: for example, that we could be asleep, dreaming, or perhaps deceived by an evil demon. On the one hand, these possibilities are extremely remote, so we are justified in ignoring them in ordinary life; on the other hand, they lend content to the idea that in ordinary life we are living “inside the plain”: and they fuel our desire to get outside the plain of everyday life and see how things really are, absolutely.¹⁰⁰

The tragic poet awakens us to the fact that there are certain emotional possibilities which we ignore in ordinary life. On the one hand, these possibilities are remote, so it is not completely unreasonable to ignore them in ordinary life; on the other hand, they lend content to the idea that in ordinary life we are living “inside the plain”: and they fuel our desire imaginatively to experience life outside the plain. Even if tragedy does not befall us, it goes to the root of the human condition that it is a possibility we must live with. And, even if remote, the possibility of tragedy is not only much more imminent than the skeptical possibilities, it is much more threatening. For while skeptical possibilities are so designed that they make no difference to the experience of our lives, in tragedy our lives are ripped asunder.

But there is a genuine problem about how to experience tragic possibility. On the one hand, the possibility of tragedy in ordinary life is too remote to justify real fear, on the other hand, it is too important and too close to ignore. Tragic poetry provides an arena in which one can imaginatively experience the tragic emotions: the performance of a play “captures our souls”.¹⁰¹ However, it is crucial to the pleasure we derive from tragedy, that

⁹⁹ *Rhetoric* II.8, 1386a32-35. Of course, Aristotle is here talking within the context of rhetorical persuasion, but his point obviously carries over to the theatre.

¹⁰⁰ See Thompson Clarke, “The Legacy of Skepticism”, *Journal of Philosophy*, 1972.

¹⁰¹ *psuchagoge*: cf. *Poetics* 6, 1450a33-36.

we never lose sight of the fact that we are an audience, enjoying a work of art. Otherwise the pleasurable katharsis of pity and fear would collapse into the merely painful experience of those emotions.¹⁰² Aristotle is keenly aware of the important difference between a mimesis of a serious action and the serious action of which it is a mimesis. The emotional response which is appropriate to a mimesis – tragic pleasure and katharsis – would be thoroughly inappropriate to the real event.

It is this experience of the tragic emotions in an appropriately inappropriate environment which, I think, helps to explain our experience of relief in the theatre. We imaginatively live life to the full, but we risk nothing. The relief is thus not that of ‘releasing pent-up emotions’ per se, it is the relief of ‘releasing’ these emotions in a safe environment. But to say that it is this experience of relief to which Aristotle gave the name “katharsis” is not to characterize it fully: one needs also to know the content of our relief, what our relief is about.

Here I will only mention briefly certain consolations which are integral to Aristotle’s conception of tragedy. The world of tragic events must, Aristotle repeatedly insists, be rational. The subject of tragedy may be a good man, but he must make a mistake which rationalizes his fall.¹⁰³ The mere fall of a good man from good fortune to bad fortune for no reason at all, isn’t tragic, it’s disgusting.¹⁰⁴ The events in a tragedy must be necessary or plausible, and they must occur on account of one another.¹⁰⁵ Insofar as we do fear that tragic events could occur in our lives, what we fear is chaos: the breakdown of the primordial bonds which links person to person. For Aristotle, a good tragedy offers us this consolation: that even when the breakdown of the primordial bonds occurs, it does not occur in a world which is in itself ultimately chaotic and meaningless.

It is significant that, for Aristotle, *Oedipus Rex* is the paradigm tragedy rather than, say, *Antigone*.¹⁰⁶ For the point of tragedy, in Aristotle’s eyes, is not to portray a world in which a person through no fault of his own may be subject to fundamentally irreconcilable and destructive demands. In Aristotle’s conception of tragedy, the individual actor takes on the burden of badness, the world as a whole is absolved.¹⁰⁷ And there is further consola-

¹⁰² See constraints (4)-(6) above.

¹⁰³ *Poetics* 13, 1453a7-17; 15, 1454b8-13.

¹⁰⁴ *Poetics* 13, 1452b30-36.

¹⁰⁵ *Poetics* 9, 1452a3-4; 10, 1452a20-21; 15, 1454a33-36; 16, 1455a17; 9, 1451a36-38.

¹⁰⁶ Which was, of course, Hegel’s choice.

¹⁰⁷ See W.R.D. Fairbairn’s account of “the moral defense” in “The Repression and the Return of Bad Objects”, *Psychoanalytic Studies of the Personality*, op.cit.

tion in recognizing that even when they are responsible for their misfortunes, humans remain capable of conducting themselves with dignity and nobility.¹⁰⁸ Even in his humiliation and shame, Oedipus inspires our awe and admiration.

In the *Rhetoric* Aristotle says that those who have already experienced great disasters no longer feel fear, for they feel they have already experienced every kind of horror.¹⁰⁹ In tragedy, we are able to put ourselves imaginatively in a position in which there is nothing further to fear. There is consolation in realizing that one has experienced the worst, there is nothing further to fear, and yet the world remains a rational, meaningful place in which a person can conduct himself with dignity. Even in tragedy, perhaps especially in tragedy, the fundamental goodness of man and world are reaffirmed.¹¹⁰

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¹⁰⁸ Aristotle makes a related (though different) point at *Nicomachean Ethics* I.10: he reluctantly admits that even a virtuous person can suffer great misfortune however he offers the consolation that the virtuous person will at least bear his misfortunes nobly and with greatness of soul.

¹⁰⁹ *Rhetoric* II.5, 1383a3-5.

¹¹⁰ For another treatment of skepticism and its relationship to tragedy see, of course, Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979). I would like to thank Giovanni Ferrari both for the many lovely evenings in which we translated and discussed the *Poetics* together and for his criticisms of an earlier draft.