

## **Action and Hamartia in Aristotle's *Poetics*.**

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### **Abstract**

In what follows we outline Aristotle's philosophy of tragedy in his *Poetics* paying particular attention to his account of action and *hamartia*. We situate his account of tragedy in terms of his ethical philosophy and philosophy of action generally. We argue that tragedy is disclosive of the frailty of the human situation in its precarious contingency. By this, we link Aristotle's philosophy of tragedy to twentieth century aesthetic, ethical and European philosophy.

## **Introduction.**

Aristotle's account of tragedy is intimately connected with his theory of action and his ethical theory. His *Poetics* was intended to form a central part of his extended inquiry into the nature of human action and happiness. It was his view that in tragedy, the tragic hero falls into misery through a *hamartia*, a mistake or error, that results in irreparable damage to the life of the protagonist and/or the lives of their loved ones. *Hamartia* or 'tragic error' brings to the fore the fragility and contingency of human flourishing. Thus, in addition to being read as a work of aesthetics the *Poetics* can be usefully read in terms of Aristotle's ethical theory and thus ultimately in terms of his account of what it is to be a flourishing human being.

If this reading of the *Poetics* is plausible then Aristotle intended his aesthetics to follow naturally from his ethics. Ethics, for Aristotle, had a much wider determination than it tends to accrue in some contemporary philosophical debate. As Alasdair MacIntyre has shown in his *After Virtue*, we must take Aristotle's ethics, particularly his *Nicomachean Ethics*, to be little concerned with what G.E. Moore would later call the *naturalistic fallacy*. This fallacy holds that the concept of the good is resistant to definition. As such, whatever the account of the good proposed it is always possible to ask, 'but is that good?'. Thus, according to Moore, the question of the good must always remain open since because attempting to define the good in terms of some particular invariable content is fallacious. Aristotle's ethics presuppose the naturalistic fallacy not to be a fallacy and hold that ethical statements about what is good are factual statements dependent upon a metaphysical account of human being.

For Aristotle, human beings are beings of a specific kind, they belong to a specific species and have a specific nature by virtue of which they maintain certain aims and goals and move towards a specific end or *telos*. The good for human beings is defined precisely in terms of the objective characteristics which human beings share by virtue of their membership of the natural kind ‘human being’. As MacIntyre has it, Aristotle’s ethics offer an account of the good which is at once ‘local and particular’ and ‘cosmic and universal’. Such an account of the good, one which moves between the extremes of universality and particularity and necessarily involves specifically human understanding, can usefully be described as *hermeneutic*. The good for ‘man’ according to Aristotle is *eudaimonia* (flourishing). Eudaimonia is, as MacIntyre defines it, ‘...the state of being well and doing well in being well, of a man’s being well-favoured himself and in relation to the divine’ (MacIntyre 1981, p. 148). Hermeneutically, the good must be able to be determined as good both in terms of the particular human being in their life and in terms of ‘human beings’ in general and the many virtues elaborated by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* are the objective qualities necessary, but not sufficient, for an individual to achieve the telos of human being, eudaimonia.

Recently, however, there has emerged a reading of Aristotle’s *Poetics* that sees it not just as a source book for readers of his ethical writings but rather as a text that discloses something fundamental about human existence that his ethics, in their extant form, did not and perhaps could not disclose. It is precisely in this context too that tragedy has been accorded a fundamental place with regards to the nature of human being or existence. Exemplary of this new trend has been the recent work of McNeill. His view is that, in his own words:

Aristotle's *Poetics* is...a crucial resource in understanding how tragedy brings to light a sense of human dwelling in a manner more primordial than the 'scientific' discourse of his treatises on *Ethics* (McNeill 2000, p. 181).

Important as they are, Aristotle's ethical writings are barred from disclosing that fundamental sense of life that is disclosed by his *Poetics*. Much like his ethics, Aristotle's aesthetics prepare the way for contemporary accounts of human existence in contemporary European philosophy such as that of Martin Heidegger. In what follows we give a reading of Aristotle's *Poetics* that centres on the function given to tragic *hamartia* in its relation to eudaimonia. We shall argue that Aristotle provides a coherent reading of tragedy and that he places tragedy in a critical relation to human existence, disclosing something fundamental about that existence in the process that remains instructive for both aesthetic and ethical thinkers. This is the tragic contingency of human flourishing.

### **Aristotle on Tragedy.**

Tragedy, for Aristotle, is one of the poetic arts. It is a *mimēsis*, an 'imitative representation' of serious human action (*praxis*), composed of actors performing actions. In chapter six of the *Poetics* Aristotle defines the essence of tragedy as follows:

Tragedy...is a representation of an action that is serious, complete, and of some magnitude; in language that is pleurably embellished, the different forms of embellishment occurring in separate parts; presented in the form of

action, not narration; by means of pity and fear bringing about the *catharsis* of such emotions (Aristotle 1965, p. 64).

Serious human action is the core of tragedy. It is Aristotle's view that 'it is on their actions that all men depend for success or failure' and representation of the action *is* the plot of the tragedy. Plot is the 'first essential of tragedy; its soul so to speak' (Aristotle 1965, p. 65). Character, in light of this takes second place: 'Tragedy is the representation of an action, and it is chiefly on account of the action that it is also a representation of persons' (Aristotle 1965, p. 66).

Action *qua* plot should be complete and self-contained and should as 'a matter either of probability or of necessity' allow for a change from 'misery to happiness or from happiness to misery' in the life of the protagonist and/or their friends and loved ones. Some plots are simple and some are more complex. This is so since the actions they represent are either simple or complex. Simple actions are 'single and continuous' and do not involve a *recognition* or *reversal* in the change of fortune. Complex action and the resulting change of fortune, by contrast, is accompanied by either a recognition or a reversal or both.

Aristotle distinguishes four kinds of tragedy: complex tragedy that depends on recognition and reversal, 'tragedy of suffering', 'tragedy of character' and 'spectacular tragedy' or simple tragedy. The tragic poet should, according to Aristotle, try to incorporate all of these modes in a single tragedy and if they cannot they should at least incorporate the most important. Regardless, the best tragedies will be complex.

Recognitions and reversals are the means by which tragedy affects us and are both constituents of plot. Both should arise out of the structure of a plot either by

necessity or by probability as a result of what has transpired. Reversal is a change ‘from one state of affairs to its opposite’. Recognition is a change ‘from ignorance to knowledge, and it leads either to love or to hatred between persons destined for good or ill fortune’. The most effective form of recognition is one that is accompanied by the relevant reversal, as is the case with *Oedipus*. A recognition of this kind in combination with the relevant reversal will provoke the emotions specifically involved with tragedy, namely, *pity* and *fear*.

Such a combination of recognition and reversal in a play is ‘likely to lead to good or bad fortune’. The representation of this, for Aristotle, is intrinsic to the poet’s function. Aristotle saw the poet as describing the kinds of things that might transpire either out of probability or out of necessity given certain circumstances in the human world. This is what he means when he says that ‘poetry is more philosophical and more worthy of serious attention than history’. As far as Aristotle is concerned poetry speaks of ‘universals’. History, by contrast, speaks of ‘particulars’. Universals are ‘the kinds of thing a certain type of person will probably or necessarily say or do in a given situation’. Particulars, by contrast, are the particular individual ‘things’ individuals’ have done. To relate particulars is the job of the historian not the poet.

Tragedy at its best should be capable of arousing fear and pity. The kind of plot that can fulfil this requirement is the one that represents the fall of an individual from ‘prosperity to misery’ who is ‘not conspicuous for virtue and justice’, but is basically good. Indeed, the individual represented should be similar to the individuals in the audience. Aristotle reminds us that this is so because our pity is aroused from observing the undeserved suffering of a basically good agent (as opposed to an evil one who deserves all they get) and our fear because it is an individual like ourselves that is suffering. We can imagine ourselves being in the same kind of position

suffering the same kind of fate as the protagonist. The protagonists represented in tragic drama are just bigger and better versions of real human agents. Further to this, it is crucial that their fall is not the result of depravity or viciousness but is the result 'of some great error'. The greatest tragedies have such a structure for 'misfortune is the right ending'.

'Character' is that by which we are able to define the 'nature' of the 'participants' in a tragedy. Importantly, it is more the representation of character types and not of historical individuals that is important for Aristotle and this by virtue of the universal function of poetry and a tragedy has, by necessity, six constituents that determine the tragedy's quality. As listed, they are: 'plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle, and song' (Aristotle 1965, p. 64). This is an exclusive list which, Aristotle reminds us, has been, 'used by practically all playwrights'. In line with his general method Aristotle approaches plays as the biologist approaches plants. He gives us the general characteristics of a thing by virtue of which it is the kind of thing it is. Somewhat in line with this he notes that the 'power' of tragedy is independent both of actors and performance. As has been indicated the most important of these constituents is the plot. This is so because tragedy is 'a representation, not of people, but of action and life, of happiness and unhappiness – and happiness and unhappiness are bound up with action' (Aristotle 1965, p. 65).

The end of human life is eudaimonia (happiness, the good life, the worthwhile life, flourishing). Eudaimonia is necessarily bound up with action. It is, therefore, not like a mental state. Indeed, as Rorty reminds us, 'intelligent human action' aims at arranging the 'affairs of life' in such a manner that is conducive to eudaimonia (Rorty 1992, p. 6). Nonetheless, we should not understand eudaimonia to be simply the 'outcome' or 'end-product' of action and activity. Rather, the flourishing life is a life

that is lived to its full comprised of excellent activity. Although intimately bound up with character, as it is character that reveals individuals' personal choice, it is largely a matter of the actions individuals perform that enables them to achieve such a eudaimon life. Aristotle reminds us of this in the *Poetics* where he says:

The purpose of living is an end which is a kind of activity, not a quality; it is their characters, indeed, that make people what they are, but it is by reason of their actions that they are happy or the reverse (Aristotle 1965, p. 65).

It is by virtue of their actions that human beings manage to live and maintain a flourishing life. Character is involved in tragedies only for the sake of the action represented. Indeed, it would be possible to have a tragedy that did not represent character at all and only represented action. For Aristotle then, the end aimed at by tragedies is the incidents of the plot. And, as Aristotle reminds us, in general 'the end is everything'.

Essentially then, and as Nussbaum (1986, p. 382) has put it, a tragedy explores the space between the 'goodness' and 'good living' of human beings and how well such human beings actually manage to live. That is, tragedy explores the space between being and doing. Aristotle believed this space to be both real and important. He saw the representation of tragic action to be important since it disclosed the truth to the audience that basically good individuals like themselves can go horribly wrong and reap the tragic consequences of what they themselves sow and viewing a tragedy can aid an individual in their moral education, their *éducation sentimentale*.

In Aristotle's view then, tragedy is concerned with basically good people who fall into misery not because of bad character but due to some 'error' or *hamartia*

(error, going wrong, missing-the-mark). To fall into misery through some hamartia is to fall by virtue of some mistake made in action that is not simply fortuitous but rather causally intelligible as belonging to the protagonist as done by them and at the same time not resulting from some settled vicious defect of character. As Sherman (1992, p. 177) reminds us, flourishing is a matter both of acting virtuously and of luck. Essentially, hamartia or ‘tragic error’ illustrates the fragility of the good life.

### **The centrality of action and the nature of tragedy.**

Aristotle emphasises the fact that it is impossible for ethics, despite its rigorous nature, to attain the exactitude of the mathematical sciences in its pronouncements (Gadamer 1975). Nevertheless, he coins a detailed and complex theory of action. It is Vernant’s contention that the motivation behind Aristotle’s theory of moral action was a concern with ‘personal culpability’ and responsibility. His theory distinguishes between all the different modalities of action according to their ‘internal conditions’ from the action performed under external constraint to the action performed of the agents own volition after deliberation and in full knowledge of the consequences (Vernant 1990).

Human action emerges, on Aristotle’s account, as a particular species of natural motion the source of which is internal to the agent. Vernant has pointed out that Aristotle formed a new concept of action taking the form of a decision. This concept is designated by the term *proairesis*. The capability for this kind of action belongs to humanity and humanity alone. We need to explain this.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle distinguishes *voluntary* from *involuntary*. The Greek cognates corresponding to voluntary and involuntary are *hekōn*, *hekousios*,

*hekousion* and *akōn*, *akousios*, *akousion* respectively. Vernant has pointed out that the translation of *hekōn* and *akōn* into voluntary and involuntary is problematic and that rendering them as ‘of one’s own volition’ and ‘despite oneself’ would be more appropriate<sup>1</sup>. This is born out by the text of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. There Aristotle says:

acts done by reason of anger or appetite are not rightly called involuntary...on that showing none of the other animals will act voluntarily...Also what is involuntary is thought to be painful, but what is in accordance with appetite is thought to be pleasant...the irrational passions are thought not less human than reason is, and therefore also the actions which proceed from anger or appetite are the man’s actions. It would be odd, then, to treat them as involuntary (Aristotle 1980, pp. 52-53).

As such, Vernant is quite correct when he points out that an animal may act *hekōn* when it acts in line with its own inclination and suffers no external constraint. This highlights the fact that although Aristotle had a concept of ‘decision’ in his theory of action he did not universalise that concept over the entire sphere of voluntary action. Some voluntary action was not done as the result of a decision. Action through desire, passion and pleasure can be said to be voluntary. Indeed, it is the case, as Nussbaum reminds us, that specifically human forms of intelligence and emotion are ‘determinations of animality’ and not something that stand in contrast to animality.

What is essential to grasp in the context of voluntary action is that an action is voluntary if the cause of the action originates in the individual agent. So although the

action that results from deliberation and decision falls under the domain of the voluntary it is not the only kind of action to do so. In voluntary action we set out to attain an objective that, from our perspective, appears to be good. Aristotle is explicit on this, despite the fact that some actions' ends are subordinate to the ends of other actions and that there is a different, though related, species of action that forms part of activities that are self-contained and are finished in their performance. He says 'good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim' (Aristotle 1980, p. 1). Despite the fact that voluntary action is often 'thoughtless' and deliberation free, in voluntary action the particular action performed 'expresses a vision of the human good' (Broadie 1991, p. 159).

We should note the further qualification that in his theory of action Aristotle was not concerned with any notion of psychological liberty. Vernant has pointed out that the concept of the will is in fact nowhere to be found in Aristotle's theory of action. The concept of *free will* in the modern sense would have been quite alien to him.

For Aristotle, there are only two distinct types of faculty that are at work in moral action. These are the *desiring part of the soul* and the *intellect* in its practical function. Soul or *psyche* should be regarded as the principle distinctive of animal life. The *scala naturae* constructed by Aristotle is determined by the addition of faculties to the soul. The human being has all of the animal faculties with the addition of imagination (*phantasia*) and reason and these two are shared, in some degree, by the 'higher animals' (Furley 1997, pp. 29-30). Soul is not something that could be separated from body. The soul of a living thing is its *form* (*morphê*) and its body is its *matter* (*hulê*). Soul is that structure which orders bodily matter so that it forms a living animal or plant. Body and soul are not separate entities but rather complementary

aspects of a single being, in this case, the living creature. This is Aristotle's hylemorphism (Gallop 1997, p. 92). It is possible to divide the soul into rational and nonrational parts (Crisp 1997, p. 118). The rational part of the soul is related to the *intellectual virtues* such as practical wisdom, *phronesis*. This virtue enables the human being not only to select the correct means to a desired end but also to select the end itself.

The agent of practical wisdom possesses the correct understanding of eudaimonia and of the role played in this by the virtues and is able to apply this in their daily life. Acting correctly requires correct reason (*orthos logos*) to govern the agent's feelings as well as their actions. Such a situation requires an intellectual function (over and above mere habituation) and the possession of *phronesis*. Once the correct means to a desired end has been identified action follows necessarily. Aristotle does not distinguish between the intentional and the premeditated within the sphere of the voluntary; *hekōn* carries both meanings (Vernant 1990, p. 60). Fundamentally, Aristotle's opposition of the sphere of the voluntary and the sphere of the involuntary opposes a determination that comes from within the agent to a constraint from outside. As Vernant has shown, despite the fact that this 'internal determination' is different from the various kinds of external constraint, it is still necessary.

Aristotle held the position that voluntary action issued from individual agents on the basis of necessity. Once the correct set of means to a desired end were identified, action would follow necessarily. Nonetheless, Aristotle retained a notion of freedom and responsibility. There is evidence to suggest that Socrates held wickedness to be ignorance. It is in his response to this problem that we can see Aristotle's concept of freedom and responsibility. Aristotle held that individuals could

be responsible for their ignorance because, in most cases, it lies in the individuals power to do something about it. He says:

they...[individuals]...are themselves by their slack lives responsible for becoming men of that kind...for it is activities exercised on particular objects that make the corresponding character (Aristotle 1980, pp. 60-61).

By this view the evil man is the cause responsible for his unhappy state. An individual's character depends on their dispositions taken as a whole which are developed over time and become fixed by habit. Aristotle's ethics is usually characterised as a *virtue ethics*. Virtues are settled dispositions of character. They are learned and maintained over time. Because individuals are free to become enlightened about the kind of life proper to them by virtue of what they are they can be held responsible for not becoming enlightened. The matter lay within their power. Prior to their character becoming settled individuals were free to act in a variety of ways which would result in the formation of a particular kind of character. However, once an individual's character is formed, their settled dispositions in place, they act in terms of their dispositions and could not act otherwise. The agent's conception of the end of their action necessarily depends upon their character. And further, their character also depends upon the actions performed by the agent. The result is a *hermeneutic movement* between character and action. Actions depend upon character and character depends upon action and the subjective responsibility of the agent is based upon the fact that the origin of the action (*archē*) and the efficient cause (*aitia*) originate from within the agent. Actions of this kind are voluntary and can be ascribed to agents legitimately.

As such, the role played by character in tragic drama is complicated. While tragedies are the dramatic representation of action, character is also represented for an individual's character is expressed in their choices and actions. It is the case that the character of the tragic protagonist is that which makes him susceptible to the hamartia that ultimately results in his/her fall into misery.

This is not necessarily precluded by, for example, Nussbaum's account, the essence of which is that a tragic hamartia is not the outcome of a defective or vicious disposition of character<sup>2</sup>. We must remember that Aristotle stipulates that the characters of the protagonists in a tragedy be basically good. They are after all individuals who 'miss the mark' through an error. In order to 'miss the mark' they must know, or at least have a sense of, what it is (the good) that they are ultimately striving for in order that their action expresses a vision of the human good. As such, the proper protagonist in a tragedy will not be an individual who has an abundance of defective dispositions of character. Nevertheless, we shall see when we consider Oedipus that ignorance can be involved in such an error and Oedipus's good and noble character was formatively involved in his murderous action.

### **Aristotle and the case of Oedipus**

Oedipus intended, in conformity with his nobility, to kill the stranger that offended him. Now, for Aristotle, right action lies in a *mean* between a vice of excess and a vice of deficiency<sup>3</sup>. This mean is *relative* to particular characters. The mean relative to Oedipus need not be equal to the mean of any other agent. After Oedipus's provocation by the coachman and his passenger (Laius) he killed them. In his speech where he gives voice to the recognition that heralds his fate he expresses his grief at

what he has done. Crucially, however, this grief is not about the act of committing an intended killing. Rather, it is about his ignorance regarding the identity of his victim.

He says:

I killed them all. If it happened there was any tie of kinship twixt this man and Laius, who is then now more miserable than I...I and no other have so cursed myself (Sophocles 1942, p. 146).

This act of intended killing is not necessarily problematic on an Aristotelian account of noble character. A noble King for Aristotle would be one who looks to the interests of his subjects:

the tyrant looks to his own advantage, the king to that of his subjects...he will not look to his own interests but to those of his subjects (Aristotle 1980, p. 209).

In this Oedipus certainly qualifies. It is, after all, in the interests of his subjects that he seeks to uncover the mystery surrounding Laius's death so as to rid his lands of the plague that has befallen them. It was his nobility that led Oedipus to kill the stranger. He had been offended and physically assaulted by his victims before he killed them. His act of killing could well be an act that satisfies Aristotle's *doctrine of the mean* since this act was done in the right way at the right time to the right people and did not result from a defect of character. Rather, it was done by a noble, kingly individual who had been grossly affronted and assaulted. He did not intend to 'go so

wrong' in doing so and had the stranger not been related to him Oedipus would not have committed a hamartia.

In such a case luck is involved since it is a matter of either good or ill-fortune if one's beliefs are correct. (Here we would do well to remember that *daimon* is Greek for luck and *eu* Greek for well). Oedipus believed that the stranger was not his father: in this he was mistaken. To believe that the stranger was, or could be, his father lies beyond what can reasonably be required of agents. The ignorance on Oedipus's part was not an ignorance for which he could reasonably be held responsible. Oedipus's hamartia was the result of his character expressed in his action plus unfortunate circumstance. Oedipus was responsible for his act but not for his ignorance and his ignorance does not qualify him as a deficient individual.

On Aristotle's account, individuals become what they are by virtue of how they behave and what they do. Further to this, individuals behave in a certain way by virtue of what they have become. We have seen that voluntary action carries with it a vision of the human good. This can only be possible if what is good is good in terms of human action. This is the case for Aristotle because eudaimonia is necessarily tied up with action. The individual is confronted with a situation in which they have to act. In Aristotle's terms, action is inherently bound up with knowledge because as a kind of thing that aims at the good, human beings need to have, as Urmson reminds us, knowledge of the general and natural regularities of the world they are in if they are to be able to give up immediate satisfaction of appetite and instead pursue long term goals and achieve the satisfaction that goes with that particular kind of success. Such knowledge pertains to an individual's attainment of the good and ultimately eudaemonia (Urmson 1988, p. 40).

The purpose of this knowledge is to govern an agent's action. The task of making a correct moral decision is the task of acting in the right way at the right time towards the right person in light of what is required of you in general. It is at once both particular and universal and must involve a *hermeneutic movement* between these two dimensions. Further, an agent acts in terms of the settled dispositions that constitute its character. There is a threefold hermeneutic intimated but never explicitly stated by Aristotle: first, the determination of the good which is at once 'local and particular' and 'cosmic and universal'. Second: the hermeneutic movement between character and action. And third: the hermeneutic of correct moral decision. The human being or *politikon zōon* is a thoroughly *interpretive* being.

This kind of knowledge is not the kind of knowledge that entails the distinction between knowledge and experience. This kind of knowledge attaches to both means and end. The individual grasps the correct means and then acts voluntarily with a vision of the human good. Essentially, this moral knowledge, which is guided by concern with the good and virtue and so on, has to be sensitive to and respond to the demands made on the individual in terms of the situation they find themselves in. Any individual must understand what they have to do in terms of a particular situation and in terms of what is morally required of them generally and in terms of what they themselves expect of themselves in general. Given this, we can concur with Gadamer and say that, in Aristotle's account, in the application of the knowledge that is bound up with action the application is not an after thought but in fact codetermines the agent's understanding from the off set and in fact, in its interpretive nature, the kind of being described by Aristotle paved the way for the elaboration of the being Heidegger was later to call *Dasein*.

Aristotle's account of action is crucial to any understanding of hamartia in the tragic context since hamartia is centrally concerned with agency. Tragedy itself is concerned with human action in all its manifest circumstance and its error. The essence of tragic hamartia is that the agent chooses to act in a way that heralds catastrophe. The tragic conditions are met in the exemplary case of Oedipus. He was susceptible to hamartia because of his character.

Now, because of the primacy of action in eudaimonia it follows that human beings are not in full control of their flourishing. Contingent impediments can, as Sherman reminds us, frustrate even the most virtuous agent's realization of eudaimonia. The human being's control over their life is essentially limited and their flourishing contingent. In the case of Oedipus this contingency, the element of luck, is expressed in the fact that one of the individuals he killed was his father. Flourishing is precarious. Individuals have to 'get it right', they have to act in such a way as to attain and maintain eudaimonia. Because contingent factors are always present in the concrete situation individuals are always, in some way, reliant on luck for their eudaimonia. It is always possible to get it wrong, even if you did everything that could be reasonably be asked of you. It is precisely here that tragedy fulfils its essential role. Tragedy is disclosive of the truth that goodness is not enough to ensure flourishing. Tragedy discloses the essential limitation to the control one has over ones fate.

### **Hamartia, action and the tragic effect.**

In a play the hamartia is the link in the chain which hangs between ignorance and recognition. The hamartia occasions the dynamic of recognition and reversal. It is the hamartia or ‘tragic choice’ which occasions both the epistemic change on the part of the protagonist and their ultimate change of fortune.

Given Aristotle’s view that there is an infinite number of ways in which individuals can ‘miss the mark’ it follows that the kind of hamartia that can lead to ruin is in principle indefinite. The end of tragedy sets a limit to the kind of individual that is represented as performing the hamartia. The individuals represented have to be individuals like us whose downfall can provoke in us the audience, fear and pity. This, however, sets no limit to the kind of mistake the tragic poet can represent. What does set the limit is the meaningfulness of the representation to the audience. That is, the narrative has to be recognisable to the audience in its universal function. Tragedy is meaningful to beings of a particular kind. Tragedy is disclosive of the human situation in all its difficulty and contingency. Thus, although Aristotle cautions us that the best tragedies are written ‘about only a handful of families’ we take this to be a development of the view that the protagonist in a tragedy is a ‘larger and better’ version of the rest of us. In other words, such a view is the result of a certain *aristocratism* that Aristotle held and that need not be maintained. Far more important in a reading of the tragic effect is the fact that the protagonist fits a certain character type. The effect of tragedy is type specific.

The tragic effect cannot be aroused by events that just happen: such as lightning striking and killing someone the protagonist loves. This would indeed be terrible, but it would not be tragic in Aristotle’s sense. The events that provoke the

specifically tragic effect – the representation of which would qualify a play as a tragedy – have to be causally intelligible in light of the actions performed by the protagonist. The tragic consequences must follow either by probability or necessity from the protagonist's hamartia. It follows that what happens in a good tragedy should not be contrary to reason. Nor should they come about *ex machina*.

The hamartia or 'going wrong' happens as the result of action that is voluntary, issues by necessity from a particular character, and is done in a particular situation. Even though, as voluntary, the act performed expresses a vision of the human good and is governed by moral knowledge the protagonist fails to 'hit the mark' in the particular context. The results of this failing are causally intelligible and attributable to the protagonist. Luck is involved because the protagonist could have done everything that could be reasonably required of him or her morally and yet still fail to hit the mark. As Oedipus says: 'O God, I think I have called curses on myself in ignorance' (Sophocles 1942, p. 143). Oedipus acted voluntarily and is subjectively responsible for the act of killing the strangers he encountered. In so doing he went horribly wrong.

The events are causally intelligible and ultimately bring about the recognition and the reversal of fortune requisite for tragedy. This displays the necessary features of tragic hamartia. As with all good tragedies the hamartia bears a 'universal' dimension as it appeals to the nature of the human condition. A person of similar character to Oedipus in a similar situation will always be susceptible to committing a similar hamartia. It provokes the tragic effect in the audience because they recognise that as human beings who are basically good their flourishing is also susceptible to chance. The pity we feel for the protagonist results from the protagonist's failing to see what could in fact, if only in hindsight, be seen and we feel fear because it is

entirely possible that we should commit a hamartia that will issue in tragic consequences for us and/or our loved ones.

## **Conclusion**

Aristotle offers us an essentialist account of the nature of tragedy. Central to this is the notion of hamartia. The tragic protagonist ‘goes wrong’ in such a way as to herald tragic consequences for themselves and/or their loved ones. Human beings feel the characteristic effect of tragedy because of the undeserved suffering that results from the hamartia and because it is entirely possible for them also to fall into a similar trap. Tragedy is disclosive of the human situation in its precarious contingency. This disclosive function of tragedy remains instructive for aesthetic and ethical thinkers and serves to link Aristotle’s account with contemporary European phenomenological philosophy and particularly with the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. An existential interpretation of tragedy building on an Aristotelian heritage would bring to the fore aspects of the role of tragedy that Aristotle could only intimate and would undoubtedly depart from Aristotle on key points such as essentialism. Nevertheless, Aristotle’s account of tragedy remains disclosive of the contingency of human existence that has so much resonance with contemporary aesthetic and philosophical experience.

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<sup>1</sup> There is a further category of ‘mixed’ actions. These are actions done under duress. As Sherman points out, these actions are more voluntary than involuntary, (Sherman 1992, p. 185).

<sup>2</sup> Nussbaum’s account in *The Fragility of Goodness* supports our interpretation here. Her interpretation of *hamartia* centres on the tragic action being causally intelligible and not the outcome of a defective disposition of character, as we have seen above. However, she augments her account of *hamartia* to include ‘...both blameworthy and non-blameworthy missings-of-the-mark...[for example]...the innocent ignorance of Oedipus...[and]...the intentional but highly constrained act of Agamemnon...[and]...the passionate deviations of akratic persons inspired to act against settled character...[and]...It can, presumably, even include the more deliberate mistakes that result from a momentary or temporary departure from character...’, Nussbaum, p383. The interpretation we shall give of Oedipus centres on the contention that he acts *in line* with his character and that he is not, at the time of his act, akratic or temporally deviating from his character. Nussbaum’s account does lend itself to our interpretation that an individual’s character can make him/her susceptible to *hamartia* since ‘...the notion of *hamartia* takes in a variety of important goings-wrong that do not result from settled badness...’, (Nussbaum 1986, p. 383). In any case, *bad* agents could not, strictly speaking, commit a *hamartia*. And this because they would either not be trying to ‘get it right’ or they would be ignorant of what they should be striving for.

<sup>3</sup> ‘There are three kinds of disposition, then, two of them vices, involving excess and deficiency respectively, and one a virtue, viz. the mean...’, (Aristotle 1980, pp. 43-44).

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