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Aristotle and the value of tragedy

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores Aristotle's understanding of the value of tragedy. The primarily technical analyses of the *Poetics* are not sufficient for this purpose: they must be read in the context of Aristotle's philosophical anthropology. An outline of Aristotle's understanding of the structure of human motivation will provide a framework within which to interpret his discussion of the uses of music, and in particular of music's status as an intrinsically valuable component of cultivated leisure. Applying that model to tragedy requires an explanation of what motivates engagement with drama that evokes distressing affects. Aristotle's account of musical *katharsis*, if read with sufficient attention to its structure and interpreted in the light of his analysis of pleasure, provides a solution. If the importance which Aristotle attaches to intrinsically valuable leisure activities is overlooked, it is not possible to understand his conception of a good human life, or his aesthetics.

What motivates human beings to invest time and effort in producing and consuming tragedies? And how does that investment contribute to a characteristically human way of life? That is, what value attaches to the production and consumption of tragedies? Though Aristotle touches briefly on poetry's roots in human nature at the beginning of *Poetics* 4, for the most part the existence of poetry and its diverse kinds is treated in the *Poetics*, not as an *explanandum*, but as the starting-point for technical analyses of how poems, in their various kinds, are best composed. The *Poetics* examines how poetry's value may be realised most effectively, but does not provide fully articulated answers to questions about the nature of that value. That has not prevented readers from wondering what answers he might have given—nor should it. But an indirect approach is needed: the primarily technical analysis of good tragedy in the *Poetics* needs to be read in the context of Aristotle's philosophical anthropology.¹ In this paper an outline of Aristotle's understanding of the distinctive structure of human motivation (§1) will provide a framework within which to make sense of his discussion of the uses of music in *Politics* 8, and (in particular) of its status as an intrinsically valuable component of cultivated leisure (§2). That provides a model for an Aristotelian account of the value of tragedy, but leaves a familiar problem unresolved: what motivates engagement with drama that is affectively distressing (§3)? It is widely supposed that *katharsis* provides a key to Aristotle's solution to this problem. That, I (now) think, is right; but to justify that conclusion it is necessary to read Aristotle's account of *katharsis* with careful attention to its structure (§4), and to interpret it in the light of his analysis of pleasure (§5).

¹ For a brief preview of this project see Malcolm Heath, *Ancient Philosophical Poetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 56-103; it will be developed more fully in *Poetical Animals: Aristotle, Anthropology and Poetry* (in preparation). The underlying research was supported by the Leverhulme Trust (Major Research Fellowship F10099B). Translations from Aristotle are my own.

1. Human Motivation

Human motivation, in Aristotle's view, has a unique structure. The behaviour of nonhuman animals is driven by the pleasure and distress evoked by perception. The same is true of some human behaviour; but humans are also capable of acting from deliberate choice: they can choose to do A because of (*dia*), or for the sake of (*heneka*), B. That is a uniquely human capacity, because it depends on causal understanding in Aristotle's sense ('the for-the-sake-of-which' is his favoured expression for the final cause). The B because of which a human being chooses to do A is sometimes a bodily pleasure of a kind that nonhuman animals also experience; but human choices may be guided by a wider range of values: for example, one may choose to do something because it is beneficial or just. The sharing of this extended range of values is, for Aristotle, what distinguishes human language from the communicative vocalisations of nonhuman animals, and is constitutive of human communities (*Pol.* 1.2, 1253a7-18).

Aristotle insists that chains of deliberative reasoning must terminate somewhere. I may choose to do A because of B, and B because of C; but choice would succumb to a futile regress if deliberation did not at some point fix on something that is chosen, not (or not only) because of something else, but because of itself (*NE* 1.2, 1094a18-22). What is worth choosing only because of something else is of less value than what is worth choosing because of itself (1.7, 1097a25-b6). There is just one thing that is chosen always and only because of itself, and never because of something else: *eudaimonia*—the best kind of life, whatever that may turn out to be (1097a33-b6). But many things are chosen *both* because of themselves *and* because of something else. Aristotle identifies such cases by applying a counter-factual test: would this thing still be worth choosing in the absence of that other thing?² This (we might say) is a test of its having intrinsic value. In Aristotelian ethics, an act's being chosen because of its intrinsic value is one of the conditions of its being virtuous (2.4, 1105a32). So, for example, a soldier who would not think it worth risking his life in battle without the incentive of extrinsic goods (honour, payment, or the avoidance of punishment) does not regard courageous action as worth choosing because of itself. So, even if he does what a courageous person would do, he is not doing it *as* the courageous person would (2.4, 1105b5-9), and is therefore not exercising the virtue of courage.

Aristotle often speaks of virtuous action being chosen because of 'the fine'³ (*to kalon*: e.g. *NE* 4.1, 1120a23-9; 9.8, 1168a33-4; *EE* 3.1, 1230a26-32). This is virtually equivalent to saying that it is chosen because of itself: to choose a fine thing because of itself is to choose it because it is fine. But not everything that is worth choosing because of itself is fine: the fine is a pre-eminent subset of things that are good by nature and chosen for themselves (*EE* 8.3, 1248b16-19). In

² See *NE* 1.7, 1097b2-4; 6.12, 1144a1-3; 10.3, 1174a4-8; *Rhet.* 1.6, 1362b25-7, with b2-4; *Top.* 3.1, 116a29-39, 117a2-4.

³ This opaque expression (a calque on the Greek article + adjective construction, designating both 'what is Φ ' and 'the quality of being Φ '), is a placeholder for a term spanning ethical and aesthetic value. T.H. Irwin, 'The sense and reference of *καλόν* in Aristotle', *Classical Philology* 105 (2010), 381-396, illustrates the range of applications in Aristotle, but does not engage closely with the quasi-technical use explained below.

ethics, that subset comprises things that are chosen for themselves and are praiseworthy (b19-25; cf. 1249a25), i.e. virtue and virtuous action (2.1, 1220a7-10). The pre-eminent status of virtue means, for example, that although honour is also an intrinsic good, doing what a virtuous person would do only for the sake of honour is an ethical failure. Sparta, which repeatedly provides Aristotle with a case-study of a society that has gone subtly but disastrously wrong in its values, illustrates the point (8.3, 1248b37-9a16). The Spartans value virtuous actions, but do so only because of other things to which those actions lead, such as honour, wealth and power. Those things are genuinely worth choosing for their own sake; to that extent, Spartan values are correct. But because the Spartans do not value virtuous actions for their own sake, they do not have ‘complete virtue’. They are good (*agathos*), but they are not ‘fine and good’ (*kalos kagathos*).⁴

Humans do not possess virtues by nature: they ‘are naturally receptive of them, but are completed by habit’ (*NE* 2.1, 1103a23-6). So virtue depends on education. Moral education requires the shaping of an individual’s dispositions to feel pleasure and distress. That is not to say that virtuous individuals perform virtuous actions because doing so will give them pleasure: virtuous action is chosen because of itself, or because it is fine. Even so, the action will give them pleasure, since it is in accordance with their character. For this reason, ‘moral excellence is concerned with pleasures and pains’ (*NE* 2.3, 1104b15-16), and ‘the effect on our actions of our feeling pleasure and distress well or badly is not trivial’ (1105a5-6).

2. Music

The ethical importance of pleasure and distress is one reason why Aristotle’s discussion of education in *Politics* 8 pays so much attention to music. Melody and rhythm are naturally pleasurable (*Pol.* 8.5, 1340a14, b16-17); moreover, melodies and rhythms may correspond to (contain ‘likenesses of’: 8.5, 1340a18-39) states of character. Consequently, by controlling the music to which children are exposed (and, in particular, exposed as active participants, when they learn to play an instrument: 8.6, 1340b20-5), educators can produce an habitual association between the natural pleasure of music and the ethically desirable states of character that correspond to those melodies and rhythms. This character-shaping exploitation of the pleasure of music is not sufficient to produce virtuous character (one becomes virtuous by performing virtuous actions: *NE* 2.4, 1105a17-b12), but it facilitates the formation of the positive attitudes towards virtue that are necessary if one is to perform virtuous actions *as* the virtuous person would.

Ethical formation is not, however, the only reason why musical education is important to Aristotle. It is also a preparation for the proper use of leisure in adulthood (*Pol.* 8.3, 1337b22-8b4). Aristotle is scornful of the notion that education’s primary function is to equip people with ‘useful’ accomplishments: ‘to be asking all the time what use something is, is highly inappropriate for people who are great-souled and free’ (1338b2-4). As has already been said, what is

⁴ For a detailed analysis of *EE* 8.3 see Sarah Broadie, ‘The good, the noble and the theoretical in the *Eudemian Ethics*’, in John Cottingham and Peter Hacker (eds), *Mind, Method, and Morality: Essays in Honour of Anthony Kenny* (Oxford: OUP, 2010), 6-25.

worth choosing only because of something else is of less value than what is worth choosing because of itself. So it is important that those who, like Aristotle's elite readership, have significant amounts of unconstrained time at their disposal learn how to allocate that time to activities that are worth choosing because of themselves. This is another area in which Sparta's defective system of values manifests itself (8.4, 1338b9-32; cf. 7.14, 1333b5-16; 7.15, 1334a40-b5).

It is necessary to distinguish between candidate leisure activities that are genuinely worth choosing because of themselves and those that are not: leisure should not be squandered on trivial amusements. That is not to say that trivial amusements have no value: they can help us relax. But relaxation is recovery from, and preparation for return to, work (*Pol.* 8.3, 1337b33-8a1). Relaxation, therefore, is chosen because of something else; leisure activities are not. Aristotle sharply distinguishes relaxation, which is constrained by work, from the unconstrained activity of leisure, and his educational recommendations have the proper use of this unconstrained time as their goal: 'it is clear that one should learn and be taught certain things with a view to leisure activity, and that these things that are taught and learned are for their own sake, whereas those with a view to non-leisure are necessary and for the sake of other things' (1338a9-13).

We have seen that, though virtuous actions are not performed because they give pleasure, but because of 'the fine', they do give pleasure to virtuous people. Aristotle recognises a parallel between ethical and aesthetic value in this respect: 'a morally good man, *qua* morally good, delights in virtuous actions and is displeased by ones arising from vice, just as a musical man takes pleasure in fine melodies but is pained at bad ones' (*NE* 9.9, 1170a8-11). In ethics, 'fine' picks out those things worth choosing because of themselves that are also praiseworthy, i.e. virtue and virtuous action. That ethical definition is repeated in the *Rhetoric* ('whatever, being worth choosing in itself, is praiseworthy'), but with the addition of an alternative formula which seems more applicable to the aesthetic case: 'whatever, being good, is pleasant because it is good' (1.9, 1366a33-4). The implication that there is more than one way in which something can be a source of pleasure is confirmed by Aristotle's account of music. We have already observed that there is a natural pleasure in melody and rhythm (*Pol.* 8.5, 1340a14, b16-17). But in his discussion of musical education Aristotle recommends that children should learn to play an instrument 'until they are able to take pleasure in *fine* melodies and rhythm, and not merely in the common element of music, as even some nonhuman animals do, and also the mass of servile people and children' (8.6, 1341a13-17). There are, then, two ways to take pleasure in music, and the goal of musical education is achieved when the second becomes accessible. Initially, music has only a subjective value for young people, dependent on the natural pleasure in melody and rhythm. The goal of musical education is to enable a young person to distinguish melodies and rhythms that are fine from those that are not, and to take pleasure in those melodies and rhythms because they are fine.

Their cultivated musical taste⁵ gives them access to an objective value, the recognition of which is a source of pleasure.

3. Tragedy

Should we extend the model of music to tragedy? Evidence that we should comes from Aristotle's *Protrepticus* (a lost work that can be partially reconstructed from later sources).⁶ In it Aristotle made a case for the value of philosophy, and had to counter the objections of those who dismiss philosophy because it is (allegedly) useless. He uses the regress argument to show the absurdity of demanding that everything needs to be valued because of something else. He also reminds his opponents that there are things which they themselves value even though they are not useful: they watch athletics and drama, not because watching them brings any extrinsic benefit, but because they are intrinsically worth watching (F44 Düring). So watching drama and athletics, as well as listening to music, are appropriate leisure activities.

A qualification is needed. Though melody and rhythm are, in principle, naturally pleasant, there is bad music which gives pleasure only to unnaturally distorted souls (*Pol.* 8.7, 1342a18-28);⁷ and not all naturally pleasant melodies and rhythms are 'fine'. Music varies in quality, and qualifies as an appropriate object of leisured attention to the extent that it approaches the highest levels of excellence. The same is true of tragedy: it is clear from the *Poetics* that tragedies range from the defective to the excellent. Likewise, the example of athletics in *Protrepticus* is, more precisely, of athletics at the Olympic games. This places one constraint on the kinds of thing that are potentially appropriate objects of leisured attention: if it is to be possible to distinguish routine from excellent instances, there must be sufficient scope for complexity, or for difficulty of conception or execution, to provide a basis for that distinction. That in turn means that the object of attention will demand a highly developed capacity for discriminating appreciation—which is why the education of musical discernment is important as preparation for adult leisure.

However, we must not forget that we are concerned with objects of appreciative *human* attention.⁸ There must be some congruence between them and

⁵ Aristotle uses this metaphor for the appreciative experience of intrinsic value in an ethical context (*NE* 10.6, 1176b19-21; 10.9, 1179b13-16), though not in an aesthetic context.

⁶ See D.S. Hutchinson and Monte Ransome Johnson, 'Authenticating Aristotle's *Protrepticus*', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 29 (2005), 193-294. The fragment cited here is Aristotle fr. 58 Rose (= fr. 42-44 Düring), recovered from Iamblichus *Protrepticus* 52.16-54.5 Pistelli. Hutchinson and Johnson provide an English translation (pp. 260-261); see also Anton-Hermann Chroust, *Aristotle: Protrepticus. A Reconstruction* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1964), 17-19 (fr. 40-42).

⁷ In this passage Aristotle licences performance of such music in his ideal city, on the grounds that the kind of people who enjoy it need opportunities for relaxation.

⁸ The object that is most worthy of appreciative attention (*theōria*) without qualification is the universe, and Aristotle argues in *NE* 10.7-8 that living well (*eudaimonia*) is paradigmatically contemplation of the universe: that is what we should aim at *so far as we are able* (10.7, 1177b33-4). But it is impossible for humans to attain this divine life uninterruptedly (*Met.* 12.7, 1072b14-16); so other objects of appreciative attention are needed.

human nature, such that human beings are spontaneously motivated to attend to them. Since pleasure is unimpeded activity in accordance with a natural disposition (*NE* 7.12, 1153a13-15) or is the completion or perfection of such activity (10.4, 1174b31-3), attending to such objects will be naturally pleasurable—or will be so to the extent that a cognitive capacity in optimal condition is directed towards the best object that falls within the scope of that capacity (b14-31). Music fits this model easily: the natural pleasure in melody and rhythm points to the soul's affinity with melodic and rhythmic structures (*Pol.* 8.5, 1340b17-19). Aristotle thinks that poetry is rooted in human nature in part because of the natural pleasure in melody and rhythm (*Poet.* 4, 1448b20-2), but also because of a natural human propensity for imitation and taking pleasure in imitations (1448b5-19). More specifically, poetry is imitation of agents and their actions (2, 1447b2; 3, 1448a25-7; 4, 1448b25-6), and it is easy to see why highly social animals with a propensity for taking pleasure in imitations should be especially motivated to take an interest in imitations of conspecific agents and their actions.

These points provide at least a partial explanation of the motivation of poetry in general. But what are we to say about tragedy in particular? Aristotle's technical analyses in the *Poetics* show that good tragedy is good in part because it is capable of evoking pity and fear (6, 1449b27; 9, 1452a1-3; 11, 1452a36-b3; 13, 1452b30-3a7; 14, 1453b1-14). These are distressing affects (*Rhet* 2.5, 1382a21; 2.8, 1385b13). Why, then do good tragedies give pleasure? To say, with *Poetics* 4, that humans naturally take pleasure in imitating and consuming imitations, and in melody and rhythm, is not a sufficient explanation. We could gain those pleasures from drama that allowed us to rejoice in the deserved good fortune of virtuous agents, without our having to experience any distressing emotion. Nor does it help to point to the pleasure we take in pictures of aversive objects. When Aristotle comments on the pleasure we take in such pictures (*Poet.* 4, 1448b9-17), he gives compelling evidence of the strength of our propensity to take pleasure in imitations as such; but he does not address the question of why we might choose to look at pictures of aversive objects when pictures of things that are nice to look at would also afford the pleasure that we take in imitations as such. Nor can we appeal to the pleasure that a cultivated audience gains through its appreciation of the fineness of a fine tragedy. That pleasure presupposes an activity developed to a high degree of excellence; but no activity can develop before it gets started. What needs to be explained, therefore, is the initial motivation of a dramatic form that subjects its audiences to distressing emotions. A solution to this problem requires a pleasure that is inseparable from the experience of pity and fear. Aristotle clearly thinks that there is such a pleasure: he describes the 'characteristic pleasure' of tragedy as the pleasure that comes from pity and fear through imitation (14, 1453b11-13). He gives no indication that the experience of pity and fear loses the element of distress when it comes through imitation. On the contrary, when he blames the preference for 'double' plots in tragedy (with negative outcomes for bad characters, and positive outcomes for good ones) on the *weakness* of audiences (13, 1453a30-4), there is an implication that some demand is made on the audience's emotional endurance by the experience of

intense tragic affect. But he does not explain the pleasure that comes from that experience. At any rate, he does not do so explicitly.

4. *Katharsis*

One widely canvassed solution to this problem is that the pleasure that comes from pity and fear through imitation is the pleasure that attends *katharsis*. Tragic *katharsis* is mentioned in passing in the *Poetics* (6, 1449b27-8), but not (in the extant text, at least) explained; we are not even told that there is an attendant pleasure. We are therefore compelled to fall back on *Politics* 8.7, even though Aristotle warns us there that he is giving an outline account, to be developed more clearly in connection with poetry (1341b38-40). But that outline does, at least, make explicit a connection between musical *katharsis* and pleasure (1342a14-16); and if tragic *katharsis* of pity and fear gives rise to pleasure, that pleasure will certainly be inseparable from the experience of distressing affect. There is, however, a difficulty. It seems at first sight that Aristotle understands musical *katharsis* as therapeutic: but therapy is not chosen because of itself. Moreover, therapeutic *katharsis* would have least significance for the best members of an audience: yet the appreciative audience of fine music must be in excellent condition. I shall try to show that this difficulty can be eliminated if Aristotle's argument is read with careful attention to its structure.

The context is a discussion of which *harmoniai*⁹ and rhythms should be used in musical education (1341b19-2a4). Aristotle borrows from unnamed philosophical experts on music a distinction between three kinds of melody: ethical, practical and enthusiastic. He specifies that only the most ethical *harmoniai* are to be used in education, when children are learning to play an instrument; but he goes on to say that the repertoire appropriate for audiences listening to others perform is wider, and includes practical and enthusiastic *harmoniai* as well. The key passage on *katharsis* follows (1342a4-18). To bring out its structure, I have emphasised the linking expressions, and numbered the five stages which they mark out:

[1] *For* the affect that occurs in some souls strongly exists in all, but in different degrees: e.g. pity and fear—and also enthusiasm. [2] *For* some are possessed by this disturbance, too, and we see that, under the influence of the sacred melodies, whenever they employ the melodies that excite extreme frenzy in the soul, they are restored, as if having undergone medical treatment and *katharsis*. [3] *The very same thing*, necessarily, is experienced by those prone to pity or to fear or, in general, to any affect, and by others to the extent that each is susceptible to such things; and for all there comes about a certain *katharsis* and alleviation with pleasure. [4] *In the same way*, kathartic melodies, too, provide harmless pleasure

⁹ Aristotle wavers between 'melody' (*melos*) and *harmonia* (plural, *harmoniai*). On the latter see Andrew Barker, *Greek Musical Writings: I. The Musician and his Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 163-168; the primary use 'is probably that which designates the adjustment or tuning of the notes of an instrument. What is created by tuning is a "fitting together" of notes, a structure of relations that can be used to form the basis of melodies. In Plato, *harmonia* conceived generally is the melodic counterpart to rhythm: it is the scheme of order that distinguishes the notes used in a piece of music from a mere collection of pitches' (164).

to human beings. [5] *That is why* the use of such *harmoniai* and such melodies should be allowed to competitors taking part in public musical performances.

This passage is introduced in [1] ('for') as an explanation or justification of the preceding statement about the *harmoniai* permissible in public performance; and in [5] Aristotle signals that the explanation has been successfully concluded.¹⁰ The progression from introduction to conclusion is effected by three intermediate stages. The argument's internal structure will become clearer if we focus on three respects in which these intermediate stages differ: who is affected, the specified effect, and what produces that effect.

In [2], the people affected are 'possessed by' enthusiasm: that is a strong expression, suggesting an extreme or pathological condition. The effect is described as *katharsis*, and also as restorative and as comparable to medical treatment (which is appropriate to a pathological state). This restorative effect is produced by 'the sacred melodies'. The people affected in [3] include those 'prone to' (but therefore not 'possessed by') a variety of emotions, and 'others to the extent that each is susceptible to such things': this is clearly a wider class of people than in [2]. The effect is *katharsis* of a kind (*katharsis tis*), alleviation (a weaker expression than 'medical treatment'), and pleasure—something not mentioned in [2]. Aristotle does not specify what has this effect on these people: we shall return to that question shortly. In [4], the class of people affected is all-inclusive: 'human beings'. The effect is 'harmless pleasure': pleasure is shared with [3], as against [2]. There is no reference to medical treatment or alleviation; but, since the effect is produced by 'kathartic melodies',¹¹ we can assume that the effect includes *katharsis* of a kind, as well as harmless pleasure. More precisely, the effect is produced by 'kathartic melodies, *too*'. Harmless pleasure is provided by kathartic melodies *as well* as by the unspecified source of the effect in [3]. To say that kathartic melodies produce pleasure, and so do kathartic melodies, would be nonsensical. It follows that [3] cannot have been concerned with kathartic melodies. Since it is certainly concerned with *something* kathartic, we must conclude that it is not concerned with kathartic *melodies*. In other words, [3] steps outside the musical domain.

One conclusion, at least, emerges clearly from this analysis: the transitional formulae which link the intermediate stages ('The very same thing... In the same way...') do not mean that Aristotle is literally saying the very same thing three times over. Rather, he is inviting us to see three different phenomena as relevantly similar. The therapeutic experience which the use of certain 'sacred' melodies provides for the pathological few, and a pleasurable non-musical experience,

¹⁰ There is a slippage in the passage from the prefatory 'practical and enthusiastic' to 'kathartic' (the antecedent of 'such *harmoniai* and such melodies' in [5] must be 'kathartic melodies' in [4]). If enthusiastic melodies were controversial because of the emotional arousal they induce, substituting a different term would have tactical point. In that case, enthusiastic melodies are co-extensive with kathartic melodies, and the permission granted to practical melodies is treated as needing no special defence.

¹¹ I translate the text as transmitted in the manuscripts. Some editors and translators substitute the conjecture 'practical' for 'kathartic'. Since the manuscript reading is linguistically unobjectionable there are no grounds for conjectural emendation if (as I try to show here) it also yields satisfactory sense.

throw light on the experience which a larger class of kathartic melodies affords to everyone, including those who are not in need of therapy. The pleasure of musical *katharsis* is therefore not inextricably bound to a therapeutic effect, and is available to an audience in excellent condition. That resolves the difficulty identified at the start of this section. But it has not resolved all our difficulties: we still do not know what that experience is.

5. Pleasure

Why is *katharsis* pleasurable? Aristotle does not tell us: he has, after all, warned us that he is only giving an outline account. But license for cautious conjecture can be found in the absence of even the briefest explanation of what causes the effect in [3]. Since Aristotle did not think it necessary to provide an explanation, or to identify a specific non-musical domain, it is reasonable to infer that he is referring to an everyday experience sufficiently commonplace for readers to be able to supply the explanation for themselves.¹² A minimalist interpretation might invoke the experience of pleasurable relief experienced when an episode of distressing affect abates. But in [2] there is a disposition that pre-exists the musically induced affective episode that produces the kathartic effect. A better parallel to this would be provided by the experience of (for example) someone in a state of irritation, whose mood is released when an angry episode is stimulated. In such cases, pleasurable relief is experienced when the distressing affect abates and (simultaneously) the burdensome pre-existing mood is removed. However, it is unlikely that in [4] we are to think of emotionally well-adjusted members of an audience bringing a burdensome mood with them to the concert: rather, the mood and/or affective episode are both induced and released within the musical performance itself.¹³ In the case of tragedy, there is no doubt that the affective episode is induced by the performance: that is why such a large proportion of Aristotle's technical recommendations are concerned with how best to elicit pity and fear.

But that leaves us with a further puzzle: why would emotionally well-adjusted people seek a pleasure that is preceded by distress in the absence of a disorder for which the experience would provide therapeutic benefit? Inducing distress simply for the pleasure of alleviating it seems perverse. The perversity may lie, however, not in the activity itself, but in the underlying structure of human nature, which is complex and conflicted; Aristotle himself describes it as containing 'a kind of

¹² Thus Wolfgang Schadewaldt, 'Furcht und Mitleid? Zur Deutung der aristotelische Tragödiensatzes', *Hermes* 83 (1955), 129-171, at 155 ('Dasselbe kann man (im Leben)... beobachten'); cf. Hellmut Flashar, 'Die musikalische und die poetische Katharsis', in Martin Vöhler and Bernd Seidensticker (eds), *Katharsiskonzeptionen vor Aristoteles: zum kulturellen Hintergrund des Tragödiensatzes* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), 173-179, at 174 ('hier geht es nicht um die Wirkung der Musik, sondern um Erfahrungen aus dem Leben').

¹³ G.M. Sifakis, *Aristotle on the Function of Tragic Poetry* (Herakleion: Crete University Press, 2001), 90: 'Catharsis, therefore, has to be a pleasurable relief following the excitation of certain emotions produced by the representations of music which affect our moral dispositions. There is nothing burdensome or painful to be shed or got rid of other than the termination of the excitement itself' (original emphasis). Similarly Schadewaldt, 'Furcht und Mitleid?', 161-162; G.R.F. Ferrari, 'Aristotle's literary aesthetics', *Phronesis* 44 (1999), 181-198, at 194-196.

perversity' (*ponēria tis*). For humans to behave in accordance with their nature is reasonable and unobjectionable. The apparent perversity of the taste for tragedy is therefore an illusion which an understanding of its natural roots will dispel.

Aristotle's claim about the perversity of human nature is made in the last chapter of the discussion of pleasure in *Nicomachean Ethics* 7. In this chapter Aristotle confronts and rejects the view that bodily pleasures (that is, pleasures of touch and, derivatively, of taste: *NE* 3.10, 1118a26-32; *EE* 3.2, 1230b36-8, 1232a12-15) are, as such, bad: what is bad is pursuing them to excess (*NE* 7.14, 1154a15-18).¹⁴ He then poses the question: what is it that makes people pursue bodily pleasures to excess? His reply comprises two main points. First, bodily pleasure is pursued as a remedy for distress: to offset the intensity of distress, a contrastingly intense bodily pleasure is sought, and that produces a tendency to excess (1154a26-31). Secondly, even in the absence of distress, the intensity of bodily pleasure is pursued by those who are incapable of enjoying other pleasures; and most people find an otherwise neutral state distressing, because animal life is burdensome (1154b2-9). Aristotle has already mentioned that pleasure is denigrated by some on the grounds that, even when it is not the operation of a bad nature, it is remedial: since remedy presupposes deficiency, and since being restored to a sound state is inferior to being in a sound state, remedial pleasures are only incidentally pleasurable (1154a31-b2). Now he responds to that argument. First, though he agrees that being remedied is only incidentally pleasurable, he points out that when something is being remedied, there is also something that is effecting the remedy—some part of the organism that is still in a healthy state: and the operation of nature in a healthy state is naturally, not incidentally, pleasant (1154b15-20; cf. 7.12, 1152b31-3a2). Secondly, he reflects on the implications of the complexity of human nature. Our intellect is embodied, and what is natural to one part of us is in conflict with the nature of the other. When the two are in balance there is neither pleasure nor distress—but, as has already been said, a neutral state is itself unsatisfactory. So humans, unlike gods, cannot be satisfied with a constant pleasurable equilibrium (1154b20-8). For human beings, change is itself pleasant: and while this may be due to 'a kind of perversity' of human nature, there is no exemption from the consequences of that perversity (1154b28-31).

In the course of his discussion of these issues, Aristotle makes passing mention of the possibility that pleasure may be intensified by artificially induced distress. When he claims that bodily pleasure is pursued by those who are incapable of enjoying other pleasures, he mentions as an example people who make themselves thirsty (1154b2-4). The point is apparently that this enables them to enjoy the quenching of the thirst, and that the contrast between the thirst and the subsequent restored state of not being thirsty makes the latter more enjoyable. Not being thirsty is a pleasure to which we usually pay little attention: it becomes

¹⁴ On this chapter see Gwenaëlle Aubry, 'Nicomachean Ethics VII.14 (1154a22-b34): the pain of the living and divine pleasure', in Carlo Natali (ed.), *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics, Book VII* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), 237-264. Joachim Aufderheide, 'Processes as pleasures in *EN* vii 11-14: a new approach', *Ancient Philosophy* 33 (2013), 135-157 provides a helpful analysis of Aristotle's account of pleasure in *NE* 7.11-14.

more salient after we have been thirsty. This pattern of artificially induced distress intensifying the pleasure of the restoration and of the restored equilibrium is parallel in structure to that suggested for musical and tragic *katharsis*, and gives a clearer sense of how Aristotle might have conceived the harmless pleasure to which kathartic music and tragedy lead.

Aristotle takes a tolerant attitude to the practice of making oneself thirsty: he says that it is unobjectionable when the thirsts are harmless, though not if they cause harm (presumably, by damaging one's health: 1154b5-6).¹⁵ His approval of self-induced thirst is, admittedly, muted: the practice is attributed to those who are incapable of pursuing pleasures other than those of the body. So, as well as a basic structural similarity between artificially induced thirst and artificially induced emotional distress, there must also be significant differences if this parallel is to throw any light on tragedy. There are such differences. First, and most obviously, the alleviation of distressing affect is not a bodily pleasure; therefore, the kathartic pleasure from pity and fear is not pursued by those who are incapable of pursuing pleasures other than those of the body. Secondly, while thirst is a symptom of a lack in the individual who is experiencing it, an affective response to a proper object of that affect (for example, fear in response to something that is fearful), even if it is distressing, is not: on the contrary, it expresses virtuous character. Thirdly, it is a straightforward consequence of what Aristotle says about virtue, and about pleasure, that the proper activity of a virtuous character is pleasurable to a virtuous person (*NE* 1.8, 1099a7-21).

That last point needs further consideration, since it posits an experience with a distinctive kind of complexity. There are other kinds of complexity in Aristotelian affects. Anger, for example, is a form of distress, but an angry person anticipates vengeance, which is pleasurable in two respects: the belief that one is going to achieve some aim is pleasant, and so are the images which arise when one dwells on the thought of vengeance (*Rhet.* 2.2, 1378a30-b10; cf. 1.11, 1370b10-15). Even grief and lamentation can be accompanied by pleasure: the loss of a loved one causes distress, but there is pleasure in the imagery that arises from remembering and visualising the deceased, and their actions and character (1.11, 1370b25-9). In those cases a pleasure *co-exists* with the distressing affect. But we are concerned here with cases in which the experience of distressing affect *qua* expression of virtuous character *is* the pleasure. The point is not that the virtuous person gets pleasure from the thought that he or she is being virtuous: rather, the virtuous activity is, to the extent that it impinges on the person's awareness, itself experienced as pleasurable. Aristotle's discussion of courage may help to understand his conception of the pleasure embedded in a distressing exercise of virtue (*NE* 3.9, 1117a29-b22). The exercise of courage in battle is distressing, because it involves confronting the possibility of painful injury or death. But even as Aristotle acknowledges that the *circumstances* in which courage is exercised tend to make the pleasure 'disappear' (1117a35-b6), he is unwilling to surrender the principle that virtuous activity *as such* is pleasurable to the virtuous. Even in this case, the goal remains a source of pleasure—that is, there is pleasure in acting

¹⁵ The criterion of harmlessness is one that we have already met in the outline account of *katharsis*: its significance will become clearer in the Conclusion.

for the sake of ‘the fine’ (1117a35-6, b15-16). Displaying courage in the face of death is a limiting case. When the circumstances are less extreme, by implication, the pleasure does not disappear. When we are watching tragedies in the theatre the circumstances could hardly be less extreme. That does not mean that the distress disappears: as we have already seen, Aristotle thinks that it is a weakness on the part of audiences that generates a preference for plots in which the tragic effect is mitigated (13, 1453a30-4). But the affective experience evoked by tragedy, as a proper expression of virtuous character, is properly pleasurable to a virtuous person.¹⁶

6. Conclusion

We began with questions about tragedy’s motivation and about its value. The answer to the first question, about tragedy’s motivation, starts from Aristotle’s belief that some objects of attention are naturally pleasurable to humans: these include, for example, music, because melody and rhythm are naturally pleasurable, and poetry, both because it is melodic and/or rhythmical, and because humans take pleasure in imitations. But tragedy poses a particular problem, since it aims to arouse an affective response that is found distressing: in what sense could *that* be naturally pleasurable? Tragedy produces *katharsis* of the distressing affects it evokes. The outline account of musical *katharsis* allows us to conclude that tragic *katharsis* is also pleasurable. Aristotle’s discussion of kathartic music begins with the therapeutic influence of one kind of kathartic music (‘the sacred melodies’) on individuals pathologically susceptible to enthusiasm, and proceeds to the everyday experience of pleasurable relief when other distressing affective states or episodes abate. But its final destination is the harmlessly pleasurable *katharsis* that everyone, including emotionally well-adjusted individuals, can derive from musical performances which induce a distressing affective episode. We are willing to expose ourselves to emotional distress because this opens the way to the pleasure experienced as that distress abates, and because the contrast makes the pleasure of the subsequent emotional equilibrium more salient. The apparent perversity of artificially inducing distress for the pleasure of relief becomes intelligible in the light of the complexity of human nature, which demands contrasting, intense and varied pleasure.

That answers the question of motivation. What of the question of value? Plato had maintained, in *Republic* 10, that the kinds of poetry that stimulate intense emotion should be banned because they are harmful (605c-6d); he also insisted that a defence of emotive poetry would need to show that it was beneficial (607d6-9). Since Aristotle has a high regard for the poetic genres that fall under

¹⁶ This Aristotelian pleasure (part of the direct response to the tragedy) is therefore different from the pleasure discussed in Susan L. Feagin, ‘The pleasures of tragedy’, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 20 (1983), 95-104 (a higher-order response to the direct response to the tragedy). In Malcolm Heath, ‘Aristotle and the pleasures of tragedy’, in Øivind Andersen and Jon Haarberg (eds), *Making Sense of Aristotle: Essays in Poetics* (London: Duckworth, 2001), 7-23, I failed to make this distinction. I also conjectured that the pleasure arising from the expression of virtuous character *is* the characteristic pleasure of tragedy. That (I now believe) was an error, to which I was driven because I was unable to give a non-therapeutic account of *katharsis*. Even so, this pleasure must have a place in an Aristotelian account of the psychology of tragedy.

Plato's ban (Homeric epic, tragedy and comedy), we may infer that he did not agree with Plato's claim that they are harmful. But he does not agree, either, that he is under an obligation to show that they are beneficial. He excludes young people from performances of comedy, because they may be harmed if they are exposed to comedy's abuse and obscenity; but he permits adults to attend on the grounds that their education makes them immune to that harm (*Pol.* 7.17, 1336b20-3). Having more confidence than Plato in the stability of adult character, he believes that comedy will not be harmful to adults—and that is sufficient defence: he does not try to show that comedy will be beneficial. Similarly, the licensing of kathartic music for public performance follows from the claim that it provides harmless pleasure.

From Aristotle's point of view, the demand which Plato tries to impose on poetry's defenders is either confused or crass. It is confused if it applies to the value of everything, since that produces a regress (§1). But if it applies specifically to poetry, Plato's instrumentalisation of poetry displays a crass insensitivity to poetry's potential for intrinsic value. Tragedy is, for humans, a naturally pleasurable object of attention; the response which good tragedy evokes is expressive of good character; and spectators with a suitably cultivated poetic discernment will take pleasure in excellent tragedies because of their excellence—that is, because they are fine. This possibility makes fine tragedy, like fine music, an appropriate object of appreciative attention in leisure (§3). That is not, of course, to say that Aristotle denied that tragedy is beneficial: the one thing that is only ever chosen because of itself, and never because of something else, is *eudaimonia* (*NE* 1.7, 1097a34-b1). Though he does not discuss the possible benefits of tragedy, we know that he valued music's contribution to children's moral education, and that he recognised *katharsis*, relaxation and leisure as benefits it affords to adults (*Pol.* 8.7, 1341b36-41). The point is that this is not the most important question. What is worth choosing because of itself is of more value than what is worth choosing only because of something else. The most important question about the value of tragedy is therefore what makes it worth choosing independently of any benefits which it may (or may not) confer.¹⁷

Interpretations of Aristotle's conception of a good human life tend to be dominated by the practical demands of ethics and politics on the one hand, and by the pre-eminent value of philosophical contemplation on the other. Both are, of course, important. But the former does not account for the importance which Aristotle attaches to the proper use of unconstrained time, and the latter cannot occupy the unconstrained time of a *human* life uninterrupted—we are not gods. Despite that deficiency, the capacities which distinguish us from other animals make it possible for us to recognise excellence in a variety of activities congruent

¹⁷ Aristotle counts harmless pleasure (and therefore the pleasure of *katharsis*) as a benefit (contrary to the terms of Plato's challenge to poetry's defenders). He also counts the contribution of fine music and tragedy to leisure as a benefit. However, music and tragedy would not be appropriate components of leisure if they were not also worth choosing, and were not in fact chosen, because of themselves. Similarly, virtuous action is chosen because of *eudaimonia*, but also because of itself (*NE* 1.7, 1097b2-6); and an action that was not worth choosing, and were not in fact chosen, because of itself it would not *be* virtuous action (*NE* 2.4, 1105a32), and would therefore not contribute to *eudaimonia*.

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with our human nature, and to value that excellence because of itself. Neglect of Aristotle's conception of leisure obscures the richness of his conception of a good human life, and places an obstacle in the way of progress in understanding his aesthetics.