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**Aristotle on the Emotions as Objects of Aesthetic Pleasure: A  
Psychological Perspective  
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### Abstract

The major concern of this article is to develop a relatively detailed account of the symbolic structures that give “to the emotions mentioned by Aristotle in the Poetics” shape and meaning. The idea that is advanced here is that the experience of “catharsis” of pity and fear, is something entirely different from the experience of each of these emotions itself in real life. In tragedy these emotions are brought to the state of stasis-contemplative mode. Tragic pleasure is this sui generis experience of delight, viewed as an intentional state aimed at the emotions of fear and pity as its intentional objects that may explain how negative emotions can be objects of pleasure when they present themselves as objects of aesthetic encounter. The proper tragic pleasure is a metaemotion—a delightful feeling of a revealed moral ordering that comes from the realization and organization of the transcendent or impersonal narrative forms that in real life settings are implicit in the most deeply rooted modes of human experience and social interaction. This type of reasoning can be better understood if we come to see what is “special” about pity and fear. Tragedy is for negative empathic affects that can function, if conditioned as in the case of Aristotle, as motivators for moral action and justice principle thinking, revealing a sort of moral ordering or catharsis.

## Introduction

Aristotle's Poetics, although ancient, can be a useful intellectual pole on which to concentrate a discussion of the psychology of emotions and arts for the following reasons: (1) the text compares favorably with any contemporary treatise on the subject of the symbolic character of emotional experience in art; (2) the text, although famous among philosophers, is not well known by researchers and especially those interested in the psychology of emotions and the arts; (3) the text provides the opportunity for an object lesson about the universally appealing yet culturally revealing character of all accounts, about what is "basic" to the emotional nature of human beings (see also Shweder & Haidt, 2000; on the cultural psychology of emotions).

Philosophical debate about the meaning of catharsis has frequently been concerned with whether it could be understood as bearing principally an emotional discharge and a purgation of feelings (Bernays, 1909/1941) or a "clearing up", a clarification — a removal of some obstacle that makes the item in question less clear than it is in its proper state (Nussbaum, 1986).

However, empirical evidence in psychology may introduce some stimulating implications for future interdisciplinary research. Meanwhile, this article's approach, through the perspective of psychology of emotions, can be also seen as an attempt to model Aristotle's proposal of the experience of tragedies operationally, for differentiating levels of processing in art as well as patterns of empathic responses in the psychology of the arts. This "reverse-design" approach to reconstruct the emotional processes from the characteristics of the stimuli that have been analyzed by Aristotle along with some of his ideas followed a twofold

investigation: a horizontal search for relevant issues on emotions and catharsis across his texts (Rhetoric and Politics) and a vertical search for the organization of meanings within the Poetics.

Thus, a major concern of this article and commentaries is to develop a relatively detailed account of the emotional, symbolic structures that give “to the emotions mentioned in Aristotle’s Poetics” shape and meaning. What defines the nature and significance (both aesthetic and socio-cultural) of the elusive emotion of proper tragic pleasure in Aristotle? What could be the relationship among pity and fear and the three kinds of pleasure mentioned by Aristotle? Is the relationship one of identity, such that, for example, the audience’s experience of fear is itself a real everyday experience of fear? Or is the experience of fear a mere simulation, or pretense, of every day fear? Or is it perhaps an intensification or amplification of the basic emotion?

Ultimately, the idea is advanced that the experience of pity and fear in tragedy which results in the proper tragic pleasure is something entirely different from the experience of the basic emotion itself. Instead, the relationship of the proper tragic pleasure to pity and fear is akin to the relationship of an intentional state to its intentional object.

### **Mimesis and the function of art**

Aristotle speaks of three kinds of pleasure that tragedy generates in its audience, and divides them neatly into those that it shares with other imitative arts, and what he calls tragedy’s proper pleasure. The former ones are further subdivided into the very pleasure of mimesis — natural to people from childhood (1448b6) and that which is brought about by the

works of imitation, and which is the only one we experience if the subjects of representations remain unintelligible to us. He says that is 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 their representation in art (1448b4-19). The explanation for this is to be found in a further fact: to be learning something is the greatest of pleasures, not only to philosophers but also to the rest of humanity, however small their capacity is. The reason for people's delight in seeing a picture is that while wondering-contemplating, they learn — they gather the meaning of things, e.g. that the man there is so-and-so. However, if one has not seen the things before, one's pleasure will not be in the picture as an imitation of it, but will be due to the execution of coloring, texture or some similar cause... (1448b19).

In fact, in Poetics, chapter 4, Aristotle attributes the general origin of poetry to two causes. The first is that imitation is natural and pleasurable as well as the fact that harmony and rhythm are equally natural to us (1448b22-24). The second is that to learn by means of imitation is pleasurable. This learning however, is not restricted to recognition-learning of what pictures represent; it goes beyond the recognition of things so as to form syllogisms about the very nature of what is represented-of their meaning (1448b5-21). This type of poetry's learning, however, although it requires pre-existing knowledge, (one could say, beliefs-propositional representations) is about statements of the nature of universals (1451b6).

It is worth looking at another passage, this time from his Rhetoric, which corresponds with parts of the text of Poetics:

Learning things and wondering at things are also pleasant for the most part; wondering implies the desire of learning, so that the object of wonder is an object of desire; while in learning one is brought into one's natural condition... again since, learning and wondering are pleasant, it follows that such things as acts of imitation must be pleasant — for instance painting, sculpture, poetry — and every product of skillful imitation; so that, even if the imitated object is not itself pleasant; for it is not the object itself which here gives delight; and thus the spectator draws inferences (that is so-and-so) and thus learns something fresh.

(Rhet. 1371b4-10)

In fact, such statements bring out the contemplative character of the proper perception in art. In Eudemian Ethics he also distinguishes between our response to the sight of luxurious food and goods which often stimulates interpretative appetites and desires and the experiencing of pleasure that is generated simply in the perception and contemplation of something, which is quite different from the pleasure of satisfying an appetite ((ibid.: 1230b). This contemplative mode, according to him, is not the object of moral disapproval since it constitutes the ground where emotions, even negative ones such as fear and pity, can be seen as intellectual objects as well as objects of aesthetic pleasure.

### **Especially about tragedy**

Aristotle develops an intricate argument about tragedy that is difficult to summarize in its nuance and with the array of topics that it incorporates. An appreciation of his theory can be garnered by

considering his treatment of three issues: tragedy as mimesis of action; tragedy as a formal entity and tragedy's main function. Tragedy is defined by Aristotle as follows:

Tragedy is the mimesis (imitation) of a serious and complete-in-itself action (praxis) of some magnitude; in language embellished in various ways in its different parts; in dramatic — action performance, not narrative form; achieving, through pity and fear, the catharsis of such emotions. (1449b)

The objects of mimesis are the plot-myth, the characters and the reasoning and decision-making process (ways of thinking); the means are the style of words as well as that of the narration in terms of harmony and rhythm and music; imitation is performed through opsis/stage arrangement (1451a12-14).

When Aristotle settles down to discuss tragedy, what rapidly emerges from his writings is the great importance he attaches to plot — story or as we might say, the action of the play. He insists also that tragedy is not really a representation of people, but of action and life, of happiness and misery (1450a). It is not apparently a representation of actions either, but an imitation of an action (1449b, 1450a, 1459a, 1461b). Indeed, action in Aristotle is purposeful, not random, and the poet's function is to describe not the things that have happened, but a kind of thing that might or should happen, i.e., what is possible as being probable or necessary (1451a41-44). He repeatedly insists that the main purpose of tragedy is to deploy the plot of myth and that the audience would be able to experience its proper pleasure if the tragedy's plot is constructed so as to resemble an organism — a unified whole (Collinson, 1992) in that its parts being related in such a way that if any one of them “makes no

perceptible difference by its presence or absence, it is no real part of the whole” (1451a).

Aristotle sounds like a modern abstractionist film director when he claims that in tragedy we can have plots without characters, but not the inverse (1450a28-29). Tragic characters are not developed per se by the poets: characters are inclusive to the development of the plot (1541a24). Characters would act and react in a predictable manner — according, that is, to probability or necessity... however, habituation and predictability of behavior do not invalidate the way one uses his will or makes his choice... since, the persons are active entities employing differentiated traits in terms of their characters/personalities and their way of thinking... so that, we can say that actions can also have two causes: the character’s personality (*ethos*) and the way of his thinking... which are the reason of their success or failure (1451a2-4).

And indeed, it is this interplay between characters and the plot that results in the statement of the universals (*katholou*) [by a universal statement he says — I mean one as to what such or such a kind of man will probably or necessarily say or do — ]. This statement, taken together with the requirement that the free choice (*ethos*; 1454a20) of the dramatic personae should be made clear, by what they say and do, in relation to the action in which they are involved, reveals the characters of tragedy to be morally specified archetypes — symbols (Sifakis, 2001). The protagonist’s incidents and dilemmas that arouse pity and fear to us are the result of a notorious flaw, a mistake that is woven into his habitual character (1453a19). However, the protagonist’s error (*hamartia*) is not something for which he is blameworthy or morally culpable (Nussbaum, 1986), since as Aristotle insists the characters shall be good — better than ordinary men (1454b3-8). To put it in another way, it is the very qualities

of character that are liable in certain unforeseeable situations to lead to disaster — which at the very end induce in us pity for the fragile estate of man and fear for a world whose laws we do not understand (Eldridge, 1994). In fact, the protagonist somehow exercises his virtues in alliance with powers or structures that embody conflict. This failure, then, that results from error (hamartia), which is pitiable and fearful must be depicted in a plot in which the incidents occur unexpectedly and at the same time in sequence of one another (1452a3-4). And such incidents have the very greatest effect on the mind when they occur unexpectedly — however, neither by chance nor by sheer nature (1452a3-12).

In chapter 14, Aristotle again introduces more that tragedy's aim or main function is the catharsis of the emotions of pity and fear. He also sets the frame within which these emotions can be induced to the audience by saying that when poets, by the sight of things, arouse the dreadful and terrific instead of the fearful, they should not be considered as tragic poets, since tragedy's function is to offer this pleasure that arouses pity and fear (not terror) through the imitation of praxis (1453b). Later on, he explicitly points out what kind of characters induces empathic emotions such as pity and fear (but we will say more of this later...) to the audience (1453b19-40). In chapter 13, he also sets the conditions that allow empathic emotions to be generated by means of imitation. The poets should avoid showing "good" men fallen to misery, since this does not generate pity and fear but terror. They should also avoid showing bad men fallen from misery to happiness — this is excluded from every sense of the word tragedy since it can not even generate our empathy, and of course not any fear or pity. Also, the very bad men should not be shown to fall from happiness to misery, since this can arouse our empathy (philanthropon), but not our fear or pity. This

happens because pity is for the one who falls to misery because of a fatal error in action that is causally intelligible and yet not the outgrowth of a settled defective disposition of his character — What causes Oedipus's ruin is his own strength and courage and loyalty to Thebes and his loyalty to the truth. However, fear is generated for someone who is similar to us (1452b-1453a).

### **Tragedy as a simulation model**

In this sense it could be said that tragedy is the imitation of the interactions of people in their predicaments so that the deep structure of selfhood and social interaction becomes clearer, since we do not only experience the emotions and hence the urgency of the human vicissitudes (incidents) and dilemmas-conflicts that cause them, but we are enabled to reflect on them in such a way as to create deeper level abstractions of ourselves and others.

This line of reasoning can resonate quite well with simulation models. Since the first aspect of simulation is the basic structure of all narrative: goal-directed actions by human agents who meet vicissitudes (Oatley, 1999, 2000). The second aspect of simulation models is also there — the depiction of what in literary theory is called character, and in psychology is called personality. People's actions and thoughts, as set by Oatley (2000), flow from interpersonal goals that are habitual, and hence somewhat predictable by self and others. Or, as James put it, what is a character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of a character? In this sense purposes are individual: they are generated from the character or particular people (Oatley, 2000). The third

aspect of simulation is the aspect of emotion. Fiction includes the idea that emotion occurs when a human purpose meets a vicissitude that produces change. According to Oatley (1999, 2000), character becomes a predominance of one of these emotion-based systems that has, in the better kind of fiction, another in conflict with it. So the effects of incident upon the individual (character, audience member) then become the emotional responses of individual to vicissitudes (incidents) in interpersonal contexts.

All these elements, to a greater or lesser extent can be seen in Aristotle. We can say that in Poetics, make-believe could be seen then as a condition for empathy, and empathy involves feelings that the subject has about other people. The beholder pretends to see people, but he actually feels for the pretend people. In this sense it could be said then, that the imagination of events and other people's mental or emotional states can result in real emotion and that the intensity of any R-emotions (emotional responses to the represented elements of the artefact) in the tragedy's experience is a function of the imagined possibility that it opens up to the beholder (Tan, 2000). For Aristotle, tragic action proceeds according to the law of probability or necessity, but the logical character of the action is not an end in itself (Sifakis, 2001). Tragic action structures our empathic feelings. The tragic hero, who has committed an act that is pregnant with horror, but in ignorance, and who redeems himself and proves his essential innocence when he discovers his mistake, has established an unassailable claim to our pity, and especially if the steps that lead to the discovery, and thus our pity, are logically connected from the first to last. These causal generalizations about the formation of action, assume that emotions, for Aristotle at this stage, have a cognitive basis on certain beliefs — they comport an element of judgment — so that

they can be a genuine source of understanding. And indeed, such a statement goes well with simulation models and Walton's account of emotion (Oatley, 1992, 2000; Walton, 1990).

### **A deeper understanding through an emotional filter**

However, Aristotle's argument rests on a conception of mimesis as an active process of selective presentation. Following his claim about a plot that results in statements of the nature of universals — not of particulars (see also Hursthouse, 1992; Neil, 2001), Aristotle provides a highly conditioned pattern of simulation (if we can say this for Poetics) by setting frames wherein each of the aspects of the simulation model has to be activated.

And, even if he allows beholders to run the make-believe play, this act of imagination seems to be “encapsulated” in two induced positive emotional frames/modes. At first there is an emotional filter induced to the audience by the very fact that mimesis is pleasurable, having a direct effect on motor programs from birth (Schmidt & Trainor, 2001). The characteristic of this mode is its pervasive dynamics, the relative fusion or lack of differentiation of self and world, the total organismic involvement, and the embeddedness of the perceived stimuli in an atmospheric context of feeling and action (Werner, 1954). This mode becomes strikingly explicit in the phenomena of empathic and synesthetic responses [for physiognomic perception, see Werner (1954)]. Aristotle in his Rhetoric, where he also speaks about emotions (1356a, 1378a, 1377b), clearly recognizes that effective rhetoric presumes a theory of emotion, at least implicitly. He says that the orator should not only make the argument of

his speech demonstrative and worthy of belief but should also put his audience, who are to decide, into the right frame of mind, i.e. emotional state (ibid. 1377b, 21,23-24). If we transfer what he says in Rhetoric about emotions, to Poetics, we can draw the following parallelism: the poet should not only construct his plot in such a manner as to state the universal, but also put his audience into the right frame of mind-emotional state — to provoke the empathy of the audience toward his characters — to gain a better understanding of the characters and their predicaments, and a fair judgment of their choices and actions (Sifakis, 2001). This sounds like a paradox — a deeper understanding through an emotional filter, leading to a fair judgment?

From a neuropsychological perspective this paradox can be validated as research evidence shows that positive emotion serves as a cue to stay the course or as a cue to explore the environment, whereas negative emotion serves as a call for mental or behavioral adjustment. The separable activation functions serve as complementary, adaptive motivational organization, where the organization of the affect system can be considered as a continued force in the shaping of even our most civilized responses (Cacioppo et al., 2000).

Furthermore, this frame/mode which points to the primacy of the affective coding of stimuli (Damassio, 1994,1999; Le Doux, 1996) is further complemented by music — melodic intonation-pulse, rhythm and harmony. Aristotle highlights the importance of music in tragedy, attributing to its presence the superiority of tragedy to epic (1462b). For Aristotle, music expresses ethical qualities and emotional states-moods: rhythm and melody supply imitations of anger and gentleness, and also courage and temperance... unlike visual arts, in which figures and colors are not imitations but signs of character, indications which the body gives

a state of feeling. The likeness or imitations of ethical qualities are inherent in the rhythms and melodies as well as in the harmonies or modes of music (Pol. 1340a18-33). Music, in this sense could alter our ethos (1340a7) as each rhythmic pattern induces to us a different disposition, so that the true function of the lyric parts of tragedy can be considered as a special enhancement of the mimesis of action in tragedies, although not directly, but by helping to set the connotative field of meanings and to reveal ethical qualities and emotions that lie beyond the limits and expressive capabilities of ordinary speech, and often transcend the boundaries of particular characters and impart a specific ethos to a dramatic situation or scene as a whole. This happens especially in the choral songs (Sifakis, 2001).

For Fraisse (1981) rhythm is characterized in terms of the following two properties: first rhythm is the perception of order in succession, which enables one to anticipate what is to follow, and second rhythm is the perception of successive groupings which are produced by the order of the stimulus. The rhythmic experience has a specific feature that the perceptual experience of rhythm ties up with sensorimotor conjunctions — so that whether the perceived rhythms are created by movements, as in musical interpretation, or whether the perceived rhythms give rise to movements, as in dance, the result is a harmony between the perception and the activity. This close connection among perception, activity and affectivity, which is evoked by music, may play a crucial role in generating the aesthetic experience. Features such as rhythm (as well as melos of the iambic trimeter) and texture (intonation) may provide dynamic representations of affective information that is transmitted by means of affective processes. Thus, the perception of rhythm may be the mapping function that creates an affective network of

distributed global information that can assign the connotative semantic field to cognitive elements (Takakshi, 1995).

### **The desire to learn — contemplation — a heightened state of consciousness**

Additionally, Aristotle poses another emotional filter within this background frame which sounds like a motivational mode — the desire to learn-to wonder (the contemplative mode), which is accomplished through acts of imitation, and activates a merging of action and a detached awareness, where even negative feelings can be experienced as pleasurable. Within this second mode which further sustains the first, the anticipatory role of feelings and the effects of formal elements in gestalt manner (we see more about this later) induce a heightened state of consciousness—a motivational mode wherein negative feelings which belong mostly to the right hemisphere by virtue of its analogic and holistic function (Ledoux, 1996) can be transformed in a wider context, so that the concerns of the self can be relocated and contextualized in a wider perspective which allows analogic comparisons and abstractions to be made. At the same time these feelings are experienced pleurably as means to further understanding.

Within this “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Werner, 1954) what all responses to artworks have in common is a tendency to fuse with the artwork, and this tendency may be an emotional action tendency when the beholder cannot resist exploring the artwork in a search for meaning structures and cognitive elaboration and enjoyment of its meaning, form and style (Tan, 2000). The core of the appraisal then is experiential

challenge mixed with promise — the emotion is interest, and it could hardly be seen as a merely cognitive state (Izard, 1993; Tan, 2000; Tomkins, 1984).

Apter's conceptualization of the paratelic and telic metamotivational modes (see Apter's reversal theory of motivation; Apter, 1982) may also fit well with such an approach. For Apter (1984), many of the phenomena of human culture would appear to be essentially paratelic, in that they help to induce this paratelic mode, they maintain it for periods once it has been induced, and provide the means by which pleasurable intense experience of high arousal may be achieved while it endures. The function of this mode, where the focus is upon the activity itself rather than upon the goal, is that high arousal is actively sought by the individual, negative emotions take on a special quality which allows them to be experienced as pleasant, and cognitive synergies (when something is seen to be possessed of mutually exclusive properties; i.e., formal elements versus representational content) are especially welcome, allowing suspension and tolerance to ambiguities. In fact, the main function of this metamotivational mode is to encapsulate the situation, removing it from the immediate self-concerns, while through the induction of cognitive synergies, cognitive dissonant components are brought into the same conceptual space, and the identity with which they are associated, are experienced more intensely, and enhance its other phenomenologically (Apter, 1984). In fact, make-believe can be seen as an aesthetic synergy between the real and the pretense, a conjunction of impossibility and actuality — a clash of incompatible self-concepts. In this mode the thinking is more likely to be sensitive to a variety of possibilities, normally anxiety-provoking topics are not avoided and so we are in a better position to overcome the effects of "set"; challenging

pre-existing emotional schemata and the cognitive bias of everyday life in a rather detached manner, restructuring relational meanings in a rather novel way that allows improvisation to occur; while at the same time, regulating self-concerns and implications for others, and thus, revealing the generic symbolic structures that are immanent in social interaction.

This line of reasoning brings to mind Averill's approach to catharsis and the tragic proper pleasure wherein he states that catharsis is a process that refines, stretches and ultimately transforms the emotions, challenging us to be creative in the emotional as well as in the intellectual domain (Averill, 1999, 2000). While this might also be the case, especially within our Western culture, if we focus on the contextual frame of references of Aristotle's work, we will see that possibly the latter is more pronounced (to regulate self-concerns and implications for others).

### **The gestalt form of plot**

According to Apter (1984), the "paratelic" frame has to be sufficiently strong to maintain the paratelic mode in the spectator. Or, it may be the case that artworks contain such cues so as to sustain it and challenge us to integrate both formative elements and subject matter, or the theme of the myth as well as abstract ideas; so that our engagement in imagining that we are part of the represented world, not to form an inclusive self-sufficient "dead end", but to activate a process of intellectual elaboration which generates abstractions, and sets the ground to get the most emotional satisfaction out of this complex experience.

Aristotle seems to know this quite well and he offers a highly conditioned model, stressing the dual character of plot: a gestalt formal

entity and the theme of the myth (goal directed actions by human actions that meet incidents). Aristotle's emphasis on the formative elements which constitute the medium of tragic mimesis as well as his insistence on the primacy of plot highlight the relation between the materiality-formal organization of the tragedy and the representation of something besides the artifact itself, setting the conditions through which they complementarily (sometimes as a weakening or intensifying condition) sustain each while preparing the ground, so that a multistage appraisal process is achieved. In addition, his definition of plot as a formal entity resembles amazingly the definition of the law of Praegnantz in Gestalt theory (we can also see that the characters and their way of thinking are built in the same manner).

In this sense, plot and characters which are inclusive to the plot, have a special formal quality that contributes to the continual search for meaning structures as the myth unfolds. At a first level, the perception of some pattern within an artwork is affectively pleasing, as it may answer a concern for order. At a second level, finding a structure in the plot that unfolds is challenging (Arnheim, 1966, 1974). It becomes a merging of action and a detached awareness, where the beholder restores ambiguities and irregularities which are stimulating-intriguing (see collative variables (Berlyne, 1971, 1974) and cognitive synergies) while the emotion potential of the myth unfolds in interactive manner, so that it provokes and sustains interest, and gives further enjoyment when unity in variety is settled (Arnheim, 1966, 1974). Aristotle in fact, insists on this: on the one hand, he emphasizes structural elements which through "deautomatisation" (Shklovsky, 1917/1988), induce a sort of "emotional distancing", so as to overcome cognitive bias and reinvest attention in formal aesthetic qualities (see also Miall & Kuiken, 1994), while on the

other hand, he insists on a type of plot that offers unexpected instances which induce uncertainty — the veil of ignorance — for the unfolding of the story-narrative, so that a sort of emotional closeness is also induced. This deepens R-emotion into compassion and contemplation at the same time, offering the structural pattern for integrated multilevel appraisals (Cupchik et al., 1998; Tan, 2000) that assimilate very complex information.

### **Deep R-emotions that go beyond make believe so as to form a universal statement**

Aristotle, possibly being aware of the emotional impact of the unfolding myth, sets the conditions of how pity and fear, which presuppose empathy (philanthropon), can be moderated so as to be not too weak and also not too intense, if their catharsis has to be achieved.

In relation to the development of the plot, Aristotle insists on the avoidance of any extreme arousing element in the plot as well as in the sight. He says that the worst for poets is to induce the feeling of terror. However, he also says that the “happy ending” is not for the proper tragic pleasure (1453a36-42). In fact, he insists on the induction of negative emotions but under a certain conditioning. The best plot for him is this that induces moderate levels of arousal (Winner, 1982), which increases slowly in suspense (i.e., he disregards the sudden emergence of the god that offers the solution to the tragic action). This happens through the hero’s adventure that entails a shift to the reverse end of what is expected (peripeteia) and the act of discovery (anagnorisis), so that the arousal mechanism and the interruptions in the narrative flow yield anticipations

of what is to come and retrospections regarding the meaning of what has already happened (Cupchik et al., 1998). This is further sustained by the very fact that intervals-interludes come in between the unfolding of myth with a corresponding change in perspectives: from the first to the third person or even to an impersonal narration of abstract ideas. Aristotle's suggestion to poets is to treat chorus as one of the actors (1456a25-31). This increased complexity, rich in stylistic devices and thus connotative meanings as well as rich in abstract ideas, controls arousal over time and thus, extends, amplifying the evoked emotions while inducing distance so that the audience realizes the fearful, the pitied and the wonderful (1452a). Thus, it challenges cognitive elaboration (Kreitler and Kreitler, 1972).

In relation to the type of characters, he insists that for pity to be aroused the imitated characters must not be strangers, nor enemies (1453b20-27). In addition, he insists that the characters should be better than us. For him, then, the best condition for empathic feelings to be aroused is when the character causes the tragic outcome, which is causally intelligible, in ignorance (1453b40-46). Tragic characters violate what, if they were true to their nature, they should be honoring. They commit this error just in virtue of their one-sidedness, so they are in conflict not only with others but also with themselves. However, in real life we would not ordinarily expect qualities such as courage and wisdom as in the case of Oedipus to lead to horrible results. In this sense, there is something pitiable and fearful and something for us to learn about our lives in social structures — to what end or with what right is the exercise of virtues naturally and appropriately directed (Eldridge, 1994). How can conflicts of this sort be resolved? The answer to this question is to be found in Aristotle's moral philosophy. Eudaimonia is something final and self-

sufficient, the end of an action — it is the activity of soul in accordance with virtue. Unconsciously or unculpably, we can deploy our best qualities of character in social interaction in such a way that the achievement of eudaimonia is blocked, for oneself — or for the others (Eldridge, 1994). And tragedy depicts the undoing of eudaimonia by the very qualities most necessary for its achievement. Nussbaum (1986) proposes that tragedies make us aware of the discrepancies between reality and possibility, and thus may affect our moral beliefs.

In such a manner, the third person perspective — the role taking in the act of imagination, becomes more detached and not self-sufficient. In tragedies we cannot really identify with bad and good guys, yet this is not the case, since characters function as symbolic archetypes — not stereotypes, not really as we are. In some sense they seem transparent, allowing the act of imagination to unfold in such a way that the beholder can pass through the character — beyond the third person perspective, stretching the emotional structures/schema of fear and pity at their limits, resolving conflicts of perspectives, setting discrepancies between reality and possibility, in order to come to terms with something else — the universal statements (abstractions) or possibly the Truth for Aristotle (this function can be revealed more clearly when we realize how Byzantine icons (or other symbolic art) are formed in order to invite us to wonder the “sublime”). This act is further induced by the kommos — lyric intervals that set the ethical quality (the moral tone) — performed by the chorus. So that you fear for the hero, you feel pity for him, you fear for you, for us, you feel pity for you in case you face a relevant possibility, you feel pity for the selfhood; and all these feelings, being stretched to their limits, have to be restored to order. At this stage, however, personal

memories and self-concerns are held further at bay, while at the same time the anticipatory role of feeling is self-modifying.

### **Empathic affects and principles of justice**

Hoffmann's suggestions about the development of empathy, which traces its path from the primitive circular responses of an infant's emotional contagion to principles of relativistic moral judgments (Hoffmann, 1990), resonate well with Aristotle's accounts. Hoffmann (1990) illustrates the reciprocal organizing role of empathic processes: a feeling of our own distress and a wish to elevate it (empathic distress) and a feeling of concern that is other-centered and a wish to help. He also says:

If the context indicates that there is a vast discrepancy between the victim's plight and his/her general conduct or character, this may affect one's empathic response; ... if the victim is viewed as basically good, one might view his/her fate as undeserved or unfair. In such cases, empathy is intensified and the quality of the resulting feeling may also have the quality of a sense of injustice, including a motivational disposition to right the wrong — so that it could be said that empathic distress may be transformed by the lack of reciprocity (cognitive processing) between the character and the outcome into a feeling of injustice (p. 159).

Within this line of reasoning, empathic affects and feelings of guilt tend to motivate moral behavior. Findings also suggest that empathic affects can be aroused by mental representations of another's sufferings

that are mediated by role-taking and by language, and that when abstract moral issues, like killing your father, come to mind they may operate as stimuli that prime the representation of victims, thereby transforming the abstract issue into an empathy-relevant one, so that empathy may make a contribution to moral judgment and moral order (Damon, 1977; Hoffmann, 1987). This possibility for Hoffmann (1990) looks plausible if the situational cues that constrain empathy are restricted, since empathic morality has limitations. He writes:

Empathy may be subject to a bias that favours victims who are familiar over victims who are strangers; also extremely salient distress cues may become so intolerable that one's empathic concern is transformed into an intense personal feeling of distress and one shifts from empathic concern for the victim (hero in our case) to direct preoccupation with one's own self-implications. (p. 163)

In this sense, empathy may be too weak to motivate moral action or too intense to move out of the empathic mode entirely. These biases may be minimized when empathic affects are embedded in a context that constrains self-interest, and this happens especially when situations involve conflicting moral claims (Hoffmann, 1990). In this case, the veil of ignorance (no one knows his or her place in a relevant imagined action), although it seems so different in nature, because of the extreme uncertainty and the importance of choice in relations to its serious implications, functions in a complementary manner with empathy. They both constrain self-interest (Hoffmann, 1990). So that we can say that the veil of ignorance may be necessary for deriving abstract moral principles; empathy may be necessary to provide the internal motivational basis for acting in accordance with these principles (p. 167). It could be said, then,

that the act of imagination — role taking, resulting in empathy illustrates the process in which the task of choosing abstract justice principles may be transformed into an empathy relevant task — a cognitive-affective-motivational package — by imagining the consequences for others (p. 168). It follows then, that acts of imagination that induce empathic emotions and thinking of moral principles, as in the case of tragedies, may produce a principle having the motivational and stabilizing properties of a “hot cognition”.

## **Conclusion**

Coming to terms with all these suggestions it can be concluded that the proper tragic pleasure possesses that quality of pleasure or enjoyment that comes from the realization and organization of the transcendent or impersonal narrative forms that in real life settings are implicit in the most deeply rooted modes of human experience.

Aristotle initiates the act of imagination in tragedies through two emotional filters that induce positive affect, while setting the conditions for the act of imagination in such a way that it doesn't become an end in itself. Tragic pleasure, then, is this sui generis experience of delight, viewed as an intentional state aimed at the emotions of fear and pity as its intentional objects that may explain how negative emotions can be objects of pleasure when they present themselves as objects of aesthetic encounter. This type of reasoning can be further extended if we come to see what is “special” about pity and fear. Tragedy, then, is for negative empathic affects that can function, if conditioned as in the case of

Aristotle, as motivators for moral action and justice principle thinking, revealing a sort of moral ordering or catharsis.

Following this line of reasoning, it could be said that the proper tragic pleasure is a metaemotion — a delightful feeling of a revealed moral ordering that comes from the clear apprehension of the symbolic forms implicit in ordinary emotional experience. This is also suggestive of a parallel type of analysis of empathy. Empathy may be viewed as a metaemotion motivated by its own characteristic source of enjoyment or pleasure, which makes it possible to be responsive to another person's negative emotional state such as sorrow or guilt. By this sense, empathic feelings are not the same as the direct experience of guilt or sorrow. Instead, it is a dignifying experience precisely because, as a witness to someone else's emotional experience, one is transported out of oneself. Thus, empathy is also a metaemotion, but of a middle case. It is less detached than the experience of catharsis, which comes from witnessing the generic symbolic structure of moral order that lends shape and meaning to social interaction; yet it is more detached than the experience of the basic emotion itself, which is the unwitnessed and immediate experience of everyday personal life.

As a final point, I have to admit however, that nowadays in our rather individualistic society empathic morality may have to be counted, as Hoffmann (1990) says, as a fragile morality. An alternative suggestion stressing the culturally revealing character of our accounts in relation to the emotional nature of human beings could be then that tragedies or art in general refine, stretches and ultimately transform emotions, challenging emotional creativity, as Averill (2000) claims. However, for Hoffmann (1990), though fragile, empathic morality remains important in society because there are no more powerful alternatives known yet. And this

possibly forms the ground for the universally appealing character of all accounts about what is basic to our emotional nature. So that, we can still say that the richness of the experience of tragedies itself offers a model for the highest forms of organization in matter and consciousness which facilitates cultural innovation and restructures society to crucial matters of life.

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