

## Several Concepts in Aristotle's *Poetics*<sup>1</sup>

---

It is time we measure Aristotle's account of poetry with Plato's and assess how well it stands up to the challenge laid out by his teacher. There is an excellent and thorough introduction to Aristotle's *Poetics* by Malcolm Heath. So I'll provide only very brief background material with additional passages from other works by Aristotle that shed light on the concepts and issues that link the *Poetics* with Plato's arguments in the *Ion*, *Phaedrus*, and the *Republic*.

---

Aristotle (384-322 BC) was born in Stagira in Macedonia (northern Greece). His father was a doctor with ties to the court of Philip II of Macedon. Aristotle came to Athens in 367 at the age of 17 to study at Plato's Academy. He stayed for 20 years—without becoming a citizen of Athens.

In 347, he returned to Macedonia to serve as tutor to Philip's son Alexander (356-323 BC, later known as "Alexander the Great"). Aristotle came back to Athens in 335 and started his own school, the Lyceum, which also functioned as a kind of research institute focusing, among other things, on the political nature of 128 Greek city-states.

To escape the political unrest after the death of Alexander in 323, Aristotle left Athens and soon after died on the island of Euboeia.

### ***Technē***

As we see in Plato's *Ion* and *Republic*, the arts in ancient Greece can be understood in relation to the notion of how we live as human beings and what produces well-being, virtue, and justice, both in the individual and society. The same holds for Aristotle. And for both Plato and Aristotle, the concepts of *epistēmē* (knowledge) and *technē* (skill, craft, art) are understood as interrelated.<sup>2</sup>

Aristotle famously begins his *Metaphysics* (1.1, 980a20) with the following observation: "All human beings by nature desire to know."

Of course, one might argue that other animals have knowledge in the sense of knowing **how** to do certain things, such as building nests, warning others of the presence of a predator, or even using a stick as a tool. But humans are unique among animals in that they **generalize** from their experience and form judgments and principles about that which is not immediately present in sensation. And through the capacity to reflect on their experiences and the world around them, human beings take great **pleasure** in knowing. "[I]t is owing to their wonder that humans both now begin, and at first began, to philosophize." [*Metaphysics* 1.1, 982b12]

Aristotle develops these concepts of *epistēmē* and *technē* by introducing distinctions involving **scientific** and **variable** knowledge. And given the link between knowledge, skill, and human well-being ("the good life"), it should come as no surprise that Aristotle's views on *technē* show up throughout his ethical theory, in particular the *Nicomachean Ethics*. It's there he draws on the distinction between scientific (what we would call "theoretical") knowledge and variable knowledge. Scientific knowledge has to do with the things that do not change; craft knowledge (art, *technē*) with the things that do vary and change.

Now what **scientific knowledge** is, if we are to speak exactly and not follow mere similarities, is plain from what follows. We all suppose that what we know is not even capable of being otherwise; of things capable of being otherwise we do not know, when they have passed outside our observation, whether they exist or not. Therefore the object of **scientific knowledge** is of necessity...." [NE VI.3, trans. W. D. Ross, emphases added.]

---

<sup>1</sup> These notes are based largely on Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Malcolm Heath, New York & London: Penguin Classics, 1997. An earlier version of Prof. Heath's website, from which I learned a great deal when I began teaching Aristotle's *Poetics*, included many useful tables, references, and sources, some of which have been adapted for these and other class notes.

<sup>2</sup> For discussion of the relation between knowledge (theory) and craft (practice) in ancient philosophy, see Parry, Richard, "Episteme and Techne", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2008 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/episteme-techne/>>.

In the **variable** are included both things **made** and things **done**; making and acting are different...so that the reasoned state of capacity to **act** [*prakton*, e.g. medicine, agriculture] is different from the reasoned state of capacity to **make** [*poiēsis*, e.g. painting, sculpture, architecture]. Hence too they are not included one in the other; for neither is acting making nor is making acting. Now since architecture is an art and is essentially a reasoned state of capacity to make, and there is neither any art that is not such a state nor any such state that is not an art, **art is identical with a state of capacity to make, involving a true course of reasoning**. All art is concerned with **coming into being**, i.e. with contriving and considering how something may come into being which is capable of either being or not being, and whose **origin is in the maker** and not in the thing made; for art is concerned neither with things that are, or come into being, by **necessity**, nor with things that do so in accordance with **nature** (since these have their origin in themselves). Making and acting being different, art must be a matter of making, not of acting.... Art, then...is a state concerned with making, involving a true course of reasoning, and lack of art on the contrary is a state concerned with making, involving a false course of reasoning; both are concerned with the variable.” [NE VI. 4, emphasis added.]

Aristotle’s texts, as you can see, are exceedingly dry, abstract, and compressed. Recall that most of the writings that have survived were not intended for publication but are notes left behind by Aristotle and his students. But if you read very carefully and think about what they say, you’ll find them insightful and occasionally even exhilarating.

In the brief passages above, Aristotle is simply drawing out the distinction between those things that arise “naturally” — spontaneously, by nature — and those that arise through the efforts of human beings — by art. And of the things that come about by art (*technē*), some are **made** (painting) and some are **done** (medicine). So the distinctions are simple enough.<sup>3</sup> The implications, however, will be significant.<sup>4</sup>

#### **Art (*Technē*), Instinct, and Experience (Trial and Error)**

Contrary to Plato, Aristotle does not think it is necessary that an artist have **reflective understanding** of their art and should not always be expected to “give an account” or articulate the rules that govern their particular practice as an artist.<sup>5</sup> He also distinguishes between mere accumulation of data (memory and experience) and generalization from particular instances to a “rule” or principle. Here’s another passage from the *Metaphysics*.

The animals other than man live by appearances and memories, and have but little of connected experience; but the human race lives also by art and reasonings. Now from memory experience is produced in men; for the several memories of the same thing produce finally the capacity for a single experience. Experience seems pretty much like science and art; but really science and art come to men through experience — for ‘experience made art,’ as Polus says, ‘but inexperience [made] luck’. Now art arises when from many notions gained by experience one universal judgement about a class of objects is produced. For [the practitioner of the art of medicine] to have a judgement that when Callias was ill of this disease this did him good, and similarly in the case of Socrates and in many individual cases, is a matter of **experience**; but to judge that it has done good to all persons of a certain constitution, marked off in one class, when they were ill of this disease...this is a matter of **art**. [Metaphysics 1.1: (980b26-981a12), emphases added.]

<sup>3</sup> Howard Caygill elaborates on these distinctions as follows: “For Aristotle the generic term for action was *ergon* (activity) from which he derived *energeia* (Aristotle, 1941, 1050a). When the latter was disclosed in ‘things made’ ( *poiēton* ), its mode was poetic ( *poiēsis* ); when disclosed in ‘actions done’ ( *prakton* ), its mode was practical ( *praxis* ). Aristotle rigorously distinguishes between *poiēsis* and *praxis*: the former directs itself to the world according to rules of art ( *technē* ), while the latter directs itself to the life of the polis according to *phronesis* [practical wisdom] (Aristotle, 1941, 1140a; see Riedel, 1975, pp. 99–101). The former is technical, producing according to rules; the latter is deliberative and discursive.” Howard Caygill, *A Kant Dictionary*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1995, 47.

<sup>4</sup> Note also that Aristotle nearly always takes the time to dissect and define his terms as clearly as possible, something we don’t always find in Plato.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Aristotle, *On Homer*, 51a24; on discovery by chance, 54a9-12.

Immediately following this paragraph, however, we find the following qualifications.

With a view to **action** experience seems in no respect inferior to **art**, and men of experience succeed even **better** than those who have **theory without experience**. (The reason is that experience is knowledge of individuals, art of universals, and actions and productions are all concerned with the individual. The physician does not cure man, except in an incidental way, but Callias or Socrates or some other...who happens to be a man. If, then, a man has the theory without the experience, and **recognizes** the universal but does **not know the individual included in this**, he will often fail to cure; for it is the individual that is to be cured.) But yet we think that knowledge and understanding belong to **art** rather than to experience, and we suppose artists to be wiser than men of experience (which implies that wisdom depends in all cases rather on knowledge); and this because the former **know the cause**, but the latter do not. For men of experience know that the thing is so, but do not know why, while the others know the 'why' and the cause. Hence we think also that the master workers in each craft are more honourable and know in a truer sense and are wiser than the manual workers, because they know the causes of the things that are done. (We think the manual workers are like certain lifeless things which act indeed, but act without knowing what they do, as fire burns. But while the lifeless things perform each of their functions by a natural tendency, the labourers perform them through habit.) Thus we view them as being wiser not in virtue of being able to act, but of having the theory for themselves and knowing the causes. And in general it is a sign of the man who knows and of the man who does not know, that the former can teach, and therefore we think art more truly knowledge than experience is. For artists can teach, and men of mere experience cannot. [*Metaphysics* 1.1: (981a13-981b9), emphasis added.]

Notice that Aristotle typically begins an analysis by surveying what is commonly thought about the subject in question. This marks a sharp difference in method from that of his teacher. Whereas Plato tends to reason from the general to the specific, Aristotle moves from the particular to the general. (In some cases, this marks a distinction between deductive and inductive reasoning.) This can be confusing. As you read Aristotle, he often seems to be changing his mind. What's important, however, is where the pattern of reasoning leads and where he arrives. You should always be looking for these conclusions and then work back to reconstruct the premises or propositions that support a given conclusion. (One of the reasons Aristotle's writing seems so dry is that he's usually very explicit in formulating his arguments, which makes him easier to understand, but not exactly thrilling to read!)

In these passages from the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle sounds as if he has Plato's *Ion* in mind. Note, when he says, "We think...that the master workers in each craft are more honourable and know in a truer sense and are wiser than the manual workers, because they know the **causes** of the things that are done". If you substitute "poets" for "master workers", and "rhapsodes" for "manual workers", you get something close to Socrates' concerns while talking with *Ion*. However, Aristotle does not go so far as to suggest that poets themselves — the purported "master workers" of the craft of poetry — know only "the how", that is, how to produce the appearances of great art, but do not know "the what", the rule governing what makes a poem a great work of art. For Plato, in the end, it seems as if there are no master workers in art, although even that view is qualified in some of his later writings.

So this raises a question. Would Aristotle recommend to poets that they study his *Poetics*? Why or why not?

### **Poetry, *Mimēsis* and Pleasure**

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle argues that **poetry is not identical with verse**. (47b17-20; 51b2-4) Rather, poetry is ***mimēsis*** in verse — a kind of "imitation" or representation which is **natural** to human beings, and thus **pleasurable**. (48b4-19)

The concept of ***mimēsis*** has a long history, from before Plato and Aristotle and up to the present time.<sup>6</sup> We need to pay close attention to Aristotle's sources, his use of the term, and the sense in

---

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Stephen Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002.

which he departs from Plato in his understanding and use of the concept, and his linking of imitation, knowledge, and pleasure. Included below is an excerpt from Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae* and some topical comments on pleasure and knowledge from Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

### On *Mimēsis*

#### Aristophanes *Thesmophoriazusae* 146-156

[Agathon] Old man, old man, your jealousy's spite I heard, its bite I did not feel. I wear my clothing in accordance with my thinking. A man who is a poet should adapt his ways to fit the plays he must compose. If, for example, one is writing plays about women, one's body must undergo a change of habits... But if one is writing plays about men, that is already present in one's body. But what we do not possess, imitation [*mimēsis*] must seek that out.

### On Pleasure Linked to Knowledge

#### Aristotle *Rhetoric* 1.11

[1371a31] Learning things and wondering at things are also pleasant as a rule; 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...

[1371b4] 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 skilful imitation; this latter, even if the object imitated is not itself pleasant; for it is not the object itself which here gives delight; the spectator draws inferences ('That is a so-and-so') and thus learns something fresh. Dramatic turns of fortune and hairbreadth escapes from perils are pleasant, because we feel all such things are wonderful.

#### Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.4

[1175a] One might think that all men desire pleasure because they all aim at life; life is an activity, and each man is active about those things and with those faculties that he loves most; e.g. the musician is active with his hearing in reference to tunes, the student with his mind in reference to theoretical questions, and so on in each case; now pleasure completes the activities, and therefore life, which they desire. It is with good reason, then, that they aim at pleasure too, since for every one it completes life, which is desirable. But whether we choose life for the sake of pleasure or pleasure for the sake of life is a question we may dismiss for the present. For they seem to be bound up together and not to admit of separation, since without activity pleasure does not arise, and every activity is completed by the attendant pleasure. [Trans. W. D. Ross, emphases added.]

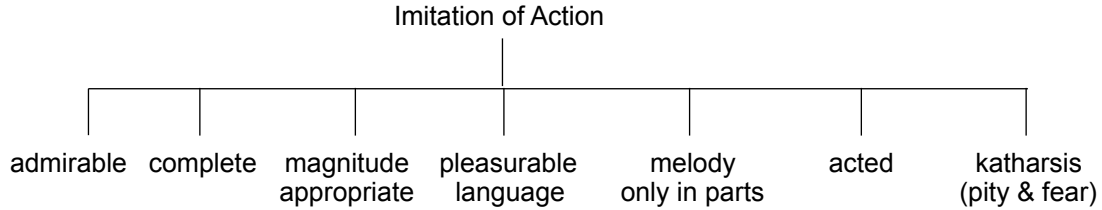
Here we get a richer sense of *mimēsis* and why it works the way it does than we found in Plato.

### Tragedy and Imitation

Tragedy developed out of "improvisation" and ultimately "came to rest" in its "natural state". (49a) (Note Aristotle's **teleological** ("goal-directed") thinking here, in the notion of tragedy emerging, moving, and "coming to rest".)

Definition (49b24-28) "Tragedy is an **imitation** of an action [which entails an agent] that is **admirable**, **complete** and possesses **magnitude**; in **language made pleasurable** [**rhythm & melody**], each of its species [in verse alone or song] separated in different parts; performed by **actors**, not through narration; effecting through **pity** and **fear** the purification [*katharsis*] of such emotions." [emphases added]

# TRAGEDY



## Clarification of Terms (*definiens*):

- admirable (*spoudaios*, “serious”)—imitation of the actions of human beings pursuing ethical goals.
- complete—a whole action in a structure made up of a beginning, a middle, and an end reached through necessity or probability.
- magnitude appropriate—of a scale that can readily be held in memory
- pleasurable language—using rhythm and melody (song) which are natural forms of human expression and, thus, pleasurable.
- melody only in parts
- acted—as opposed to narrated.
- katharsis—an exercise of fear and pity in such a way so that these emotions are understood at a fundamental level and function in an appropriate way in the whole life of the individual within the community.

## Fear and Pity

*Katharsis* is one of the most elusive and contested concepts in Aristotle’s *Poetics*. The embedded concepts of fear and pity are, thus, essential in the study of tragedy and *katharsis*. Just for reference, I’m including some passages from Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* that expand on these concepts and provide some more insight into Aristotle’s way of thinking about them and their role in poetry.

### Aristotle *Rhetoric* 2.5

[1382a20] Fear may be defined as a pain or disturbance due to a mental picture of some destructive or painful evil in the future...only such as amount to great pains or losses. And even these only if they appear not remote but so near as to be imminent.... From this definition it will follow that fear is caused by whatever we feel has great power of destroying or of harming us in ways that tend to cause us great pain. Hence the very indications of such things are terrible, making us feel that the terrible thing itself is close at hand...

### Aristotle *Rhetoric* 2.8

[1385b11] Let us now consider pity, asking ourselves what things excite pity, and for what persons, and in what states of our mind pity is felt.

Pity may be defined as a feeling of pain caused by the sight of some evil, destructive or painful, which befalls one who does not deserve it, and which we might expect to befall ourselves or some friend of ours, and moreover to befall us soon. In order to feel pity, we must obviously be capable of supposing that some evil may happen to us or some friend of ours, and moreover some such evil as is stated in our definition or is more or less of that kind. It is therefore not felt by those completely ruined, who suppose that no further evil can befall them, since the worst has befallen them already; nor by those who imagine themselves

immensely fortunate - their feeling is rather presumptuous insolence, for when they think they possess all the good things of life, it is clear that the impossibility of evil befalling them will be included, this being one of the good things in question. Those who think evil may befall them are such as have already had it befall them and have safely escaped from it; elderly men, owing to their good sense and their experience; weak men, especially men inclined to cowardice; and also educated people, since these can take long views. Also those who have parents living, or children, or wives; for these are our own, and the evils mentioned above may easily befall them. And those who neither moved by any courageous emotion such as anger or confidence (these emotions take no account of the future), nor by a disposition to presumptuous insolence (insolent men, too, take no account of the possibility that something evil will happen to them), nor yet by great fear (panic-stricken people do not feel pity, because they are taken up with what is happening to themselves); only those feel pity who are between these two extremes. In order to feel pity we must also believe in the goodness of at least some people; if you think nobody good, [1386a] you will believe that everybody deserves evil fortune. And, generally, we feel pity whenever we are in the condition of remembering that similar misfortunes have happened to us or ours, or expecting them to happen in the future.

So much for the mental conditions under which we feel pity. What we pity is stated clearly in the definition. All unpleasant and painful things excite pity if they tend to destroy pain and annihilate; and all such evils as are due to chance, if they are serious. The painful and destructive evils are: death in its various forms, bodily injuries and afflictions, old age, diseases, lack of food. The evils due to chance are: friendlessness, scarcity of friends (it is a pitiful thing to be torn away from friends and companions), deformity, weakness, mutilation; evil coming from a source from which good ought to have come; and the frequent repetition of such misfortunes. Also the coming of good when the worst has happened: e.g. the arrival of the Great King's gifts for Diopieithes after his death. Also that either no good should have befallen a man at all, or that he should not be able to enjoy it when it has.

The grounds, then, on which we feel pity are these or like these. The people we pity are: those whom we know, if only they are not very closely related to us - in that case we feel about them as if we were in danger ourselves. For this reason Amasis did not weep, they say, at the sight of his son being led to death, but did weep when he saw his friend begging: the latter sight was pitiful, the former terrible, and the terrible is different from the pitiful; it tends to cast out pity, and often helps to produce the opposite of pity. Again, we feel pity when the danger is near ourselves. Also we pity those who are like us in age, character, disposition, social standing, or birth; for in all these cases it appears more likely that the same misfortune may befall us also. Here too we have to remember the general principle that what we fear for ourselves excites our pity when it happens to others. Further, since it is when the sufferings of others are close to us that they excite our pity (we cannot remember what disasters happened a hundred centuries ago, nor look forward to what will happen a hundred centuries hereafter, and therefore feel little pity, if any, for such things): it follows that those who heighten the effect of their words with suitable gestures, tones, dress, and dramatic action generally, are especially successful in exciting pity: they thus put the disasters before our eyes, and make them seem close to us, just coming or just past. Anything that has just happened, or is going to happen [1386b] soon, is particularly piteous: so too therefore are the tokens and the actions of sufferers - the garments and the like of those who have already suffered; the words and the like of those actually suffering - of those, for instance, who are on the point of death. Most piteous of all is it when, in such times of trial, the victims are persons of noble character: whenever they are so, our pity is especially excited, because their innocence, as well as the setting of their misfortunes before our eyes, makes their misfortunes seem close to ourselves.