

# Aristotle — Poetics, Ethics, and Tragedy

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There are many ways in which Plato and Aristotle differ in their understanding of, and approach to, poetry. But they agree on one important point — that poetry **educates** the individual, **affects** one's disposition to act a certain way, and **informs** one's character. In short, poetry plays an instrumental role in the **ethical** life of the community. At its best, it shows what it means to **be** a human being and what's **expected** of one. So, for better or worse, it provides models for well-being and human flourishing.

On Socrates' account, as we've seen in several of Plato's dialogues, both poetry and the poets seemed to fall short of meeting the needs of ancient Athenians. The political, religious, and social transformations in the 4<sup>th</sup> century produced a general shift in expectations and desires in the population, and new demands on individuals and their rulers. The old traditions and teachings were being questioned and were losing their relevance for many. Something was needed, but the dominant alternative — **sophism** — was probably much worse than the status quo.

Aristotle, ever the pragmatic scientist and analyst, tried to meet the challenge by developing an account of poetry that avoided the apparent dogmatism of Socratic thinking represented in Book X of the *Republic*, the banishment of *mimētic* poetry and the endorsement of non-*mimētic* hymns that praise the gods and honor their good deeds. From the available evidence, which is somewhat lean, it seems Aristotle set out to demonstrate the **ethical value** of *mimētic* art and its role in showing his compatriots both what's at stake in establishing a good society and the role good poetry plays in the cultivation of character and human flourishing.

In wrapping up our discussion of philosophy and art in ancient Greece, several questions remain. How is Aristotle's aesthetics related to his ethics and metaphysics? How does he formulate his understanding of poetry and tragedy, in particular? In what sense is it Aristotelian? In "Several Concepts in Aristotle's *Poetics*", I highlighted some of the **metaphysical** background in Aristotle's philosophy. But before moving on to consider Aristotle's *Poetics* and how his view of poetry compares to Plato's, it may be helpful to summarize briefly the key principles of Aristotle's **ethical** theory.

## Aristotle's Ethics

In the opening sections of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, he builds on his **teleological** approach to philosophical inquiry.

### Book I

§1 Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and choice, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim. But a certain difference is found among ends; some are **activities**, others are **products** apart from the activities that produce them. Where there are ends apart from the actions, it is the nature of the products to be better than the activities. Now, as there are many actions, arts, and sciences, their ends also are many; the end of the medical art is health, that of shipbuilding a vessel, that of strategy victory, that of economics wealth. But where such arts fall under a single capacity—as bridle-making and the other arts concerned with the equipment of horses fall under the art of riding, and this and every military action under strategy, in the same way other arts fall under yet others—in all of these the ends of the master arts are to be preferred to all the subordinate ends; for it is for the sake of the former that the latter are pursued. It makes no difference whether the activities themselves are the ends of the actions, or something else apart from the activities, as in the case of the sciences just mentioned.

§2 If, then, there is some end of the things we do, which we desire for its own sake (everything else being desired for the sake of this), and if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else (for at that rate the process would go on to infinity, so that our desire

would be empty and vain), clearly this must be the good and the chief good. Will not the knowledge of it, then, have a great influence on life? Shall we not, like archers who have a mark to aim at, be more likely to hit upon what we should?<sup>1</sup>

Every activity aims at some good, Aristotle tells us. And the highest good is the **end** — the **telos** or **goal** — of that activity. Therefore, the goal of human activity is the highest good. And it's reasonable to think that our knowledge of this highest good should have a great influence on the way we live. Among the goods that we pursue, we can distinguish between (a) that which is good for its own sake, and (b) that which is good for the sake of something else. The highest good belongs in the category of **that which is good for its own sake**.

Aristotle goes on to argue that since the good for all is better than the good for an individual, it is the **common good** that we seek to understand. But then his pragmatism moves him to cite one important proviso: The question of what's good for us and how we should live is an **inexact** science since it is concerned with that which is **variable** [as opposed to geometry, for example, which studies **fixed** rules and objects (cf. Plato)]. Thus, we can only expect as much precision as the subject matter allows. [This is a point to keep in mind in the study of art and aesthetics, as well as in ethics.]

There is general agreement that **happiness** (*eudaimonia*) — living well **and** doing well — is the highest of all human goods. But there is no general agreement as to what produces happiness. So this is one of our first problems. [Note that the concept of happiness includes both a sense of **well-being** and a measure of success. According to this definition, one cannot be poor but happy. To the ancient Athenians, that would be a contradiction.] In trying to give an account of happiness, we should keep in mind that it has the following characteristics: (a) It is the end of action; (b) it is self-sufficient, i.e. it makes life desirable and lacking in nothing; and (c) it is complete, i.e. it is not a component part of some larger whole.

To fully understand the goal of human life, we must also examine the function of the human being, i.e. that which distinguishes the human from all other nonhuman forms of life. This function is based on reason. Thus, the highest human good must involve a life characterized by rational **activity** [as opposed to the mere **capacity** to reason]. But reasoning in itself is not enough. We must reason well (i.e. with virtue or excellence). And not just for a short time, but throughout a long and healthy life. Remember, happiness is characterized both by **well-being** and **prosperity**.

But what is the nature of human virtue and how do we acquire it? Virtue, Aristotle claims, is not instilled in us “by nature” (as is vision, hearing, touch, etc.). Rather, it is acquired by **habit** through repetition and practice. The purpose of moral education is not merely to know (theoretically) what virtue is, but to become good (virtuous). This includes

- **knowledge** [Since I am not acting virtuously if I do the right thing by **chance**, I have to know what I am doing.]
- **choice** [I must choose to do what is good **for its own sake**.]
- **character** [I must act from a constant character that is good.]

In what part of the soul can we find this moral virtue? Aristotle begins by noting that the soul is composed of three parts:

1. **passions** (feelings accompanied by pleasure or pain, e.g. desire, fear, love, hate, anger.)
2. **faculties or capacities** (those things in virtue of which we are capable of feeling passions)
3. **states of character** (how passions are felt and exercised, e.g. a tendency toward too much or too little anger, etc.)

In which of these is moral virtue found? Here he offers an “argument by elimination”.

1. We are not called good or bad on the basis of our **feelings**, so it can't be passion.

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W. D. Ross; in *Complete Works (Aristotle)*, edited by Jonathan Barnes, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991 (emphases added).

2. Neither are we good or bad on the basis of our **capacity** for experiencing passions, since we have such a capacity by nature. Rather, we are judged to be good or bad on the basis of our **choices**. So moral virtue can't be a faculty or capacity.
3. Thus, it must be a **state of character**. (That is its genus.)

But then what differentiates moral virtue from other states of character? It is a state of character that allows one to perform one's function well, i.e. to be a good human being. How does this happen? According to Aristotle, it happens when one avoids extremes and chooses the mean.

But this is not a strict or arithmetical mean. Rather it is defined by reason as one with **practical wisdom** (*phronēsis*) would define it. Here are a few examples:

ACTIVITY	VICE (excess)	VIRTUE (mean)	VICE (defect)
Facing death	cowardice	courage	foolhardiness
Giving money	prodigality	liberality	stinginess
Claiming honors	vanity	pride	humility
Social intercourse	obsequiousness	friendliness	sulkiness

Note that not all vices have corresponding virtues. Theft, murder, adultery, etc. are bad in themselves, not as extremes. [Recall Aristotle's initial pragmatic remarks about precision.]

As we see in Greek tragedies, such as Sophocles' *Antigone*, the mean in a given situation is often hard to obtain. When it's grasped, it's by a kind of **intellectual virtue** (practical wisdom) which operates in a way similar to **perception**, i.e. one has to "see" that this is a situation that calls for a certain sort of action that is not an excess but a mean between two extremes.

Thus, according to Aristotle, virtue is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in the mean relative to us, as defined by reason and as one with practical wisdom would define it.

### Tragedy as Analyzed in the *Poetics*

With this brief summary of the *Ethics* in hand, we return to the *Poetics*. Here, for reference and by way of a quick summary, I'll use the breakdown by chapters that we find in the Heath translation.<sup>2</sup>

1. Aristotle starts from first principles based on what he takes to be widespread and common understandings.
- 2.1 He begins with a taxonomy of **mimēsis** in terms of genus and species, and the now familiar claim that poetry is **imitation**. The **medium** of imitation is rhythm, language, and melody used separately or combined. [Note the mention of "Socratic dialogues" as an example of prose *mimēsis*, acknowledging Plato's philosophical writings as **poetic** discourse. (47b)]

#### Medium (of Expression)

rhythm	rhythm melody	rhythm melody language (throughout)	rhythm melody language (in parts)	rhythm language	language
(dance)	(instrumental music)	<b>Lyric</b>	<b>Tragedy, Comedy</b>	<b>Epic</b>	(prose)

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Malcolm Heath, New York & London: Penguin Classics, 1997.

Note: Poetic forms involving just **dance**, **instrumental music**, or **prose** are not given proper names.  
Malcolm Heath, "Lecture Notes"\*

- 2.2 The **objects** of imitation are **agents** who are either "**admirable** or **inferior**" in character. [This is an important claim given that it will link his poetics to his ethics. Recall that one's virtue is determined by a character with the disposition to act according to the doctrine of the mean.]
- 2.3 The **modes** of imitation are **narration** and **direct speech**.
- 3.1 Imitation is a **natural** part of human behavior. It plays a role in **learning** and thus gives pleasure. Looking at images also produces the pleasure of identification and understanding [when the image is seen as coherent and recognizable]. If the object is not recognizable, the viewer sees its **formal** properties, not its mimetic properties.
- 3.2 [Here Aristotle provides a brief developmental history of poetry.]
- 3.3 **Tragedy** came out of "improvisation" and ultimately "came to rest" in its "natural state". [Note Aristotle's teleological thinking in terms of the "goal" or final resting place of an activity.]
- 3.4 Comedy is "imitation of inferior people" as **laughable**, i.e. disgraceful without pain.
- 3.5 **Epic poetry** is similar to tragedy in that it involves imitation of "admirable people". Epic is different from tragedy in using only **narrative** forms and in **length**. Epic poetry is a subset of tragedy. (49b) Here's a breakdown:

	<b>Epic</b>	<b>Tragedy</b>	<b>Comedy</b>
<b>Medium</b>	language rhythm	language rhythm melody	language rhythm melody
<b>Object</b>	agents better than us	agents better than us	agents worse than us
<b>Mode</b>	narrative	dramatic	dramatic

Malcolm Heath, "Lecture Notes" \*

Now, finally, we arrive at a definition of "tragedy".

- 4.1 "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]
- 4.2 Next we have an **analysis** of tragedy into its component parts ("formal elements").
  - dramatic mode with an implied visual component [**spectacle**]
  - rhythmical language often with melody [**lyric poetry** and **diction**]
  - action of ethical agents [**character** and **reasoning**]
  - structure/organization of actions = object of imitation [**plot**]

Note: Aristotle defines "diction" as the "actual composition of the verse", i.e. the verbal text.

Formal Elements of Tragedy	
<b>Medium</b>	lyric poetry & diction
<b>Object</b>	plot, character & reasoning
<b>Mode</b>	dramatic (spectacle)

Malcolm Heath, "Lecture Notes" \*

After the analysis of tragedy Aristotle begins his evaluation.

4.3 He begins this section with arguments for the primacy of plot and action over character.

1. Tragedy [organization of events] is an imitation of actions and good and bad fortune, not character. (Here we see another sense in which the ethics informs the poetics. Recall that for ancient Greeks, success is necessary for well-being. What one does is a combination of character and action. The goal of human life is faring well (an activity) not simply having certain qualities or character. Thus, what one does (the plot) is the most important part of a story, not what one is.)
2. Action is a necessary part of tragedy, but character is not.
3. Emotional effect in tragedy depends more on the quality of the plot than on the character.
4. Emotion is determined most importantly by "reversals and recognitions".
5. Ability to construct strong plots comes after one's ability to use diction and character and is more difficult to acquire.

4.4 Thus, "plot is the source and soul of tragedy." Character is second to plot, followed by reasoning (50b), then diction, song, and drama, in that order. (Character is analogous to color vs shape (plot) in painting. And shape gives more pleasure than random colors.)

5. **Plot: Basic Concepts (Qualities)**

- completeness ("connected & self-contained" — beginning, middle, end in **plot** with necessity)
- magnitude (appropriate scale — held in memory but allowing for change of fortune)
- unity (single action)
- determinate structure (single unified action—integrated whole)
- universality ("could have been" — consistent with necessity & probability)

5.1 **Completeness** corresponds to a whole action with some magnitude. A whole is made up of a beginning, a middle, and an end = the structure of the action in a play. The beginning and ending should never be arbitrary but linked by **necessity** or **probability**.

5.2 The **magnitude** in question is that of an appropriate scale — neither too small nor too large, but what can be readily held in **memory**. A rough characterization of an appropriate magnitude for a tragedy is "a series of events occurring sequentially in accordance with probability or necessity gives rise to a change from good fortune to bad fortune, or from bad fortune to good fortune". (51a)

5.3 **Unity** is about "a single action of the kind we are discussing". ["Unity of plot depends on connected, closed series of events." (Heath's notes.) If you have access to Halliwell's translation and commentary, you may want to read his comment on the history of the concept of unity (H 98f) in terms of formalist, neo-platonic ("organic" unity), and pragmatic approaches. Aristotle does not fall simply and clearly into any one of these.] "Tragedy is imitation of a complete action that evokes **fear** or **pity**."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See the previous lecture notes for more on fear and pity in Aristotle.

- 5.4 **Determinate structure** of a tragedy is an imitation of a single unified action, that is, a **whole**. Any change to a part changes the whole. If the presence or absence of a thing has “no discernible effect, it is not a part of the whole”.
- 5.5 **Universality** is determined by events that **could** have happened, not necessarily what **has** happened. Therefore, “poetry is more philosophical and more serious than history”. (51b) The **universal** is the action “consonant with” character and necessity or probability. That means the poet is a “maker of plots”.
- 5.6 **Defective plots** include episodes neither necessary nor probable.
- 6 **(Optimum) Plot: Species and Components**  
(two parts—reversal of fortune + recognition & suffering) [6.5]
- 6.1 **Astonishment**  
Fear and pity are evoked most effectively when events occur “**contrary to expectation but because of one another**”. [emphasis added]  
Spontaneous events increase astonishment. [Here cause seems linked to interpretation, i.e. another sense of “because”.]
- Pity is triggered by seeing an undeserving sufferer.  
Fear is triggered through identification with the sufferer as a person like us.
- 6.2 Simple and complex **plots** are a function of simple and complex **actions**. **Simple** plots exhibit “change of fortune...without reversal or recognition”. **Complex** plots involve reversal and/or recognition. In either case, the change of fortune comes about through **necessity** or **probability**.
- 6.3 **Reversal** occurs when an action produces an effect opposite to the one expected.
- 6.4 **Recognition** is a change from ignorance to knowledge with respect to relationships central to the plot, producing pity or fear.
- 7 **Plot: Best Kinds**
- 7.1 What is the goal? What causes the goal (effects)?
- 7.2 “Simple” action—change from good fortune to bad in the life of a very good or reasonably good person, due to “serious error” of some kind. (*hamartia*) The best plots have this structure (simple). The next best plots have a “double” structure—they end with opposite outcomes for both better and worse persons, e.g. Odysseus triumphs and suitors killed.
- 7.3 It is better when fear and pity are produced by the plot rather than the staging (“spectacle”). [Note: This presupposes the priority of the text (poetry) over the realization (acting).]
- 7.4 Sufferings in **close personal relations** lead to fear or pity. Agents must at or not act, knowingly or in ignorance.
- 8 **Other Aspects of Tragedy**
- 8.1 Character should aim at goodness, appropriateness, likeness, and consistency.
- 8.2 Kinds of Recognition  
a. by means of physical signs or marks (“tokens”)  
b. poet tells the reader  
c. based on memory

- d. based on reasoning (**2<sup>nd</sup> best**)
- e. arising from the plot, i.e. the actual turn of events (**best**)

[...]

8.5 **Complication** is comprised of what is outside the play and, to some extent, what is inside —everything from beginning to the change of fortune, i.e. the **resolution**.

- 8.6 Kinds of tragedy are
- a. complex, which depends entirely on reversal and recognition
  - b. suffering
  - c. character
  - d. simple

### **Conclusion**

With the background on Aristotle's ethics, his metaphysics and rhetoric, and the summary of the main points on tragedy in the *Poetics*, you should be able to compare Plato and Aristotle on the role and value of poetry.

Timothy Quigley, 29 Sep 13.