

ARISTOTLE'S POETICS

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➔ "FALLIBILITY & MISFORTUNE:
THE SECULARISATION OF THE TRAGIC"

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VII

Fallibility & Misfortune:
the Secularisation of the Tragic

The previous two chapters have shown how two prominent aspects of Aristotle's theory of tragedy reflect the relevant areas of his ethical and psychological philosophy – first, the relation between action and character, which reproduces the general primacy of activity over states in the moral life; secondly, the nature of pity and fear as responses to the contemplation of certain types of misfortune, responses which are the affective counterpart of ethical judgements on those who encounter such misfortune. Together these arguments confirm that the *Poetics* does not purport to seal poetry off from wider concerns and values, but that it frames a conception of tragedy which accepts the genre's serious engagement with 'actions and life', and recognises the potential significance of this engagement for the understanding of matters of major ethical import. Approached in these terms, tragedy can be seen to give substance to Aristotle's conviction that the appreciation of mimetic art is rooted in cognitive experience, and to lend some force to the quasi-philosophical status which he attributes to this experience in chs. 4 and 9 of the treatise. In the present chapter this assessment will be carried a stage further and clarified by consideration of the central tenets of the theory of tragedy. I shall begin by asking more precisely how tragedy might be thought to bear on the leading notion of Aristotle's moral philosophy – 'happiness', *eudaimonia*, the goal and ideal of the good life. This will call for closer scrutiny of the idea of extremes or poles of fortune which is used to define the contours of tragic action in the *Poetics*. And out of this will emerge a further pair of themes, which lie at the heart of Aristotle's view of the genre: the implications of the tragic dénouements set up as models in chs. 13 and 14 (including the question of *hamartia*); and the relation between these models and the religious dimension of Greek tragedy.

By its very nature the Aristotelian concept of 'happiness' (*eudaimonia*) is such that everything else in human life must be held subordinate to it. Happiness is the supreme moral good, but while Aristotle defines it as the perfect exercise of virtue, this rests on an entire theory of human nature within which virtues and vices are aligned with pleasure and pain. Happiness is, therefore, not a paradigm of self-sacrificing virtue, but entails a perfect, and perfectly fulfilling, harmony between the individual's will and the requirements of moral action: *eudaimonia* embodies, so to speak, a consummate equation between virtue and happiness. It was just such an equation which Plato had laid an obligation on tragic poets to affirm,¹ but Aristotle clearly felt unwilling to exact anything quite so uncompromising from them. This was in part because Aristotle was more prepared than Plato to concede the existence of an imbalance between virtue and external status or fortune in the world – at least below the level of perfect *eudaimonia*, though even here too in exceptional circumstances, as we shall see. But if tragic poetry cannot be expected to demonstrate the ethical ideal of happiness, the latter remains the supreme criterion of moral success, the standard by which less virtuous and happy lives are ultimately to be measured.

An indirect connection between tragedy and happiness may be specifically acknowledged in the *Poetics* itself. In the sentence following on Aristotle's description of the genre as 'a mimesis ... of actions and life', we encounter this: 'happiness and unhappiness both consist in activity, and the goal [of life] is a certain kind of activity, not a state; and while it is in their characters that people are of a certain sort, it is through their actions that they achieve or fail to achieve happiness.' (50a 17-20) Objections have been brought against the authenticity of this sentence, but the justification for some sort of reference at this juncture to Aristotle's wider principles of ethics should not be in doubt, and the link holds firm (as I argued in ch. V) between the primacy of plot in drama and the dependence upon action of moral success or failure.² A similar observation to the one just quoted can in fact be found earlier in ch. 6 of the treatise,

¹ *Rep.* 363e ff., 380a-b, 392a-b, *Laws* 660e-661c, 663c-d.

² Although a degree of textual corruption is possible, see H.-J. Horn, *Hermes* 103 (1975) 292-9 on the place of 50a 17-20 in Ar.'s argument. Belfiore 115 suggests that *eudaimonia* (if genuine) is here a synonym of *eutuchia*, but this is inapt: Ar. was not committed to the view that *eutuchia* is dependent on action (50a 2f. is not restricted to the sphere of *eutuchia*). Note that *kakodaimonia* does occur in *Protr.* B46 Düring (1961), though this may not be enough to prove the word genuine at *Poet.* 50a 17.

where we are told that 'it is in their actions that all men experience either success or failure' (50a 2-3). The language of this earlier remark does not refer us directly to the standard of *eudaimonia*, but it is clear enough from the connection made in the same context with moral purpose or character (*êthos*) that the success or failure in action which Aristotle has in mind is taken to possess an ethical dimension.

These passages confirm, then, what is more diffusely recognisable, that the types of human action encompassed by tragedy necessitate an ethical framework for their understanding. As a step further towards seeing how Aristotle supposes this to be so, we should now take account of a word-group (to which the language of 50a 2-3 is related) which, unlike *eudaimonia* itself, occurs repeatedly in the *Poetics*. The most prominent terms in this group are *eutuchia*, which can be translated, without prejudice to its place in Aristotle's argument, as 'prosperity' or 'good fortune', and its antithesis, *dustuchia* or *atuchia*, 'adversity' or 'misfortune'.³ Prosperity and adversity, good fortune and misfortune, are the poles between which the action of tragedy moves. It is at first sight odd that the movement into and out of these conditions is not part of Aristotle's definition of tragedy, but reflection shows that it is in fact implicit in the phrase 'pity and fear', for these emotions will later be attached specifically to certain types of misfortune. The group of words in question are employed in the *Poetics* to define the curves of action, to mark the direction of events, which form tragic plot-structures. Prosperity and adversity constitute the grand dichotomy of tragic action in Aristotle's scheme, and it is worth listing some of the chief passages in which a transition or transformation of fortune (*metabasis*) appears in the analysis.

Ch. 7 (51a 13f.): the essential criterion of the appropriate scale of a tragedy is said to be the scope required for a change of fortune – in either direction – to occur according to the cardinal principle of probability or necessity. The fact of a transformation is here interlocked with the organisation and unity of the tragic action.

Ch. 11 (52a 31f.): the device of tragic recognition (*anagnôrisis*)

³ At *Phys.* 197a 25-7 Ar. defines *eutuchia* and *dustuchia* as favourable or adverse fortune of some magnitude, and this qualification can be assumed in the *Poetics* (53a 10 makes it explicit); cf the phrase 'great *dustuchiai*' at *EN* 1153b 19. The good and evil fortunes of others are the objects of the pity and fear aroused by poetic *logos* at *Gorgias* fr.11.9: cf. ch. VI n.27.

involves the acquisition of knowledge which concerns or affects the success or failure (*eutuchia* and *dustuchia*) of the characters. Recognition is therefore one of the hinges on which the change of fortune in a complex tragedy turns, though it should be observed that here again Aristotle refers to the possibility of a change in either direction.

Ch. 11 (52b 2f.): prosperity and adversity are once more said to depend on the elements of the complex plot, recognition and reversal.

Ch. 13: there are here several mentions of a tragic transformation of fortune, and the change from good to bad which is caused by *hamartia* is part of Aristotle's definition of his ideal plot (52b 35-7, 53a 2, 4, 9f., 14f., 25).

Ch. 18 (55b 27f.): the change of fortune is here viewed as bounded by a structural section of the play, the *dénouement* (*lusis*).

The two questions which arise out of this clear insistence on tragedy's concern with the movement of human action between the poles of success and failure are: first, why does Aristotle make so much of this movement, and, secondly, what is the relation between *eutuchia*, good fortune, and *eudaimonia*, his ideal of virtuous happiness? It will be easier to take these in reverse order.

In more than one passage outside the *Poetics* Aristotle stresses that *eutuchia*, despite common opinion, is not to be identified with *eudaimonia*.⁴ The latter derives from and consists in virtue; the former is a matter of what Aristotle calls 'external goods', things such as good birth, status, wealth, power and honour. In view of the fact that the word *eutuchia* can sometimes be translated as 'good luck', it is important to realise that neither in the *Poetics* nor in many other Aristotelian contexts does the emphasis of *eutuchia* fall on the pure randomness or fortuitous distribution of the goods in question, but on the fact that these goods are not intrinsic to virtue and are therefore not within the primary moral control of the individual agent.⁵ *Eutuchia* consequently has affinities with traditional values of

⁴ *Phys.* 197b 4f., *EN* 1099b 6-8, 1153b 21-5, *EE* 1214a 25, *Pol.* 1332a 25-7; cf. ps.-Ar. *Rh. Alex.* 1440b 18ff., and note Eurip. *Medea* 1228-30.

⁵ The most important references to *eutuchia* are to be found at *EN* 1099a 31-b 8, 1124a 12-31, 1153b 16-25, *Pol.* 1323a 24-1324a 4, *Rhet.* 1390b 14-91b 6. Ar. sometimes speaks of *eutuchia* as the sphere of things of which chance (*tuchê*) is a cause, as at *Rhet.* 1361b 39ff. But this passage goes on to state what we could anyway infer from the range of goods covered by *eutuchia*, namely that chance is not their only possible cause:

status and success, including heroic values, as the *Poetics* itself seems to acknowledge;⁶ but Aristotle's notion of external goods makes the components of material and social prosperity more contingent than they would be likely to appear in the eyes of the holder of a traditional outlook. The relation in the Aristotelian moral system between *eudaimonia* and *eutuchia* is that of the essential and primary to the subordinate and secondary. Whether it is also the relation between the indispensable and the dispensable is a little less certain. It seems to emerge at a number of points in Aristotle's works that happiness is to some unavoidable extent dependent on the support of good fortune: or, to put the proposition negatively, and perhaps more appropriately for my present argument, happiness can be undermined or impeded from fulfilment by misfortune. The main discussion of the relation between happiness and prosperity occurs in Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. What is striking about this section of the work is the tension between Aristotle's concern to establish virtue at the centre of happiness, and his reluctant recognition (contrary to the Platonic view of the immunity of the good to change) of the vulnerability of even the virtuous man to the assaults of inescapable misfortune. Aristotle affirms unequivocally to begin with that happiness *requires* external goods (1099a 31ff.). Yet he also wishes, understandably, to deny that virtuous happiness is the gift of fortune (1099b 20ff.). Of the goods which fortune is said to control, some are indispensable while others are merely instrumentally useful (1099b 27ff.). But the negative caveat has yet to be expressed, for perfect goodness is the work of a complete lifetime (1100a 4f.), and there are many vicissitudes which can shake a life, even in its final stages. Aristotle here uses a word for changes of fortune, *metabolai*,⁷ which

nature and human agency may also produce the fabric of *eutuchia*. Popular Greek belief, as alluded to at *Phys.* 196b 5-7, *Rhet.* 1391b 1-3, would add the gods as a source, perhaps the source, of *eutuchia*: see e.g. Aesch. *Cho.* 59f., Herod. 1.32, Isoc. 1.34. This fact may be obliquely reflected in the special type of *eutuchia* referred to at *EN* 1179b 22f., *EE* 1247a-8a, on which see M. J. Mills, *Hermes* 111 (1983) 282-95. *Eudaimonia* is not, for Ar., god-given, despite some equivocation at *EN* 1099b 9-18.

⁶ See esp. 53a 10-12, with ch. V pp. 166f.

⁷ 1100a 5, 23f., 1100b 1. In the *Poetics* Ar. applies *metabolê* to both reversal and recognition in tragedy (52a 23, 31), and he calls the change of fortune *metabasis* (52a 16, 18, 55b 29); but he uses the verb *metaballein* repeatedly in connection with the latter (51a 14, 52b 34f., 53a 9, 13f.), and comparison of 49a 14 and 37 shows that *metabolê* and *metabasis* are synonyms. This helps to indicate the special association in Ar.'s theory between reversal, recognition, and the tragic change of fortune (though it does

we find with its cognate verb several times in the *Poetics*, and the impression that he is treading on ground germane to tragedy is confirmed by the example of Priam's tragic old age which he cites from epic. He goes on to adduce the maxim of Solon's, which finds many echoes in Greek tragedy, that no man should be called happy before his death.⁸ But after raising the obscure question of how happiness may be affected even after death, Aristotle returns to the subject of fortune. He now expresses misgivings about making happiness even negatively dependent on it, and attempts to restore the balance of his argument by giving more weight to the intrinsic stability and quality of permanence in virtue itself. In a tone which carries some Platonic resonances, Aristotle now stresses that the good man will, after all, know how to bear misfortune, to make a virtue even out of his external sufferings. Yet the balance is finally disturbed once again by a reiteration of the power of great adversity to damage happiness.⁹

Having sketched the relation between Aristotelian *eudaimonia* and *eutuchia*, and having seen how in his own exploration of this relation in Book I of the *Ethics* Aristotle's thought moves significantly towards a paradigmatic figure, Priam, we can now return to the *Poetics* itself and propose the hypothesis, in explanation of the accentuation on the *eutuchia-dustuchia* dichotomy in the treatise, that Aristotle's theory commits tragedy to an engagement not directly with the ethical centre of happiness, but with the external conditions or circumstances in which the quest for happiness takes place. The movements and patterns of tragic action concern, it seems, the fabric of material and social status (to allow that term to cover the full range of Aristotelian *eutuchia*) rather than the primary substance of virtue.¹⁰ This inference must be qualified to some degree by the

not justify the use of 'reversal of fortune' which one still sometimes encounters as a translation of *peripeteia*).

⁸ 1100a 10f. (~ *EE* 1219b 6f.). Cf. e.g. Aesch. *Agam.* 928f., Herod. 1.32.7, Soph. *OT* 1186-96, 1528-30, *Trach.* 1-3, Eurip. *Hkld.* 865f.

⁹ 1100b 7-1101a 13. Cf. 1096a 1f., 1153b 16-25 and *Pol.* 1323a 24ff. for various acknowledgements of the need for a portion of external goods for *eudaimonia*. On the other side, note the great-souled man's relative indifference to good and bad fortune: *EN* 1124a 13-16. On this tension in Ar.'s thought see Adkins (1970) 207f.

¹⁰ It is a weakness in Smithson's article that on the basis on 50a 16ff. he gives too simple an account of the moral implications of Ar.'s notion of plot (plot 'has as its objective the presentation of *eudaimonia*', 7) and ignores the emphasis on *eutuchia*. The distinction between happiness and fortune, and their varying vulnerabilities to change,

scope for ethical colouring provided by dramatic characterisation (*êthos*), and I noted earlier that at 50a 2f. Aristotle indicates a link between character and the success or failure in action which the action of a play portrays. If this link were straightforwardly causal, however, we would be left with the necessary entailment of happiness in virtue which Plato claimed, but which Aristotle's philosophy did not allow him to accept without reservation. While, therefore, we may see clearly that there should be a *general* integration and consistency of character and action in the type of tragedy envisaged by Aristotle's theory, we are faced with a radical problem about how the theory expects the tragic swings from prosperity to adversity, or the reverse, to be causally accounted for. We are still far from discerning just what sort of illumination Aristotle supposes that tragedy can shed on the vicissitudes of human fortune. Does the *Poetics*' emphasis on the extremes of fortune, and on the transformations that occur between them, imply that it is tragedy's business simply to exhibit the fragility and instability of fortune, and, if this should be so, why does Aristotle conceive so firmly of the figures of drama as active agents, and the substance of tragic plots as actions not passive states of suffering?

I warned earlier against the temptation to equate *eutuchia* and *dustuchia*, prosperity and adversity, purely with chance or luck. This caution is strengthened by Aristotle's choice of the misfortunes of Priam as an example in *EN* 1, since the Trojan King's sufferings were not wholly a matter of chance but were implicated in a complex series of human choices and actions (as well as, it should be added for future reference, divine actions). As the next stage in an attempt to elucidate the ethical implications of the *Poetics*' view of tragedy, I want to establish that Aristotle's whole theory of the genre requires and presupposes the exclusion of chance from the dramatic action.¹¹

can be profitably compared to the general remarks at *Cat.* 8b 26-9a 13 on stable dispositions (*hexeis*, including virtues) and unstable conditions (*diatheseis*).

¹¹ Cf. Butcher 180-4, House 59, Stinton 231. Sorabji 295-8 argues that *hamartia* in *Poet.* could cover mishaps, *atuchēmata*. A serious difficulty here is that the same act can be sometimes described from more than one point of view: Sorabji 279f. and 298. In Oedipus' special case, to which Sorabji refers, there is the further question of whether, in view of the oracular background, normal standards apply. But Oedipus' case perhaps also makes it possible to see that an *atuchēma* (in Ar.'s secular terms) could be allowed *outside the plot*: it would then be catered for by what is said at 54b 6-8, 60a 27-30 (though this also alerts us to the problem of how *hamartia* enters into Sophocles' play: n.20 below). But Ar.'s whole theory rules out the impingement of chance within

If this is right, appreciation of the nature of tragic fortune can be advanced.

In the first book of his *Rhetoric* Aristotle describes chance events as those which happen 'for no reason, and neither always nor for the most part'.¹² This phrasing of the point conveniently shows how the idea of chance cuts right against the grain of the type of intelligibility which Aristotle repeatedly prescribes for tragedy in the *Poetics*, where again and again necessity or probability, which in Aristotelian terminology are equivalent to things which hold 'always or for the most part', are invoked as the principle of sequential coherence in the tragic action. Essentially the same diagnosis of incompatibility between chance and Aristotle's conception of tragic plot-structure can be made from other angles. According to the *Metaphysics* (1027a 20-2), for example, no knowledge is possible of the fortuitous or accidental: all knowledge is of that which exists 'either always or for the most part' – another occurrence of the formula that underlies necessity and probability. Yet if a tragic plot is to adhere to the latter principle and to embody the universals which ch. 9 of the *Poetics* declares to be the substance of poetry, it must exclude that of which we can have no knowledge. It is important that the ideas both of chance and of necessity and probability involved here concern not only individual events but also the relations between events, so that two occurrences whose causes are individually known may nonetheless stand in a meaningless or arbitrary relation to one another. A primary interest of Aristotle's in the *Poetics*, as I tried to show in ch. II, is in the sequential intelligibility of the tragic plot (which is also its unity), and it is not only particular impingements of chance which his theory requires to be eliminated, but fortuitous or irrational juxtapositions of events or actions. This much is clear from the most explicit reference to chance in the *Poetics*' analysis of plot, at the end of ch. 9. Aristotle says that the desired emotional effect of pity and fear will best be elicited by events which happen unexpectedly but on account of one another; and he goes on to suggest that a sense of wonder is more truly created by such things, reinforcing his claim by the remark that even chance happenings are more impressive if they *seem* to be causally significant (52a 1-10). The

the plot-structure. Lucas (1968) 302 takes a line similar to Sorabji's, though on p. 143 he correctly observes that an *atuchēma* would contradict probability.

¹² *Rhet.* 1369a 32-4, cf. *Top.* 112b 14-16, *Phys.* 197a 31f., *GC* 333b 6.

implication is that it would be a basic dramaturgical fault to portray actions or events which could only be perceived as standing in a chance relation to one another.

The exclusion of chance from tragedy, then, is entailed in the central Aristotelian requirement of unity of plot, which itself is a reflection of the need for necessary or probable clarity in the structure and logic of the dramatic action. It is the total coherence of a work, if Aristotle is right, which will be disturbed by even a single chance event within the sequence of action, as in the case of Aegeus' arrival in Euripides' *Medea*, faulted at 61b 19-21. Chance is one form, though not the only one, of 'the irrational', which the scheme of the *Poetics* explicitly rules out. The stress on connective unity, and the concomitant rejection of the irrational, are of wide application. They lead, for example, to the strictures in ch. 8 on plots, particularly epic plots, which concern one hero's life but do not make a unity of it: 'for many random events may happen to a particular individual' (51a 17). Similarly, it is the lack of any necessary or probable coherence in the data of history which means that the historian is not a maker of organised plot-structures comparable to the poet's (51a 38ff.). An individual life, the material of history, and an episodic tragic plot all have in common a deficiency of unity which impedes the possibility of generalised understanding or true knowledge. The standards of wholeness and cohesion are exacting indeed, too exacting for much that occurs in the real world. It is to these standards that we must refer the exclusion of chance from tragic action in Aristotle's ideal.

The relevance of these propositions to the theme of *eutuchia* is evident. They yield the conclusion that Aristotle's theory does not commit tragedy to the dramatisation of the crude and disconnected vicissitudes of life, even though it locates the genre's essential material in the transformations of fortune which affect those external goods that are the secondary conditions of happiness. This point is important, since there is no doubt, as Aristotle himself acknowledges elsewhere, that external goods can come under the control of chance. History may frequently demonstrate the random strokes of fortune, whether favourable or unfavourable, but it does not follow that the fabric of material and social status is solely or in all circumstances the province of chance. It is not to history that poetry's portrayal of human life approximates, but to philosophy, and it must therefore be that tragedy, on Aristotle's model, can seek to present some order and pattern in the transformations of fortune which it dramatises.

But in just what way does Aristotle believe that the requirements of tragedy's dominant themes can be reconciled with the need for a structure of dramatic events which can be rationally comprehended: is there a degree of tension between the stuff of tragic instability, without which tragedy would not be recognisably what it is, and 'the imperative of intelligibility',¹³ without which, in the philosopher's terms, poetry is not fully itself?

Answers to these questions must be sought in the concentration of Aristotle's theory of tragic plot on the climactic stage of transition or transformation itself – the *dénouement* (*lusis*), as it is called in ch. 18,¹⁴ or simply the 'change of fortune', *metabasis*. Aristotle appears to assume that a tragedy will involve a determinate turn in the status of the agent or agents, whether or not it has a transformation of the particular kind entailed in the complex plot to which he gives his preference. This assumption first occurs in the final sentence of ch. 7, and while there is some reason to believe that Aristotle allows the possibility that a change of fortune may extend so as to constitute the whole play (as, perhaps, in the *Prometheus Bound* or Euripides' *Trojan Women*), the more usual supposition is that the change will form a critical element or section within the play's structure. This is at any rate quite certain for the preferred type, the complex plot, to which the prescriptions for the best tragedy in chs. 13 and 14 apply. It is here that we must focus our attention to find further elucidation of the operations of fortune in Aristotle's theory, for it is here, if anywhere, that the paradoxical relation between tragic instability and

¹³ Golden & Hardison 290.

¹⁴ *Lusis* is defined at 55b 24-32; it is also used at 54a 37, 56a 9, and the cognate verb occurs at 56a 10. The antithesis of *lusis* is termed *desis* at 55b 24ff., and *ploké* at 56a 9. The standard English translations are 'complication' for *desis/ploké*, 'dénouement' for *lusis*. *Ploké* (literally, 'knotting') is cognate with Ar.'s term for the 'complex' plot. This is significant: if we combine the definitions of simple and complex plots in ch. 10 with those of *desis* and *lusis* at the start of ch. 18, we can infer that the simple plot's complication must be contained entirely in the events prior to the opening of the play, so that the play itself will constitute only a process of resolution or *dénouement* (Lucas (1968) on 55b 25 resists this inference in a self-contradictory note). It remains unclear whether Ar. thinks the same can happen with a complex tragedy, but since the *lusis* is in this case the structural counterpart of the recognition and/or reversal, Bywater on 55b 25 and Lucas (1968) on 55b 27 are certainly wrong to see the *OT* as an instance.

Ar.'s remarks on *desis* highlight an uncertainty over the importance of things outside the play. Ar.'s model of self-contained unity (ch. 7) would seem to make them negligible (see 55b 8 for an apparent example); and he is prepared to apply less stringent standards to them (53b 32, 54b 2-8, 60a 29). But the combination of *desis* and *lusis*, encompassing events both inside and outside the plot, would seem to view the matter from a different angle.

intelligibility of plot-structure must be reconciled. Around the central idea of a change of fortune there cluster, in the main chapters of the analysis (10-14), three related notions, all of them more specific than the *metabasis*, and each of them contributing a particular facet to the ideal model of a tragic dénouement. These are reversal (*peripeteia*), recognition (*anagnôrisis*), and a term which, even if translatable, it is prudent for the moment at least not to translate, *hamartia*.

Of these, the first two, which Aristotle virtually considers to be a linked pair, can be relatively firmly dealt with, particularly since their connection with the observable practice of surviving tragedy, and epic, is unproblematic. It is remarked towards the end of ch. 9 that the tragic emotions of pity and fear are best aroused by events which happen 'unexpectedly but on account of one another'. This phrase intimates Aristotle's adherence to his principle of unity, while also providing for dramatic elements of a sufficiently powerful kind to carry the charge of the desired emotions. But what the phrase also points to is the common requirement behind the three plot constituents – reversal, recognition and *hamartia*: namely, a disparity between the knowledge or intentions of the dramatic characters and the underlying nature of their actions; in short, tragic ignorance. This way of stating the inference is closest to Aristotle's own definition of recognition, which is said to be 'a dramatic change (*metabolê*) from ignorance to knowledge'; but it equally well covers his notion of reversal, according to which the outcome of events is the opposite of what is expected by those involved actively in them (and also, in a sense, by the audience). Aristotle's example in ch. 11 of a reversal from the *Oedipus Tyrannus* touches the fact that the expectation, aroused by the Corinthian messenger but shared by the other characters, that the King's fears of incest can be dispelled, actually leads to the recognition in which both Jocasta's and Oedipus's fateful ignorance is revealed.¹⁵ It is not surprising that

¹⁵ Much unnecessary argument has been spent on this reference to the *OT*: it is not difficult, given Aristotelian compression, to see at 52a 25 a *compound* reference first to *OT* 923ff., and then to the later part of the scene, 989ff. (Ar. may have had 1002f. particularly in mind). Cf. Hubbard 104 n.5. It ought also to be said, once and for all, that *contra* e.g. House 97 and Burnett 4, Ar.'s illustration has nothing to do with a reversal for the messenger himself.

On *peripeteia* in general an earnest debate continues. Schrier (who takes the point about the *OT* reference on 106f.) cites earlier contributions, but omits Glanville (1947), which remains in my view the most subtle treatment of the topic. Glanville 77f. acutely defines the sense in which the audience's expectations are involved, though her

Aristotle conceives of recognition and reversal ideally in combination.

It is of some interest that at a later stage in the *Poetics*, in ch. 24 (60a 13f.), the irrational or unintelligible is picked out as a source of poetic surprise and wonder, whereas in the passage from ch. 9 quoted above Aristotle attributes the effect of wonder to events which, however unexpected, do not sever the sequential coherence of the action or breach the exclusion of the irrational. The remark in ch. 24 is in fact explicitly made as a concession to epic, but it does help to demonstrate Aristotle's awareness of the need for dramatic poetry (which includes epic at its best) to achieve startling and emotive climaxes. In tragedy itself the most forceful devices available are precisely recognition and reversal: it is these which are called 'the most moving features of tragedy' at their first mention in the *Poetics* (50a 33-5). It is recognition and reversal, both of which, because of their involvement with the unexpected, might sometimes *seem* irrational or contrary to probability, that serve as tragedy's chief sources of wonder, which I argued in ch. II to be intimately related for Aristotle to the processes of understanding and learning.¹⁶ Wonder here therefore combines a suggestion of emotional impact, concentrated in the specific tragic response of pity and fear, with an indication that the crucial constituents of the complex plot are to produce no emptily sensational effect, no mere *coup de théâtre*, but the culmination of the comprehensible design of the action. The moment or process of recognition and reversal represents the turning-point of the tragedy, the juncture at which ignorance has knowledge revealed to it, or at which action is confronted by its own unintended outcome. At the same time it is an integral part of the unity and order which the audience or reader perceives in the plot-structure (and hence in the causation of the action), and in which, through sympathetic understanding, its emotions are rationally engaged.

In its own terms this aspect of Aristotle's theory of tragedy seems sharply formulated (if, like everything in the treatise, compressed and

point – the alignment of *doxa* with probability – is not taken by e.g. Lucas (1968) on 52b 7. But to *restrict* the expectations to the audience, as Else (1957) 345-8 does, goes against the grain of 52a 22-6.

¹⁶ 52a 4f. effectively refers to *peripeteia*, and so links it with wonder; this is confirmed at *Rhet.* 1371b 10-12 (a case of *peripeteia* overlooked by Lucas (1968) 130, final para.). On the link see Glanville (1947) 78, and on wonder cf. ch. II pp. 74f. Note also the connection between fear and the unexpected at *Rhet.* 1383a 10-12.

schematic). The critical factor is human ignorance, but ignorance implicated in action, and suffering (at least in prospect) the consequences of its action. The manifestation of this ignorance through the structural elements of recognition and reversal allows the momentous change of fortune which tragedy calls for, but without destroying the causal coherence of the action which Aristotle insists on for the sake of intelligibility. The root causes of the *metabasis*, the transformation in the status and fortune of the tragic figures, lie in the action itself, and are not the result of an arbitrary impingement of chance or any other irrational force. This much, at any rate, is what the theory ideally prescribes. But one cannot, I believe, reach or advance beyond this stage in the argument without raising a fundamental question about its validity.

The motifs of recognition and reversal are hardly an Aristotelian invention or discovery; they are prominent features of many major Greek myths, and they had been employed in certain archetypal ways in the Homeric epics.¹⁷ Superficially at least, Aristotle's emphasis on these ideas is drawn from the best of existing poetic practice. But this observation holds good only if we regard recognition and reversal as discrete components or devices in tragic story-patterns. Once we reflect on their implications within Aristotle's theory, and compare these with their part in tragic poetry, new issues arise. The underlying theme of human ignorance, which I have identified at the centre of the complex plot of the *Poetics*, is, as a traditional tragic motif, the significant corollary and converse of divine knowledge; it is not a self-sufficient fact about the world, but one which Greek myth and poetry places within the framework of a larger religious view of things. The recognition and reversal of the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, to take a case which ostensibly fits Aristotle's model, represent not only Oedipus' discovery of his own and his parents' tragic ignorance, but also his recognition of the prescience and the mysterious agency of Apollo. Similarly in the *Trachiniae*, to cite the other surviving Sophoclean play to which the Aristotelian scheme of the complex plot appears most directly applicable, Heracles' discovery of the immediate cause of his suffering leads him not simply or even primarily to an awareness of his former ignorance, but to an overwhelming sense of the knowledge of Zeus, and of the way in which his own life's pattern has been both foreseen and effected

¹⁷ See Rutherford's article for demonstration of this, but cf. ch. IX n.18.

without, until this final stage, his comprehension of it (if indeed he has fully acquired it even now). In both these works there is certainly, as the *Poetics* seems to require, a symmetry between the recognition-and-reversal within the play and the audience's understanding of the dramatic action. But the vital dimension of both plays which the theory of the complex plot does not allow for is the religious. In so far as the complex plot is regarded, as it is by some, as a purely formal or structural model, the neglect of religion may be thought to be irrelevant. But to attribute such formalism to the theory is to forget that the structure of a tragic plot is a structure of human actions, the ordered artistic enactment of 'actions and life': it is a construct which Aristotle's whole concept of mimesis demands should be apprehended as an image of possible reality.¹⁸ If it is indeed the case that the complex plot posits a transformation of fortune without any divine involvement, then we are obliged to ask what the implications of this are for tragedy's representation of the universals of human existence.

But neither the conclusion, nor the consequent need for such a question, can be deemed to be properly established until we have examined the third component of the complex plot, *hamartia*. I have tried to prepare the ground for an approach to what has been in recent times the most controversial of the *Poetics*' ideas by paying closer attention than is often given to the other elements with which *hamartia* is associated in the ideal tragedy of ch. 13 (and 14: see below). For the first point which ought to be urged in the interpretation of *hamartia*, contrary to much traditional practice, is that it is not to be extracted from its context and treated as a concept or theory complete in itself. Both the disproportionate mass of criticism which has been produced on *hamartia*, and the striking range of different positions taken up within this criticism, reflect the assumption that *hamartia* is a self-contained or technical doctrine, a unique Aristotelian perception placed at the centre of the treatise. In the hope of avoiding the *longueur* of retracing all the old ground yet again, my analysis of the issue will concentrate on attempting to situate *hamartia* more closely, as well as more simply, in relation to the rest of the theory of the complex tragedy.¹⁹

¹⁸ Else (1957) 328 rightly argues against the idea of the complex plot as pure structure, 'as if complex structure were an end in itself ...'; cf. also 353. Against formalism in general in the *Poetics* see ch. I pp. 4f. and ch. III p. 98.

¹⁹ Radt (1976) is right to suggest that discussion of *Poetics* 13 has been obsessive over *hamartia*, though he exaggerates in calling the latter a 'Nebenergebnis' (279);

We must start, then, not by focussing intensely on ch. 13 itself, but by noting how it follows on from the preceding chapters (excepting ch. 12), as Aristotle says explicitly that it does. There is both a general and a specific connection with the earlier parts of the treatise: a general carrying over of the basic principles of wholeness, unity, and necessity and probability; and a specific continuation of what has already been said about the complex plot. Throughout ch. 13 (as again in his conclusions in ch. 14) Aristotle is considering the finest kind of tragedy (52b 31, 53a 12 and 19), not all tragic plots, and he stipulates that the best tragedies will be complex in his given sense. It is neither stated nor clearly implied that *hamartia* is or should be a feature of all kinds of tragedy – a fact which in itself makes dubious much of the ‘*hamartia* hunting’ which has been pursued in attempted explication of Aristotle’s doctrine. *Hamartia* is presented in ch. 13 as the substantive cause of the change of fortune in a complex plot whose other constituents are reversal and recognition. I suggested earlier that the common premise underlying reversal, recognition and *hamartia* is human ignorance, and it is on this level that the immediate sense of the combination can be seen. Reversal involves an unexpected yet explicable caused transformation, and one which must be unintended: it is consequently inevitable that some sort of human error or defect should be caught up in it. Recognition involves ignorance by definition, which again allows for – and once ignorance is part of action, necessarily leads to – positive error, as opposed to a merely passive state of erroneous belief. Though it remains to be seen more precisely how *hamartia* belongs in this scheme, its *prima facie* suggestion of a failure, fault or error obviously interlocks with the other implications of the complex plot. This is not to argue that the elements of such a plot simply coalesce, for at least one evident distinction is that Aristotle does not give *hamartia* the formal identity or the clear structural role which reversal and recognition possess; unlike them, it is not defined, simply because, I suggest, it is not a comparably technical term. Whereas there is no doubt about the place to be occupied in the pattern of a tragic plot-structure by these other components, we cannot immediately (if at all) deduce from the uses of the term in ch. 13 at what point or points in a play, or by what

similarly Smithson 12f. On the moralistic bias which has often marred understanding of the issue see von Fritz 1-112, Bremer (1969) 65-98.

mechanisms, *hamartia* is to function.²⁰ It is tempting to adduce the general dictum found in Book 2 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, that ‘it is possible to go wrong (*hamartanein*) in many ways’ (1106b 28f.). This indeterminacy in the introduction of the concept of tragic *hamartia* will prove to be significant.

To indeterminacy must be added the fact that *hamartia* is presented as part of a largely *negative* argument in the first half of ch. 13. Aristotle’s procedure here is to stipulate a set of conditions for the best type of tragic plot, and then to eliminate those patterns of possible dramatic action which do not fulfil the requirements. Since, however, he does not declare all his premises systematically, it is useful in trying to understand his conclusions to analyse schematically the quasi-syllogistic train of his thought. The three primary desiderata are:

- (a) a complex plot-construction: that is, a transformation entailing recognition or reversal, and preferably both;
- (b) a representation of fearful events;
- (c) a representation of pitiful events.

Conditions (b) and (c), by their implications of certain kinds of suffering, generate two further conditions:

- (d) tragic characters ‘like ourselves’: that is, not morally extreme;
- (e) undeserved misfortune.

These can be supplemented by another two requirements, one derived from the earlier stages of the theory, and the other an assumption which appears only in ch. 13 itself:

- (f) intelligibility, which presupposes, as I have argued, the exclusion of chance, and is grounded in the conception of unity;
- (g) dramatic concentration on a single, central tragic figure.²¹

²⁰ This is clear enough from Soph. *OT*, in which Oedipus’ *hamartia* can only be his ignorance and the acts in which it is implicated. This means that it is not a discrete element in the plot-structure, but a pervasive factor in the events of the past (part of the ‘complication’, n. 14 above) as well as in the play’s present.

²¹ The point stands despite the objections of Jones 11-20: Romantically rich ideas of the tragic hero may be inapt, but *Poetics* 13 assumes the preeminent individuals of Greek heroic myth. However, 53a 11 and 19 anticipate a point which Ar. elaborates in

A final condition calls for special comment. It is:

(h) a change of fortune from good to bad.

The difficulty attaching to this final premise arises from the fact that it is abandoned in ch. 14, which I shall be discussing later. What needs noting here is that this discrepancy should not be treated as an isolated problem concerning the relation between the two sections of the work, still less as an oddity about ch. 14 in itself. The change of fortune which Aristotle's theory presupposes for tragedy has been mentioned several times before ch. 13, but invariably in a manner which leaves open the possibility of a change in either direction.²² Moreover, not only does the preferred type of tragedy in ch. 14 involve a positive change from bad to good fortune, but in the one reference to this point later in the treatise, in ch. 18 (55b 28), the non-committal formula of a change either to favourable or to adverse fortune once more occurs. It is of course now ingrained in attitudes to tragedy that the genre is characterised by a dominant movement towards suffering and evil, and it is because ch. 13 of the *Poetics* accords with this that there is a tendency to attribute special authority to this part of the work. But while the analysis of ch. 13 itself must indeed proceed with the premise of a required transformation from prosperity to misfortune, it is vital to keep in mind that this is actually exceptional within the *Poetics*' total discussion of tragedy.

From the conditions set out above, then, Aristotle moves to a straightforward process of elimination. But since here too the presentation of his argument is not as systematic as it might be (though there are grounds for believing that he may have used a diagrammatic aid at this point)²³ it will be as well to tabulate all the relevant patterns of action that can be derived from the elements defined by the theory. (All are compatible with conditions (a) and (g).)

the following chapter, the familial context of many heroic tragedies. See pp. 223f., and cf. pp. 165-7 with nn. 33-5.

²² 51a 13f., 52a 22f. (and note the double change in the *Lynceus*, 52a 27-9), 52a 31f.

²³ See the parallel passage at *EE* 1232b 31ff., esp. 1233a 1f. ('the man opposite to these is left ...'): the use of a diagram is indicated at 1233a 9. On Ar.'s use of

(1) An outstandingly virtuous character falls from good to bad fortune (52b 34-6):²⁴ although consistent with (e), this goes against (d) (and hence (b) too), and also against (c), since such a case, according to Aristotle, would be morally and emotionally repellent. In addition, this plot-pattern is implicitly contradictory of (f).

(2) An outstandingly virtuous character moves from bad to good fortune: although it is not mentioned by Aristotle, and might seem to be a very unpromising formula for tragedy, this case should be noted as a strong version of (4) below.

(3) A moderately virtuous character moves from good to bad fortune: this is Aristotle's preferred type (see below).

(4) A moderately virtuous character moves from bad to good fortune: this is not considered in ch. 13 (though it is alluded to negatively at 53a 14), but it is, with the relaxation of condition (g), essentially the kind of tragedy which is recommended as best in ch. 14.

(5) An evil character moves from good to bad fortune: this may appeal to humane sympathy²⁵ (which is weaker than pity), but it offends against (b), (c), (d) and (e).

(6) An evil character moves from bad to good fortune: 'most untragic' (52b 37).

However artificial it may seem to display Aristotle's argument in this way, the above scheme does fairly exhibit the process of thought embodied in *Poetics* 13. A final piece of schematisation can be used to analyse the tragic case which best satisfies Aristotle's requirements

diagrams cf. Allan (1972) 83-5, and for other arguments where he works by elimination see e.g. *EN* 1141a 3-8, 1142a 31-b 15, *Rhet.* 1385b 29-33.

²⁴ The qualification 'outstandingly' needs to be supplied for the following reasons: it is the only way of discriminating between this first, rejected case and the eventual ideal; it explains the vehemence of Ar.'s judgement ('repellent', *míaron*, 36); it balances 'extremely wicked' at 53a 1; and it matches what is again ruled out in the conclusion at 53a 8. The point was seen by Twining 232, and it is strengthened by 54b 11ff., where the characters of tragedy are said to be good (*epieikeis*) but with some failings (i.e. not outstandingly *epieikeis*).

²⁵ I take *philanthrôpon* at 53a 2f. in this sense, but without much confidence. On the dispute over the term see most recently Lamberton 96f. and Moles (1984b) 328f. For an association with pity see Bywater on 52b 38, and cf. Dover 201f. 56a 21 may lend some support, though the context is opaque (ch. I p. 32 and n.48), and 53b 18 seems to refer to a weak form of pity which may be germane to *philanthrôpia*. On the other hand, one would not have expected the extremely wicked man at *Poet.* 53a 1-3 to merit any positive feeling, but rather the pleasure to be taken in deserved suffering (*Rhet.* 1386b 26ff.).

(again, (a) and (g) can be presupposed). 'We are left', as Aristotle himself puts it, acknowledging the negative thrust of his procedure, with:

- i. a moderately good character (= (d))
- ii. who has enjoyed, but loses, great prosperity (= (h))
- iii. and who does not deserve his adversity (= (c) and, given i, (b) too)
- iv. but who yet is also not the victim of arbitrary misfortune and whose downfall must therefore be the result of an intelligible causal factor (= (f)) which leaves his innocence intact.

It is stage iv in this argument which is the crucial one, for it is here that *hamartia* makes its appearance. I drew attention earlier to what seems to be a paradoxical feature of Aristotle's theory as a whole, its combination of emphasis on tragic instability, as embodied in the *metabasis*, with a pervasive insistence on unity and coherence, marked above all by the cardinal principle of necessity or probability. The crux of this paradox, as we pick our way through Aristotle's argument, turns out to be *hamartia*, and the paradox hardens in the juxtaposition of elements iii and iv in the above model of the complex tragedy. The effect of the direction of thought in ch. 13 is gradually to narrow down the circle which delimits the area of tragic possibility where essential moral innocence coexists with *active* causal implication in the suffering which is the upshot of the plot. It is, so to speak, somewhere in the space between guilt and vulnerability to arbitrary misfortune that *hamartia* ought to be located. But to look at the matter from this angle is not only to see the strong negative force of the argument, but also to recognise that *hamartia* is not, as much scholarship has presupposed, a discrete, technical term, designating a single, sharply demarcated formula of tragic potential, but rather an appositely flexible term of Greek moral vocabulary to signify the area opened up in Aristotle's theory by the exclusion both of full moral guilt and of mere subjection to the irrational strokes of external adversity.²⁶

It is because my thesis leads to this last claim that I have avoided the procedure, common in modern discussions of *hamartia*, of setting

²⁶ Cf. Dover 152: 'not all errors are crimes or sins, but any crime or sin can be called 'error' [*hamartia*] in Greek.' For a survey of the word-group's usage see Bremer (1969) 24-60. *Hamartia* is misleadingly called a 'technical term' by e.g. Østerud 65, 68, 76.

out to show how my interpretation is to be aligned with Aristotle's treatment of responsibility and error in his ethical philosophy. If I am right to argue that the conclusions drawn in ch. 13 derive from a set of premises contained in the concept of the complex plot, as well as in the more general analysis of plot-construction proffered in chs. 7-10, then the quest for a precise relation between tragic *hamartia* and specific Aristotelian notions of ethical failure becomes unnecessary for my purposes. This is not to advocate the detachment of *hamartia* from the broad realm of Aristotle's understanding of moral action, but simply to suggest that there is no reason to expect it to conform to particular technical doctrines or definitions to be found in the ethical treatises.²⁷ However, two further and connected observations on the relation of *Poetics* 13 to the ethical works are in place, since both of them will strengthen my argument that tragic *hamartia* is not a discrete doctrine, but an element in Aristotle's theory necessitated by the negative implications of his approach. The first point is that the word-group to which *hamartia* belongs not only carries a wide range of meanings in Greek generally, but within Aristotle's own ethical philosophy covers virtually the whole gamut of moral failure and error, from voluntary wickedness at one extreme to innocent mistakes at the other.²⁸ The *hamartia*-group is therefore of very broad and varying applicability, and that the *hamartia* of ch. 13 is not meant to be tied to one specific kind of fault or error is strongly suggested by the phrase 'some sort of *hamartia*' (*hamartian tina*) at 53a 10. It does not follow from this that tragic *hamartia* can correspond to any of the range of things of which this word and its cognates are used in the ethical writings; the terms of Aristotle's theory rule out at least fully guilty action, as well as errors of a purely fortuitous kind. But the extent of application of *hamartia*-language in the *Ethics* does lend support to my interpretation of *Poetics* 13. This leads on to my second point, which is that, if closer scrutiny of the relation between tragic

²⁷ The basic affinity is illustrated by the occasional use of tragic exempla in Ar.'s discussions of voluntariness: *EN* 1110a 27-9 (Alcmaeon: cf. *Poet.* 53a 20, 53b 33, *EN* 1136a 11-13); *EN* 1111a 11f. (Merope: cf. *Poet.* 54a 5-7); *EE* 1225b 2-4 (the Peliads – a subject of plays by Sophocles and Euripides). But there is no encouragement here to try to fix tragic *hamartia* in a narrow or technical sense.

²⁸ For the broadest sense of the verb *hamartanein*, covering all failures to produce virtuous results, see e.g. *EN* 1106b 29, 1159b 7. Members of the word-group are applied to wickedness (*EN* 1110b 29), *mikropsuchia* (1125a 19), other character defects (1115b 16), *akrasia* (1148a 3), acts of passion which constitute injustice (1135b 22), acts done through ignorance (1135b 18f., 1136a 7), and the category which includes both the latter and mishaps or accidents (1135b 12).

hamartia and the relevant parts of Aristotle's moral theory should be thought necessary or valuable, I am content to note that my position is largely consistent with the findings of the most impressive and thorough re-examination of the whole issue by Stinton, who concludes that tragic *hamartia* could encompass one of a number of moral failings and errors defined elsewhere by Aristotle.²⁹ My conclusions have, however, been reached from a somewhat different direction, and it remains less important for my case that such a relation should be perceived to exist between *Poetics* 13 and the doctrines of the ethical treatises, than that the inherent indeterminacy of tragic *hamartia* should be seen to be the consequence of a tension within the theory of tragedy itself.

It is a relatively plain inference from the thesis I have so far offered on *hamartia* that no particular English translation evidently recommends itself for this term. It is especially difficult to commit oneself to a single equivalent in view of the fact that several of the possible candidates – error, fault, mistake, flaw – have been closely associated with various attempts to pin the word down to a restricted sense. In so far as it is impractical to proceed altogether without translations, the terms 'fallibility' and 'failing' seem to me perhaps the least prejudicial ones available. But it should be clear from the whole tenor of my argument that it would be futile to imagine that we could find a precise equivalent for the function of *hamartia* in the compressed context of Aristotle's theory. There is much to be said, somewhat ironically, for avoiding a consistent translation for the term.

But the understanding of *hamartia* in the *Poetics* may not, in any case, be confined to the actual occurrences of the word in ch. 13. For although *hamartia* is mentioned as such only in this one passage, it is one of a number of suppositions which are carried over and sustained in the following chapter. In order, therefore, to carry the argument a

²⁹ Stinton's central argument is detailed and powerful. Two marginal reservations: first, I cannot share his belief that Ar.'s doctrine is somehow vindicated by the discovery of multiple *hamartiai* in certain plays (esp. 248); secondly, I doubt his acceptance (244, but contrast 252) of the view that *hamartia* is consistent with the religious conception of *aitē*. This view is argued for by Dawe; it is also discussed by Bremer (1969) chs. IV-VI, whose position is more elusive, though it seems to concede a basic discrepancy between Ar. and tragedy (esp. 111f., 184, 193). For scepticism see Radt (1976) 274f., Golden (1978) 5-12, Winnington-Ingram 323, Söffing 236 ('eine säkularisierte Fassung des Ate-Motivs'). In connecting *aitē* and *hamartia* Armstrong & Peterson are led to the curious conclusion that Oedipus's *hamartia* in the *OT* is 'partly caused by ... success and high reputation at Thebes' (70).

stage further, and to try to open up the ethical implications of Aristotle's theory a little more clearly, it is necessary to take account of the evidence of ch. 14. It is, I believe, from a realisation of the degree of continuity between the two sections of the treatise that we must begin an assessment of *Poetics* 14, rather than from immediate puzzlement over the discrepancy between the types of plot recommended in the two chapters. There are certainly some inconcinnities in the juxtaposition of the chapters, including the jolt to the sequence of thought caused by the occurrence of some remarks on theatrical spectacle at the start of ch. 14; and, after these remarks, Aristotle can to some extent be said to be readdressing himself to questions he has already raised, but now approaching from a slightly changed angle.³⁰ There are doubtless some difficulties here, and ones which give scope for conjecture about Aristotle's original intentions. But such concerns are not as deep as is sometimes thought, and they should not be allowed to obscure an underlying, and in my view more significant, consistency between the two chapters.

One strand of continuity between 13 and 14 is supplied by the fact that in both Aristotle's method follows the negative procedure of considering a series of possibilities, and eliminating, or demoting to inferior status, all but one of them. It is therefore pertinent in both cases to ask what is excluded or devalued, and why. In ch. 14 two main issues are raised: first, what is the ideal relationship between the chief parties in a tragic plot; and secondly, which combination of circumstances – and the variables here are knowledge or ignorance on the part of the prime agent, and the possibility of a recognition before or after the committing of a tragic deed – will arouse the finest effect of pity and fear. Aristotle's answer to his first question is that the parties in a tragedy should be related by a strong tie, particularly that of kinship. If this can be taken unproblematically as a reflection

³⁰ It will be clear that I cannot share the common view that ch. 14 involves a new concentration on the *pathos*, the physical act or suffering (e.g. Twining 322-5, Vahlen (1914) 48-58, Radt (1976) 280, Moles (1979) 82-92, Söffing 33f., 122-9). Ch. 14 shows precisely that *pathos* in itself is of minor importance (53b 18) and even, in the ideal, dispensable (a fact which may help to explain the remarks on *opsis* at the start of the chapter: see Appendix 3 n.6). Cf. *EN* 1101a 31-3, which indicates that *pathē* may just as well belong to the antecedents of a play. Ar.'s focus in *Poet.* 14 continues to be on the plot-structure (compare 53a 3, 23, 53b 2, 54a 14), that is, in particular, on the *metabasis* which constitutes the setting of the *pathos* (actual or imminent) in the cases Ar. considers. Grube (1958) 28 n.3 is right, therefore, to say that there is 'no hint of a change of criterion'.

of the tendency of Greek tragic myth to portray events within the family or other closely related group,³¹ it might also be thought to represent a shift from the perspective of ch. 13, in which a central figure is postulated for the ideal plot. It is important, however, to observe why this is so only to a limited extent. Certainly Aristotle is now taking explicit account of a factor which was only assumed in the previous chapter (particularly in the choice of illustrations at 53a 11 and 20-2), but it is essential with this as with other details to discern the underlying continuity of premises. Where this especially emerges – and in such a way as to reinforce the whole theory's stress on agency – is in ch. 14's primary criterion, the knowledge or ignorance of the *active tragic figure*. It is true that an uncertainty remains, since the active figure in a particular situation may not be the leading character in the play as a whole; but about the steadiness of Aristotle's focus on tragic agents, not victims, there can be no doubt at all.³² Ch. 14's consideration of the familial settings of tragedy therefore need not undermine, even if it does modify a little, the idea of tragic individuals presented in the preceding section (condition (g) in my earlier scheme, p. 217).

But it is appropriate to ask also how the cases considered in *Poetics* 14 stand in relation to the other conditions which I earlier drew out of Aristotle's thinking. The results are as follows:

- i. An act intended in full knowledge, but not performed (Aristotle instances, somewhat curiously, Haemon's attempted killing of his father at Sophocles *Antigone* 1231ff.). Although such an action might lead to reversal, and so take the form of the complex plot, it fails to satisfy conditions (d) and (e), and therefore (b) and (c), in my earlier list. Instead of arousing pity and fear, the evil of the intended deed (presupposed by Aristotle) is morally repulsive (*miarón*).
- ii. An intentional, knowing deed, such as Medea's murder of her children. Aristotle classes this as next-to-worst in his group of four; it is not hard to see why. Such a case (which is conceived of as entailing the *agent's* misfortune, it must be stressed)

³¹ See Knox 21f. on this aspect of Greek myth, and cf. Else (1957) 349-52 on the importance of *philia* in Ar.'s argument from the start.

³² In plays such as Euripides' *IT* and *Cresphontes* Ar. may have been attracted by the fact that both parties to the *pathos* were *actively* implicated in events, and neither could be regarded as a merely passive victim: even the sleeping *Cresphontes* was in the process of planning the King's death.

would presumably, as with type i, involve precisely the 'evil and wickedness' which was explicitly ruled out in ch. 13 (53a 8f.). At any rate, it flatly contradicts the possibility of *hamartia*, and makes it difficult if not impossible to feel pity and fear for the agent, though not necessarily for the victim(s). Neither reversal nor recognition would be feasible in such a plot-structure (unless in subordinate actions).

- iii. A deed done in ignorance, followed by recognition, as in the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. It is not necessary to enter into detail for this case, since it appears to correspond to the ideal tragedy of ch. 13, which I have already examined. It remains, of course, to be asked why, if that is so, it is here classed only as second-best.
- iv. An act about to be done in ignorance, but prevented in time by a scene of recognition, as in Euripides' *Iphigeneia in Tauris* and (lost) *Cresphontes*. This is Aristotle's new recommendation for the finest tragedy. I return to it below, but mention for the moment that it allows for a complex plot-construction, since recognition is essential to it and reversal is possible (and probably presupposed); that it entails pity and fear for the undeserved sufferings which are *in immediate prospect*³³ (though averted); and that its change of fortune from bad to good is consistent with everything in the *Poetics* other than the recommended model of ch. 13. On the status of this type of plot in relation to the criterion of intelligibility, I reserve comment for below: it is, I believe, of key importance for the interpretation of the new tragic ideal of ch. 14.

What clearly emerges from this brief analysis of the main argument of ch. 14 is that if we attempt, as we are obliged to do unless baulked, to read the movement of Aristotle's thought in the light of the principles and suppositions offered in the preceding sections, there is a substantial degree of coherence between the latest conclusions and what has gone before. The judgements passed on the kinds of tragic material considered in ch. 14 can largely be made sense of by reference to the set of conditions apparent in, or deducible from, the earlier stages of the theory. It is important to grasp this point before

³³ The notion of a prospective or imminent deed certainly strikes a new note in the theory: *mellein* is used for this purpose six times in ch. 14 (53b 18, 21, 34f., 38, 54a 6, 8) but otherwise only at 55b 9 (again referring to the *IT*). For the wonder aroused by sudden escapes from danger cf. *Rhet.* 1371b 11 (with n. 16 above).

trying to deal with the anomaly between *Poetics* 13 and 14, for the temptation, to which many have succumbed, is otherwise to treat the first of these chapters as necessarily authoritative in itself, and then to measure the second as if it were simply aberrant from what has preceded.³⁴ But once it is seen that ch. 14 is at least as compatible with Aristotle's general requirements for tragedy as is ch. 13, the issue of a specific discrepancy becomes subordinate to a larger question, which I wish to approach, about the whole nature of Aristotle's view of tragedy.

In order to put the relation between chs. 13 and 14 more firmly in perspective, it has to be recognised that the recommendation of the type of plot illustrated by the *Iphigeneia in Tauris* does not straightforwardly contradict the earlier preference for works such as the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. For not only does the tragedy of averted catastrophe conform, as I have tried to indicate, to Aristotle's major conditions, but it also in a sense contains within itself, and goes beyond, the ideal tragedy of ch. 13. In putting the point this way I am not offering an independent evaluation of the two types, but comparing them by reference to the terms and standards of Aristotle's schematic theory. Apart from the shift from attention to a single character to attention to an encounter between two parties, which I have argued is only a moderate change of emphasis, the preferred tragedy of ch. 14 could be thought to incorporate all the significant elements of the ideal of ch. 13: the components of the complex plot; *hamartia*³⁵ (and hence the preservation of intelligibility); and even, in fact, the transformation from prosperity to adversity, since, to judge by the *Iphigeneia* at least, the final turn from adverse to favourable fortune is in effect an inversion of a preceding and contrary turn. To look at the relation between the two plots in this way is, of course, precisely to play down what differentiates them; but that, I suggest, is just what the combination of arguments in these two chapters warrants us in supposing that Aristotle's theory itself does.

³⁴ Jones 47 and Kaufmann 83f. rightly object to the common assumption, but Jones (n.1) overlooks the implicit presence of *hamartia* in ch. 14, and Kaufmann persuades himself (despite 52b 31f.) that reversal and recognition are ignored in ch. 13.

³⁵ Although the term *hamartia* does not recur (which hardly matters if, as I urge, we do not regard it as a technical term), ch. 14 stresses ignorance: in particular, 'through ignorance' (53b 35) is equivalent to 'through *hamartia*' (53a 9f.) – which is *not* to suggest that *hamartia* must be restricted to acts involving factual ignorance.

Having so far stressed the continuities between chs. 13 and 14, the *prima facie* incongruence must now be directly confronted. When in the course of ch. 14 Aristotle describes the kind of plot in which a terrible act, about to be committed in ignorance, is prevented by a scene of recognition, the phrase he employs for the act is 'to perpetrate something incurable' (53b 35). Aristotle uses the adjective 'incurable' nowhere else in the *Poetics*, and only once outside it, but it is an apt word in Greek for the ultimates of suffering and evil, and it is found with this force in a variety of authors.³⁶ It is mildly ironic that the term should occur at just this point in the *Poetics*, since it can apply only proleptically (and without fulfilment) to the case which Aristotle is considering – the tragedy in which the tragic deed, and therefore the *pathos*, the physical suffering, is prevented by recognition. Aristotle's averted catastrophe simply is not, in the end, a catastrophe at all; and if the requisite emotions of pity and fear are to be aroused by undeserved misfortune, then while the prospect of such misfortune may successfully elicit them, as Aristotle's argument presupposes, it cannot do so in quite the same way as the actuality. This is not a matter of an exactly calculable difference between the emotional response called for in the two cases; one can say, though of course from premises other than those which Aristotle implicitly accepts, only that the enacted tragedy subsumes and goes beyond the prospective but prevented tragedy. Nor is the difference purely one of emotion: the tragic emotions are aligned, on Aristotle's own theory, with the understanding of the whole pattern of dramatic action. What the type of play recommended in *Poetics* 14 lacks is precisely the finality of the 'incurable', the tragedy of collapse into irredeemable misfortune. Yet it is just this extreme degree on the scale of human fortune which characterises many of the major tragic myths from Homer onwards, and which involves the kind of suffering that, as Aristotle himself observes of the misfortune of Priam in the passage from the *Ethics* to which I earlier referred, makes any possibility of happiness inconceivable (1100a 8f.). Even if we allow the title of tragedy, then, to the drama of averted catastrophe, as on one level we must, it cannot, on Aristotle's own terms, be tragedy of the same irreversible intensity, and cannot carry quite the same significance, as the tragedy of a Priam or Oedipus: for the avoidance of the 'incurable' does not eliminate the possibility

³⁶ *Rhet.* 1399b 4; see e.g. Plato *Rep.* 619a 4 and LSJ s.v. *anēkestos*.

of happiness, in either the traditional or the Aristotelian sense. I think we are therefore justified in regarding *Poetics* 14 as a prescription, in the realm of dramatic theory, for the avoidance of the starkest tragedy. And to reach this conclusion is to evaluate Aristotle's view not by the criteria of some later or quite independent notion of the tragic, but by reference both to the dominant quality of the genre for which the *Poetics* offers its ideal, and to the philosopher's own ethical system of thought.

Yet such a conclusion might be taken by some to be a confirmation of the problem posed simply by ch. 14 itself, and so to bring us back round to the common opinion that this section of the work is aberrant within the theory as a whole. I have already argued, however, that this opinion comes up against the objection that the ideal tragedy of ch. 14 satisfies the requirements of the theory (including *hamartia*) as well as does that of ch. 13; and I want now to reinforce this objection, and to go on to contend that the avoidance of extreme tragedy discernible in ch. 14 has wider implications for Aristotle's view of tragedy in general. One fundamental observation, which I touched on earlier, suffices to show that *Poetics* 14 does not represent a departure from the rest of the analysis of tragedy, namely Aristotle's repeated provision, from ch. 7 to 18, for the possibility that a tragedy may not end in unmitigated misfortune: *all* the references to the tragic pattern of change, outside chs. 13 and 14 themselves, employ the dual formula of a transition from good to bad, or bad to good. So far, then, as the ideal tragedies of 13 and 14 are concerned, we have alternatives which are equally compatible with the general statements and principles of the theory. If this is so, then it is to ch. 13 that we must return, in order to question whether it is really as open to extreme tragedy as an initial reading might lead one to believe.

An answer to this question needs to take into account the fact that, as Aristotle himself clearly recognised, a serious conception of what I have called extreme tragedy cannot rest on the notion of misfortune alone. It is for this reason that the *Poetics* strives for a formulation of the integral relationship between states of fortune and the actions of those who experience them. But this relationship cannot be ethically invariable: if it were, Aristotle would have no reason not to commit himself to Platonic moralism, and to demand of tragedy the dramatisation of either merited prosperity or deserved unhappiness. On the other hand, Aristotle is partially constrained, as chs. 13 and 14 both indicate, by the desire to avoid too stark a

disparity between moral worth and state of fortune, a disparity which he describes and rejects as *míaron*, repellent or outrageous. This judgement is applied to the first type of play considered in ch. 13, the downfall of the exceptionally virtuous man, and it signifies that the sufferings of such a figure would too deeply disturb our moral expectations (to which the emotions are, in principle, attuned). The vehemence with which Aristotle rejects such a subject for tragedy is in itself sufficient to establish that his criteria are not in any restrictive sense 'aesthetic', as is sometimes claimed:³⁷ no merely dramatic or technical factor would call for the expression of outrage or disgust. In fact, not only here but throughout the theory Aristotle's premises concerning the emotions elicited by tragedy rest on foundations which contain a necessary ethical element. Nowhere does he suggest that the conditions affecting these emotions in the experience of poetry differ at all from the conditions affecting them in life: as I pointed out on p. 196 above, Aristotle commits himself in the *Politics* to the principle that our feelings towards mimetic works are directly related to our feelings towards the equivalent reality. The downfall of the exceptionally virtuous man in tragedy is morally repellent for precisely the same reasons as it would be in life.

Aristotle's theory of tragedy therefore faces the dilemma of equally unacceptable alternatives – simple, Platonic moralism, and wholly arbitrary and unjustifiable misfortune. I have already tried to indicate that it is the function of *hamartia* to solve this dilemma by reconciling the requirement of tragic misfortune (actual or prospective, temporary or 'incurable', we can now add) with the human agent's active, if largely innocent, implication in the configuration of events. The indefiniteness of the doctrine of *hamartia* is a sign of its crucial role as the factor which allows tragic instability to be operative, but without breaking the chain of unity and intelligibility. Now it is clear that the man of outstanding virtue could fall into misfortune, on Aristotle's terms, only through something over which he had no control at all, the impingement of some accidental or quite external cause, for anything originating with the agent himself would constitute a defect in his practical

³⁷ E.g. Potts 77f. ('aesthetic rather than moral'), Goldschmidt (1970) 127 ('normes purement esthétiques'), Moles (1984a) 54 n.8 (cf. his (1984b) 334f., which I find more qualified). It is important to avoid polarising the issue between the purely aesthetic (whatever that might be) and the didactic: for criticisms of such polarities, which are not Ar.'s, see G.K. Gresseth, *TAPA* 89 (1958) 328-35, and I.A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* 2nd edn., reset (London 1967) 51-3. Cf. also ch. I pp. 3f. and n.4.

wisdom. Aristotle's rejection of such a case is consequently not just a matter of instinctive moral outrage. It can be traced back to the same premises which lead to the doctrine of tragic *hamartia*, and it is the fundamental premise of comprehensible causality – with its corollary, the exclusion of the 'irrational' – which now calls for further elucidation. Earlier in this chapter I tried to show how Aristotle's standards of necessity and probability rule out the play of chance from the tragic plot. This is not, however, the most significant negative implication of the principle of dramatic coherence, and I also earlier touched on the possibility that the theory of the complex plot, revolving as it does around human ignorance and fallibility, leaves little space for the central religious component in Greek tragedy. These two subjects, chance and divine agency, are in fact related, for while it was possible by Aristotle's day to make a clear separation between them, traditional Greek thinking had closely associated them, and this is especially pertinent to the world of heroic myth in which tragedy has its being.

The essential point for this traditional mentality about the idea of *tuchê* (customarily but sometimes misleadingly translated as 'chance') is that it represents a source of causation which lies beyond human comprehension or rational expectation. It is not surprising, therefore, that *tuchê* should to some extent coalesce with belief in divine causation, and indeed sometimes be simply identified with it.³⁸ The salient implication of this is that traditional Greek 'chance' need not be purely random: it does not exclude the possibility of a concealed order or pattern in events, only the immediate human ability to perceive one. Chance and the gods may be alternative and equivalent ways of accounting for the operation within human life of factors which cannot be explained in entirely human terms. If this is so, then it is indeed necessary to ask whether Aristotle's conception of tragedy rules out the traditional understanding of divine agency and responsibility, as well as more impersonal notions of the 'irrational'.

A preliminary doubt about this proposition might seem to be raised by the well-known passage in ch. 25 of the *Poetics* where Aristotle nonchalantly dismisses philosophical complaints about the

³⁸ Some passages in which *tuchê* and the gods are related: Hes. *Theog.* 360, *Hom. Hymn* 11.5, Pind. *Ol.* 8.67, 12.1ff., *P.* 8.53, *Nem.* 6.24, *Soph. Phil.* 1326, *Gorgias* fr. 11.6, Eurip. *HF* 309, *IA* 1136, *Cycl.* 606f., *Plato Rep.* 619c 5; for popular belief see Dover 138-41. Ar. himself acknowledges the point at *Phys.* 196b 5-7.

theological and moral inaccuracy of poetry's treatment of the gods. He identifies these complaints by reference to the early philosopher Xenophanes, but his point is also implicitly directed against Plato, with whose strictures on the religion of Greek myth Aristotle's negative attitude stands in sharp contrast. The line of defence, that 'it may be neither good nor true to say such things about the gods, but this at any rate is what men say' (60b 36f.), makes a simple appeal to conventional or popular beliefs the solution of the problem raised by the philosophers. This is remarkable evidence of Aristotle's tolerance of the character of traditional Greek religion, but it has, in fact, little bearing on the question of whether the major tenets of the *Poetics*' theory of tragedy leave space for the divine, since it is advanced only as an instance of how poets can be defended against certain types of criticism, and not as a positive injunction. For the latter we must turn elsewhere, particularly to ch. 15. Here we find a passage in which Aristotle explicitly denounces the use of the gods in the solution of dramatic action, giving as his examples the divine help which allows Medea to escape at the end of Euripides' play, and the intervention of Athena which helps to prevent the departure of the Greeks for home in *Iliad* 2 (a characteristically tangential choice). He goes on to specify that the *deus ex machina* may be employed for 'events outside the play ... since we allow the gods to see everything'.³⁹ It would be a mistake to suppose Aristotle here to be attending only to special divine interventions of the kind typified by the tragic *deus ex machina*. His choice of a standard mode of involvement of a deity in the action of the *Iliad* indicates what we might anyway infer from the repeated insistence on the principles of coherent plot-construction: that Aristotle's ideal of dramatic action does not readily permit the intervention of divine agency in any form, except 'outside the plot' – which is where, we note, the 'irrational' in general belongs.⁴⁰

The point is in fact strikingly confirmed by another passage later in the treatise, and one which has peculiar relevance to the interpretation of Aristotle's theory, since it concerns the *Iphigeneia in Tauris*. In his summary of the plot of this play in ch. 17, Aristotle

³⁹ 54a 37-b 6. Else (1957) 470-3 emends away the *Iliad* example, but he ignores the prefix of *apoplous* (cf. 59b 7) and wrongly dismisses the implication of fr. 142 (Rose) from *Homeric Problems*. The relevance to Ar.'s attitude to the gods remains anyway unaffected (see Else 306, 474f., cf. 508 and n.63).

⁴⁰ See 54b 6-8 and 60a 28f.

remarkably claims that 'the fact that Apollo gave Orestes an oracular instruction to make the journey, and his reason for sending him, are outside the plot' (55b 7f.). This is contestable, as the two facts in question are not only mentioned in the play, but are essential to the causal sequence of the action. It must matter, for one thing, that Orestes has been sent by Apollo, for his journey would otherwise be, on Aristotle's own terms, an unintelligible coincidence comparable to the one in Euripides' *Medea* which he faults at 61b 20f.; the paraphrase at 55b 6f. ('the priestess's brother *happened* to arrive') fails to disguise this problem. It also matters why Apollo sent Orestes, since, to go no further, the parallelism between the god's aim of helping his own sister, and Orestes' rescue of Iphigeneia, is part of the interweaving of divine and human in the plot. Apollo's involvement in the action, then, although initiated prior to the start of the plot, is sustained within it:⁴¹ without this, the play would lose a fundamental level of significance. Nor is it surprising that Aristotle fails to mention Athena's intervention in the final scene of the play, which is closely related to the Apolline strand in the story. Athena's appearance explains the divinely executed pattern in all the preceding action, and it is difficult to see how this could be regarded as a dispensable view of things, a merely optional or external perspective on the human events. To make the crucial recognition-scene wholly a matter of causally intelligible action on the human plane, as Aristotle's summary appears to do, is to substitute only a part for the whole, and to displace the religious with the secular. Some (especially those given themselves to a secular reading of Euripides) will wish to regard Aristotle's summary as an innocent outline; but it does effectively intimate his theoretical presuppositions.

The procedure exhibited in ch. 17 cannot be treated as a local aberration (though one notices that Aristotle is inconsistent enough to mention Poseidon's involvement in the *Odyssey* at 55b 18). If my argument is justified, the attempt to set out the essential structure of the *Iphigeneia* in rationally lucid terms is a symptom of the deeply-rooted preoccupation in the theory as a whole with coherently connected patterns of tragic action. For it is a consistent assumption of the traditional religious outlook with which tragic myth is impregnated that the gods, and other forces associated with them, represent at best only a partially intelligible cause of events. This

⁴¹ See esp. lines 77-94, 711-23, 936-78, 1438.

assumption is pervasive and unavoidable, despite the many variations of detail in the presentation of the divine both between playwrights and even between plays by the same dramatist. It is not, then, with a clear or fixed religious doctrine that the *Poetics*' conception of tragedy comes into conflict, but with the general status of the gods in Greek myth, and hence in tragedy, as active forces which lie at and beyond the limits of human comprehension, and which therefore cannot be reduced to the level of steady and rational expectations. The discrepancy between such an outlook and the requirements of Aristotle's view of tragedy is ineliminable. Even if he was able to suppress his own philosophico-religious beliefs in order to accept the personal notion of gods operative in the fictions of poetry, as the sentence from ch. 25 suggests, Aristotle could hardly have reconciled his attribution of a quasi-philosophical value to poetry with a recognition of the possibility of a traditional religious world-view in the best tragedy. It was precisely this world-view against which some of Plato's strongest censures had been directed. The price of Aristotle's philosophical *rapprochement* with the tragic poets turns out, at the level of ideal theory, to be secularisation.⁴²

If it is true that the theory put forward in the *Poetics* posits a type of tragedy from which divine agency is to be excluded, then we are now in a better position to frame a judgement about Aristotle's view of the ethical scope and potential of tragedy. I have tried to establish that the treatise puts human ignorance and fallibility at the centre of the genre, making these the active yet innocent causes of the great disturbances in fortune which furnish tragedy's characteristic subject-matter. But I have also tried to suggest that, contrary to the practice of the tragedians themselves, this fallibility is to be dramatised and made intelligible within a purely human framework,

⁴² On Ar.'s neglect of the gods in tragedy see Goldschmidt (1970) 127, (1982) 406, Söfing 224f., 236, 265, Silk & Stern 157, 227, Østerud 76f., Lord (1982) 172, 174, 179. Kitto 125-7 links this aspect of the theory with fourth-century tragedy, Kannicht *Poetica* 8 (1976) 327f. n.5 with Euripides – both unjustifiably, in my view. Rees (1981) 33f. thinks that Ar. would have regarded the subject as irrelevant, while Gomme 209f. plays down the point (his argument, 210-12, against a determinist reading of Greek tragedy may be right, but it is a separate question). I find Glanville (1949) 54-6 elusive on the implicit religious significance of Ar.'s theory.

Ar. rejects a central element of traditional (poetic) religion, divine jealousy, at *Met.* 982b 32-983a 3 (compare *Rhet.* 1386b 16, which only concedes the popular view). Other passages which reflect his attitude to popular belief and poetic theology are: *Met.* 1000a 9ff., 1074a 38ff., *EN* 1099b 11-13, 1145a 22ff., 1178b 8ff., *Pol.* 1252b 24-7 (a reminiscence of Xenophanes).

the framework of ethical intention and action. This is, in other words, one side at least of the world perceived and described by Aristotle's own moral philosophy, a secular and naturalistic world of human aims and failures. Moreover, being shorn of accident and the irregularities of 'the irrational', this world is, as Aristotle himself claims, closer to the general insights of philosophy than to the disconnected variety of ordinary life. It is a world whose causal connections demonstrate 'things as they might or should be', not as they simply are; but it is equally remote from the sense of the hopeless, the mysterious and the opaque which colours much of the tragic myth that we know. The universals which tragic poetry can handle are akin for Aristotle to the categories of the ethical philosopher, and they are categories made for the understanding of the fabric of man's state, his fortune and adversity, as these are influenced by his own actions and marred by his own shortcomings.

It would be fanciful to imagine that Aristotle supposed tragic poetry capable of exploring these matters with the thoroughness or cogency of philosophy itself; Aristotle no doubt believed that much which concerns the moral philosopher remains inaccessible to even the finest dramatist. For one thing, to cite a negative point which cannot be elaborated here, the *Poetics* gives no hint that tragedy's material can bear with any seriousness on the political dimension of ethics; the scope of action envisaged within Aristotle's scheme does not extend beyond the individual and his personal ties of kinship.⁴³ But tragedy's ethical potential is limited in other ways too. From the point of view of the positive thrust of the philosopher's own ethical system, these limitations are due above all to tragedy's necessary (though not exclusive) presentation of human adversity and suffering. This means for Aristotle that the genre centres around the changes in men's external states, rather than their virtues and vices. But the pressure to find some ethical significance in tragedy leads to the attempt to preserve some degree of alignment between character and fortune, or at any rate to avoid the more shocking cases of disparity between them. Having undertaken, as I have contended, to produce a theory of tragedy which proscribed direct divine participation, Aristotle was left with the acute problem of allowing for tragic instability without giving way to a vision of the sovereignty of

⁴³ The reference to the 'political' (which includes moral) use of rhetorical 'thought' in early tragedy at 50b 7 perhaps represents a certain qualification on this proposition; but Ar. makes nothing of this factor anywhere else in the treatise.

chance, which would have been alien to his whole philosophy. What can be conceded as a rare and exceptional possibility must not be made the ideal subject-matter for the most important of all poetic genres: hence, as *Poetics* 13 prescribes, tragedy must not exhibit that ultimate vulnerability against which, as Aristotle reluctantly accepts in the *Ethics*, even perfect virtue cannot protect.

This last point, it is true, can also be seen from a different angle. Since it is the perfectly virtuous man who will best be able to withstand external misfortune, the tragic emotions will be better aroused by the sufferings of ethically less elevated figures. Aristotle's theory does recognise the importance of external goods in the imperfect lives which most men lead, and he differs from Plato in allowing the impairment or destruction of these goods to be a proper object of pity, though only at the price, as I argued at the end of ch. V, of compromising the paradigmatic standing of traditional heroism. Where Plato is implacably hostile to the tragedians' care for the fabric of existence, Aristotle at least meets them half-way by acknowledging the real, if secondary, ethical value of external goods – the material and social conditions of status. But there also remains a degree of deep kinship between the philosophers in their rejection of the pessimistic side of the Homeric and tragic view of life. If the latter places man against the backdrop of a religious *Weltbild* which offers little if any consolation to the perception of ineradicable conflicts in nature, the configurations of events posited in Aristotelian tragedy are bounded by a more limited and less awesome horizon.⁴⁴

This returns us again, and finally, to that telling but often misapprehended section of the treatise, ch. 14. Certain features of the theory of tragedy – its emphasis on coherence and intelligibility, its exclusion of the irrational, and the affinity with philosophy – combine to highlight a paradoxical strand of optimism in the *Poetics*, and one which can be seen to produce the preference in ch. 14 for the play of averted catastrophe. The paradox arises out of a desire to make misfortune accessible to reasoned understanding through the principle of necessity or probability, and so to turn tragedy's business

⁴⁴ There is no warrant in the *Poetics* for the Hegelianising vision of Butcher, marked by such phrases as 'human destiny in all its significance' (241), 'the fate of mankind' (266), 'the higher laws which rule the world' (270), 'universal law and the divine plan of the world' (271). Butcher was following where others had already led: Zeller 780 presumably borrows the phrase 'das Gesetz einer ewigen Gerechtigkeit' directly from Hegel. More recently, Tumarkin talks repeatedly and portentously of 'Schicksal': this is all alien to Ar.

into a kind of pathology of human fallibility: the mind that contemplates the tragedy, and is drawn into it by the pull of pity and fear, is led to recognise the mechanisms of human errors and their consequences in the heightened form made available by myth. This is not meant to entail, it is important to insist, a simple process of moral propaedeutic; it is not Aristotle's suggestion that we can straightforwardly transfer to our own practical lives what it is that we perceive in the causation of the tragic action.⁴⁵ But the central emphasis on the comprehension of tragedy does contain an element of reassurance and rational confidence: understanding, where the failures of action are concerned, may imply that in principle things might be effected otherwise, that they might be controlled so as to avoid suffering and misfortune. That part of the force of Aristotle's theory does push in this direction seems to be confirmed by the superficially, and only superficially, surprising verdict of ch. 14 in favour of tragedies such as the *Iphigeneia in Tauris*. For what this verdict suggests is that the experience of prospective suffering is sufficient to allow the human conditions and causes of misfortune to come within the range of intelligibility, without the physical fulfilment of the misfortune becoming necessary. But even this statement of the point is too negative for ch. 14, since in the terms of its argument 'incurable' suffering not only becomes dispensable in tragedy but can be shown to be averted – and without the assistance of beneficent gods.

Aristotle himself was certainly aware that a preference for a particular sort of tragic plot might derive from a desire to avoid facing up to the worst that tragedy can offer, since in ch. 13 he refers to the 'weakness' of audiences who appreciate best the play which ends with the equilibrium of poetic justice, both good and bad getting their deserts.⁴⁶ Aristotle wants nothing so morally or emotionally simple,

⁴⁵ It is all too easy, but unjustified, to translate the Aristotelian connections between tragedy and philosophy into didactic terms. This can be seen even from such a careful work as Lord (1982), which lapses into the conclusion that tragedy 'provides ... models of moral and political behaviour' (178). Eden's article offers a more measured statement of the ethics of poetry. Gulley 170-5 is right to oppose the more grandiose readings of Ar.'s treatise, but he seems to me to underestimate the implications of *Poetics* 9 for poetry's capacity to promote comprehension of human action and life, and he tends to set up the emotional effect of tragedy as a self-sufficient aim.

⁴⁶ 53a 30-9. Compare the weakness of the young (a propensity towards pity) at *Rhet.* 1390a 19f., and of rhetorical audiences at 1419a 18. I do not understand the claim of Bywater ix that Ar. 'is ready to make concessions to the weakness of the audiences' in

and my thesis is not designed to convict him of weakness but of a more subtle and deliberate philosophical reinterpretation of Greek tragedy. Yet, if my argument is right, his own theory is formulated in such a way as to eliminate from tragedy at least some of those events with which our moral hopes and expectations cannot easily cope. At the centre of the *Poetics*, I conclude, we see the results of a confrontation between a confident rationalism and the tragic vision of the poets.⁴⁷

the fourth century. On Ar.'s reaction against contemporary taste see Lamberton's article (though the larger argument is questionable).

⁴⁷ Although I cannot endorse everything he says, there seems to me to be some justification for the claim of S. Booth, *King Lear, Macbeth, Indefinition & Tragedy* (New Haven 1983) 81-90 that Ar. attempts to set limits on tragedy against its true nature.