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The Political Utility of Poetry in Aristotle’s Thought

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Aristotle’s political thought asks the serious student of politics to examine critically the way we use our leisure (σχολη) in the life of the city. This project aims at such a critical examination by exploring the relationship between poetry and the city. The task here is not to understand the political commentary of a specific poetic work but to understand the way that poetry has a use in the life of the city. Traditionally this relationship is explored through piety but I argue that Aristotle rejects this foundation and grounds the usefulness of poetry in how we learn mimetically. Because of this, the highest political utility of poetry depends on a kind of education of empathy (ἔλεός).

This refinement then serves two functions for the city. The first: poetry arouses within us the same emotional structure necessary for life in the city and helps to cultivate a shared sense of judgment about blame and mercy. The second develops from the first: poetry forces the non-decent to have a clarified sense of what is worthy of forgiveness. The non-decent, by being forced to give mercy to a protagonist, makes them imitate the appropriate kind of decision-making necessary for adjudicating blame. In these two ways, poetry helps to establish a sense of political friendship within the city and helps to reinforce decency/equity (ἐπιείκεια), therefore a belief in the justness of the law, by forcing us to allocate blame and mercy appropriately.
THE POLITICAL UTILITY OF POETRY IN ARISTOTLE’S THOUGHT

BY

STEPHEN CLOUSE
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2: ELEOS AS EMPATHY</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3: CATHARSIS AS KNOCKING OUT</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 4: WHO IS LIKE US? ON POLITICAL FRIENDSHIP</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 5: DECENCY AND EDUCATION</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKS CITED</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

Aristotle’s political thought asks the serious student of politics to critically examine the way we use our leisure (σχολή). Leisure, understood as the absence of menial work, defines the life of the philosopher and the life of the citizen. For Aristotle, a citizen cannot participate in the life of the city if he/she is occupied with menial labor.¹ Leisure is, "better than occupation and is its end; and therefore, the question must be asked, what ought we to do when at leisure?"² The serious student of politics must take up the question of how leisure is to be used by those who live in the city. A facet of how we have collectively answered that question is found in how we have structured our education, specifically those things we have instantiated into curricula. To this end, we can see in Book 8 of the Politics, Aristotle indicates that musical education³ is a central component of our education because such education is critical for understanding the proper use of leisure. In the Poetics, Aristotle establishes that poetry is the highest form of the mimetic arts, including music. From this, we can conclude that if a serious student of politics is to examine the proper use of leisure, they must examine the role of poetry within the life of the city.⁴

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¹ Politics 1252 29-30.
² Politics, 1338a 32-35.
³ Though a more accurate translation may be a cultural education; an education that is derived from the muses.
⁴ One such exploration could stem from Plato’s Socrates comment that there is an “ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry.” This falls out of the scope of this dissertation but it is worth mentioning. Much has been written on this subject, more than can be catalogued here. However, a few notable ones include: Stanley Rosen, The Ancient Quarrel Between Philosophy and Poetry Studies in Ancient Thought (Philadelphia: Routledge, 1993); Thomas Gould, The Ancient Quarrel Between Poetry and Philosophy (Princeton: University of Princeton Press,
Aristotle argues that a πόλις is made up of many elements and is unified (κοινὴν) by its education. He also asserts that education is the goal of legislators. This means that the legislator has a compelling interest in understanding the education transpiring within the city. The natural question is how does the theater teach us anything? Here, Aristotle contends in the Poetics that representative art (μίμησις) is inherently connected to how children learn through imitation and role-playing. Because we learn through copying others, we are psychologically primed to learn mimetically. Therefore, our soul is educated by role-playing; by mimicking the actions of another, we come to understand those actions or the consequences of them. This imitative process parallels, in critical ways, Aristotle’s argument about how we learn the virtues as described in the Nicomachean Ethics. This leads to the question of how mimetic works (music, art, theater, literature, etc.) affect the souls of adults given that our education has its foundation in, and is fulfilled by, a mimetic process. This means that the theater can aide us in properly educating essential political emotions for life in the city (πόλις).

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5 πλῆθος – it’s translated as “multitude” by Joe Sachs, trans. Aristotle's Politics (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2012) p. 35. But it highlights the fact that a city is not an extended family but a composite and is not constructed out of one economic class or skillset but of multiple.

6 Politics 1263b 37.

7 Politics 1325a 8-10.

8 See Stephen Halliwell, trans., Aristotle's Poetics (University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill 1987), pg. 71. Halliwell contends that 'mimesis' has a plasticity that the word 'imitation' lacks and, therefore, the word 'representation' is more applicable.

9 Poetics 1448b 5-10. See also Stephen Halliwell, The Aesthetics of Mimesis (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2002), p. 151-206. His notion of the dual experience of mimesis as both an emotional and psychological experience is particularly useful in light of mimesis as part of our nature.

10 Poetics 1448b 4-21.

11 For example, as translated by Bartlett and Collins, “virtue, therefore, is a characteristic marked by choice, residing in the mean relative to us, a characteristic defined by reason and as the prudent person would define it.” NE 1107a 1-2. Robert Bartlett and Susan Collins, trans. Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), p. 35. Nicomachean Ethics may be abbreviated to NE for the remainder of this text.
As I will establish in chapter two, the primary political emotion which is educated is empathy (ἔλεός). I contend that through the arousal of fear (φόβος) and empathy (ἔλεός), and its release (κάθαρσις), the theater provides a means for engendering decency (ἐπικίεια). As I argue in chapter four, a sense of decency in the citizenry toward one another is required, at minimum, for the development of political friendship. Political friendship is vital for citizenship in regimes with a rotation of offices\textsuperscript{12} and is essential for holding such cities together.\textsuperscript{13} However, the concept of political friendship is never fully developed by Aristotle. One part of this project will be to construct a definition of political friendship. An additional element to this inquiry, which makes it distinct from prior work on Aristotle and poetry, will be elucidating the relationship between poetry, namely tragedy, and political friendship. I will contend that the education of ἔλεός, via tragedy, can engender within the citizenry sentiments for others which are necessary building blocks for political friendship. A correctly educated ἔλεός is vital for molding the proper disposition amongst citizens to evaluate claims on justice, which is a central element for man’s political nature.\textsuperscript{14}

But more importantly, in questions of justice, decency becomes essential to evaluate guilt correctly. Tragedies display undeserved calamities, even as the calamities are derived from the character of the actor, forcing us to learn about ἔλεός and moral dessert. We will not weep for

\textsuperscript{12} I don’t want to limit this purely to democracies because of the ambiguity associated with the term – particularly given the discussion in Politics III on the factional nature of democracies. Instead, the modern term of ‘self-governing’ would be more appropriate but it’s not a term that’s native to Aristotle, therefore the more cumbersome phrase of “sharing in ruling offices” is going to be used. While the opportunity to gain this political friendship would be available to a king or a tyrant, it’s effects would be lost on them since they would not share in the rotation of offices and, therefore, would not partake in the friendship between equals that’s necessary for the understanding of political friendship presented here.

\textsuperscript{13} And it seems likely that cities are to be held together by friendship, and some legislators are more serious about it than they are justice. (ἐοικε δὲ καὶ τὰς πόλεις συνέχειν ἢ φιλία, καὶ οἱ νομισθέαται μᾶλλον περὶ αὐτῆς σπουδάζειν ἢ τὴν δικαιοσύνην) NE 1155a 3-5.

\textsuperscript{14} Rhetoric 1386b5-1387b20 and NE 1108b5-10; Marlene Sokolon, Political Emotions: Aristotle and the Symphony of Reason and Emotion (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2006) p. 141-47.
someone who we believe deserves their fate. Therefore, the primary question raised by tragedy is: does this person deserve their fate? In making such an evaluation through the arousal of ἔλεος, we are declaring the calamity acted out on stage is not deserved. This presents the audience with an education on what is worthy of ἔλεος, who is worthy of ἔλεος, and to what degree justice is violated when a punishment does not match the crime.

It is also essential to highlight the limitations of the education provided by the theater and the boundaries of this inquiry. Watching a play will not make one virtuous. For Aristotle, to be virtuous requires acting with knowledge, acting by choice and choosing the action for its own sake, and acting with conviction.¹⁵ A play is not going to engender all of these elements, specifically the requirement that virtue is an action, but what it can do is contribute to the knowledge attached to an action. The theater cannot take the place of the law or the education provided therein. What it can do is inform one that there are times when the application of the law in a specific circumstance violates justice. Also, the theater is not philosophy. While Aristotle claims that it is more philosophical than history, he tells us there are distinctions to be made between philosophy, poetry, and history. Poetry is more philosophical because it deals with human universals made manifest in specific characters, but it is not philosophy because it is not attempting to provide accounts of first principles. As to the boundaries of this inquiry, it will not address questions related to the “ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy” nor will it provide a new approach to Aristotle’s aesthetic theory.

What this inquiry will do is attempt to draw from primarily four works of Aristotle (Poetics, Politics, Nicomachean Ethics, and Rhetoric) to establish the political utility of the theater. Mine is far from being the first attempt at drawing these texts together nor is mine the

¹⁵ NE 1105a30-35.
first to examine the relationship between poetry and politics in Aristotle; the literature on this topic is vast.\(^\text{16}\) This exploration is not going to explore the unexplored, but rather, claims that a fuller account is necessary. What is too often overlooked or underdeveloped in other analyses is the relationship between empathy (\(\varepsilon\lambda\varepsilon\omicron\zeta\)), poetry, and the city. This project is aimed at addressing that relationship directly and, in so doing, establishing why poetry has a political utility instead of an aesthetic or pious one. I argue that poetry, specifically tragedy, provides an education for the city through its arousal and release of \(\varepsilon\lambda\varepsilon\omicron\zeta\). This process helps in adjudicating moral desert, by forcing us to weigh allocating blame and granting forgiveness. In so doing, it implicitly works to construct political friendship and helps instantiate decency into the non-or less-decent, by, at least in part, providing a shared language to debate issues of justice and injustice.

To make this argument, this project is divided into five chapters: (1) Poetry, the City, and the gods of the Poets, (2) \textit{Eleos} as Empathy (3) \textit{Catharsis} as Knocking Away, (4) Who is Like Us? On Political Friendship, and (5) Decency and Education. The first chapter takes up Aristotle’s redefinition of myth and the implication this has for the gods of the city. Specifically, it looks at how Aristotle nearly omits the gods from his account of poetry; this tells us Aristotle is using poetry for a different political purpose. As I will argue, Aristotle diminishes the role of

the gods throughout the *Poetics* counter to the cultural traditions showing that while the poetry of the ancient Greeks utilizes the tales of their culture, poetry does not depend upon it. This also means that whatever political utility poetry does have does not depend upon the piety of the city.

The second chapter is devoted to deconstructing Aristotle’s understanding of ἔλεος, the primary emotion of tragedy. Our ability to have ἔλεος for the fall of the hero depends on us seeing the hero as someone who is like us, someone who is generally decent but not outstanding in judgment, and understanding why the hero’s ruin was caused by his or her mistaken judgment. However, the arousal of ἔλεος is itself a judgment of moral dessert relative to someone’s actions. Because of this dynamic, this chapter will argue that the city is provided a kind of education via tragedy through these interlaced facets. This education is not the same as the one provided to gentlemen but is one provided to non-gentlemen. By arousing ἔλεος for a specific kind of character who falls into ruin, the audience’s judgment on moral dessert is refined. The vulgar are not made virtuous by tragedy but their capacity to empathize for the right kind of character for the right reason is given a kind of education through the tragic experience.

Chapter three looks at the psychological phenomenon of the much-debated term *catharsis* and the different ways that this word has been interpreted. I argue that the best way to understand this phenomenon is akin to having the wind knocked out of you. This blow comes from understanding that the plight of the protagonist is self-induced, that we are the causes of our fates. From this, I then argue that catharsis points us to wonder (θαυμάζω) about the weakness of human reason while simultaneously highlighting the necessity of prudence in political life. This means that wonder, not catharsis (καθαρσίς), is the end (τέλος) of tragedy. Because καθαρσίς is an essential component to Aristotle’s definition of the tragic experience, how one defines καθαρσίς also becomes central to understanding the relationship between poetry and the city.
Chapter four is dedicated to understanding political friendship by taking up this question: what does it mean for someone to be like us? In this chapter, I argue that politics requires a level of affection somewhere between the intensity of the family and the coolness of the contract; collapsing one into the other is ruinous, which means there must be an emotion best suited for life in the city. I argue that this is empathy (ἐλεος). This emotion helps to reinforce the like-mindedness that is necessary for living together in a city. Such like-mindedness is best understood as agreeing to what is beneficial and how to live together, which also delineates the horizons of a regime and a potential boundary for what it means to be “like us.” This sense of what it means to be “like us” politically can be understood as political friendship. If a city is to be held together by political friendship, it must be comprised of those who can at least approximate decency. This approximated decency, I shall argue, is the best way to understand the nature of political friendship.

Chapter five seeks to understand the relationship between decency and education relative to the political purpose of poetry. Aristotle asserts that it is education that makes the “multitude into one and common through education.”\(^{17}\) By forcing audiences, who are comprised of both the decent and the non-decent, to engage in empathy and judge someone fairly, tragedy makes the non-decent approximate the behavior of the decent, augmenting the foundation of political friendship. In this way, the wonder generated by tragedy points us not toward the heavens but back into the life of the city; poetry provides a shared experience for generating like-minded people within the city. It is because of this shared experience, this education, that poetry must be of concern to the serious student of politics.

\(^{17}\) Politics 1263b 36-37.
The project concludes by highlighting that there are two political uses for poetry. The first is that poetry serves a political function for the city by being a reflection of the city, both in the sense of reflecting man in the city and being a reflection about man in the city. It arouses within us the same emotional structure necessary for life in the city and helps to cultivate a shared sense of judgment about blame and forgiveness. The second utility is by giving a clarified sense of what is worthy of forgiveness among the non-decent, poetry provides the city an opportunity to be educated beyond the primary educator for the city, the law. The forgiveness we are forced to give to a protagonist makes the non-decent imitate the appropriate kind of decision-making necessary in such cases within the city. Poetry serves as a necessary education beyond the laws of the city for the stability of the city.
CHAPTER 1:

POETRY, THE CITY, AND THE GODS OF THE POETS

Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, presents poetry as a product of human reflection, not as the consequence of divine inspiration. Even the master poet, Homer, is not presented as a source of divine wisdom nor are the Homeric gods presented as anything other than characters in a story.\(^1\) This is quite jarring given that poetry was traditionally associated with the gods of the city and both tragedy and comedy were performed during religious festivals in honor of those gods.\(^2\) To the common citizen, the poet was no mere storyteller.\(^3\) The poet presented a divinely-inspired tale of heroes and gods, the same heroes and gods honored at those festivals. In tandem with this, it is important not to dismiss the importance of these festivals for the life of the city.\(^4\) Poetic presentations at the annual Dionysia were screened through an archon, a contest was held that allowed the public to vote on which performance won the contest, and these events were paid for

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by the wealthy as part of their obligation to the city.\textsuperscript{5} As Else notes, "Here all Athenians, noble and commoner alike, could meet on common ground, in a common surge of emotional identification with the heroic spirit."\textsuperscript{6} The life of the city cannot be separated from poetry and the power of the poets.

Performing in the chorus is a clear example of this intersection. Such performances were often part of the education for an Athenian male.\textsuperscript{7} It was so powerful that Xenophon cites Cleocritus’ speech that invokes that tradition when speaking on behalf of exiled democrats during the rule of the Thirty Tyrants:

Fellow citizens, why are you keeping us out of Athens? Why do you seek our deaths? For we have never done you any harm. We have taken part alongside you in the most hallowed rituals and sacrifices, and in the finest festivals. We have been your co-dancers in choruses and co-students, as well as your co-soldiers.\textsuperscript{8}

The festivals of the city shaped Athenian life, with the wealthy required to pay for attendance at events\textsuperscript{9} and with participation in the chorus being a bond of civic affection.\textsuperscript{10} These traditions were essential for the life of the city, and the traditions were based on a specific understanding of the gods.\textsuperscript{11} The festivals existed to honor the gods of the city and the work of the poets fell

\textsuperscript{6} Gerald Else, \textit{The Origin and Early Form of Greek Tragedy} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 76.
\textsuperscript{7} Franz Stoessl, "Aeschylus as a Political Thinker" \textit{The American Journal of Philology} 73 (1952): 113.
\textsuperscript{8} Xenophon, \textit{Hellenica} 2.4.20 found in Edith Hall, \textit{Greek Tragedy Suffering Under the Sun} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 59.
\textsuperscript{9} Goodell, \textit{Athenian Tragedy}, 66.
\textsuperscript{10} Edith Hall, \textit{Greek Tragedy Suffering Under the Sun} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 59-109.
\textsuperscript{11} Jon Mikalson, \textit{Ancient Greek Religion}, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 49. One thing Mikalson points out is the distinction between the unified gods of literature and the fragmented nature the gods were worshipped. The unification was critical for culture but not for practice.
within this tradition. Aristotle even says that the names of the heroes and gods of Homer and Hesiod come from the “stories handed down to us.”

In contrast to this traditional association, however, Aristotle never attributes any divine status, cause, or relationship to the work of the poets. This is a striking departure from the traditional understanding, and even seems to violate how the characters in Greek tragedy understood their relationship with the gods. The term god (θεος) appears five times and the cognate, godly speech (θεσπεσιος) appears once. Does Aristotle’s omission of attribution assume the traditional association, given his normal methodology of beginning with popular opinion? My argument is no. Aristotle’s omission is not because he assumes the association of the gods with poetry. Rather, Aristotle’s lack of reverence to the gods of the city indicates that he is both rejecting the commonly held understanding of poetry and questioning the traditional relationship between the poets and the city.

If the poets are telling stories that do not rely upon divine inspiration or serve a divine purpose, what role do the poets play for the city? For Aristotle, ultimately it is the audience’s evaluation or judgment of the characters in the story that makes poetry useful to the city. This judgment is an essential component to the political utility of poetry, namely the appropriate education of political emotions, but it requires grounding poetry not in the piety of a city but in political psychology. Having this kind of piety makes it more believable that Oedipus is cursed.

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12 Poetics 1451b 18. Goodell points out that tragedians would have known this about their audience and utilized that prior knowledge to immerse the audience in a more intense emotional story through deception and dramatic anticipation. Goodell, Athenian Tragedy, 64-5.
13 Edith Hall, Greek Tragedy Suffering Under the Sun (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 7.
14 Once at 1454b6, twice between 55b5-7, once at 60b35, and once at 61a17.
15 Poetics 1459a32.
16 See Joe Sachs, trans. Aristotle’s Politics (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2012), 2, footnote 40. He points out that τὴν ὡδὴν ὁδεγεῖν is often translated as “our usual method” but is better understood as being “the beaten path” that comes from “popular or received opinion.”
by Apollo than a modern audience would believe, but modern audiences are still moved by Oedipus’ ruin. This shows that poetry does not need to be connected to the piety of a specific city or culture.\textsuperscript{17} Aristotle also understood this. He saw that Agathon’s stories, which were not based on the traditional stories of the Greeks, were as effective as anyone using the traditional stories.\textsuperscript{18} Instead of seeing poetry as dependent upon piety, Aristotle grounds poetry in mimesis (\textit{μιμησις}).

As I will argue, Aristotle diminishes the role of the gods throughout the \textit{Poetics} counter to the cultural traditions showing that while the poetry of the ancient Greeks utilizes the tales of their culture, poetry does not depend upon it. This also means that whatever political utility poetry has does not depend upon the piety of the city. This is because poetry works psychologically in a way that does not require piety; actually, the divine elements can undermine the believability of the stories. In order to make this argument, this chapter will first examine the origins of tragedy and how Aristotle’s theory of mimesis replaces divine origin, turning then to the question of the political nature of poetry, and finally to examine the instances where Aristotle uses \textit{θεος} or its derivations in his \textit{Poetics}.

The births (\textit{γενοι}) of tragedy

To explore Aristotle’s near omission of the gods, it is appropriate, in Aristotelian fashion, to begin with the beginning. But that beginning is twofold. On the one hand, it is the

\textsuperscript{17} This is at least partially why Moles argues philanthropy is an essential element to tragedy. Contrary to this, I will argue in the next chapter that the central emotion is empathy, not philanthropy, but this does not mean philanthropy cannot play a role in tragedy, particularly when we are dealing with questions of universal character type. See John Moles, "’Philanthropia’ in the Poetics,” \textit{Phoenix} 38.4 (Winter, 1984): 325-35.

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Poetics} 1451b 18-22.
literal beginning of the Poetics. On the other hand, it is the logical beginning of defining the essence of poetry. This section will explore both births, turning to the first line of the text, which provides the first birth, then turning to the second sentence, which provides the second. This is followed by a look at chapter four of the text because Aristotle establishes his theory of imitation or representation (μιμησις) there. It is through this theory, which Else rightly calls the “master-concept” of the Poetics, that we see the essence of poetry. It is also worth noting that the art of poetry developed mimetically in Aristotle’s account. Tragedy seems to have developed through improvisational imitation, emerging out of choral odes, dithyrambs, and dramatic recitations of passages in Homer. Comedy developed out of a kind of pre-modern stand-up that heckled or ridiculed public officials and influential people in Athens. Both tragedy and comedy then became tools of storytelling but retained their distinctive origins; tragedy was about serious people doing things of serious consequence whereas comedy was about lampooning foolish people doing base or foolish things. Therefore, μιμησις serves as a dual foundation, as both the essence of poetry and the means by which poetry came to be as a performance art. It is the birth (γενος) of tragedy in an empirical sense but is the γενος analytically as well. These births (γενοι) of tragedy are essential for understanding why Aristotle undermines the role of the gods while also informing us on how Aristotle sees the political function of poetry.

Turning first to the first beginning, the opening sentence of the Poetics, Aristotle not only provides a framework for the subsequent inquiry, he has also already shifted the relationship between poetry and the gods:

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20 Poetics 1449a 10-30.
21 Poetics 1449a 31-35.
About both the art of making (poetry) itself and its forms, what power each carries, how to put together plots if they are to possess beauty in their construction\textsuperscript{23}, what amount and what kind each piece is, and about those things which are similar to these in the inquiry into the whole [making of art], we speak starting first, following nature, with those things which are first.\textsuperscript{24}

In the first clause, Aristotle indicates that there are multiple forms contained within the poetic art, but the third (and middle) clause is only specific about the poetic form dealing with the construction of plots. This could mean that Aristotle only intends to explore the poetic art connected to plot construction. However, this would contradict the use of the plural in the first clause and the subsequent definition\textsuperscript{25} of what is included within the poetic art, something analogous to the broadly inclusive, contemporary term “fine art.”\textsuperscript{26} Therefore, why would he single out the one art associated with the construction of plots if he intends his inquiry to be on the nature of the poetic arts in general? The implication clearly is that the most important of the poetic arts is the one dealing with the construction of plots. As the only form of art singled out from the rest, Aristotle is indicating that the work of the poets is the one most worthy of consideration.

Thus, the work of the poets is the one dedicated to putting together plots or to storytelling. It is worth noticing that storytelling is not elevated because of its content or its religious implications, but due to construction and the power inherent within that construction.\textsuperscript{27}

By extension, we can say that the work of the poet can be evaluated on the quality of the construction relative to the power of the art form. He also states that this construction can be

\textsuperscript{23} Ποίησις – the second term in this word is a cognate of this word (ποιητικής) speaking on the art of making and here is speaking to the same phenomenon so the term “construction” is used since construction is a kind of art in making something.
\textsuperscript{24} Poetics 1447a 8-13.
\textsuperscript{25} Poetics 1447a 12-15.
\textsuperscript{27} ἥν τινα δύναμιν ἐκαστὸν ἔχει Poetics 1447a 9.
done in a beautiful way, with the subsequent clause speaking of the number and the quality of the pieces necessary to that construction.\(^{28}\) The beauty of a composition is relative to how each event is presented, how long each event is, and what kind of event is being presented.\(^{29}\) The beauty is not dependent upon an external source. Rather, its beauty lies in how the poet utilizes the tools of storytelling. There is no mention that this activity is from divine inspiration. A poet constructs, not transmits or relays; they are not a messenger but a kind of builder.

Before turning to the next passage, it is first worth noting what Aristotle has done to the word μύθος in this opening sentence. Μύθος, in common usage, meant things transmitted by speech or word of mouth.\(^{30}\) Aristotle does not reject μύθος as being spoken or performed aloud but he prioritizes construction over performance. A well-constructed μύθος is one that is beautiful because of how it is constructed not because of its inspired delivery. A μύθος is a story conveyed by speech which is a self-contained whole, including a beginning, middle, and end that are logically sequenced. It is not a scientific treatise or essay; its power is not that of philosophy. Instead, both the beauty and power of a μύθος comes from its logical construction. This logical construction is also essential for the poetic function of μύθος which is to arouse a specific range of emotions relative to the kind of story being told. While the power of tragedy is not the power of comedy, all plots must be well-constructed in order to be beautiful. Because of Aristotle’s technical application, the term μύθος here shall be translated as plot or as story.\(^{31}\) Perhaps the

\(^{28}\) καὶ πῶς δὲ ἑξεῖν ἡ ποίησις Poetics 1447a 10.
\(^{29}\) ἕτε ἐκ πόσων καὶ ποίων ἐστὶ μορίων Poetics 1447a 11.
\(^{30}\) The literal meaning of μύθος is “anything delivered by word of mouth, word, speech” and is considered in opposition to λόγος. See Liddel and Scott, An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon, 7th ed. (Oxford, Benediction Classics 2010), 521.
\(^{31}\) This is with a reservation. I’m in agreement with Sachs that the “word ‘plot’ may suggest a skeletal framework of events...but stories are genuine wholes that already have a life of their own.” Joe Sachs, trans. Aristotle’s Politics (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2012), 4. The term plot does not convey the sense of a self-contained whole, which is perhaps the most important element Aristotle adds to this term. However, because of the popularity of this translation, the term plot is also used interchangeably with the term story because of this redefinition.
most significant thing to note is that the poet is not just tasked with preserving the traditional μύθος, albeit in creative fashion. Rather, the poet is now tasked with the proper organization of events intended to arouse and direct specific emotions regardless if the μύθος is drawn from tradition or not. Beauty is in how the story succeeds in completing its emotional function and the μύθος is evaluated relative to that standard of beauty, not truth, tradition, or reverence.

While the initial sentence of the Poetics may present us with a broad introduction to the treatise, it also conveys the treatise’s primary teachings: (1) the primacy of plot, (2) the intelligibility of poetic forms, (3) the beauty associated with the poetic form of storytelling, and (4) the technical elements necessary for effective construction. It also tells us, through omission, what is not necessary for a well-ordered story: divine inspiration. This omission could be because Aristotle assumes the gods’ centrality to poetry, as the ancient Athenian audience would have done. To frame this in a different way, the omission could be a consequence of Aristotle’s methodology of beginning with popular opinion. This means his near silence about the gods would be the result of methodological blindness. This seems unlikely. Aristotle does not even take up the most serious criticism of the poets, that the poets lie about the nature of the gods. This shows the extent to which the gods are omitted from his discussion of poetry. Such a resonate silence must tell us something about how Aristotle views the significance of the gods in their relation to the poetry, and perhaps is also a comment on the nature of the Homeric gods themselves.

There is evidence that Aristotle does actually take up that most serious criticism but only indirectly. One of the clearest examples is Aristotle’s reference to the pre-Socratic Xenophanes,
whose extant fragments are laced with criticisms of the gods, during a discussion about how one should address the impossible things in poetry. The appearance of the gods is one such impossibility. Aristotle argues that if one is to do something impossible, one should write the plot conforming to what is, what is best, or what is said about something. It is to this third possibility that Aristotle references Xenophanes. There are not enough fragments left of Xenophanes to know to what exactly Aristotle refers, but we can glean from those fragments that the inclusion of Xenophanes is not meant to support the account of the Homeric gods. Xenophanes’ criticism of Hesiod and Homer is they teach erroneous things about the gods including that the gods are too full of human vices and pettiness. At the heart of Xenophanes’ criticism is that the poets made their gods to look like them; they made the gods too much like mortals. This reference to Xenophanes alone tells us that Aristotle’s omission of the gods as a causal element should not be read as a mistake or an oversight. The things said of the gods by the poets might be wrong, but the concern is with how one handles the impossible in stories. In this instance, one relies on the prejudice of the audience to explain the supernatural even if such claims are based on erroneous premises. Aristotle has diminished the role of the gods to the point where mistruths about the them, perhaps including their existence, are just a kind of creative license of the poets and a prejudice of the audience. Omitting the gods from the initial sentence of the text tells us that they are not essential for understanding the nature of poetry.

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33 See fragments 7, 10-12, 14-17, 23-26. For further examination on Xenophanes view on the gods see J.H. Lesher, trans. Xenophanes of Colophon (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 78-119.
34 Poetics 1460b 38.
35 Poetics 1460b 10-30.
36 It is worth noting that Aristotle does not make reference to Plato’s Socrates similar criticism in Republic III and this is the only reference to Xenophanes in this text.
The first line of the text provides us a beginning for the treatise on poetry, concerned with laying out the technical concerns of the text. The second sentence of the treatise serves as a second origin sentence because it lays out the essence of art. Here again Aristotle omits the gods. Instead of grounding ποίησις in divine inspiration, Aristotle grounds it in imitation or representation (μιμησις). By grounding art as a representation or imitation of nature, Aristotle is indicating that the skill necessary to produce art is one of reflection. Ποίησις, while attached to the act of making a specific thing (not limited to aesthetics or art, but including anything made by technical skill), is not an act of pure creation. This is true of instrument playing, dancing, singing, and storytelling; anything that is mimetic. Art is not done for its own sake; art is done for the sake of representing or imitating something outside of itself.

It is worth turning back to the highest form of art, storytelling, and briefly establishing the relationship between μίμησις and ποίησις. It has been noted that μύθος takes on a technical nature (meaning plot or story) in Aristotle, setting him apart his intellectual forebears. If the poet is a technician, like a house builder, and a tragedy or comedy is comparable to a house, then

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38 Poetics 1448 14-17; πᾶσα τυχάνουσιν οὖσα μιμήσεις τὸ σύνολον “all happen to be, when taken together, mimetic.” See also Angus Armstrong, “Aristotle’s Theory of Poetry,” Greece & Rome 10.30 (May, 1941) 120-5 for Aristotle’s task to distinguish poetry and music from carpentry or other technical skills and how this distinction relies upon mimesis. For a competing account, see Frank Granger, “Aristotle’s Theory of Reason (II): The Poetic Reason,” Mind 45.180 (October, 1936) 450-463.

39 See Stephen Halliwell, trans., Aristotle’s Poetics (University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill 1987), 71. Halliwell contends that 'mimesis' has often been translated as 'imitation' but instead should be translated as 'representation' because the English word 'imitation' does not have the same connotation as 'mimesis,' - he argues that the plasticity of the word 'representation' is more applicable. See also S.H. Butcher, 115-152. See also Stephen Halliwell, The Aesthetics of Mimesis (Princeton University Press: Princeton 2002), 214-49.


41 On the relationship between beauty and poetry (or between aesthetics and making) see John S. Marshall, “Art and Aesthetic in Aristotle,” The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 12.2 (December, 1953) 228-31

42 Poetics 1448a 13-20.

the plot is comparable to a blueprint. The quality of that construction, “the beauty it carries” (καλῶς ἔξειν), is open to evaluation. That evaluation, which comes from the audience, is itself a reflection. An audience, therefore, is engaging in a reflection on an artist’s reflection of something present in nature, something which exists by nature, or something that could exist. What is worth noting here is that the initial reflection, the one done by the art marker, is presented as having its own beauty; the beauty of the artist’s reflection is not dependent upon the beauty of its source. Seeing a drawing of a corpse is not going to inspire the same emotion as seeing an actual corpse. The source, the corpse, can be odious but this does not mean that the drawing will, by necessity, also be odious. There is no sense here that the poetic reflections are defective by definition.

Rather, Aristotle contends that there is a beauty to be found in this artistic reflection, reflecting on what nature is or could be. A beautiful tragedy will be constructed beautifully relative to the power of tragedy. It is not beautiful in the sense that it represents the Truth or represents the divine or anything of this sort. Instead, its beauty is relative to how its elements are put together and understood by an audience. From the outset, the Poetics tells us we can evaluate the poets on purely human terms. The beauty of the poets is not dependent upon their capacity to tell us anything about the nature of the gods. Instead, the beauty of poetry is found in its capacity to utilize the power relative to its form correctly. What still remains is the question of divine inspiration and its relationship to the poets. There is a gap between the reflection of the poet and the object they reflect. It is theoretically possible that it is in this space, between the

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44 Aristotle goes on to argue that the plot is the “soul of a tragedy.” Poetics 1450a 35.
45 See also Poetics 1448b 10-20.
power of reflection and the object of that reflection, that divine inspiration could exist. The gods could serve as conduits between the mind of the poet and their subject matter. This is the received notion that the works of the poets are the result of a consummation between the poet and the muse. But this is doubtful in the Aristotelian account. Halliwell points out that the gods and the idea of chance (τυχη) could be seen as “alternative and equivalent ways” to account “for the operation within the human life of factors which cannot be explained in entirely human terms.”

 Chance as the cause of human behavior is one explanation, even in poetry, but this is not Aristotle’s explanation.

Instead, a beautifully constructed story is beautiful because it is intelligible; random events or chance undermine that intelligibility. For example, if an audience is watching a play and somewhere in the third act, the protagonist is randomly killed without any explanation, that story is not going to be beautifully constructed. Chance events cannot happen because of necessity; chance events undermine the intelligibility of the story. The demand for the poet’s tales to be rational need not flatten the tragic weight of their tales nor eliminate their capacity to sway the audience. Instead, the work of the poets, their reflection on nature and man’s place within it, must only be intelligible to the audience. As for the gods existing as a cause, even an only partial one, Aristotle makes no mention of this. The mimetic activity of the poets is theirs alone; there is no need for a divine muse to tell the stories of man’s life in the city.

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If Aristotle has grounded poetry in man’s rational faculty, does this mean he undermines the political utility of poetry? Given that the ancient polis explicitly connected the work of the poet to the celebration of the gods, does Aristotle disconnecting poetry from the divine also mean he is disconnecting poetry from the city? One strand of interpretation says yes.\(^{50}\) Halliwell, as an exemplar of this strand, argues, that, “the Poetics gives no hint that tragedy’s material can bear with any seriousness on the political dimensions of ethics; the scope of action…does not extend beyond the individual and his personal ties of kinship.”\(^{51}\) This, in essence, means there is no political nature to tragedy; there is no polis in the theater. In opposition to this idea, an alternative strand\(^{52}\), exemplified by this claim from Heath, contends that “if poetry is ethical, it is social; society is implicated in any human activity with an ethical dimension.”\(^{53}\) Given that politics is the architectonic science for human interactions\(^{54}\) it would be odd that poetry, presenting an account of the interactions of man within the boundaries of the city, would be the exception to the architectonic science.

If the poets were writing with the prejudice of the audiences in mind\(^{55}\) and the tales of poets are vested with ethical questions or circumstances, why would it be that poetry has nothing serious to say about politics? While Halliwell does note Aristotle mentions the “political”\(^{56}\) as a


\(^{54}\) NE 1094a26-b2.

\(^{55}\) Halliwell notes that this is certainly likely, and something which Aristotle criticized. Halliwell, Aristotle’s Poetics, 236.

\(^{56}\) Poetics 1450b7.
means of moderating the drastic separation between poet and city, the line he cites does not point to such a division. Rather, Aristotle’s claim is that what would be good or bad in the city would not necessarily be good or bad poetry.57 Aristotle’s distinction is that a vicious act in the city would be bad ethically, but this badness is essential for comedy. It is because the act is vicious in the city that the comedy works; if there were nothing shameful in the viciousness, there would be no comedy.58 Therefore, poetry and the city are intrinsically linked; for the former to be intelligible, and achieve the power relative to its form, it presumes the latter. For poetry to achieve its effect, it presumes an audience nestled within a political condition, with an understanding of what is vicious and what is virtuous. Therefore, the work of the poets must be understood within a political context.

That political context depends on the second half of the second beginning, μιμησις as learning. Aristotle begins chapter four,

It is likely that the creation of the whole poetic art is because of two causes, both of which are natural. For to mimic59 is innate to human beings from childhood. That ability to imitate is what differentiates humans from all other animals since humans first learn by doing60 mimicry. All humans take delight in representations.61

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57 See Heath, “Polis in Poetics”, 469.
58 Poetics 1448a 15-18, 1449a 35-49b8.
59 μιμεῖοθαι is a cognate of μιμήεις, which means “copy, imitate, represent.” The term “mimic” is nearly a transliteration of the Greek term and it possesses some of the innate qualities of the original term. Imitation, while also accurate, is laden with Platonic notions of being “fake” or “diminished.” As discussed, there’s no evidence in Aristotle that mimetic art is a diminished form of nature. Therefore, in this use of the term, children mimic the world around them. In subsequent uses, the terms imitation or representation may also be used depending on context. All are going to be cognates or derivatives of the original term μιμήεις.
60 ποιεῖται – has the sense of “to make” or “to do.” However, ‘to make a mimicry’ sounds like the child is producing an item but they aren’t learning by making something. Rather, they are learning by copying activities around them. Therefore, ‘doing mimicry’ preserves the sense of the Greek, and is closer to conveying the idea that children learn by copying what they see as compared to ‘children learn by making a mimicry’ or ‘children learn by making mimicry.’
61 Poetics 1448b 1-9.
The two causes, drawn from nature, are learning and enjoyment. Because we first learn through making representations, by doing mimicry, we come to enjoy the representations of others. Therefore, the second cause, the enjoyment, is derived from the first. From this we can also glean that human beings learn through interactions; learning is not a solitary endeavor. The capacity for children to learn by role-playing is only possible if they are presented with models to emulate. This further re-enforces the notion that poetry must assume, if nothing else, familial relations. But it should also include a polis. The way Aristotle speaks of learning ethics in the *Nicomachean Ethics* follows a similar logic.\(^{62}\) Contrasting the virtues with the senses, Aristotle argues that our senses are used because we have them, “but the virtues we come to have by engaging in the activities first, as is the case with the arts as well. For as regards those things we must learn how to do, we learn by doing them…”\(^{63}\) Children learn by mimicking those things around them. As they role-play, they learn.

While learning the various virtues, no singular virtuous act makes one virtuous in the same way a child is not a hero because they have tied a bedsheet around their neck mimicking a superhero’s cape. Rather, both are engaging in imitative acts; the child is learning various aspects of being heroic by role-playing where the person learning the virtues is imitating someone who already displays them. This is in keeping with comments like “Matters of action are said to be just and moderate, then, when they are comparable in kind to what the just or moderate person would do. And yet he who performs these actions is not by that fact alone just and moderate, but only if he also acts as those who are just and moderate act.”\(^ {64}\) Setting aside the question of how

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\(^{62}\) *NE* 1103a 25-35.


\(^{64}\) *NE* 1105b 5-9. See, for adult the importance of mimesis in adults, Andreas Vakirtzis, “Mimesis, Friendship, and Moral Development in Aristotle’s Ethics,” *Rhizomata* 3.2 (December, 2015): 125-42.
mimesis interacts with character development,⁶⁵ the important element for understanding the theory of mimesis and how it pushes out the gods is the naturalness of mimetic activity to human beings. It is not simply that mimesis brings us enjoyment, even though it certainly does. Mimesis is the way that human beings, not just children but also those who are mature, prudent citizens, learn. Poetry is ultimately derived from how we naturally learn, and, therefore, its origin is only from human nature. Insofar as human beings are creatures of the city, endowed with speech for debating ethical and legal questions, our mimetic nature demands that the characters of the poets also be creatures of the city.

The gods of the poets and the city

If poetry intrinsically presumes a relationship with the city, one would presume that Aristotle’s account of poetry would also address the relationship between the gods of the poets and the gods of the city. This is particularly the case given his claim in the Politics that the best city will contain a series of elements including, “fifth but also first, the attention to the divine that people call the priestly function…”⁶⁶ But, as noted, Aristotle only uses the term (or its cognates) θεος five times in the Poetics.⁶⁷ In each of these uses, Aristotle makes no mention of a connection between the gods of the poets and the importance of those gods for the city. There is

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⁶⁶ Politics 1328b 12, Sachs trans., Politics, p. 216.

⁶⁷ Poetics 1454b6, 1455b5-7, 1460b35, and 1461a17.
no mention that the purpose of poetry is to give reverence to the gods or that poetry is tethered to piety. By examining each use of the θεος, this section will show that in each instance, Aristotle treats the gods as fictional characters whose existence in the story must serve the plot. Poetry, instead of coming from the heavens and being introduced into the city, begins in the city and gives an account of how human beings live together.

Reducing the significance of the gods does not mean that the poet should never engage with the impossible. The characters within the play may think of themselves driven by the gods or the gods themselves may appear within the story as long as the plot indicates that gods exist and that these gods can take corporeal form. Since the Homeric gods already do this, telling tales of this sort is easy because they are derived from the “names which are known.” However, as exemplified by Agathon and his stories, one need not draw from those “names which are known” as long as the plot is coherently constructed. But these elements are not the highest concern. Rather, the ultimate concern for the poet is that the story is able to generate the appropriate emotional response, that of catharsis and wonder. For Aristotle, that response is only tenable if the plot of the story is intelligible to the audience. The gods must be reduced to those things which are either intelligible within the plot or whose existence makes sense for the plot.

Aristotle first mentions the gods fifteen chapters into the extant text. This, alone, should make us question how Aristotle is approaching them. Their importance is so diminished that he has outlined the structure, function, and best means of constructing tragedies before he mentions

68 Poetics 1451b 20.
69 Poetics 1451b 18-22. Specifically, Aristotle’s claim about Agathon constructing stories which don’t rely upon the gods.
70 Poetics 1449b 22-28, 1452a 1-5; see also my chapter three.
the gods. Their first mention in the text is to associate them with the irrational elements of poetry. Aristotle says,

One must use the mechanical devices\(^71\) outside of the action of the play for it is not possible for human beings to know how much happened before the events came to be nor the extent of what may happen without a prophesy or a message, for we give up\(^72\) to the gods to see everything. Nothing irrational should be in the actions,\(^73\) but if not, it should fall outside of the tragedy such as in the Oedipus of Sophocles.\(^74\)

All that is left to the gods and their role in poetry is either irrational\(^75\) or beyond the scope of the story. This is significant because just before this claim about the gods, Aristotle argued that all story elements must be drawn from necessity and be internally rational to the plot.\(^76\) Irrational elements undermine that internal logic and corrupt the power of tragedy. For a story to be effective, the end of the story must make sense based on the beginning of the story. The conclusion must follow not by random chance but from the necessary consequence of choices made by the characters. Instead of arguing, however, that there cannot be anything irrational within the plot construction, including those elements that happen prior to the story, Aristotle tolerates irrational elements as long as they do not affect the intelligibility of the plot. The gods

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\(^{71}\) The *deus ex machina* where a god/goddess is hoisted out onto the stage through a crane or some other mechanical device.

\(^{72}\) ἀποδίδομεν – third person, present, indicative of ἀπό- and διδομαι literally translated as “we give in the direction of” meaning to assign. He uses this as well in *Rhetoric* 1354b 3 talking about the difficulty of assigning power to judges to make a snap decision on legislation and expecting it to be well-developed.

\(^{73}\) Πράγμασιν - plural of “deed or act.” Benardete translates this as events (see Seth Benardete, trans. Aristotle’s *Poetics* (South Bend: St. Augustine’s Press, 2002), 39) as does Halliwell (Stephen Halliwell, trans., *Aristotle’s Poetics* (University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill 1987), 48). I agree with Sachs (Joe Sachs, trans. *Aristotle’s Politics* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2012), 42) because tragedy is about people in action not the progression of events. How actions transpire and how events unfold are almost a semantic difference but given the primacy of action over episodes in Aristotle’s discussion, I have chosen the term actions. For a more extended exploration see Alexander Nehamas, ed. *Aristotle’s “Rhetoric”: Philosophical Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) 276-78. Simpson holds that action is the heart of mimesis and we should understand mimetic art via action, highlighting why we should translate Πράγμασιν as action but also reinforces the centrality of action to poetry. See Peter Simpson, “Aristotle on Poetry and Imitation,” *Hermes* 116.3 (Third Quarter, 1988): 279-91.

\(^{74}\) *Poetics* 1454b 2-8.

\(^{75}\) Irrational translates αλογον which literally means to be unspeakable, though not in the sense of failing to have the appropriate words but of being unintelligible.

\(^{76}\) *Poetics* 1454a 33-54b 10.
can be used as plot devices, such as a prophecy or other things, because culturally the Greeks attributed these elements to the gods. In essence, Aristotle is holding his prior notion that these stories are part of a larger tradition, including these supernatural elements, and such things can be included because of the prejudice of the audience. It is not altogether different from a continuity argument in fiction or in a film series. Because the premise has already been established that the gods exist and interact with human beings, their inclusion does not undermine the rationality of the story as such. If those premises are not already established or are not established within the story itself, the sudden appearance of Aphrodite in a story will destroy its intelligibility.

This means that human creativity is not bound up in interpreting a divine message or will; it is predicated on constructing a story that is beautiful, meaning that it is rationally constructed and intelligibly understood. This does not mean that there cannot be supernatural elements in the story nor that the divine cannot be a character in the story (though he is critical of this trope). Instead, the supernatural or the divine cannot be the foundation upon which the scaffolding of the play rests. Perhaps the contemporary phrase “suspending disbelief” may be appropriate here; we willingly suspend disbelief in the impossible, including the irrational or the unintelligible about the parameters of a story, as long as the story maintains an internal coherence. Poetic stories are best when they do not include these elements since it reduces the unintelligibility of

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77 Poetics 1454b 1-10.  
78 Worth draws a similar conclusion regarding the suspension of disbelief but from a different avenue. She highlights how the contradiction between arousing painful emotions and their release being a kind of pleasure, in concert with the requirement that the emotions felt in the theater are actual emotions and not approximations, must mean that we have a kind of suspension of disbelief. If we did not, the emotions would be too painful for any kind of pleasure to result from watching the theater. See Sarah E. Worth, “Aristotle, Thought, and Mimesis: Our Responses to Fiction,” The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 58.4 (Autumn, 2000): 333-9. See also Lear’s framework for understanding catharsis, particularly points three, four, and seven; Jonathan Lear, “Katharsis,” Phronesis 33 (1988), pg. 314-16; 321.
the story. Tragedy, as poetry par excellence, tells stories of serious people who make serious mistakes that have serious consequences. It is an attempt to understand why some lives fall apart but without relying upon supernatural forces. The destruction of a character is from the character’s own misjudgment, not merely fate or chance. Playthings of the gods we are not, at least not in Aristotle’s account of fiction.

Aristotle’s next two uses of θεος serve as an application of this principle in his analysis. From Chapter 17, Aristotle summarizes the story of Iphigeneia among the Taurians.\(^79\) He describes in general terms how to construct a story. First a plot should be laid out and then different episodes should be inserted into that structure so that the play will have enough content in order to arouse the emotions of the audience.\(^80\) For this story, Aristotle recounts how the audience is told that a girl is made invisible to those who intend to sacrifice her. The term ἀδήλως, “made invisible,” also has the sense of not understanding or being obscure. The girl is made invisible by her would-be killers in a way that is not totally understandable. This is an instance where we can suspend our disbelief because the event transpires before the plot of the story. She arrives in a new land where the, “law was to sacrifice foreigners to the gods.”\(^81\) This is the second use of the term θεος in the text. Setting aside how deeply impious such a law would have been for the Athenians, Aristotle here is using the gods as a tool within the plot, establishing the empirical reality that communities have rules regulating piety. Θεος is not used

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\(^{79}\) It is worth noting that this play is the one Aristotle holds out as the exemplar for tragedy. *Poetics* 1454a 1-15. See also Sheila Murnaghan, “Sucking the Juice without Biting the Rind: Aristotle and Tragic Mimesis,” *New Literary History* 26.4 (Autumn, 1995), 755-73. For a more extended exploration than is possible here, Belfiore’s assessment is persuasive. See Elizabeth S. Belfiore, *Murder Among Friends Violation of Philia in Greek Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 21-34.

\(^{80}\) *Poetics* 1455a 21 - 55b 5.

\(^{81}\) *Poetics* 1455b 6.
to say one must include the gods in one’s story telling or that their inclusion is vital to the art of poetry.

Aristotle continues, describing how this saved girl has become a priestess in this local community. In this new role, she is now charged with enforcing the very law that would have killed her because she is a foreigner. Next, the girl’s brother arrives, a foreigner to this land, and is to be sacrificed. He concludes his summary by saying that the story can be resolved, either in the way of Euripides or Polyidus, by the sister recognizing the brother. When Orestes comments that both he and his sister are to be sacrificed, Iphigenia realizes who he is and he is spared.\(^{82}\)

What then, according to Aristotle’s retelling, is the plot? Point 1: Girl is mysteriously saved from sacrifice. Point 2: Saved girl arrives in a distant land. Point 3: Local law requires foreigners be sacrificed. Point 4: She becomes a priestess who does human sacrifices. Point 5: Unknown to her, her brother floats up onto this foreign land and is to be executed. Point 6: She discovers he is her brother. Point 7: She saves him from his sacrifice and helps him escape. The brother is not saved because the gods intervene but by a discovery of the sister.

Focusing more directly on *Iphigenia*, Aristotle’s retelling of the plot completely omits multiple supernatural elements: that Iphigenia was being sacrificed to gain favor from Artemis; Iphigenia, saved by Artemis, is now sacrificing foreigners to the hunter goddess; Orestes is being chased by the Furies for matricide; Apollo, through his oracle, had directed Orestes to escape to the island of the Taurians; perhaps most of all, he completely omits Athena’s appearance at the end of the play. Aristotle sees this story as an exemplar because it displays Euripides prowess as

\(^{82}\) *Poetics* 1455b 10-12.
the “most tragic of the poets” but it is not without its flaws.\textsuperscript{83} Perhaps we are to understand the inclusion of all of these supernatural elements as one such flaw.

However, perhaps by pointing us to Euripides’ play, Aristotle is also providing an insight into his own perspective on the gods.\textsuperscript{84} The clearest example of this is how Iphigenia uses the piety of King Thoas to escape with Orestes and Pylades. The King believes that his priestess is engaging in a writ of cleansing when in reality she is engaged in a ruse to free herself and her kin. Iphigenia, like Euripides himself, is using the piety of the audience to tell a larger story to affect a different end; the piety is used but it is far from reinforced or supported. While Euripides may turn to Athena at the end of the play for dramatic reasons, the plot of the story is already over, at least according to Aristotle. In his account, the story ends with the ruse that led to escape; this is a rationally constructed story where the end is derived from the beginning and all of the elements are connected to this arc. What we must take away from Aristotle’s summation is that Iphigenia’s story does not require the supernatural to be compelling and that by omitting the gods, Aristotle is seemingly correcting a mistake made by Euripides. One can use the gods because the audience believes them to be real, just as Iphigenia uses Thoas piety. But it would be better if one did not. Leaving the gods out of the story does not diminish the story but their inclusion might. Using storytelling as a tool for piety instead of using piety as a tool for storytelling undermines the effectiveness of tragedy. It seems Aristotle’s larger project is to make tragedy fully intelligible without the gods at all.\textsuperscript{85}

\textsuperscript{83} Poetics 1453a 25-27.
\textsuperscript{84} At multiple points in the play, characters defy the gods, equate the gods with man, and reject oracles and divine intervention as folly. See, for example, 380-390 (Questioning the justness of Artemis’ desire for sacrifice), 710-75 (Orestes says Apollo has abandoned him and the gods cannot be trusted), 1151-1221 (Iphigenia uses King Thoas’ piety against him in order to escape).
Aristotle’s third use of θεος criticizes the inclusion of the gods in the *Iphigenia* story. He says of the brother, “that he was told by the gods to go there and for what reason is left out of the plot.” Is this a condition where the audience is to suspend their disbelief or an example of irrationality in the plot, a “plot-hole”? The brother’s motivation is particularly unclear if one ascribes it to a god. Why would the brother travel to a land where they sacrifice foreigners and why would a god send a person on such a task? His motivation is either irrational or is a weakness in the plot because of the intervention of the gods. Either the gods know how the story will transpire, at which point it is unclear why the gods do not save the brother instead of leaving it up to the sister to discover his identity, or the gods do not know how it will transpire and they cannot see all. In either instance, the addition of the gods for the motivation of the brother undermines the rationality of the plot structure and, therefore, undermines the power of the story. Because the gods, unlike human beings, can also see the realm of the αλογον. However, if they are to be included within a story, their motivations must be the same as those of human beings. Doing so must reduce their divinity so they are merely another character or they will introduce αλογον into the plot and undermine the power of the tragedy by marring the intelligibility of the plot.

The final two uses of θεος also occur in a discussion dealing with errors within the story, continuing the theme of how properly to use the gods in the plot. In Chapter 25, Aristotle is discussing how to handle criticisms of plays and which kinds of criticisms are appropriate, which are not, and the ways in which criticism can be mitigated. He says, pedantic on its surface, that playwrights should construct plots which, “Ought to be, if possible, generally without

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86 *Poetics* 1455b 8.
mistakes.” But what kinds of mistakes are admissible? He uses the example of erroneously placing a horn onto a female deer or presenting the behavior of a deer incorrectly. The two kinds of errors, both errors in representation, can be divided between an empirical error and an artistic one; contrast between the empirical error of giving female deer horns and the artistic error of drawing the deer in an un-deer like manner. Which is a greater error? Instead of providing a clear resolution to this question, Aristotle posits the following question: what if the errors in representation are intentional? What if they are designed to represent a creature, particularly a human being, as we should be instead of as we are and how are we to justify this error in representation? The progression of error, then, is as follows: (1) it is best to make no errors; (2) it seems better to make an error in empirical fact than an artistic one; (3) what if the error is meant to convey a higher truth than a literal representation could? How is one to manage such a scenario?

Aristotle’s answer to these questions seems to be another artistic conceit. If one is to make an error of representation, particularly about the gods, that error can be derived from the opinion or bias of the audience. He says,

To the next of these criticisms, if the assertion is “That isn’t true” the counterclaim would be “it is as it should be” just as Sophocles is said to make people better than they are while Euripides makes them as they are. But if neither of these two [suffices], then it can be solved in this manner, “this is what people say” such as what people say of the gods; perhaps it is equally not better nor true to speak in this way, but it may be as Xenophanes claimed, “Well, it is certainly said.”

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88 *Poetics* 1460b 28.
89 *Poetics* 1460b 31.
91 Ibid 274.
Sophocles says of himself that he presents man as he should be; he presents man in a more idealized or higher form than how man truly exists. Euripides presents man as he is, or so says Sophocles, and, according to Aristotle’s antecedent discussion, this would mean that Euripides is a better artist than Sophocles.93 But Aristotle provides another alternative. The error can be attributed to what people say about such things meaning to attribute the error to common perception or received opinion. His example is the gods, his fourth use of the term θεος. People attribute to them a certain nature; their essence is from received opinion, not from truth, and, in the context of the conversation, is included among the errors in construction. Because the nature of the gods is associated with received opinion, or is an artistic license, the gods can either be a kind of empirical error (things are attributed to them which, like the female deer, they do not possess) or an artistic error in presenting them differently than as they exist. But in either situation, the inclusion of the gods is presented within the discussion of error.

Why would this be the case? Aristotle points to a ἁμάρτημα made by a character in Homer says this mistake raises a problem. ἁμάρτημα (mistake/error) is being used in a dual manner here. In the first instance it is used in reference to Telemachus not greeting Icarus even though they were kin. Aristotle says it is possible this is because there was a mistake either by Homer in attributing the wrong name to a character, making a kinship relationship where there was none, or in Telemachus’ action. We return to the problem of the deer. Is it worse to misattribute a name to a character or to make the character act, so to speak, out of character? Does the first error lead to the second one? And, if so, is the error made by the character the consequence of the character or the artist? This distinction is significant because of the moral

93 See Poetics 1448a 7-10. See also Hardison, “Commentary on Aristotle’s Poetics”, 273.
weight given to ἁμάρτημα in the Poetics, a topic that will be explored in chapter two. But for the exploration here, the error can be either internal or external to the plot.

An internal mistake, one made by a character out of ignorance, is the heart of a tragedy or epic; an external mistake is a weakness in the construction of the plot. The compression of the Greek makes the next passage somewhat unclear, which says, “On the whole, regarding the poetic art, one should bring up the impossible in relation to what is better or what is opinion.”94 It is possible that Aristotle is saying that the resolution to error can be found in the art, in what is better, or in common opinion.95 But, Aristotle could also be saying the resolution of the error in the art is either in what is better or what is common, which is how Benardete translates this passage.96 Given that the antecedent discussion was aimed at understanding the error between artistic construction (συμβεβηκός) or skill in empirical accuracy (τεχνη)97 it is probable that Aristotle is continuing that same dichotomy here. This would mean that the solution to errors which transpire in the art (πρὸς τὴν ποίησιν) are found in what is better (πρὸς τὸ βέλτιον) or what is opinion (πρὸς τὴν δόξαν). The parallelism of artistic construction/empirical accuracy would then be preserved in the parallelism of better/opinion.

This is important for understanding the inclusion of the gods because this parallelism informs how Aristotle undermines the role of the gods. One of the justifications for error in poetry is received opinion (δόξα). This is the same thing he says of the gods in his discussion

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94 Poetics 1461b 10.
95 The literal translation of πρὸς τὴν ποίησιν ἢ πρὸς τὸ βέλτιον ἢ πρὸς τὴν δόξαν. This is also a frequent way the passage is translated. See, for example, Sachs, trans., Poetics, p. 65; Golden, trans., Poetics, p. 50; Halliwell, trans., Poetics, p. 63; Butcher, trans., Poetics p. 99.
96 See Benardete, trans., Poetics, p. 68.
97 Poetics 1460b 30.
about presenting characters as they are or as they should be.\textsuperscript{98} This includes even those things that are irrational (the attribute given up to the gods) and the impossible. Aristotle argues that,

With regard to the poetic art, it is better to what is plausible yet impossible instead of what is implausible and possible…Zeuxis painted figures being of this sort, which is better, for the example should be a rise above. Irrational things should come back to what men say, both because they do speak in this way and sometimes the thing isn’t irrational, for it is possible that was is beyond possibility comes to be.\textsuperscript{99}

Specifically, the irrational should be tethered to what the people in the audience say, to the δόξα, because that is what such people will do anyway. Also, sometimes their opinion is not irrational; what is irrational can happen even if it is tremendously unlikely. People in the audience believe certain things to be true about the nature of the gods therefore those things can be presented in poetry because such people believe them to be true. They may actually be errors of the first category, errors of fact, but as long as they do not result in the second kind of error, error of construction, then the error of the masses is fine. This means that the task of poetry is not to educate the masses on technical matters; a poet is not a scientist or a philosopher but nor is their task to teach correctly about the divine. Their task is to use the opinions of the audience, including erroneous beliefs about (or perhaps even in) the gods, in order to effectively construct an emotionally compelling narrative. Again, it would be better if this kind of error was not included within the story.

His final use of θεός provides an example of how to correctly use the irrational, but in so doing, one again must be willing to turn the divine into merely another character. Aristotle discusses the use of metaphor and contradictions within the construction of a story and points to a seeming contradiction in the \textit{Iliad}. We are told by Homer that all gods and men are asleep after

\textsuperscript{98} \textit{Poetics} 1460b 35-6.
\textsuperscript{99} \textit{Poetics} 1461b 11-15.
a battle but we are also told that instruments are heard in the fields of Troy. Leaving aside the possibility that Aristotle has confused two passages in the Iliad, Aristotle is pointing to the gods and man as characters, with different characteristics of course, but merely characters all the same; the gods are addressed here in the same way that man is. Aristotle is not concerned with the problem of equating the gods with men but with the seeming impossibility that we could hear music being made while, simultaneously, everyone is asleep. He concludes that the contradiction means that all is being used as a poetic metaphor for many. The gods are mere characters in the story, acting according to their character, so their inclusion is not an error of construction even if their existence may be an error of fact.

This passage, examining the metaphors in Homer, is not unique in how it treats the gods. Every named god in the Poetics, of which there are few, is treated this way: Ganymede and Zeus are characters interacting through wine; Poseidon, playing the role ascribed to the gods in Poetics 15, is watching the events of the Odyssey; Dionysus and Ares are used as analogies, where the cup of Dionysus is sometimes called the shield of Dionysus or the shield of Ares called the cup of Ares indicating that there are certain items attached to their characters which can be used for poetic analogy because of that character association. One possible exception to this is Aristotle’s reference to Hercules. Here he does not treat the character as a character but, instead, relies on the nature of the character to criticize an error by some poets who believe that

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100 Benardete posits that perhaps Aristotle is confusing two different passages in the Iliad. Benardete, trans., Poetics p. 66-7. But Powell contends that the version of the Iliad which we’ve read wasn’t complied until the 3rd century in Alexandria so Aristotle’s possible confusion here could be result of an anachronistic structuring of Homer. It falls outside of my inquiry here to address it. See Barry Powell, trans. Iliad (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 5-8.
101 Poetics 1461a 16-19.
102 Poetics 1461a 30-31.
103 Poetics 1455b 19-20.
104 Poetics 1457b 20-22.
in order to tell the story of Hercules, they must tell the entire life of Hercules.\textsuperscript{105} In contrast, Aristotle actually praises Homer for how he handles Odysseus and his journey. Homer does not recount all of the events in Odysseus life, but, rather, only those that are tethered to the plot of the epic. To tell the tale of Hercules does not require telling every facet of the life of Hercules; that is more akin to history than poetry.\textsuperscript{106} Gods are bound by the same constraints of poetic storytelling because they are just other characters in the story.

Aristotle does not treat the gods as anything other than mechanisms in the plot or as tools for artistic construction because of the δόξα of the audience. References to them, and to the term θεος, are rare and do not happen until deep within the text.\textsuperscript{107} The gods seem to play, at best, an inconsequential role in poetry and when they do play a role, it must be circumscribed to avoid being harmful to the plot by introducing unnecessary irrationality. Aristotle, however, seemingly holds that it would be best if the poets omitted the gods altogether. Aristotle reduces the role of the gods to an artistic tool which can create a “suspension of disbelief” but their re-introduction into the plot can either cause astonishment\textsuperscript{108} or unravel the story altogether; the danger is they cause “plot holes” and unravel the intelligibility of the plot. The gods of the city, if presented in any other way, diminish the latent power of poetry.

Poets can attribute things to the gods that do not conform to intelligibility, but it is the intelligibility, ultimately, which gives poetry its beauty. For example, if, in Sophocles’ \textit{Oedipus Rex}, after the messenger tells Oedipus about his true identity, Hermes arrived to say the whole thing was a massive prank to punish Oedipus for his arrogance but now everything was remedied

\textsuperscript{105} Poetics 1451a 20-22.
\textsuperscript{106} Poetics 1451b 1-10.
\textsuperscript{107} First use of θεος happens in chapter 15, first reference to a named god is in chapter 17.
\textsuperscript{108} Poetics 1452a 5-10.
because he had learned his lesson, the play would not be a tragedy. Such a story would fail to appropriately arouse and release the tragic emotions because there would be nothing intelligible about the plot; it would not be rational. The gods of the poets, reduced to being mere characters in their stories, are made to account to the rationality of man.

Conclusion

If the gods of the city are to be relegated to the prejudice of the audience, with Aristotle preferring the gods not be present at all in the stories of the poets, what function does poetry serve? Given that its task is to present a self-contained whole which is intelligible from its beginning to its end, presenting people in action, poetry then is an expression of man attempting to understand his plight rationally. The gods can be inserted into stories for poetic purposes but the power of the poet is mimetic; it is a power to reflect on the nature of human beings. There is no mention that this mimetic power is connected to the gods of the city nor that they are essential for poetry to be powerful. Rather, Aristotle speaks with apprehension about the usefulness of the gods in the stories of the poets while presenting mimesis as the γενος of the poetic art, not the divine muse. The best stories are not going to include the gods at all. If art is a reflection of man, and the best kinds of stories do not include the gods at all, we can at least conclude that Aristotle does not see piety as an essential element for telling stories. Even more likely, given that the inclusion of the gods undermines the emotional power of a story, is Aristotle is rejecting the Homeric account of the gods and their inclusion within poetry is merely from the prejudice of the Greek audience.

Because man is, at least with some qualifications, a creature of the city,\textsuperscript{110} stories about his plight are going to transpire in the city; poetry is intrinsically linked to politics. What is left to examine, then, is if poetry serves a political role within the city or if it merely reflects man as he exists in the city. To frame this slightly differently, are the poets useful for the governance of a regime or are do they exist only as empty entertainment? In order to examine that question, it is necessary to turn away from the gods and toward the way the best form of poetry, tragedy,\textsuperscript{111} conveys its power. Aristotle says that tragedy’s power comes through the emotions of fear and pity\textsuperscript{112} so it is to those emotions we turn.

\textsuperscript{110} *Politics* 1253a 1-2, 1278b 20, *NE* 1097b 10-11; see also my chapter four.
\textsuperscript{111} *Poetics* 1462b 9-15.
\textsuperscript{112} *Poetics* 1449b 28.
CHAPTER 2:

ELEOS AS EMPATHY

As established in chapter one, Aristotle considers including the gods in poetry to always be a kind of error. However, their inclusion is an acceptable error given the prejudice of the audience. The stories about the gods, which have endured or come down through tradition, are taken to be true by the audience.\(^1\) Aristotle goes on, however, to note that the stories told by Agathon, for example, do not include any of those traditional names even though his stories are no less moving.\(^2\) Because of this, he draws two conclusions. First, it would be silly to make all stories adhere to the tradition. For even traditional stories are only known to some, not to all, but everyone enjoys the stories even without knowing the traditional tales. Second, a poet should be one that focuses on stories, not on meters or other aspects, because a poet is one who is engaged in mimesis.\(^3\) Poetry, as a mimetic activity, is presenting stories in which we can see ourselves; that, fundamentally, is what makes the work mimetic. By grounding the poet and poetry in the act of mimesis, Aristotle’s inherent argument is that poetry is concerned not with piety but with human psychology.

The task here is to understand Aristotle’s argument about the psychology of the theater and how that psychological effect impacts the life of the city. The two central emotions for

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\(^1\) *Poetics* 1451b 13-16.
\(^2\) *Poetics* 1450b 20-25.
\(^3\) *Poetics* 1451b 25-32.
tragedy, which Aristotle argues is the best form of poetry, are ἔλεός and φόβος but neither are defined in his Poetics. Instead, for an examination of human emotions we must turn to the Rhetoric. However, there is a fundamental problem in seeing the definitions from the Rhetoric as being fully harmonious with how the terms are used in the Poetics. The clearest example of this problem is in the relationship between ἔλεός and φόβος. In the Rhetoric, too much φόβος neutralizes ἔλεός. In the Poetics, both ἔλεός and φόβος are essential for the poetic experience of catharsis. In essence, in the Poetics, Aristotle seemingly abandons φόβος as an intense pain at anticipated harm for oneself and turns φόβος into a facet of ἔλεός, specifically the anticipation of harm befalling someone else. In so doing, φόβος cannot negate ἔλεός because φόβος is essential for arousing ἔλεός.

Our ability to have ἔλεός for the fall of the hero depends on us seeing the hero as someone who is like us, someone who is generally decent but not outstanding in judgment, and

4 Poetics 1449b 27-28.
6 Skulsky goes as far as arguing the two should not be read together because dramatic fear and pity are a category unto themselves. While the definitions in the Rhetoric do seem to conflict with the ones presented in the Poetics, the difference in the audiences is not sufficient to conclude one should take one text into consideration while reading the other. Rather, it seems that Aristotle places ἔλεός at the heart of the dramatic experience so fear must now be understood as a reflective emotion instead of an idiosyncratic one; we are feeling fear for what could happen to someone else who is like us even if we are not actually afraid such a calamity could happen to us, at least not within the confines of the theater. See Harold Skulsky, “Aristotle’s Poetics Revisited,” Journal of the History of Ideas 19.2 (April, 1958), 147-160. As counter, particularly with regard to the pleasurable nature of the dramatic emotions, see Jonathan Lear, “Katharsis,” Phronesis 33 (1988), 314-16; 321; Stephen Halliwell, Aristotle’s Poetics (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 62-81.
7 Rhetoric 1385b 30 – 86a 5.
8 Poetics 1449b 20-25.
9 Poetics 1449b 22-23; “for empathy deals with someone suffering undeserved misfortune, while fear is concerned with someone being like us...” See also David Konstan, “The Tragic Emotions,” Comparative Drama 33.1 (Spring, 1999) 1-3; Marleen Sokolon, Political Emotions: Aristotle and the Symphony of Reason and Emotion (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2006), 143. Nehamas account asserts that fear is still generated but only in an indirect way. Because a character is like me, I fear for myself if I were in a similar situation. But this does not address the problem that fear is painful so either the fear must be a mere abstraction that I cannot think will soon befall me or it is not fear for myself in the given circumstance. See Alexander Nehamas, ed. Aristotle’s “Rhetoric”: Philosophical Essays (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) 269-72.
understanding why the hero’s ruin was caused by their mistaken judgment. However, the arousal of ἔλεος is itself a judgment of moral dessert relative to someone’s actions. Because of these interlaced facets, this chapter will argue that the city is provided a kind of education via tragedy through these interlaced facets. This education is not the same as the one provided to gentlemen but is one provided to the vulgar. By arousing ἔλεος for a specific kind of character who falls into ruin, the audience’s judgment on moral dessert is refined. The vulgar are not made virtuous by tragedy but their capacity to empathize for the right kind of character for the right reason is given a kind of education through the tragic experience. In order to make this argument, this chapter is divided into three sections. The first looks, briefly, at how Aristotle understood the emotions relative to the soul. The second explores the standard translation for ἔλεος in order to provide a new definition for ἔλεος. The third portion turns to the question of how ἔλεος is connected to the life of the city by examining the relationship between ἔλεος, decency (ἐπείκεια), and erroneous judgment (ἀμαρτία).

Παθός and λόγος

In order to construct a definition for ἔλεος, it is necessary to examine Aristotle’s understanding of the soul, specifically the relationship between the passions and reason. Without this connection, it is unclear why grounding poetry in human psychology would necessarily impact the life of the city. The task here is not to examine the philosophic meaning of technical terms attached to Aristotle’s psychology.\textsuperscript{10} Rather, it is to examine how the human soul, 

\textsuperscript{10} Falling out of the scope here, Sach’s notes in his translation provide useful context for these terms. Joe Sachs, trans., \textit{Aristotle’s On the Soul and On Memory and Recollection} (Sante Fe, NM: Green Lion Press, 2004), p. 189, 199, 201.
possessing the generative, reproductive, and sensory capacity of animals, also contains a rational capacity (δυναμις)\(^{11}\) and why we, unlike the other animals,\(^{12}\) have the capacity to engage beyond the simple stimuli of pain and pleasure. This, however, does not mean that our reason has the capacity to eradicate pain and pleasure from our existence nor that our lives, even in their best form, will not depend upon navigating pain and pleasure stimuli.\(^{13}\) The lower facets of the soul coexist with the higher facets as a present capacity or power; a soul with reason still maintains the desire of the nutritive soul but is not limited only to that desire.\(^{14}\) Instead, our rational capacity allows us to navigate that landscape by distinguishing the nature of various stimuli,\(^{15}\) debating the appropriate response to the stimuli, and, as a consequence of that debate, develop an understanding of the good human life.

The first thing to examine is the relationship between reason and speech. Creating sounds to communicate is not unique to human beings\(^{16}\) nor is having desires or imagination.\(^{17}\) What distinguishes human beings is our capacity to think through our desires, imaginations,

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\(^{11}\) Haskins argues that dunamis should be understood as a means to an end without a political or ethical constraint. She contends that Aristotle is dividing the art of rhetoric from the art of politics. However, Arnhart contends that the power or capacity of rhetoric is only viable if we understand rhetoric as a means of political or ethical dialogue. While Aristotle does criticize those who see rhetoric and politics as the same kind of science, cleaving the one from the other would also be an error. The emotions and our desires are not separate from our political existence so the means by which we persuade one another using our emotions and desires are inherently political. See Ekaterina Haskins, “On the term ‘Dunamis’ in Aristotle’s Definition of Rhetoric,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 46.2 (2013), p. 234-40 and Larry Arnhart, *Aristotle on Political Reasoning* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1981), p. 40-1, 55-7, 75.\(^{11}\)

\(^{12}\) Aristotle does hold that other animals are able to have imaginations and desires because they can feel pain and pleasure. See *On the Soul* 413b 22-24, 414b 1-3.\(^{12}\)

\(^{13}\) See Marta Jimenez, “Aristotle on ‘Steering the Young by Pleasure and Pain,’” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 29.2 (2015) 137-64.\(^{13}\)


\(^{15}\) On the Soul 426b 12-23, 429b 14-21, 431a 20-22, 432a 30-31) See also Sachs, trans., *On the Soul*, p. 12-16.\(^{15}\)


\(^{17}\) On the Soul 411b 28-30.\(^{17}\)
perceptions, etc.\textsuperscript{18} Human speech is aimed at debating the nature of those phenomena because the ability to think through (διανοια) various stimuli is the foundation of our reason. While our reason is also not limited to only debating or thinking through, these are the primary ways human beings use reason.\textsuperscript{19} Our speech, which is expressing these facets of reason, presents what we have thought through regarding how a pleasant or painful phenomenon is good or bad. This means that the purpose of our speech is to debate whether something is harmful or beneficial, good or bad, just or unjust; man’s life is defined by using reason to engage in these kinds of debates.

Our speech is a consequence of us thinking through the various stimuli, and corresponding responses to that stimuli, in our lives. Our reason is a capacity of the soul which also directs the actions of that soul, at both the individual and communal level, therefore making it the defining element connecting our psychology and politics. However, this certainly does not mean that our reasoning is always correct. Aristotle is clear about this since, “…even when the intellect enjoins and the reasoning part declares that something is to be fled or pursued one does not necessarily move, but acts instead in accordance with desire, as does one without self-restraint.”\textsuperscript{20} Two things are apparent from Aristotle’s claim. Our reason can be overridden by our desires and our reason gives us the capacity, in turn, to override our desires.\textsuperscript{21} We are not fixed, as are the other animals, to be the playthings of our desires.

\textsuperscript{18} On the Soul 410b 20-25. For how this contrasts with other animals and its relationship to μιμησις, see Malcolm Heath, “Cognition in Aristotle’s ‘Poetics’”, Mnemosyne 62.1 (2009), 51-75.
\textsuperscript{19} We also have the capacity to engage in contemplation which, unlike thinking through or debate, is an activity which transcends most humans most of the time. The distinction between these various facets of reason have been debated at least since Thomas Aquinas and would require their own examination. For one brief examination which lays out the various contending claims, see Sachs, trans., On the Soul, p. 29-38.
\textsuperscript{20} Sachs, trans., On the Soul 433a 1-5.
Instead, our reason is capable of prioritizing various desires and then deciding a course of action. We even have the capacity to disregard the commands of reason, knowingly following our desires in opposition to our deliberation. One clear example of the dynamic between reason and desire is from his discussion of choice. Aristotle argues:

since what is chosen is a certain longing, marked by deliberation, for something that is up to us, choice would in fact be a deliberative longing for things that are up to us. For in deciding something on the basis of having deliberated about it, we long for it in accord with our deliberation.

Choice clearly illustrates the relationship between our desires (ορηχις) and our reason. Our choices are a consequence of us weighing various options and deciding which of them is the best option. Once this deliberative step is finished, our desire motivates us to produce that outcome. Our choices depend on reason but are driven by our desire to see that choice enacted. Therefore, while choosing is a consequence of our deliberation, the action which results from that deliberation is from our desire. Man, therefore, is a creature that is defined by reason but our non-rational capacities play a role in our rational activities.

In order to better understand this dynamic, it is beneficial to turn to the end of Book One of the *Nicomachean Ethics* where Aristotle distinguishes between the rational and irrational

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23 He comments on the importance of choice for poetry at 1450a21-22 highlighting its connection to character. See also *NE* 1102b5-8, 1111b4-10.


components of the soul, arguing that the human virtues, both moral and intellectual, mirror this distinction. The irrational part of the soul is divided into two pieces: the vegetative which “does not naturally share in human virtue” and the desiring part which is only rational enough to follow the dictates of reason. The rational facet of the soul is also twofold since there is reason in the authoritative or commanding sense and reason in the ability to listen to that authoritative sense. He then argues that “virtue too is defined in accord with this distinction, for we say that some of the virtues are intellectual, others moral...For in speaking about someone’s character, we do not say that he is wise or comprehending but that he is gentle or moderate.” In a sense, habituating our character depends on the interplay between the higher tier of the non-rational soul (the part which can be commanded) and the lower tier of the rational soul (the part which can listen to the commands of reason).

Having established this bifurcation of the soul between rational and nonrational, it is still unclear where the passions reside. Given that desire is necessary for deliberation, and can be persuaded by reason, we can place desire within the part of the non-rational soul which can follow the commands of reason. But, are the passions more akin to desire or feeling sensations? The lowest part of our soul, the one that engages in mere sensation, is not open to the commands of reason. One feels exhaustion or hunger or heat without any reliance on reason. If our passions were to exist within this part of the soul, then anger would be the same as hunger. But Aristotle, in the *Rhetoric*, argues that, "the passions are all those sources of change on account of

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28 NE 1102b 30.
29 NE 1103a 1-3.
30 Bartlett and Collins, trans., NE 1103a 4-8.
31 NE 1113a 26-30.
which people differ in their judgments that are accompanied by pain and pleasure; examples are anger, pity, fear, and everything else of that sort, as well as their opposites.”\textsuperscript{32} The passions depend upon our judgment as well as our sensation. One cannot be persuaded to feel ice as hot; it is a sensory perception which is not dependent on judgment. One can be persuaded to feel anger at a slight; anger is both a judgment and a sensation. As Fortenbaugh notes, while human emotion may exist within the non-rational portion of the soul, “emotion, that is say the alogical behavior of human beings, involves judgment and therefore is open to reasoned persuasion and properly classified among cognitive phenomena.”\textsuperscript{33} While Fortenbaugh’s conclusion is too reductive because it includes all alogical behavior instead of just the behavior in the higher tier of the non-rational bifurcation, his definition still has utility. The passions depend upon our judgment and therefore must be understood as a kind of cognitive activity paralleling the interactive part of our soul, which can follow or listen to the commands of reason.\textsuperscript{34}

However, like so many things in Aristotle, this assessment comes with caveats. For example, during his discussion on self-love, Aristotle asserts that the one who loves themselves is “especially that person who is fond of and gratifies this authoritative part” going on to argue that, “It is not unclear, then, that each person is this [rational] part, or is this above all, and that the decent person is fond of this especially.”\textsuperscript{35} This is not the appropriate place to discuss self-love\textsuperscript{36} except to highlight the relationship between reason and the passions. The person who

\textsuperscript{33} Fortenbaugh, \textit{Aristotle On Emotion}, p. 30.
\textsuperscript{35} Bartlett and Collins, trans., \textit{NE} 1168b 32 – 69a 3.
loves the authoritative part of their reason loves themselves most of all; self-love is not self-gratification but self-regulation. To clarify this distinction on the nature of self-love, Aristotle argues as follows: “In fact it differs as much from this latter form as living in accord with reason differs from living in accord with passion, as much as longing for what is noble differs from longing for what is held to be advantageous.”37 Living according to reason is akin to desiring what is noble, just as living according to the passions is akin to desiring what is advantageous, (here, advantageous is a short cut for what is pleasant).38 The passions, coming from the lower facet of our nature, desire those things more akin to animals than to man. Reason and passion are set at odds here, which seems to undermine the claim that the passions depend upon reason.

Indeed, it seems as though Aristotle sees the passions as detrimental to reason. As Smith highlights, perhaps this is because the worst of the passions is appetite since man’s appetites know no bounds.39 But even the discussion about how shameful it is to succumb to desire, as opposed to spiritedness (θυμος) is rife with tensions because “spiritedness follows reason in a way, but desire does not. Desire, then, is more shameful.”40 Deliberation requires the use of desire to motivate action. Desire itself cannot be what is shameful. Aristotle argues as much when he distinguishes between those desires that are shared with beasts and those unique to human beings.41 This distinction depends upon reason; beasts are not morally responsible for their desire because they lack the capacity to direct it. When our reason is corrupted to facilitate

37 Bartlett and Collins, trans., NE 1169a 4-5.
38 The relationship between reason and what is noble is also more tenuous than this but cannot be explicated more here. For further exploration, see Audrey L. Anton, “The Harmony of To Kalon and the Dissonance of to Kakon in Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics,” found in Heather L. Reid, Tony Leyh, ed., Looking at the Beauty (to Kalon) in Western Greece (Parnassos Press, 2019) 203-18.
40 Bartlett and Collins, trans., NE 1149a 35-37.
41 NE 1150a 1-6.
merely seeking what is advantageous, our life becomes the vicious form of self-love. The seeming tension here can be resolved by understanding that desire is an essential component of human activity but it cannot ever be the end of that activity. The relationship between reason and the passions, therefore, is one of interdependence predicated on the power of reason to persuade the passions and the power of the passions to motivate a person to act according to that persuaded passion.

From this, it is possible to conclude that deliberation, which is a weighing of different arguments relative to action, depends upon the capacity of our reason to persuade our passions to react correctly to given stimuli. We can deliberate about how best to act, and therefore how best to live, because our passions can be persuaded. It is only because the passions are fundamentally part of reason that they are different from mere sensations and why we can debate about the reasonableness of a choice. If choice were fully independent of reason, there would be no reason to debate the reasonableness of a choice and, thus, deliberation is a kind of persuasion of the passions. The art of persuasion, or rhetoric, is only emotionally powerful because the emotions can be directed by persuasion or deliberative reasoning. The capacity for deliberative reasoning, the ability to debate about the moral worth of actions and to compel people to act accordingly, is what makes political life possible. This means that, through the rational portion of our soul, the life of the city rests directly upon the passions. How one uses the passions to direct politics through persuasion becomes a central concern for one governing a city and that is why the lawgiver must be concerned with poetry. We see characters who are acting according to their reasoning, including the mistaken reasoning which ultimately destroys the protagonist. The

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43 *Politics* 1253a 12-18.
primary emotions of tragedy depend upon two things: the protagonist’s mistaken judgment and the undeserved suffering which follows. However, before turning to this interlaced relationship, it is first necessary to examine the operative emotion for a tragedy, ἔλεος.

Defining and redefining ἔλεος

Before examining Aristotle’s definition of ἔλεος, it is worthwhile first to note the overwhelmingly popular way of translating ἔλεος as pity. The issue with this translation is the range of emotions pity conveys in English. An example of this comes from how translators have handled two of Sophocles’ tragedies, Ajax and Philoctetes. The purpose here is not to criticize the choices made by a specific translator but, rather, to show the plasticity of the term pity. In the Ajax, John Moore uses the term pity or pitiable four times. The first use of pity is worth looking at specifically because it establishes the tone for the rest of the play. Odysseus, upon seeing the crazed state of Ajax, laments to Athena, “Yet I pity / His wretchedness, though he is my enemy, / For the terrible yoke of blindness that is on him. / I think of him, yet also of myself; / For I see the true state of all us that live- / We are dim shapes, no more, and weightless shadow. Pity translates ἐποικτίρω, a verb which could just as easily be translated as sympathy. Sympathy (συμπάσκω) means to experience with or to suffer alongside someone else, which is the emotion Odysseus is expressing. Odysseus sees himself as Ajax in that both men are mere shapes and shadows. Odysseus is lamenting the fate of Ajax but also his own fate. Pity here is conveying an
emotion we utilize when saying we share in the same condition as someone else. While Aristotle’s definition of ἔλεός states that we must be able to see ourselves in the person suffering, we must not be so close or alike the sufferer that we are sharing in the suffering. Pity as both ἐποικίρω and ἔλεός would be viable if not for this limitation. The continuing question is what facet of this emotional experience is primary: is it merely seeing the suffering, having pain at seeing another suffer, or is it a suffering the same pain with someone else?

The other three uses of pity in the Ajax provide a muddled answer. At line 655, Moore translates οἶκτον, a noun meaning lamentation or lamentable wailing, as pity. Here the emphasis is placed on the suffering; Ajax’s condition, which is causing him to lament and wail, makes him worthy of pity. At line 1170, Moore translates δυστήνου, an adjective meaning wretched, miserable, unfortunate, as pitiable. Ajax’s condition is worthy of pity because of his pain; his condition is one which is lamentable, therefore it is pitiable. The final example is of Agamemnon chastising Odysseus for not dishonoring the now-dead Ajax. Agamemnon asks Odysseus “Do you intend pity to a corpse you hate?” Pity is the translation of χάριν, a noun meaning grace, goodwill, or favor. This indicates that Odysseus is being gracious to a former enemy because of that enemy’s condition. Agamemnon does not see Ajax’s condition as worthy of such grace, in this case giving Ajax a dignified burial. Utilizing pity here to reference Ajax’s lamentable condition, both before and after he died, displays how pity can be an act of grace and not just pain at the suffering of another. Therefore, from the utilizations in this text, pity incapsulates an

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47 Rhetoric 1385b 13-16.
emotional range extending from feeling the pain of someone who is like you to being pained at hearing someone wailing in lamentation to an act of grace for a lamentable fate.49

In the Philoctetes, a tragedy seemingly centered on the emotion of ἔλεός, David Grene uses the term, or its derivation, seventeen times.50 Instead of examining every utilization of the term in the translation, it is sufficient to note that Grene is translating one of three terms: oiktíρω, δύστανος, or ἐλεέω. Of the seventeen uses, ten are derivations of oiktíρω, two are of δύστανος, and five are of ἐλεέω. Grene also translates a derivation of oiktíρω as compassion twice. The first two terms also appear in the Ajax and their broader meaning has already been established. The third term, ἐλεέω, is a verb describing the pain one feels at the suffering of another. The first and second terms, oiktíρω and δύστανος, while used outside the theater,51 are used more by the tragedians and comedians.52 This verb ἐλεέω and its derivations are the only terms used by Aristotle in the Poetics, Rhetoric, Politics, or Nicomachean Ethics. If pity can translate all three terms, and yet two of those terms do not exist within these texts, is pity the best word for translating ἔλεός? Perhaps in the one sense, yes, because all three are speaking to the painful experience of seeing someone else suffer. And yet, in a more profound sense, no, because Aristotle defines ἔλεός as being not only a painful experience but also a judgment drawn from a proper understanding of moral desert and mercy. It is beneficial to utilize a different English

49 See Edward B. Stevens, “Some Attic Commonplaces of Pity,” American Journal of Philology 65.1 (1944), p. 1-25 for even more possible uses of pity in Athens. His assessment, while not questioning the use of pity to translate ἔλεός implicitly highlights the plasticity of pity to describe political behaviors.
51 For example, Xenophon uses it approximately eleven times across six works (Cyropædia 5.4, 7.1, 7.2; Anabasis 1.4, 3.1, 7.2; Hiero 4; Apology 18; Economics 2, 7; Symposium 4) and Plato uses it twice (Laws 653d, Euthyphro 288d).
52 ἐλεέω, was used the least among the tragedians and comedians, though Homer uses it the most of the three; Homer utilizes the term or its derivation at least 84 times in the Iliad and the Odyssey. He uses δύστανος at least 22 times and oiktíρω 5 times.
word because of this ambiguity. My argument is that the term *empathy* is better aligned with how Aristotle defines and uses ἔλεος.

In the *Rhetoric*, in customary fashion, Aristotle defines ἔλεος and then provides a discussion which, at times, seems to contradict that initial definition. He defines ἔλεος as “a certain pain at an apparent evil of a destructive or painful sort, when it strikes someone who does not deserve it, an evil which one might expect to suffer oneself, or that someone close to one might, and all this when it appears near at hand.”53 This definition has six facets: (1) ἔλεος is painful, (2) the cause of the pain is destruction or ruin, (3) the suffering is unwarranted, (4) one can expect to suffer in a similar way if the same ruin happened to you, (5) it could happen to a friend, (6) it is not too far in the past or future. It is useful to explore this definition one facet at a time because Aristotle does not seem to preserve the same definition after he has discussed the composite parts. Rather, as he refines each part, the definition becomes both more narrowed, for example in facet four, and more ambiguous, for example in facet one. His discussion of ἔλεος as a kind of pain also moves into the condition, or mindset, of those who feel ἔλεος and the phenomena which arouse it. Since this conditional element concerns multiple facets of his definition, it must also be addressed after examining the kinds of phenomena which arouse ἔλεος.

Based on the initial definition, it would seem that merely showing someone in pain is not enough to arouse ἔλεος. However, Aristotle then goes on to claim that “all painful and distressing things that bring destruction are [ἔλεεινά], and all that bring any sort of ruin, and all evils of any magnitude for which chance is responsible.”54 He then lays out more specific

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54 Ibid, p. 208, 1386a 8-10.
examples of the various things which can arouse ἔλεος including death, distance from loved ones, and destruction from something which should have brought joy. From this discussion it would seem that, counter to the definition, merely seeing another suffer is enough to arouse the pain of ἔλεος. Here, it is worth reiterating that ἔλεος is a painful emotion. It is aroused, at least in political oratory, to motivate action to relieve such pain. But, given the prior discussion about the emotions, we know that ἔλεος cannot only be a simple sensation like heat or hunger. Rather, it must also require a certain kind of psychological state to be an emotion.

If parts one and two of Aristotle’s definition of ἔλεος deal with the sensory nature of the emotion, the other four facets deal with the psychological condition of ἔλεος. The first of these, the unwarranted nature of the suffering or ruin, will be addressed after the other three facets. This is because facets four through six outline the character and condition of those we see as warranting ἔλεος. Therefore, it is necessary to look first at what parameters define our judgment before examining the nature of that judgment itself. With facet four, the self-referential nature of ἔλεος, Aristotle outlines that there are certain kinds of people who will not feel ἔλεος.

Specifically, there are two kinds: the already ruined and the insolently blessed. He argues

people who have been completely ruined feel no pity (for they do not believe they can suffer anything more, since they have already suffered it), and neither do people who consider themselves to be at the pinnacle of happiness – they are insolent instead, for if they believe they are already in possession of all good things, this clearly includes an inability to suffer any evil, which is one of the good things.

Those who see themselves as already ruined will not be moved by the ruin of others; they lack the distance from their own suffering to empathize with another. This tells us that the capacity to

55 Lord argues we should see ἔλεος as part of a larger range of emotions connected to θυμος and understand these as painful emotions. See Carnes Lord, Education and Culture in the Political Thought of Aristotle (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 160-62.
feel ἔλεός requires a distance from our own suffering. But if that distance is too great, believing that we are beyond the boundaries of suffering or that no suffering can come to us, we also are immune to ἔλεός. Therefore, there is a spectrum where ἔλεός occupies the mean between already ruined and the insolently blessed. Both the ruined and the insolently blessed are experiencing emotional extremes which negate their ability to properly feel ἔλεός.⁵⁷

Since ἔλεός is a kind of mean between extremes it is beneficial to understand the kind of person who exists at this mean. Aristotle says that people who have already endured suffering such as the elderly because of their “judgment and experience”, the weak, those who have family members, those who aren’t overwhelmed by some other emotion, and the educated “since their reasoning is best” are capable of feeling ἔλεός.⁵⁸ This wide-ranging category includes both the fourth and fifth element of his definition (we must believe someone else’s suffering could happen to us, someone similar to us, or a loved one). The element which binds this category together is not the ability to see someone in distress, but, rather, judge that their plight could also be yours. In order to feel ἔλεός, we must assume that those afflicted by these evils are similar enough to us that we believe that their condition could be our condition.⁵⁹

Before moving further into Aristotle’s definition, it is worth noting that this self-referential component is further reason why pity is an inadequate translation for ἔλεός. Aristotle clearly identifies the weak (and the cowardly) as those who can feel ἔλεός. If the weak and cowardly have the capacity to feel ἔλεός, we must presume this means they are not in such a wretched condition that they are immune to such feelings. Beyond this, Aristotle simply states

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⁵⁸ Rhetoric 1385a 25-30.
that “the most pitiful of all [is] when those who are in such a critical condition are people of
serious stature.” If the condition which elicits the most ἔλεος is watching someone who is
serious (σπουδιας) suffer, and a person who is weak or cowardly can feel ἔλεος in that instance,
then Kaufman’s assertion that pity, “has the connotation of feeling sorry for someone, of looking
down rather than up. We do not ‘pity’ those we greatly admire, much less those to whom we
look up in awe,” is useful. If the weak can have ἔλεος for those who are in an elevated position,
ἔλεος cannot be a downward looking emotion. In contrast to pity, Kaufmann presents the
possibility that sympathy could be a viable alternative. While sympathy does harken to the
notion that an audience is being moved by the emotion of the character, sympathy is too intimate.
Aristotle makes this clear in his distinction that, “they have pity on those who are known to
them, unless they are exceedingly close to their own household. About the latter, they are in the
same condition as when those things are about to happen to themselves…” If we suffer with
someone else as they suffer, and are not merely pained by their suffering, we actually will
neutralize ἔλεος.

Aristotle’s example, recounted also in Herodotus, of why Amasis cried for his friend
but not for his son, since the latter was not as intimately connected to him as the former, shows
the boundary of being horrified and feeling ἔλεος. Amasis’ son was in a horrifying condition,
which his father was sharing; his father was not taking pity on the plight of his son. Another
example, while not spoken of by Aristotle but is recounted in Herodotus, is of the poet

62 He ultimately dismisses sympathy, instead advocating for the more archaic ruth. While ruth, drawing from the
same root as rue, does speak to this condition, it tends to also overshoot the intensity of the emotional reaction.
64 Herodotus’ History 3.14.
Phrynichus. Herodotus tells us that Phrynichus presented his play, *The Capture of Miletus*, to an Athenian audience still lamenting their humiliation. Herodotus tells us, “when Phrynichus produced his play…the whole audience at the theater burst into tears and fined Phrynichus a thousand drachmas for reminding them of a calamity that was their very own; they also forbade any future productions of the play.” The audience reaction here shows us the limit of self-referential pain. We can be pained at the suffering for another, even lament at their plight, but if we share too intimately with the suffering, we will not have ἔλεος for the suffering of another. Aristotle argues, “What is horrifying is a different thing from something pitiful; it drives out pity and is often felt as its opposite, since people no longer feel pity when the horrifying thing is near them.” ἔλεος does not cause us to feel the pain of the person suffering nor can it be sharing in the suffering of someone else. ἔλεος, to summarize and clarify points four and five, must be a kind of pain-at-a-distance for someone who is suffering who is similar to you in certain regards but not so similar as to cause you to suffer their same pain.

The Phrynichus example also highlights the sixth facet of the definition, that the destruction or ruin must be close at hand. Aristotle says that, “putting [the suffering] before the eyes as either imminent or recent, and things that have just happened or are just about to happen are more pitiful from the shortness of time.” Phrynichus made the mistake of reminding people of their own suffering too quickly; the proximate cause of their suffering had not receded from their minds enough. Attempting to arouse ἔλεος for an event too long past or too far into the future is not effective because the pain is not intense enough, just as arousing recent pain too

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quickly breaks the barrier from ἐλεός into horror (δεινός). This requires correct judgment from the rhetorician in order to properly arouse ἐλεός in the audience. This aligns with Aristotle’s assertion that rhetoric is ultimately about judgment,69 in this instance both the judgment of the audience and of the rhetorician. While Phrynichus was a poet and not a rhetorician, his example shows that both the rhetorician and the poet are time-bound in their ability to arouse ἐλεός. The rhetorician can only arouse ἐλεός if the harm is at hand and the poet arouses ἐλεός by showing impending, or even experiencing, ruin. So even while Aristotle argues that the rhetorician and the poet should approach language differently,70 this constraint of making people see suffering immediately in front of them holds true in both instances. Ἐλεός can be effectively aroused only when another’s suffering is recent or happening concurrently, and their suffering cannot arouse within us a sense of horror for our own suffering.

This time-bound nature of ἐλεός then points us back to the third facet of Aristotle’s definition, that the suffering we see is unwarranted. Because we are bad judges in our own case, we believe that we, and those like us, deserve more benefit than we actually do and less pain than we may actually warrant whereas the opposite is true for our enemies.71 Since ἐλεός contains a self-reflective response to the suffering of another, we have to imagine if we were in the same scenario, we would not deserve such a fate. A person will not receive ἐλεός if we believe their evil is justified. As Aristotle argues, “no honest person...would be pained when those who commit patricide or other bloody murders meet with punishment, since one ought to rejoice at such things, the same way one would when people do well in accord with what they deserve.”72

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69 Rhetoric 1377b21.
70 Rhetoric 1404a 20-5b30.
71 Rhetoric 1377b 30-78a 4.
72 Rhetoric 1386b 29-32.
If someone has done something worthy of ruin, we will not empathize with their plight for we do not feel that we have done things worthy of ruin. Instead, the appropriate response is to be glad in a person obtaining what they deserve. This qualification means that ἔλεος is tethered to our ability to attach moral deserts appropriately. ἔλεος then is an emotion and a judgment, both of which require the correct kind of disposition; one must be in the correct psychological state in order to feel ἔλεος and to evaluate the worthiness of another’s suffering.

Out of this brief exploration, it is now possible to begin a reconstructing Aristotle’s definition in order to create a clarified definition of ἔλεος. To begin, empathy (ἔλεος) is a painful experience caused by the lamentable condition of someone who is morally like us but whose suffering happens at a certain distance, both in terms of personal intimacy and in time, and it can only be aroused when someone else’s suffering is made visible and relevant to a given audience. However, even after reconstructing this clarification, it is important to note how empathy relates to the life of the city. It is possible to address that relationship by asking to what degree does Aristotle mean “like us”? In order to feel empathy for someone else’s suffering, Aristotle argues that we must see that person as decent (ἐπιείκεια) and that, “to feel empathy, one needs to believe there are some decent people, since one who believes there are none will think everyone is deserving of evil.” In this sense, like us means to be someone who is decent. In the Poetics, Aristotle describes the kind of person who will arouse our empathy as not being neither better nor worse than we are. Instead, they must be similar to us in moral standing. What is not clear here is if “like us” must mean merely be a human, which means we would have ἔλεος for the

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75 Poetics 1452b 30- 53a 10.
species, or must the similarities be more intimately related to the city or the private life. This will be addressed more fully in chapter four but it worth raising the relationship between ἕλεός and ἐπιείκεια here because it interweaves facets three, four, and five of Aristotle’s definition into a single idea – we empathize with those who are morally similar to us. Functionally, empathy does not work without decency and neither does tragedy.

ἐπιείκεια, ἕλεός, and ἁμαρτία

The term ἐπιείκεια is used to describe the capacity to evaluate moral desert in reference to the law in both the Rhetoric and the Nicomachean Ethics. A fuller exploration of this facet of ἐπιείκεια will come in chapter four, so this exploration will be limited to understanding the relationship between ἐπιείκεια and empathy. One way in which to do this is through the notion of a bad judgment or mistake (ἁμαρτία). This section will first explore the seeming contradiction in Aristotle’s use of ἐπιείκεια in the Poetics, and then examine how ἁμαρτία, ἐπιείκεια, and empathy are intertwined. I will argue that there is no contradiction in Aristotle’s use of ἐπιείκεια and because there is no contradiction, the audiences of tragedy must understand themselves as being ἐπιείκεια. Because of this self-understanding, when the hero falls from their mistaken judgment, our decency arouses our empathy allowing us to experience the pleasure of tragedy. Without this nestled set of psychological structures acting interdependently, tragedy would not be powerful. Even beyond this, however, it is because of this interconnected psychological web that tragedy also has a political function which, in this case, is helping to establish the correct kind of reaction to a mistaken judgment.

76 Rhetoric 1374b 5-22; NE 1137b5-1138a.
Turning first to the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle’s definition highlights how ἐπιείκεια is both a kind of activity and a characteristic, so when translating ἐπιείκεια we often need two terms, one to describe the action and the other the characteristic. Since ἐπιείκεια is often translated as equity when describing the action and *decent, fair, or reasonable* for describing the characteristic, for this exploration both *equity* and *decent* will be used. This is intended to highlight the reciprocal dynamic between both facets of ἐπιείκεια; in order to be decent, one will be equitable and being equitable shows one’s decency. Aristotle argues,

> it is clear what sorts of things are and are not decent, and what sorts of people are not decent, because when there are things for which one ought to make allowances, that is the decent thing to do, and not to consider mistakes and injustices worthy of the same punishment, or even mistakes and misfortunes.\(^77\)

From this we can see that equity compels us to evaluate the moral desert of a person and their plight. It requires that we do not treat those who deserve their fate in the same way as those who do not deserve it. Acting equitably means that we evaluate the specific circumstances in a situation and discern if someone is worthy of their fate. Equity is a kind of evaluation and the decent person is the one who evaluates correctly. The decent person is the one who appropriately shows mercy when evaluating claims of moral dessert by distinguishing between misfortunes, mistakes, and injustices.

Equity requires that we evaluate whether a particular situation is the result of misfortune, a mistake, or of injustice. Aristotle defines a misfortune as unpredictable and not connected to the character of the actor, mistakes are predictable and not connected to the character of the actor, and injustice are predictable and connected to the character of the actor.\(^78\) Injustice is the consequence of a deliberate act which is drawn from a vicious person. If one acts unjustly and is


\(^78\) *Rhetoric* 1374b 9-10.
punished accordingly, a decent person will not be swayed by the pleas of an unjust person. But if someone suffers a misfortune, the decent person will be moved since the situation is due to chance and not related to the goodness of the actor. If someone, while suffering a heart-attack, falls into someone else and injures that person, we are not going to condemn them. Rather, the assault was unintentional and the result of a misfortune.

What of a situation where the actor acts intentionally but is wrong in their judgment? An error in judgment is categorically different than intentionally harming someone else. In evaluating someone who has harmed another through a mistake instead of intention, the decent person would act equitably and not hold that person to the same moral standard as one who intentionally acts viciously. Aristotle asserts, “It is a decent thing to make allowances for human failings…” and that we should “consider not the sort of person someone is at a moment but the sort of person someone always was and is for the most part.”\textsuperscript{79} The decent person considers more than any singular act at any specific time and, if warranted, is gracious toward human fallibility. A decent person is marked by this ability to allow for human fallibility, to take into consideration the general nature of a person, and to discern the moral dessert appropriate to the intention behind an act. Take, for example, when someone kills someone else. A soldier, Achilles, killing another soldier, Hector, is not a morally reprehensible activity. If a civilian kills a civilian, intention becomes paramount. Did the civilian act in self-defense and, in the ensuing conflict, inadvertently kill their assailant? Did the civilian act in anger accidentally killing the other civilian in their rage? Did the civilian calculate and intentionally execute the other civilian? The decent person is going to evaluate these claims not based on the impact (the killing) but, rather, the intention behind the actor. Moral dessert is dependent upon intention, and, as Aristotle

\textsuperscript{79} Sachs, trans., \textit{Aristotle's Rhetoric} 1374b 11-14, p. 181.
argues, this ability to distinguish between forgivable and non-forgivable actions is necessary to the fair administration of the law.  

What should follow in Aristotle’s discussion of the decent person in the Poetics is that such a person coming to ruin will arouse our empathy and, therefore, is the best kind of character for a tragedy. However, this is not the case. Instead, there are two passages in the Poetics which seem to conflict on this account. In the first, in chapter thirteen, he says that it is not the decent person falling into misfortune that arouses empathy but, rather, a person who is neither abounding in virtue or vice. The ideal person would then be of average moral capacity or a morally middling sort, which is an odd claim to make about the great heroes. In second instance, in chapter fifteen, Aristotle reaffirms his assertion that tragedy deals with people who are better in some regard than the regular audience member, but they are not without flaws. It is because of these flaws that the poet should “make them be decent…as Homer made Achilles good and also a paradigm of harshness.” So, which kind of person will arouse our empathy the best: the morally mediocre individual or the decent individual with character flaws? If empathy is aroused by those who are like us, what we identity as “like us” indicates our ability to evaluate our own moral standing. If the morally middling sort is the ideal hero for tragedy, then we see ourselves as morally middling. If the flawed but decent person is the hero, we then see ourselves as flawed but decent. Because of this, working out this contradiction reinforces the importance of decency, not just for poetry, but also for the political function poetry serves in the city.

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80 NE 1137b5-30.
81 Poetics 1452b 30 – 53a 10.
82 Poetics 1454b 10-15.
83 Poetics 1454b 14-15.
To begin working out this contradiction, it is worth examining the passage from chapter thirteen in some detail because Aristotle does not just take into consideration the decent person but also multiple other kinds of characters who may or may not arouse our empathy. He first claims that since poetry works by imitating things that arouse empathy and fear, “first, it is clear that decent men should not be displayed moving from good to bad fortune (since this is neither horrifying nor empathizable but foul).” In contrast to our expectations, Aristotle holds that watching a decent man fall from good fortune to bad is not tragic but vile (μιαρόν). This is reinforced when Aristotle claims that, “people of wicked character should not move from bad to good fortune for this is the most untragic of all. This possesses none of what tragedy needs, not love of humanity, not arousal of empathy, not arousal of horror.” A bad character, even in a tragedy, is not going to arouse that self-reflexive response nor trigger our judgment of their moral dessert, meaning such a character is not a tragic one. By contrast, a decent person should be able to generate the appropriate reflexiveness and reflection, and yet, Aristotle’s claim is that watching this kind of person fall is not tragic but odious. Decency, in this account, is presented as the counter to wickedness (μοχθηρός). Here, watching a decent person fall from good to bad fortune is morally odious or repellent whereas watching a bad person rise from bad fortune to good is a non-tragedy (ἀτραγωδότατον). The decent man here must be someone who does not just evaluate the plight of others correctly but is, instead, a kind of virtuous actor.

In contrast, in the Rhetoric, Aristotle’s account of decency does not present it as the opposite to bad character. The closest he comes to this use of decency is when he says, “it is a

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84 Poetics 1452b 35-38.
85 Μιαρόν means stained or defiled by blood. It speaks to the odious or repugnant nature of a stained or tainted thing.
86 Poetics 1452b 37-40.
decent thing to remember the good things done to one more than the bad, and the goods things
done to one more than the good things one has done…”87 He also says the decent person can put
up with injustice and resorts to words before taking action, implying that taking action means
being violent. The decent person is one who highlights the benefits and not the slights, who
respects the good one has received instead of prioritizing the good one has done, and whose
judgment prioritizes discussion for redressing injustice. While these may be laudable traits,
Aristotle does not present the decent person as the inversion of the bad one.

In order to address this difficulty, it is more beneficial to turn to the third use of ἐπίεικεια
instead of the second. Aristotle final use of ἐπίεικεια is in reference to the audience and not to the
characters in the play. This helps provide insight into initial odd use of ἐπίεικεια because what
kind of characters an audience relates to tells us which character best evokes the tragic emotions.
Aristotle is examining the common claim that epic is better than tragedy because the epic, “art,
people say, is for an audience of decent people who have no need to see gestures, while tragedy
is for a low sort of people.”88 The essence of this argument is that the orated epic is superior to
the performed tragedy because the orated epic does not contain all of the lamentations and
wailing gestures from the performance. He counters this gesture argument, which implies it is the
sensational nature of tragedy which appeals to the audience, by claiming tragedies can be
powerful even when they are read.89 A tragedy does not need the scenery and other visual
components to be emotionally effective.

The audience for an orated epic and the audience for a performed tragedy could be the
same if the tragedy is read aloud or even merely just read. Therefore, if the audience for tragedy

88 Sachs, trans., Aristotle’s Poetics p. 66-7 1462a 2-4.
89 Poetics 1462a 10 – 63a 5.
is base or lowly, given that epics and tragedies can both be orated and be emotionally effective, one must also assert that the audience for an epic is base or lowly. Aristotle does not present this as a means of rejecting poetry holistically. Rather, he is rejecting the notion that because epic is narrated instead of performed, is larger in scope both in its characters and plots, and is more expansive in terms of time (both within the story and about its duration) epic is superior to tragedy. He rejects all three claims and, therefore, dissolves the distinction between the two audiences.

But his discussion is just as much a commentary on the judgment of the audience as much as it is on their character. If an audience is to be moved by a tragedy, they must be able to see themselves in the protagonist. This points us to Aristotle’s second use of ἐπείκεια where he invokes the great hero of epic, Achilles, saying Homer made Achilles decent while also making him the paradigm of harshness. When Aristotle rejects the common opinion about the audience for epic, collapsing the two audiences into a singular one, he is also asserting that the audience for epic, where Homer made Achilles decent so we would find him compelling, is the same audience for tragedy. Therefore, the audience for tragedy is going to be decent, or as will be explored in chapter four, are at least able to approximate decency, as well. This means that the audience for tragedies will share both in the appropriate character and judgment befitting the ἐπείκεια.

Therefore, two of the three instances of ἐπείκεια in the Poetics are aligned; the audience must be at least able to approximate ἐπείκεια in order to relate to a character which is also ἐπείκεια. But, in light of the initial use, the nature of ἐπείκεια is still contested because ἐπείκεια is often only seen through the moral exemplar discussion in chapter thirteen. Stinton asserts that

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90 Poetics 1454b 13-15.
how Aristotle uses ἐπιείκεια there is unusual given how ἐπιείκεια is not the term used for the most virtuous, but does ultimately assert that watching someone of high moral character be destroyed is odious. Halliwell argues that we must see ἐπιείκεια in chapter thirteen as “outstandingly virtuous,” with the term outstandingly doing much of the lifting. This aligns with the latter discussion of ἐπιείκεια, he contends, because it allows for tragic characters to still be virtuous but not too virtuous. Moles agrees with Halliwell’s assertion that ἐπιείκεια must mean “very good” or beyond the normal standard of good. Instead, he argues, it is reasonable to see ἐπιείκεια used in chapter thirteen as a kind of idealized form, whereas how ἐπιείκεια is used in chapter fifteen points to a practical way of constructing tragic characters.

However, it is just as reasonable to see ἐπιείκεια as the opposite of being wicked (μοχθηρός) without the gradation because ἐπιείκεια is both a disposition and a judgment. Μοχθηρός comes from the verb μοχθέω, to be weary with toil or distressed, and it is only in the moral sense of being weighed down or burdened by vice that the term is used to mean wicked or knavish. Aristotle’s use of this term, instead of describing this kind of person as vicious (κακος) or, drawing from the Ethics, as lacking restraint (ακρασία), tells us that the characters are not being evaluated on the same standard as the excellent or virtuous person. Instead, using the metric of decency, the metric is now a disposition, a judgment, or both. Decency, here at least, seems to mean that someone is not defined by a particular moral burden or toil. Therefore, the metric of evaluation is vis-à-vis disposition or character. Again, one would imagine that this unburdened moral character would be the best kind of character for a tragedy but, in typical

Aristotelian fashion, the appropriate kind of character for these stories is one who is neither decent nor knavish but rather one in between.\textsuperscript{94}

The best characters for a tragedy are not those who are without a moral defect but also are not merely caricatures of that moral defect. Recognizing this tension, Benardete provides the most persuasive account of ἐπιείκεια when he argues, “The ‘good’ man – previously spoudaios or of stature (1448a2) – now becomes the epieikēs – the sound man who is aware of the impossibility of perfect justice.”\textsuperscript{95} He concludes that the serious stature of the characters in a tragedy compound their fall but ultimately their “mistake has to do with being too little aware of the fuzziness of moral principles – too little epieikēs,”\textsuperscript{96} preserving the sense that decency must include equity; that ἐπιείκεια must be both a disposition and an activity. Therefore, when Aristotle argues that the highest kind of person in poetry is ἐπιείκεια, the standard is both one of disposition and judgment. The perfect example of ἐπιείκεια will not have the tension between the disposition and correct judgment. The disposition is gained through habituation meaning there was a time when the character failed to achieve ἐπιείκεια. This disposition must be cultivated by practicing judgment in evaluating appropriate moral dessert at the appropriate time. Proper judgment develops the disposition, whereas the existence of the disposition conveys the judgment, but there is a perpetual gap for anyone who is not of the highest sort of ἐπιείκεια. The hero in a tragedy is going to be flawed in their ἐπιείκεια; their judgment is not going to always be correct, therefore their cultivation of ἐπιείκεια is incomplete. A person who does not have a flaw in their judgment is incapable of making a destructive mistake, a ἁμαρτία. Therefore, the seeming contradiction between the three uses of ἐπιείκεια in the Poetics is not actually a

\textsuperscript{94} Sachs, trans., \textit{Aristotle’s Poetics} 1453a 8-12, p. 37.
\textsuperscript{95} Benardete and Davis, trans., \textit{Aristotle’s Poetics}, p. xxiii.
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid, p. xxiii.
contradiction. While this is an adequate exploration for my purposes in this chapter, it does not resolve the issue that Aristotle treats ἐπιείκεια as a subset of justice. This would contradict Aristotle’s use of ἐπιείκεια to describe both the audience and the protagonist but such a tension requires more direct exploration. This tension, and the way to address it relative to this exploration of the Poetics, I take up in chapter four.

Having discussed the issue of ἐπιείκεια, it is now appropriate to examine ἁμαρτία. In order to frame this examination, it worth briefly restating what has been discussed up to this point. Since the audience for epics feels empathy for a character like Achilles, and Achilles is decent but with a flaw, so too will the audience feel empathy for characters who are like Achilles. From this we can conclude that the decent person, as a foil to the knavish or wicked person, is not absent a moral defect but is not defined by it. Achilles is not just a murdering brute throughout the entire epic. Rather, it is at the height of his brutality where we feel the most empathy for the character. This is critical for understanding ἁμαρτία. The task here is not to fully explicate ἁμαρτία, laying out the various claims on the significance of the term to Aristotle’s aesthetics nor to trace the development of the term ἁμαρτία. Rather, the task is to understand ἁμαρτία in light of empathy. Therefore, it is necessary to briefly define ἁμαρτία and then turn to examine why the error of the hero invokes empathy instead of condemnation or indignation, the key to which lies at the intersection of empathy, decency, and ἁμαρτία.

Ἁμαρτία is perhaps the second most debated term from Aristotle’s *Poetics*, second only to καθαρσις. Nearly all debate about the term centers around the single use of the term in chapter thirteen, extending beyond the discussion of the decent or the wicked, and, instead, arguing that it is not the decent or the wicked that invoke empathy but those who have made an error in judgment. But this is only one of the seven times Aristotle uses ἁμαρτία in the *Poetics*. In each instance, Aristotle is describing an error or mistake but these errors and mistakes are made by different actors. Two of the times he uses ἁμαρτία are in reference to mistakes made by a character, whereas he uses the term four times in reference to the mistakes of a poet, and finally uses it once in reference to a critic’s mistake. While the exploration here is going to follow the pattern of focusing specifically on the use in chapter thirteen, it is worth recognizing that ἁμαρτία is mostly used in reference to the poets, not to their creations. It is also worth noting that it is not clear Aristotle intends every tragedy to be based on ἁμαρτία. Omitting this fact while defining ἁμαρτία often results in a very moralized definition of ἁμαρτία, usually translated as tragic flaw. While Aristotle certainly utilized terms in different ways given their context,

98 *Poetics* 1453a 10-15.
99 *Poetics* 1449a, 51a, 53a, 54b, 56b, 60b, 61b. (49a 31 – on comedy; 51a 18-22 – poet error; 53a 10 – character error; 54b 15 – poet error; 56b 15 – criticizing other critics; 60b 15-18 – potential poet errors; 61b 8-9 – poet error/text mistake).
100 Decontextualizing this usage and focusing only on chapter thirteen is how Ho Kim reaches his conclusion that hamartia is ignorance of one’s particular actions. Such a focus, while highlighting one facet of this technical term, distorts the general category of behavior it describes. See Ho Kim, “Aristotle’s “Hamartia” Reconsidered,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 105 (2010), p. 33-52.
the uses have to be related to a similar kind of activity or disposition. So, unless the poet is also
marked by a tragic flaw by presenting a female deer with antlers, telling unrelated or
disconnected episodes without a plot, or creating a plot-hole by misnaming the birthplace of a
character, it is better to understand ἁμαρτία as a mistake of judgment.104

The way Aristotle describes that mistake in chapter thirteen augments the initial
definition of tragedy, provided in chapter six, by placing ἁμαρτία at the center of the best
tragedies. This augmented definition would be akin to this: a story which is a self-contained
whole about the fall of a protagonist whose mistake arouses our fear and empathy causing us to
experience catharsis. Two other tenants, the reversal (περιπέτεια) and recognition (ἀναγνώρισις),
are also presented in a new light. The best form of tragedy is going to have the reversal and
recognition happen simultaneously and be the logical consequence of the character’s mistake.105
While the initial definition from chapter six makes no mention of the mistake as essential for the
arousal of fear and empathy, Aristotle now argues that a tragedy needs to show a character
changing, “from good to bad fortune, not through wickedness but by a great error, by the kind [of

103 Poetics 1460b 15-18, 51a 18-22, 61b 8-9 respectively.
104 See J.M. Bremer, HAMARTIA Tragic error in the Poetics of Aristotle and in Greek Tragedy (Amsterdam 1969),
chapter 2; P. Van Braam, “Aristotle’s Use of Hamartia,” Classical Quarterly 6 (1912), 266-272 lays out how Aristotle
utilizes hamartia in the Nicomachean Ethics, showing that in the context of discussing ethics, Aristotle uses the
term to mean mistake. For this, see also Michael Anderson, “Knemon’s ‘Hamartia,’” Greece & Rome 17.2 (Oct.
1970), p. 199-217. Bernard Knox assessment of Oedipus Rex also makes this conclusion; Oedipus is not undone by
a tragic flaw but by arrogantly believing he knew the truth when he did not. See Bernard Knox, Oedipus at Thebes
105 Poetics chapters 10, 11, 14. Aristotle also notes that παθός is an essential component for tragedy, but spends
far less time exploring it. Rees provides a good exploration of παθός as this essential component in B.R. Rees,
“‘Pathos’ in the ‘Poetics’ of Aristotle,” Greece and Rome 19.1 (April, 1972) 1-11. For how these phenomena are
intertwined with the demand that the plot be intelligible, see D.W. Lucas, “Pity, Terror, and Peripeteia,” The
Classical Quarterly 12.1 (May, 1962), 52-60. This account blends ἔλεος a bit too much with sympathy, at least in
the way it handles the problem of whose expectations are subverted (the audience or the characters). However,
the conclusion that ideally both the audience’s and the characters’ expectations are subverted follows from
Aristotle’s demand that all actions be intelligible and that this intelligibility is what arouses ἔλεος,
person] we’ve described or one who is better rather than worse.”\textsuperscript{106} The averagely decent person, or one better than that, who makes an error in judgment, not just a character flaw, is the central character of the tragedy. It is this person, the one who is not fated to fail by their wickedness but the one who is fairly decent but makes a mistake, who generates our empathy and fulfills the tragic experience.\textsuperscript{107}

While this mistake is a kind of error in judgment, it does not mean that the error is just a random mistake. Sherman frames it that, “tragic ignorance does not simply descend upon a character like a sudden blanket of fog. It involves a construal or misconstrual that often has a history in the ends and interests of a character.”\textsuperscript{108} The mistake must come from the nature of the character if the mistake is to be intelligible. If the mistake was a random event, completely alien to the character, then the fall of the hero may as well be caused by the gods or some other divine source which, as discussed in chapter one, is a failure of storytelling.\textsuperscript{109} Lord’s claim, in contrast to this divine intervention theory, that “Aristotle’s own theory…would appear to require that the hero’s downfall follow unambiguously from his moral error, or that the hero be held unambiguously responsible for yielding to the passion which occasions the tragic deed,”\textsuperscript{110} highlights this dynamic but unfortunately refers to the error as a moral one. While we have to hold the person responsible for their action, instead of attributing to a god or other divine force,
in order to avoid the ambiguity of moral error as *sin*, the character makes a mistake of judgment which is derived from their character.

In light of this constraint, Aristotle argues that there are four things we should be concerned with regarding a character: worthiness, appropriateness, be lifelike, and consistency. The last three facets all inform the initial one, noting that the characters’ behaviors must be appropriate to that kind of character, that the character act how they would if they were not in a story, and that a character be consistent in their behaviors throughout the work. In this final point, Aristotle even argues that if one is to present an inconsistent character in the story, their inconsistency must be consistent. The first facet, worthiness, is the term *χρηστά* which can mean a range of things from good, to appropriate, to honest or worthy. Sachs translates *χρηστά* as “solidly reliable” whereas most other translations translate *χρηστά* as “good.” As Bernadete and Davis note, *χρηστά* is a “cognate with the verb ‘to use’ and always retains a hint of the good as the useful.” Aristotle argues that we can glean the goodness or reliability by the choices a character makes, saying that a character will be good if they make good choices. Such a claim is almost a tautology except when placed within the context of ἐπιείκεια. *Χρηστά* now takes on a dual meaning by pointing us to the soundness of a character but also to their usefulness in the plot.

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111 *Poetics* 1454a 15-30.
112 *Poetics* 1454a 27-29.
115 Benardete and Davis, trans., *Aristotle’s Poetics* p. 37.
116 *Poetics* 1454a 17-20.
These two facets inform one another since the useful character in a tragedy is the ἐπιείκεὺς who errs and falls into ruin and the sound or reliable character is the one who is consistent throughout the story. Χρηστά informs our understanding of the decent character and on how to best utilize that kind of character by consistently displaying their judgment throughout the story. One’s nature as decent is evidenced by one’s decent acts, though not through any singular act because decency demands contextualizing a particular act within a larger range of activities. This contextualization is why we see some behaviors as worthy of mercy and others not. It is also why we feel empathy for certain characters instead of indignation or condemnation. A character we have grown to like in a story could just as easily arouse our anger and provoke us to condemn them for their poor judgment. We could easily condemn Oedipus for his arrogance instead of empathizing with his ruinous ignorance. The critical element is that we do not see Oedipus as deserving his ruin because the character is made decent enough that we see ourselves in him.

A character’s mistake, then, displays a weakness in their judgment, but we must also see that weakness as not deserving ruin. Therefore, empathy, decency, and flawed judgment are all nested within the same judgmental system and are interdependent with respect one another. Empathy will not be aroused for someone who is vicious or who deserves their fate, nor will it be triggered for someone that is morally superior who falls into disgrace. A decent person who makes a mistake drawn from their lack of moral excellence and who is ruined, killed, or causes the death of a loved one, arouses our empathy because we do not think that such people should be destroyed by such circumstances. This is fundamentally because we, as the audience, do not

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feel that we should be destroyed by such events either. Tragedy is only able to be powerful if these criteria, including both the way in which the stories are constructed and the nature of the audience, are met.

Conclusion

Tragedy relies upon a series of interconnected judgments in order to be emotionally powerful. These judgments first require that the audience sees the protagonist as someone like them, meaning they are neither highly virtuous nor vicious. Rather, this protagonist is able to make mistakes including ones which could ruin them. Watching such an event transpire arouses our empathy for such a cataclysm because we do not believe such ruin is warranted. If we did, or if we did not believe that there were those who did not deserve their ruin, tragedy would hold no power over us. It is only because we have judged someone worthy of empathy that the artform is able to function.

It is the fact that tragedy does function that points to its political utility. The proper education of the emotions is central to developing the correct kind of character. But the correct kind of character in a tragedy is not the virtuous person; watching this kind of person fall inspires indignation. Instead, the moral ceiling is lowered so the protagonist is decent. The audience is not expected to relate to the morally excellent character, but, rather, to a more morally middling sort. By lowering the bar on those with whom we relate, the education provided by tragedy is not going to be the same as the education provided to the gentleman, such as the moral education discussed in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Instead, since the audience for a tragedy is going to include both those who are excellently educated and those who are not, the vulgar are given a
kind of education which at least includes a certain level of mercy. Because we judge that a character does not deserve their fate, our capacity to properly adjudicate claims of moral dessert is refined.

While this arousal provides a kind of education, the arousal alone is not adequate. What is missing is the cathartic experience where the aroused emotions are released, providing a sense of relief but also of understanding. While empathy is an essential component for understanding the political purpose of tragedy, it alone is not sufficient. It requires the clarity and understanding which comes from catharsis; it is to that we now turn.

Alford’s account of pity differs from mine insofar as it places the Aristotelian concept within the broader history surrounding pity. The account of the importance of this emotion for the stability of the city, however, parallels my own. See C. Fred Alford, “Greek Tragedy and Civilization: The Cultivation of Pity,” Political Research Quarterly 46.2 (June, 1993), 259-80.
CHAPTER 3:
CATHARSIS AS KNOCKING OUT

Chapters one and two both provided examinations of Aristotle’s definition of tragedy. Chapter one explored the theoretical re-founding of tragedy on the idea of mimesis and chapter two explored the psychological nature of that re-founding, looking at the critical role that empathy plays in properly employing the power of tragedy. This chapter continues that examination by turning to one of the most controversial terms from the Poetics, catharsis (καθαρσις). Much of this controversy stems from how difficult it is to define catharsis because it is used so infrequently in the Poetics. However, as discussed in chapter two, part of this definition must include empathizing with the plight of the protagonist, including judging them as not deserving their suffering, while also understanding that they are the cause of that suffering. Catharsis both requires and re-enforces the principle that the tragic hero’s downfall does not have a superhuman cause. Combining these different elements results in experiencing catharsis which shall be defined as a kind of knocking out, the metaphor being to knock the wind out of someone. From this, I will then argue that catharsis points us to wonder (θαυμάζω) about the weakness of human reason while simultaneously highlighting the necessity of prudence in political life. This means that wonder, not catharsis, is the end (τέλος) of tragedy.¹

¹ Schaper argues that catharsis is the telos of tragedy derived from the definition given in chapter 6 of the Poetics. From this, she concludes that we must understand catharsis as an aesthetic experience and not merely a moral or political one. What this omits is how Aristotle adds to this definition with his discussion of θαυμάζω. The sensation
This chapter is divided into two sections. The first establishes the relationship between Aristotle’s *Politics* and *Poetics* because both texts speak about the cathartic experience via poetry. The second examines various understandings of catharsis, ranging from a purging of emotions leading to an emotional hardening to a cleansing of the emotions leading to a rational clarification. Because catharsis is an essential component to Aristotle’s definition of the tragic experience, how one defines catharsis also becomes central to understanding the relationship between poetry and the city. Therefore, this section will be given significant consideration.

The *Politics* and *Poetics* Connection

Part of the difficulty in understanding what Aristotle means by catharsis is that he never provides a clear definition of the term. The term is only used twice in the *Poetics* and in neither instance does he define it; there are no chapter long discussions of it as there are with other concepts, such as reversal (περιπέτεια) or recognition (ἀναγνώρισις). Adding to the difficulty, Aristotle only uses catharsis in reference to the arousal of the tragic emotions, saying that empathy and fear are knocked out of us (καθαρσιν) by the end of the play. Because the term is used so sparingly in the *Poetics*, it is necessary to turn to other texts in the Aristotelian corpus for assistance in defining it. He most frequently uses catharsis in his biological works, mostly in reference to menstruation but, as Lear notes, “no one in the extended debate about tragic

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of wonder is aesthetic in the sense that it is a combined emotional and rational response. This affirms her argument that catharsis is an aesthetic experience but catharsis requires that we make a moral judgment. Catharsis, while essential to the poetic experience, is not the end of poetry. See Eva Schaper, “Aristotle’s Catharsis and Aesthetic Pleasure,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 18.71 (April, 1968), p. 131-43.

2 *Poetics* 1449b 28, 1455b 15.
3 *Poetics* 1449b 25-28.
katharsis has suggested the model of menstruation." The most reasonable text to which to turn is the *Politics*, where the term is used five times in book eight. Here, Aristotle is considering the question of music education and its role in the life of the city. Because Aristotle holds that music falls under the broad category of mimetic activities, alongside all forms of poetry, it is reasonable to draw a connection between Aristotle’s use of catharsis in the *Poetics* and the *Politics*. However, in the *Politics*, Aristotle says he will provide a clearer examination of catharsis in the *Poetics* than he is providing in his discussion of music education. While this creates an indisputable connection between the two texts, that connection is not illuminating. Therefore, the first task here is to contextualize the use of catharsis in the *Politics* within his broader conversation of education. The next task is to utilize that contextualization to redraw the connection between the two texts to understand that catharsis inherently has a political facet.

While Aristotle’s exploration of education begins in book seven, for the purposes of this inquiry, the relevant discussion begins with the opening sentence of book eight. It begins by declaring the need for an education which is relative to the regime that is taught to citizens.

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4 Jonathan Lear, “Katharsis” found in Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, ed. *Essays on Aristotle’s Poetics* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 316. For a discussion of how Aristotle’s methodology is consistent in the *Poetics* with his biological works, see B.R. Rees, "Aristotle's Approach to Poetry," *Greece & Rome* 28 (April, 1981), pg. 23-39. In particular, he discusses the way that Aristotle divides the mimetic arts into different genus and species aligns well with his methodology presented in the biological works. However, he does place the *Poetics* within the phronetic works (*Rhetoric, Ethics, Politics*) and not within the epistemic works, and does not ever make the assertion that καθαρσις in the *Politics* or *Poetics* should be seen as menstruation.

5 *Politics* 1341a 23, twice at 1341b 39, 1342a 11, and 1342a 14.

6 *Poetics* 1447a 15.


8 *Politics* 1341b 39.

9 *Politics* 1337a 10-20.
Failing to provide such an education would hinder or mislead (βλάπτει) the city because the education provided within a city is relative to that city. Each citizen must not conceive of themselves as unencumbered or detached individuals, but rather must “not even consider that a citizen belongs to himself, but rather that all belong to the city; for each individual is a part of the city.”

These citizens are bound together through the education provided by their regime, and that education must, above all, provide for the preservation of that regime. Any education that does not do this misleads the regime and, therefore, is politically disastrous. Any discussion of education that does not keep this political nature in mind, including that the education is relative to the regime, misunderstands the purpose of educating the public.

It would follow that the next consideration is the proper development of curriculum and the administration of such an education. But this is not where Aristotle turns. Instead, he comments, “the superintendence of each part naturally looks to the superintendence of the whole.”

This is recalling the introductory chapter of book eight, a chapter that begins by proclaiming the legislator must prioritize the education of the young, while so highlighting that the one concerned with the whole of the city must be concerned with its parts. Aristotle is reiterating that concern by highlighting that the focus here is not about music education as aesthetic education alienated from its political context but a concern of how music impacts the parts of the city. The lawgiver, and by extension those who study lawgivers and the life of the city, must be concerned not just with how the city functions relative to its constitution but also with how its constituent parts, its citizens, spend their time when not engaging in debate about justice and injustice, right and wrong. To frame it differently, the student of politics must be

concerned not only with how citizens rule and are ruled but also with how they spend their leisure (σχολη). A student of politics must look at both the rearing of the citizen as well as the rearing of the city; the two elements are intertwined.

But, again, Aristotle does not take up this topic. Instead, Aristotle moves to the broader concern of the purpose of education, highlighting the three assertions that conflict on whether education is for utility, for virtue, or for superfluous knowledge (περιττά).\(^\text{12}\) We should understand this shift in perspective through the prior lens, however. Aristotle’s return to the broader topic of the purpose of education must be understood within the political framework of the general inquiry. This is highlighted, at least in part, by Aristotle’s subsequent discussion that argues a proper education will contain the appropriate measure of utility, giving one the skills for self-sufficiency without making them act vulgarly (βάναυσον). Aristotle defines vulgar in this context as a, “task, art, or sort of learning…that renders the body, the soul, or the mind of free persons useless with a view to the practices and actions of virtue.”\(^\text{13}\) Therefore, one should be able to participate in various technical or utilitarian enterprises without that enterprise degrading one to the point of slavishness. For a contemporary example, one should be able to make one’s food without having to depend upon that skill for staying alive. This is a skill that is essential for the basics of life. Perhaps the error here would be by devoting an inordinate amount of time to that effort. This is to say, devoting an excessive amount of time to the basics of preserving life preclude you from engaging in the higher elements that separate human from animal life.

Participating in a specific skill enough to acquire it without it defining your life means that a technical skill cannot be the highest metric for education. Technical skills serve a technical

\(^{12}\) *Politics* 1337b 1-3.

end. Rather, unsurprisingly, virtue is the metric for education, not technical skill or expertise, and any kind of activity that infringes upon an education in virtue may succumb to vulgarity. This includes excessive studying of the “liberal sciences” (τῶν ἐλευθερίων ἐπιστημῶν) because while, “it is not unfree to share in some of the liberal sciences up to a certain point, to persevere overly much in them with a view to proficiency is liable to involve the sorts of injury just mentioned.”

The education of a citizen does not need to include expertise in these liberal sciences, merely knowledge enough to facilitate living with one another. The concern here, based on Aristotle’s comments about vulgarity, is about the excessive quality of someone pursuing, or being trained to pursue, such knowledge without bounds.

In this sense, relative to the governance of the city, a philosopher is excessive in what they know. Their pursuit of the liberal sciences moves beyond the need for prudential decision making and into the level of superfluity. However, it is important to again note that this is not speaking about what kind of education is best for a human being in the abstract but, rather, the kind of education with which a lawgiver should be concerned. The education of the polis is not aimed at creating a citizenry of content experts or philosophers. Such a devotion to any specific thing, outside of the preservation of the regime, inculcates a slavishness or vulgarity within the population that does not allow them to properly rule and be ruled. It is within this opening context, in the first two chapters of book VIII, that the subsequent discussion of music education

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15 This raises the fundamental concern on what is actually the best form of education, or, rather, what the best end is for education. If education is aimed at the city and the life of the citizen, it seems as if Aristotle is prioritizing the city over philosophic concerns. Within the context, it is clear Aristotle’s primary concern is the education of citizens. But this concern should not be understood as saying this kind of education is best without qualification. Instead, while leisure is an essential element of philosophy, Aristotle’s concern is the best way to utilize music education vis-à-vis the education of citizens. A larger examination of this gap between an education for the philosophical and the political cannot be take up here but it is worth noting the tension.
takes place. Ignoring this political framework disregards the impetus for Aristotle’s exploration. The concern for Aristotle is what kind of education is appropriate for the lawgiver to pursue relative to the kind of regime in which they live. There is no escaping the political nature of this discussion and, as will be established, this reality extends to understanding the Poetics as well.

Having established this context, Aristotle transitions into a discussion of education curricula and how music education is part of that overall structure.\(^\text{16}\) He argues that,

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\text{since music belongs accidentally among pleasant things, and virtue is connected with enjoying it in correct fashion and feeling affection and hatred, it is therefore clear that one should learn and become habituated to nothing so much as to judging in correct fashion of, and enjoying, respectable characters and noble action.}\(^\text{17}\)
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It is worth noting four things in this passage. First, the virtue relative to music is the appropriate enjoyment of the aroused emotions. Second, the habituation of that virtue is a kind of judgment. Third, the aroused emotions emanate from particular kinds of characters and their behaviors. And fourth, while music is enjoyable, the enjoyment is relative to the characters and actions presented; the enjoyment is accidental to the content, not inherent to just listening. As discussed in my first chapter, the power of tragedy is rooted in its ability to arouse emotions properly and this arousal is a pleasant experience. Also, in my chapter two, empathy is a kind of judgment about one’s relationship to a character. The same qualities that are attached to music are also attached to tragedy.

To judge something, however, one must have a certain amount of knowledge relative to that thing. Aristotle argues, “for it is an impossible or a difficult thing for them to become


excellent judges without participating in the works.” Pangle argues that this passage, in the context of Aristotle discussing rattles given to children so they do not break things in the house, shows that Aristotle does not take music education all that seriously, at least as it relates to moral or intellectual virtue. But Aristotle’s contention is that, “education is a rattle for the young when they are bigger.” Pangle does not go so far as to say that music education is just frivolity because Aristotle does not, but he does clearly imply that the concern here is less serious because of the rattle reference. But if the task of education, again relative to the lawgiver, is the preservation of the regime, is it not fitting to say that such an education is like a rattle for adults? The task of education is the preservation of the regime – to prevent one from smashing up their house. Therefore, while the reference may be humorous, Aristotle’s larger point is quite serious. A failure of educating individuals in the regime is akin to leaving a child in a house without something to draw their attention. The unguided adult, in their leisure, can be as destructive to the house, or even to themselves, as the toddler without the rattle. Education, music education in this case, is about cultivating the appropriate behaviors relative to a given framework. Providing an education to teach citizens enough about a subject so they can be competent judges of that subject allows citizens to engage in civic activities, including having a discerning taste in music and evaluating the works of the poets.

With this context in mind, it is now appropriate to look at how Aristotle utilizes catharsis in the Politics. Specifically, Aristotle argues that it is one of the potential three outcomes of music. He says,

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for it is for the sake both of education and of catharsis – as to what we mean by catharsis, we will speak of it simply at present, but again and more elaborately in the [discourses] on poetic expertise – and third, [it is useful] with a view to pastime, rest, and the relaxation of strain, it is evident that all the harmonies are to be used, but that all are not to be used in the same manner, but with a view to education those most relating to character, and with a view to listening to others performing those relating to action and those relating to inspiration as well.\textsuperscript{22}

This passage indicates, for our purposes here, two things. The first is that, at least for music, catharsis is different than the intellectual enjoyment and the educational purpose of music. The educational purpose of music seems to be arousing the virtuous parts of the soul. What Aristotle does not do here is reject or eliminate any of the modes of music from the city but merely highlights that there is one which is best suited for educating the virtuous parts of our soul. He does distinguish between modes for virtuous and modes for inspiration, which is the facet most attuned to pious music, making a distinction between education and piety.\textsuperscript{23} The music attached to pastime and piety is of a different sort, a lower sort, than that concerned with virtue. However, if it were the case that the relaxing and enthusiastic modes served no function to the city, why does Aristotle not argue the lawgiver must reject them? To answer this, we must look at the second element to take-up from this passage: the relationship between the \textit{Politics} and \textit{Poetics}.

This passage clearly shows that Aristotle intended to explore the idea of katharsis more in the \textit{Poetics}, directly tying the two texts together regarding catharsis. The way catharsis works in music, and the way it works with poetry, are functionally connected enough that Aristotle directs

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{22} Lord, trans. Aristotle’s \textit{Politics}, p. 240. 1341b 37-1342a 3. Lord translates καθαρσις as purification. In order to avoid confusion, I’ve returned καθαρσις back to its transliterated \textit{catharsis}.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{23} Those modes and harmonies are the ones attached to the aulos, “an instrument involving not character but rather frenzy, and so is to be used with a view to those occasions when looking on has the power of [effecting] catharsis rather than learning.” This seems to contradict the argument that καθαρσις has anything to do with education, a criticism which will be addressed in the next section. For the purpose of drawing a connection between the two texts, Aristotle clearly sees the aulos as the instrument played when people are “looking on” and experiencing καθαρσις.}
our attention to the *Poetics*. But, as noted, he rarely uses the term except to say it is a functional part of tragedy. Yet we can inform the omission in the *Poetics* through what he says in this passage. Different modes of music and their harmonics are related to different purposes; those related to character are the ones attached to education, those related to action and enthusiasm/inspiration are related to listening, presumably incorporating both catharsis and leisure, rest, and relaxation. Our concern as a lawgiver is which modes are the most apt for educational purposes. By including them, Aristotle is inherently arguing that catharsis serves an educative role even if it is not for virtue. If the latter category, the one concerned with enthusiasm, was not preserved in the utilization of music, Aristotle would also be expelling poetry out of the city for poetry is grounded in this latter form.

Aristotle directly ties these elements together when he takes up what kind of music best arouses empathy and fear and the catharsis that can emerge from it; he explicitly claims that this kind of music is attached to the theater. Aristotle, in the context of discussing the sacred songs (which he defines as the music that puts the soul into a frenzy, i.e., the music attached to the aulos), says aroused emotions are released and “we see them calming down as if obtaining a cure and catharsis.” He contends that the empathizing and the fearful as well as by the generally passionate, and by others insofar as each individual has a share in such things, and there must occur for all a certain catharsis and a feeling of relief accompanied by pleasure. In a similar way, the cathartic tunes as well provide harmless delight to human beings. Hence it is to be set down that contestants undertaking theatrical music [should use] harmonies of this sort and tunes of this sort.

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24 *Poetics* 1449b 22-28.
25 *Politics* 1342b 1-5.
27 Ibid, p. 240, 1342a 10-16. Again, *purification* has been returned to the transliterated *catharsis*. 
What Aristotle is describing here closely matches the definition of tragedy he provides in the *Poetics*, echoing that it is the arousal of empathy and fear that results in catharsis.²⁸ The cathartic experience constructed by music is the same as the one in the theater because both have the same cause. Also, while these kinds of songs are the best for the theater, it is also clear that everyone shares in these emotions to some degree. This is not an instance where the educated and the vulgar are categorically different in how they approach these songs; the difference between them, at least in how they feel the emotions, is one of degree but not kind. This is because everyone in the audience has the capacity to feel the power of music (and of poetry) but people will experience it differently given their various levels of education and the condition of their soul.²⁹ From this, it is clear that what Aristotle says about catharsis in the *Politics* is directly relevant to the things he says in the *Poetics*.³⁰ This means, remembering the framework Aristotle established at the opening of Book VIII, the lawgiver must be concerned with the events in the theater because such events are directly related to the education of citizens.

Cathartic contentions

Having established the connection between the *Politics* and the *Poetics*, it is now appropriate to turn to the various interpretations of catharsis. Aristotle’s lack of clarity regarding catharsis has caused much ink to be spilled trying to construct, or re-construct, a meaning for

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²⁸ *Poetics* 1449b 27-28. Lord notes, in footnote 27 of his translation, that this is describing the experience in the theater.
²⁹ *Politics* 1340a 1-5, 10-18; 1340b 10-17
³⁰ See also Jonathan Lear, "Katharsis," *Phronesis* 33 (1988), pg. 299. For a discussion of how Aristotle’s methodology is consistent in the *Poetics* with his biological works, see also B.R. Rees, "Aristotle’s Approach to Poetry,"*, pg. 23-39. In particular, he discusses the way that Aristotle divides the mimetic arts into different genus and species aligns well with his methodology presented in the biological works. He places the *Poetics* within the phronetic works (*Rhetoric, Ethics, Politics*) and not within the epistemic works.
catharsis. The task here is not to examine every argument made regarding the term but to examine three essential schools of interpretation. These schools can be loosely identified by the words they use to translate καθαρσις – purgation, purification, clarification. All three theories implicitly recognize the educative power of catharsis by seeing the emotional release serving an ethical purpose. This is broadly in keeping with Aristotle’s argument that the statesman must be concerned with music because it can change the character of the soul.31 However, what is most often missing from each perspective is correctly identifying that the purpose of the arts is wonder (θαυμάζω). This section will examine each school, starting with purgation, and conclude by offering an alternative position, that catharsis is a kind of knocking out (εκπληχις) which points us to wonder about the limits of human reason.32

The purgation theory, which dates to the Renaissance,33 holds that the purpose of catharsis was, "to get so hardened by the sight of human suffering in drama, that we should be able to pass it by unmoved when we met it in real life."34 This understanding of catharsis comes from aligning Aristotle’s biological works with his poetic and political works.35 If the passions are presented as a pathology, then the release of those emotions is a kind of toughing of the skin. One is hardened through the theater; the goal according to this theory is to make the audience

31 Politics 1339a23-25, 1340a 14-25. See also Lord, Education and Culture in the Political Thought of Aristotle, p.66-7, 74-5, 94-8.
35 See Lear, "Katharsis," pg. 298-301. His discussion of Aristotle using 'catharsis' to mean a kind of physical expulsion, specifically menstrual discharge, is particularly useful. He rejects the notion that Aristotle was intending to use catharsis in this way when discussing the mimetic arts.
immune the pathological nature of the passions or to promote a kind of asceticism. However, this perspective misunderstands Aristotle’s perspective on the emotions. As discussed in chapter two, the passions are not simply reactions to stimuli; they are predicated on our character. Because this theory misunderstands Aristotle’s conception of the emotions, the relevancy of this school has waned and is unpersuasive. But, the idea that the passions are meant to be expelled because they are, at least in part, pathological has continued on in the purification understanding of catharsis.

This second theory of catharsis, the one of purification, also employs the terms purge or cleanse as it invokes the religious metaphor of cleaning out an impurity in the soul. Because this is currently the most prevalent theory of catharsis, holding that the excesses of the emotions are a kind of pathology that need to be expunged from time-to-time, it warrants a more intensive investigation than the purgation theory. For this perspective, catharsis is a kind of psychological and political medicine which allows festering, potentially destructive emotions to be released.

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36 For a variation on this theme, where the plot of tragedy purges these emotions out of itself instead of out of the audience, see Paul Schollmeier, “Purgation of Pitiableness and Fearfulness,” *Hermes* 122.3 (1994), p. 289-99.

37 Lear, "Katharsis," pg. 297, 299. Halliwell also contends that this is the foundation of the perspective, noting that this argument fundamentally misunderstands Aristotle’s perspective on the emotions of pity and fear. See Halliwell, *Aristotle’s Poetics*, 90 as well as Lord, *Education and Culture*, 120-22. Trench also agrees with this perspective, arguing that Bernays perspective caused ‘criticism [to] break away on a false scent again.’ See Trench, "Function of Poetry," pg. 551. Leon Golden also rejects this perspective. See Leon Golden, "The Purgation Theory of Catharsis," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 31 (Summer, 1973), pg. 473-479. The overwhelming perspective is that the use of ‘katharsis’ as a purging of the emotions is an inappropriate translation of the Greek as well as being disconnected from the context of Greek culture. However, the other consensus is the fact that while katharsis is understood as ‘to cleanse’, the moral underpinnings of ‘purge’ or even ‘cleanse’ is not present in the Greek.

The city, in a sense, is cleansed of damaging pathologies, even if temporarily, by the work of the poets.\textsuperscript{39}

In light of this, it is worth noting that Aristotle contends that the tragedians are better than the epic poets for essentially two reasons. The first is the tragedians are better able to swell both fear and empathy toward the plight of the family, the fragility of fortune, and the contingent nature of man's existence. The second is the scope of tragedy is narrower in terms of plot and characters which augments its ability to generate catharsis, thus reinforcing the first reason.\textsuperscript{40}

Tragedy, then, is better able to arouse painful emotions based on our familial and political ties. If catharsis is meant to be a purification of the emotions derived from these ties, and these emotions become pathological via intense connections to these ties, one purpose of catharsis would be to cleanse periodically the audience of the excesses of these emotions. Unlike the purgation theory that holds that such emotions are pathological, this school holds that it is an excessive accumulation which is harmful. This school also draws from the pious setting of these performances so when they translate καθαρσις as purification or cleansing, they are making catharsis akin to the ritualized, emotional cleansing which takes places during religious festivals.\textsuperscript{41} This, however, omits that Aristotle has diminished the gods and grounded poetry in μιμησις and not piety.

\textsuperscript{39} Often these pathologies are understood by placing Plato and Aristotle in conversation on καθαρσις, taking its mooring from Plato’s Socrates comment about the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry. See Halliwell, Aristotle’s Poetics, chapters 1 and 4; Elliot Bartky, “Plato and the Politics of Aristotle’s ‘Poetics,’” The Review of Politics 54.4 (Autumn, 1992), p. 589-619. While worthwhile in its own right, it falls outside the parameters of my exploration.

\textsuperscript{40} Poetics 1149a 10-19. See also Poetics chapter 13 for his discussion on the best way to generate the tragic effect.

\textsuperscript{41} Καθαρμος. Scott and Liddell define this as “a means of purification, purifying sacrifice, atonement, expiation” that would at times be applied to rites of initiation. See Scott and Liddell, p. 388.
Perhaps the key passage with respect to this interpretation comes from the *Politics*, and therefore it is worth considering in some detail. Aristotle begins, “For any passion, such as pity and fear, that comes strongly upon some people is also present in different ways in everyone to a lesser or greater degree, and this is also the case with inspiration.”\(^\text{42}\) An audience is going to feel the same emotions but not the same extent; there is not a categorical difference between those who are overwhelmed emotionally and those who have a more muted reaction. Both are going to feel fear and empathy but some are going to be more overwhelmed than others. Of those who are overwhelmed by such emotions, Aristotle argues that, “there are certain persons who are possessed by this motion, but as a result of the sacred tunes – when they use the tunes that put the soul in a frenzy – we see them calming down as if obtaining a cure and purification.”\(^\text{43}\) Here, Aristotle is speaking of pious music, the songs of Olympus,\(^\text{44}\) that whips the soul into a frenzy (ἐξοργιάζουσι)\(^\text{45}\) and also about the kind of person who is pulled into a near orgiastic state by the power of this pious music.\(^\text{46}\)

Enthusiasm seems to be a critical element for understanding this dynamic though Aristotle says little of it here.\(^\text{47}\) However, what we can draw from this is that a person

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\(^{42}\) Joe Sachs, trans., *Aristotle’s Politics*, p. 256 1342a 4-6.


\(^{44}\) Lord, *Education and Culture in the Political Thought of Aristotle*, p. 132-33.

\(^{45}\) This verb means to emerge out of the orgies, be orgiastic, or to come from orgiastic worship. The root of the verb is ὀργη, which can range in meaning from anger to passion to temperament.

\(^{46}\) Lord holds that the final clause in this passage, where the sacred songs are used to put the soul into a frenzy, points us to the homeopathic nature of καθαροσ; the emotional arousal, which is nearly pathological, leads to the treatment of that pathology. It could be, as he holds, that καθαροσ is meant to treat those susceptible to pathological extremes of emotion. But the underlying problem is being too fully possessed or inspired by a god. Therefore, such a person is overly susceptible to religious music. If Lord’s framing is correct, such people are pathologically affected by their piety. If experiencing the sacred songs is homeopathic for them, is not the cause of their ailment the songs themselves? Why would Aristotle not conclude to either exclude such people from public audiences or exclude the music altogether? See Lord, *Education and Culture in the Political Thought of Aristotle*, p. 125-34.

\(^{47}\) This requires a more thorough exploration of enthusiasm that is possible here. It is worth noting that Aristotle rarely uses the word; nearly all of the uses come from a few passages in the *Politics* 1340a 12-13, 1340b5,
overwhelmed by enthusiasm is possessed by this action (κινήσεως κατοκώχιμοι τινές εἰσιν) and is whipped into an orgiastic frenzy. The final clause of this passage indicates that such a person is brought down into a certain state (καθισταμένους) like they were hit (τυχόντας) by a treatment (ἰατρείας) and a catharsis (καθάρσεως). If this framing is correct, one should conclude that Aristotle is highlighting the danger posed by overwhelming religious enthusiasm (ἐνθουσιασμός). The treatment is provided to those who are held captive or possessed (κατοκώχιμοί) by enthusiasm because the treatment is of the enthusiasm, not just the frenzied. Rather, it is the enthusiasm which makes possible the treatment for the enthusiasm. The city is not purified or cleansed through its piety but, if the interpretation is correct, it is the overwhelming arousal of enthusiastic piety which would be cleansed. This, in a certain sense, is in keeping with Aristotle’s approach to the gods in the Poetics, which would provide support to this interpretation of catharsis except for the looming contradiction in the sequel passage.

Aristotle argues that being struck by this treatment and catharsis is also true of the other emotions and since everyone shares in these emotions, at least to some degree, everyone is affected accordingly. The next sentence, however, is unusual relative to the purification or cleansing theory. Aristotle says that because everyone participates, to some degree, in this cathartic experience with “a feeling of relief accompanied by pleasure,” that “in a similar way the [cathartic] tunes as well provide harmless delight to human beings.” From this, Lord
concludes that, “the excitement of enthusiasm by the sacred tunes or by the enthusiastic music generally is an experience that is both harmless and delightful for the great majority of men.”\textsuperscript{50} If everyone has the capacity to experience the arousal from the sacred songs and the difference is only one of degree and not one of category, everyone must also be able to experience catharsis and this hit of medicine. And yet, Aristotle’s conclusion here is that these cathartic songs, the pious music, arouse our emotions only to provide harmless delight to mature people through a pleasurable release of those aroused emotions. Aristotle’s position does not seem to be that the audience is hit with a treatment. Rather, what they experience is a pleasant experience from having their emotions aroused and released; there is not a pathology to treat. Instead, it is only those who are riddled with excessive enthusiasm who seem to receive what looks like a medical treatment. From this, we have to conclude either that catharsis is reduced to a pleasant release of aroused emotion for most people or the cathartic songs do not work on the general population as they do on those possessed by a god.\textsuperscript{51}

Given the connection already established between the account of music in the \textit{Politics} and tragedy in the \textit{Poetics}, applying this standard to the audience of tragedy would mean that only those who are in an excessive state of fear or empathy would receive the medicinal hit; the rest of the audience would merely receive harmless delight (χαρὰν ἄβλαβη). And yet, given the discussion in chapter two about ἐλεός and φόβος, the excess of these emotions cannot coexist; excessive fear negates empathy. Therefore, catharsis either does not have to operate merely on the excesses of the emotions to provide its benefit, which calls into question the cleansing theory, or catharsis merely provides harmless pleasure to those who experience it, making catharsis just

\textsuperscript{50} Lord, \textit{Education and Culture in the Political Thought of Aristotle}, p. 133.  
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid, p. 133.
a kind of pleasant relief for those not afflicted with overwhelming enthusiastic piety. This contradicts Aristotle’s claim as to why we must care about music, therefore also poetic, education; they have the power to move the character of our soul.\textsuperscript{52} If something is just a harmless delight, it makes all music (and poetic) education about play, which Aristotle directly rejects.\textsuperscript{53} Therefore, the cleansing theory of catharsis is ultimately unpersuasive because the claims of homeopathic care either separate music and poetry into two different categories of experience, which seemingly violates how Aristotle ties the two together, or it means that most people are merely amused by music and poetry and do not require the experience to be a medicinal cleansing or purification of their excess.

The next theory, that catharsis is purely intellectual clarification, claims that catharsis is not about directing the emotions at all.\textsuperscript{54} Rather, the function of catharsis is to provide clarity about some aspect of the human condition.\textsuperscript{55} The primary focus of this school derives from Aristotle’s discussion of the universals and particulars in book nine of the \textit{Poetics}. Here, Aristotle is examining the difference between those things that have happened and those that

\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Politics} 1339a 21-25, 1340a 10-25.
\textsuperscript{53} \textit{Politics} 1337b 35-37.
\textsuperscript{54} A variation on this theme argues that emotional arousal is actually not necessary for tragedy at all. Because the emotions cited in the Poetics are painful emotions, they reject the idea that poetry can actually aim at generating those emotions. Rather, as Daniels and Scully claim, Aristotle is, “using emotion words to describe the kinds of emotions that are typically felt in response to the kinds of real-life incidents tragedies represent in make-believe, for the purpose of conveying to his reader the sort of incidents that are appropriate for dramatic tragedy, pitiable and fearful incidents that move to fitting resolution.” Charles B. Daniels and Sam Scully, “Pity, Fear, and Catharsis in Aristotle’s Poetics,” \textit{Nous} 26.2 (June, 1992) 216. This framework does not take into account two things: the relationship between the \textit{Poetics} and the \textit{Politics} and the political nature of the emotions generated by tragedy. This omission undermines the persuasiveness of the argument because it does not take into consideration that poetry has a political function, not just an aesthetic or philosophic one. The arousal and release of the emotions are essential components for poetry not just as good storytelling, which they reject, but also because such emotions are vital to the life of the city. For additional exploration of this framework, see Gerald F. Else, \textit{Plato and Aristotle on Poetry} (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1986).
may happen, commenting that stories are concerned with the things that would happen either from necessity or by probability.\textsuperscript{56} He contrasts history and poetry saying, “that the one speaks of things that have happened, but the other the sort of things that might happen,” and that, “for this reason too, poetry is a more philosophical and more serious thing than history, since poetry speaks of thing that are universal, and history things that are particular.”\textsuperscript{57} The concern is about the nature of stories told by the poets, whether they are accounts of individuals and the things that have happened to them, or if the identity of the individual is secondary to the action transpiring in the plot.

This does not mean that the protagonist is diminished, but that a well-told story is not about conveying the entirety of that individual’s life. Must we watch someone muddle through the mundane elements of life, for the sake of accuracy regarding what happened, or must we only be concerned with the actions that are directly relevant to the end, both in terms of time and purpose, of the story. Aristotle concludes that well-told stories are concerned with a series of actions bound together by necessity, not by accident, and where specific character actions are more important than conveying the entirety of the character.\textsuperscript{58} In chapter eight, Aristotle praises Homer for understanding this phenomenon. Homer only tells the parts of the story that are relevant to a specific set of events, not every event that transpired for the entire duration of the Trojan War or Odysseus’ trials.\textsuperscript{59}

Because plots are devised in this way, focusing on the connections between events to understand the ending in light of the beginning, Aristotle concludes that poetry is more

\textsuperscript{56} Poetics 1451a 35-51b 5.
\textsuperscript{57} Joe Sachs, trans. Aristotle’s Poetics, p. 32 1451b 3-8.
\textsuperscript{58} Gresseth’s assessment of this is persuasive. See Gresseth, “The System of Aristotle’s Poetics,” 312-335.
\textsuperscript{59} Poetics 1451a 20-30.
philosophical and more serious than history. In a sense, a plot is similar to a syllogism in the sense that each step is connected by necessity. If A does B, and B causes C, then A causes C. But tragedies are not philosophy. Tragedies require a certain level of particularity to arouse empathetic emotions; human beings do not empathize with formulas. Therefore, a plot follows the same basic structure of a syllogism, giving it a more universal structure, but it is still vested in the acts of a particular kind of person. Achilles story at the end of the Iliad follows the A-B, B-C, A-C, pattern but it emotionally resonates because of the particularity of the character and the emotions such particularity arouses. Achilles, having been slighted, refuses to fight the Trojans out of anger. Achilles’ inaction drives Patroclus to wear Achilles’ armor. Hector then mistakes Patroclus for Achilles and kills him. This ignites Achilles’ bestial rage where he slaughters anyone in his path, ultimately killing Hector out of revenge. A causes B, B causes C, A caused C. If the story had not been constructed in this manner, and the Iliad were more akin to a chronicle of Achilles’ life, such particularity would not be connected by necessity or probability; that Achilles ate bread on Tuesday but not on Wednesday is not linked to the broader narrative of his μῆνιν. Tragedies recount events where each event flows from the preceding one either through necessity or probability, constructing a wholistic account of a single action.

In this context, the universal nature of poetry is connected to a universal human experience and not one that is specific to any particular individual. However, for tragedy to be pleasurable, and not just an arousal of painful emotions, the audience must be able to understand both the universal and particular elements of the story. Aristotle gives the example of a

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60 Poetics 1451b 7-9.  
painting; we delight in seeing the painting for what subject it represents as well as the way in
which that subject is represented. We receive a higher degree of pleasure if we have more
knowledge of the represented subject. It is in this context that Golden, the exemplar of this
interpretative school, claims that the "movement from the particular to the universal involves a
learning process in that it renders clearer and more distinct the significance of the events
presented in the work of art." The heart of his interpretation of καθαρσις is that the pleasures
drawn from engaging with tragedy are wholly intellectual pleasures and therefore, “art becomes
a significant and respectable domain of philosophy.”

Golden’s claim, while perhaps apt with respect to the educated facet of the audience,
seems to overshoot the nature of Aristotle’s discussion in book nine of the Poetics. Aristotle’s
concern is why poetic stories must be told according to necessity and that the universals within
the poetic landscape are the cause of that necessity. He says, “It is what is universal, the sorts of
things that a certain sort of person turns out to say or do as a result of what is likely or necessary,
that poetry aims at, even though it puts names on people.” Because character appears through
choice, the universality of stories depends upon the protagonist acting either according to
necessity or probability relative to their given character, highlighting the general nature of these
kinds of characters. That they are given names re-enforces that stories are not philosophy; a story

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63 Poetics 1448b 15-18.
64 Golden, "Catharsis," pg. 54. Golden’s argument is that the full tragic experience requires understanding the
content of the art in order to move beyond the particular work and toward a universal idea which the art is
representing. The association between the particular and the universal is both a prerequisite, since one must know
what a particular work of art is portraying to make the relationship intelligible, and a consequence, since the work
of art is going to provide an insight into the relationship of the particular and the form. This learning process is a
kind of ascension away from the particulars and toward the universal and is something that is completely
intellectual. See also Golden, “Catharsis,” 54-60.
65 Golden, "Catharsis," pg. 60
67 Poetics 1450b 9-10.
that is abstracted to a theoretical level is not going to be emotionally gripping and will lack the power inherent in poetry. Poetry is more philosophical than history but poetry is not philosophy. Philosophy, that which deals with eternal universals, is different from that which deals with universals manifest in particulars, in this instance, poetry.  

Aristotle’s discussion of comedy further clarifies his understanding of the relationship between the universal and the particular in poetry. In fact, he seems to argue that comedies are even more universal than tragedies. He claims that once the poets “have organized the story through things that are likely, they simply slip in random names, and do not make a story about a particular person, as did the poets of personal ridicule.” Comedians are not telling stories about a particular person, as, for example, a contemporary stand-up comedian would, but instead are telling stories that highlight how vicious people can be without that viciousness ruining them. And yet, Aristotle goes on to argue that playwrights like Agathon also utilize made-up names, akin to the comedians, and Agathon’s tragedies are just as moving as those who utilize the Homeric tradition. This means that the distinction between tragedy and comedy, at least in how they construct stories, is dissolved. Both can provide delight to the audience through the power latent within their storytelling.  

Returning to the clarification theory, if stories caused us to transcend the particulars only to reflect on the nature of man, comedies and tragedies would both have that effect on the

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68 But, as Lord notes, it is this participation between the universal and the particular that makes poetry far more akin to phronesis than to philosophy. See Lord, *Education and Culture in the Political Thought of Aristotle*, p. 177-79.

69 *Poetics* 1451b 11-15.

70 *Poetics* 1451b 22. He also says that those who utilize these established families fell into them by luck, not by design. See also *Poetics* 1454a 10-15.
But this would be a strange outcome. Tragedies deal with those who are serious in stature and whose actions have dire consequences whereas comedy deals with those who are not serious in stature and whose actions do not have dire consequences. If we apply the idea of catharsis to comedy, the clarification we would receive is about how more vulgar sorts of people are not ruined by their mistakes; rather, we can just laugh at their folly instead of weeping at their mistake. Because Aristotle seems to dissolve the distinction between comedy and tragedy, at least as it relates to universals, Golden’s assertion leads to a condition where both tragedy and comedy would have the same effect on us because they are both attached to the same universal condition. If the goal of poetry is to be a kind of philosophy because of the ascension to universals, what is the universal condition of man to which both poetry and tragedy point? Beyond this, Golden’s claim would negate the distinction between the vulgar and the serious, a distinction Aristotle preserves throughout the duration of the Poetics, but, perhaps more importantly, a distinction that would unravel the distinction between decency and vulgarity. This effort to dissolve the distinction between poetry and philosophy by attaching both to universals also dissolves the distinctions necessary for ethics and political science; it undermines the political nature of poetry. This contradicts Aristotle’s concern with how the mimetic arts change the nature of our souls and, therefore, undermines the persuasiveness of the clarification theory.

However, the least persuasive element in this theory is that catharsis works by ascending away from the emotions. The emotions, as discussed in chapter two, require both a psychological state and a sort of judgment and, therefore, if catharsis is to work by arousing and releasing those

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72 Poetics 1448b 30-35, 1449a 1-5, 1449b 30-35, 1451b 11-15.
emotions, catharsis cannot be a purely intellectual experience. The emotional responses one has toward a particular event is indicative of one's moral habituation, and therefore, the emotions are an essential part of the human condition. If catharsis were only an intellectual experience, it would necessarily reject the notion that the emotions play a vital role in the human experience, a position that Aristotle does not hold.

καθαρσις as knocking out

In contrast with these three schools, there is a fourth interpretation that is more persuasive: καθαρσις is a knocking out (ἐκπληχις). Drawing from Sachs and Halliwell, I will argue that catharsis is best understood as the knocking out of emotions driven by an awe-striking (ἐκπληχις) revelation that results in wonder. In order to make this argument, the first consideration is the explicit connection Aristotle makes between the imitative arts, wonder, and learning in the *Rhetoric*. The next is to turn, in some detail, to how Aristotle uses ἐκπληχις and θαυμαστός in the *Poetics*.

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73 Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pg. 338-90. While Golden argues that Aristotle's views katharsis as a way to ascend toward a more enlightened state of intellectual excellence, Nussbaum argues that this is far too Platonic. She sees Plato’s criticism of poetry is both of the form of poetry and of the poet himself; that the form fails to move the audience toward knowledge and that the poet lacks a sense of self-reflective awareness that is necessary to ascend toward knowledge. (395) She does while agreeing with Golden that καθαρσις before Plato meant to purify and that Plato's contribution was to transform the word to mean to clear or to clarify, she also rejects the notion of a purely intellectual clarification because of Aristotle's perspective on the emotions.


75 While Golden’s theory may hold true in some instances, particularly with the educated part of the audience, it is not able to account for the broad experience of the theater, and while Nussbaum appropriately reattaches the emotions to the clarification interpretation, her account still does not account for the way Aristotle describes music education and its relationship to poetry because it fails to account for the political nature of music and its influence on the city.

Aristotle, in the *Rhetoric*, makes an explicit connection between wonder and the imitative arts, providing a potential example of how we should understand his use of θαυμαστός in the *Poetics*. He states, “Learning and being in a state of wonder are pleasant for the most part, for in wondering there is a desire to learn, so that the thing wondered at is desired, and in learning there is a settling into our natural state.” This seems to echo the opening to the Metaphysics where Aristotle argues that human beings yearn to know. In both instances, Aristotle seems to indicate that we are driven to know. In the case of the *Metaphysics*, that drive is either to seek understanding itself or to understand the causes of this. In the *Rhetoric*, it seems that our natural state is the one where we are learning. In both instances, being human seems to be defined by our capacity to learn. Also, wonder, which contains the desire to learn (ἐπιθυμεῖν μαθεῖν), is a means to learning. Wonder is not the same as learning but seems to be an essential component of it, in the same way that arousing empathy is not the same as the tragic experience but is an essential component of it. It is worth noting that these conditions, the desire to learn and the state of wonder, are not limited to any specific category of human being but, rather, are set in (καθίστασθαι) our nature.

Within the context of this framework, Aristotle lays out a summarization of his opening arguments from the *Poetics* and draws a clear connection between the work of the poets and wonder:

And since it is pleasant to learn and to be in a state of wonder, whatever is associated with that is necessarily pleasant as well, such as a work of the imitative arts like painting, sculpture, and poetry; and anything that is skillfully imitated is pleasant, even if the thing imitated itself happens to be unpleasant, since that is not the thing one gets enjoyment from, but rather the inference that this image is that thing, so that one ends up learning

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78 *Metaphysics* 980a 21.
something. Sudden reversals and narrow escapes from dangers are also pleasant, because they are all sources of wonder.\textsuperscript{79}

The argument he makes about seeing something unpleasant, if it is presented well, he echoes in the \textit{Poetics}.
\textsuperscript{80} The key there is that watching something unpleasant becomes pleasant if we can reason through (συλλογισμός) what something is when it is presented to us. The observation is not the pleasant experience but, rather, the learning. In keeping with this, Aristotle also argues that the best kind of tragedy happens when the reversals (περιπέτειαι) happen at the same time that we recognize (ἀναγνώρισις) who the person actually is.\textsuperscript{81} Aristotle phrases it as “συλλογισμός ἐστιν ὅτι τοῦτο ἐκεῖνο” – “reasoning through that this is who that is.”\textsuperscript{82} The imitative arts are most associated with wonder and that through this wonder, they provide a pleasant experience even if the events we see transpiring are painful while also serving as a foundation for learning.

It, however, would be inaccurate to say this is purely a rational experience, such as what is argued by Golden above. Rather, this experience is visceral. To take a bit of liberty with the Greek, perhaps a more accurate idiom for ἐστιν ὃτι τοῦτο ἐκεῖνο would be “THAT is who that is!!” The knowledge comes upon you by connecting pieces together rationally but this does not preclude a physical or emotional reaction. One example of this is gasps or painful groans one hears when the reveal happens at the zenith of a tragedy. The audience is processing the information presented to them, tying plot elements and characters together, indicating that this is at least partially a rational process, but the involuntary nature of the gasp or groan also indicates

\textsuperscript{80} \textit{Poetics} 1448b 10-20.
\textsuperscript{81} \textit{Poetics} 1452a 30-35.
\textsuperscript{82} \textit{Poetics} 1448b 16-18.
that this rational process is not merely rational. This dynamic is displayed when one examines how Aristotle uses terms like awe-striking (ἐκπληχις) and wonder (θαυμάζω).

Aristotle only uses the term wonder (ἐκπληχις), or its derivations, three times and in each instance, he is discussing the goal of the storytelling.83 This should strike us as odd given that his initial definition of tragedy seems to make catharsis the goal. But, as explored in chapter two with the discussion of mistake (ἁμαρτία), it seems as though Aristotle’s initial definition is inadequate to the task of properly defining the tragic experience. Also, as with mistakes, it is not that the initial definition is rejected, but, rather, clarified. With this in mind, it is appropriate to turn to these three text passages in order to clarify Aristotle’s meaning. In the first example, Aristotle is discussing the nature of the actor and the power of recognizing the weight of one’s actions. He says, “it is better for someone ignorant to act, and once having acted to make the discovery, for there is nothing repellent connected with it, and the discovery is awe-striking.”84 This re-enforces several of the issues discussed prior, including the importance of decency and the role of mistakes, but adds to it that when someone discovers their mistake, if all those other elements are present, the audience is struck by the weight of that discovery vis-à-vis the character. Given that Aristotle argues the better form of tragedy is one where empathy and fear are aroused by the organization of the plot and not just the spectacle of lamentation, echoing his chapter six definition,85 constructing a story whose goal is awe-striking through recognition aligns with the role catharsis plays in that definition.

The second and third uses of ἐκπληχις re-enforce this initial claim, further supporting the idea that catharsis and ἐκπληχις are connected. Aristotle argues that “the best discovery of all is

83 Poetics 1454a 5, 1455a 17, 1460b 26.
84 Sachs, trans., Aristotle’s Poetics, p. 40 1454 4-7.
85 Poetics 1453b 1-5.
the kind that arises out of the actions themselves, so that the awe-striking (ἐκπλήξις) impact comes about from things that are likely…”

The plot of a story must be constructed in such a way that at the zenith, when the character’s action causes their fall, the audience is able to understand why the fall is self-inflicted because the events in the play either necessarily follow the hero’s mistake or stem from them in a plausible way. In the third use, Aristotle is discussing utilizing impossible things in a story and argues their inclusion “is the right thing to do if one hits the mark that is [the] end at which the art itself aims (for the end has been stated) that is, if in this way one makes the thing itself or some other part of the poet more awe-striking.”

The poet should include those things that can best cause awe in the audience; knocking something out of us is the mark to hit (τυγχάνει). One could perhaps say that at its peak, the best form of tragedy is going to knock the wind out of an audience member from an awe-striking revelation.

From these three uses, Aristotle lays out a clear argument for the nature of poetry. To generate empathy and fear in the audience, the poet must construct a story where all of the parts are connected either through necessity or probability so that when the hero falls, we can recognize the cause of the fall is the hero’s mistaken judgment. Aligning the fall with the recognition strikes us viscerally and points us to something else. Given how Aristotle has described awe, it seems that catharsis is best understood as a knocking out of us the aroused emotions. Catharsis, then, is not the end of tragedy but is the means to a different end.

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90 As Sachs notes, ἐκπλήξις is often translated as astonishment but this is misleading because the verb ἐκπλέω means to no longer be anchored. Sachs, trans., *Aristotle’s Poetics*, p. 15. It also refers to the action of sailing way.
That catharsis is a means and not an end is also evident in the *Politics*, specifically in how Aristotle described the effect of listening to the cathartic songs. This effect highlights the suddenness of the cathartic effect if it is correctly understood as awe. Recalling the prior discussion of catharsis as purgation, Aristotle argues that the person whipped up by the sacred music or the cathartic songs is brought down into a certain state (καθισταμένους) like they were hit (τυχόντας) by a treatment (ιατρείας) and a catharsis (καθάρσεως). The frenzied state of arousal is expelled by listening to this kind of music because the listener is hit on the mark by something like a treatment and catharsis. The aroused state is released from the body because the listener is struck by this experience. This is awe (ἐκπληξίς). The simile to medicine is not meant to say that catharsis is medicinal but, rather, that it operates in a similar way to medicine. Catharsis, then, is not purging or cleaning the body of the emotions but, rather, it is the phenomenon of the arousal being knocked out of the body. Catharsis is like the wind being knocked out of us by a sudden strike. This is only possible if the emotions are aroused to such a pitch, in conjunction with a certain mental state, that their release is pleasurable and, thus, catharsis is only a pleasurable experience in such a condition. The best example of this comes, again, from Oedipus. The events of the play arouse these painful emotions to a fevered pitch and then, through a sudden reveal that connects all of the plot elements together, those aroused emotions are suddenly knocked out of us when we conclude “THAT is who that is!!” An awe-inspiring revelation strikes us and the aroused state is knocked out of us. The act of the emotions being knocking out is catharsis.

What we must next ask is if catharsis is describing knocking the wind out of us, what is doing the striking? Aristotle echoes his conclusion in the *Rhetoric* that poetry is designed to induce in chapter twenty-four and twenty-five of the *Poetics*. While discussing impossible
things, he holds that nothing in a story should be unintelligible.91 But then he concludes that “this is the right thing to do if one hits the mark that is [the] end at which the art itself aims (for the end has been stated) that is, if in this way one makes that thing itself or some other part of the poem more awe-striking.”92 This tells us that the impossible thing must be intelligible since hitting the mark requires all the plot elements to be intelligible. But this also gives us insight into why wonder, not catharsis, must be the end of poetry. Aristotle’s interjection that the end has already been stated seems to stem from his discussion of wonder in chapter twenty-four where93 he argues that both tragedy and epic must contain a wonder (θαυμαστόν) causing element.94 It is because of this element that impossible things can be included in storytelling so long as the impossible element is in service of wonder.

Since wonder is a means to learning, his claim further reinforces the need for impossible things in the plot to be intelligible; if they are not, the story will not generate wonder. This does not mean that every element in a story must correspond to an empirical truth; there can be supernatural or fantastic elements, but they must be intelligible within the framework established within a given story. It may be most accurate to say that perhaps in spite of impossible things within the story, there must be an element which compels us to wonder about the nature of human beings in order for a story to be well-constructed.

However, the clearest example from the Poetics that the goal of poetry is the production of wonder comes from Aristotle’s discussion of paradoxes and revelations. Aristotle argues that since the imitation is not only of a complete action but also of things that produce fear and [empathy], this comes about most of all when things have happened on account of one another in a paradoxical way. For in this way it is more a source of wonder than if

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91 Poetics 1460a 29-32.
93 This is in agreement with Sachs. See Joe Sachs, trans., Aristotle’s Poetics, p. 62.
94 Poetics 1460a 11-20.
they came from chance or luck, since even among things that come from luck, it is the ones that seem to have happened as if by design that are the most productive of wonder.\textsuperscript{95}

Paradox (παρὰ τὴν δόξαν) is the opposite of one’s expectations, not a contradiction. Oedipus is trying to find the cause of the plague to save his people. That he killed a man on the side of the road and then married that man’s wife, which makes Oedipus the cause of the plague and also causes his private ruin, runs counter to our expectations. Such a construction causes more wonder (θαυμασιώτατα), which is, ultimately, the goal of poetry. The highest form of wonder generated by poetry comes from experiencing the paradox of one’s judgment juxtaposed against the causal truth.

Aristotle’s comment that wonder is better produced when it is by design instead of from chance or luck (τοῦ αὐτομᾶτου καὶ τῆς τύχης) reinforces his claim in the Rhetoric on the symbiotic relationship between wonder and learning. Those things that happen by chance or randomly are not intelligible to us if we are not able to see that even random events seem to have a plan laid out for them. Hence his subsequent comment that, “even among things that come from luck, it is the ones that seem to have happened as if by design that are the most productive of wonder.”\textsuperscript{96} It is the ability to understand causal relationships that facilitates wonder at how a thing can transpire. We wonder about those things that defy our expectations but are intelligible to us nonetheless.

Catharsis, knocking out of the aroused emotions, leaves us in a state of wonder. If tragedy is aimed at arousing wonder, and wonder depends upon reasoning-through a striking revelation, this then begs two questions: first, about what are we to wonder and second, what do we come to

\textsuperscript{95} Joe Sachs, trans., Aristotle’s Poetics, p. 33 1452a 1-6.
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid, p. 33 1452a 7-8.
understand through tragedy? Golden’s proposition of intellectual clarity seems to be one of the viable answers to this question, but it is limited to a particular part of the audience. Perhaps the educated in the audience will be able to engage in a kind of intellectual clarification about the role of man in his own fate caused by the limitations of human judgment, but that is not completely clear. The educated in the audience are not philosophers; they are merely properly educated relative to the mimetic arts, given the discussion in the *Politics*. For the rest, the non-educated, what is this state of wonder meant to clarify or educate? Drawing from chapter two, the ultimate concern is the judgment of moral dessert. Perhaps this portion of the audience is to wonder about the nature of failure, learning to “make allowances for human failings.”

Instead of understanding the emotions as pathologies in need of purifying or clarifying, I have argued that the arousal of the emotions and their release is more akin to the wind being knocked out of someone. Painful emotions are aroused watching a play and then, through a sudden revelation of information, those emotions are kicked out of us and that sudden expulsion drives us to wonder. In particular, we are driven to wonder about man as responsible for his own failures. Therefore, catharsis is essential for understanding the political purpose of ποίησις because the sudden expulsion of these emotions provides a moment of clarity that drives us to wonder at the causes of man’s plight and the limitation of human judgement. It is worth contrasting this against Sach’s argument that “the impact of a tragedy is to leave us gazing at a human image with our habits of blaming and excusing blocked,” because “the poet has knocked all our moralism and sentimentality out of us.”

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97 *Rhetoric* 1374b 10.
98 Sachs, trans., *Aristotle’s Poetics* p. 16.
judgment and that empathy is the central emotion of tragedy, it cannot be that tragedy aims at knocking out our moralism and sentimentality.

Instead, tragedy depends upon us correctly concluding that someone’s ruin as being both undeserved and caused by their own doing. It is precisely the nature of our morality and the weight of moral dessert that is aroused by tragedy; the wonder we experience is a result of the paradoxical nature of knowledge and ignorance. We often believe things to be true that are not and often act according to those false beliefs, sometimes to our own ruin. Instead of knocking empathy and fear out of us, catharsis knocks away the aroused condition, releasing us to experience wonder. Tragedy provides us an opportunity to reflect on the paradox that we can be both the cause of our own downfall and yet not deserve such a fate; we do not always deserve the suffering which accompanies our ignorance. Catharsis helps reinforce the empathy dynamics discussed in chapter two by pushing us beyond the particulars of a given mistake and toward the general idea of man’s ignorance.

As the exemplar of the most effective tragedy, if not the best in form, it is worth turning back to Oedipus the Tyrant to understand how this dynamic works. It is not appropriate to do a full explication of the play here but only to establish the broad plot dynamics to evaluate the emotional impact of the story. The play opens with Oedipus detailing the suffering in Thebes from a curse. Oedipus, who is considered the great savior because he answered the riddles of the

Sphinx and came to rule the city through his wisdom, is lamenting with the townspeople. Because of this shared pain, which he asserts that he feels more intensely than anyone else since he feels the pain of the entire city, he seeks assistance from the Oracle at Delphi. When he receives the oracle, it presents him with a new riddle: the cause of the plague is within the city. In his attempt to uncover the truth, Oedipus accuses first the prophet Teiresias of conspiracy and murder, then accuses his brother-in-law Creon on similar grounds. Teiresias is unwilling to tell Oedipus explicitly who is the cause and how he knows. Oedipus draws the conclusion that Teiresias is plotting against him and, if nothing else, is a failed prophet. The Chorus, in a show of loyalty to the great hero Oedipus, tells us that perhaps it was a burst of anger that led Oedipus down this path, insulting both a prophet and his kin. However, his drive to solve riddles is evident from his entrance; the anger is a consequence of his pursuit to know. In concert with this, his wife Jocasta compels him to stop seeking out the truth and instead to live life “unthinkingly” and “lightly,” reinforcing that Oedipus’ drive here is the desire to know. He knows that his fate is to kill his father and wed his mother and he believes he has overcome this prophecy by abandoning his homeland. But, as the drama of the play unfurls, we all come to learn that Oedipus is wrong and that his fabled wisdom from dealing with the Sphinx does not extend to controlling every facet of his life. As Creon says at the end of the play, “Do not seek to be master in everything, for the things you mastered did not follow you throughout your life.” Upon

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100 Oedipus Rex 59-61.
101 Oedipus Rex 330-460.
102 Oedipus Rex 523-24.
103 Oedipus Rex 798-82; 1060-72.
104 Oedipus Rex 790-800.
learning the truth of his lineage and of his actions, Oedipus’ family is destroyed and he blinds himself in order to no longer see the evidence of his corruption (μιασμα).

It is possible for an audience to consider this story as a tale of fate; Oedipus’ fate is given to him and he is merely following the will of the gods. But even Oedipus recognizes this is not the case. The gods may have given him the prophecy but he had to bring it to fruition; Oedipus recognizes his own agency in his ruin.\(^{106}\) If Oedipus’ life was just a plaything of the gods, and his fate was the consequence of mere divine intervention, his suffering is undeserved and would inspire empathy for it alone, but it would not generate in us any kind of pleasant release. The culmination of the story would be to generate indignation at the capriciousness of the divine, not just empathy for Oedipus’ plight. But if Oedipus is the cause of his own fall because of his mistaken judgment then when his ruin arrives, the painful emotions felt by the audience are released because the cause of his misfortune is not just chance or divine caprice. As Aristotle notes, “it is possible to act and yet be ignorant that the action is a terrible deed, and then to discover the kinship afterward, as with Sophocles’ Oedipus.”\(^ {107}\) Oedipus’ undoing is not the result of a prophecy, akin to how Macbeth’s destruction is not because of the witch’s prophecy, but rather his inability to see he could be in error. Oedipus is not a vile character nor one bereft of decency; he seeks out justice for his city and desires an end to the suffering of his people.

However, once he accuses both the prophet Teiresias and his brother-in-law/uncle Creon of being the ones who conspired to kill Laius because he believes he has avoided his prophecy, his fabled cleverness leads to his own ruin. As the revelation appears to Oedipus, however, Jocasta seems to have already deduced who Oedipus is and she attempts to prevent him from

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\(^{106}\) Oedipus Rex 1330-35; see also Bernard Knox, Oedipus at Thebes: Sophocles’ Tragic Hero and His Time (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998) 33-42.

learning it. But once Oedipus has discovered the truth of his life, she kills herself instead of living in ignorance. Jocasta’s desire for a thoughtless, easy life is destroyed by Oedipus’ need to not just know something, but to “master it” as Creon says. When he fails in this endeavor, his life is ruined and he fulfills the prophecy. In another way of framing this, the prophecy does not happen to Oedipus. Rather, Oedipus enacts the prophecy even as he attempts to subvert it. Instead of doubting what he believed of himself, to the point of threatening to murder those who question him, he operates under a set of false beliefs and this is his undoing.

Because we, the audience, also seek to understand and, through that understanding, seek to control what we can, we do not see Oedipus’ undoing as receiving just desserts; we do not say he got what he deserved for his anger and arrogance. If we did, the emotion we would feel at the end is not pain but satisfaction. Perhaps we would have felt indignation from the opening pages of the play and watch as Oedipus is destroyed by knowledge and thus find his fall satisfying. Such an outcome would engender ἐπιχαίρεκακία, a joy at the suffering of someone else. The political dangers of this will be taken up more directly in chapter five. Tragic catharsis only works if the audience sees itself as similar to the protagonist and feels as if that protagonist is enduring something they do not deserve. Instead of feeling either indignation or ἐπιχαίρεκακία, we feel fear on his behalf as he tries to discover who he actually is and we ache for him when that knowledge destroys his family, his reputation, and him.

The fear generated by the play, which we can perhaps best understand as dramatic tension, starts by being told that Oedipus is both clever and wise (σοφος) which gives the audience an image of Oedipus that Oedipus has of himself – a man with powerful judgment who is able to overcome supernatural challenges. The tension is elevated when that same skill is applied to finding out who is guilty of causing the plague on Thebes. This quest places Oedipus
in conflict both with the divine (through Teiresias) and with his kin (through Creon). As the evidence mounts that Oedipus is not who he thinks he is and that he may be the cause of his city’s plague, the tension rises to a level where we fear for the harm that will befall this man. When he discovers that he is actually the murderer of his father and that he has sired children with his own mother, our fears are realized and we ache for the plight of this man.

These painful emotions, aroused to a fever pitch, are released when the audience experiences the awe-striking revelation, in this case that Oedipus is the cause of the plague in the city for killing his father and procreating with his mother, and we are forced to realize that, over the objections of Jocasta, that it was Oedipus’ drive to know that led to his ruin. Had he stopped at any point along the journey, being comfortable with what knowledge he had of himself, he would not have been destroyed. But we also know that Oedipus had come to power through his cleverness and wisdom and that he was the great savior of the city because of it. In a sense, Oedipus’ drive to know was an essential component of his character and for him to abandon his quest to know would violate the necessity of character consistency. Here, at the end of this riddle, he is able to save Thebes once again but the cost is his ruin. The emotions that are aroused to a fever pitch are knocked out from us when we understand that these events did not happen to Oedipus but, rather, were the consequence of his character. We experience catharsis because we understand the causes of the ruin and through this understanding, we are able to release our aroused emotions. As Aristotle notes, Oedipus may be the best in generating this tragic release because the revelation and reversal of fortune happen simultaneously. As the audience concludes that Oedipus is the cause of the plague, Oedipus also learns it while also simultaneously experiencing the destruction of family and the shattering of his self-understanding. As the

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108 Poetics chapter 15.
emotions are knocked out of us from this revelation, we do not feel what Oedipus feels. Doing so would make tragedies an unbearable experience. Rather, the audience is forced to wonder at how it is that Oedipus, the man who comes to power through his own cleverness, is undone by his desire to know.

Conclusion

Understanding how catharsis operates gives further insight into both how Aristotle defines tragedy and what capacities exist within tragic storytelling.\(^{109}\) Beyond this, Aristotle also considers an entire category of music to be concerned with catharsis and so it is necessary to understand the connection between music education and poetry. Within that framework, however, it cannot be forgotten that Aristotle understands music education as a central piece of education itself because music can change the nature of the soul.\(^{110}\) Since catharsis is attached to both music and tragedy, understanding catharsis becomes part of understanding Aristotle’s argument about education. It is through these connections that we can see how catharsis plays a political role in the city. In the case of both music and tragedy, catharsis is derived not from the creation of the art but from the reception of it - for music, in listening to a performance, and for tragedy, in observing the events of the play. This means that catharsis is produced when one is observing the product of another's actions, and therefore, is inherently a more vulgar act than learning to play the instrument or write poetry. Catharsis must serve a particular purpose that is outside of *praxis* but still within the realm of education since catharsis is part of music education.

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\(^{109}\) *Poetics* 1449b 25-30.

\(^{110}\) *Politics* 1342b 1-5.
Examining that function is what has led to the flurry of activity trying to define catharsis, with most definitions seeing catharsis as the purpose of tragedy. But, as argued here, this misses the mark. Instead, the purpose of tragedy is the generation of wonder while catharsis serves a role in that generation. Therefore, catharsis should be understood in light of wonder (ἐκπληχις) instead of purgation, purification, or clarification. Catharsis, the experience of having the metaphorical wind knocked out of you which expels the aroused emotions by a given mimetic work, is not the end of poetry. Rather, the end of poetry is wonder and catharsis is a means to that end. But this does not mean that catharsis serves to remove those emotions from us, rather, that the release of painful emotions is a kind of pleasure. That pleasure requires a series of interrelated judgments about the characters witnessed and their actions. As Nussbaum points outs, responding to something with the appropriate emotion is an essential component of understanding who we are, and “it is a recognition of practical values, and, therefore of ourselves, that is no less important than the recognitions and perceptions of the intellect.”111 The passions are not things to be purged or eliminated, but instead, are opportunities for human beings to learn about themselves.

In addition to this, Aristotle holds that the emotions that are aroused by tragedy are politically useful ones. Catharsis cannot be a stripping away or purging of emotions that are politically useful. If so, tragedy is not just dangerous to the city but harmful. Purging the city of empathy (ἐλεός) and fear (φόβος) would destroy the ability to use those emotions for politically useful ends, such as war. Empathy is necessary for maintaining the belief in the law. 112 And, as will be argued in chapter four, it seems to be an essential component of equity/decency.

112 See chapter two; this will be explored more fully in chapter five.
Purification of these things implies their natural existence is corrupt. If they were corrupt by nature, why would they also be important for politics? Emotions are not pathologies but, rather, have the potential to be used well or poorly.

The final element to note is comes from the Oedipus example. Oedipus is a man of great intellectual skill who believes he is being pious in his actions and seeking out justice in his quest for knowledge. His skill, however, is not so great that we cannot relate to the rest of his condition as a man being decent. He is like us enough that we imagine his suffering could be ours if we were in a similar condition with similar prowess. It is through sense that we are like the character that the poet is able to generate empathy for the protagonist. Tragic catharsis is only possible because of this sense that they are “like us.” But it also that sense of “like us” that is essential to the political utility of poetry. As will be explored in the next chapter, this sense of being “like us” is a vital concern for the maintenance of the city but that same psychology is at play within poetry. If we do not find Oedipus both like us and undeserving of his ruin, even recognizing that he has done vile and horrifying things, then we will not feel empathy for him. In a similar way, ἐπιείκεια (decency/equity/fairness) relies on the same dual system to evaluate the moral dessert in other cases. This interweaving of empathy and ἐπιείκεια is thrust upon an audience by an effective poet and they are forced to utilize these essential political emotions. These same political emotions, and the judgments inherent to them, are essential components in generating affection within the city. Such affection we can call political friendship and it is to that concern we now turn.
CHAPTER 4
WHO IS LIKE US? ON POLITICAL FRIENDSHIP

Having established a new definition of empathy (ἔλεος) in chapter two, this chapter now turns to the city to lay the foundation for understanding the political utility of poetry. This is done by taking up one facet of the question: what does it mean to be like us (τῶν ὁμοίων)? Such an investigation would usually lead to Aristotle’s discussion of the highest form of friendship¹ and the notion of the friend as a second self (ἄλλος ὑτός).² However, instead of turning to perhaps the most intimate interpersonal relationship,³ this chapter will be an examination of political friendship (πολιτικὴ φιλία). The clearest exploration of political friendship comes from chapter six of book nine of the *Nicomachean Ethics* where Aristotle begins by claiming that being like-minded (ὁμόνοια), in the sense that there is agreement on what is beneficial and how to live together, appears to be the same as political friendship.⁴ By agreeing to what is beneficial

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⁴ *NE* 1166b 30 – 1167a 5. Bickford argues that it is not friendship but deliberation that stands at the heart of the city; that friendship is not an essential element for the polis. Instead, attention giving and deliberation are the key elements for a city. While both of these elements are certainly essential to a city, a city without a shared sense of affection for those who are “like us” lacks the foundational elements to engage in deliberation or share in meaningful attention; I will not be open to persuasion from someone I do not see as similar to myself in a more
and how to live together, Aristotle is highlighting the horizons of a regime and a potential boundary for what it means to be “like us.” Aristotle uses τὸν ὁμοίον across a range of associations including another as a second-self, one related by kinship, a fellow-traveler in an organization, a fellow-citizen, or the species connection, and, thus, we are left with a term that is as plastic as φιλία. For example, he argues that it is possible, through traveling, for one to develop a kind of friendship with every other human being, for they are also “like us.” This points to a cosmopolitan feeling that exists in all human beings for other human beings, the feeling φιλάνθρωπον. Since all human beings are alike insofar as they are human beings, one could make the claim that this species level connection is the best for understanding what it means to be “like us.” This level of plasticity also raises the question of intimacy: how intimate must we be with someone for them to qualify as being “like us?” The exploration here will only look at the question of what it means to be “like us” as regards political friendship, but in so doing, it must lay out a hierarchy of intimacy ranging from having a simultaneous emotional experience to the broadest pangs of philanthropy.

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6 NE 1155a 23.

7 Aristotle also speaks of this feeling having a power over us in tragedy. See *Poetics* 1452b38, 1453a2, 1456a21. John von Heyking argues that this is the essential emotion that sits at the educational core of tragedy. But this emotion tends toward the coolness of the contract too much compare to the necessary affection at the heart of the city. See John von Heyking, *The Form of Politics* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2016) p. 74-80.
This chapter will argue that the appropriate level of intimacy for politics is the one that sits between these poles of feeling the same pain together (sympathy) and the species level pang of philanthropy, the feeling of empathy. It does this by first examining the kind of intimacy appropriate to the city and then turns to a discussion of equity and its relationship to justice. Finally, the chapter takes up Aristotle’s discussion of political friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, with a close examination of what it means to be like-minded and how that relates to the question of intimacy. If a city is to be held together by political friendship, it must be comprised of those who can at least approximate decency. This approximated decency, I shall argue, is the best way to understand the nature of political friendship.

**Politics and Intimacy**

Before turning to the question of political friendship, it is necessary to examine first one facet in the relationship between the family and the city. This facet, the appropriate level of intimacy, is essential for understanding the role that political friendship plays in the city. Because the city is not an extended family nor a mere contractual relationship, we know that political friendship must exist between the intimacy of the family and the coolness of the contract.\(^8\) The relationship between the city and the family is fraught with tension and will not be fully explicated here.\(^9\) Rather this question will only be taken up insofar as it is needed to establish

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that the family and the city both share the need to produce second selves; the family through children, the city through citizens, with the city’s need to produce a second self requiring a lower degree of intimacy than the family. This intimacy gap raises the question: what in the city must be like us, or, rather, to what degree must we be able to see ourselves in our fellow citizens? This section will argue both that decency (and through decency, empathy) is key for delineating who is like us relative to the city and that it is also the foundation for both the generation and preservation of political friendship.

While not the only place that Aristotle takes up the question of the family and its tensions, the primary place of analysis here will begin with his discussion of the natural origins of the city in *Politics* 1.2. He holds, in this account, that the family is derived from the natural impulse to leave a second self. Human beings, we are told, are more naturally coupling than political creatures, reinforcing the principle that the family is driven by biological concerns. In tandem with this, or perhaps because of this impulse to replicate, the family is the most intimate of associations for human beings and it makes a special claim on our lives because of it. But

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10 See, for example, *NE* 1161b 1-15 and the discussion of the relationship between the family and companions. There, Aristotle is making a special distinction for the family that seems different than the one presented in the *Politics*. This falls outside of the scope of the inquiry here but it is worth noting the complication.


the critical piece that separates human families from non-human families is the ruling element.\textsuperscript{13}

He defines this ruling element as “that which can foresee with the mind is the naturally ruling and naturally mastering element,” whereas the naturally ruled is, “that which can do these things with the body,” but both elements must work in harmony so that the, “same thing is advantageous for the master and slave.”\textsuperscript{14} The ability to regulate the body is associated with natural rule and this ruling element has the power to do this because it can make provisions or see before others (\textit{προορᾶν}). This capacity not only gives commands to the body but has the ability to anticipate what kinds of commands are necessary for a given circumstance; it has the power to see what the person needs before the body makes such a demand.

Thus, one could make the distinction that the drive to replicate leads to the family and the drive to rule leads to the city but Aristotle’s account here is that both the drive to replicate and to rule exist within the family.\textsuperscript{15} If this were not the case and the only drive to the family was procreation and preservation, not ruling understood as foresight and the ability to command accordingly, then human beings would live like other animals defining our lives by procreation and preservation and nothing more.\textsuperscript{16} But including both drives in the family and the city does not dissolve the tension either. If the family is based upon the drives to replicate and rule, which of those is inadequately satiated within the family? The answer seems to lie in whether replicating or ruling best facilitates self-sufficiency, for living well through self-sufficiency

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Politics} 1252a 28-32
\textsuperscript{14} Lord, trans., \textit{Aristotle’s Politics}, p. 36, 1252a 30-33. See also \textit{NE} 1096b 29-31.
seems to be the goal of human life. The ruling element is not bound by the desire to reproduce one who is like you. Instead, it seems to be concerned with the judgment necessary to, at minimum, preserve one’s life and, ultimately, to facilitate living well. Living well, it seems, depends upon the ability to either be self-sufficient or at least approximate it. Aristotle is ambiguous on this account, particularly when one takes into consideration the problem that self-sufficiency requires living like a god in contemplation. Beyond this, it is the life of contemplation and not politics that Aristotle holds as the most self-sufficient, but even there, such claims on self-sufficiency are limited. This, however, falls out of the scope here. When discussing self-sufficiency, at least as it relates to the limited form available to the city, our concern is why the this ruling element is not satiated by the family and why it forces us into a larger association.

The next level of association, the village (κώμη) of kin, arises to address non-daily needs, but since, “by nature the village seems to be above all an extension of the household,” it is unclear why the village would not also have the same inadequacies of the family. For if the village was adequate to fulfill our nature, people would be ruled by this extended kinship, “even as nations (ἔθνη) are now.” The necessary intimacy of life would be defined by kin relations.

17 Politics 1252b 29-30. The drive to replicate is inherently not self-sufficient because it requires a coupling. See Politics 1252a 27-30.
18 NE 1177b1.
19 NE 1178a 1-10. A human being is not a god and therefore cannot engage in the life of a god; at best, all we can do is approximate such behavior. On the relationship between participation and happiness, see Tim Duvall and Paul Dotson, “Political Participation and “Eudaemonia” in Aristotle’s ‘Politics,’” History of Political Thought 19.1 (Spring 1998): 21-34.
22 Lord, trans., Aristotle’s Politics, p. 36, 1252b 16.
23 Lord, trans., Aristotle’s Politics, p. 36, 1252b 20. Lord uses this as a way of highlighting how “politics” cannot mean “relating to the polis” because Aristotle presents these associations as competitors to the polis. See Carnes
such as the model presented by the Homeric gods; “for human beings assimilate not only the
looks of the gods to themselves, but their way of life as well.”24 The rule of kings is appropriate
to nations, or those associated through kin, and we see this paralleled in the gods of Homer, but
this form of life is not adequate for human beings because it is still not self-sufficient.25 Instead,
Aristotle argues that the πολις, while including kin networks, is not a familial association and it
is only through the πολις that man can reach an approximation of self-sufficiency.26 He argues
that it is man’s ability to reason through arguments, an extension προορᾶν, that both defines his
status as a unique political animal and explains why man is naturally aimed at the city;27 man is
able to judge things that are beneficial or harmful, just or unjust.28

However, as Aristotle concludes Politics 1.2, we must not see man’s capacity for
judgment as intrinsically good. He argues,

For injustice is harshest when it is furnished with arms; and man is born naturally
possessing arms for [the use of] prudence and virtue which are nevertheless very
susceptible to being used for their opposites. This is why, without virtue, he is the most
unholy and the most savage [of the animals], and the worst with regard to sex and food.
[The virtue of] justice is a thing belonging to the city. For adjudication is an arrangement
of the political partnership, and adjudication is judgment as to what is just.29

Aristotle now clarifies the earlier assertion about man’s natural potential for rule, defining man
as a creature armed to produce or bring forth prudence and virtue (ὁ δὲ ἄνθρωπος ὀπλα ἐξ ὁμν
φύεται φρονήσει καὶ ἀρετῇ). But he immediately highlights how this armed capacity is not

Lord, "Aristotle’s Anthropology," found in Essays on the Foundations of Aristotelian Political Science, ed. Carnes
27 Politics 1253a 1-10.
Aristotelian Political Science, ed. Carnes Lord and David K. O’Connor. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press,
inherently positive. Man’s capacity for foresight and prudence, without being attached to an idea of human excellence, makes man savage. The capacity that allows us to live beyond animals and point toward a godlike condition\(^3^0\) is the same capacity that can render us worse than the animals. The capacity for prudence or the ability for foresight, alone, is not enough. Instead, humans must live under a condition of justice in light of virtue; the capacity for prudence must be actualized into beneficial activity. The city is not an extension of the family nor of the tribe or nation but, instead, is an agreement (\(\tau\acute{a}\zeta\varsigma\)) within the political community (\(\pi\omega\lambda\iota\iota\kappa\iota\kappa\iota\varsigma\ \kappa\omicron\iota\nu\omicron\nu\iota\alpha\varsigma\)) about claims of justice.\(^3^1\)

While we are first drawn into the family and the most intense claims on our lives exist within that framework, the family is unable to provide the necessary conditions for man’s proper education in his use of prudence.\(^3^2\) The only object which is able to achieve a kind of self-

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\(^3^0\) This echoes Aristotle discussion of the city and its relationship to self-sufficiency. He claims, “one who is incapable of participating or who is in need of nothing through being self-sufficient is no part of a city, and so is either a beast or god.” One incapable of life in the city is a beast, a creature incapable of being self-sufficient, and one with no need of the city is a god, for they are already self-sufficient. The defining element of man as a political creature is not that he lives together in a community (thus he is not merely a social creature) but his ability to participate, through speech, in a life which debates the best way to live. Salkever usefully notes that, “logos makes it possible for us to discover, through argument, conjectures, or narratives, the kinds of goals in terms of which we can most sensibly organize our lives,” and this allows us to generate the laws and customs of a city, laying out the most important use of our ruling element. A man beyond the need of the city would seemingly also be beyond the need for such speech. It would also mean that the associations which drove man into the family would not be present for, as already described, those same elements which drove man into the family also drive him out of it. A fully self-sufficient person would have no need of any association and a person who lacks the capacity for self-sufficiency lacks the ruling element. is the place where the city lies, between the bestial and the divine. See Lord, trans., *Aristotle’s Politics*, p. 37, 1253a 27-29 and Stephen G. Salkever, "Aristotle's Social Science." found in *Essays on the Foundations of Aristotelian Political Science*, ed. Carnes Lord and David K. O'Connor (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), 28, 29.

\(^3^1\) Mulgan notes that it is the sharing of constitutional principles within the citizenry that underscores any city and serves as a foundation for political friendship. See Richard Mulgan, "The Role of Friendship in Aristotle’s Political Theory," found in Preston King and Heather Devere, ed., *The Challenge to Friendship in Modernity* (London: Frank Cass, 2000) 25. For why both virtue and common good need to shape our understanding of the citizen, see Cathal Woods, “The Limits of Citizenship in Aristotle’s “Politics,’’ *History of Political Thought* 35.3 (Autumn 2014): 399-435.

\(^3^2\) Aristotle’s argument here does leave us wondering why the family, if it is also, at least in part, derived from the natural ruling element, is not concerned with justice and does not exist as a kind of agreement. Why is that man without the city is presented as an animal worse than the beasts but we are not to see the family as an association of creatures worse than animals? The answer must be that the family exists within the confines of the city is never
sufficiency is the city, an organization which is not intimate like the family but is defined as being like-minded (ὀμόνοια). Aristotle’s conclusion that man is by nature a political animal if, “such also are the first partnerships,” relies on us understanding that those things that drove us to the first partnerships also drive us away from them. Our ruling capacity is what gives us the perception of “good and bad and just and unjust and other things [of this sort]” and the association caused by this perception is what, “makes a household and a city.” The natural impulses which drive man to the family also drive man into the city; both facets of our nature are essential to living a fully developed human life. But this can only be partially true, for the city is not founded upon the need to replicate oneself unless we understand the idea of the second-self not in a biological sense. Rather, if we understand the need to replicate as it relates to a specific way of organizing the city, a πολιτεία, then it is possible to understand the city as being driven by these same phenomena. But there is a very different degree of intimacy relative to the replication. Instead, the concern becomes the preservation of the life of the city in order to engage in rule, both in the sense of self-governing the private life and also in the sense of debating with others about what is good or just for those who are not blood relatives. Therefore, the desire to reproduce a second-self in the city becomes a desire to replicate those who are ὀμόνοια.

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33 NE 1167a 21.
34 Politics 1252b 30.
To establish what we must be like-minded about, and why this like-mindedness cannot just result in politics being an extended marketplace,\(^{36}\) we need to establish the intimacy appropriate to the city. Recalling Aristotle’s discussion in the *Rhetoric* on ἕλεός, he makes a distinction based on the intimacy of the family. He claims we have empathy for, “those who are known to them, unless they are exceedingly close to their own household. About the latter, they are in the same condition as when those things are about to happen to themselves…”\(^{37}\) The example Aristotle uses is of Amasis who did not cry when his son was taken to be executed but did cry when he saw his friend begging. Instead of weeping for his son, Amasis is shocked with grief: “what is horrifying is a different thing from something [worthy of empathy]; it drives out [empathy] and is often felt as its opposite, since people no longer feel [empathy] when the horrifying thing is near them.”\(^{38}\) We have horror for the terrible things that happen to our family members because we are experiencing them as intimately as a person can; the special claim that family has on us is due, at least in part, to this phenomenon. As explored in chapter two, this phenomenon is best understood as sympathy and is the level of intimacy most appropriate to the family.

If sympathy is the appropriate intimacy level for the family, the species level of intimacy is philanthropy. Aristotle argues that friendship is evident by nature between parents and children but,  

\(^{36}\) Mulgan indicates that this is may be the proper metaphor for the city. In contrast Cooper argues that we see the benefit of the city through its benefits to us on an individual level; we see the benefit the law gives us and therefore find affection with those who share both the law and understanding of benefit. Mulgan notes that it is the sharing of constitutional principles within the citizenry that underscores any city and serves as a foundation for political friendship. See Richard Mulgan, "The Role of Friendship in Aristotle's Political Theory," found in King, Preston and Heather Devere, ed., *The Challenge to Friendship in Modernity* (London: Frank Cass, 2000) 20 and John Cooper, “Political Animals and Civic Friendship,” found in Richard Kraut and Steven Skultety. *Aristotle's Politics Critical Essays* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishing, 2005) 71-80.


not only in human beings but also in bird and most animals, and for animals alike in kind
toward one another, and especially among human beings, which is why we praise those
who are friends of humanity. And one might see among those who travel that every
human being is akin a friend to every human being.\textsuperscript{39}

The first thing to note is that this level of intimacy is not unique to human beings even if it is
“greatly” (μάλιστα) seen among human beings. Rather, in a parallel to the biological impulse that
drives us to the family, this collective species friendship is not uniquely human.\textsuperscript{40} This is not a
true sense of friendship because of its lack of intimacy; “and goodwill is not loving either, since
there is no intensity or desire in it, but these things go along with love; and loving involves
intimate acquaintance…”\textsuperscript{41} The inability to be like-minded with someone else, sharing only this
general sense of goodwill, is the demarcation line of intimacy.\textsuperscript{42} While I can have well-wishes or
pangs of discomfort for those I do not know, who I randomly meet in my travels, or who are
merely human, this kind of philanthropic perspective is the loosest of bonds. For similar reasons
to why the city cannot be a family, though with an inverted intimacy, the city cannot be
composed of mere fellow-travelers or those whose only connection is a cosmopolitan
philanthropy. These three emotions, sympathy, empathy, and philanthropy, seemingly comprise
the broad range of human intimacy, including the most intimate connections within the family
and the most distant goodwill for the species. For the city, it appears that the most appropriate
emotion is empathy, not sympathy or broad philanthropy.

\textsuperscript{39} Sachs, trans., \textit{NE} p.144, 1155a 18-22.
\textsuperscript{40} This general sense of goodwill Aristotle will eventually define as a pre-friendship feeling. \textit{NE} 1166b 30-1167a20;
155-56.
\textsuperscript{41} Sachs, trans., \textit{NE} p. 169, 1166b 32-34.
\textsuperscript{42} While Konstan does not see intimacy as a vital element to friendship, he does note that Aristotle uses intention
as the demarcation of friendship, not merely closeness, along with the desire to wish well on someone else. Well-
wishing and intention, however, are not enough since Aristotle holds we must have a sense of reciprocity; we must
know the person and at least have some intimacy with them. See David Konstan, “Aristotle on Love and
This is further explored in *Politics* 1.2 through Aristotle’s criticism of καλλιπολις in Plato’s *Republic*, specifically how the beautiful city collapses the distinction between kin and companion. He argues, “For the city is in its nature a sort of multitude, and as it becomes more a unity it will be a household instead of a city, and a human being instead of a household.” 43 This establishes an inverted intimacy relationship – one is most intimate with themselves, then less with the family, then even less with the city, and, by implication, even further less with the species. But it also raises a problem for understanding the city as an association of people who are like us, particularly given that Aristotle argues that the city is not a unity but a plurality; the city does not “arise from persons who are similar.” 44 However, given the prior discussion, it is clear Aristotle does hold that a city must be comprised of those who are ὁμόνοια. 45 Therefore, similar here should be understood in terms of intimacy; the people in a city are not similar in the way kin are but, rather, are similar through ὁμόνοια.

A further illustration of the intimacy appropriate to the city comes from Aristotle’s discussion of “mine” and “not mine” in *Politics* 2.3. This discussion highlights how making the city feel the same things at the same time to the same degree about the same objects is not possible. Even if one were able to do so, it would be destructive to the city. 46 He also notes that by making all things common, we reduce our attachment to them, for what belongs in common to the most people is accorded the least care: they take thought for their own things above all, and less about things common, or only so much as falls to each individually. For, apart from other things, they slight them on the grounds that someone else is taking thought for them. 47

44 Ibid, p. 56, 1261a 25.  
45 NE 1166b 30 – 1167a 5.  
46 *Politics* 1261b 17-35.  
47 Lord, trans. *Aristotle’s Politics*, p. 57, 1261b 31-34.
On the one hand, Aristotle here is commenting on the collective action problem and the need for individuals to feel as though something is dependent upon their actions. However, on the other hand, this is an odd claim to make because what the city shares most in common is the city itself. If people were to give what is common the least regard, how is it possible that the city is the most self-sufficient of human interactions? Perhaps he means that collapsing the distinction between mine and thine does not make everything mine but, rather, makes everything thine. Collapsing the distinction between the family and the non-family does not make the city into a family but, rather, dissolves the family.\footnote{Bernard Yack, \textit{The Problems of a Political Animal} (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 118-22.} But, by the same token, we cannot also believe that the city is always a concern of thine. The individual member of the city must, at least so far as the responsibility of living in the city falls to each individual, conceive of the city as at least partially mine.

This need for individuals to see themselves not as just family members but as members of the city is why Aristotle argues that cities need some kind of affection to hold them together. He asserts, “we suppose affection (φιλίαν) to be the greatest of good things for cities, for in this way they would least of all engage in factional conflict; and Socrates praises above all the city’s being one, which is held to be, and which he asserts to be, the work of affection (φιλίας ἔργον).”\footnote{Lord, trans. \textit{Aristotle’s Politics}, p. 59, 1262b 6-8.} The problem is the preservation of the city and Socrates, from the discussion in the \textit{Republic}, is asserting that the thing which destabilizes the city, at least in how Aristotle is using Socrates here, is private affection. Therefore, it is important to understand how Aristotle is using affection in this context. He argues, “there are two things above all which make human beings cherish and feel affection (ἀγαπητόν), what is one’s own and what is dear; and neither of these can be
available to those who govern themselves in this way.” Here, cherish is translating κήδεσθαι derived from the verb κήδω meaning to distress or trouble, in the sense of “being concerned for.” These causes of concern are paralleled with things that are ours individually (τό τε ἰδιόν). In the context, these are the emotions associated with those like us, specifically to kin. The second facet, feeling affection, translates φιλεῖν and its parallel by τὸ ἀγαπητόν, those who generate affection or fondness. These are non-familial ties but ones that still generate affection, not some mild form of fellow-feeling or abstract acquaintance. Given that Aristotle is discussing collapsing the distinction between the family and the city, unless we are to understand that the bifurcation between one’s own and those who generate affection is actually a unity pointing us only to the family, this distinction must point us to the distinction between the family and city.

Aristotle is not taking up the supposition if a city is unified by affection but he is rejecting the supposition that to preserve a city, one must make all of the individuals feel as though they were a family. He is rejecting the notion that one must collapse the levels of intimacy into a singular, familial one. For, “it must necessarily happen that both, or one of them, disappear [in the union],” because the bonds of affection are thinned as they are extended and, thus, “in the city, however, affection necessarily becomes diluted through this sort of partnership…just as adding much water to a small amount of wine makes the mixture imperceptible, so too does this result with respect to the kinship.” Collapsing the city and family into one unit, even to mitigate the harm posed by factions within the city, does not save the city but it does destroy the family. But, perhaps even more so, it may ultimately dissolve the

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50 Ibid, p. 59, 1262b 21-23.
51 See Rhetoric 1371a 21.
52 This may be in contrast with NE 9.5 where Aristotle describes goodwill as something like friendship but far milder and one-sided; goodwill lacks the necessary reciprocity which makes friendship viable. 1166b 30-1167a20
city given the prior discussion of distinguishing mine/thine and the dual drives of human nature. If we dissolve the ability to distinguish between my family and our collective enterprise, making them into the same experience, the necessary sense of ownership and affection that citizens must feel for the city perishes.

Therefore, if the city is held together by affection but it is not the affection of the family, it must have an affection specific to the city; it must have a kind of political friendship which is distinguished from the intimacy of the family. Aristotle, however, does not discuss this in this passage of the Politics. Rather, at the end of this conversation, he concludes that Socrates was correct that the family and city should be a kind of unity in one sense but not in another. Rather, a city is comprised of multiple facets and, “must be made one and common through education.”54 Part of that education must be educating the members of the city for the appropriate level of affection. That level of affection, a political friendship, is only explored directly in Nicomachean Ethics 9.6. However, since political friendship relies upon empathy as its emotional tether, it is appropriate to first examine the nature of decency because, as explored in chapter two, decency and empathy are intrinsically connected.

Decency and Equity

If political friendship is to be understood as approximated decency, the next element to explore is what being decent requires. To do so, one must first establish, at least in brief, the relationship between equity and justice. To this end, it is appropriate to turn specifically to two chapters in the Nichomachean Ethics, 5.10 and 6.11. In 5.10, Aristotle examines the relationship

54 Ibid, p. 62, 1263b 38.
of equity and justice directly whereas in 6.11 he takes up the subsequent concern the relationship between judgment and equity. Since the first concern here is the relationship between equity and justice, this examination will begin with a close reading of 5.10.

If justice and equity are the same, meaning that justice in an unqualified sense is the same as equity, this would make equity a virtue par excellence. Perhaps this is why 5.10 opens asking whether decency/equity (ἐπιείκεια) is the same or different than justice and whether it is superior or inferior accordingly. After weighing various claims on this relationship, Aristotle summarizes that

For the decent thing, though it is better than a certain kind of just thing, is just, and is not better than what is just by being of some other kind. Therefore the same thing is just and decent, and while both are things of serious worth, what is decent is superior.  

Decency is a sub-set of unqualified justice but is superior to other, qualified forms of justice. The purpose here is not to explicate this distinction but to highlight the way in which decency and fairness are fundamentally connected. This is particularly the case if one understands following the law to be a qualified form of justice. He distinguishes that, “while what is decent is just, it is not so according to the law, but is a setting straight of what is legally just.” This distinction between what is decent and what is legal leaves open the possibility that the law could be unjust. Since the primary purpose of a citizen in a given regime is to preserve that regime

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58 NE 1129b 19-24. Part of this, also, can also be understood through Aristotle’s distinction between what is legal and what is lawful/conventional within political justice (NE 1134b 18-19). See also Miller, Nature, Justice, and Rights, p. 74-79.
59 Politics 1276b 28-31.
such an opening retains the possibility that a given regime will produce laws which violate justice in an unqualified sense. This would mean that a citizen would be behaving unjustly by following the regime’s laws. While this is a problem for living a virtuous life, it is not inherently a problem for a regime’s citizens to behave unjustly in an unqualified sense. However, because of this intrinsic connection between what is just and what is decent, such a regime has an incentive, at minimum, to encourage decency within its citizenry for reasons that will be explored in the next section of this chapter. In terms of this exploration, decency should be aligned with a qualified sense of justice and this qualified sense should also be aligned with justice in an unqualified sense. When these elements come into conflict, decency is the superior quality seemingly because it exists outside of the boundaries of the law.

This is evident by Aristotle immediately transitioning into why equity and the law are distinct, arguing that, “every law is universal, and there are some things about which it is not possible to speak rightly when speaking universally.” Universal here is relative to the regime, not universal to the species because the concern is with how a law is applied in a specific case, not if a law aligns with a universal standard without application. This is further clarified when he argues that, “the error is not in the law or in the lawmaker, but in the nature of a particular case.” But, just in the next line, he argues,

So whenever the law speaks universally, but what turns out in this case lies outside the thing said universally, then it is right, insofar as the lawmaker leaves something out and errs by speaking simply, to set straight the thing left out, which even the lawmaker

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60 It is possible to see the deviant regimes in this light; that because they exist for the benefit of the rulers, they are undermining justice in an unqualified sense. Politics 1279a 17-21; Pangle, Aristotle’s Teaching, p. 103-111

61 Sachs, trans., Nicomachean Ethics, p. 100 1137b 15-17.

62 Miller rightly notes that both universal and particular justice require a sense of community or share something in common, but that, “universal justice includes any ethical virtue in so far as it promotes and protects the good of the community, whereas particular justice involves specific sorts of actions affecting the common advantage.” 69-70. He does go on to argue, however, that there may be a sense of non-political justice in Aristotle but that exploration is beyond the scope here. See Miller, Nature, Justice, and Rights, p. 84-86.

63 Sachs, trans., Nicomachean Ethics, p. 100 1137b 19-20.
Lawmakers do err insofar as they do not know the consequences of their omission. While Aristotle attempts to shield the law or the lawmaker from the accusation of injustice or incompetence, his defense highlights deficiencies within a given law. Specifically, this passage highlights two deficiencies: the law cannot be applied in all situations justly and it requires correction from something outside of itself. Decency/equity compels us to evaluate the justness of a given claim or outcome, not by the standard of a given law, but by an external standard of fairness. Equity, then, exists in the space of this deficiency and seems to serve a corrective role.

Before moving forward, it is worth noting that the lawmaker is behaving similarly to the protagonist in a tragedy because both are acting in a way they believe to be correct, only to discover their error in the consequences of their actions. The difference between the two is the error of the lawgiver rarely destroys the lawgiver whereas the error made by the protagonist is their undoing. The underlying error is the same, namely acting without an understanding of the consequence. As discussed above, the foresight that drives man out of the family and into the city is limited in the production and application of the law. Such limitations of reason in the production of the law highlight why decency is necessary as a corrective for those limitations. As Aristotle argues in the Politics, “it is not best to leave written [laws] unchanged…it is impossible for everything to be written down precisely; for it is necessary to write them in

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64 Ibid, p. 100 1137b 21-25.
65 This is the same logic behind Sokolon’s argument that we must understand the harmony between reason and passion for justice. She argues, “emotions, such as anger and gentleness, are necessary elements in Aristotle’s understanding of justice. Along with reason, just action can be motivated at the right time in the right manner and for the right reason. Hence, as Aristotle indicates in the Politics, although law may be intellect without emotion, justice always requires the symphony of reason and emotion." Marleen Sokolon, Political Emotions: Aristotle and the Symphony of Reason and Emotion (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2006), 62.
universal fashion, while actions concern particulars.”66 As particulars of a given law conflict with the universality of the law in the regime, prudence dictates that one either change the law or suspend the application of the law in a given circumstance. Even the most virtuous of lawgivers, or even the most virtuous of laws, requires changing because of the limitations of human reason.67 No law can be made that will endure in all circumstances because there is no way for human reason to construct such a law. Failure to make corrections to the law is a kind of mistake, one which augments the ignorance bound up within the law. In this sense, it is possible to see decency as means to mitigate not only the law but also human error (ἁμαρτία) within the law.

Changing the law, however, should only be done gradually or perhaps not even at all depending on its impact. He notes that, “since it is a bad thing to habituate people to the reckless dissolution of laws, it is evident that some errors both of the legislators and of the rulers should be let go,” highlighting that lawmakers do err but sometimes it is better for the city if those errors are sustained. This is because “[the city] will not be benefited as much from changing them as it will be harmed through being habituated to disobey the rulers…for law has no strength with respect to obedience apart from habit, and this is not created except over a period of time.”68 Since the law is only able to properly function if the people are habituated to following the law, changing the law risks dissolving the purpose of citizenship by undermining the stability of the regime.69 Such actions are not prudent but neither is having laws, even ones created without errors by the lawmaker, applied erroneously or unjustly.

66 Lord, trans., Aristotle’s Politics, p.73 1269a 8-11.
67 Or because of the reality that the best regime may never exist. Politics 1295a 25-31 See also Pangle, Aristotle’s Teaching in the Politics, p. 121-25.
69 He further notes that poor habituation, or a failure to properly habituate people, leads to acting unjustly. NE 1179b 31-1180a24.
The remedy that remains is to modify or suspend the application of the law in a given circumstance. Aristotle says that this is, “the nature of what is decent, a setting straight of a law, insofar as it leaves something out as a result of being universal.”

Modifying or suspending the law in a particular instance, or perhaps more accurately, suspending the penalty from violating the law, is the more prudent remedy for the error made by the lawmaker. But his next line indicates that the flaw is not actually with the lawmaker but with law itself; “this is also the reason why not all things are in accord with law, because it is impossible to set down a law about some things, so that there is need of a decree.” Decree is translating ψηφίσματος which refers to a proposal or declaration passed by a vote. This decent or equitable act is not something done by a specific individual but, rather, is an overtly political act because it refers to the action of a jury or an assembly; this is not an activity reserved for the few or the virtuous. Because any law produces this gap between the universal and the particular, any city which is governed through the law is going to require their citizens to utilize this corrective.

Aristotle concludes this chapter reiterating that decency/equity is just and is better than other forms of justice, specifically the form which requires a rigid application of the law to all cases equally. The decent person is the one who, “is inclined to choose and to do things of that sort, and who is not rigidly precise about justice to a fault,” but he is also, “inclined to take less, even when he has the support of the law…and this active condition of the soul (ἕξις) is decency, being a certain kind of justice and not a different active condition.” Aristotle resolves that decency is a kind of justice, making decency/equity into a virtue. What is unusual about this claim is equity’s function is to be a corrective to a different application of the same virtue. Even

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70 Sachs, trans., *Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 100 1137b 26-8.
71 Ibid, p. 100 1137b 29-30.
72 Ibid, p. 100 1137b 31- 1138a 5.
if adhering to law in accordance with virtue is “complete virtue, though not simply but in relation to someone else,” this discussion of equity highlights how simple adherence to the law, even law attached to virtue, is incomplete for the virtue of justice.

Yet, Aristotle uses ἐπεικὴς in ways that seem to contradict this idea that decency is a virtue. One example comes in NE 5.4 where he is discussing how the law operates within a population, claiming, “it makes no difference whether a decent person cheated someone of a low sort, or a low sort of person cheated a decent one…the law looks only to the difference arising from the harm, and treats people as equals, if one of them does injustice and the other suffers it…” This passage indicates, perhaps, that the bifurcation between the decent and lowly (ἐπεικὴς and φαύλον) is not that concrete. Rather, if both the decent and the lowly are able to engage in the same kind of unjust behavior, what separates them cannot be the vice of injustice alone. One must then ask if decency is held to be part of justice, how is it that the decent are capable of acting unjustly?

One possible answer can be found in Aristotle’s discussion of voluntary action (ἐκουσίῳ) in NE 5.8. Aristotle makes a distinction between harms caused which are counter to reasonable expectations and from harm caused without prior consideration; both are absent vice. The first he calls an error (ἀμάρτημα) and the second an unjust act (ἀδικήματά). Even though the latter category is an unjust act, because it comes from, “anger or some other passion” it is, “a consequence of either necessity or the nature of human beings,” and therefore is not vice because while the act is unjust, “these people are not yet unjust or wicked…for the harm done

74 Ibid, p. 86 1132a 2-4.
75 NE 1135b 15-20. Errors happen because the cause is within the moral actor; if the cause is external, Aristotle refers to this as unfortunate or a misfortune (ἀτυχεῖ).
76 θυμόν καὶ ἄλλα πάθη, ὡσα ἀναγκαία ἢ φυσικά συμβαίνει τοῖς ἀνθρώποις NE 1135b 21-22.
does not arise through any corruption.”

This means that the act alone is not sufficient to determine that someone is unjust but both reason and emotion are necessary. Making a mistake or acting rashly do not rise to the level of vice. Only when one acts unjustly after deliberation and intending to cause harm rises to the level of vice.

In light of this, it is worth re-examining Aristotle’s example of the decent person cheating someone else to illustrate the nature of decency. A decent person cheating a non-decent person violates Aristotle’s claim that someone who is decent accepts less than what they deserve when something is distributed by the law or honor. Not only does such action violate the claim, the action inverts the central premise that the decent person takes less than what should be their equal allocation; stealing is the inverse of this situation. How could it be that the decent person would be capable of acting in the exact opposite manner to their character? Given the discussion of error and vice, Aristotle’s example should be understood as arguing that the decent person inequitably distributed some good but such an action cannot be the consequence of vicious intent; if it were, such a person would be acting maliciously. Rather, because the law takes into consideration only the harm, the law treats similar actions as being the same when they may not be. Causing harm voluntarily, meaning to act with vicious intent, is categorically different than causing it by accident even if the harm is the same. Equity requires evaluating broader considerations than just harm or the injustice of a particular act. Failing to do so is actually a kind of injustice. If Aristotle’s example means that the decent act viciously, this would contradict his argument that the decent are able to properly judge a given circumstance. The difference

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78 Sokolon, Political Emotions, p. 5-32.
79 NE 1135b 25.
80 NE 1137b 32-36.
between the decent and non-decent seems rooted in the capacity for making the just decision even when doing so violates another sense of justice, namely the strict application of the law.

Aristotle, in *NE* 6.11, furthers the argument that the nature of decency is to distinguish things correctly.  The term Aristotle uses to describe this sort of judgment is συγγνώμην, and he uses this term in multiple places in the *Politics*, the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and the *Rhetoric*. It is a term describing leniency or mercy, though recent translators have used a range of terms from *sympathetic* or *compassionate*, to *indulgence*, *excuse*, or *forgiveness*. The significance of the term is that this lenient or merciful act is what defines someone who is decent. Aristotle’s argument that, “συγγνώμην is a judgment characterized by a correct decision as to what is equitable, it being correct because it grasps what is truly equitable,” further cements the notion that equity/decency is defined by the ability to have the appropriate level of mercy. He goes on to argue that, “good [judgment] or [συγγνώμην] consists in his being skilled in deciding the matters with which the prudent person is concerned.” Aligning mercy/leniency with prudence indicates that this kind of behavior is virtuous, perhaps limiting the amount of people who can be called merciful/leniient.

Yet, in this next sentence, he argues that these are behaviors are not limited to just the virtuous, even if the prudent are best able to handle them. He argues,
For the equitable things are common to *all* good human beings in their being directed toward another, and *all* matters of action fall among things particular and ultimate: the prudent person must recognize them, and both comprehension and judgment concern actions performed, which are ultimate things.\(^{87}\)

Here, he seems to further collapse the distinction between decency and virtue, asserting that decency is shared with all good people (ἐπεικῆ κοίνὰ τῶν ἀγαθῶν). The concern with the gap between the particular and the ultimate (τῶν καθ᾽ ἐκαστὰ καὶ τῶν ἐσχάτων) in the prudent person is worthy of far greater exploration than is possible here.\(^{88}\) For the purposes of this inquiry, it is worth noting because it reinforces the nature of prudence; the prudent person is the one who is able to understand the ultimate end (ἐσχάτων) while understanding how to apply it in each instance (καθ᾽ ἐκαστα). That ability is part-and-parcel of having mercy/leniency. From these passages, we could conclude that the prudent exemplify equity and thus, equity is best displayed by the virtuous. In this way, it is possible to see equity as a virtue because the tension between mercy and justice is hard to parse even for the founders of cities, exemplified by the failure of the law to have a corrective for its own universality.\(^{89}\)

However, since Aristotle rejects the notion that decency is lower than justice, arguing the opposite, we cannot conclude that the decent are somehow lower than the virtuous. As explored

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\(^{87}\) Ibid, p. 129-30 1143a 32-5.


\(^{89}\) Perhaps it is only the philosopher, the one who is able to understand both first principles without demonstration as well as the particular cases exemplified in a demonstration, is capable of engaging in such behavior consistently. *NE* 1143b 1-15.
above, avoiding civil war within the city seems to depend on the lowly sort at least approximating the behaviors of the decent. By extension, this must mean that the lowly sort can at least be persuaded to be merciful/l lenient, if not actually come to merciful/lenient judgments themselves. If equity/decency is akin to justice, and its application is common to all good or prudent people, doing decent acts or having mercy in particular instances cannot be beyond the capacity of even the lowly sort. They must have the capacity to relate to the decent by doing decent acts, even if in so doing, they are merely mimicking or approximating actual decency. In a certain sense, we can understand this as a similar division within justice itself: complete and qualified justice. Equity is dealing with concerns of qualified justice and, therefore, is not akin to the virtue of justice but it is more like unqualified justice than simply following the law.

Recalling the discussion in chapter two, the ability to feel empathy can be invoked even among the non-decent and empathy is an essential component of decency; those who are decent are able to empathize with the plight of those who do not deserve their suffering. Therefore, combining this understanding of empathy and with this understanding of equity means that cultivating acts of equity should not be limited only to the decent nor to the virtuous. Rather, such cultivation may be an essential component of political friendship because such acts both generate and display decency. In relying upon this same emotional structure, it is possible to understand that poetry serves a critical role in cultivating these vital political emotions. This will be explored more fully in chapter five. Before turning to that, however, it is first necessary to establish a more direct connection between political friendship and decency to understand why this political emotion is vital for the life of the city.
Turning now to Aristotle’s only direct exploration of political friendship in NE 9.6, it is important to note that chapter nine of the *Nicomachean Ethics* opens with Aristotle discussing heterogeneous (ἁνομοιοειδέσι) friendship and how it is a type of friendship between those who are not the same or do not desire the same outcome from the interaction. The discussion of political friendship falls within this paradigm. The concern of the preceding chapter, 9.5, is the issue of goodwill (εὔνοια) and how, while goodwill resembles a kind of friendship, it is not friendship. I will return to this topic in the next section dealing with the question of philanthropy but it is worth noting the context here because the foundation of political friendship, like-mindedness (ὁμόνωμα), is presented as different than goodwill, even if both are actually necessary for friendship. This distinction is based on the inherent intimacy of the relationships; goodwill is possible even for those one has just met whereas like-mindedness requires living together for an extended period of time. But, as Aristotle quickly transitions into 9.6, like-mindedness is far more about having similar judgment about similar things than simple cohabitation.

90 See Sachs, trans., *Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 162-3. Yack and Price both contend that we should see political friendship as a form of friendship between equals but this overlooks this context. Aristotle’s discussion of political friendship emerges from this discussion of friendship with the self then transitions to the general feeling of goodwill before turning to political friendship; this is still within the context of heterogenous associations. It seems odd to say a person can be heterogenous with themselves but 9.4 examines how the decent are marked by being friends with themselves whereas the non-decent are not friends with themselves; in this sense, their affection for themselves is not equal nor based on mutual exchange. Bernard Yack, *The Problems of a Political Animal* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993) 111-17, A.W. Price, *Love and Friendship in Plato and Aristotle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 194-99.


92 *NE* 1167a 8-10.

93 *NE* 1167a 10-30. See also Pangle, *Aristotle and the Philosophy of Friendship*, p. 155-159.
By connecting like-mindedness to judgment about certain things, Aristotle is providing a starting definition for political friendship as a sort of intimacy generated through a shared perspective on how one is to live. His argument begins by rejecting the claim that people are like-minded because they share the same opinion, even including those who share a similar perspective on anything (his reference is to the planets and stars). Rather, he claims that we speak of, “cities as being like-minded, whenever people judge alike about what is advantageous, and choose the same things, and act on the things they believe in common.” Like-mindedness here is a variation on the claim that someone else can be “like us,” specifically that we agree about what is mutually beneficial and how we should mutually behave. This should not be understood in a kind of materialistic transaction but, rather, as things which are “of magnitude and capable of belonging to both or all of them together.” Like-mindedness is better understood as an agreement on what kind of behavior is necessary for mutual exchange; it is an essential foundation for the other, smaller layers of interaction. In this way, it serves as the architectonic framework for life in the city which is why lawmakers are concerned, perhaps above all else, with it. Therefore, Aristotle concludes that when there is not a general consensus among the population and instead there is competition among powerful individuals who wish to impose their preference, such as the example provided by Euripides’ Phoenician Women, there is civil...

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94 NE 1167a 23-26.
96 Valk sees benefit (συμφέροντα - he calls it advantage) as a category of utility friendship and paints political friendship almost like a kind of social contract. The seeking of benefit is part of our natural condition and what drives us out of the family into other associations, not mere self-interest. In the case of the city, the line between what is beneficial and what is good is not altogether clear, at least as it concerns to political and not philosophical concerns. See Francis Vander Valk, “Political Friendship and the Second Self in Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics,” Innovations: A Journal of Politics 5 (2004-2005), 51-52.
98 NE 1094a 27-1094b10, 1145a 10-12.
99 NE 1167a 32-34.
strife.¹⁰⁰ Civil strife is an indication of either the breakdown or absence of like-mindedness and is, therefore, the opposite of political friendship.

With this contrast established, Aristotle then transitions to the question of political friendship and decency, the topic that finishes his very short chapter. He begins by arguing that “like-mindedness…appears to be political friendship…for it concerns advantageous things and those that relate to life [or livelihood].”¹⁰¹ This would be a strong enough clarifying statement defining political friendship as both a mutual understanding of why living together in a specific way is beneficial to all and an agreement on the best way to allocate those benefits through a particular organization for the city. It seems that such a condition would be available to anyone within a given city. However, he goes on to argue that,

…this sort of like-mindedness is present among the decent, since they are like-minded both with themselves and with one another, being on the same page, so to speak (for with these sorts of people the objects of their wishing remain constant and do not ebb and flow like a violent strait); they also wish for what is just and what is advantageous, and they aim at these also in common.¹⁰²

There are two claims in this passage I wish to examine more closely: (1) the decent are like-minded with themselves (ἑαυτῶς ὁμονοοῦσι) and (2) what they wish for is what is just and beneficial (βούλονται τε τὰ δίκαια καὶ τὰ συμφέροντα). Both claims inform us to the nature of both the decent and political friendship since these same characteristics exist within both categories.

The first claim should be read in light of a prior passage in NE 9.4. Here, Aristotle first takes up the idea that friendship includes one who both wishes and does good things for someone, one wishes for longevity for another, and one with whom we share our time, raising

¹⁰⁰ NE 1167a 30-31.
¹⁰¹ Bartlett and Collins, trans., Nicomachean Ethics, p. 198 NE 1167b 1-4.
¹⁰² Ibid, p. 198 NE 1167b 5-7.
the question if this means we must be friends with ourselves. He argues that the decent person already has such a condition with themselves because he “is of like mind with himself and longs for the same things with his whole soul.” Individuals who cannot do this run away from themselves because their recollections are painful; being with others allows them to avoid such recollections. The decent person can also live with others who are decent, or whom the decent person perceives as being decent. Because his internal order has not been corrupted from having contradictory wishes or desires, often grounded in vice, it is possible to say that the decent person is same-minded with himself through time. This is contrasted by someone who does not share this same mindedness and they are called base (οἱ ἰθαλοῖ). Aristotle ends this short chapter by saying if one cannot be friendly toward themselves, “because he possesses nothing lovable. If, therefore, to be disposed is to be extremely miserable, a person must flee corruption with the utmost effort and attempt to be decent, since in this way he would both be disposed toward himself in a friendly way and become a friend to another.” The common or the vulgar, incapable of being their own friend, should strive to avoid other vices in order that they may at least be capable of being someone else’s friend. In this sense, such a person is incapable of being a friend in the highest regard for they are incapable of being friends with themselves. Perhaps the best they can construct is an approximation of decency.

103 NE 1166a 1-10.  
105 NE 1166b 16-19.  
106 NE 1166a 12.  
107 Stern-Gillet, Aristotle’s Philosophy of Friendship, p. 11-58; Pangle, Aristotle and the Philosophy of Friendship, 176-82.  
109 Pangle, Aristotle and the Philosophy of Friendship, p. 142-54.
Given that political friendship is heterogeneous (ἀνομοιοειδέσι) and also concerned with what is beneficial\textsuperscript{110}, the vulgar may be able to have a kind of friendship with the decent if they can act as if they were decent. In making such a claim, Aristotle is echoing how he describes the process by which one becomes ethical broadly, acting as the prudent would, even if one is not ethical.\textsuperscript{111} While decency is not a virtue, its absence may be indicative of a vice.\textsuperscript{112} A city does not need all citizens to be virtuous, nor would it be possible except maybe in the best regime,\textsuperscript{113} but it at least needs people to either be decent or approximate decent behavior. Without having a like-mindedness akin to the decent, life in the city succumbs to civil strife.\textsuperscript{114} The decent already contain the elements necessary for political friendship whereas the vulgar do not. Since a city is going to be comprised of both elements, political friendship, in this regard, is an approximated decency.\textsuperscript{115}

In this way, we can say that others in a city are “like us” for we share a similar understanding of what it means to be decent, even if a specific individual within that schema is


\textsuperscript{112} The vice here could be a deficiency in friendliness (φίλον) as discussed in \textit{NE} 1126b 11-1127a10. Avramenko and Promisel argue that this virtue may best be understood as toleration. Building from this, It may be that toleration is an essential marker of political friendship and may be the virtue most associated with empathy, the two being essential components of political friendship. This requires more exploration than is possible here but the association is important to note. See Avramenko and Promisel, “When Toleration Becomes a Vice: Naming Aristotle’s Third Unnamed Virtue,” p. 849-60.

\textsuperscript{113} Though even in the best city, Aristotle is doubtful this could ever come to be. \textit{Politics} 1277a 1-10.

\textsuperscript{114} \textit{NE} 1167b 10-15.

\textsuperscript{115} Price contends that political friendship is better understood under the banner of advantage friendship. While this is certainly correct in one sense, particularly that the city is a kind of partnership (\textit{Politics} 1276a 40-1276b 10), it misses the important distinction had between friendships based in mutual exchange and that based on heterogeneity. Because the city is comprised of both the decent and non-decent (\textit{Politics} 1276a 1-5), political friendship either must only exist within a given faction of the city, undermining the idea that cities are held together through affection, or political friendship is only a contract, which Aristotle rejects. Therefore, while the city emerges as a kind of advantage for all those within it, political friendship should not be understood as being a subcategory of advantage friendship. See Price, \textit{Love and Friendship in Plato and Aristotle}, p. 194-99.
not actually decent. Turning back to 9.6 where Aristotle claims that, “to be like-minded is not for each to have the same thing in mind, whatever it may be, but to have it in mind in the same way,” approximated decency does not mean the city must all agree on the nature of any specific thing. Rather, they must agree on the broad contours of a given action. Aristotle’s example that “when both the *demos* and the *epieikes* have it in mind for the best persons to rule – since in this way what they aim at comes to pass for everyone,”\textsuperscript{116} provides a certain amount of clarity, namely, that both parties in a city can agree that the best should rule; both the demos and the decent agree to live under the same constitution. This does not mean that the decent and the demos will agree on who is the best or what is the nature of the best, for agreements of this kind are about things concerning a specific item or action. His other example, that “cities are like-minded whenever it is resolved by all to make the political offices elective, or to conclude an alliance with the Lacedaimonians…”\textsuperscript{117} highlights how political friendship requires we agree on the nature of the regime. This requires the citizens to agree on what kinds of honors the city should give and how offices should be distributed. From these passages, it would seem that political friendship is just a kind of social contract outlining the nature of the regime, how it functions, and who rules. However, given the prior discussion of empathy, political friendship is not just a contractual obligation but one that requires we see ourselves on both sides of the hypothetical coin. A decent person, as explored in chapter two, will decide to take less than what they deserve as well as understand when applying a punishment is not just. These are rational qualifications but it relies on an underlying emotional structure, empathy, in order to imagine

\textsuperscript{116} Bartlett and Collins, trans., *Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 197, 1167a 35- 1167b 3. They translate ἐπιεικείς as the decent; I have preserved the transliteration here.

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid, p. 197, 1167a 30-32.
how painful a different outcome would be. Like-mindedness requires a kind of shared understanding but also a shared experience.

Aristotle ends the chapter on political friendship not by returning us to the question of broad-based agreement within the city, nor with a return to the nature of the decent, but with the nature of faction. His concern is not with the character of the decent but with the poor character of the masses; if the city does not keep watch over the character of the masses, the city succumbs to civil unrest.\textsuperscript{118} His concluding line is a warning, arguing that the city, “falls into civil faction, compelling one another by force and not wishing to do what is just themselves.”\textsuperscript{119} The dissolution of political friendship into faction comes about because the masses lose their ability to approximate the behavior of the decent and rather come to behave like the base (φάύλος). The agreement about the nature of life in the city succumbs to petty desires instead of a widely shared understanding on what is beneficial. This seems to illustrate the tension that lies at the heart of the city: the necessity that the masses act decently while not being decent by nature or habit. What a city requires is a means for generating an approximation of decent behavior within the masses in order to mitigate, as much as is possible, the dangers of civil strife drawn from baseness.

However, there is little question that the few can be driven to dominate just as much as the demos and can serve as a threat to the stability of the city.\textsuperscript{120} This must mean that the decent are the ones who actually act decently, not just the well born or the wealthy few. While Aristotle is using the demos and the vulgar nearly interchangeably here, we should not read the decent as being interchangeable with the few. While an oligarchy is more prone to factional strife than a

\textsuperscript{118} \textit{NE} 1267b 13-16. See also \textit{Politics} 1303b 15-17.
\textsuperscript{119} Bartlett and Collins, trans., \textit{Nicomachean Ethics}, p. 198 1167b 15-16.
\textsuperscript{120} \textit{Politics} 1301a 25-1302a 15, 1289b4-1290a28. See also Pangle, \textit{Aristotle’s Teaching in the Politics}, p. 199-210.
democracy, the “regime made up of the middling elements is closer to [rule of] the people than to [rule of] the few, and this is the most stable of the regimes of this sort.”\textsuperscript{121} The mean between the many and the few is the most stable of such regimes, and the decent contain within them the elements necessary for political friendship. If one were to construct an ideal typography for a regime, at least for a practical one, it would be one constructed of a decent middling sort or one which most closely approximates it. The few serve as a greater threat to the stability of the regime because they are more prone to civil strife than the many, but the character of masses is more difficult to change than the few. Perhaps this is just an empirical observation; it is more difficult to properly educate a larger number than a smaller one. But perhaps it also indicates that while the many are able to approximate the behaviors of the decent, ruling in a way that has the effect of meeting the common interest even if it is not done in the common interest, the city is less prone to civil strife.

It seems, then, that Aristotle’s warning is aimed at the character of the vulgar because the “law has no strength with respect to obedience apart from habit, and this is not created except over a period of time.”\textsuperscript{122} What is necessary is for the city to construct an education with an eye toward political friendship in order to mitigate potential civil strife. This is in keeping with Aristotle’s argument that the city, “being a multitude, must be made one and common through education.”\textsuperscript{123} If the multitude can be understood as at least the bifurcation between the decent and the vulgar, there must be an education which extends to both of them and which is able to

\textsuperscript{121} Lord, trans. \textit{Aristotle’s Politics}, p. 149 1302a 13-15. 
\textsuperscript{122} Lord, trans. \textit{Aristotle’s Politics}, p. 73 1269a 20-22. 
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid, p.62 1263b 35-37.
make both facets see themselves as a unity insofar as the good of the city is concerned.\textsuperscript{124} The good of the city requires that the vulgar approximate the behaviors of the decent.

In light of this, we can also better understand Aristotle’s claim that, “What happens in the cities too bears witness to this, for by habituating citizens, lawgivers make them good, and this is the wish of every lawgiver; all who do not do this well are in error, and it is in this respect that a good regime differs from a base regime.”\textsuperscript{125} Lawgivers are interested in making citizens good through habituation for the benefit of the regime, but no lawgiver, save perhaps the one of the best regime, is able to make all citizens good.\textsuperscript{126} Aristotle’s claim that good lawgivers point the city toward the public good must be moderated a bit given this limitation. However, this moderation reinforces the importance of an education toward political friendship, particularly if we understand political friendship to be an approximation of decency. Lawmakers may not actually be able to make the citizens good, but the laws may be able to make citizens act in accordance with decency. Doing so will not make the vulgar decent in the same way that doing one virtuous act does not make one virtuous.\textsuperscript{127} Instead, what it may do is show us that the best we can wish for in the law is to make people as good as possible knowing that making them good is beyond the power of the city. The best we can wish for are laws which generate political friendship, understood as approximated decency, among the citizenry.

\textsuperscript{124} NE 1155a 22-26.
\textsuperscript{125} Bartlett and Collins, trans., Nicomachean Ethics, p. 27 1103b 2-5.
\textsuperscript{126} Politics 1276b 25-35. While at Politics 1278a 8-9, Aristotle indicates that the best regime will not make a vulgar person a citizen, it is doubtful even the best city could resolve this tension. See Collin’s discussion of the problem of aligning the best man and the best citizen even in the best regime; Susan Collins, Aristotle and the Rediscovery of Citizenship (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 124-31.
\textsuperscript{127} NE 1103a 30-35, 1104a 26-30, 1105a 23-1105b5.
Man is by, nature, a political animal in a qualified sense. The biological impulse to reproduce drives human beings into the family, but the capacity for foresight and desire for self-sufficiency pushes him beyond the boundary of the familial life. Because of this bifurcation in man’s nature, the drive to replicate is not limited to only biological off-spring but also includes the need to make others who are “like us” in our associations including the city. Therefore, man is driven to construct a schema that allows him not only to generate biological second-selves but also ethical and political second-selves.

The conflicts that arise through these competing interests manifest most intensely along lines of intimacy. The claims of the family supersede the claims of non-familial ties, which presents a threat to the claims of the city to make all citizens “like us.” The life of the city depends on people within the city sharing the same mind as it relates to the regime but also as it relates to the necessary conduct of fellow citizens. Since we cannot rely on all citizens to be decent, much less virtuous, we have to create a sense of like-mindedness that is intimate enough to generate love (φιλία) but not intimate enough to dissolve the private-public distinction. Political friendship, a bond of affection within the boundaries of the city, serves this role but it is a friendship defined by its heterogeneity; the occupants of the city are a unity in the sense that they all live within the same regime but beyond that, the city is an economic, social, and ethical multiplicity. Because the city is not comprised of those who are the same without qualification, the best we can do is generate an affection that approximates the kind of behavior that is most conducive to life in the city. That life is the one that is decent which is why political friendship is best understood as a kind of approximated decency.
Having explored the re-founding of poetry in mimesis, the psychological architecture at work in poetry and how poetry utilizes it and the nature of political friendship, this final chapter will take up the last two concerns. First it will turn to the tension between justice and friendship, and then it shall examine the relationship between education and judgment. I argue that, building on the definition of political friendship from chapter four, that decency serves as a bridge for the tension between justice and friendship and that equity is, above all else, dependent upon a proper education for judgment. Because tragedy utilizes the same psychological architecture as political friendship and the same judgment mechanisms as the courts, it can educate the city in a way that the laws cannot. By driving audiences, who are comprised of both the decent and the vulgar, to engage empathetically while judging someone else’s plight, tragedy makes the masses who could otherwise succumb to vulgar tendencies to approximate the behavior of the decent, augmenting the foundation of political friendship.

This educative role exists because the audience is comprised of both the decent and the lowly. Aristotle argues that such an audience must be able to relate to the protagonist in order for tragedy to have its power. A tragedy does not work if the audience does not see the protagonist as decent, therefore not deserving of their fate, nor does a tragedy work if the audience does not see themselves as decent. This layered understanding reinforces one central political purpose of
tragedy: to give us a collective sense of what is worthy of empathy/merits our forgiveness beyond the scope of the law. The collective nature of the theater, with its capacity to change the state of our soul, further points us to the educative role that the theater has for the population. The stories told in the theater are designed to elevate essential components of living together in the city. Both tragedy and the city rely on our capacity to empathize and it is through this shared emotional network that tragedy serves a critical educative role for the city. I will argue that μῦθος serves as a tool for educating the city (πολις) beyond the laws (νομοι), which are the primary educator for the city, because the education provided by the laws alone is inadequate to living justly. If this were not so, equity would not need to be a corrective to the unjust application of even the just laws. This chapter will first turn to look at the tension between justice and friendship and then turns to the question of the educative role poetry serves in the city, establishing the final element for understanding the political purpose of poetry.

Justice and Friendship

Empathy helps bridge the gap between justice and friendship, reinforcing the underlying affection necessary for viable political friendship. An act of decency transpires after a transgression. Perhaps in contrast with political friendship, in the highest kind of friendship, a friendship in virtue, transgressions should not take place. Such friends are not going to be miserly with one another and will see that their personal interest is also their friend’s interest.

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2 They are designed to reflect “decent characters and noble actions.” Politics 1340a 23-25.
3 NE 1130b 22-24.
4 NE 1157a 18-25, 1158b 30-35, 1159a 5-10, 1162a-1163a23. See also David Konstan, Friendship in the Classical World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 70-75.
Aristotle states, “When people are friends, they have no need for justice, but when they are just, they do need friendship in addition; and in the realm of the just things, the most just seems to be what involves friendship.”\(^5\) Friends have no need for justice because they have no need to redress grievances but it may also be that the most just will be the thing that most approximates close friendship.\(^6\) This, however, is not possible at the level of the city; a city can never become so just as to be comprised of intimate friends. Therefore, this must mean that there is an asymptote between justice and friendship. The inability for justice to generate a powerful sense of obligation, at least when compared to friendship, leaves the city with a problem of how to not devolve into a mere defense alliance or economic exchange. However, relying too much on affection may undermine the nature of the city itself, as discussed in chapter four, because it may dissolve the necessary distinctions between family and companion. So, we are left with the problem of how to balance within the city the affection of friendship and the impersonal nature of justice.

Aristotle’s exploration of justice and friendship in NE 8.9 is the only chapter dedicated specifically to this problem so it warrants a close examination. He begins by arguing that every community is somehow concerned with justice and also contains some degree of friendship,\(^7\) coming to argue, “To the degree that people share something in common, they also share friendship, and to this degree they share justice.”\(^8\) In one sense, this is tautology: both friendship and justice require that we share things in common and when we share something in common

\(^7\) *NE* 1159b 28.
\(^8\) *NE* 1159b 30.
with another we also, to the extent which they are shared, have friendship and justice. But in a
different sense, by drawing both of these elements together via community, Aristotle is implicitly
arguing that every community must be held together by affection and affection is partly defined
by those with whom we share things; same for justice. This further reinforces that a city must
contain affection for the others within the city and that a city cannot merely be a contractual
association. This passage also highlights how affection and justice are distinct attributes of
communities and that the responsibilities of affection and justice are relative to intimacy.

Because of this, “it is more terrible to steal money from a comrade than from a fellow citizen, not
to aid a brother than not to aid a stranger, and to strike a father than to strike anyone else.”
The demands of justice correspond to the level of intimacy within a given community and it is worth
noting that this is going to place the various levels of intimacy in conflict with one another. The
demands of the family conflict with the demands of the city because the duty derived from
intimacy requires it. Justice and friendship would seemingly dissolve into one another at the
deepest levels of intimacy.

This, however, seems to contradict his prior claim that friendship does not need justice
but justice does need friendship. While justice in an unqualified sense may contain the same
qualities as virtue friendship, in 8.9 Aristotle must be discussing justice in the qualified sense
of dealing with the distribution of goods and the redressing of grievances. The best evidence for
this is that Aristotle’s next topic is the city. Given that a city is not going to be defined by

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9 See Kazutaka Inamura, *Justice and Reciprocity in Aristotle’s Political Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University
Press, 2015) p. 149-51 on how this argument dismisses the modern bifurcation of private-intimate and public-
10 *NE* 1159b 32-34.
unqualified justice but by justice concerning the distribution of goods and the redress of grievances.\textsuperscript{13} Aristotle’s comment that “all communities are like constituent parts (μορίοις) of the city” makes it clear that our concern here with friendship and justice is not with the ideal types but the ones possible in the life of the city.\textsuperscript{14}

This is because fundamentally, the city exists for the things that are beneficial to life; “the city is a collection of communities expecting favor, for this is the origin of why we came together and persist together.”\textsuperscript{15} Favor translates \textit{χάριν}, a word meaning a wide range of things from gratitude to grace to worship or even gratification. Generally, however, it is translated as \textit{advantage} or \textit{good}.\textsuperscript{16} The word is associated with giving or receiving something pleasurable or desirable and is associated with living together.\textsuperscript{17} All communities exist because their constituent members expect that community to exist for their benefit and that, “lawgivers aim at this benefit (\textit{χάριν}) and they say what is held in common is justice.”\textsuperscript{18} The lawgivers aim at a shared understanding of justice above all else. But since justice alone is not sufficient for a community, lawgivers must also be concerned with the affection of citizens for one another. Because of this, the city is going to make dual claims on its members: they must be governed by their mutual understanding of justice and they must have more affection for their fellow community members than for those in other communities.


\textsuperscript{14} \textit{NE} 1160a 9.

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{NE} 1160a 10-11.

\textsuperscript{16} The term is used very frequently by Aristotle – nearly a hundred times in the \textit{Politics} alone. For examples of how it is translated in this passage, see Bartlett and Collins, trans., \textit{Nicomachean Ethics}, p. 177; Joe Sachs, trans. \textit{Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics} (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2002), 155. Lord translates it generally as \textit{good} or \textit{sake}. For example, see Lord, trans. \textit{Aristotle’s Politics}, p. 35 for \textit{good}, 230 for \textit{sake}.

\textsuperscript{17} Aristotle also uses it in the \textit{Metaphysics} where it serves a wide range of meanings including, for example, purpose (986a 14) sake (992a 32, 1074a 26, 29) gratitude (993b 10) or pleasure (1000a 16).

\textsuperscript{18} τούτου γάρ καί οἱ νομοθέται στοχάζονται, καί δίκαιον φασιν εἶναι τὸ κοινὴ συμφέρον \textit{NE} 1160a 13.
It is also clear that, in a certain sense, the city should be valued more than the subsidiary communities because the lower associations only provide a partial (μέρη) benefit in comparison to the city.\textsuperscript{19} This, however, seems to contradict the immediate prior discussion of how intimacy determines our obligations. If the city provides the highest advantages to us, it should command the highest obligation if we are driven to be merely self-interested or interest maximizing creatures. This is why the inclusion of affection is such a critical component, and why, “it seems too that friendship holds cities together and that lawgivers are more serious about it than about justice.”\textsuperscript{20} As affection increases, the moral obligation also increases; one’s father has a higher claim on one’s affections than one’s president. But, as discussed in chapter four, the nature of the family does not adequately satisfy or mitigate human desires so we are driven into the city. Our affection extends to the thing that can better satisfy or mitigate those desires but the affection loosens as we expand outward.\textsuperscript{21}

Given this, we can conclude that the lawgiver is concerned with cultivating affection (φιλία) because it generates moral obligation whereas justice is aimed at advantages derived from mutual agreement. One may follow a contract to exchange like for like or distribute goods according to an agreed upon political structure,\textsuperscript{22} but the life of the city is more than a defense alliance or mere commercial existence,\textsuperscript{23} so cities must rely on the affection of citizens for one another. This does not mean that justice is unconcerned with obligation and, as Aristotle notes in NE 8.13, relationships based solely on a legal exchange of utility succumb frequently too

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{19} NE 1160a 14-17.
  \item \textsuperscript{20} Bartlett and Collins, trans., Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics, p. 164 1155a 25.
  \item \textsuperscript{21} See also Tessitore, Reading Aristotle’s Ethics, p. 89.
  \item \textsuperscript{22} NE 1132b 30-35.
\end{itemize}
accusations and grievances.\textsuperscript{24} Instead, Aristotle notes that within utility friendship, there is a liberal (ἐλευθεριωτέρα) category that is not governed by mere contract. Instead, a level of trust (πίστιν) that is presumed to be based on fondness (στέργειν) derived from the exchange.\textsuperscript{25} But this more liberal form of the association is rarely litigated. The assumption is this higher level of affection places a higher level of obligation, one not just based on the strict letter of a contract, on both parties to resolve their grievance. It seems this kind of association is somewhere between a contractual relationship and a friendship of affection.\textsuperscript{26} This dynamic also highlights how questions of justice do contain obligations but when a relationship includes affection, and not mere contract, these obligations are augmented because they add a moral commitment to be trustworthy. This example highlights how the combination of qualified justice and qualified affection serve as a foundation for highest advantage for human beings can aim at in the city. Lawgivers aim at cultivating a sense of affection, not just fondness from exchange, within the city because it elevates these moral weights among the citizens, but there must always be an understanding that there is a boundary that exists between justice and friendship, just as there must always be a distinction between the family and the city.

Aristotle seems to reinforce this point when he notes that as the association becomes more intimate, the demands of justice increase. But, in this instance, the asymptote between them is apparent because of a fundamental limitation regarding equality. Aristotle argues that, “for in

\textsuperscript{24} NE 1162b 5-20.  
\textsuperscript{25} NE 1162b 30-31.  
\textsuperscript{26} NE 1162b 12-15. Pangle notes that this gap leaves open the possibility for conflict, or as she terms it, quarreling. Such quarreling is due to the imbalance that develop when benefits are used to create a feeling of indebtedness between the two parties. Such a condition asks if friendship really can be understood as bound in mutual exchange or if it must be grounded in something that can be equally shared but not transferred between both parties. For further exploration, see Lorraine Smith Pangle, \textit{Aristotle and the Philosophy of Friendship} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 123-32.
matters of justice, what is equal is, first, what accords with merit, and, second, what accords with a certain quantity; in the case of friendship, however, what accords with a certain quantity is first, what accords with merit second.”

Merit (ἀξίαν) is concerned with financial concerns and since this is the first concern of justice, it is evident that we are speaking of conditional justice. Since quantity (ποσὸν) is an adjective, what it is modifying plays a large role in what the term means. It is concerned with measurement but can mean “to what degree” or “how great” and can be concerned with magnitude. Aristotle is arguing here that justice is concerned first with how things are materially evaluated and then concerned with the relative amount to be given to an individual. Friendship, on the other hand, is first concerned with how much one should give and then only secondarily be concerned with material value. This is in-keeping with how Aristotle has discussed the distinction between justice and friendship throughout and reinforces the centrality of intimacy.

Aristotle also highlights that too much inequality among friends dissolves the bonds of affection. This inequality can range from virtue and vice to material goods (εὐπορίας) to other things of this sort. He highlights how both gods and kings create too much inequality between themselves and others to generate friendship with non-gods or subjects and that because of this we ultimately do not wish our friends to become gods or to excel so greatly in some area that we create an unbridgeable gulf between us. Within the context of the city, political friendship is going to be subject to these same limitations, meaning that a city cannot endure with too much

28 Though it can also be concerned with human dignity or reputation; it can contain the same ambiguity as the English term value.
29 NE 1158b 34.
30 NE 1159a 1-10.
inequality of virtue, vice, wealth, etc.\textsuperscript{31} The people in the city must be able to understand themselves as being akin to one another within an acceptable range of inequality.\textsuperscript{32}

It is unclear, however, whether political friendship is first concerned with justice or with affection. Some argue that political friendship is purely one of utility, pointing to the exchange of advantages definitional to the city.\textsuperscript{33} Others argue that it is akin to virtue friendship because the goal of the city is to aim at virtue.\textsuperscript{34} What is frequently overlooked or omitted in these accounts is the role of equity/fairness and how it is a key component to political friendship. Seeing political friendship in this way also provides further clarity on the attainability of equity among the citizenry. Since equity is concerned with the allocation of dessert, which is going to include both blame and material goods, it is fundamentally about relative justice. If political friendship is an approximation of decency, then it must be something which a city needs to properly avoid faction. In this sense, political friendship is primarily concerned with justice but also requires a degree of equality appropriate to friendship; the differences between people cannot become so great that the underlying infrastructure fractures or dissolves.

\textsuperscript{31} Mulgan highlights that, “In unequal relationships, the contribution made by each party is proportional to their inequality, thus equalizing the relationship as is proper among friends.” A city, being comprised of unequal and heterogeneous factors, cannot by its nature make all elements equal but must have a kind of proportional equality in order not to best avoid the strife of faction. See Mulgan, “The Role of Friendship in Aristotle's Political Theory,” p. 15-32.

\textsuperscript{32} Tessitore usefully draws the parallel to a mixture of purity and impurity, remaking that, “The 'more useful' substance produced by this mixture is homonoia within the civic association as a whole, something that insures the domestic stability of a regime.” Tessitore, \textit{Reading Aristotle's Ethics}, p. 86.


Also, because decency is concerned with mercy, it highlights why friendship does not need justice but justice does need friendship. Friendship does not need justice because it has already prioritized one’s value and makes a moral claim on us relative to intimacy. It already contains the appropriate kind of judgment to allow for forgiveness. This is evident in Aristotle’s discussion of mothers and their love for their children or fathers and their reluctance to reject all but the most corrupt of sons.\footnote{NE 1158b 21-23, 1161b 28-30, 1163b 23.} Equity works as a means of softening the rigid nature of justice and keeps us from acting unjustly in our implementation of justice. It requires we share in the same kind of activities as friendship but to a far lower degree, not dissimilar to how speech is necessary for rhetoric, politics, and philosophy. Understanding it in this way also highlights how equity can be a moral virtue but also, to a lower threshold, necessary for the proper functioning of the city.

**Education and Judgment**

At the end of *NE* 8.9, in the final passage, Aristotle raises the tension between seeking the current advantage and pursuing the larger advantage that is beneficial to living a good life. This tension, I will argue, highlights the importance of leisure (\(\sigma\chi\omicron\lambda\eta\)) for the collective advantage of the city and points to why a city must take leisure seriously because of the critical role it plays in a good life. This, by necessity, turns to the role that leisure plays in the city and for that, this exploration will turn back to the *Politics* and the *Poetics*. These texts give the clearest explanation for the role of leisure in the city but also highlight the best uses of leisure and the best means by which leisure can serve a political role.
But before turning to those larger questions, given the discussion in chapter one on the nature of the gods, it is worth first taking up the last claim of NE 8.9 where Aristotle invokes the gods. He highlights how worshipers of Bacchus and dining clubs exist for pleasure since they exist to perform sacrifices and share that experience communally. The subsequent passage, where Aristotle seemingly subsumes these associations under the umbrella of the city, is somewhat ambiguous because it seems the text is corrupted. Bartlett and Collins translate it as follows:

But all these seem to fall under the political community; for the political community aims not at the present advantage but at the pertaining to life as a whole, [since those engaged in political life] perform sacrifices and host gatherings concerning them, thereby distributing honors to the gods and providing a pleasant rest for themselves. For the ancient sacrifices and gatherings appear to take place after the harvest – for example, the “first fruits” – because people used to have leisure especially in these seasons. All communities, therefore, appear to be parts of the political community, and the sorts of friendships will correspond with the different sorts of communities.

The question about this passage is whether those who come together for Bacchic rituals and making sacrifices are a separate entity from the city itself. Their translation interprets this passage in the affirmative; political life includes religious practices. Pangle agrees with this interpretation, arguing that this primitive city cannot be founded on simple self-interest because this city is united and defined by, “a concern with worshiping and sacrificing to the gods.” The city, being concerned with the things concerning a whole life, necessarily requires a unification beyond simple self-interest and religion serves this purpose. But, as Pangle recognizes, Aristotle’s context here means that religious practice falls under the concern of pleasure.
This leads Pangle to conclude that the city cannot be satisfied by a never-ending pursuit of utility or security, instead arguing that a city must fundamentally be concerned with the pleasure of its citizens or at least be organized in such a way as to allow citizens to devote themselves to something beyond the boundaries of the city.

In agreement with the argument that the city must be limited in its pursuit of utility or security, I do wish to make three objections to equating religious belief with a concern for the whole or having a similar concern as that of the city. First, Aristotle begins this final paragraph by drawing a distinction between what is favorable (χάρις) and what is pleasurable (ἡδονή), specifically associating the Bacchic rituals as a community of pleasure. He quickly subsumes these communities within the political community because the lower associations are aimed only at a portion of the χάρις of the city. If there is a good that is derived from religion, it is lower than the good of the city since Aristotle holds that the city contains the highest χάρις with regard to communities. Therefore, these communities of pleasure concerned with Bacchus may have a role to play but a city is not defined by religious participation, nor is it the highest good for the city. It seems that we should see the city as directing religious associations and festivals, making use of them for political ends. By seeing the Bacchic rituals and the dining festivals as just examples of pleasant associations, Aristotle is also highlighting that whatever benefit religion may have to the believer or practitioner, the city derives a benefit from the association but not on the particular content of the association. The benefit to the primitive city was not derived from

40 It is certainly up for debate if this is the best for human beings without qualification, particularly given the difficulties surrounding happiness in book X and the role of philosophy in the best life. But that concern is not within the frame here because the topic is the good of communities, not the good of individuals. There is no indication that the best community for Aristotle is one comprised of philosophers, and the best city is not comprised of philosophers for even the best city must be comprised heterogeneously.
religious belief as such but, rather, from the leisure time available to the city that we see exemplified in the associations of pleasure.

Secondly, the distinction between associations aimed at present advantage and associations concerned with a whole life echoes how Aristotle describes the family/city dynamic in NE 8.12 and Politics 1.2. The first exists for meeting daily needs or the present advantage (παρόντος συμφέροντος) whereas the second is concerned with self-sufficiency, or at least the closest approximation possible. It is not unreasonable that Aristotle is preserving that same distinction here. The communities of pleasure are akin to families insofar as both are concerned with immediate benefit, be it survival or the pleasure derived from pious leisure. The city, in contrast, is not concerned with immediate benefits but with the long term χάρις of citizens. Piety can be a tool used by the city for this end but, just as an army or trading company is an association which has a utility, their end is not the same as the city’s end.

The third point is the most difficult but also the most relevant to the concerns of this exploration. Aristotle makes an empirical argument that the foundation of these religious festivals and dining clubs comes from leisure; they are the consequence of good harvests which allowed for leisure. Leisure then becomes affiliated with associations of pleasure based on the absence of work. As explored above, Aristotle dismisses this as the appropriate understanding of leisure, criticizing Odysseus’s claim that the best kind of leisure is one based in pleasure. Rather, it seems from this passage, that the purpose of leisure is a kind of education that may result in pleasure but associations for education are not aimed at pleasure. Counter to Odysseus’ claim, it seems Aristotle is redefining leisure into a kind of activity that has the possibility of being pleasant. The pleasure that is provided by these events is accidental to them and whatever

41 Politics 1338a 25-30.
pleasure that does emerge from them is not from the absence of labor. Each of these associations is aimed at accomplishing some task that is specific to it but all under the larger task of living well. Since the city’s task is to facilitate living well, it is the task of the lawgiver to utilize things derived from leisure (here including religion) appropriately and redirect it to the proper end of the city. This is why all communities appear to be pieces or portions of the political community; it is tasked with an end greater than the lower parts and, by extension, is tasked with correctly utilizing the lower associations to assist in the end of living well.\textsuperscript{42} This does not mean that Aristotle is asserting that living well is a kind of asceticism or that associations that result in pleasure are in opposition to the goal of living well.\textsuperscript{43} Instead, it does mean that the best use of leisure time is not the absence of activity but as an activity directed toward nobler pursuits. Σχόλη is not ανέργεια. Part of this certainly includes philosophic inquiry but another part, one perhaps more important to the governing of the city, is how the non-philosopher spends their leisure. An appropriate music education aims at the proper use of leisure for this reason. To further understand Aristotle’s criticism of Odysseus’s claim, it is worth turning directly to the question of leisure and the role it plays in the life of the city. The best place for this examination is in the \textit{Politics} and in the \textit{Poetics} since these two texts are concerned, at least in part, with leisure. This is because, as established in chapter three, both music and poetry are capable of

\textsuperscript{42} This further supports his argument that politics, insofar as we are concerned with communities and not individuals, is the architectonic science. See \textit{NE} 1094a 15-18

\textsuperscript{43} This is a topic far broader than can be accounted for here. For some explorations of this, particularly that the good life is not aimed at pleasure but contains it, see Gary M. Gurtler, “The Activity of Happiness in Aristotle’s Ethics,” \textit{Review of Metaphysics} 56.4 (June, 2003): 801-34 and assessment of much of the current debate among contemporary commentators; Robert Bartlett, “Aristotle’s Introduction to the Problem of Happiness: On Book I of the ‘Nicomachean Ethics,’” \textit{American Journal of Political Science} 52.3 (July, 2008): 680-84; Richard Avramenko and Michael Promisel, “When Toleration Becomes a Vice: Naming Aristotle’s Third Unnamed Virtue,” \textit{American Journal of Political Science} 62.4 (October, 2018): 856-58.
moving our souls and are concerned with our character. In *Politics* 8.5, Aristotle asks whether music education is concerned with relaxation (ἀνάπαυσις), virtue, or “does it contribute any toward pastime and prudence.” He dismisses the first because while music is a relief from pain, the pleasure derived from music is not about play or the secession of labor. He does not dismiss that music is pleasurable, instead arguing that all humans have a perception that, “music involves a natural pleasure, hence the practice of it is agreeable to all ages and characters.” He goes on to argue that the pleasure we have from listening to music is not instrumental but rather accidental to it; it does not exist merely for the sake of being pleasant. Rather, it is an essential component of an education aimed at making virtuous distinctions, such as learning to love some things while disdaining others, but above all judging, “respectable characters and noble actions.” An education in music is ultimately aimed at habituating citizens to react correctly to the appropriate stimulus, which is why Aristotle restricts the educated classes to the Dorian mode and rejects learning how to play the aulos, the instrument of frenzy. He concludes that of the three possible options, an education toward properly enjoying “noble tunes and rhythms and not merely the common element of music,” is the best education. Therefore, music education is aimed at appropriately judging the nobility (καλός) of songs, the actions presented therein, and the character such songs generate. This education is one of judgment since the educated are to enjoy only the noble songs and rhythm, not all of them.

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44 See Carnes Lord, *Education and Culture in the Political Thought of Aristotle* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982) 92-5; in particular, Lord’s discussion of how εθος can mean “moral character” strictly or “character” broadly, indicating in either use that what is being discussed is a disposition toward emotions, judgment, and behavior.

45 πρός διαγωγήν τι συμβάλλεται και πρός φρόνησιν *Politics* 1339a 25.


48 *Politics* 1340a 14-18.

49 *Politics* 1341a 20- 41b15; 1342b 10-15.

And yet, Aristotle ultimately concludes that there are three uses for music even if the end of music is judgment. As explored already in chapter three, these uses are education, catharsis, and pastime. The distinction between education (at least if we understand education to mean something beyond the technical skill of playing an instrument) and pastime dissolves, however, particularly given that the goal of education is appropriately judging the nobility of music and then enjoying it, which is akin to how he describes pastime. Lord pithily summarizes it that, “genuine pastime combines pleasure with the noble, enjoyment with benefit, entertainment with instruction.”\(^{51}\) Catharsis serves a different role, one of knocking the wind out of us as our emotionally aroused state is released. The primary place this happens is through the inspired music, which can also be understood as the music of the aulos or the music of the theater.\(^{52}\) However, his qualification of this use is important, particularly when considered in light of the discussions of decency and political friendship in chapters two and four, respectively. He argues:

> But as the spectator is twofold, the one free and educated, the other crude and composed of vulgar persons and laborers and others of this sort...just as their souls are distorted from the disposition that accords with nature, so too there are deviations among the harmonies, and tunes that are strained and highly colored...here license is to be given to those contesting with a view to this sort of spectator to use a certain sort of music of this type.\(^{53}\)

In this passage, it is clear that Aristotle understands that a theatrical audience will be heterogenous, just as the city is. The goal of music education cannot be to make the city more like the educated classes because Aristotle does not recommend eliminating the frenetic and mixed modes. Also, it would also be odd to argue that he is making a strictly empirical claim here about the nature of the audience instead of a larger judgment concerning the use of music

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\(^{52}\) *Politics* 1342a 18.
within the city. Much of book VIII is dedicated to searching for the best curricula for music education and we should draw from the structure of the text that Aristotle is now concerned not only with how the educated classes are to engage with music but how the city more broadly should. Because of this, we must read this passage in light of political friendship and the role that the regime plays in the lives of citizens.

If the concern for music education were simply about the decent, the logical step would be to restrict the musical diet of the vulgar to align with the decent as much as possible. Since the theater is already going to contain modes and rhythms which are “strained and highly colored” to match the distorted disposition of the vulgar, its inclusion must serve a purpose. In the way that the educated are trained toward appropriate judgment about the noble, which is why they are trained in the Dorian mode and come to judge it as best, the vulgar have to be educated in a way that is akin to their nature. Since the frenzied modes do not corrupt the decent but can be beneficial to those who are not, part of that benefit is engendering within the vulgar an approximated sense of decency. Going even further, since pastime is interested above all with judgment, it is not inconceivable that pastime is really an education for prudence; that it is an education about decent characters and noble actions. Such an education would be available for the educated classes but would, through the utilization of empathy, also be partially available to the base as well.

Perhaps above all else, however, an education in music is an education on how one should spend their leisure time. It is worth noting that such an education is only possible when life is organized to generate leisure. The life of the family or the clan, both aimed at the concerns

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54 Politics 1342b 1-20.  
55 Politics 1340a17-18; Lord, Education and Culture, p. 103-4.  
56 Politics 1338a10-25.
with daily living or just beyond it, are not going to generate enough leisure to allow for proper music education. Perhaps this is why Zeus does not sing or play the lyre; he has no need for a music education. Instead, Aristotle draws the comparison to a rattle for infants; just as one needs a rattle to keep an infant still and protect the house, “education is a rattle for the young when they are bigger.” Because the city provides enough leisure time for some, without the appropriate education on how to use that leisure time, adults will become restless and threaten the city akin to how a toddler can threaten a household. The city allows for proper music education, or an education about those things which can move the soul through imitation, including music in the common usage as well as poetry, because such an education is essential for life within the city. This education teaches us what in music is beautiful and, therefore, worthy of praise. More fundamentally, what the appropriate use of leisure is fundamentally doing is teaching us to make distinctions between what is worthy and what is not worthy, that is to say, that which is noble and what is base. As explored in chapter three, music is inherently somatic and therefore is going to provide a kind of education beyond the boundaries of pure reason.

This is even more clearly displayed when Aristotle argues that cities cannot rely on reason to educate its citizens properly; speech is limited in its capacity to habituate properly. He argues, “if speeches were sufficient by themselves to make people decent, they would justly fetch ‘much pay and great,’ …and one ought to pay it.” But speeches cannot do that; they can merely inspire people open to such inspiration and can aid someone who is already habituated or

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57 *Politics* 1339b 8-10.
who already loves the noble for, “speeches are incapable of exhorting the many to nobility and
goodness.”61 In tandem with this, if the law is reason without passion,62 then we must understand
reason here to include the use of force or it is subject to the same limitation as speeches; reason
alone is unable to habituate someone toward any virtuous disposition. And yet, “there is no
benefit in the most beneficial laws, even when these have been approved by all those engaging in
politics, if they are not going to be habituated and educated in the regime.”63 A regime requires
an education relative to that regime and such an education must be aimed at preserving that
regime above all else.64 Aristotle argues that, “to be educated relative to the regime is not to do
the things that oligarchs or those who want democracy enjoy, but…the things by which the
former will be able to run an oligarchy and the latter to have a…[democracy].”65 This resonates
with how he describes like-mindedness; it is not about having the same things in mind on a
specific topic but, rather, having the same things in mind about the general ordering of things.66
An education relative to the regime, then, is akin to an education for political friendship.

This raises a difficulty given that Aristotle holds that regime specific educations are
essential and political friendship, broadly understood, is not bound to a particular regime. This
can be partly addressed when Aristotle’s political taxonomy is understood as a ranking of best
regime to worst and not just as an empirical categorization of what interests are ruling. While
this is not the place to examine this taxonomy and the subsequent ranking,67 it is sufficient to say

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61 Bartlett and Collins, trans., Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics, p. 229 1179b 5-6, 8-10.
62 Politics 1287a 32.
66 NE 1167a 37-40.
67 This is a widely explored topic in the literature. Some excellent explorations include: Pangle, Aristotle’s Teaching, p. 105-11,134-45, 170-77; Susan Collins, Aristotle and the Rediscovery of Citizenship (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 132-46; Mary Nichols, Citizens and Statesmen A study of Aristotle’s Politics (Savage, MD:
that Aristotle’s exploration of the best regime tells us implicitly that there is a ranking of regimes and we must understand that the best form of political friendship is going to exist in the best regime. Therefore, if one were to organize a democracy, the political friendship that a founder would be most interested in would be the one relative to that democracy. All cities share the goal of avoiding civil strife even if that goal is instantiated in idiosyncratic ways relative to a given regime.

The problem still remains, however, that reason is incapable of generating decency on its own, so there must be something beyond the boundary of reason that serves an essential educational component. This circumstance is also paralleled in the justice/equity paradigm. Justice is incapable of preserving its own justness without the aid of a corrective; even the most just laws require an equitable check. If political friendship is best understood as an approximation of decency, it can play a role in both of those facets since it is rooted in affection and not persuasion or reason alone. This approximated decency also contains the element of mercy, the essential component in what makes equity/decency valuable. As explored in chapter two, ἐπείκεια shares a bifurcated nature with equity insofar as it is both a disposition and an action. One only gains the disposition by actively utilizing the actions, but there is a danger in collapsing the disposition and action into the same phenomenon; a single act does not a virtuous person make. At its best, tragedy forces us to feel empathy and have mercy for someone who has been ruined by their own mistake. In order for that to work, an audience must be able to see a protagonist as “like us,” meaning they cannot be of such high moral standing we cannot fathom


68 *Politics* 7.1-7.4.

69 See chapter four.
being like them. As explored in chapter four, this notion of “like us” is multifaceted but on the political level, it means behaving in a way that approximates the behavior of the decent. One of the critical political purposes of tragedy, at least one that properly utilizes its power or capacity (δύναμις), is to make an audience at least approximate such behavior. This dual reliance on decency highlights one of the political purposes of poetry: to observe actions that display the limits of human judgment in order to arouse empathy. This arousal leads to an inherent refinement of empathy by forcing an audience to feel empathy, and ultimately mercy, for the plight of the protagonist.

Conclusion

Decency is concerned, ultimately, with the just application of the law. Because no law is perfectly just, every law must have exceptions and the ability to utilize those exceptions, for the right reason, at the right time, and to the right degree, is an essential skill for political judgement (φρονησις). Decency is, in application, akin to phronesis (φρονησις) in that its application is context specific but its fundamental principle is apparent in the abstract. How we cultivate this kind of judgment, particularly outside the boundary of the law, is a problem for lawgivers and for citizens tasked with upholding the law. Part of that cultivation comes from the appropriate utilization of poetic education.

This education, highlighted specifically in Aristotle’s discussion of music education, is concerned most of all with how people are using their leisure. Contrary to the argument that leisure is the absence of work, Aristotle repurposes leisure as a means to educate people’s judgement about those things that are noble in a way that is not full dependent upon reason. Two questions emerge: at what should this new kind of leisurely work be aimed and what is the
benefit of this education. As explored, the answer to this is that music education is aimed at making us respond appropriately to given stimuli meaning we will laugh at things that deserve to be lampooned and cry at unjustified suffering. Music education, then, is aimed above all else at appropriately judging moral dessert.

Part and parcel of moral dessert is the question of how someone is “like us.” Those we are most like us, or we perceive as being so, will generate the most empathy and perhaps the inverse is also true; those we do not see as being like us would garner the most ridicule. By relying on essential political emotions, particularly empathy, poetry works as a kind of education that is beneficial to the city. This turns leisure into a politically productive activity but poetry, specifically tragedy, helps to refine what things are worthy of forgiveness. It also generates within us the vital emotions associated with decency and, in this way, serves a vital purpose for the city.
CONCLUSION

Having explored Aristotle’s re-founding of poetry on mimesis and how the psychological framework of poetry works and intersects with the political emotions of the city, it is now appropriate to draw some conclusions regarding the political utility of the theater in Aristotle’s political thought. First, tragedies specifically are the most salient to this inquiry for they are the highest form of mimetic art. As discussed in chapter one, it is essential that a character’s actions be intelligible to the audience. If the actions of a character are unintelligible to us, or if a plot is structured in such a way that we cannot understand why a character is acting the way they are, the plot will neither generate the appropriate emotions nor generate the appropriate emotional release. As explored in chapter three, the best of tragic plots will knock the wind out of us as the various plot elements are tied together through recognition and reversal. The audience experiences a reversal in expectations as the protagonist experiences a reversal of fortune; we are able to understand that the climax of the story is the result of the protagonist making an error. The largest flaw in the protagonist is not one of moral defect but of mistaken judgment.

As established in chapter four, decent people are meant to have good judgment, therefore poetry highlights the limitations of reason even for the decent. The audience is able to reflect on how vital judgment (φρονησις) is for human life, but how easily it can be undone by one ἁμαρτία.¹ Because of this, we should understand that poetry shows how ἁμαρτία is the inverse of

Prudence (φρονησις) is the most essential component to Aristotle’s ethical theory so being able to see its inverse in action is going to serve, at minimum, as an educative tool for the examination of ethics. One possible path of examination would ask if the protagonist’s mistake is reflective of a character deficiency. This could lead to the conclusion that the purpose of poetry is to condemn the protagonist, meaning such stories would be cautionary morality tales, but such a conclusion is antithetical to the emotional state necessary for tragedy to be powerful.²

Because empathy is associated with decency, and decency is directly linked to equity/mercy, it is more likely that witnessing these stories is not meant to harden the audience but to soften them. This is why, as explored in chapter two, it is important to see ἁμαρτία not as a flaw but as an intelligible mistake. If these characters are acting out of ignorance, particularly ignorance of their own action, they are going to be making a mistake but it is one we can forgive.³ Being called to have mercy is, at its core, what an audience is asked to do in a tragedy; the protagonist’s ignorance of their own circumstance or ability brings about their downfall. The audience is asked to empathize with the protagonist’s plight because they are either acting out of ignorance or by mistake. Oedipus does not kill his father and father children with his mother out of malice or perversion but out of ignorance. When his mother/wife kills herself upon learning what both she and Oedipus have done, our reaction is not to cheer that he has received his just dessert. Rather, our emotions reach a fevered pitch as he is devastated by his mistake.

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² This system could also be appropriately attached to the “hardening” school of cathartic interpretation. See chapter three. See also, as an exemplar, S. H. Butcher, Aristotle’s Theory of Poetry and the Fine Arts (New York: Dover Publications, 1951), p. 238. In contrast, Smithson does note, rightly, that we should not conclude, as did Butcher and others, that tragedy has nothing whatsoever to do with morality. Rather, we should understand that the mimetic nature of tragedy inherently means there will be a moral component. See also Isaiah Smithson, “The Moral View of Aristotle’s Poetics,” Journal of the History of Ideas 44.1 (Jan-March, 1983), 3-17.

³ NE 1135a 30-1135b 10.
It would also be incorrect to argue that Oedipus’s fate just happens to him. Oedipus’s character, exemplified by being arrogant in his dealings with the Sphinx, tells us how he is able to overlook information he should otherwise see; his mistake is not random or chaotic, even if such events would activate ἐλεός. Because evaluating culpability is essential for evaluating the appropriate level of punishment, if someone’s plight were merely the result of fate and not the consequence of their own action, we would simply be pained by watching someone else suffer. But Aristotle is quite clear that we do not do this; empathy requires a judgment of dessert, not just the observation of pain. The story of Oedipus is most powerful if we are able to allocate blame and forgiveness, not attribute his downfall to a forgone fate.

By rejecting the idea of fate (ατη) as the cause of ruin in poetry, Aristotle reinforces the importance of both proper judgment and human fallibility. In this way, Aristotle uses poetry to point us to the dangers of living in a city, a place comprised of heterogenous people clashing over the nature of justice and injustice. This highlights that perhaps the best we can do is act prudently since we can never act with absolute knowledge of the consequences of our actions. Even those who are otherwise decent can lose their place not because they lose their decency but because decency alone cannot save them from ruin. The theater points us to consider the limitations of human reason and the limitations of the city itself. In this way, the wonder generated by tragedy points us not toward the heavens but back into the life of the city; poetry

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4 Poetics 1452a 1-5. See also Halliwell, Aristotle’s Poetics, 223.
5 Sokolon highlights this well, drawing a distinction between the modern notion of compassion and Aristotle’s definition of ἐλεός. See Marleen Sokolon, Political Emotions: Aristotle and the Symphony of Reason and Emotion (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2006) 143-45.
6 Poetics 1453a 5-7.
7 Halliwell usefully phrases it, “readily accommodate any case in which the disparity between ethical agency and suffered misfortune is so drastic, so morally repugnant, that nothing could be learned from it but the ultimate inhospitality of the world to human virtue." Halliwell, Aristotle’s Poetics, p. 226.
provides a shared experience for generating like-minded people within the city. This is why the stories of the divine do not have to be true, nor does poetry require any divine elements to be effective. Poetry serves a political function for the city by being a reflection of the city, both in the sense of reflecting man in the city and being a reflection about man in the city. It arouses within us the same emotional structure necessary for life in the city and helps to cultivate a shared sense of judgment about blame and mercy. Poetry gives us a common language by which we can debate right and wrong, justice and injustice, and a mechanism for educating the emotions necessary for preserving the life of the city, one dedicated to the principle of living well. This is of vital importance to the city and comprises the first political utility of poetry.

The second utility is, perhaps, an even more important one. The proper use of leisure time is the purpose of arts education. The emotions that are aroused through that education are essential to understanding because they move the soul; they have the capacity to change the nature of how we act and react to various stimuli. Therefore, an education in the arts is going to be an education, at its best, aimed at political emotions. Watching a play or engaging with other mimetic arts provides a kind of education, particularly for the base, that is beneficial to the city. As explored in chapter three, the emotions that are aroused by the theater are refined through the cathartic process. Our judgment on who and what is worthy of a specific emotional response is refined as well. Specifically, tragedy arouses and refines our sense of empathy which, as explored, is an essential political emotion.

The essential nature of empathy is brought into even starker relief when it is juxtaposed against other political emotions. In particular, it is worth exploring righteous indignation (νεμεσῶν) and envy (φθόνος), two of the emotions Aristotle discusses in context with ἔλεος in

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8 Politics 1341a 15-25.
his *Rhetoric*. Aristotle considers both empathy and indignation as markers of good character because both are concerned with just desserts. Because empathy and indignation are both markers of good character, further understanding indignation will highlight why tragedies need to rely on empathy as the central emotion and not indignation. Envy (φθόνος), like empathy and indignation, is also a kind of pain one feels about the condition of someone else but it is not concerning dessert. Exploring envy is useful because such an exploration further establishes the nature of what it means to be “like us” within a political context. It does this by showing the limitations of equality and affection within the city.

One element that is important to clarify before defining indignation is that these emotions (empathy, indignation, envy, etc.) are aimed at others and are not felt toward yourself. If this were not the case, and the emotions turned inward, someone would not feel indignation or empathy but, “fear, if the pain and agitation is present on account of feeling that there will be something bad for oneself as a result of the prosperity of the other person.” It is worth remembering that the fear one feels in the theater is on behalf of someone else and not that you are experiencing the same emotions the character does; this must be the case for the theater to produce any kind of pleasure. If not, watching your family be destroyed by your mistake would generate horror, not empathy. If one’s enemy in war rises in prosperity, the reaction is not

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9 *Rhetoric* 1386b 10, 15. Sokolon, for example, clusters together ἐλεός, νεμέσαν, φθόνος, and ζηλοῦσι, linking them together as other-facing political emotions. While Aristotle explicitly contrasts ἐλεός with νεμέσαν and φθόνος, understanding all of these emotions under a larger umbrella has utility. See Sokolon, *Political Emotions*, p. 141-63.


indignation but fear of what that prosperity could mean for you; there is an anticipation of harm instead of an evaluation of merit.

While Aristotle holds indignation as the foil to empathy, both pains relative to merit but with inverted reactions, there is another alternative emotion that may be a better foil to empathy: joy from someone’s suffering (ἐπιχαιρεκακία).\textsuperscript{15} Aristotle only uses this term a handful of times\textsuperscript{16} and when he does, it is usually associated with envy (φθόνος). In each use, he considers both of these emotions to be in opposition to indignation. If we see that indignation is an inverse to empathy, it also worth establishing envy and joy from someone’s suffering within that matrix.\textsuperscript{17} Envy is, “a pain at the prosperity of those like oneself in regard to the goods things mentioned, not in order to get anything for oneself but just because they have it.”\textsuperscript{18} Aristotle does not provide a definition for joy from someone’s suffering. Instead, he only uses the term in contrast to other emotions: highlighting that joy from someone’s suffering is deficient in feeling pain to the point one feels glee,\textsuperscript{19} it causes one to feel glee when someone has lost something which had originally caused envy,\textsuperscript{20} or it leads to one rejoicing at misfortune.\textsuperscript{21} Aristotle considers both envy, the pain at someone else’s success because you do not have it and, epichairekakia, the joy at watching someone endure a misfortune, are deficiencies in indignation.\textsuperscript{22} But, given how Aristotle understands empathy, both emotions can also be

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{15} ἐπιχαιρεκακία is a difficult term to translate into a single English word. Bartlett and Collins translate it as spiteful (NE p. 38). Sachs translates it as malice (Rhetoric p. 210) or the literal meaning of joy at suffering or pain (NE p. 33) Kenny translates it as malicious (EE p. 50).
  \item \textsuperscript{16} Rhetoric 1387a 1, Eudemian Ethics 1233b 20-21, Nicomachean Ethics 1108b 7.
  \item \textsuperscript{17} It is this relationship that led to speculation that envy and joy at suffering were the two primary emotions in comedy. See W.B. Standford, Greek Tragedy and the Emotions An Introductory Study (London: Routledge & Kegal Paul, 1983) 34-5.
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Sachs, trans. Rhetoric p. 212, 1387b 25-7.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} NE 1108b 5-7.
  \item \textsuperscript{20} Rhetoric 1387a 1-4.
  \item \textsuperscript{21} EE 1233b 21-4.
  \item \textsuperscript{22} NE 1108b 1-4.
\end{itemize}
considered deficiencies in empathy. Instead of being pained at undeserved misfortune, the envious person would be pained at the initial success of a person. This is not just a selfish impulse but a spiteful one; it is not connected to an evaluation of moral dessert. The undeserved ruin or destruction will abate the envy but, as Aristotle notes, this absence inspires epichairekakia. No longer is a such a person pained at someone else’s success but they are gleeful at their ruin.

If we were to generate poetry that was aimed at this, particularly poetry that dealt with serious people engaged in serious affairs, as Aristotle understands tragedy to be, then what would our most serious artform be teaching us about human affairs? What world would be reflected in a story where the hero’s failure is not met with empathy but with ridicule or glee? This is not an emotion that would spur fellow-feeling but one of disdain or disgust. Instead of being an aide to the emotions that underscore political friendship, this highest form of art would instead depend on a city being defined by envy or joy at misfortune. These political emotions are more appropriate to faction and the desire to see your enemies ruined or destroyed than to soften the divisions that define a city in order to create harmony. Such an artform would not, in this sense, have a political utility but merely a martial one. This could be why such emotions are reserved for stories that deal with the absurd or the vicious, such as comedy, for there, the arousal and release of such emotions is not aimed at serious matters or serious people but those we are already disposed to mock or ridicule.

Perhaps this is why comedy is able to take place in a city similar to Athens as opposed to tragedies taking place in ancient cities or non-democratic ones. Since the extant *Poetics* is only
a fragment of the larger work, what Aristotle says about comedy is limited. Comedies are engaged with unserious people who do make mistakes that are not ruinous.\textsuperscript{24} Aristotle gives credit to Homer for recognizing that comedy is not about invective (ψόγον) but for telling stories about what is ridiculous or absurd (γελοῖον).\textsuperscript{25} Tragedies are telling stories about ruinous behavior and are dependent upon understanding the mistakes made by a protagonist whereas comedy is about lampooning the absurd.\textsuperscript{26} Because tragedy is painful, telling stories that go beyond empathy may result in indignation, as noted in chapter two’s discussion of Phrynichus and his censure in Athens.\textsuperscript{27} Comedy seems more insulated from this reaction because it is relying upon a different range of emotions that are more palatable for the audience.\textsuperscript{28} There is little risk that an audience is appalled enough watching Strepsiades burns down Socrates’s Thinkery in the \textit{Clouds} to generate a censure. Instead, the audience laughs at the absurdity of the entire venture. No person in that play is beyond ridicule; we laugh at all of their failings, their peccadilloes, their absurd behavior. This, however, is not to say that philosophy does not take comedy as seriously, if not more seriously, than tragedy, but rather to highlight that the risk to the city is much less.\textsuperscript{29}

\textsuperscript{24} \textit{Poetics} 1449a 31-1149b 1. What is ridiculous is a kind of ἁμαρτία that is not painful to see and is not ruinous.
\textsuperscript{25} He credits this to the lost epic \textit{Margites}.
\textsuperscript{26} As Halliwell notes, comedy is not just about invective or ridiculing a specific person. Instead, comedy is still a form of storytelling but one whose content is less serious, with characters of lower stature, and whose mistakes do not bring about ruin. See Stephen Halliwell, \textit{Aristotle’s Poetics} (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998) 266-76.
\textsuperscript{27} See chapter two.
\textsuperscript{28} Which is perhaps why the city saw it as less serious than tragedy for a long time, denying it an overseeing archon. \textit{Poetics} 1449b 1-5.
\textsuperscript{29} See, for example, Leo Strauss, \textit{Socrates and Aristophanes} (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1966). Here it is also worth noting that the reflection generated by poetry is going to be different for the philosopher than for the audience. In the same way that one who has a better understanding of a subject matter will appreciate a piece of art depicting that subject more than one who is ignorant, so too will an individual who has a better understanding of the human experience reflect on a higher level than one whose only understanding is limited to their lived
Because tragedy deals with serious people doing things of serious consequence, the story telling is fraught with potential peril. It is this peril which highlights why tragedy is the more serious of the poetic arts and highlights its central political role. If the poet is able to arouse within the audience emotions that are destructive to the ends of the city, the poet is dangerous. Instead, because the poet is arousing emotions that are vital for the preservation of the city, poetry serves an essential role in the life of the city. By forcing us to feel empathy, the poet is forcing us to make a moral judgment. We are not asked to condemn the failure of a protagonist but to be pained by their undeserved suffering. We are made to understand the dangers of mistaken judgement but not to conclude that mistakes should result in ruin. Rather, we are forced to have mercy on the failure of judgment. This kind of behavior is part and parcel of decency. Poetry, by forcing us to engage in this kind of behavior, makes an audience at least imitate the behavior of the decent. This approximation of decency is, at the scale of the city, best understood as political friendship.

In this way, poetry is both relying upon and reinforcing what it means to be “like us.” Poetry is relying upon the same psychological framing as political friendship but reinforces the shared identity by generating a common understanding of what things are worthy of forgiveness (and, to a related degree, what is worth lampooning) as well as a common language for describing these phenomena. In short, it cultivates a necessary shared set of political emotions that reinforce the affection necessary for political friendship. That shared set of emotions is experience. Utility is found in both experiences; the cathartic experience of the audience augments the capacity for evaluation, an essential component for political friendship, whereas the experience gives the philosopher the opportunity to look beyond the horizons of the particular city toward the city as such. Therefore, just as the audience in the theater is multi-faceted, so too is the outcome: the poetic experience contains tools necessary for forging political friendship and also the means by which those bonds can also be unhinged. Poetry is not a danger free enterprise for it does have the capacity to change the state of our soul which is why it is essential that the city take an interest in the education provided by leisure.
going to further aid in properly educating the sense of empathy in the masses by appealing to the strained and colored elements of their soul.

By giving a clarified sense of what is worthy of mercy among the masses, poetry provides the city an opportunity to be educated beyond the primary educator for the city, the law. Since following the law alone is not adequate to justice, we must have a means for learning when strict adherence is unjust in itself. While this may be possible for a philosopher to do independently, or for the decent to understand with the guidance of a philosopher, how are the many to learn this except by imitating the decent? The mercy we are forced to give to a protagonist makes the many imitate the appropriate kind of decision making necessary in such cases within the city. This reinforces Aristotle’s argument that, ultimately, the virtues attached to citizenship are prudence and correct opinion (εὐδοκία) because it gives the audience the opportunity to correctly evaluate the plight of another person. Poetry serves as a necessary education beyond the laws of the city for the stability of the city.

We must be willing to see a person as “like us” in the sense that we share a common set of values or principles regarding how one is to live their life. This is directly dependent upon the regime in which one lives. Aristotle argues that each regime type is going to generate different tastes regarding friendship, including political friendship. This is in keeping with his argument that political friendship is based in like-mindedness about who should rule, what should be honored, etc., and that the various regimes are going to be defined by how they organize themselves according to such questions. Since each regime is going to prioritize different things to honor and going to understand qualified justice in a relative way, each regime is going to require a different character relative to that regime. Each regime requires an education relative to that regime, and political friendship, while not the same as citizenship, is part of the necessary
education to unify a city and to give it a communal sense of what is beneficial (χάρις). Poetry works in that effort by refining our sense of empathy relative to the concerns of the regime. This vital function is the second political purpose for poetry.
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