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Hamartia, Akrasia, Ignorance, and Blame
In Aristotle's Philosophy

Hamartia, or "tragic error" as it has come to be translated, and akrasia ("weakness of will" or, more accurately, "acting against knowledge") are two rather enigmatic moral notions in Aristotle's philosophy. The purpose of this paper is to illustrate similarities between the two and to conclude the status of each with regard especially to ignorance--the part it plays in both hamartia and akrasia--and culpability of an action occurring under each moral condition. Such notions as voluntariness and responsibility shall be considered as well because Aristotle's analysis of praise and blame is a direct outcome of his inquiry into voluntariness or the preconditions of virtue. I shall begin with a general discussion of hamartia.

The most relevant, and most explicit, passage in the Aristotelean corpus dealing with hamartia is contained in the Poetics. In the Poetics, Aristotle discusses the structure of tragic drama--an analysis of plot and what the ideal structure of a plot for a tragic drama would be--as well as analyzing the nature of tragedy itself. It is with this analysis that we are most concerned, for the precondition of the tragic emotion, what evokes the tragic emotion in one particular type of tragedy, is hamartia or "tragic error."

We assume that, for the finest form of Tragedy, the Plot must not be simple but complex; and further, that it must imitate actions arousing fear and pity, since that is the distinctive function of this kind of imitation. It follows, therefore, that there are three forms of Plot to be avoided. (1) A good man must not be seen passing from happiness to misery, or (2) a bad man from misery to happiness. The first situation is not fear-inspiring or piteous, but simply odious to us. The second is the most untragic that can be; it has no one of the requisites of Tragedy; it does not appeal either to the human feeling in us, or to our pity, or to our fears.
Nor, on the other hand, should (3) an extremely bad man be seen falling from happiness into misery. Such a story may arouse the human feeling in us, but it will most move us to either pity or fear; pity is occasioned by undeserved misfortune, and fear by that of one like ourselves; so that there will be nothing either piteous or fear-inspiring in the situation. There remains, then, the intermediate kind of personage, a man not pre-eminent in virtue and just, whose misfortune, however, is brought upon him not by vice and depravity but by some error of judgement, of the number of those in the enjoyment of great reputation and prosperity; e.g. Oedipus, Thyestes, and men of note of similar families. The perfect Plot, accordingly, must have a single, and not (as some tell us) a double issue; the change in the hero's fortunes must not be from misery; and the cause of it must not lie in any depravity, but in some great error on his part; the man himself being either such as we have described, or better, not worse, than that. (Poetics 1452b30-1453b16)

It must first be noted that, whereas in this translation (Bywater) hamartia is translated simply as "error," the consensus in current scholarship is that the term should be rendered as "mistake of fact" or "ignorance of fact." I, however, agree with T. C. W. Stinton's argument that hamartia has a wide range of meaning and can be construed, relative to context, as anything from the orthodox "mistake of fact" to Stinton's more radical inclusion: "moral error." Stinton's argument seems reasonable and his account, at least with regard to how the term ought to be translated, is the one I shall rely upon. I leave all other dispute in this matter up to the philologists. Furthermore, and this is a point to which I do not think Stinton would take offense, I shall refer to the error involved in a tragic situation, whether it be a
specifically moral error or not, as a tragic error. This, it seems to me, is a commonsensical reference and should find no opponent in the classical scholars. Regardless of how the term is translated it is universally agreed that an error of some sort is involved. Our goal is to determine the moral status, within Aristotle's theory, of this error.

First, a few general remarks must be made about Aristotle's notion of tragedy. What constitutes the tragic emotion? In Poetics 14 Aristotle states: "The tragic pleasure is that of pity and fear..." Both of these emotions involve sympathy on the part of the audience--they involve sympathy for the plight of the man who has fallen into tragic error. For this reason we pity him. We have pity because we clearly see his error, where he did not, and can understand his unfortunate situation. On the other hand, because we can somehow place ourselves in his position, the tragic act evokes fear in us. We pity the man because we can relate his situation to our own. Even more than that, we come to fear the tragic situation because we realize our own vulnerabilities and can easily picture ourselves involved in the tragic scene; we fear that we shall someday ourselves take the place of the actor and be faced with similar unfortunate and horrible circumstances.

Thus far what has been said pertains to tragedy in general. But our concern is with a specific type of tragedy, or rather, a particular aspect of a specific type of tragedy. Aristotle notes that there are, roughly, three conditions under which the tragic deed is performed:

The deed of horror may be done by the doer knowingly and consciously, as in the old poets, and in Medea's murder of her children in Euripides. Or he may do it, but in ignorance of his relationship, and discover that afterwards, as does Oedipus in Sophocles... A third possibility is for one meditating some deadly injury to another, in ignorance of his relationship, to make the discovery in time to
In the second case the tragic situation is the result of some sort of *hamartia* or error. Aristotle illustrates this type of tragedy by offering the case of Oedipus as an example. Unlike the actions of, say, Medea or Agamemnon, the tragic case of Oedipus rests on quite specific and easily recognizable errors: he did not simply kill a man—he killed his father. He did not merely marry a woman, but he married his mother. These are grave errors. They are tragic errors. It is the nature of one type of tragedy to be due to such an error, to be due to *hamartia*.

It must be noted that the great misfortune brought about by error is not due to a character flaw in the agent. This is important because the error itself will not then be due to viciousness on the part of the tragic figure. Though the tragic character may have flaws in his character and personality, as Oedipus' bad temper clearly attests, the error involved in his action is not directly caused by these traits. Aristotle describes this character as "a man not pre-eminently virtuous and just, whose misfortune, however, is brought upon him not by vice and depravity but by some error of judgement." (Poetics 1453b8)

The tragic figure's character may be--indeed must be--relatively virtuous. Were a vicious man to fall into great misfortune we would not be apt to call his plight tragic. No pity or fear would be evoked and one would probably feel that the vicious man had "gotten his just desserts." On the other hand, if a relatively virtuous man (relative to us, the audience) falls into misfortune we clearly sympathize with him and hence call his situation tragic. Again, Oedipus is just such a tragic protagonist.

Now we must consider a few things. First, how is it possible for a relatively virtuous man to commit such an unvirtuous act? Secondly, what can we conclude about the origin of *hamartia*; to what is the tragic error due? And finally, within Aristotle's theory, what might arise in the way of blame and even punishment as a result of tragic error?
Hamartia and Akrasia in Aristotle

The answers to all three of these questions are necessarily dependent upon Aristotle’s discussion of the preconditions of virtue in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book III.

Aristotle begins *Nicomachean Ethics* Book III by pointing out that in order for an action to be praiseworthy (as all virtuous actions are) it must be performed voluntarily. "Virtue, then is about feelings and actions. These receive praise and blame when they are voluntary, but pardon, sometimes even pity, when they are involuntary." (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1109b30) From this passage we might infer that the tragic act is involuntary (because it evokes pity). But it would seem that such is not the case. It seems, *prima facie*, that Oedipus’ tragic act was a voluntary one. In order to determine this, however, we must delve still deeper into Aristotle’s analysis of voluntariness/ involuntariness.

A voluntary action is partially defined as that action for which the cause or origin resides solely in the agent (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1111a22). In contrast, an involuntary action is one for which the origin lies in some sense outside of the agent (*E.N.* 1110a). Aristotle’s third category is that of a mixed action. As a whole, the mixed action must be classed as voluntary because the origin of the act resides within the agent. However, the mixed action is so named because there is an element of outside influence or coercion involved; the act is performed under some sort of duress. Aristotle offers the example of a hostage situation (*E.N.* 1110a33): a man’s family has been taken hostage and he has been ordered to perform an unvirtuous act in exchange for their safe return. Now if he performs such an action the origin lies within him and hence he voluntarily performs it. And yet he would not have performed the distasteful deed if not for the duress he was put under by his family’s captors. Perhaps a better illustration is Aristotle’s second example. In this example we are told that a man is at sea in a violent storm, and in order to save himself and the ship he must throw the ship’s cargo overboard. Now he voluntarily performs this action because his hand is not literally forced and the origin
lies within him. But we can easily see that he would certainly not throw cargo overboard unless it meant saving himself and the ship from the violence of the storm. The only reason he performed the deed was because he was under duress.

Thus far we have considered only the origin of the act—whether it resides within the agent (as in a voluntary act), or outside of the agent (as in an involuntary act), or whether it resides within the agent but is strongly influenced by outside factors (as in a mixed action). But Aristotle's fourth category for action is dependent not so much upon the cause or origin of the action as whether the act is performed with or without knowledge. As we shall see, the analysis of actions performed with knowledge or in ignorance (and precisely what type of ignorance) is of the utmost importance to our inquiry into the moral status of hamartia.

Those actions that are performed in ignorance Aristotle terms "nonvoluntary." (E.N. 1110b17) We, at first, might be tempted to classify them as voluntary because the origin obviously resides with the agent. However, if an agent performs an action without knowing what it is that he is doing we would be hard pressed to say that he performed a voluntary action. This is the reason Aristotle expands his definition of voluntariness to include knowledge of what one is doing as well as self-causation. (E.N. 1111a22) But what type of knowledge must the man who acts voluntarily be in possession of, or rather, what precisely is the nonvoluntary agent ignorant of?

We are told that the nonvoluntary action is performed in ignorance in general. However, if an action is performed in ignorance and is subsequently regretted by the agent, we are told this type of action is involuntary.

Everything caused by ignorance is non-voluntary, but what is involuntary also causes pain and regret. For if someone's action was caused by ignorance, but he now has no objection to the action, he has done it neither willingly, since he did not know what it was, nor unwillingly,
Hamartia and Akrasia in Aristotle

since he now feels no pain. Hence, among those who act because of ignorance, the agent who regrets his action seems to be unwilling, while the agent with no regrets may be called nonwilling, since he is another case—for since he is different, it is better if he has his own special name. (E.N. 1110b19)

Furthermore, an involuntary action thus construed is performed under a specific type of ignorance—the agent who performs an involuntary act due to ignorance is lacking knowledge of particulars. A man may know the universal premise that, for instance, sweet things are not to be eaten because they are bad for one’s health. He may seemingly voluntarily pick up a morsel of food and eat it without realizing that it is sweet and is to be avoided. Since the origin of his action lies within him we may consider his action voluntary, but because he is ignorant of the particular (in this case that the food is indeed sweet) we cannot say he voluntarily ate sweet food because he did not know what he was doing. In this sense his action is involuntary.

Due to the involuntary status of such an act, and that only voluntary actions merit praise or blame (E.N. 1110a30), we cannot hold the agent accountable for his action. Determining praise or blame for a mixed action is far more difficult. Aristotle states that a judgement must be made based upon the agent’s own judgement exercised in the action.

For such [mixed] actions people are sometimes actually praised, whenever they endure something shameful or painful as the price of great and fine results; and if they do the reverse, they are blamed, since it is a base person who endures what is most shameful for nothing fine or for only some moderately fine result.

In some cases there is no praise, but there is pardon, whenever someone does a wrong action because of conditions of a sort that overstrain
human nature, and that no one would endure. But presumably there are some things we cannot be compelled to do, and rather than do them we should suffer the most terrible consequences and accept death; for the things that [allegedly] compelled Euripides’ Alcmaeon to kill his mother appear ridiculous. (E.N. 1110a20-30)

With this discussion of voluntariness and blame in mind we must now turn to our previous three questions regarding *hamartia*. First, how is it possible for a relatively (or at least “not pre-eminently) virtuous man to commit an unvirtuous act? In order to answer this question we must determine what kind of action the act following from a tragic error is. Is it done voluntarily or involuntarily? Or is it a mixed action? If we turn once again to the tragic case of Oedipus we can see that the origin of his action was with him solely—he was in no way forced to perform the tragic deed. Likewise, we cannot say that he was coerced or that the action was done under duress. Hence his action cannot be classified as a mixed action. Again, this might lead us to believe that his action was performed voluntarily. Indeed, under one description of the act it was performed voluntarily: Oedipus voluntarily killed a man. But, of course, this was not the tragic deed. The tragic deed was the killing of his father (as well as marrying his mother). Under this description of the act can we say that it was voluntary? The conditions for a voluntary act are twofold: (1) the origin must lie solely with the agent, and (2) the agent must have knowledge of the particulars. It is easily seen that the action of Oedipus fulfills (1) but does not fulfill (2). We may say that Oedipus had knowledge of the universal premise: it is wrong to kill one’s father. What he was lacking was the minor premise containing the particular facts involving his specific action; Oedipus did not know that “this is my father.” We must conclude, therefore, that his action was involuntary—he did not voluntarily kill his father because he did not know that the man he was killing was his father. This is a rather commonsensical point.
But this also explains how it is that a relatively virtuous man can commit an unvirtuous act. The question, at first, may seem shocking. But once it is understood that the agent acts without knowledge of particulars, and hence does not fulfill the criteria for voluntary action, the explanation of the virtuous man's unvirtuous action becomes quite clear and simple. It is not performed voluntarily and, though it is not a forced action, it is performed in ignorance of particulars. This makes the action resulting from tragic error an involuntary action. And this, of course, explains how it is that a relatively virtuous man can perform an unvirtuous act.

As for our second question—what is the origin of hamartia—we can see that it is precisely this: the tragic error arises through ignorance of particulars. Again, Oedipus held the universal: it is wrong to kill one's father. But he was in ignorance of the particular: this is my father. Hence hamartia is due strictly to ignorance of particulars. But, one might ask, to what is the ignorance itself due? Remember that there are certain types of ignorance that Aristotle holds the agent responsible for. He makes the distinction here between an action caused by ignorance and acts done in ignorance (for example, if we perform an unvirtuous act while drunk we must be held responsible for it because we, presumably, voluntarily got drunk in the first place [E.N. 1110b25-30]). Now it is clear that the action of Oedipus was caused by ignorance and that there was nothing he could have done to remedy the situation. In such a case the ignorance itself was due to circumstances beyond the agent's control. This is the aspect of tragedy, and of man's moral situation in general, that Martha Nussbaum addresses in her book entitled: The fragility of goodness: Luck and ethics in Greek tragedy and philosophy. Nussbaum's thesis is that luck plays a large role in the possibility of the attainment of a virtuous life. Her discussion especially brings out the primacy of good fortune as a necessary requirement for Aristotle's conception of eudaimonia.
Kinesis: Graduate Philosophy Journal

Oedipus had a good character; but he did a terrible thing that impeded (presumably) his eudaimonia. The 'gap' created by luck in his case was not in any simple way one between good character and activity: for he did not act and was not in any literal sense impeded. There was, however, a gap, created by circumstances of excusable ignorance, between the act he intended or voluntarily did—the killing of an old man at the crossroads—and the bad act that he involuntarily did, the parricide that dislodged him, if it did, from eudaimonia.

Hence the origin of hamartia is ignorance, and that ignorance itself may be due simply to adverse or arbitrary circumstances; the tragic error may very well be the result of one's "moral luck."

If such a thesis is accepted, what then is the answer to our third and final question regarding hamartia—what might arise in the way of blame and even punishment as a result of tragic error? Because deeds caused by hamartia are done without knowledge of particulars, then, on Aristotle's view, we must classify all such actions as involuntary and hence as at least pardonable or at best blameless. Such findings seem to coincide with Aristotle's emphasis on knowledge as the measure of moral worth as opposed to the intention of an agent or actual consequences of an action. In addition, if we take Nussbaum's notion of moral luck seriously, the injustice created by blaming or punishing a victim of tragic error is manifest.

Our conclusions with regard to hamartia are then threefold: (1) Hamartia results in an action that is involuntary and due to an ignorance of particulars (this ignorance itself perhaps due to unpredictable circumstances or "bad luck"); (2) The tragic deed evokes pity and fear in an audience or moral community; (3) Because the act resulting from hamartia is, on Aristotle's analysis, an involuntary act, it is not culpable. Much of what has been said in the previous
Hamartia and Akrasia in Aristotle

discussion would seem to apply also to akrasia or "acting against knowledge" and may lead one to wonder what the distinction between the two is. It is to this moral condition, and Aristotle's treatment of it, that we shall now turn.

The Platonic position on akrasia, exemplified in the Protagoras, is that acting against knowledge is impossible; akrasia is an illusion and, if a situation were to arise where it would seem an agent willingly acts against knowledge, it can always be shown that the agent was not in fact acting in knowledge but always rather in ignorance. Aristotle, on the other hand, does not so quickly dismiss akrasia as an impossibility. His method of thought in general is to begin with an empirical observation and to then attempt to discover the principles that would make possible or preserve such observation.

As in other cases we must set out the appearances, and first of all go through the puzzles. In this way we must prove the common beliefs about these ways of being affected—ideally, all the common beliefs, but if not all, then most of them, and the most important. For if the objections are solved, and the common beliefs are left, it will be an adequate proof. (E.N. 1145b3-7)

Aristotle does not dismiss akrasia as an impossibility. Rather, he begins with the observation, the "common belief," that incontinence does indeed occur. Socrates' position in the Protagoras "contradicts things that appear manifestly." (E.N. 1145b27) We must attempt an explanation of the appearances and not simply dismiss them as illusion. The question is valid: How is akrasia possible?

We must first note that the akratic man is not vicious. Akrasia is distinguished from vice and bestiality as one of three conditions of character to be avoided. Because the incontinent man is not vicious, it may be that he is therefore
relatively virtuous. The important point is that akarasia is not due to viciousness. So what then is it due?

Incontinence in some sense involves knowledge and it is to the akratic man's status with regard to knowledge that we must look to find how incontinence is possible. What Aristotle must explain is how it is possible for someone to have knowledge (of what is good for him/her) and to act on it or even, perhaps, to act against it. The greatest innovation of Aristotle over Plato in this matter is that in his attempt to "save the appearances," he distinguishes between two senses of knowledge.

... we speak of knowing in two ways, and ascribe it both to someone who has it without using it and to someone who is using it. Hence it will matter whether someone has the knowledge that his action is wrong, without attending to his knowledge, or both has and attends to it. For this second case seems extraordinary, but wrong action when he does not attend to his knowledge does not seem extraordinary. (E.N. 1146b31-6)

Ronald D. Milo summarizes this position as follows:

The man who simply has knowledge that his food is dry food simply has the capacity to actually recognize that this food is dry without actually recognizing this at the moment.

Now there is a problem here. For if the man knows that this is a piece of dry food, then he recognizes that it is indeed a piece of dry food (for if he did not recognize that fact, then he should not be able to say that he knows), and if he recognizes that what he is looking at is a piece of dry food, then he certainly has the capacity for such recognition (because the capacity for recognition is a necessary but not sufficient condition of recognition). It is readily apparent that what is occurring here is an attempted explanation of a
Hamartia and Akrasia in Aristotle

situation where one is inclined to say, "I didn't know that I knew." But Aristotle never explicitly states that this is in fact what he is addressing. What he does is to posit two senses of knowledge in an attempt to explain how, while it is impossible to be incontinent if one sense of knowledge is used, it is very easy to see how one may be incontinent if another sense of the term is used—if one has knowledge but is not attending to it. Of the three arguments or explanations of how akrasia is possible which Aristotle offers, this one is the least satisfying; it does not really account for how a man may have knowledge but not attend to it, that is, Aristotle merely posits two senses of the term "knowledge" without any analysis of how a situation of the sort previously mentioned might arise.

Aristotle's second explanation of how akrasia is possible arises from a close scrutiny of the practical syllogism (E.N. 1147a). He notes that when a person is in possession of the universal premise of the practical syllogism but does not have the particular premise, it is therefore possible to act against knowledge (of the universal premise); if we lack the particular premise we will have an incomplete practical syllogism and will not be compelled to act in the manner demanded of a complete syllogism. Hence, while we have knowledge, we act against it. Furthermore, Aristotle notes that in each type of premise—universal and particular—there is the difficulty created by the different types of universal term.

Moreover, [in both types of premises] there are different types of universal, (a) one type referring to the agent himself, and (b) the other referring to the object. Perhaps, e.g., someone knows that (a1) dry things benefit every human being, or that (a2) he himself is a human being, or that (b1) this sort of thing is dry; but he either does not have or does not activate the knowledge that (b2) this particular thing is of this sort.
Hence these ways of [knowing and not knowing] make such a remarkable difference that it seems quite intelligible [for someone acting against his knowledge] to have the one sort of knowledge [i.e. without (b2)], but astonishing if he has the other sort [the sort including (b2)]. (E.N. 1147a4-8)

However, as Irwin points out in his note to this section, such an analysis does not really apply to the akratic man because the akratic man acts against his knowledge of the correct conclusion of the practical syllogism; lack of the particular premise or a universal term may explain how an incorrect conclusion is arrived at, but the incontinent man by definition is in possession of knowledge of what he ought to do.

Aristotle’s third explanation of the possibility of akrasia is the most illuminating though it is really not an explanation, per se, but rather an explanatory analogy. Aristotle states, that, just as we had previously found two senses of knowledge (actual and potential or knowledge that is not being attended to), so too might there be a distinction in the ways of having knowledge. Aristotle offers the analogy of the drunken man as an example of how a man may have knowledge in one sense but act against it in another sense. (E.N. 1147a10) The drunken man knows the universal, for example, that it is wrong to pick fights. But he acts against his knowledge. What gets in the way or disrupts the normal combination of premises in the practical syllogism in such cases is appetite.

Suppose, then, that someone has (a) the universal belief [that one ought to avoid tasting sweet things], and it hinders him from tasting; he has (b) the second belief, that everything sweet is pleasant and this is sweet, and this belief (b) is active; and he also has appetite. Hence, the belief (c) tells him to avoid this, but appetite
Hamartia and Akrasia in Aristotle

leads him on, since it is capable of moving each of the [bodily] parts.

The result, then, is that in a way reason and belief make him act incontinently. The belief (b) is contrary to correct reason (a), but only coincidentally, not in itself. For it is the appetite, not the belief, that is contrary [in itself to correct reason]. (E.N. 1147a31)

In this way appetite intervenes in the practical syllogism and, though the agent may know the content of the universal premise, his actions follow from the particular premise which is normally a belief about some perceptible object involving appetite (the appetite functioning as the contrary element to the universal premise in the syllogism).

With this in mind, and the drunken man analogy as well, what then is in store for the akratic man in the way of blame for his actions? In order to answer this we must first determine whether his action is voluntary or not. To restate, the requirements for voluntary actions are: (1) the origin of the action must reside solely with the agent, and (2) the agent must have knowledge of particulars. The incontinent man might claim that, with regard to (1), his actions were indeed coerced or forced by his appetite for what is pleasant. But Aristotle clearly rules this out as an outside force; one's appetite is an internal drive, not an external force. In Nichomachean Ethics 1110b10 Aristotle states that the result of defining appetite as an outside force would be that "everything is forced, since everyone in every action aims at something fine or pleasant." To claim that appetite is an outside force and that incontinent acts are thus involuntary is ridiculous. So we must conclude that the origin of the act lies with the incontinent man himself.

But next we must ask whether the incontinent man acts with knowledge of particulars. The akratic man's conclusion to the practical syllogism is correct—he knows what he ought to do. Now, that imperative follows from both a correct universal premise and a correct particular premise. So far as knowledge
is concerned the incontinent man acts with knowledge of both the universal and particular (where his action is hindered is in his beliefs about particulars). Therefore the incontinent man acts in knowledge of particulars and his action is culpable. The analogy of the drunken man further supports this assertion. In Book III Aristotle made the distinction between actions caused by ignorance (involuntary action) and actions done in ignorance. The former are not blameworthy and the latter are fully culpable. Now Aristotle specifically uses the drunken man to illustrate his point. The drunken man acts in ignorance as opposed to having his actions caused by ignorance. Hence his actions are culpable and so too the akratic man, being somewhat a drunkard himself, must accept blame for his own acts. With this I close the general discussion of akrasia.

Prima facie it seems that hamartia and akrasia are quite similar moral notions on many counts. First, both are not due to viciousness. This is quite clear from the textual evidence. Hence they are not the result of a character flaw (although we may say that the repeatedly incontinent person suffers from a character flaw). In addition, it would seem that both the act performed by the tragic character and that of the incontinent man are due to an ignorance of particulars. Indeed hamartia does depend on ignorance of particulars, but I think it is clear from the previous discussion of akrasia that the incontinent man has knowledge of particulars. From this I concluded that the akratic act is performed voluntarily and hence is fully culpable; the incontinent man is responsible for letting his appetite intervene in the normal progression of the practical syllogism and is hence blameworthy. On the other hand, at first glance it might seem that the tragic act is also performed voluntarily since the origin of the act lies with the agent. But the requirements of voluntariness are twofold and it is rather obvious that the tragic character is not in possession of knowledge of particulars—the second requirement. Our conclusion was that on Aristotle’s analysis the action resulting from the tragic error must be performed.
Hamartia and Akrasia in Aristotle

involuntarily and so is not blameworthy. I think Stinton misses the mark with regard to this point when he states:

What all these [actions resulting from hamartia, the incontinent act, and mixed actions] have in common is that the act has extenuating circumstances which the agent can plead in his defense. If the act is unintentional the defense is complete, and acquits the agent of his act, though his ignorance may be culpable. With mixed actions, there may be pardon, if the pressure is beyond human nature to bear; in any case the plea of compulsion, if it is not frivolous, will have some mitigating effect. The purely voluntarily (intentional) acts, in which there is no element of compulsion, are culpable, but are all due to mastery by natural impulses, which again may be pleaded in mitigation. Thus in all these acts culpability is reduced or modified in some way.

With regard to akrasia such a conclusion would presuppose that appetite is to be construed as an outside, compelling force which it patently is not (E.N. 1110b10). With regard to hamartia, such a conclusion presupposes that the tragic act is in some sense culpable. It is hard to see, on Aristotle's view, how this would be possible. What specifically is blameworthy? Stinton seems to suggest, in other passages, that the tragic character somehow could have foreseen the unfortunate circumstances. But, to utilize Nussbaum's argument to support my own thesis, if the tragic character's situation is due in some sense to bad luck, if he is a "victim of circumstance," then it is difficult to sympathize with Stinton's point. I do not mean to equate the tragic character with the "victim of circumstance." I do, however, maintain the view that victims of hamartia represent a sub-class of those who have fallen into bad luck. What differentiates the specifically tragic character from others in this general class is that the tragic character evokes the tragic emotion
from an audience or moral community. (This of course is a circle, but is a circle similar to others in Aristotle's moral theory and it is the position I feel he maintains.) This is perhaps the greatest difference between, what at first may have seemed quite similar moral notions in Aristotle's philosophy, between akrasia and hamartia: whereas the incontinent man may prompt blame and even scorn, the victim of tragic error evokes our fear, our sympathy, and our pity.

Mark Cyzyk
Hamartia and Akrasia in Aristotle

Notes


