

## Pleasure in Aristotle's aesthetics

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### Introduction

It is doubtful whether Aristotle can be said to have a concept of aesthetic pleasure in anything like the modern sense of 'aesthetic'. (He does, of course, have the concept of pleasure that is *aisthêtikos* in the classical sense of the word—that is, related to perception: *EE* 1220b13f.; *DA* 431a10f.; *Phys.* 247a16f.) Nor does Aristotle have a clearly demarcated category that corresponds to the modern concept of 'art'. It is true that he habitually groups together many of the things that we would classify as art—painting, sculpture, music, dance, poetry. But the shared feature which for Aristotle makes this a coherent grouping is imitation or representation (*mimêsis*, to which similarity is essential: these activities all, in Aristotle's view, involve making likenesses). The fact that this requires a narrower definition of 'poetry' than is normal in either ancient or modern usage (*Poet.* 1447b9-23) is one indication that the match between Aristotle's grouping and the modern classification is not perfect. Moreover, imitation is also a feature of activities, such as children's play-acting games, which do not fall within Aristotle's grouping. The continuity between the activities within the group and other human activities (which is an important feature of Aristotle's theory) makes it impossible to define a pleasure that is distinctive to 'artistic' imitative activities. The pleasure which the activities within Aristotle's grouping occasion simply by virtue of their being imitations will also be present in non-artistic imitation.

Nevertheless, although Aristotle does not have the concept of a distinctively aesthetic pleasure, pleasure does play an important role in what (for convenience) we may refer to as Aristotle's 'aesthetics'—that is, his thinking about the activities that fall within the group of imitative activities that corresponds roughly to the modern category of 'art'.

### Pleasure in Aristotle

Aristotle discusses pleasure twice in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (7.11-14, 10.1-5). There are differences between the two discussions in detail (though they are relatively close as compared with the incompatible definition in *Rhet.* 1369b33-70a4), and Aristotle's arguments raise a number of difficult questions. But it is not necessary to resolve all the issues here: a broad characterisation of the main points of Aristotle's theory will suffice.

Pleasure is, or attends on, the exercise of a natural capacity under favourable conditions. In one formulation it is the unimpeded exercise of a disposition (*hexis*) that is in accordance with nature (*EN* 1153a14f.); in another, it is what makes the activity complete or perfect (1174b23). Aristotle never clearly defines the sense in which pleasure completes or perfects an activity. It does not do so in the same way as the intrinsic factors which make for optimal or unimpeded activity, such as the good condition of the capacity being exercised or the excellence of the object on

which it is exercised (1174b23-6). Rather, it is something additional or supervenient (*epigignomenon*)—a suggestion only explained by means of a rather vague metaphor (1174b31-3). It is at any rate clear that when a well-conditioned capacity for perception, reasoning or contemplation (see 1174b21f. for this trio) is exercised on the worthiest object, one has the most complete or perfect, and therefore the most pleasurable, activity (*EN* 1174b14-23, 1174b26-31, 1174b33-1175a1).

Each activity has its own distinctive or characteristic pleasure (*oikeia hêdonê*, 1175b26f.). Likewise, each kind of living creature has its own distinctive or characteristic pleasure (1176a3-8); different species have different sets of capacities and dispositions, and therefore what is naturally pleasurable will be different for members of different species. This may seem to create a presumption that pleasures are the same for all members of a species (1176a8f.), but at least in the case of human beings we can observe significant variations in what is found pleasurable (1176a10-12). There is a correlation between individual preferences and pleasure; people with different talents (e.g. for music, geometry, and so on) enjoy different activities (1175a10-21, 31-6; cf. 1099a7-14; *EE* 1235b19-6a16). But this does not lead to indiscriminate relativism. Pleasures can be evaluated in terms of the value of the activity that occasions them; the pleasure of a worthwhile activity is a good pleasure, that of a trivial or immoral activity bad (1175b27-9). In fact, a depraved pleasure is not a pleasure by nature (cf. *EN* 1099a11-13); only the pleasures that attend the activities of a fully and properly developed adult in good circumstances are human pleasures in the strict sense (1176a26-9). This does not mean that other activities do not afford subjectively pleasurable experiences, but that one should not wish to be the kind of subject for whom they are subjectively pleasurable (just as it would be perverse to choose to be ill so as to experience the pleasure that attends getting better). The criterion for the characteristic pleasure of each species is therefore the pleasure of a good specimen of the species, that is (in the case of human pleasures) a good man (1176a15-26; cf. *Pol.* 1342a18-28).

### **Pleasure in Aristotle's aesthetics**

This analysis of pleasure provides Aristotle with a number of resources for aesthetics.

First, it can be used to make the activities in question anthropologically intelligible. By showing that the capacity or capacities which an activity exercises are part of human nature Aristotle can explain why human beings engage in that activity and find it pleasurable. This can be seen clearly in Chapter 4 of the *Poetics*, where two features of human nature are cited to explain poetry. The first is the instinct for imitation (1448b4-9); the second is the instinct for melody and rhythm (1448b20f.). (Some interpreters take the two causes to be the instincts for producing imitations and for taking pleasure in them as observers; melody and rhythm are then a supplementary point. But since this point is needed to complete the explanation of poetry, which uses the medium of rhythmical language, with or without melody, I find that interpretation less plausible.) Aristotle states here that the imitative instinct differentiates human beings from other animals, and it is

clear from another context that he also regarded the instinct to take pleasure in ordered sound as distinctively human (*EE* 1230b36-31a4).

Secondly, the concept of characteristic pleasure gives Aristotle a way of differentiating between different kinds of artistic activity. All are imitative, and since imitation is the exercise of a natural human disposition this makes them inherently pleasurable for human beings. But this pleasure is common to all imitative activity (including non-artistic ones); we have to push the analysis further to understand the range of diverse artistic activities that exist. Each exercises a distinctive additional set of capacities, and therefore has its own characteristic pleasure.

That point, thirdly, gives us a critical tool that can be used to determine what is appropriate to each kind of imitation. This has both an empirical and a normative dimension. Observing the participants in a given kind of artistic imitation (producers, performers and recipients) and the kinds of pleasure they derive from it allows one to determine what natural capacities and dispositions are being exercised. That in turn provides a basis for deductions about the best way to construct an imitation of that kind. So, for example, identifying the characteristic pleasure of tragedy ('the poet should produce the pleasure which comes from pity and fear through imitation') makes it possible to deduce the appropriate means of achieving that pleasure (the plot, not spectacle) and also opens the way to deductions about the kind of events most suitable to a tragic plot (1453b10-15). Such deductions may raise questions about the appropriateness of what the participants are actually observed doing. It is possible that the participants have not yet discovered the best way to do it (poets had to find out the by trial and error that certain families provide the best material for tragedy: 1454a9-12). But it may also be that the activities as actually practised are distorted because the participants deviate (as a result of congenital defects, poor education or the pressures of an adverse social environment) from the ideal of being human. The principle that the quality of an activity, or of the agent who engages in it, is a criterion of the value of the attendant pleasure provides a means by which such distortions can be identified and normatively corrected. So, for example, identifying the characteristic pleasure of tragedy also shows that the observable popularity of tragedies with a double outcome, ending happily for good characters, is a distortion, a concession to weak audiences (1453a30-9); and empirical evidence can be found to show that the correct view is recognised by participants, despite the deviation (1453a24-6).

### **Cognitive pleasure**

In *Poetics* 4 Aristotle says that human beings have a natural disposition to engage in, and take pleasure in observing, imitation. He goes on to explain why—that is, he specifies the natural capacity to which imitation gives pleasurable exercise. Using the visual arts as an example, he points out that someone looking at a painting needs to go through a process of reasoning and inference in order to reach a conclusion of the form 'this is so-and-so' (*Poet.* 1448b12-17; cf. *Rhet.* 1371b4-10). At the simplest, one has to recognise a picture of (for example) Socrates as a picture of Socrates. This act of recognition involves an exercise of

our capacity for cognition, and is pleasurable as such, since it is a basic premise for Aristotle that learning is universally pleasant to humans: 'all human beings by nature desire knowledge' (*Met.* 980a22; cf. *Rhet.* 1371a31-4).

Recognitions of the form 'this is Socrates' are very rudimentary, and many interpreters argue that such a basic process cannot give an adequate account of what goes on in our dealings with art; it is too lacking in experiential richness and human significance. Hence (it is argued) we must assume that Aristotle is referring to more sophisticated cognitive processes; many, in particular, see here a reference to the processes by which we learn from (and not just about) the artwork. Even though Aristotle only makes explicit mention here of the *prior* knowledge that is required to interpret the imitation (1448b17f.), it is argued that he must also be referring to the way in which our understanding is subsequently enhanced *by* the imitation.

It must be said, however, that if this is what Aristotle was referring to in *Poetics* 4, the reference is entirely implicit. He does mention, as part of the evidence that the activity is natural to human beings, the fact that children learn from imitation (1448b7f.), and other evidence shows that he thought children learn about future adult roles through play-acting (*Pol.* 1336a32-34). Clearly, the children could not participate in such imitations without some prior knowledge of adult roles, but *through* participation they explore and therefore learn about those roles. But one cannot safely extrapolate from what takes place in the formation of children to the experience of the formed adult (e.g. *Pol.* 1336b17-23, 1339a29-31, 1340b14-17, 25-31, 1342b17-24). Nevertheless, although I do not believe that Aristotle was referring to this in *Poetics* 4, I do not suggest that he would have denied that one may learn from art (it would, after all, be surprising if anyone thought that it was impossible to learn about an object from an accurate representation of it). Aristotle's citation of poets in philosophical contexts shows one way in which one could learn from them; for example, reflection on Neoptolemus in Sophocles' *Philoctetes* may reveal that it is possible for weakness of will to be a good thing (*EN* 1146a18-21, 1151b17-22). It should be noted, however, that what is imitated in a tragedy need not be true to reality: it may correspond to 'what people say' (*Poet.* 1460b10f., 1460b35-1461a1). So the truths we grasp and may learn from tragedy are not necessarily truths about the real world; they may, for example, be 'truths' within the worldview assumed (falsely) by traditional religion and mythology. So learning from tragedy is not straightforwardly learning about the world as it is.

The distinction between what Aristotle is concerned with in the specific context of *Poetics* 4 and the propositions he might have agreed to in a larger perspective is also relevant to worries about the rudimentary nature of the cognitive process described above. In a context in which Aristotle is attempting to trace the most basic anthropological roots of poetry, and stresses that pleasure in visual representations is accessible even to the least cognitively sophisticated human beings ('understanding is extremely pleasant, not just for philosophers but for others too in the same way, despite their limited capacity for it', 1448b12-15), a simple process is what the argument requires. But that does not mean that recognising what is imitated tells the whole of the cognitive story for every kind

of imitation. Aristotle is establishing a baseline from which an understanding of more complex forms of imitative activity can be developed; so the simplicity of what he highlights in the basic activity does not impose a limit on what can be expected from imitations in general. If one thinks about what is involved in watching a tragedy, for example, one does need rudimentary recognitions of the form 'this is so-and-so (e.g. Oedipus)'. But one also needs to grasp the structure of the plot—to recognise that this event happens because of that event (which involves a grasp of universals: that is, of what would necessarily or probably happen). And one also needs a moral understanding of the events—to recognise, for example, that this misfortune is not deserved (1453a3-5); without that, there would be no pity. So tragedy involves cognitive processes that are distinctly more complex than that in the basic example. Even so, the processes are not unduly demanding. We grasp causal relations and make moral evaluations all the time in everyday life. So tragedy will still be inherently pleasurable for everyone. In *Rhet.* 1410b10f., in a context in which he is using the cognitive pleasure to throw light on why we enjoy metaphor, Aristotle significantly qualifies the thesis that learning is naturally pleasant: 'learning *easily* is naturally pleasant to all'.

### **The structure of characteristic pleasures**

The discussion of cognitive pleasure in *Poetics* 4 is the first and the fullest account of any aspect of pleasure in the *Poetics*. There has therefore been an understandable inclination to use it as a key to understanding other, less elaborated references to pleasure. Hence many interpretations of the characteristic pleasure of tragedy, which comes from pity and fear through imitation, or of the pleasure of catharsis, present them as species of the cognitive pleasure. An alternative, and I think more promising, approach recognises that different kinds of imitation are each likely to give rise to a genuine multiplicity of diverse pleasures. As we shall see in the next section, at least one of the pleasures that can be derived from imitative art is not a species of cognitive pleasure, and there is no reason why it should be the only one. On the contrary, it seems plausible to suppose that (for example) watching a tragedy is a relatively complex form of behaviour that requires the simultaneous exercise of many different capacities; if so, it will occasion a range of different pleasures. We must therefore look beyond the basic and generic pleasure in imitation described in *Poetics* 4, and consider as a whole the distinctive set of capacities whose exercise is occasioned by any given kind of imitation; only then will we be able to identify and make sense of its characteristic pleasure (*oikeia hêdonê*). So, for example, tragedy may be seen as affording a multiplicity of pleasures; its characteristic pleasure will be that pleasure which most differentiates it from (for example) comedy.

It must be stressed, however, that in speaking of a multiplicity of pleasures we are distinguishing analytically things that are not separable in practice. When we watch a tragedy we are not doing two or more different things at once in the same sense as we would be if we were reading a book while watching a tragedy. In the latter case the different activities would compete with and distract from each other (*EN* 1175b1-26), but in watching a tragedy we exercise a range of capacities on a single object, and this is a single activity that gives rise to an integral experience.

So we might say that complex behaviour occasions a single, but equally complex pleasure. The element of complexity remains, however, and in analysing what it is about (for example) tragedy that gives pleasure we must take account of a range of diverse aspects.

### **The imitating object**

The basic cognitive pleasure arises from our grasping a relationship between the imitating object (e.g. a painting) and the object that is imitated (e.g. Socrates). This requires some prior knowledge of the object that is imitated, and if such knowledge is lacking, then the cognitive pleasure is absent. But there is still an object that has sensible properties, and the contemplation of this object may give pleasure independently of the imitative dimension (*Poet.* 1448b17-19). Hence for the observer who is cognisant of the object imitated, both pleasures are available (or, in the alternative formulation, a complex pleasure combining both elements).

In *Poetics* 4 Aristotle's illustration refers to visual imitation: a picture of something with which I am not familiar may give pleasure because of its execution or colour (1448b17-19). So patterns of colour and shape may be inherently pleasurable as well as being pleasurable as imitations. Aristotle also states, as a further anthropological fact necessary to explaining the existence of poetry, that melody and rhythm are natural (1448b20f.). Such patterns of sound are, for Aristotle, imitative (*Pol.* 1340a18-39), but they too may be seen as inherently pleasurable (cf. *Probl.* 19.38, 920b29-1a7). In dance, too, rhythmical movement is imitative (*Poet.* 1447a26-8); but Aristotle would probably have agreed that patterned movement, like patterned sound, is intrinsically pleasurable even in abstraction from the imitation. Smells can also be intrinsically pleasurable (*EE* 1230b36-31a11); the fact that there is no imitative art based on smell would presumably be explained by its being, like touch and taste, even less capable of conveying likenesses of character than shape and colour (*Pol.* 1340a28-38).

If we turn to tragedy (the form of imitation which Aristotle examines in most detail) to illustrate this, we find that various pleasures arise from qualities that tragedy possesses as verbal text and as staged performance. In the definition of tragedy Aristotle describes its language as 'made pleasurable' (*Poet.* 1449b25), explained as 'that which possesses rhythm and melody' (1449b28f.). In 1450b16f. song is the most important of tragedy's 'pleasurable enhancements' (*hêdusmata*), and staging too is attractive; elsewhere, music and (probably, though the text is uncertain) staging are mentioned together as sources of intense pleasure (1462a16). So there is pleasure to be got from the aural and visual realisation of tragedy in performance. The fact that Aristotle attaches relatively little importance to these aspects as compared with, above all, plot reflects the priority he gives to the pleasure of imitation over inherently pleasurable sensible properties: 'It is much the same in the case of painting: if someone were to apply exquisitely beautiful colours at random he would give less pleasure than if he had outlined an image in black and white' (1450a39-b3).

### **The object imitated**

Perception or contemplation of a worthy object is pleasant (*EN* 1174b20-3). And if perceiving or contemplating an object is pleasant, it is easy to see that perceiving or contemplating an accurate likeness of such an object will also be pleasant (*Pol.* 1340a23-8). But what about likenesses of objects that in themselves are unpleasant? In *Poetics* 4 Aristotle provides a partial explanation of how we can take pleasure in imitations of objects that are, in themselves, distressing, 'such as the shapes of the lowest species of animal, and corpses': we derive pleasure from the exercise of cognitive capacity (1448b10-12). But this is only a partial explanation of why human beings should make a practice of imitating unpleasant objects: it does not remove the presumption that we would derive *more* pleasure from a picture of a pleasant object.

This poses a particularly insistent problem in the case of tragedy. The objects imitated in tragedy are, up to a point, pleasurable to contemplate: we see fine people, acting well (*Poet.* 1449b24f., 1453a10, 1454a16-19). But the things that happen to them typically are not pleasant to contemplate. They suffer undeserved misfortunes that elicit pity and fear, and these emotions for Aristotle are by definition species of distress (*Rhet.* 1382a21, 1385b13). Yet Aristotle sees a close link between the characteristic pleasure of tragedy and these distressing responses: 'one should not seek every pleasure from tragedy, but the one that is characteristic of it. And since the poet should produce the pleasure which comes from pity and fear through imitation, clearly this must be brought about in the events' (*Poet.* 1453b10-14). Aristotle thus seems to be committed to a paradox (much debated in the history of aesthetics). Plays in which fine people acting well prosper would give the cognitive pleasure common to all forms of imitation, and would present pleasurable objects of contemplation, and they would not cause distress. Why, then, should we seek pleasure from imitations of distressing events which cause us pain, when imitations of happy events would give us pleasure unmixed with pain? Aristotle offers no explicit resolution of this problem. He is, as we have seen, critical of tragedies that do not give the characteristic pleasure of tragedy (*Poet.* 1453a30-9); but to say that something is not a good tragedy is not to explain why tragedy should be a good thing.

The problem is not limited to tragedy. Aristotle goes on to observe that quasi-tragedies with a happy ending give a pleasure closer to that of comedy (1453a35f.). But they are not identical with comedy as Aristotle defines it: 'the laughable is an error or disgrace that does not involve pain or destruction; for example, a comic mask is ugly and distorted, but does not involve pain' (1449a34-7). Disgraceful, ugly and distorted objects are not in themselves pleasant objects of contemplation. So comedy too, though less obviously, raises a question about the rationale of the pleasure we seek in it.

### **The craft of the imitation**

The imitating object has properties that are not immediately accessible to sense perception. It is also a crafted product, and the recognition of the skill that has created it is another potential source of pleasure. Aristotle observes in *Parts of*

*Animals* that pictures of 'animals which are unattractive to the senses' give pleasure because along with the pictures 'we are at the same time studying the art which crafted them (e.g. the art of painting or sculpture)' (*PA* 645a8-15). This implies a recognition not simply of *what* is portrayed but also of *why* it has been portrayed in the way it is; Aristotle mentions the parallel to illustrate his claim that the philosopher can derive pleasure from the study even of trivial or unpleasant organisms if their study enables them to understand why the organism has the form it does.

The pleasure derived from the sensible properties of the imitating object are available to any normal human observer, and the pleasure derived from grasping the imitative relationship is available to any human observer sufficiently equipped with prior knowledge. But the pleasure in question in *Parts of Animals* requires special expertise. Artists themselves may achieve success in imitation without an understanding of the reasons for what they are doing, working by habit, instinct or trial and error (*Poet.* 1447a19-20, 1451a24, 1454a10-11). Since we cannot suppose that any casual observer will have a more explicit grasp of what the art requires than the artists themselves, it is unlikely that such an understanding is achieved by all, or even most, observers. Aristotle is comparing the expert naturalist's pleasure in the understanding of natural phenomena to the pleasure which an expert critic derives from appreciating a painter's skill.

The passage from *Parts of Animals* therefore provides a pointer to the possibility that Aristotle believed that reading the *Poetics* might enhance the pleasure which poetry gives us. If the *Poetics* helps us gain an understanding of what a good tragedy is, and why it is good, then in watching a good tragedy we will also be able to study the art which crafted it; and that will be a source of pleasure. But this is a connoisseur's pleasure, of more restricted accessibility than the cognitive pleasure discussed in *Poetics* 4, and it takes us no nearer to resolving the problem posed by the paradoxical pleasure of tragedy.

### **Catharsis**

One possible line of approach to this problem relies on the concept of catharsis. The definition of tragedy in the *Poetics* includes the clause 'effecting through pity and fear the purification (*katharsis*) of such emotions' (1449b27f.); and it is clear from the *Politics* (1342a14f.) that catharsis is accompanied by pleasure. So it might well seem that a pleasure derived from a catharsis of pity and fear is a promising candidate for a characteristic pleasure which comes from pity and fear. But since Aristotle provides no further explicit elucidation in the extant *Poetics*, while the *Politics* (on Aristotle's own admission) gives a brief account that needs to be supplemented from the 'clearer' explanation in the *Poetics* (1341b38-40), it is notoriously difficult to know what is meant by catharsis. Fortunately, we do not have to solve all the problems to make sufficient progress for the question in hand—though the reader should bear in mind in what follows that there is no such thing as an uncontroversial statement about catharsis.

In the *Politics* Aristotle links catharsis with healing (1342a10-11) and with relief (1342a11-15). This makes it plausible (though by no means universally

accepted) that catharsis involves some kind of therapeutic or restorative process. If so, the pleasure of catharsis is easily accounted for, since a process of restoration to a natural state is pleasurable. According to the *Rhetoric*, pleasure may be defined as a perceptible movement to a natural state (1369b33-70a4). However, according to the more careful analyses in the *Ethics* restorative processes are only 'incidentally' pleasurable (EN 1152b31-53a6, 1154b16-20). The qualification means that such processes are not *naturally* pleasant; they are not a source of pleasure when one is in a settled good state.

This creates an obstacle to the identification of cathartic pleasure with the characteristic pleasure of tragedy. If catharsis is in any sense therapeutic, then it is least available to the best members of the audience, who have least need of therapy. But the characteristic pleasure should be available to all members of an audience, and especially to the best. Even if the best audience is rarely, if ever, realised in practice, tragedy should in principle be available to the best audience if it is to be taken with full seriousness. Otherwise, it becomes uncomfortably analogous to musical performances for the vulgar masses, which make concessions to their souls' deviation from the natural state (*Pol.* 1342a18-27). In the final chapter of the *Poetics* Aristotle defends tragedy against critics who regarded it as vulgar, and that defence would be compromised if tragedy's characteristic pleasure were only or especially available to inferior audiences. In fact, Aristotle thinks that inferior audiences are least attached to the characteristic pleasure of tragedy: it is the weakness of audiences that explains their preference for inferior tragedies with 'comic' plots (*Poet.* 1453a30-9).

Either, then, we must abandon the premise that catharsis is in some sense therapeutic, or we must abandon the premise that the pleasure of catharsis is the characteristic pleasure of tragedy. If we abandon the therapeutic interpretation, then identifying the pleasure of catharsis with the characteristic pleasure remains possible; but unless we know what catharsis is (and I do not think, on that premise, that we do) the possibility throws no light on the nature of the characteristic pleasure. Moreover, if the pleasure of tragedy is a complex structure comprising a number of diverse pleasures, we have no grounds for assuming that cathartic pleasure and the characteristic pleasure must be identical. So it is worth pursuing other lines of enquiry.

### **Moral response**

In the *Ethics* Aristotle classifies virtues or excellences (*aretai*) as intellectual or ethical (EN 1103a2-18; cf. EE 1220a5-12, 1221b27-34). The intellectual dimension of human nature has received ample attention from interpreters of the *Poetics*, prompted by the discussion of cognitive pleasure. But if, as was argued earlier, understanding the pleasure of tragedy requires us to consider as a whole the distinctive set of capacities whose exercise it occasions, the ethical dimension must also be taken into account. This dimension has come into focus primarily in connection with the possibility that tragedy might be ethically improving. (Theories of catharsis as emotional habituation illustrate this tendency, just as theories of catharsis as intellectual clarification illustrate the emphasis on the cognitive dimension.) But moral improvement is not what human existence aims

at; the formation of moral character is directed towards, and subordinate to, the possession and exercise of moral excellence. We must, then, ask what someone who has achieved moral excellence would find rewarding in tragedy in the ethical, as well as the intellectual, dimension.

There is a surprisingly simple answer to this question. A good tragedy portrays events that are pitiable and fearful; and a good tragic audience reacts with pity and fear—that is, they react appropriately. More specifically, their reaction is *ethically* appropriate, and thus an expression of properly formed moral character. It is a basic Aristotelian premise that pleasure is, or attends on, the exercise of a natural capacity under favourable conditions. It follows that the exercise of properly formed moral character occasioned by tragedy will be pleasurable to those who have such a character. To the virtuous person, living virtuously is a source of pleasure (*EN* 1099a7-20, *EE* 1249a18-21).

So it seems to follow from Aristotelian premises that the emotions elicited by tragedy, though painful, are also in another sense a source of pleasure to those who are disposed to feel them; and if those emotions are an ethically appropriate response to the events portrayed (as, in a good tragedy, they will be), then the emotions will be a source of pleasure to people with a well-formed moral character. The notion that something may involve pain and distress and yet because it is an exercise of virtue still in some sense be pleasurable to a virtuous person has an analogy in Aristotle's discussion of courage in *EN* 1117a29-b22. Aristotle notes that the circumstances in which courage is exercised tend to make the pleasure 'disappear'. But in the case of tragedy, the circumstances under which we experience pity and fear are not such as to overwhelm the pleasure, since they include an awareness of the unreality of the situation to which we are responding will (the fact that in tragedy pity and fear come *through imitation* is therefore crucial to this understanding of its characteristic pleasure). On this view, then, the pleasure that comes from pity and fear would be a pleasure taken in being appropriately pained by objects to which distress is an ethically proper response. The fact that Aristotle's adverse evaluation of tragedies with happy endings explicitly identifies an ethical shortcoming ('weakness', 1453a34) in the audiences which prefers them is clearly pertinent to this conception.

This line of argument may point the way to an account of the characteristic pleasure of tragedy, which comes from pity and fear through imitation, that satisfies the requirement set down in the previous section: it is a pleasure most available to the best members of an audience. On this view, tragedy is morally serious, not because it helps to form moral character (though for many it may do that), but because it is an occasion for the exercise of virtuous character once formed—and that is pleasurable.

It will be obvious that the preceding paragraphs have been traversing extremely speculative and controversial territory. Aristotle never provides an explicit analysis of the pleasure that comes from pity and fear, or an explicit resolution of the paradox to which it seems to give rise. We cannot be sure that he had a solution to offer. The paradox that tragedy gives pleasure by eliciting painful emotions was recognised before Aristotle, and he may have accepted the observed

phenomenon without having analysed it in depth. The most that can be claimed, therefore, is that the suggestions made in this section are consistent with, and arguably follow from, other positions to which Aristotle is committed. If so, they may throw light on implications of his theory of tragedy that he may not himself have worked out explicitly.

### Further reading

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- S. Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics* (London 1986), 62-81
- S. Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: ancient texts and modern problems* (Princeton 2002), 177-206
- M. Heath (tr.), *Aristotle. Poetics* (Harmondsworth 1996), xxxv-xliii
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- M.L. Homiak, 'The pleasure of virtue in Aristotle's moral theory', *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 66 (1985), 93-110
- G. van Riel, *Pleasure and the Good Life: Plato, Aristotle, and the Neoplatonists* (Leiden 2000), 43-78
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