

# ENDURING ARISTOTLE: A PREFATORY STUDY ON HIS LEGACY OF ETHICS AND AESTHETICS

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## ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to pinpoint and elucidate major conceptual contributions of Aristotle to art and literature at large. Aristotle's propositions offer enduring legacies both to literary philosophy and moral philosophy. Aristotle is basically a teleological thinker which sets him apart from his predecessors such as Plato. A historical contention in respect of the relationship between life and literature gets reconciled by Aristotle's teleology for the first time. This paper introduces a major selection of such categories of consequence from both the texts in question, and explores the interconnections they exert aesthetically. His concepts such as *telos*, *mimesis*, *poesis*, *eudaimon*, *ergon*, *arête*, *hexis*, *catharsis*, *phronesis*, *praxis/action*, *plot*, *probability*, and *necessity* on art are explained in relation to each other related categories, and explored in reference to poesy<sup>1</sup> and life at large given their usefulness. In this process, the paper exemplifies from Greek dramatic texts, and suggests the uniqueness of art, as well as its oneness with life. It maps out the relationship between art and life by recourse to aesthetic categories from Aristotle. It concludes with a note of harmony whereby life and art are recognised as reciprocally enriching.

Keywords: Poesy, Art, Teleology, Necessity, Probability, Aesthetics.

## INTRODUCTION

Aristotle was an inaugural thinker of profound insights both in moral philosophy and literary philosophy. He was a down to earth pragmatist too. Hence, his ideas on poesy hold water across their diachronic career. Plato and Aristotle appeared in a period of transition from orality to literacy. Aristotle appeared on the scene in an era, when the conflict between orality and literary began to crystallise in favour of literacy. While Plato upheld transcendental view of nature, Aristotle championed the theory of Immanence. He was the first philosopher of Immanence. Immanence is an indwelling, redeeming process within Nature, Time, History, and Human process<sup>2</sup>. This philosophy of Immanence presupposes that there is a *telos* in Nature, Time, History, and Human process. Thus, the whole cosmos is represented as 'not static'. An orientation is precipitated.

<sup>1</sup>Art

<sup>2</sup>*Telos* literally means end, goal, and purpose. *Eschaton* in Eschatology (Walls, 2010, p. 4), 'Omega point' coined by Teilhard de Charolin (see Castillo, 2012), and 'attractor' of contemporary use are synonymously used.

For teleological view of reality, everything is pulled by a purpose than pushed by a cause. *Telos* becomes a directional energy. It renders human process into a developmental process in a foretold direction. Aristotle relates this theory of Immanence to works of art in his enduring works on art. This paper attempts to bring out the relevance of a set of Aristotle's concepts to life at large through practice of art and poesy by means of connecting and coordinating them.

### 1. Ethics and Life

While *Nicomachean Ethics* is concerned with verbalising desirable attributes and practices, *Poetics* details the technicalities that should go into the making of art so as to produce a certain consciousness which will be beneficial. Thus, the work of art would produce a synergic effect by combining content and form.

### 2. Prominent Ethical Categories

Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Poetics* spell out a

corresponding teleology for poesy. For him, poetry<sup>3</sup> (literature) embodies a teleological revelation - a truth, namely, human meaning by means of an *eidōs*, which means form. Art is not isomorphic with life. It is an attempt at making something that is not available in nature (Carr, 1986). The maker (the artist / poet) supplies the form. Aristotle believed in poetry as a "rational pursuit" and "as serving a social and moral function" (Habib, 2008). *Nichomachean Ethics* gives vent to his moral and ethical philosophy that serves as a backdrop for his literary philosophy exemplified by *Poetics* by positing a number of aesthetically valid and enduring set of categories. Aristotle prescribes *eudaimonia* which means fulfilment in life, flourishing well, or faring well. It is in this backdrop, relevance of art and elements of its composition must be seen. Aristotle characterises *eudaimonia* as following:

*Eudaimonia* / happiness must be something final and self-sufficient... that which is always desirable in itself and never for the sake of something else... such a thing happiness, above all, is held to be (Aristotle: *Nichomachean Ethics* 1.7).

In view of achieving the orientation to becoming a *eudaimon*<sup>4</sup>, Aristotle recommends conditions of *praxis* (action) and poesy. *Praxis* means much more to Aristotle than it did to his predecessors. As for him, action of an individual ought to assist to make him/her a *eudaimon*. Aristotle's precipitating conditions are diffused across in terms like *poesis*, *ergon*, *arête*, *hexis*, *phronesis*, *telos*, *hamartia*, *catharsis*, *necessity*, *probability*, and *eudaimonia* scatteringly found in *Nichomachean Ethics* and *Poetics*.

Aristotle abandons the term *mimesis* proposed by Plato<sup>5</sup> and highlights the category *poesis* instead with its meaning "to remake". The term *mimesis* meant removal and distortion from reality for Plato, but is taken up by Aristotle to mean something apparently better than reality (Wimsett, 1957, p. 26). The inferior association that afflicted poetry by then is overwhelmingly superseded by a positive association / connotation ascribed by Aristotle. He revives

this concept as a basic human instinct towards the search for truth knowledge, and cloaks it with a fresh aesthetic category *poesis*. This marks the renewed importance bequeathed to meaning, that is accomplished through re-making of the form.

*Ergon* is a function which is characterized by best-fittedness. *Ergon* is meant as "an activity of the soul" (*Nichomachean Ethics* 1.7). To be precise, it relies on activity of the rational part of the soul. The goodness of the human being is implicated in being human. By the use of reason, humans can make their life better. Human happiness entails using reason well over the course of one's life. *Arete* which means virtue is tied up with happiness. Therefore, virtue is inextricably one with doing well in life. He identifies happiness as a virtuous activity. For, "... happiness is virtuous activity of soul" (*Nichomachean Ethics* 1.9). Aristotle characterizes virtue as having two subcategories, such as intellectual virtue and moral virtue; intellectual virtue indicates the dispositions of mind, truth, intuition, knowledge, wisdom, and contemplation; moral virtue is achieved through habit and practice. He identifies them as achievable only through rigorous and relentless training. He designates this disciplined training as *hexis*, which means that one ought to contain a range of run-away emotions such as pride, envy, jealousy, avarice, ambitiousness, lust, greed, etc. Accordingly his thesis is that, an individual seeking happiness is not supposed to allow his emotions to run berserk. Nonetheless, "Happiness is activity of soul in accordance with virtue (*arete*)" (*Nichomachean Ethics* 1.13). Portal of practical wisdom designated as *phronesis* could be opened by means of intense and sustained perseverance of virtue. Aristotle declares one is not virtuous unless and until one cultivates *phronesis*. *Nichomachean Ethics* stipulates conditions for good acts. In order for one action to be good, the agent of the action must be in a 'certain state'. Just acts must issue out of an agent's deliberate choice<sup>6</sup> (*Eudemian Ethics* II.2, cited as Kenny, 2011). Nonetheless, the agent must execute just acts for the sake of the acts themselves (*Nichomachean Ethics*

<sup>3</sup>Poetry meant literature in Aristotle's time.

<sup>4</sup>*Eudaimon* in Greek means 'a happy human being'.

<sup>5</sup>For Plato, poetry is twice removed from the ideal world of Forms. Hence, his low opinion of poetry. This actually derives from *mimesis* literally meaning 'to imitate' (see Lodge, 2014, pp. 171-172).

<sup>6</sup>Aristotle in his *Eudemian Ethics* states that the choice of act identifies a man.

VI.12). Instrumental seriality of actions is hereby undermined. What's more, the agent by himself/herself should be of a firm and unchangeable character (*Eudemian Ethics* II.4); he/she should be decidedly good if he/she wants to attain *phronesis*. The Aristotelian terms referred to so far are conditions stipulated in *Nicomachean Ethics* for attainment of *eudaimonia*. Other supplementary conditions, the role that could be played by arts in producing similar favourable conditions through arts and poesy, are enumerated in *Poetics*.

### 3. Major Aesthetic Categories

Aristotle privileges tragedy and epic poetry over other forms of poesy. Aristotle picks out plot from the elements of tragedy to illustrate its consequential role in bringing about the tragic effect. Towards this end, the events should culminate in a certain closure. So, the dramatized events should move in a certain direction, the *telos*, in Aristotle's vocabulary. While taking care to sequence the events that compose the plot, it should be borne in mind that plot is bound to be arranged only in terms of certain laws of 'necessity' and 'probability' given their connection to the *telos*. Probability and necessity cement the unity, which in turn bring about the *telos*. Imaginative rationality in literature helps accomplish this coherence. The imaginative rationality comes to spell out the probable necessity. The possible or actual action has to be recast accordingly as art is proposed to have a shape as opposed to life which is amorphous. In the making of a literary text, the plot refines actual life into probable, necessary sequence, getting rid of life's metonymic succession. Upon completion of refinement, the text takes on a unified shape. Aristotle calls it 'one action'. By extension, out of the amorphous metonymy of actual action, the maker (the poet) wrenches out a unity and coherence (teleology). This is in consistency with the basic human urge to wrest a single meaning. Butcher, a well-known Aristotelian critic elaborates on these two terms: "the rule of probability, as also that of 'necessity', refers rather to the internal structure of a poem; it is the inner law which secures the cohesion of the parts" (Butcher, 2003, p. 166). By extension, Butcher further quotes Aristotle: "It is not the function of the poet to relate what happened, but what

may happen, what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity" (Butcher, 2003, p. 163).

#### 3.1 Tragedy: The Best Illustration

In view of constructing a sequence of actions that is designated as emplotment, Aristotle speaks of properties of emplotment, such as unity, wholeness, completeness, and magnitude as well in addition to probability and necessity. His definition of tragedy enumerates them in detail: "A tragedy is an imitation of an action that is complete, and whole, and of certain magnitude...A whole is that which has a beginning, middle, and an end" (Aristotle: *Poetics* VI). The discrete parts, such as beginning, middle, and end need to be causally integrated to produce the tragic effect. Plot is characterized by one action/unity and this is the point of variance with actuality. Artistic logic of action (rationality) governs the plot (sequence of actions). An ideal example of a Greek tragedy that could potentially explain plot and other related strategies is *Oedipus Rex*, by Sophocles. In *Oedipus Rex*, the entire story can be broken up into chunks of events that make up the skeleton of a series of actions that mark the movement of the action forward. Events such as gathering in front of king's palace requesting him to take action for the plague, Creon's message from the oracle, Oedipus's sending for Tiresias to find the answer, Oedipus' recalling of the scuffle with a group of men in the forest so on and so forth are arranged in such a sequence that they would be logically connected to make a coherent story out of a mass of discrete events or actions which are apparently unconnected if not for the particular sequence in which they have been plotted into. Logic plays a crucial role herein in the successive sequencing of the events/actions. If a single event were taken off the chain of events, the remaining events in the series would not provide the same story impact which otherwise would have been created.

#### 3.2 Emplotment

When setting forth the concepts of probability and necessity as the intricate-level governing laws of emplotment, Aristotle speaks about impossible plot as a matter of artifice. Aristotle interweaves the two to attribute tragedy (supposed to be the best form of poesy) with

impossible plot:

“...the poet should prefer impossibilities to improbable possibilities. The tragic plot must not be composed of irrational parts. Everything irrational should, if possible, be excluded...” (XXIV.10).

Aristotle identifies rationality as the very characteristic that makes art discontinuous with life. However, the plot as given by the maker reveals truth which is very much sought after as the meaning of life. Thus, meaning gets revealed in structure. This creates a new revealing consciousness. In this sense, *poesis*, as it were, comes to imply the essence of *mimesis*. And there comes about how a literary text relates to life: it gets spelled out in meaning conjured up by *poesis*. Art is about what may happen/‘what ought to be’ (XXV.17), to quote from Aristotle. Aristotle now sets the standard for art: art should not replicate life. Life transformed as art is the highest life lived, he states:

“With respect to the requirements of art, a probable impossibility is to be preferred to a thing improbable and yet possible...the impossible is the higher thing; the ideal type must surpass the reality” (XXV.17).

Probability and necessity serve to scheme the events towards an anticipated culmination/fruition by the author. The author would have had certain idea in his/her mind to create a certain effect to produce an emotion that, in turn, would help in bringing about a desired consequence. For instance, in *Oedipus Rex*, that Oedipus should come across Laius during his ride across the forest, that he should feel much arrogant as to refuse to give way to Laius, that he should plunge into a fight with him, and that he should defeat him by killing him all point to the probable state of affairs that have been taken into account by Sophocles in the weaving of the story. The probable events are a scheming of the dramatist in this case. He sets in motion a number of events in succession that they happen in accordance with the principle of probability.

Now, when events that had begun to materialize in line with the desired plan, the story reaches a point where things begin to take shape on their own. The author could no longer effect any remarkable changes in the orientation of the story. The intervention on the part of the playwright would not materially affect the ending at this stage. The reason is that

since, there is no going back along the events happened temporally, very few options are left out for the playwright to impose any restrictions. If imposed, they would look illogical and spoil the entire scheming of the story. This autonomous course of the events of the story independent of the author happen by virtue of sheer necessity. Hence, Aristotle assigns it a central place in emplotment. The entanglement Oedipus had been drawn into through trivial-seeming actions finally makes it difficult for him to take certain inevitable decisions in accordance with the customs of Thebes expected of a king. There begins the tragic fall by virtue of an unknowing implication in a detested act. He has to start the enquiry into the cause of the plague and on and on which eventually destroys him.

### 3.3 Aesthetic Consequences of Artistic Composition

Conception of the idea of *hamartia*<sup>7</sup> enables the maker to accommodate what is inevitable in life. *Hamartia* entails wickedness; it is not a deep-seated character; nor vice; nor depravity. Ingram Bywater illustrates *hamartia* as ignorance of some material fact of circumstance. (Aristotle: *Poetics* IX). It would be construed ‘as a “mistake” or “error in judgement” unconnected to the character’s moral condition. But an error in judgement’ (Bushnell, 2008, p. 86). It is also known as tragic flaw. *Nichomachean Ethics* holds ignorance to be the cause of error. Aristotle says ‘every wicked man is ignorant of what he ought to do, and what he ought to abstain from’ and that ‘no one acts contrary to him what he knows the better course’ (Aristotle: *Nichomachean Ethics* III). In an interesting circular logic, he states: one cannot know good and act evil; to do evil is not to know good; when one knows good one always does good; However, the ignorance of good is unpardonable. In the case of Oedipus, his tragic flaw was arrogance. Had it not been for his arrogance, when he encountered Laius in the forest, he need not have gotten himself entangled in all the tragedy of his life. A momentary thought that made him arrogantly assert his individuality and importance, a momentary indifference – arrogance – *hamartia* in the words of Aristotle - accounts for his downfall.

Poesy is best-exemplified in tragedy according to Aristotle.

<sup>7</sup> *Hamartia* literally means ‘missing of a mark’ as in archery or spear-throwing, glosses Rebecca Bushnell (Bushnell, 2008, p. 86).



A well-constructed tragedy, with all its elements – plot, character, thought, diction, song, and spectacle – attains the capacity to evoke pity. Pity is an experience from evident, undeserved, unmerited misfortune of others. Fear is a kind of pain from impending fortune of ourselves. We pity in others what we fear for ourselves. Pity and fear are evoked for a character who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty. Aristotle borrows *catharsis*<sup>8</sup> from medical science of his time to explain a moral condition which transpires upon aesthetic enjoyment brought about through pity and fear. A well-made tragic art produces a purging effect. Bottled-up emotions all get released upon experiencing a tragic art (tragedy), and the individual feels purified and relieved. By reading the play or by viewing it, the reader or the audience feels pity for the protagonist for having had to get caught in the whirlpool of destiny as dramatized in *Oedipus Rex*. The pity is evoked principally on account of his innocence. This arousal/kindling of emotion is possible because of the inherent human nature of an individual to put himself/herself in the shoes of the suffering character. The fall of Oedipus is precipitated by virtue of reasons not of his own. An unpleasant end is thrust upon him who has done no wrong knowingly. All unfortunate events happen either by virtue of accidents and tradition. But an individual, Oedipus, is made to suffer from ignominy when he ultimately finds himself amidst the chaos which is detested. Again, fear is caused as one feels one should not be destined for such an end or one should be wary of similar eventuality in store for oneself at any point in life. When chorus repeats the following both the emotions ineluctably engulf the audience: "...look on Oedipus, ...he rose to power. Who could behold his greatness without envy? Now what a black sea of terror has overwhelmed him..." (Sophocles, 1947, lines 1679-1680)

#### 4. Poetic Truth versus Truth of Fact

By mapping out the aesthetic arena, and laying out a number of aesthetic categories with reference to art and

<sup>8</sup> Greek word *Catharsis* originally meant the relief one experiences when a certain laxative is consumed. It would literally mean *Catharsis* is purgation, expulsion, or evacuation in relief. Aristotle uses it to denominate a moral sense of purification (See entry on Aristotle: Poetics as cited in Sachs, 2017).

poesy in both *Nichomachean Ethics* and *Poetics*, Aristotle establishes poetic truth. Poetic truth and the truth of fact, according to Aristotle, are essentially different. And he values the artist's role towards fashioning of the art by imputing the art a form, a unity, and other paraphernalia of aesthetic effects, so as to achieve an imaginative truth which may ideate a life to be lived.

#### Conclusion

Teleological view of Aristotle has it that Nature, Time, History, and Human Process are governed by a purpose, namely, doing well in life or attain supreme happiness. *Ergon, arete, hexis, poesis* establish the attributes required for attaining the so-called *eudaimonia*, says Aristotle. Action is introduced as the cardinal tenet in the service of making one a happy human being in his moral as well as ethical philosophy. The moral philosophy stipulates conditions for achieving happiness through action. Literary philosophy, for its part, elucidates how pleasure is derived from the act of *poesis*, the art of making. Aristotle's definition of tragedy imputes unparalleled significance to action. Both art and life pivot on action. Art and literature, by virtue of remaking process, produces a new form of consciousness. This new consciousness dispels aporetic intrigue. It provides a complementary wholeness to life by nailing the individuals to the reality around them, and it puts the individual through the experiences explicated in the concepts above to help individuals attain enduring happiness. In other words, a work of art puts a check on the unreflective life by means of its arrangement of the probable impossibility and improbable possibility – the precondition being that it drain out the metonymic succession of events which are shapeless. This arrangement glorifies the impossible through provision of a relief outlet for contained emotions. Nevertheless, what is more remarkable is that it inspires them to aspire for a preferably better form of life.

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