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Tragic Error and Agent Responsibility

Charlotte Witt

We are praised and blamed for things of which we are causes,
not things for which necessity, nature, chance or other human
beings are causes.

Eudemian Ethics, II 6 1233a11-12

In his ethical writings Aristotle restricts moral responsibility to those actions an agent performs voluntarily. Only voluntary actions are candidates for praise and blame, reward and punishment. Voluntary actions meet two conditions: they have their causal origin in the agent, and they are performed knowingly.¹ In the *Poetics* Aristotle tells us that actions are the primary ingredient of tragedy, and that the pivotal action of an exemplary tragedy is an *hamartia* or error.² An error, like Oedipus' murder of his father, is committed unknowingly, and so does not satisfy Aristotle's epistemic condition for voluntary action. It would seem, therefore, that the heroes and heroines of tragedy, in Aristotle's opinion, are simply not responsible for their deeds and the awful consequences of what they have done.³ Bad things happen to them.

This conclusion is problematic. The difficulty appears once we consider the kinds of dramatic plots Aristotle prefers. Aristotle favours plots in which a good person's reversal of fortune is brought about unintentionally by his own actions over plots in which the reversal occurs because of the agent's bad character or by accident or external cause. (*Poet.* 1452a32-33; 1453a7-12)⁴ The choice of unknowing action rather than intentional wrongdoing or sheer accident raises the question of agent responsibility. Indeed, it seems intended to do so. In the finest kind of tragedy the moment of recognition depicts a character coming to understand what he has unknowingly done, and coming to understand that his own actions have precipitated his change in fortune. (*Poet.* 1452a29-33) That Aristotle requires a moment of recognition, in addition to a reversal of fortune, suggests that the question of agent responsibility is central to the meaning of tragedy. But how can the question of agent responsibility arise if a tragic error is involuntary?

In his recent book *Shame and Necessity* Bernard Williams argues that the Greek tragedians and poets were more insightful concerning the nature of agent responsibility than philosophers like Aristotle: "As the Greeks [the tragedians] understood, the responsibilities we have extend in many ways beyond our normal purposes and what we intentionally do".⁵ We are sometimes responsible for our actions even if they are not fully voluntary—however that notion is spelled out. So, although Williams approves of Aristotle's modest, non-metaphysical account of the voluntary, he questions the idea that agent

responsibility is restricted to actions performed voluntarily.⁶ His argument is simple. We could not understand, as we do, Oedipus' reaction to his actions and their consequences, if we did not think that he was, in some sense, responsible for them. But Oedipus did not act knowingly, voluntarily, and so we ourselves must extend agent responsibility beyond the sphere of voluntary actions.

If the pivotal actions of tragedy do not entail agent responsibility in some sense, then it is difficult to see why Aristotle prefers plots in which the agent is brought down through his own actions. If the notion of tragic error is cleanly severed from that of agent responsibility, then the evident sense of responsibility of the character is unmotivated, and does not flow smoothly from previous events. Aristotle's theory of agent responsibility renders the relationship between the characters in a tragedy and what they have done problematic at least for those plays where *hamartia* plays a central role in the plot. But the difficulty is not merely confined to Aristotle's theory. For, as Williams points out, we understand Oedipus' reaction to his deeds, a reaction that only makes sense if he is, in some sense, responsible for them. But in what sense can an agent be responsible for actions that he performs unknowingly or unintentionally? Surely Aristotle is right to restrict agent responsibility, the framework of praise and blame, reward and punishment, to actions knowingly performed.

We are faced with an *aporia*. We have good reasons to think that the characters of tragedy are in some sense responsible for their errors, and yet we also have good reasons to think that they ought not be held responsible by others for what they have done. As a solution I suggest that we distinguish two kinds of agent responsibility: accountability and culpability.⁷ Characters in tragedy are accountable to themselves, and sometimes to others, for what they have done, even if they acted unknowingly. They satisfy the causal, but not the epistemic condition for voluntary action. To be accountable for what one has done is primarily a private matter; others are not entitled to demand reparation, although they might deserve an explanation or apology. Moreover, in addition to the ethical task of accepting responsibility, to be accountable to oneself means that one must confront the questions of identity and self-understanding that are raised by the unintended nature and outcome of one's actions. Oedipus needs to understand, and learns in the play, who he is, or has become, given what he has done. That is, through understanding what, in fact, he has done, he comes to a new understanding of himself. This process necessarily includes accepting responsibility for what he has done.

But Oedipus is not culpable for his errors, since culpability requires that both the causal and the epistemic conditions be met. Culpability is the appropriate concept of agent responsibility for the legal system, for moral pedagogy, for rewards and punishments, and praise and blame. But, as Aristotle tells us, the appropriate response of others to Oedipus, and indeed to anyone who brings about his or her own downfall unknowingly, is pity and fear rather than censure

and punishment. (*Poet.* 13)

If we make this distinction we can explain in what sense the characters in tragedy are responsible for their errors and so we can understand Aristotle's preferred kind of plot. Aristotle's views on voluntary action, error and tragedy can be seen to hang together and reinforce one another rather than illustrating a bad fit between his ethical writings and the *Poetics*. Further, we can see how and why a tragedy like Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* makes sense to us today; the distinction between accountability and culpability gives us an unproblematic sense in which Oedipus is responsible for what he has done, and so we can understand his remorse. Finally, we can respond to Williams on behalf of Aristotle. For, just like Aristotle, Williams himself reserves full culpability for those actions that are performed voluntarily, and he ascribes to Oedipus the kind of agent responsibility that I call accountability. Williams' can only fault Aristotle and praise the tragedians by overlooking an ambiguity in Williams own concept of agent responsibility.

In section one I explain Aristotle's distinction between voluntary and involuntary actions, and his further distinction between two kinds of involuntary actions—errors (*hamartia*) and misfortunes (*atuxema*). The first distinction is important because it allows us to see that voluntary actions must satisfy both a causal and an epistemic condition. This suggests the possibility of a class of actions that satisfies one condition but not the other. If there were such a class it might make intuitive sense to assign some kind of agent responsibility to them. The second distinction, between errors and misfortunes, supplies this class of actions. Errors entail agent responsibility in some sense because errors, unlike events that are plain bad luck, have their origin or cause internal to the agent. Tragedies describe the consequences of what a character does, his deeds, and not bad things that happen to him passively or by chance.

Next I turn to Williams' account of agent responsibility and his argument that agent responsibility extends beyond what we voluntarily do. By examining in what sense Williams attributes agent responsibility to Oedipus, I argue that he uses the term in two different ways that correspond to what I call accountability and culpability. Once we clearly distinguish the two senses of agent responsibility, then we find Aristotle and Williams to be in substantial agreement over Oedipus.

In the third section I turn to Aristotle's theory of tragedy. I focus on the form of tragedy that Aristotle prefers in which the actions that constitute the plot are causally related even though the tragic hero acts unknowingly. I argue that we can best understand Aristotle's preference for this kind of dramatic structure on the assumption that it describes a moral space in which a character must encounter, and is accountable for, the unintended consequences of what he or she has done.

Aristotle on Voluntary Actions, Errors and Misfortunes

In different places Aristotle lists several conditions for voluntary actions. Voluntary actions are those that are “up to us” to perform or refrain from doing.⁸ If I were a divinity, a necessary being, then my actions would be necessary and not “up to me” to perform.⁹ (*E.E.* II 6 1222b20-23) The action must also have its causal origin in me. I am not responsible for what happens when my ship is blown off course by a typhoon. Finally, the agent must know the relevant facts concerning the circumstances surrounding the action. Oedipus did not kill his father voluntarily, since he did so in ignorance that the person he struck was his father.¹⁰ Although there are apparent tensions between what Aristotle says in different texts, it is clear that Aristotle’s analysis of voluntary actions includes a causal condition and an epistemic condition.

Let us consider the causal condition in more detail. If an agent is the source of an action, then the action is in the agent’s power; it is up to the agent to do or refrain from doing.¹¹ But when is the moving principle in the agent? To decide this question we need only consider whether or not the agent acted as a result of force. And an agent’s action is the result of force only when its origin is entirely external and the agent contributes nothing. (*N.E.* III 1 1110a1-4, b15-17) Two of Aristotle’s examples of force are a ship that is blown off course by a wind and a situation like we all remember of an older sibling hitting a younger sibling with the younger child’s hand and shouting “why are you hitting yourself?” Aristotle sides with the younger sibling in holding that the hitting action is involuntary because the moving principle is external.

The clear distinction between internal and external causation, as exemplified by ships blown off course, might seem too simple for classifying human actions. Human actions necessarily arise from internal sources, yet our internal motivations are complex and are not simple expressions of our natures. We experience inner conflict when, for example, we are overcome by passion. True, the source of the action is internal, but the vocabulary of the emotions and our own experience suggests a kind of internal agent passivity in the face of overwhelming desire or anger. This kind of example is particularly important in the context of Greek tragedy. For the plays are populated by characters like Euripedes’ Medea, who claimed to have been overcome by anger when she murdered her own children. Was her action voluntary or involuntary? For Aristotle, Medea’s actions, and indeed all actions committed in the throes of passion, satisfy the causal condition for voluntary action. (*N.E.* III 1 1110b9-15, *lllla*24-b3, *V* 8 1135b20) Aristotle does not divorce us from our emotions; they can count as internal causes of our actions just as much as a reasoned process of deliberation does.

As we have seen Aristotle’s conception of voluntary action is rooted in the causal condition; we are responsible for what we cause to happen. But,

we rarely act in full knowledge of the circumstances of our actions, and sometimes our ignorance is sufficient to cancel our causal responsibility. Aristotle's epistemic requirement for voluntary action amounts to the condition that the agent knowingly perform the action in question. The knowledge concerns the factual circumstances surrounding the action—its end, object, instrument and so on. If an actor stabs another actor with a sword thinking that the point was covered, then the action was involuntary. The causal condition was met, but the epistemic one was not. Similarly, if you serve a friend poison thinking it is wine, then you acted involuntarily because unknowingly.¹²

Aristotle thinks that in the finest tragedies the moments of recognition and reversal of the main character are brought on by the agent's own actions. The agent causes his own downfall, but he does so unknowingly. *Hamartia* or error is a kind of action which satisfies the causal condition for voluntary action, but not the epistemic condition. When Oedipus unknowingly tries to unravel the riddle that is plaguing Thebes, he is committing the actions that will eventually lead to his own downfall. When Oedipus unknowingly kills his own father, he is committing an action that will have disastrous consequences. Although the fact that Oedipus acted unknowingly removes what he did from the realm of voluntary action, it does not follow that he did not cause his own downfall. In Aristotle's analysis of drama the concept of *hamartia* preserves a causal connection between agent and deed.

We also find the causal connection preserved in a distinction Aristotle makes in a legal context between injuries to others that are misfortunes (*atuchema*) and those that are errors (*hamartema*). (N.E. 1135b 11-25) Aristotle may have in mind a puzzle that had intrigued intellectuals in Athens, and is recorded in the *Tetralogies* of Antiphon.¹³ In that text legal arguments are presented concerning the accidental death of a boy during javelin practice. Ordered by a judge to pick up loose javelins, the boy ran across the line of fire and was killed by a javelin. The question debated in Antiphon is who is the origin or cause of death: the boy, the javelin thrower, the javelin, or the judge who sent the boy on the errand?¹⁴

Aristotle's approach to this kind of legal puzzle is to distinguish actions according to causal responsibility. If the origin of the accident was the javelin thrower, (if, for example, he was throwing at dusk and unintentionally hit a fellow competitor) then the action was an error. The death was an unforeseen and unintended outcome of the javelin thrower's action, but there is a single, undisputed origin or cause of death. If, however, the athlete threw in the normal practice direction and the fatal accident occurred because a boy suddenly ran across his path, then the origin of the accident is not located in the javelin thrower, but in both thrower and runner. The question of causal responsibility in this case is complex and unclear because there are two origins or causes of the fatal motion. The causes of misfortunes are by nature indeterminable,

and resistant to rational adjudication. It's just not clear who is responsible.¹⁵ In errors, unlike misfortunes, however, we find a class of actions in which the primary cause of the bad outcome is a single agent even though the agent acted unknowingly, and for that reason, involuntarily.

The most prominent and problematic example of an unknowing tragic agent is Sophocles' Oedipus. If we restrict agent responsibility to voluntary actions, then Oedipus does not bear responsibility for his deeds. Bernard Williams has argued, however, that unless we attribute agent responsibility to Oedipus, unless the concept extends beyond what we knowingly do, our understanding of the play becomes deeply puzzling. In order to clarify the question of what kind of agent responsibility might attach to *hamartia* or tragic error, it will be helpful to consider Williams' discussion of agent responsibility. I argue that Williams' description of agent responsibility in cases where the epistemic condition for voluntary action is not met, differs importantly from agent responsibility in the context of voluntary actions. Williams does not think that Oedipus is agent responsible for his unknowing actions in the very same sense that we might hold someone responsible for an action knowingly performed. I call this the distinction between accountability and culpability.

How does accountability differ from negligence? We typically consider an agent to be culpable for events which occurred as a consequence of negligence. An agent is negligent if she should have known certain facts (e.g. the gun was loaded, tobacco causes lung cancer). In cases of negligence the fact that the epistemic condition is not met does not absolve the agent of culpability. The agent should have known certain facts, but didn't. Is it really a kind of negligence? That it is not is clear from the case of Oedipus. His ignorance is not culpable, since he tries to come to know the relevant facts. Indeed, a deep irony of the play is the way in which Oedipus' search for knowledge of the facts of his life brings about his downfall.

Williams on Agent Responsibility

Williams describes agent responsibility as centered on the notion of causality. Indeed, as Williams notes, the Greek language expresses a close connection between the idea of a cause and that of responsibility or guilt. One word "*aition*" means both cause, and the charge or accusation against someone who caused something bad.¹⁶ And, as Williams says, the idea of a causal requirement is also almost always central for our ideas of responsibility today.¹⁷ In addition to the causal condition Williams describes three factors that constitute, in various combinations, the notion of agent responsibility: intention (which corresponds to Aristotle's epistemic requirement), mental state, and response.¹⁸ I will have nothing to say about "mental state" except to note that modern legal systems, unlike ancient ones, tend to exclude the mentally ill from culpability for what

they done.¹⁹ I will discuss the concept of response later because one of the key differences between accountability and culpability concerns what kind of response is appropriate for the agent herself in relation to what she has done and what may be demanded by others.

Does agent responsibility necessarily include the concept of intention according to Williams? Perhaps not, since Williams points to examples from Greek tragedy and poetry where an agent claims responsibility for an unintended outcome. Williams describes Telemachos, who accepts responsibility for accidentally giving the suitors access to a cache of arms. "Telemachos can be held responsible for things he did unintentionally, and so, of course, can we."²⁰ And he remarks that the four ingredients of agent responsibility—cause, intention, state and response—can be present in varying combinations. Presumably, as with cause, the idea that an action must be intentional need not hold for all cases of agent responsibility.

On the other hand, Williams explicitly restricts the notion of a voluntary action to an action knowingly performed: "A certain thing is done voluntarily if (very roughly) it is an intentional aspect of an action done in a normal state of mind. All conceptions of responsibility make some discriminations, as Telemachos did, between what is voluntary in this sense and what is not; at the same time, no conception of responsibility confines response entirely to the voluntary."²¹ Aristotle's epistemic condition (or something like it) is indeed an integral part of what makes an action voluntary, but voluntary actions are not the only ones for which we are responsible. William's idea that, in fact, we extend agent responsibility beyond the category of voluntary actions raises a pressing question concerning what notion of responsibility there could be that extends beyond the voluntary. But before we address that question, we need to consider whether Williams is right in holding that *we* extend agent responsibility beyond the realm of the voluntary. The Telemachos example, and others like it, might convince us that the Greeks extended agent responsibility beyond the voluntary, but how does that show us anything about the concept itself, or about what we think?

Williams' view concerning the relationship between Greek notions of voluntary actions and agent responsibility, and our notions is nuanced and complex. On the one hand, he rejects entirely the view of progressivist classicists, historians of ideas and philosophers, who "refer to a concept of moral responsibility that we supposedly enjoy and the Greeks lacked."²² On the progressivist view the Greeks display their primitive moral evolution because they "blamed and sanctioned people for things that they did unintentionally."²³ There is, on Williams' view, no core notion of agent responsibility to be uncovered through the historical unfolding of civilization, so there is no true idea of agent responsibility that we have but the Greeks lacked. But, on the other hand, our notion of agent responsibility is not identical with the

Greeks.” Rather, Williams holds that the ingredients—cause, intention, state and response – and how they are blended, varies over time and across cultures. In general he thinks that these differences are to be explained by reference to differences in political organization and legal system. In our system, for example, intention is a central concept of criminal law, although in the law of torts our system does not always require that the harm be intentionally inflicted.

Thus, for Williams there is neither a perfect fit nor a radical disjunction between us and the Greeks on the topic of agent responsibility. And, on one point, namely that agent responsibility extends beyond the range of voluntary actions, there is overlap. What is his evidence? The centerpiece of Williams’ case is the fact that we understand a play like Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus* directly and not as an artifact of a foreign culture that has primitive beliefs about moral responsibility. The fact that we understand and are effected by discovery directly, can only be explained by the fact that we can understand how and why Oedipus feels the horror of responsibility for what he unknowingly has done:

The whole of the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, that dreadful machine moves to the discovery of just one thing, that he did it. Do we understand the terror of that discovery only because we residually share magical beliefs in blood-guilt, or archaic notions of responsibility? Certainly not, we understand it because we know that in the story of one’s life there is an authority exercised by what one has done, and not merely by what one has intentionally done.²⁴

Their poetry and tragedy shows us that the Greeks extended responsibility beyond what an agent voluntarily does. The fact that we understand and are directly moved by these works shows us that we, too, operate within this conceptual framework.

But what exactly is the conceptual framework that undergirds the moments of discovery and reversal in *Oedipus Tyrannus*? In what sense do we understand the responsibility that Oedipus accepts for what he unknowingly has done? Does agent responsibility mean the same thing for Oedipus in connection with his involuntary actions as it would for an agent, who had voluntarily done those very same things? It is clear from Williams’ discussion of Oedipus that he is responsible for his actions in a different sense from the sense of responsibility that attaches to voluntary actions. In his discussion of Oedipus, Williams switches from agent responsibility in the sense of culpability to agent responsibility as accountability. Agent responsibility is ambiguous for Williams, and neither he nor Aristotle judge Oedipus to be responsible in the sense of culpable for what he did.

The clearest indication that Williams changes the sense of agent responsi-

bility concerns the category of response. Responsibility necessarily brings with it the idea that the agent must respond to what he or she has brought about. Voluntary actions, for which we hold people culpable, find their appropriate responses in the public arenas of the legal system, and other civic institutions. Culpability entails the response by others to what we have done of praise and blame, reward and punishment. But, when we bring about bad outcomes unintentionally we are in another conceptual space, a private zone of regret in which the recognition of responsibility is primarily a question of understanding how what we have done changes who we are and the character of our lives, and only sometimes requires an accounting to others. In Williams' words "But one thing it (tragedy) expresses is that the significance of someone's life and its relations to society may be such that someone needs to recognize and express his responsibility for actions when no-one else would have the right to make a claim for damages, or be in a position to."²⁵ The appropriate response of spectators to the actions of an Oedipus is, as we all know, pity and fear rather than praise and blame.

If one notion of agent responsibility legitimates claims for damages by others, and another notion of agent responsibility does not, it is pretty clear that we are talking about two different senses of agent responsibility. But, is causal responsibility alone sufficient to establish agent responsibility? After all, if a typhoon causes a ship to run aground, we might say that it is responsible for the ship's sinking without attributing agent responsibility to the wind. Mere causation alone is not sufficient for agent responsibility. We need to add the condition that the action in question must be intentional under some description. Oedipus did intentionally kill the person who turned out to be his father. Not only does this condition restrict the kind of causation appropriate for agent responsibility, but it also explains why remorse or guilt is an appropriate response for the agent. In recognizing the error as his action, in seeing that he did something dreadful, the agent comes to see the harm as flowing from his decisions, however careful, and his character, however admirable. Remorse for his deed is what we would expect from a person of good character, even though no one else ought to blame or punish him.

Reliance on the causal condition alone as the basis for agent accountability, it might be objected, opens the floodgates of irrational guilt. Can the causal condition provide a criterion for distinguishing legitimate accountability from degenerate forms of collective guilt or excessive guilt verging on mental illness? How can we distinguish, for example, Oedipus' legitimate sense of accountability for his actions from a parent's irrational sense of responsibility for the behaviour of an adult child or from the phenomenon of collective guilt? The causal condition can be used to delineate legitimate accountability. Oedipus was the single, direct and immediate cause of the actions for which he feels remorse. In contrast with the case of Oedipus, the parent of an adult child is

not the direct cause of the child's actions. And, the phenomenon of collective guilt entirely sidesteps the causal condition which requires a direct connection between individual and event. Remember that for Aristotle, when we have multiple lines of causation, their intersection is an accident (*atuxema*), the causal condition is not met, and it is not possible to assign agent responsibility of any kind.

Williams thinks that tragedy is superior to philosophy in showing that agent responsibility extends beyond what an agent knowingly does. But this claim is true only if we use an ambiguous idea of agent responsibility. Once we distinguish accountability from culpability we find Williams and the philosophers in agreement in limiting culpability to voluntary actions. We are left with one remaining question. Does Aristotle's theory of tragedy, like Williams', find characters like Oedipus accountable for their errors? In order to answer this question we need to see how accountability coheres with what Aristotle says about tragic error.

Aristotle on Tragic Error

In the immense literature on Aristotle's *Poetics* there are two basic interpretations of the term *hamartia* or error.²⁶ The first, popular with Victorian classicists and high school English teachers, understands *hamartia* to refer to a character flaw. On this interpretation, Aristotle holds that the reversal of fortune of the tragic hero or heroine is brought about due to actions that flow from a moral shortcoming. More recently, scholarly opinion has swung towards understanding *hamartia* to signify a mistake of fact or error. The reversal of fortune occurs because of a mistaken action that unintentionally brings about the character's downfall.²⁷ The scholarly consensus against identifying an Aristotelian tragic error with a moral flaw has held, although some have argued that it is also wrong to restrict *hamartia* to mistakes of fact.²⁸ Instead, we ought to understand tragic error as having a wide range of applications "from 'ignorance of fact' at one end to 'moral defect', 'moral error', at the other."²⁹ Along these lines, Nancy Sherman describes tragic error as grounded in "the ends and interests of a character."³⁰ Scholars have also worked to enrich the interpretation of tragic error as a mistake of fact, to specify exactly what kind of mistake of fact is appropriate for tragedy and what sphere of human experience Aristotle seeks to illuminate. Stephen Halliwell locates the error "in the space between guilt and vulnerability to arbitrary misfortune."³¹ With important modifications, I endorse the latter proposal. Tragic error in an exemplary drama occurs in the space cleared by a fact of human existence, namely that our own actions can unintentionally occasion extreme reversals of fortune.

Nancy Sherman has proposed a general account of tragic error that avoids a simplistic and moralistic appeal to a tragic flaw in the protagonist's character.

Sherman does, however, want to characterize *hamartia* as an error of judgement that reveals, in some cases, flaws of character.³² Taking Oedipus as one pole, in whose actions there is no connection between error and flawed character, we traverse all the way to Medea, in whose voluntary crimes we can discern bad character all right, and squeeze in error in the thought that she has not realized how unhappy her actions would make her. Sherman's account fails as an interpretation of Aristotle's idea of tragic error in the *Poetics* (though not, of course, as an Aristotelian explanation of tragedy) because the errors of Oedipus are the central case for Aristotle and not a pole, and similarly, Medea is not at the opposite pole of a continuum for Aristotle. She is just the kind of character tragedy should not depict.³³ Sherman agrees that Oedipus did not commit an error of judgement and that there is nothing flawed in his "ends and interests". Since Oedipus is an exemplary tragic hero for Aristotle, our interpretation of tragic error should suit his predicament rather than fit poorly with it.

In Aristotle's theory tragic error does not flow from a flaw, large or small, in the agent's character. Rather, in an exemplary drama, the reversal in fortune occurs because the agent of good character unknowingly acts in ways that boomerang. *Hamartia*, in the context of tragedy, like *hamartema* in the context of justice, satisfies the causal, but not the epistemic condition for voluntary action. The error is an error of fact and circumstance, and not a flaw in character. Indeed, in Aristotle's view, the audience response to the agent's reversal of fortune depends in large part on the fact that the agent is good; like us (so we can identify) but a bit better. Pity and fear are evoked by the reversal of fortune, and in the terrible moment of recognition. The notion of recognition itself underlines the importance of the requirement that the agent did not know what he or she did; recognition is a movement from ignorance to understanding. (*ex agnoias eis gnosisin metabole*—*Poet.* 1452a30-31) Part of what the character comes to understand is his or her reversal of fortune, but another part, the part that distinguishes the best plots, is that the character comes to understand the true nature of his or her deeds and their implication in the reversal of fortune.

Because the action was unintentional, and the agent of good character, tragic error is removed from the arena of guilt and deliberate wrongdoing. But the reversal of fortune cannot be a matter of bad luck or accident either. The emotions of pity and fear are evoked especially when events occur "contrary to expectation, but on account of one another." (1452a2-4) Reversals of fortune can be caused in many ways, and most of them (illness, natural disaster, war) have causes external to the agent's life or anything he or she has done. There is a puzzle here: Why does Aristotle insist that in the best tragedy the mechanism of the reversal of fortune must be something the agent has done?

Halliwell argues that accidents or misfortunes are ruled out because they

undercut the requirement of “comprehensible causality” that ought to govern the relations among events in tragedy.³⁴ Aristotle holds that in tragedy the events unfold with necessity or probability. (*Poet.* 1451a36-8) These terms, even modified to suit the unscientific context of drama, rule out chance or accidental occurrences.³⁵ Aristotle holds that there is no science of accidents or chance events because the causal components are simply too varied to lend themselves to systematic understanding. If we take seriously the idea that the actions that constitute a tragic plot must be related to one another intelligibly, and if intelligibly is taken to mean systematically, then we have a plausible explanation for the exclusion of chance or misfortune from tragic plots.³⁶

But Halliwell’s interpretation does not resolve our puzzle entirely. For there is an additional requirement on the errors that bring on the reversal of fortune in an exemplary tragedy, namely that they be the hero’s own actions. Martha Nussbaum has put the puzzle this way:

The unanswered question, however, is why Aristotle insists that the causal mechanism must be an act of the hero’s rather than a (causally intelligible) network of events that bears down on him from outside. Halliwell tends to contrast hero-causality with unintelligibility as if these were exhaustive options. They are not.³⁷

There is nothing unintelligible about wars, famine and floods, and Aristotle himself comments on the reversal of fortune suffered by Priam as a result of war. (*N.E.* I 1100a5, 1101a7) Yet these events, tragic though they may be, are not the stuff of an exemplary tragedy.

One might argue that the tragic emotions of pity and fear can help solve the puzzle. Perhaps Aristotle thinks that the emotions of pity and fear require that the hero be brought down by his own deeds. I find this suggestion implausible. Surely, we feel pity and fear contemplating Priam, whose happy life was destroyed at the very end by war and the loss of his sons. Surely, we can identify with Priam enough to feel pity for him, and surely we fear the same kind of catastrophe happening to ourselves.

Let us imagine two plays, *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Priam*. We know the plots. And we also know that Aristotle would not consider *Priam* to be an exemplary tragedy.³⁸ The difference between the case of Priam, and the case of Oedipus does not lie in a difference in the magnitude of their reversals of fortune. It does not lie in a difference of character. There is an important difference, however, with regards to the idea of recognition. Recognition is a moment of cognitive enlightenment in which the character comes to understand what he or she has really done, and how those actions have brought about the reversal of fortune. Priam will undergo a tragic reversal of fortune but will not experience a moment of recognition. Oedipus did not unintentionally cause his reversal. In this sense he has no cognitive task in addition to his ethical one. Priam has to

accept his reversal with dignity, and he is portrayed as doing so. Oedipus, too, needs to accept his reversal with dignity, but he has an additional, cognitive task, and that is to understand that who he thought he was and what he thought he did were deeply mistaken. Oedipus has learned that his famous cleverness is a double-edged sword. The blessedness and invulnerability that his cleverness secured is also destroyed by it. He has to forge a new understanding of himself in light of the fact that he bears responsibility for his own downfall. In short, he is in the realm of accountability, a moral space outside the public arena of reward and punishment or praise and blame where questions of identity and self-understanding are located.

How can a play like *Oedipus Tyrannus* strike a reader or viewer as something like a universal, as depicting events that are necessary or probable? Part of the pleasure and wonder the play elicits originate in the uniqueness and perfection of the events depicted, and in the device of artistic distance. The swiftness of the reversal, the awful moment of recognition, the profundity of Oedipus' self-questioning all seem to be, and are, beyond our human experience. How can we identify sufficiently with Oedipus and his circumstances to feel pity and fear? Our response, as Williams has pointed out, demonstrates that we, too, fear for the unintended content and results of our actions, that we, too, might be faced with the task of re-understanding ourselves and what we have done. Like Oedipus we are responsible for our unintentional actions; we know that what we have done is far more important for our self-understanding and identity than what has merely happened to us. Sophocles' depiction of agent responsibility as accountability is luminous and severe on the stage, but we can identify even with the hero of the finest tragedy because we also face the possibility of reversals of fortune due to the unintended outcomes of our own actions, and we also face the project of reinterpreting what we have done, and who we are in the light of what we have done.

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Notes

¹ Aristotle's distinction between voluntary and involuntary action is made in *N.E.* III 1-5 and *E.E.* II 6-9. For a helpful discussion of Aristotle's view see chapter 3 of *Ethics with Aristotle* by Sarah Broadie (Oxford 1991).

² *Poetics* 10-13.

³ Scholars are divided on the question of tragic hamartia and moral culpability. Some scholars like Richard Sorabji (*Necessity Cause and Blame* (Cornell 1980) and T.C.W. Stinton ("Hamartia in Aristotle and Greek Tragedy")

Classical Quarterly XXV 1975) 221-54) argue that tragic error includes both culpable and non-culpable acts. Among those scholars who follow this general line of interpretation are those like Nancy Sherman who ground at least some cases of tragic error in the agent's "blemishes of character" (190) and those like Martha Nussbaum who limit the agent's culpability to the question of his ignorance not his character. Nussbaum thinks that hamartia includes both ignorance that is blameworthy and cases like Oedipus where the ignorance is not blameworthy ("Tragedy and Self-sufficiency" in *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics* ed. by Amelie Oksenberg Rorty (Princeton, 1992). Stephen Halliwell, in contrast, locates the hamartia that brings the reversal of fortune for an Aristotelian tragic hero outside the realm of moral culpability. "It is, so to speak, somewhere in the space between guilt and vulnerability to arbitrary misfortune that hamartia is to be located." Aristotle's *Poetics* (North Carolina 1986), 220. The view I develop in this paper is close to that of Halliwell in that I agree that moral responsibility and guilt in the usual sense do not apply to tragic hamartia because they are actions performed in non-blameworthy ignorance. However, I develop a different sense of agent responsibility that I think captures Aristotle's intention in singling out those tragic hamartia that are the character's unknowing deeds in his preferred plots.

⁴ For a thorough discussion of the fact that Aristotle excludes from the plots of tragedies chance events (including both accidents and events external to the action of the play) see chapter 7 of Stephen Halliwell's *Aristotle's Poetics* (North Carolina 1986).

⁵ *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley, 1992), 74.

⁶ Williams praises Aristotle's account of the distinction between voluntary and involuntary actions presumably because Aristotle does not find it necessary to posit an unconditioned, characterless agent like the Kantian will that acts in perfect freedom in order to justify moral responsibility. (152-155)

⁷ This distinction is not intended to cover every kind of agent responsibility. There is certainly a kind of causal responsibility attributed to persons outside of the reach of morality. We might say for example, that Bill Clinton caused the Democratic ticket to do badly in the 1994 elections, without attaching a moral judgement to his role. We also assign agent responsibility to people because of their roles (as parents, captains of the ship etc), and this responsibility may or may not have a moral or legal dimension. Although my interest in this paper is with morality and not the law, I found H.L.A. Hart's "Responsibility and Retribution" in *Punishment and Responsibility*

(Oxford 1968) a useful resource.

⁸ The stipulation that a voluntary action be “up to us” to perform or refrain from is put into the definition of voluntary action at *N.E.* V 8 1135a23-29 and *E.E.* II 9 1225b7-9. It is also mentioned in *N.E.* III 5 1113b2-14.

⁹ Unlike God, who is a necessary principle who originates only necessary results, human beings are themselves contingent and bring about only contingent actions. Aristotle contrasts human and divine action at two points. The necessity that attaches to the divine is a necessity of purpose and result. I may ultimately decide to sell my house (the decision was not necessary but was “up to me”), and whether or not I actually succeed in this purpose is also contingent and not necessary.

¹⁰ That there must be an internal causal origin is stated at *E.E.* II 6 1222b15-22, 8 1224b9 and at *N.E.* III 1 1109b34-1110a4. The epistemic condition is discussed at *E.E.* II 8 1224a5-8, 9 1225b1-15 and at *N.E.* III, 1. The differences between the two texts are not of significance for the argument of my paper, and neither is the scholarly controversy concerning their dating and order. For a discussion of these two issues, see Sorabji ch. 17 esp. pages 281-287.

¹¹ Certain kinds of prior causal stories, those that involve the coercion or blackmail of the agent, raise the question of the agent’s freedom in a striking way. If you are choosing the lesser of two evils, or are acting as a result of intimidation or blackmail, in what sense can the resulting action be described as “up to you”? Aristotle holds that these kinds of actions are voluntary on the grounds that the immediate decision to perform the action has its origin in the deliberation and choice of the agent even if the act is not choiceworthy in the abstract. (*N.E.* 1110a18-20) No one would choose in the abstract to throw valuable cargo overboard, but anyone would if the ship was sinking. The key question is whether or not the occurrence has an origin internal to the agent, and not whether or not there was coercion or compulsion.

¹² Aristotle says that in these cases the agent acted through ignorance. Suppose, however, that when I mistook a real gun for my son’s toy gun I did so because I was drunk or in a fury or of a reckless disposition. Then Aristotle says that I acted in ignorance, and I am responsible for my action. If I am ignorant of right and wrong or not in my right mind due to intoxication, then even if I act in ignorance of the circumstances I nonetheless acted voluntarily, because I voluntarily developed a character that issues in reckless behaviour or I voluntarily drank too much. There is a lengthy literature on this point.

Some scholars believe that Aristotle is not entitled to hold us responsible for the virtuous or vicious character we develop. For a discussion of this issue, see Sorabji, chapter 14.

¹³ Sorabji, 279.

¹⁴ Williams uses Antiphon's *Tetralogies* to make the point that the idea that a pollution is incurred by a killing (and hence the person responsible must be identified) is not restricted to Greek tragedy or to supernatural interference, but was a concept at play in Athenian civic life of the late fifth century. It does not simply exemplify an unevolved and magical system of ethical and legal responsibility. "The fundamental point is that insofar as we deal differently with criminal responsibility under the law, this is because we have a different view, not of responsibility in general, but of the role of the state in ascribing responsibility, in demanding a response for certain acts and certain harms." (88)

¹⁵ Neither misfortunes nor errors are voluntary acts, so neither are subject to praise and blame, reward and punishment. Hence, it is unlikely that Aristotle's category of errors is meant to correspond to the notion of culpable negligence as some scholars have claimed. For the case in favour see Sorabji, chapter 17, and for the case against see Sherman "Hamartia and Virtue." Elsewhere Aristotle discusses something like culpable negligence, but he does so by stressing the failure of the agent to take care, a concept missing from this passage. Here we find a legal analogue to the poetic notion of tragic error, the idea of an agent unknowingly causing a bad outcome.

¹⁶ Williams, p. 57.

¹⁷ As Williams points out we need the rider "almost always" because we have a notion of corporate responsibility according to which we might hold a general responsible for the actions of his or her troops even if there was no causal role. See Williams p. 57.

¹⁸ Williams p. 55.

¹⁹ For a discussion see Sorabji, chapter 16.

²⁰ Williams, p. 54.

²¹ Williams, p. 66.

²² Williams, p.64.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Williams, p. 69.

²⁵ Williams, p. 74.

²⁶ For a thorough discussion of these two options see “*Hamartia* in Aristotle and Greek Tragedy” by T.W.C. Stinton, *Classical Quarterly* N.S. 25 (1975), 221-254.

²⁷ Richard Janko translates “*hamartia*” as “error” in his recent translation. (Hackett, 1987) For an account of the origin and history of this interpretation see Stinton, p. 224

²⁸ Stinton makes the argument in “*Hamartia* in Aristotle and Greek Tragedy” as does Nancy Sherman in “*Hamartia* and Virtue” in *Essays on Aristotle’s Poetics*, ed. Amelie Oksenberg Rorty (Princeton University Press 1992).

²⁹ Stinton, p.221. Stinton lists the full range of tragic action on p.232.

³⁰ Sherman, p. 179.

³¹ Halliwell, p. 220.

³² Against this idea see Nussbaum, “Tragedy and Self-Sufficiency” in *Essays on Aristotle’s Poetics*: “The vulnerability of good people to ethically significant reversals is among the central themes of tragedy.” (263)

³³ At *Poetics* 14 1453b27-29 Medea is described as having knowingly murdered her own children. And, in the previous chapter, Aristotle has made clear that the tragic responses of pity and fear are best aroused by the “undeserved misfortune” of a person like ourselves. (1453a2-7) Pretty clearly, Euripedes’ Medea does not fall into that category.

³⁴ Halliwell, p. 230. Glanville gives the same explanation in “Tragic Error”, *Classical Quarterly* 43 (1949), p.53.

³⁵ For a discussion of how we can understand terms like “necessity” and “prob-

ability” in the context of tragedy see Dorothea Frede’s “Necessity, Chance, and “What Happens for the Most Part” in Aristotle’s *Poetics*.” in *Essays on Aristotle’s Poetics*.

³⁶ In another sense of the term “intelligible” accidents are perfectly intelligible. We can give a full explanation of what brought about an accident even though the causes resist systematic organization.

³⁷ Nussbaum, p. 278. My answer to this question is that Aristotle finds most satisfying tragedies that depict first person agent responsibility. Nussbaum does not directly answer the question, but rather thinks that Aristotle’s preference for this kind of plot is a limitation of his theory of tragedy. For a discussion of how Aristotle’s theory applies (or does not apply) to the plays see Nussbaum and Stinton sections III and IV.

³⁸ For a discussion of Priam along the same lines as mine see Nussbaum, p. 284.