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Moral learning through tragedy in Aristotle and *Force Majeure*

James MacAllister

In this paper I challenge Critchley's recent suggestion that tragic art is not morally educational in Aristotle's analysis and instead argue it can be inferred from Aristotle that tragic art can morally educate in three main ways: via emotion education, by helping the audience come to understand what matters in life, and by depicting conduct worthy of moral emulation as well as conduct that is not. Halliwell's reading of how catharsis helps the audience of tragedy learn to feel pity and fear appropriately is discussed. Two objections Lear makes to Halliwell's account are thereafter outlined and responded to. I maintain that for Aristotle the pleasure proper to tragedy is prompted by understanding of what matters most in life – not making mistakes that threaten the prosperity of loved ones. I pull the paper together by questioning aspects of Falzon's reading of Ruben Ostlund's film, *Force Majeure*. I conclude that the film both exemplifies and critiques Aristotle's account of moral learning through tragedy.

Moral learning though Tragic Art?

In his influential paper, *Moderate Moralism*, Carroll argues that some artworks can be evaluated as artworks 'in virtue of the contribution they make to moral education' and whether they 'deepen' or 'pervert' moral understanding.¹ He maintains that a core function of art is to absorb the audience. This being so, it is very natural to employ ethical vocabulary in relation to narrative artworks as their success as artworks often rests on the extent to which they are able to awaken powers of moral judgement and so absorb the audience. He claims that appropriately mobilising the moral emotions and judgement of the audience is a standard feature of narratives that succeed aesthetically. Conversely, narrative artworks are aesthetically flawed when they misunderstand the moral psychology of the audience and fail to activate moral emotions and judgement. Carroll cites *American Psycho* as an example of a narrative artwork that is aesthetically flawed because it is morally flawed. The aesthetic design of the novel, he claims, rests on a moral mistake: that the audience could find humour and satire in the coolly detached and forensically detailed dismemberments the story depicts. Carroll's view however rests on a problematic assumption. I know of more than one person from within my own small circle of friends who has been able to morally do what Carroll did not think possible, to 'get past the gore in order to savour the parody'.² Carroll's argument rests on the over general assumption that all readers will respond to the novel in the same way and with the same moral sentiments and difficulties. I therefore do not agree with his all too swift dismissal of *American Psycho* as an aesthetic failure.

There is a further problematic assumption underpinning Carroll's wider argument for moderate moralism - that *absorption* is the main criterion for the evaluation of art. As Gaut points out, it is questionable that all art has this aim.³ Moreover, mere absorption does not in itself constitute aesthetic merit as an artwork might captivate an audience because it so aesthetically bad.⁴ I agree with Gaut in thinking that aesthetic and moral evaluation of art should focus on intrinsic features of artworks rather than the responses of any audience to artworks. However, Carroll's more positive account of *moral education* through narrative art has been relatively neglected and merits greater consideration. Carroll attributes to Aristotle the idea that narrative artworks can enlarge moral understanding by providing the audience with occasion to learn how to bring the right emotion to bear on the situation at hand with apt

intensity of feeling. As we have seen, Carroll stresses that to be properly understood, some narrative artworks must activate moral emotions in the audience, giving occasion for the exercise of moral judgement. Active moral engagement is necessary for audiences to follow the narrative thrust of some stories. In such cases, moral education is not an ‘alien imposition’ into narrative artworks but is instead ‘built into’ the internal fabric of them.⁵ Carroll also stresses that most narrative artworks do not so much teach *new* moral emotions as mobilise already existing ones. It is appropriate to consider such mobilisation of already established moral emotions as a form of moral education because the audience are being given opportunity to *practice* feeling the right emotion towards the right object.⁶

Carroll suggests tragic art might be a good source for such moral education but only in specific circumstances. Tragic heroes must be of a ‘certain moral sort’ if the tragedy is to ‘secure the effects that are normatively correct for it’.⁷ Again citing Aristotle, Carroll claims that to elicit pity, tragic characters must be neither downright evil nor morally flawless. Hitler could not be a tragic hero as he is simply too evil. His tragic demise would be deserved not pitiable. Nor could ‘Mother Theresa...be a figure of tragedy since she has no fatal flaw’.⁸ Tragic heroes are instead of mixed moral character. They are neither perfectly virtuous nor irredeemably bad. Is Carroll right? Can tragic art enable distinctively moral learning through mobilising moral emotions and affording the audience opportunity to practice making moral judgements? Is this the only sort of moral learning that tragic art might afford? In this article I explore Aristotle’s views on these issues and I do so in more depth than Carroll does. I defend the thesis that it can be inferred from Aristotle that tragic art can morally educate in three main ways: via emotion education, by helping the audience come to understand what matters in life, and by depicting conduct that is worthy of moral emulation as well as conduct that is not. My argument, that tragic art has potential to morally educate the audience in at least three different ways, is important as it challenges an alternative interpretation of Aristotle defended by Critchley and inspired by an influential paper by Lear – that tragic ‘art is not moral tutorial’.⁹ Critchley claims that Lear ‘convincingly’ shows that catharsis is not for Aristotle ‘some kind of moral education of the emotions’.¹⁰ The understanding of catharsis defended by Lear is therefore examined in this paper. It is acknowledged that Aristotle probably did not mean to specifically equate *catharsis* with moral emotion education. However, contrary to Lear and Critchley, in this paper it is argued that Aristotle allows for the possibility that tragic art may confer such educational benefit.

I will first discuss Halliwell’s suggestion that the effect of catharsis central to Aristotle’s definition of tragedy may involve a process of ethical habituation whereby the audience learn to feel pity and fear appropriately, that is to say, virtuously. I thereafter outline two objections Lear makes to Halliwell’s account: 1) Aristotle is clear that the benefits of education and catharsis are not the same 2) educated adults are the proper audience of tragedy but such an audience is already virtuous and so not in need of any further ethical education. I draw upon Aristotle’s *Poetics* and *Nicomachean Ethics* to argue that neither objection knocks down the claim that audiences can learn from engagement with tragedy via emotion education. I secondly analyse Lear’s objection to Nussbaum’s view that the purpose of tragedy is to explore the gap between being good and living well. Unlike Nussbaum, Lear indicates that the cue for the audience to experience cathartic release from pity and fear is understanding the error of the tragic protagonist. Understanding prompts but does not constitute cathartic release. I argue that while Lear’s consolation reading of catharsis is more persuasive than Nussbaum’s, this does

not undermine my claim that tragedy can help audiences understand what matters in life. Contrary to Nussbaum, I conclude that the *Poetics* suggests the prosperity of close family and loved ones matters more than the fragility of goodness. I pull the paper together by showing how Ruben Ostlund's film, *Force Majeure*, both exemplifies and critiques Aristotle's account of moral learning through tragedy. What Aristotle and *Force Majeure* both suggest is that moral learning involves not just finding out what one ought to do, but also what one should not do.

Catharsis and emotion education

Aristotle claims that tragedy is 'an imitation of an action that is admirable...performed by actors, not through narration; effecting through pity and fear the catharsis of such emotions'.¹¹ However, the concept of catharsis central to Aristotle's definition of tragedy is shrouded in mystery and has prompted significant academic debate.¹² Catharsis can be translated as either *purgation*, where harmful material is expelled from the body resulting in an emotional release, or *purification*, more akin to a religious ritual where the audience is freed of guilt.¹³ There are two further prominent interpretations that suggest catharsis is principally a matter of education or clarification.¹⁴ We shall focus on the more educational interpretations of catharsis, first looking at Halliwell's reading and then Nussbaum's. Halliwell indicates catharsis may involve a process of ethical habituation whereby the audience learn to feel pity and fear appropriately, that is to say, virtuously. Lear disagrees, concluding that while this view has a 'genuinely Aristotelian ring to it', any positive value tragic poetry has must come from outside the sphere of ethical education.¹⁵ Lear makes several objections to the relation that Halliwell sketches between tragic catharsis and ethical education. I will discuss two. First, Aristotle is clear that the benefits of education and catharsis are not the same. Second, educated adults are the proper audience of tragedy but such an audience is already virtuous and so not in need of any further ethical education.

In respect to Lear's first objection, it needs to be acknowledged that education and catharsis are contrasted by Aristotle in his discussion of the purposes of music in the *Politics*.¹⁶ However, Halliwell is careful to stress that his argument draws upon *Politics* 8 without transferring all that is said there about catharsis through music to the 'particular phenomenon of tragic catharsis'.¹⁷ In my view Halliwell is here suggesting it should not be assumed that the experience of *tragic catharsis* exactly mirrors that of *catharsis through music*. In the *Politics* catharsis through music appears to be straightforwardly not synonymous with emotion education, but *tragic catharsis* might be compatible with emotion education. Music and tragedy are after all different phenomena. Aristotle stipulates that 'true education' entails habituating people from a young age to feel joy and grief at the right things, later elaborating that pleasure and pain are the whole concern of morality as feeling pleasure and pain rightly 'has no little effect on conduct'.¹⁸ While music and tragedy can both help learners feel pleasure and pain aptly, Aristotle stresses that we come to understand the nature of practical wisdom (the virtue that guides agents to feel the right feeling in the right way at the right moment) by considering people who possess that virtue.¹⁹ Music does not provide concrete examples of practically wise people but tragedies may. Given that Aristotle specifies that the best tragic plots should depict persons of at least moderately good character, or someone of better rather than worse character, it seems reasonable to conclude that some protagonists in tragedies may possess at least a measure of practical wisdom.²⁰

It further seems reasonable to conclude that audiences of tragedy might be capable of learning what it is right to feel in tragic situations through imaginative engagement with the actions and feelings of tragic characters. In depicting characters with at least a modicum of goodness in action, tragedy has more obvious potential than music for emotion education that is consistent with Aristotle's ethics. This does not of course show that tragic catharsis specifically refers to a process of emotion education. It does however open up the possibility that tragic catharsis is not incompatible with Aristotle's views on education of the emotions and the acquisition of virtue and this in the end was the main claim Halliwell defended.²¹ While Mason is probably right to conclude that Aristotle did not mean to specifically equate *catharsis* with such emotion education this does not mean that tragedy cannot confer such educational benefit.²² It is my argument that although it is probably wrong to call such emotion education *catharsis*, tragedies do in Aristotle's view, nonetheless have potential to help audiences learn what it may be right to feel in a tragic situation. Such emotion education would contribute to the learners' wider ethical education. Before turning to Lear's second objection I want to note that such learning need not involve the formation of feelings entirely new to the audience. Instead it may most often be, as Carroll suggests, a matter of activating already existent emotions in such a way that the audience is afforded space to practice making judgements about what it may be morally good to feel.

The audience of tragedy

To develop his second objection Lear cites Aristotle's point that there are two types of audience at the theatre, one of educated free men and the other of common persons.²³ Ethical education would be 'futile' for common persons as their character is fixed and virtue is beyond them and 'superfluous' for those previously educated as they are already virtuous and so not in need of any further ethical education. Lear concludes that 'for Aristotle, education is for youths, tragic katharsis is for educated, cultivated adults'.²⁴ It is however questionable whether Aristotle was, as Lear suggests, categorically willing to dismiss the possibility that adults who have received an education for virtue in their youth stand in need of no further ethical education.²⁵ There is after all textual evidence to suggest Aristotle did not think an education into virtue in youth was sufficient to ensure the sustained practice of virtue in adulthood. Instead, adults need to continue to observe the habituation of their youth 'even after they are grown up'.²⁶ Aristotle emphasises that while law makers should in the first instance appeal to the 'finer feelings' and goodness of people in hope that those who have received a habituation into virtue will respond, laws may nonetheless be needed to punish and regulate the behaviour of those who do not.²⁷ My contention then is that tragic art forms may be a means of appealing to the finer feelings of those members of the audience who received a habituation into virtue in their youth in such a way that it can help them continue to observe virtuous habits in adulthood. Some adults may not need these appeals but many may. While Aristotle did not explicitly make this argument it is consistent with his conception of tragedy and the practice of virtue, and it is reasonable to think that virtuous dispositions need 'to be maintained by practice'.²⁸

A rejoinder can also be made about 'common persons' in the audience who have received no education in virtue. It is true that Aristotle is sceptical that *argument* might help adults lacking in virtue acquire it. He remarks that 'to dislodge by argument habits long embedded in the character is a difficult if not impossible task'.²⁹ However, he does not

categorically rule out the possibility. Moreover, he concludes that for most people ‘we should probably be content if...all the means that are supposed to make us good enable us to obtain some portion of goodness’.³⁰ Given that Aristotle thinks that most people refrain from evil due to fear of punishment, it is not unreasonable to suppose that experiencing fear when watching a tragedy may help ‘common’ persons attain some measure of goodness.³¹ A further reason to doubt Lear’s conclusion is that the principal characters in tragedy are, as we have already noted, intended to be better rather than worse than the audience. Tragic protagonists are good but imperfect so the audience can relate to them.³² It is my argument that both of the types of audience Aristotle identifies can not only relate to but also learn from tragic heroes. Tragic heroes after all at least sometimes exemplify what it may be right to feel in a tragic situation. Such emotion education may help the audience to practice virtue as feelings significantly impact on conduct in Aristotle’s ethics. Lear’s conclusion that ethical education cannot be a benefit of tragedy can therefore be rejected. There is moreover a second possibility for moral learning through tragedy gestured towards by Nussbaum.

Understanding what matters in life

Nussbaum maintains that Aristotle’s emphasis on the centrality of action in tragedy is important. She asserts that ‘the value of tragic action is a practical value: it shows us certain things about human life’.³³ In particular tragic action shows the audience that ‘having a good character...is not sufficient for the fullness of good living’.³⁴ There is a gap between being good and living well. The best tragic plots examine this gap.³⁵ This conception of *eudaimonia* puts Aristotle at odds with Plato. For Plato chance events like the death of a loved one do not prevent a person from living well as the good life of contemplation is self-sufficient.³⁶ In contrast, for Aristotle ill luck can lessen the likelihood of living well. Goodness is, as Nussbaum puts it, *fragile*. Nussbaum argues that by eliciting pity and fear, tragedies can help people ‘learn more about their implicit views of what matters in human life, about the vulnerability of our own deepest commitments’.³⁷ Nussbaum maintains that an important lesson to be drawn from Aristotle’s *Poetics* is that reversals of fortune entirely down to circumstances beyond an agent’s control can happen to even ‘good’ people. Thus for Nussbaum tragic catharsis is largely a matter of ‘clarification’ or ‘illumination’ regarding what matters in life. A clarification that arises from the experience of pity and fear.

Lear takes issue with Nussbaum’s view that ‘the point of tragedy is to explore the gap... between being good and living well’.³⁸ Lear concedes that Aristotle did not think being virtuous is always sufficient for living well. However, Lear insists Aristotle did not think the downfall of a good person due to events entirely beyond their control would be a proper basis for a good tragedy. Lear is correct here. Aristotle makes clear that the best tragic plots do not show virtuous men going from prosperity to bad fortune, as this ‘does not evoke fear or pity, but disgust’.³⁹ Lear also disputes Nussbaum’s discussion of hamartia – the error of the tragic hero. For Lear the error of the tragic protagonist is significant as it means good people are not shown falling in to misfortune due to events completely beyond their control. Nussbaum does, to be sure, agree with Lear in thinking that hamartia involves coming to grief through ‘some sort of mistake in action that is causally intelligible, not simply fortuitous, done in some sense by oneself, and yet not the outgrowth of a settled defective disposition of character’.⁴⁰ While Nussbaum and Lear share a similar understanding of hamartia they nonetheless disagree on the significance of it. For Lear hamartia is crucial to the ‘content’ of relief that tragedy provides. For Nussbaum it is not.

Lear holds to be vital Aristotle's thought that the best tragedies involve some terrible suffering or doing within a family household.⁴¹ Lear maintains the best tragedies possess an *objective* feature, a terrible act or undergoing between kin or loved ones that activates the tragic emotions in the *subjective* experience of the audience. The tragic events that people most fear is a 'breakdown of the primordial bonds' that connect one person to another.⁴² Lear concludes that Aristotle offers the consolation that when tragedies happen the world is revealed to be rationally intelligible as the tragic hero makes an error that rationalises their fall. For Lear the theatre provides an arena where the audience can experience tragic emotions safely.⁴³ Any release of tragic emotions in the safe environment of theatre must also however be preceded by understanding, 'one also needs to know the content of our relief, what our relief is about'.⁴⁴ Lear here contests Nussbaum's implication that the pleasure proper to tragedy is one of *mimetic* learning. Mimetic pleasure is simply a matter of appreciating an artist's skill at representing something accurately.⁴⁵ For Lear the pleasure proper to tragedy is not one of mimetic learning, it is an emotional release from pity and fear. Importantly, understanding what (at least in part) caused the tragic event - the error of the protagonist - is the cue for the audience to experience release from pity and fear.⁴⁶ Understanding prompts but does not constitute cathartic release. For Aristotle the pleasure proper to tragedy is prompted by understanding of what matters most in life – not making mistakes that threaten the prosperity of loved ones.

While neither of Lear's objections to Halliwell knock down the claim that audiences can learn from engagement with tragedy via emotion education, Lear does help to show the main purpose of tragedy is not to examine the divide between 'being good' and 'living well'. For Nussbaum, catharsis involves clarification about the fragility of goodness. For Lear, catharsis is a consolation preceded by an understanding of the tragic hero's error. While I think Lear's reading is more persuasive, this does not undermine my claim that tragedy can help audiences come to understand what matters in life. Indeed, on Lear's view such understanding is needed before the pleasure proper to tragedy can take effect. While goodness may well be fragile, what is suggested in the *Poetics* is that a threat to the prosperity of family and loved ones is a more central feature of tragic plots. Aristotle after all believed that it is the suffering of close family that generates most pity and fear in the audience.⁴⁷ A key moral teaching of the *Poetics* is that an error that threatens to contribute to a family misfortune is the greatest tragedy of all. Such tragic themes are played out in *Force Majeure*, a film to which we now turn.

Moral thought experiment and moral luck in *Force Majeure*

The possibility of family tragedy looms large in *Force Majeure*.⁴⁸ The film revolves around the fate of Tomas and his wife Ebba who are on a skiing holiday in the Alps with their children. Near the start of the film the family are having lunch on a hotel terrace when an avalanche begins in the surrounding mountains. Tomas tries to reassure everyone there is no risk to them - it is a controlled snow slide. However, as it nears the hotel the cascading snow shows no sign of abating and panic ensues on the restaurant terrace. A thick fog of snow fills the air and Tomas bolts, leaving Ebba alone to protect the children from catastrophe. However, after a few seconds the snow dust settles and it becomes clear that the avalanche did not in fact reach the hotel terrace – the family were not in any real danger from it. Tomas returns to the table and lunch resumes. The remainder of the film is concerned with making sense of the near miss avalanche experience. While the avalanche did not directly threaten the prosperity of the family, as the film unfolds it becomes clear that the reaction of Tomas to it does. The director

of the film Ruben Ostlund notes that while the family are not physically harmed by the avalanche, the bonds that connect Tomas to his family are shaken to the core.⁴⁹

Ostlund explains that the initial inspiration to make the film came from the personal experience of friends of his who were unexpectedly attacked by gunfire while on holiday in Latin America.⁵⁰ The husband abandoned his wife and ran for cover. While the couple in real life were, like the family in the film, physically unharmed, upon return home, after a glass of wine the wife could not resist telling the story of her abandonment over and over again. In the film too, again after a glass of wine, Ebba also feels compelled to tell the story of abandonment by her husband. While important aspects of the plot draw inspiration from real life then, Ostlund also wanted the film to explore the wider question of how human beings react to sudden situations of unexpected catastrophe. He looked into empirical studies on this topic and found that after unexpectedly facing danger together a couple is more likely to divorce, perhaps because ‘in many cases, men do not act according to the expected codes of chivalry’.⁵¹ Ostlund cites an empirical study into survival rates of over 15000 people from 18 maritime disasters over 300 years. This study, by Elinder and Erixson, suggested that women had a distinct survival *disadvantage* over men in disaster situations.⁵² Elinder and Erixson conclude that the *women and children first* principle of chivalry associated with the Titanic did not hold true in practice to most other maritime disasters – instead the findings suggest that in disaster situations the human response is best captured by the principle of *every man for himself*.

Ostlund observes that as human existence is increasingly insulated from nature, most men in the western world today lack opportunity to stand up for their family in the face of primal danger.⁵³ *Force Majeure* thus provides an ethical experience most people in the West are not likely to get in real life – viewers of the film have opportunity to think about what they would do in Tomas’s life and death situation.⁵⁴ Falzon argues that the movie can therefore be understood as a thought experiment, albeit an atypical one. He explains that movies are particularly ‘well placed to run such virtual thought experiments’ as they can evoke experience powerfully and invite character identification in the process.⁵⁵ Movies are also richer in narrative and experiential detail than traditional thought experiments in philosophy which tend to be more abstract and conceptual. Furthermore, while thought experiments in philosophy usually employ narrative means to test out philosophical claims or aspects of philosophical theory, *Force Majeure* puts the moral character of the main protagonist in the film to the test.⁵⁶ Tomas is found horribly, shamefully, wanting, and in more than one way. In running away from his family in a bid to save himself, he failed to live up to his own moral ideals. He also failed to play the part of the stereotypical male hero of Hollywood action films who protects his family when they face danger.⁵⁷ Instead Tomas embodied the principle of *every man for himself*.

To make matters worse he later lies about his actions and tries to gaslight his wife into believing that he did not run away. It is only when Ebba offers proof in the form of a video recording from Tomas’s phone (in a cringe-worthy tragicomic scene) that he accepts the truth of what happened. However, Ebba also fails to live up to her moral ideals.⁵⁸ When reflecting on Tomas’s flight, Ebba insists that she cannot identify with someone who would trample over their own family to survive. She remarks that “my natural focus is on my children, while Tomas’s natural focus is away from us”. However, in a later incident Ebba does abandon her children when sensing that the bus they are all on is out of control. Although Ebba’s moment of moral weakness is nowhere near as egregious as that of Tomas, neither character in the film

is left with their moral dignity entirely intact.⁵⁹ The only character who does not get off the careering bus is Charlotte. Charlotte notably rejects conventional notions of motherhood and family in having a shame free affair with a ski instructor. She is exactly the sort of character who should be shown to be punished for eschewing traditional moral norms but the film notably does not punish her and instead subtly challenges conventional ideals of femininity and motherhood.⁶⁰ However, it is not just the moral identity of Tomas and Ebba that are being challenged in the film nor does it only trouble traditional norms of masculinity and femininity. Instead it raises questions ‘about the moral agent as such’.⁶¹ The film shows how the lived reality of human moral experience often differs from the abstract choice shaping arguments typically found in moral philosophy. While moral life may well require, or be well served by ideals that shape conduct, moral life is also nonetheless ‘perilous’ and human beings always face the unfortunate prospect ‘of failing to live up to their defining ideals’.⁶² Tomas is thus morally unlucky as well as morally flawed in that his cowardice is only exposed through the ill fortune of finding himself in a situation most people will not have to face.⁶³ There is much to admire in Falzon’s reading of *Force Majeure*. However, aspects of his reading are also questionable, most particularly his discussion of Aristotle.

Virtue, courage, cowardice and moral softness

Prior to drawing the conclusion that Tomas is morally unlucky as well as morally flawed, Falzon considers two other explanations of Tomas’s behaviour. The first explanation is a Hobbesian one gestured towards by Mats in the film. According to Mats, Tomas was acting on a primitive, perhaps even pre-moral, survival instinct to escape a dangerous situation. On this view Tomas was in the grip of an unconscious reflex reaction so it is an open question whether or not he actually bears responsibility for his moral failure. However, Falzon considers the second Aristotelian interpretation of Tomas’s conduct to be more philosophically nuanced. This view is embodied by Ebba who thinks that Tomas revealed his real character when unthinkingly running away.

‘For Aristotle, being good is not a matter of thinking how to behave before acting...Rather, a good person is precisely the one who does not have to think. Being good involves practicing being good until one has cultivated the habits of goodness, the habitual behaviours constitutive of one’s character. The same applies to being a bad person. As such, an unthinking action, especially if part of an ongoing pattern of behaviour, can reveal your character’.⁶⁴

Falzon is right to suggest that an unthinking action from habit can reveal character in Aristotle’s ethical outlook, at least in some circumstances. However, Aristotle’s ethical framework is more subtle and complex than Falzon credits. The idea that the good person ‘does not have to think’ is almost certainly not Aristotelian. Aristotle after all stipulates that ‘moral virtue is a state involving choice’ and practical ‘*deliberation*’ about what it is good and right to desire and do.⁶⁵ It is the function of the practical, deliberative intellect to arrive at the truth in respect to what it is good and right to desire and do.⁶⁶ Aristotle thus emphasises that full moral virtue requires feeling, action, choice and deliberative *thought* about what to desire and do.

Falzon’s conclusion that an Aristotelian moral view is not able to make sense of Tomas’s actions is also highly questionable.⁶⁷ *Force Majeure* actually exemplifies several Aristotelian ideas and Aristotle’s ethics can make very good sense of Tomas’s actions, especially if considered alongside his views on tragedy. For one, Aristotle’s ethical outlook

can address the role of luck in moral life. Aristotle takes account of how ill fortune can lessen the likelihood of prosperity.⁶⁸ He remarks that ‘a man’s misfortunes sometimes have a powerful influence on his life’.⁶⁹ For another, Tomas responds to the avalanche threat in a cowardly fashion and Aristotle discusses courage and cowardice at some length. He defines courage as a mean state regarding feelings of fear and confidence and stipulates that the ‘most fearful thing of all is death’.⁷⁰ He adds that ‘surely a man is not a coward if he dreads brutality towards his wife and children’.⁷¹ The courageous feel fear but are ultimately undaunted by it and able to endure it. Courage entails facing one’s fears for the right reason at the right moment.⁷² Tomas is certainly not courageous – he flees from his fears instead of facing them. If he feels dread at the prospect of brutality towards his wife and children this is not reflected in his actions. Does Tomas’s cowardly reaction to the avalanche reveal a settled state of ‘bad’ character? In my view it does not. Aristotle’s ethical framework does not simply pit the good against the bad in absolute terms as Falzon in places implies.

Instead Aristotle identifies up to seven different ways that the morally virtuous may temporarily fall into error while still retaining an overall virtuous character.⁷³ Furthermore, there may be as many as six different stages of moral development in an Aristotelian ethical framework ranging from ‘the many’ at level one through to the fully virtuous at level six.⁷⁴ Tomas’s self-pitying confession to Ebba of other indiscretions including infidelity suggests the avalanche abandonment is not the first time he has let his family down. This, coupled with his attempt to gaslight Ebba, suggests Tomas is nowhere near a state of full moral virtue. However, Tomas is not downright bad to the bone either. He is aware of his moral failure. He does therefore have at least some knowledge of the good and of what courage entails. *If* Tomas’s cowardice in the face of the avalanche arises from a settled state of character then this is probably best described as *morally soft* rather than outright bad. The morally soft person may have a sense of what actions virtue calls for but they easily stray from this path when they are confronted with the prospect of pain.⁷⁵ When faced with the prospect of pain Tomas fled. At first glance this may suggest Tomas is morally soft.

Hamartia, the best tragic plots, moral learning and philosophical movies

It is not altogether clear however that Tomas’s cowardly reaction to the avalanche threat does arise from a settled state of character, morally soft or otherwise. Indeed, in the two other dangerous situations Tomas faces in the film he comes to the rescue of first his wife, on the ski slope, and then later to fellow passengers on a wildly driven bus. While Ebba may well have contrived the first and possibly even the second situation in order to help him get over his avalanche-reaction-shame the fact remains that Tomas, for all his other moral faults, is not consistently cowardly in the film. Another Aristotelian concept can though account for Tomas’s actions – hamartia. In the *Poetics* it is made clear that the hero in tragic plots falls into misfortune through an error (hamartia) that arises from something other than a settled state of character.⁷⁶ This error could be both factual and/or moral.⁷⁷ Tomas makes a monumental moral error when he abandons his family and this error is all too plain for the audience to see. Tomas is not a readily likeable hero because of his cowardice and dishonesty. He may nonetheless possess several of the attributes of Aristotle’s ideal tragic hero.

Tomas may, as we have seen, possess an intermediate, morally soft character. He is neither purely bad nor wholly good. He is evidently nowhere near the stage of full moral virtue but in having at least some conception of the good and in acting courageously (as well as

cowardly) on occasion he is perhaps slightly more morally advanced than ‘the many’ who only seek virtue, if they do at all, through fear. The ideal hero of tragedy also has an intermediate moral character and is not outstanding in moral excellence, and they undergo a change to bad fortune through error.⁷⁸ Tomas too has obvious moral flaws that lead to his misfortune. While Tomas does fall out of favour with his family because of his failings, his suffering is not terminal, and by the end of the film he does seem to have been cautiously reintegrated back into the family. Interestingly, the tragic power of *Force Majeure* may even be enhanced by the fact that Tomas’s demise is not fatally harmful to his family life. Aristotle after all suggests that the best tragic plots involve ‘situations in which suffering arises in close relationships’ but where the worst misfortune of death is ultimately averted.⁷⁹ Tomas can perhaps be appropriately regarded as a tragic hero then, albeit not a very morally good one.

This said, when Tomas confesses to being a smoker to one of his children at the end of the film the audience is left in no doubt that Tomas is very far from being a conventional moral role model. While he may at least here display a new found commitment to honesty about his flaws he does not seem committed to his own moral improvement beyond this. Tragic heroes in Aristotle’s account are probably intended to be more morally admirable than Tomas so that the audience can identify with them. It is generally easier to cringe at the actions of Tomas than identify with him. Aristotle also recommends more than just honesty about one’s own moral failings. He calls on those seeking virtue to be aware of the errors to which they are prone so that they can take steps to actively drag themselves in the contrary direction.⁸⁰ Tomas does not seem consistently committed to dragging himself towards the good. Tomas is not especially worthy of moral emulation then. Nonetheless the audience may still be morally educated by the film. What Aristotle and *Force Majeure* both suggest is that moral learning involves not just finding out what one ought to do, but also what one should not do. Films can morally educate by depicting behaviour that is morally inspiring and worthy of emulation and also behaviour that is morally shameful and worthy of avoiding.⁸¹ In leaving his family to face danger alone, and especially in lying about this, Tomas teaches the audience how not to behave in like situations. The fact that Tomas manifests moral flaws is central to any moral learning in the audience that may follow. If Tomas was not cowardly the audience would not have borne witness to his fall from family grace nor would they understand the cause of his fall. His flaw rationalises his fall and the audience who understand this have opportunity for tragic catharsis.⁸² A tragic catharsis that carries moral educational potential with it.

Force Majeure shows that tragic stories may be able to morally educate some in the audience *because of* the hero’s flaws not in *spite of* them. From an Aristotelian perspective the fact that Tomas is later ashamed of his conduct is of significance as ‘shame is the semi-virtue of the learner’.⁸³ Tomas was ashamed of his cowardice and in two further threatening situations (albeit ones that were much less dangerous than the avalanche and also possibly staged) his conduct was more courageous. While the film may not press this point hard *Force Majeure* does open up a possible objection to Aristotle’s view that moral shame is apt for youths but improper for adults.⁸⁴ Tomas may well not embody the most edifying example in film of a character who learns to be morally better through the shame of moral failure. Aristotle may well also be right to think that it would be better if adults never did anything shameful. However, *Force Majeure* reminds its audience that adults do morally fail and perhaps more often than they would like to admit. Aristotle rather writes off the possibility of adults learning from moral failure – he simply condemns the adult who feels shame as bad.⁸⁵ There is though

no good moral or educational reason to exclude adults from any moral learning that may accrue from such shameful experiences. Indeed, it would surely be better if an adult learns from shame and does better next time than repeat the same shameful actions over and over again.

While Critchley believes that the audience of tragedy will be unaltered by the artistic spectacle it is my argument that tragic characters like Tomas have the potentially to ethically educate the audience. While many who watch a film like *Force Majeure* may well be left unaltered by the film viewing experience some audiences may have a different, more morally educational experience. They may bear witness to the cowardice and dishonesty of Tomas and the consequences it has for him and learn from his moral failure. His fate need not be that of the audience. Critchley suggests that tragic art can help the audience to see into the past – to who they are and the fates that curse them. However, he concludes that tragic art cannot help the audience escape their curses and fates.⁸⁶ I take a different view. The stories we experience can shape our actions and fate, especially if we are open to learning from them.⁸⁷ Seeing the tragic consequences of actions on the film screen can in some circumstances be morally instructive for the audience. A film like *Force Majeure* may not change the behaviour and fate of many who watch the film and this need not be a bad thing. However the possibility should not be ruled out that some may experience *Force Majeure* or other films with tragic plots and alter their behaviour and fate as a result. Someone may for example watch *Force Majeure* and learn to prize honesty and courage in respect to their loved ones more than previously. While Falzon is right to suggest that the film may teach the audience that people are prone to moral failure and more often than they would like to admit, the film can teach the audience something else too. It is my argument that Tomas may be shown to make morally shameful mistakes so that any audience to the film can learn not to repeat them. Tomas's shame is painful for him and painful to watch and it is this spectacle of pain and shame that may be morally instructive for some in the audience.⁸⁸

In this paper it has been argued that it can be inferred from Aristotle that tragic art can morally educate in three main ways: via emotion education, by helping the audience come to understand what matters in life, and by depicting conduct worthy of emulation from a moral point of view as well as conduct that is not. Critchley and Lear's conclusion that ethical education cannot be a benefit of tragedy has been rejected and it has been claimed that adults can morally learn from tragic art. It is my argument that *Force Majeure* has potential to morally educate the audience in each of the three ways I have claimed are suggested by Aristotle. The actions and fate of Tomas in the film may firstly afford the audience opportunity to experience and recognise the emotion of shame and when it may be, morally speaking, warranted. The film can secondly remind the audience of a truth at the core of the tragic form – an error that threatens the prosperity of loved ones is the most fearful and tragic of all fates. The film can thirdly morally educate the audience by depicting moral conduct that is not worthy of moral emulation (and in particular the cowardice and dishonesty of Tomas) as moral learning involves understanding what it is not good to do as well as what it is good to do. Falzon's claim that an Aristotelian view cannot make sense of Tomas's conduct in *Force Majeure* has also been disputed. It has been shown that *Force Majeure* exemplifies several Aristotelian ideas including his thoughts on cowardice and moral softness and his suggestion that the best tragic plots involve a hero of mixed moral character whose fall to bad fortune is rationalised by error. I would like to end the paper by flagging up Wartenberg's suggestion that films can be regarded as doing philosophy when they exemplify complex philosophical ideas on screen and call aspects of these ideas into question in the process.⁸⁹ It can now be seen that *Force Majeure* not only exemplifies but also critiques Aristotelian ideas. On the one hand the character of

Charlotte embodies a challenge to the all too traditional norms of female behaviour, famously, and regrettably endorsed by Aristotle.⁹⁰ On the other hand, and again contrary to Aristotle, *Force Majeure* suggests that in some instances adults can and should learn from the shame of moral failure. For some audiences (and perhaps the majority of them) characters in films that make moral mistakes may be better moral educators than heroes without flaws.

Notes

¹ Noel Carroll, "Moderate Moralism", *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 36 no. 3 (1996), 229.

² Carroll, *Moderate Moralism*, 232.

³ Berys Gaut, *Art, Emotions and Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁴ Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics*.

⁵ Carroll, *Moderate Moralism*, 230.

⁶ Carroll, *Moderate Moralism*.

⁷ Carroll, *Moderate Moralism*, 232.

⁸ Carroll, *Moderate Moralism*, 232.

⁹ Simon Critchley, *Tragedy, The Greeks and Us*, (London: Profile Books, 2020), 191. Critchley maintains that the audience of tragic art is not morally educated by it. Instead, they are left unchanged by the artistic spectacle they have witnessed. He suggests that this anti-moralistic and anti-pedagogical reading of Aristotle is made possible by the minimalist understanding of catharsis articulated by Jonathan Lear, "Katharsis", *Phronesis*. No. 33 (1998), 297-326.

¹⁰ Critchley, *Tragedy, The Greeks and Us*, 190.

¹¹ Aristotle, *Poetics* (London: Penguin, 1996), 1449b24-28.

¹² A point made by both Lear, *Katharsis*, and Andrew Mason, *Ancient Aesthetics*. (London: Routledge, 2016).

¹³ Mason, *Ancient Aesthetics*.

¹⁴ The educational reading is articulated by Stephen Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics* (London: Duckworth, 1998) while the clarification interpretation is defended by Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

¹⁵ Lear, *Katharsis*, 304.

¹⁶ Aristotle, *The Politics* (London: Penguin, 1981), 1340-1341b.

¹⁷ Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics*, 195.

¹⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (London: Penguin, 2004), 1104b9-16 & 1105a1-16.

¹⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1140a25-26.

²⁰ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1453a1-16.

²¹ Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics*, p 196.

²² Mason, *Ancient Aesthetics*.

²³ Aristotle, *The Politics*, 1342a.

²⁴ Lear, *Katharsis*, 306.

²⁵ Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics*, xi, likewise states that 'Lear perhaps puts too much emphasis on the emotions of the ideally virtuous person'.

²⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1180a1-3.

²⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1180a5-11.

²⁸ Mason, *Ancient Aesthetics*, p 94.

²⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1179b16-17.

³⁰ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1179b18-20.

³¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1179b11-14.

³² A point also made by both Lear, *Katharsis* and Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*.

³³ Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, 380.

³⁴ Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, 380.

³⁵ Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, 382.

³⁶ Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*. Mason, *Ancient Aesthetics*, expands on Nussbaum's point and explains that contrary to Plato, Aristotle thought that death was to be mourned, just not excessively.

³⁷ Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, 385.

³⁸ Lear, *Katharsis*, 309.

³⁹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1452b21-22.

⁴⁰ Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, 383.

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- ⁴¹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 53a20-25.
- ⁴² Lear, *Katharsis*, 325.
- ⁴³ Mason, *Ancient Aesthetics*, 99, similarly suggests that tragedy enables the audience to ‘experience intense emotions in a safe setting’. This process frees the audience from excessive emotions not from emotions per se.
- ⁴⁴ Lear, *Katharsis*, 325.
- ⁴⁵ Lear, *Katharsis*.
- ⁴⁶ Lear, *Katharsis*.
- ⁴⁷ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 53b18-22.
- ⁴⁸ Ruben Ostlund, Director, *Force Majeure*, (Sweden: 2014).
- ⁴⁹ Ruben Ostlund, “Director’s Statement”. Accessed in January 2022 from *Following Films*, [Runen Ostlund on Force Majeure and some surprising facts about maritime disasters \(followingfilms.com\)](https://www.followingfilms.com/runen-ostlund-on-force-majeure-and-some-surprising-facts-about-maritime-disasters)
- ⁵⁰ Ostlund, *Director’s Statement*.
- ⁵¹ Ostlund, *Director’s Statement*.
- ⁵² Mikael Elinder & Oscar Erixson, “Gender, social norms and survival in Maritime Disasters”, *PNAS*, 109 no. 33 (2012), 13220-13224. The study showed that in 11 of the 18 shipwrecks women had a survival disadvantage, in 5 no survival advantage between men and women was clear and in only 2 shipwrecks did women have a survival advantage.
- ⁵³ Ostlund, *Director’s Statement*.
- ⁵⁴ Christopher Falzon, “Experiencing Force Majeure”, *Film-Philosophy*, 21 no. 3 (2017), 281-298.
- ⁵⁵ Falzon, *Experiencing Force Majeure*, 283.
- ⁵⁶ Falzon, *Experiencing Force Majeure*.
- ⁵⁷ Falzon, *Experiencing Force Majeure*.
- ⁵⁸ Falzon, *Experiencing Force Majeure*.
- ⁵⁹ Falzon, *Experiencing Force Majeure*.
- ⁶⁰ Falzon, *Experiencing Force Majeure*.
- ⁶¹ Falzon, *Experiencing Force Majeure*, 293.
- ⁶² Falzon, *Experiencing Force Majeure*, 293.
- ⁶³ Falzon, *Experiencing Force Majeure*.
- ⁶⁴ Falzon, *Experiencing Force Majeure*, 288.
- ⁶⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1139, 23-31.
- ⁶⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1139, 25-31.
- ⁶⁷ Falzon, *Experiencing Force Majeure*, 288.
- ⁶⁸ A point also noted by Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*.
- ⁶⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1101a 29-30.
- ⁷⁰ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1115a5-10 & 1115a28.
- ⁷¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1115a22-23.
- ⁷² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1115b18-21.
- ⁷³ A view expressed by both Howard Curzer, “How good people do bad things: Aristotle on the misdeeds of the virtuous”, *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, no. 28 (2005), 233-256 & Kristjan Kristjánsson, *Aristotle, Emotions and Education*, (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2007).
- ⁷⁴ Kristjánsson, *Aristotle, Emotions and Education*.
- ⁷⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1150a10-15. The morally soft person is classed at level 2 of six stages of virtue by Kristjánsson, *Aristotle, Emotions and Education*.
- ⁷⁶ See both Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* and Mason, *Ancient Aesthetics*.
- ⁷⁷ Mason, *Ancient Aesthetics*.
- ⁷⁸ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 53a7-11.
- ⁷⁹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 53b18-22 & 54a4-8.
- ⁸⁰ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1109b10-15,
- ⁸¹ For further discussion of the moral educational potential of film from a broadly Aristotelian perspective see David Carr, “Moral Education at the movies: On the cinematic treatment of morally significant story and narrative”, *Journal of Moral Education*, 35 no. 3 (2006), 319-333 and Berys Gaut, *A philosophy of Cinematic Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Gaut suggests that in some instances film audiences can grow with cinematic characters as they are shown to grow. In other instances when a cinematic character reacts to a situation in a way that is not appropriate it is only the audience that can grow.
- ⁸² Lear, *Katharsis*, if we recall suggests that understanding the error of the tragic hero is the cue for catharsis in the audience.

⁸³ Myles Burnyeat, ‘‘Aristotle on Learning to Be Good’’, *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics*. Ed. by Rorty, Amelie. (London: University of California Press, 1980), 78.

⁸⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1128b15-22.

⁸⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1128b25-30.

⁸⁶ Critchley, *Tragedy, The Greeks and Us*, 277.

⁸⁷ I am not alone in thinking something like this. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 216, for example famously suggested that children would not know how to confidently act in the world without stories to guide them.

⁸⁸ Though Aristotle did not think it morally apt for adults to learn through shame this view is otherwise consistent with Aristotle’s in some important respects. We have seen in this paper that Aristotle suggests people are often motivated to act through fear of pain and punishment, with the tragic loss of loved ones representing the most fearful pain of all.

⁸⁹ Thomas Wartenberg, *Thinking on Screen: Film as Philosophy*. (London: Routledge, 2007).

⁹⁰ Helene Foley, *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy*, (Oxfordshire: Princeton University Press, 2001), 111, notes that Aristotle endorsed several retrograde traditional norms for women and for example ‘quotes with approval the popular view that ‘‘silence brings glory to woman’’. Foley points out the anomaly that while women were debarred from much of public life in ancient Greece, female characters in tragedies (like Medea and Antigone) nonetheless frequently violated popular norms of female behaviour. Charlotte perhaps carries on this tragic tradition of female characters subverting conventional moral expectations placed on women.