CHAPTER 12

Aristotle on the Best Kind of Tragic Plot: Re-reading *Poetics* 13–14

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Abstract

It is widely held that Aristotle presents two contradictory accounts of the best kind of tragic plot in chapters 13 and 14 of the *Poetics*. But an explicit cross-reference between the two chapters puts it beyond doubt that Aristotle regarded their conclusions as mutually supporting. Since Aristotle often expects readers to be willing to follow a prolonged and circuitous argument without drawing premature conclusions about his final conclusion, the first part of chapter 13 must be viewed as an interim stage in a complex exposition. The first part of chapter 13 contains lexical and logical anomalies, often overlooked, which provide pointers to Aristotle's strategy in making a case against those who advocate double plots, and against those who reject plots that end in misfortune. Against these opponents Aristotle insists that plots that end in misfortune are not faulty, but not that such plots are required. The careful formulation of his initial conclusion, using grammatical forms that specify a trajectory of change rather than its end-point, leaves both possibilities in play. There is therefore no contradiction when, on emerging from the polemical context of chapter 13, he adopts an inclusive, rather than a narrowly exclusive, conception of the best kind of tragic plot and develops a graded hierarchy of the sub-types it contains.

1   Introduction

At the beginning of *Poetics* 13, Aristotle introduces the question of what things poets should aim at, and what things they should avoid, in constructing tragic plots (*Poet.* 13.1452b28–30). Constraints established in the preceding chapters (1453b30–33) provide the point of departure for an argument that leads to what I shall call the Familiar Conclusion: Aristotle recommends plots in which "the sort of person who is not outstanding in moral excellence or justice" undergoes a change from good fortune to bad fortune "not due to any moral defect or depravity, but to an error (*hamartia*) of some kind" (1453a7–

12).[1] In this paper I shall argue that the Familiar Conclusion cannot be, in any straightforward sense, a conclusion; and if it is not a conclusion, its apparent familiarity must be illusory. Dispelling that illusion will teach us something about Aristotle's understanding of tragedy, and also (I hope) something about reading Aristotle.

Why can the Familiar Conclusion not be a conclusion? One obvious point: Aristotle continues the discussion for another eighty lines. It makes no sense to suppose that he has spoken his last word on a subject when he has so many words left to say. That is not in itself decisive. Aristotle might have established his conclusion, and then devoted his remaining words to elaborating it or drawing out its further implications. But, on a standard interpretation, that is not what he does. On the contrary, in chapter 14 a new formulation of the original question introduces an argument that reaches a *different* conclusion: chapter 13, it is supposed, awards first place to plots that end in misfortune, but chapter 14 ranks plots in which something terrible happens less favorably than plots in which the terrible event is averted (1454a4–9). Most interpreters have concluded that the two chapters are inconsistent.[2]

Yet Aristotle apparently saw no inconsistency. When he elaborates on his statement of the Familiar Conclusion in chapter 13 (1453a12–17), he adduces the practice of tragedians as supporting evidence: a "sign" (1453a17–22). His conclusion about the optimal tragic plot in chapter 14 (1454a4–9) is supported by the fact that it explains (1454a9, διὰ γὰρ τοῦτο) the phenomenon that constituted that sign. This explicit cross-reference puts it beyond reasonable doubt that Aristotle regarded the conclusions of the two chapters as mutually supporting.[3] There is a presumption, therefore, that the chapters were written to be read as a single extended exposition, coherent and consistent, though complex. If so, then it is a mistake to suppose that the first part of chapter 13 formulates Aristotle's final conclusion, or that the two chapters formulate inconsistent conclusions. The Familiar Conclusion in chapter 13 must be a staging-point on the way to a Final Conclusion in chapter 14.

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1 Translations from the *Poetics* are adapted from Heath 1996.

2 Moles 1979 has a useful discussion, though in the end he is unable to escape the conclusion that there is a "flat contradiction" (91). Compare, e.g., the perplexity expressed at Heath 1996, xxxi.

3 Contrast the interpretation of those who explain the apparent inconsistency by suggesting that Aristotle changed his mind: e.g., Stinton 1975, 252–253 (= 1990, 183); Glanville 1949.

11   A Circuitous Enquiry

There is nothing intrinsically implausible in that suggestion. Aristotle often
expects his readers to be willing to follow a prolonged and even circuitous
enquiry before drawing a final conclusion. Two examples will illustrate this on
a large scale. In *Generation of Animals* the account of reproduction in the first
two books leaves many phenomena unexplained, including the inheritance
of traits in the maternal line. In book 4 the theory as initially formulated is
extended and enriched so that it can account for those phenomena. Readers
who suppose that Aristotle's views are adequately encapsulated by formulae
derived from the first two books alone, such as the allocation of form to the
male parent and matter to the female (*GA* I 20.729a9–12; II 1.732a6–11), are likely
to misunderstand his theory of reproduction. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristo-
tle gives an answer to the question about the best human life (*eudaimonia*) half
way through the first book (*NE* I 7.1098a16–18). That initial formula, explicitly
an outline that needs to be filled in (1098a20–22), provides the starting point
for an investigation that is not completed until book 10. There he awards pri-
macy to the contemplative life (X 7.1177a16–18, 1178a7–8), with the practical life
ranked as *eudaimonia* in a secondary (though still genuine) way (X 8.1178a9, δευ-
τέρως). Aristotle places the contemplative life on his agenda in book 1, with a
promise to return to it later (I 5.1095b19, 1096a4–5); but this is done so unob-
trusively that readers who have conscientiously worked their way through the
detailed examination of the practical virtues in the intervening books may be
surprised, and even bewildered, by the conclusion that Aristotle finally draws.[4]

On a smaller scale, consider the discussion of what produces animal move-
ment in *On the Soul* III 9–10. The first stage (*An.* III 9.432b14–433a8) takes
the form of an elimination argument: Aristotle works through four candi-
dates (nutrition, perception, thought, desire), and eliminates those that cannot
account for all cases of movement. Since all the candidates fail the test, this
leads to an apparent impasse. In the second stage (433a8–21), Aristotle breaks
the impasse by redefining one of the candidates from the first stage and sus-
pending the implicit assumption that there must be a *single* cause of move-
ment: if "thought" is limited to practical thought, but also extended beyond rea-
soning to include *phantasia*, then movement may be produced by thought and
desire *acting together*. The final stage of the argument (433a21–26) reformulates
this conclusion, reinstating in a more sophisticated form the original assump-

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4 The literature is huge: see, e.g., Dahl 2011. Books 1 and 10 are designed to frame a unified
argument: Natali 2007, 374–375; Lockwood 2014.

tion of a single cause: movement is not produced by thought (broadly defined) *and* desire, but by desire *informed by* thought (or misinformed: 433a26–29).

It seems unlikely that Aristotle was blindly groping his way toward a conclusion as he wrote this passage. More probably, he regarded an exposition that exhibits the process of thinking one's way to a conclusion as more instructive than one that simply states or proves the conclusion. In this exhibition he engineers an impasse, escapes from it by modifying the original assumptions, and thereby reaches an interim conclusion that, though not correct as stated, has sufficient validity to point the way to a more satisfactory solution in the final stage. As a pedagogical demonstration of how to think about a problem, this seems admirable. It also provides *us* with an important lesson in reading Aristotle: patience is a necessary virtue.

If chapter 13 is, as I have suggested, a staging point on the way to the Final Conclusion in chapter 14, then we have been misreading it. My attempt to re-read it begins by highlighting two details of the text that interpreters have not found sufficiently puzzling: a Lexical Anomaly, and a Logical Flaw.[5] Paying attention to these details, I shall argue, will help us understand what Aristotle was doing in chapter 13.

III   A Lexical Anomaly

The Familiar Conclusion is reached by means of an argument that, like the first stage of the example from *On the Soul*, proceeds by elimination. The first step in this Elimination Argument is as follows: "So it is clear first of all that decent men (τοὺς ἐπιεικεῖς ἄνδρας) should not be seen undergoing a change from good fortune to bad fortune: this does not evoke fear or pity, but disgust" (*Poet.* 13.1452b34–36). Is that clear? Far from it. Aristotle's analysis of pity in the *Rhetoric* makes the existence of decent (*epieikēs*) people a precondition of pity: if we thought there were no such people, we would regard everyone as deserving their misfortunes (*Rhet.* II 8.1385b34–35).[6] How, then, can it be true that

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5 This paper is a re-reading also in the sense that it revisits, and substantially revises, a line of interpretation tentatively sketched out in Heath 2008. The present paper largely supersedes that earlier version: but some details have not been repeated here (they will be revisited elsewhere).

6 In *NE* IX 8.1169a15–18, as elsewhere (Vahlen 1914, 267–268), ἐπιεικής is not clearly distinct from σπουδαῖος, which describes the kind of person that tragedy imitates (*Poet.* 2.1448a1–2; 3.1448a26–27; 5.1449b9–10), and whose undeserved sufferings evoke pity (*Rhet.* II 8.1386b4–7).

misfortune befalling a decent person evokes disgust and not pity? The Elimination Argument therefore begins with an extraordinary claim. I am not the first to have reached that conclusion.[7] Scholars puzzled by Aristotle's choice of the word *epieikēs* have generally reassured themselves with the thought that its meaning is fixed by the Familiar Conclusion. Though the semantic difficulty is often frankly acknowledged,[8] no explanation is given of how readers are supposed to foresee what lies twelve lines ahead. Janko's blunt rejection of this evasion is entirely justified.[9] Janko still maintains that "to be consistent he [i.e., Aristotle] *ought* to have written 'perfectly good men' here". But if that is what, for consistency, Aristotle ought to have written, why did he not write it? Carelessness is one possibility; another is that consistency was not in this context his primary concern. If that suggestion seems surprising, recall that in the example from *On the Soul* demonstrating the process of thinking one's way to a conclusion took priority over maintaining consistency in the definition of "thought" between the preliminary elimination argument and its constructive sequel.

Aristotle most commonly uses "decent" in binary opposition with terms of moral and social disparagement.[10] In this usage, it must apply to the full range

7   E.g., Lucas 1968, 140: "nothing could be less 'manifest' than the truth of this extraordinary statement"; Stinton 1975, 237 (= 1990, 164): "The first situation ruled out by Aristotle in chapter 13 as untragic is that morally good men, ἐπιεικεῖς ἄνδρες, should be represented as changing from good fortune to bad. This is in itself surprising and far from evident …; for ἐπιεικής is a word of moderate commendation, and overlaps in sense with χρηστός and σπουδαῖος, words designating qualities which Aristotle elsewhere prescribes for the stage-figures of tragedy".

8   E.g., Lucas 1968, 140: "It appears from 53a7–9 τοὺς ἐπιεικεῖς ἄνδρας is here to be understood as ἀρετῇ διαφέρων καὶ δικαιοσύνη, 'outstanding in goodness and righteousness'. This is not the normal meaning of the word, nor indeed one easily paralleled". Stinton 1975, 237 (= 1990, 164): "This difficulty is partly resolved by the context: ἐπιεικεῖς, being opposed to ὁ μήτε ἀρετῇ διαφέρων καὶ δικαιοσύνη, must stand here for σφόδρα ἐπιεικής, morally faultless … though this is hard to get out of the Greek".

9   Janko 1987, 100: "'Decent' is a synonym for 'good', and cannot mean 'perfect': to suppose that it does is an illegitimate solution to this problematic statement".

10   E.g., opposed to φαῦλος: *Topics* I 7.113a13–14; *NE* III 5.1113b14; IV 9.1128b21–27; V 4.1132a2–4; IX 8.1168a31–33; 12.1172a8–11; X 6.1176b24; 9.1180a8–10; *Eudemian Ethics* VII 2.1238b1–2; *Politics* II 7.1267b6–8; 12.1274a14–15; III 11.1282a25–26; *Rhet.* II 11.1388a35–36; 19.1392a23–24; to πονηρός: *NE* IX 2.1165a8–10; to μοχθηρός: *NE* VIII 10.1160b16; IX 4.1166b27–28; 8.1169a15–18; *Pol.* VI 8.1322a23–24; to social categories (δῆμος, πλῆθος): *NE* IX 6.1167a35–b1; *Pol.* V 8.1308b27–28; VI 4.1318b34–35. Some particular cases: (i) at *NE* IX 6.1167a35–b1 the ἐπιεικής is clearly distinguished from "the best" (οἱ ἄριστοι); (ii) *NE* V 4.1132a2–4 envisages an ἐπιεικής committing fraud or adultery: no inference should be drawn from this, since the point of the passage is the law's indifference to person, not the personal characteristics

of morally good people, and cannot be limited to those who are outstandingly good. But in that case, it includes people whose misfortunes (as we have seen from the *Rhetoric*) Aristotle regards as pitiable, and cannot sustain the first step in the Elimination Argument. On the other hand, the binary opposition is inconsistent with Aristotle's account of the plot-type that survives the Elimination Argument. At that point, Aristotle makes room for the intermediate character, and the virtuous antithesis to the depraved (1452b36–37, 1453a9) is no longer merely "decent": at *this* point it becomes "outstanding in moral excellence or justice" (1453a7–8). The move from a binary to a ternary division of ethical character is not an *ad hoc* novelty: Aristotle has done this already in chapter 2 (1448a1–5). Nor does it involve any inconsistency. The subsequent refinement that the person who undergoes a change from good fortune to bad fortune should be "better … rather than worse" than the intermediate character (1453a16–17) shows that in Aristotle's view ethical character is not neatly compartmentalized, but distributed along a continuum. Since there is no uniquely correct way of dividing a continuum, different divisions may be appropriate for different analytical tasks. In chapter 4, for example, the binary division gives structure to Aristotle's very schematic history of poetry (1448b22–26); here, however, the analysis and comparison of tragic plots requires a more nuanced framework.

As in the example from *On the Soul*, therefore, an elimination argument is used to produce an impasse, the solution to which involves a change in the initial terms of the debate. In this case, the initial terminology produces a premise that is implausible if taken in its normal sense; removing the implausibility by taking the terminology in a non-standard sense leaves an undistributed middle—which Aristotle exploits in the Familiar Conclusion. We shall return later to the question of what expository advantage is gained by this maneuver. Before that, there is a second puzzling feature to consider.

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of the ἐπιεικής; (iii) at *NE* IX 9.1170a27 τοὺς ἐπιεικεῖς καὶ μακαρίους does imply exceptional virtue: but that is because exceptional happiness requires exceptional virtue, not because exceptional virtue is implied by ἐπιεικής; (iv) in *NE* VIII 4.1157a16–18, the only instance I have found of a neutral character, neither ἐπιεικής nor bad, the ternary scheme is explicit; (v) of the other two occurrences of ἐπιεικής in the *Poetics*, one (15.1454b8–15) is concerned with characters who have ethical shortcomings, and is thus inconsistent with exceptional virtue, while the other (26.1462a2) places it in binary opposition to φαῦλος, in accordance with Aristotle's common usage. Aristotle has another, more specialized use of ἐπιεικής, describing a form of justice that does not insist on the letter of the law when that is inappropriate, so is willing to take less than its legal entitlement out of fairness (*NE* V 10; cf. *Rhet.* I 13.1374a26–b23); but this does not seem relevant to *Poetics* 13.

IV   A Logical Flaw

The Lexical Anomaly in the Elimination Argument is less significant than the Logical Flaw in the transition from the Elimination Argument to the Familiar Conclusion: "we are left, therefore (ἄρα), with the person intermediate between these" (1453a7). Aristotle thus presents the Familiar Conclusion as an *inference* from the Elimination Argument. But this inference is, in fact, invalid. For the inference to be valid, the plot in which the intermediate character undergoes a change to bad fortune must be the only remaining possibility. But there is at least one alternative plot-type that has not as yet been eliminated: the "double" plot.

   This logical error is easily overlooked, because Aristotle has not yet drawn our attention to the existence of double plots. It is only *after* the faulty inference about the best kind of tragic plot has been stated that double plots are mentioned (though still not explained): "Necessarily, therefore (ἄρα), a well-formed plot will be simple rather than (as some people say) double …" (1453a12–13). The rejection of the double plot therefore purports to be a necessary inference from what has just been said about the plot based on the intermediate character. But that simply compounds the logical error. The conclusion that "we are left … with the person intermediate between these" only follows if there is no alternative. A conclusion that *presupposes* that no other kind of plot is available cannot then be used to *exclude* other kinds of plot.[11]

   There is no way to repair the Logical Flaw. Aristotle reviews a variety of single plots, and shows which of them is best. But showing that one kind of single plot is superior to other single plots cannot possibly prove that the best single plot is superior to the double plot. The argument that leads to the Familiar Conclusion is therefore flawed in its underlying conception. Aristotle was very good at arguing:[12] why, then, has he presented us with such a bad argument here?

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11   This will be obvious if one considers how the argument would have progressed if the existence of the double plot had been recognized before the "necessary" inference is drawn: "We are left, therefore, with *two alternatives*: the person intermediate between these *and the double plot*. Necessarily, therefore, a well-formed plot will be simple rather than double".

12   And he was alert to the possibility of a statement being presented as if it were the conclusion of a valid syllogism when it is not: *Rhet.* II 24.1401a1–8; *Soph. El.* 15.174b8–11.

V   The Agonistic Context

The Familiar Conclusion leads up to the rejection of the double plot, which is what "some people say" is the best kind. So Aristotle is engaged in debate with a current rival to his own view. The importance of this agonistic context is clear from the fact that he returns to the rival theory in the last part of chapter 13 (just under a fifth of the chapter). It is only at this late stage that he reveals what the double plot is. Previously he mentioned and rejected the double plot without explaining it (1453a13); now we learn that it is a plot in which the outcome is opposite for better and worse characters, as in the *Odyssey* (1453a30–33). Aristotle rejects the rival theory's claim that a plot such as that of the *Odyssey* is the *best* kind of tragic plot. But he does not deny that it is tragic: he rates it as the *second* best kind of tragic plot (δευτέρα 1450a30). That is not surprising: Aristotle elsewhere treats both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as analogous with tragedy (4.1448b38–1449a2; 23.1459b7–15, cross-referring to 18.1455b32–1456a3).[13] What is surprising is that he apparently goes on to deny what he has just asserted. He now says that the pleasure that the double plot affords is *not* the pleasure of tragedy, but more akin to the pleasure of comedy (1453a35–36). To illustrate this claim, he refers to a plot in which Orestes is reconciled with his father's murderer "and no one gets killed by anybody" (1453a36–39). That is certainly comic, according to Aristotle's characterization of comedy: it is disgraceful and does not involve pain or destruction (5.1449a32–37). But it is completely unlike the *Odyssey*: Odysseus is not reconciled with the suitors, and the suitors do get killed. If the *Odyssey* provides a paradigm of the double plot, therefore, the transformation of a tragic plot of second rank into a comic burlesque is a caricature of the rival theory.

Aristotle's treatment of his opponents here is not underhand, however. In the strategically delayed explanation of the double plot, and in the pointer to its Odyssean prototype, he has provided all that we need to know about the opposing position to recognize that the burlesque plot is not really what the rival theory recommends. And the opponents are treated gently by the standards of Aristotelian polemic at its most robust. Contrast, for example, the comparison of the theory of Forms to meaningless "tum-ti-tums" (τερετίσματα, *Posterior Analytics* I 22.83a32–34), or of the opponents of non-contradiction to vegetables (*Metaphysics* IV 4.1006a14–15). The fun he pokes at his opponents

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13   The clear statement in *Poet.* 23.1459b7–9 that epic and tragedy have the *same* kinds of plots is often, and perversely, neglected by scholars attempting to solve the difficulties of text and interpretation in 18.1455b32–1456a3. See Tarán-Gutas 2012, 280 (*ad* 1456a2).

here might be compared to the satirical image of Pythagoreans getting in a tizzy (θορυβεῖσθαι) about the universe and posting a guard (*On the Heavens* II 13.293b1–8).[14] Such cases do, at any rate, confirm that Aristotle is not always engaged in dispassionate analytical reasoning: he can be wickedly playful. If we are to make sense of chapter 13, therefore, we need to attend, not only to the logical and (as the passage from *On the Soul* reminded us) pedagogical structure of Aristotle's arguments, but also to his debating tactics.

The last part of the chapter shows how important the rejection of the double plot is to Aristotle. We might therefore wonder whether the double plot is implicitly present in the first part of the chapter, which leads up to its first explicit rejection at the head of the restatement of the Familiar Conclusion (1453a12–13). Since we do not have direct access to the position that Aristotle is opposing, we cannot be sure. But the indirect access provided by Aristotle's critique provides some grounds for conjecture. To have explanatory value, a conjecture should furnish Aristotle's opponents with an argument in favor of their preferred outcome, and also make sense of Aristotle's response. One thought presents itself immediately: to secure the primacy of the double plot, all possible single plots must be shown to be in some respect unsatisfactory. Two points follow. First, it would make sense if the advocate of the double plot deployed something like Aristotle's Elimination Argument. Since the successful elimination of every single plot really would succeed in showing that the double plot is superior to all single plots, the double plot theorist's version of the argument would not suffer from the flaw identified in Aristotle's version. Secondly, an elimination argument for the double plot will be easier to formulate if the ethical world is divided in two, so that the faultiness of every single plot can be displayed in the course of a brief but systematic review of a maximum of four possible variants. The binary division of the ethical landscape is a useful device in the hands of advocates of the double plot, since it creates a trap from which the advocate of single plots at first sight has no escape. It is, of course, also intrinsic to the concept of a double plot, which is defined by opposite outcomes for better and worse characters. Aristotle is therefore not only escaping from the apparent trap when he rejects the binary division: he is also exposing a fundamental weakness in his opponent's position.

How might an advocate of the double plot have gone on to exhibit the positive merits of the plot-type that Aristotle ranks as second best? Taking the *Odyssey* as the paradigm of the double plot, it would be possible to argue that elements that cannot produce a satisfactory plot on their own may be

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14   Aristotle's humor: Quandt 1981; Touloumakos 1996.

satisfactory when combined. Plato's evocation of a recitation of the scene in which Odysseus is about to attack the suitors (*Ion* 535b) shows that it has a powerful emotional impact of the kind we expect from tragedy: Ion's comment suggests that the scene inspires pity (perhaps) and (certainly) fear (535c). The hero is in a pitiable position, and the risks that he runs evoke the possibility of failure and a terrible ending, but his victory avoids this morally disgusting (*miaron*: 13.1452b36) outcome and the downfall of his wicked enemies secures an agreeable effect (*to philanthrōpon*: 1452b38, 1453a2).[15] Aristotle's version of the Elimination Argument omitted the plot in which a good person undergoes a change from bad to good fortune: this, though agreeable, is self-evidently lacking in fear and pity. An advocate of the double plot, however, might argue that turning this defective single plot into a double plot preserves the agreeable outcome in a way that allows the introduction of fear and pity, while still avoiding the disgust that disqualifies the plot in which a decent person moves from good fortune to bad.

What is puzzling in Aristotle's Elimination Argument, therefore, makes sense in his opponent's version of the argument. For an advocate of the double plot the ethical dichotomy maps the space of possibilities in a way that produces an apparent impasse, from which the double plot provides an escape. Conversely, in Aristotle's response, temporary acquiescence in the dichotomy facilitates a demonstration of the flaw in his opponent's argument: when the original terms of the debate are rejected, the apparent impasse is exposed as an artifact of his rival's ethical over-simplification. In this perspective, the Lexical Anomaly constituted by the use of "decent" in the Elimination Argument

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15   *To philanthrōpon* is a quality absent from plots in which a morally bad person enjoys a change from bad to good fortune (13.1452b36–1453a1), but present in plots in which a morally bad person undergoes a change from good to bad fortune; plots of the latter kind lack the pity and fear that are required for tragedy (1453a1–7). The most plausible interpretation, in my view, is that "a plot or incident would ... be φιλάνθρωπος in that it has an agreeable effect; it would be agreeable, pleasing, gratifying, satisfying" (Carey 1988, 133). Carey provides references to alternative interpretations: the main candidates are (i) satisfaction at justly deserved suffering; and (ii) humane feeling (sympathy for human suffering, detached from any assessment of desert). See further Heath 2008, 9–10 note 31. Since there has been no previous indication in the *Poetics* that *to philanthrōpon* is something that tragedy aims at, its prominence in the Elimination Argument may reflect the tastes of those who prefer double plots: see Lamberton 1983, 99. I understand the cryptically expressed reference to *to philanthrōpon* at 18.1456a19–23 as follows: this (i.e. surprise) achieves the tragic effect (i.e., fear/pity), and (in addition, the agreeable effect of) *to philanthrōpon*; and *this* (i.e., *to philanthrōpon*) happens when someone who is clever but bad is deceived, or someone who is courageous but unjust is defeated.

is no longer puzzling. A word that can be used in binary opposition with terms of moral and social disparagement is just what an advocate of the double plot requires: his argument would collapse if only those "outstanding in moral excellence or justice" were eliminated. In Aristotle's version, those troubled by a sense that decent people are recipients of pity *par excellence* will soon discover that they had cleverly anticipated the objection to his opponent's argument that subsequently motivates Aristotle's substitution of a more adequate mapping of the ethical landscape. Those who were not troubled will soon learn that they should have been.

We saw earlier that the Elimination Argument fails to establish Aristotle's Familiar Conclusion. We have now seen what it succeeds in doing: it shows that the double plot theorist has failed to establish *his* conclusion. A plausible inference is that this is what it was designed to do. If so, it performs its task in a striking and instructive way. That is consistent with the suggestion that the point of the first part of chapter 13 does not lie exclusively in argument: polemical and pedagogical considerations must also be taken into account.

VI   A Not-So-Familiar Conclusion

Showing that an opponent's argument fails to support their conclusion is not enough to show that the conclusion is incorrect; nor does it show that one's own conclusion is correct. So valid arguments in favor of the Familiar Conclusion are still needed. Aristotle goes on to provide them, and it is in these further arguments that his positive case for the Familiar Conclusion is to be found.[16] Before we examine them, however, we need to be clear about precisely what commitments Aristotle has incurred in formulating the Familiar Conclusion. Again, careful attention to the text is needed.

Both in the first formulation of the Familiar Conclusion (1453a9) and in its restatement (1453a13–14) Aristotle speaks about the change from good to bad fortune using the present tense of the participle (μεταβάλλων) and infinitive (μεταβάλλειν). In Greek, the present tense of the infinitive and participle is used to speak of process, by contrast with the aorist tense, which connotes completion. This distinction, and Aristotle's sensitivity to its philosophical significance, can be illustrated by a sentence from the *Physics*: "nor is that which

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16   If my interpretation is incorrect, these further arguments are still necessary to make a valid case for the Familiar Conclusion, because of the Logical Flaw. My interpretation acquits Aristotle of an oversight.

cannot change capable of changing into that into which it cannot change"
(*Phys.* VI 10.241b7–8: οὐδὲ τὸ μεταβαλεῖν ἀδύνατον ἐνδέχοιτ' ἂν μεταβάλλειν εἰς
ὃ ἀδύνατον μεταβαλεῖν). What may seem tautological in English translation
becomes meaningful when we pay attention to the oscillation in the Greek
between aorist (μεταβαλεῖν) and present (μεταβάλλειν) infinitives: "that which
cannot *complete a change* [aorist] is not capable of *being in the process of
changing* [present] into that into which it cannot *complete a change* [aorist]".[17]
Elsewhere in the *Poetics* Aristotle uses aorists to describe completed changes in
the history of tragedy's development;[18] in chapter 14, when describing the plot-
type in which an intended act of violence toward unrecognized kin is averted
by recognition, he uses the aorist when speaking of its averted accomplishment
(πρὶν ποιῆσαι), but a present infinitive when speaking of the act as imminent but
as yet unfulfilled (τὸ μέλλοντα ποιεῖν). So the persistent use of present participles
and infinitives when speaking of the change of fortune must be significant.[19]
Aristotle is commenting on the process of change, not its completion: the
trajectory of the change, rather than its outcome.

In formulating the Familiar Conclusion, therefore, Aristotle commits him-
self to a change of fortune with a certain trajectory without specifying either
the completion of that change or its non-completion. If that neutrality is sus-
tained through the rest of chapter 13, the way would lie open to a resolution of
the alleged inconsistency with chapter 14. Is it sustained?

VII   The Positive Case

Having affirmed the superiority of his preferred single plot to the double plot
(1453a12–17), Aristotle advances two substantive arguments in support of his
position. First, he notes a trend in the practice of tragedians toward a limited
range of suitable plots (1453a17–22). This is a "sign" (1453a17) supporting his
view of the best kind of plot: in fact, as we saw in the Introduction, it is *the*

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17   More concretely: since a kitten cannot *change* (aorist, signaling completion) into a carrot,
      it makes no sense to say that the kitten *is changing* (present, signaling process) into a
      carrot.

18   4.1449a14 μεταβολὰς μεταβαλοῦσα; a20 ἐκ σατυρικοῦ μεταβαλεῖν. He also uses the noun
      μετάβασις at 5.1449a37.

19   Present participle/infinitive of μεταβάλλω: 7.1451a14; 13.1452b34–35, 1453a9, 1453a13–14; of
      μεταπίπτω: 13.1453a2; of μεταβαίνω: 18.1455b27. He also uses the noun μετάβασις for the
      change of fortune in chapters 10–11 (reserving μεταβολή for the transitions in reversal and
      recognition) and 18.1455b29.

sign to which chapter 14 cross-refers. Secondly, he rejects criticisms of Euripides (1453a23–30). He introduces this second point by saying: "this is why those who criticize Euripides … are making the same mistake". So at this point he is drawing an *inference from* his own theory, not providing *evidence for* it. But he goes on to provide that evidence. The audience reception of the Euripidean plays that have been criticized is the "greatest sign" (1453a26–27) that the critics are wrong and his own view is correct: in (successful) performances, such plays appear extremely tragic, and Euripides appears the most tragic of poets. To understand the significance of these arguments, we need to take account of two background assumptions and a fundamental methodological principle.

The first background assumption is that people will tend, over time, to find better ways to do things. Arts generally develop by a process of incremental improvement,[20] and poetry is no exception: it has advanced by gradual innovation and enhancement (4.1448b22–24; cf. 1449a13–14). The process is not infallible: epic poets failed to learn from Homer's discovery of the way that plots should be unified (8.1451a16–22; 23.1459a37–38); a poetic or musical culture can be corrupted if the demands of self-promoting performers or vulgar audiences become dominant (9.1451b36–1452a1; *Pol.* VIII 6.1341a11–13; 7.1341b10–18). But, in general, the evolved practice of practitioners of a mature art can be regarded as *prima facie* evidence for the way the art *should* be practiced.[21]

The second background assumption is that what people think has evidential value. The empirical data (*phainomena*) include observational data, but also people's opinions. Especial weight attaches to opinions that have some claim to good standing (*endoxa*): for example, those that are held universally, or widely, or by those most qualified to judge (*Top.* I 1.100a29–b23; cf. 10.104a8–11; *Divination in Sleep* 1.462a14–16). But "*every* individual has some contribution to make to the truth" (*EE* I 6.1216b30–31);[22] no one attains the complete truth, but no one misses it entirely (*Metaph.* II 1.993a30–b7). Since we have an imperfect grasp of the truth, opinions are likely to conflict; *endoxa* may be false (*Top.* VIII 12.162b27). A theory will be most in harmony with the empirical data if it shows that conflicting opinions all have some element of truth—or, if not all of them, at least the "the greater number and the most authoritative" (*NE* VII 1.1145b2–7; cf. *EE* VII 2.1235b13–18). So when Aristotle approaches a question in ethics, for example, he insists on the importance of taking account of what

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20   *Soph. El.* 34.183b17–34 (Aristotle sees his own transformational contribution to logic as exceptional: 183b34–36, 184b1–8). Cf. *NE* I 7.1098a22–26.

21   On this, and the social factors that may influence the development of a poetic tradition positively or negatively, see Heath 2009b, 474–480; 2013, 75–83.

22   An overstatement: for exceptions see *EE* I 3.1214b28–1215a3; cf. *Rhet.* I 1.1355a15–18.

people say (e.g., *NE* I 8.1098b9–12), and sets out to identify the elements of truth in those opinions and to explain the errors.[23]

Given these background assumptions, the two arguments that constitute Aristotle's positive case for the Familiar Conclusion are both empirically based. Consequently, they make the case more effectively than the abstract theoretical reasoning of the Elimination Argument. Aristotle repeatedly insists on the need to start from observation (e.g. *History of Animals* I 6.491a7–14; *GA* III 10.760b27–33) and criticizes theories based on abstract assumptions and arguments, rather than on observed facts (e.g. *Cael.* III 7.306a5–17). This is the fundamental methodological principle. The importance that Aristotle attaches to it can be illustrated from his discussion of the sterility of mules in *Generation of Animals*. Having demolished explanations proposed by Empedocles and Democritus (II 8.747a23–b27), he introduces an alternative account of his own, which "perhaps would seem to be more plausible" (747b27–28). But after he has expounded this theory (747b30–748a7) he immediately dismisses it as "empty" theorizing, not grounded in empirical evidence, with which it is in fact in conflict (748a7–14). Aristotle's pedagogical concerns are again in evidence: concocting a dummy theory in order to expose its vacuity is an imaginative way to draw attention to the crucial methodological lesson to be learned from the critique of Empedocles and Democritus.

It is clear from this passage in *Generation of Animals* that what Aristotle says is not always to be understood as a straightforward statement of his own considered opinion: context is crucial. In one respect Aristotle's procedure here is more cautious than in the first part of *Poetics* 13 as I have interpreted it. The dummy theory is introduced tentatively, and the description of the theory as abstract (λογική), in the sense that it operates at a level of generality that makes it relatively remote from explanatory principles specific to the phenomenon in question (747b28–30), would have put those already familiar with the methodological point on their guard (cf. e.g., *EE* I 8.1217b22–23; *GC* I 2.316a5–14; *APr.* I 30.46a17–27). There is no such hint in the confident opening of the Elimination Argument ("So it is clear first of all ...", 1452b34). In another respect, however, Aristotle's procedure in the Elimination Argument is less radical. The dummy theory about the sterility of mules is invented in order to suffer unqualified rejection; in *Poetics* 13 the Elimination Argument (which,

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23   The advocates of the double plot might appeal to the preference that some people have for such plots in support of their thesis: Aristotle suggests that this misguided preference results from a defect of character, "weakness" (1452a33–35). To the extent that we find this explanation plausible, we have additional reason to conclude that the double plot cannot be the best kind of tragic plot.

I have argued, Aristotle did not invent, but borrowed from an opponent) is not rejected in its entirety. Aristotle agrees with his opponent that the key variables are ethical status and the direction of the change of fortune; he agrees that plots that evoke disgust rather than pity and fear must be rejected; and he agrees that a change to bad fortune may evoke disgust, depending on the ethical status of the character who undergoes that change. The crucial feature of the argument that he rejects is the binary division of ethical character. His procedure is to correct this error, and to follow the modified argument to its legitimate conclusion. The correction is, admittedly, a far-reaching one: when he goes on to speak of "someone of the kind specified, or better than that, rather than worse" (1453a16–17), Aristotle approves plots that intrude significantly into the ethical space that the double plot theorist had tried to fence off.

We may now return to the question of whether the neutrality with regard to outcome preserved in the first part of chapter 13 is sustained when Aristotle develops his positive case for the Familiar Conclusion. Two points may give rise to doubt. In the first sign, when he expresses emphatic approval for tragedies about characters who suffer or do terrible things Aristotle uses aorist infinitives, signaling completion (1453a20–22, ἢ παθεῖν δεινὰ ἢ ποιῆσαι); in the second sign, he rejects criticisms of Euripidean plays that end in bad fortune (1453a25–26, τελευτῶσιν).[24] Here, then, he explicitly commits himself to the completion of a change to bad fortune being "correct" (ὀρθόν, 1453a26). But that is still a limited commitment. If such plots are correct, the advocates of the double plot and the critics of Euripides are wrong to exclude them; it does not follow that they are *required* by the best kind of plot. To reach that stronger conclusion an additional premise would be needed: that the best kind of tragic plot must be narrowly defined, so as to admit of no variants. Aristotle does not supply that premise, and there is no evidence that he tacitly assumed it. On the contrary: as I mentioned at the outset, in chapter 14 he refers back (1454a9–13) to the first "sign" in chapter 13 (1453a17–22) in support of the claim that plots in which the unfortunate outcome is averted are superior. So he cannot

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24   White 1992, 231 (cf. 233) notes that 1453a24–26 is the first mention of endings in chapter 13. This term is carried on into the subsequent discussion of double plots (1453a32 τελευτᾶσα, a38 ἐπὶ τελευτῆς). The ending (τελευτή) is also important in chapter 7, but there the point is structural: plots must have closure. The conditions for closure (7.1450b29–30) are satisfied equally by a change to bad fortune that is completed in accordance with necessity or probability, and by a change to bad fortune that is pre-empted unexpectedly but in accordance with necessity or probability (for this combination see 9.1452a3–4), provided in each case that there is nothing else that necessarily or probably happens next. Chapter 7 is therefore neutral with regard to the question addressed in chapter 13.

have understood that sign as evidence that the best kind of plot requires an unfortunate ending.[25]

Aristotle's conception of the best kind of plot therefore specifies a trajectory but is neutral as to outcome. That is not a bland neutrality.[26] The crux of Aristotle's dispute with the advocate of the double plot is not the double plot in itself: Aristotle rates it less highly than its advocate does, but does not eliminate it. The crux is the *exclusion* of plots in which the change to bad fortune is completed. The critics of Euripides make the same error (1453a24). Since they are distinguished from the advocate of the double plot, they must have a different positive preference: a plausible hypothesis is that they prefer single plots in which the outcome is averted. At the end of chapter 14, Aristotle himself declares that such plots are optimal. In his dispute with the critics of Euripides, therefore, even more than in his dispute with the advocates of the double plot, Aristotle's objection is not so much to the opponents' positive preference, but to their *exclusion* of something that he regards as genuinely tragic.

Conclusion

In the first part of chapter 13, I have argued, Aristotle stages a demonstration that an argument designed to establish the primacy of the double plot by the elimination of all alternatives is faulty. In the second part he shows that this argument's intended conclusion is false by providing two empirically grounded signs that his own preferred category of single plots is superior. That category is introduced in terms that specify the trajectory of the change of fortune, but not its outcome. The following shift in focus to plots in which the change to bad fortune is completed cannot mean that such plots are required or preferred: that would be inconsistent with the conclusion of chapter 14, which gives first place to plots in which the change is not completed. If the advocate of the double plot were Aristotle's only opponent, we might understand the focus

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25   In 1453a23 "this plot-structure" must refer back to the trajectory-specific but outcome-neutral position formulated in 1453a7–17, and not restrictively to the plots with unhappy endings of 1453a17–22. Since 1453a17–22 is introduced in support of 1453a7–17, and retrospectively invoked in support of 1454a4–9, there is nothing to recommend an interpretation of 1453a23 that makes 1453a17–22 modify the outcome-neutral formulation of 1453a7–17 in a way that brings it into conflict with 1454a4–9.

26   Bouchard 2012, 192 understands Heath 2008 as "lessening the importance of the conclusion of the play": I hope it will become clearer from what follows why I do not accept that interpretation of my argument.

on plots in which the change to bad fortune is completed as purely tactical: establishing the correctness of these plots establishes *a fortiori* the correctness of plots in which the change is not completed. But the opening of a second front against the critics of Euripides shows that more is at stake. Even though Aristotle shares their (inferred) preference for plots in which the change to bad fortune is not completed, he insists that the rejection of plots that end in bad fortune is an error. He is therefore committed to defending the whole of the category that is defined in outcome-neutral terms in 1453a7–17.

As we observed in the large-scale architecture of the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Generation of Animals*, an interim formulation that serves as a starting point for further enquiry is not uncharacteristic of Aristotle. In the *Poetics*, likewise, chapter 13 reaches interim conclusions and chapter 14 pursues the investigation further, assessing the relative merits of different variants within the best kind of tragic plot inclusively defined in chapter 13. The implication in chapter 13 that these plots should be based on interactions within a family (1453a18–19) is taken up in chapter 14 (1453b14–22), and provides the starting point for an analysis that reaches the conclusion that it is best if someone interacts with a family member in ignorance in a way that creates a trajectory from good fortune to bad fortune (the intended harm), but this outcome is averted by recognition (1454a4–9). We may assume, from chapter 13, that the agent is not morally outstanding, and is set on a trajectory to misfortune by "an error of some kind" (1453a7–10). Ignorance is one kind of error,[27] and the recognition by which the error is revealed and corrected automatically entails that the plot has the advantages of the complex plot. So there is clear cohesion between the conclusions of chapter 14 and the premises stated at the start of chapter 13.[28]

We might say that, having defined the best kind of tragic plot in inclusive terms in chapter 13, in chapter 14 Aristotle determines what is the *best* of the best. But if we do say that, we must be careful. Though he is willing to eliminate some plot-types as untragic, Aristotle's objection to the error of Euripides's critics shows that his goal is not to insist on the best of the best to the exclusion of all else, but to resist the exclusion of any genuinely tragic option. Far from insisting that tragedies should conform to a narrowly defined ideal, he argues against such narrowness on more than one front, and constructs a diverse, graded hierarchy of tragic plots. This should not surprise us. Aristotle's ultimate aim is to understand tragedy as a genre. If tragedy comprises a field of

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27   Not, I suspect, the only kind: but this is not the place to discuss the scope of *hamartia*.

28   There is more to be said about the argument of chapter 14, but this will need to be done elsewhere: Heath 2008, 14–16 has some tentative preliminary suggestions.

diverse possibilities, simply awarding a prize to one pre-eminent variant will contribute less to our understanding of tragedy than a ranking that reveals the structure of that diversity.

Reflecting on the consequences of a more exclusive policy will confirm that Aristotle had good reason to resist the exclusion of genuinely tragic options other than the best of the best. Aristotle regards the *Iliad* as an outstanding poem: the epic corpus would be impoverished if it were discarded. It would therefore be absurd to maintain that the *Iliad* should be discarded on the grounds that it has a simple plot (24.1459b14), and that plots should be complex rather than simple (13.1452b31–32). Aristotle also regards Sophocles's *Oedipus* as an outstanding tragedy: the tragic corpus would be impoverished if it were discarded. But its plot-type is ranked second best in chapter 14 (1453b29–31, 1454a2–4). The abundant evidence for the play's exceptional status elsewhere in the *Poetics* relates to other features, such as the handling of the recognition and the combination of recognition with reversal.[29] Sophocles's *Oedipus* is an outstanding tragedy, therefore, not simply because of its plot-type, which is not in the last analysis the best of the best (and that, in any case, it shares with many inferior tragedies), but because of its distinctive combination of other technical excellences. Despite the importance of plot, therefore, the quality of a tragedy cannot be deduced from its plot-type alone. The superiority of tragedy over epic, for which Aristotle argues in chapter 26, obviously does not mean that every individual tragedy is superior to the *Iliad*. Similarly, it is possible for one play (e.g. *Oedipus*) to be superior to another (e.g. *Ion*), even if its plot-type is inferior. Other things being equal, the superior plot-type will yield a superior play. But if a particular body of material affords exceptional opportunities, and a dramatist of exceptional talent is able to exploit them, other things will not be equal. Aristotle was right to resist the exclusion of any genuinely tragic option.

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29 *Oedipus* illustrates reversal (11.1452a22–26, alongside Theodectes's *Lynceus*); the recognition is excellent because it coincides with reversal (11.1452a32–33), and because it "arises out of the actual course of events" (16.1455a16–18, alongside *Iphigeneia in Tauris*). The terrible act against a family member is "outside the play" (14.1453b31–32). The plot's irrationalities are also kept outside the play (15.1454b6–8; 24.1460a28–30). Sophocles has not made the mistake of composing a tragedy "out of a body of material which would serve for an epic" (18.1456a10–19 with 26.1462a18–b7).