

Ethics and Aesthetics in Aristotle's *Poetics**

Paul Crittenden

I shall be concerned mainly with some of the things Aristotle says about character and characterisation in the *Poetics*. But I shall begin with some remarks about the general context of the discussion as suggested by the broad title of the paper. Aristotle's treatment of poetry has sometimes been seen as a form of aestheticism, that is to say, as an argument for the complete autonomy of poetic values and standards. This interpretation rests most generally on the well known opposition between Aristotle and Plato in regard to the nature of poetry and its place in human life. Plato in the *Republic* assessed poetry essentially in terms of his conception of universal truth and eternal moral goodness. On these grounds, he rejected poetry as full of lies and untruths, especially in what it has to say about the gods. Secondly, he castigated it for purveying unworthy moral and educational values and for engendering wayward emotional responses and illegitimate pleasure.

These criticisms were directed, of course, at poetry as Plato was familiar with it, specifically Homer's epic poetry and the great dramatic tragedies of the fifth century written by Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. But in Book X of the *Republic* this critique is given general force in connection with Plato's account of art as imitation (*mimesis*), where *mimesis* is understood as the realisation of an essentially limited and distorted mirror on reality. In taking this line, Plato was not unaware of the power and beauty of poetry. Indeed the artistry of great poetry is precisely what makes it so dangerous and harmful in his eyes, for through its artistry it works on the emotions and draws the audience deeply into its limited and distorted vision of the world. In this case it is all the more necessary to subject mimetic art, poetry and drama in particular, to the judgment of reason and the universal and overriding canons of truth and morality to uncover its true nature.

Aristotle by contrast takes the view that the pleasure associated with poetry is natural and legitimate. *Mimesis*, of which poetry is a

* Paper given to the Inaugural Colloquium of the Sydney Society of Literature and Aesthetics, Oct. 4-5, 1990.

mode, is spoken of as natural to human beings from childhood, and there is the proposal that it is also natural for everyone to delight in works of *mimesis* (see *Poetics* 1448b5-8). As for the demands of truth, Aristotle did not think that poetic description is properly subject to the criticism of not being 'true to fact': he was not disturbed, therefore, by what Homer and the writers of tragedy had to say of the gods on the grounds that 'the tales about the gods ... may be wrong, not true and not the proper thing to say, nonetheless they are certainly *what people say*' (*Poetics* 1461b35ff). Errors in descriptions, even impossibilities, are held to be justifiable if they serve the end of poetry itself, by making the poetic effect more astounding for example (*Poetics* 1460b25f.). Most significantly, he insisted that 'correctness in poetry is not of the same kind as correctness in politics, or indeed any other art' (*Poetics* 1460b13-15). Politics in Aristotle's classification is the master art, the supreme science of the good; it thus embraces moral philosophy. On the face of it, then, he singles out poetry as a domain of life and practice insulated from morality and normal requirements of truth, secure in its own procedures and standards. In short, Aristotle's reaction against Plato's view of art in the *Republic* is interpreted as a form of aestheticism.

I take the view that this interpretation is a superficial and partial reading of the *Poetics*. Aristotle is concerned to rescue poetry from the wholesale subordination to the high and narrow conception of truth and moral values to which Plato is disposed to subject it. He is certainly willing to recognise it as an art. The very fact that he devotes a separate treatise to the topic is witness to his recognition of its significance as an art with its own specific form. In similar vein, he is sensitive to the various forms of poetry (as he was familiar with them) and to the qualities of poetry as poetry of one or another sort. But it is quite contrary to Aristotle's way of thinking, as it was to Greek thinking generally, to suppose that aesthetic principles could form an independent set of values insulated from ethical and political values and, indeed, from a general view of the cosmos. That Aristotle did not set poetry apart in the way aestheticism would require is in any case obvious from the significance he attached to the role of music and poetry in the moral education of the young (see *Politics*, 1339a). Aristotle holds, as noted above, that poetry has its own forms of procedure and that 'correctness in poetry is not of the same kind as correctness in politics or indeed any other art'. This rules out the sort of moralism and didacticism which Plato was drawn to impose on poetry. But it is consistent with the claim in Aristotle's ethical and

political writings that 'the goal of political science must embrace those of other branches of knowledge' (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1094b6). Art in all its forms, and poetry in a particular way, is bound to be drawn into the embrace of political *episteme*.

Towards the end of his quarrel with the poets, Plato opens up the possibility of a reconciliation by issuing an invitation (or a challenge):

We would allow the champions of poetry—men who do not practise the art themselves, but are lovers of it to offer a prose defence on its behalf, showing that poetry is a source not only of pleasure, but also of benefit to communities and to the life of man. And we shall listen graciously. (*Republic* 10, 607d)

As Stephen Halliwell suggests in his book *Aristotle's Poetics* (London, 1986), the *Poetics* can be read as a response to this invitation. Both elements in the case for the defence—that poetry is at once a source of pleasure and of benefit to communities and human life—are linked essentially with ethical assessment and the consideration of poetry within a more general conception of human life. One has to say that, in defending poetry, Aristotle does not labour the ethical dimension excessively in the *Poetics*. But this does not lessen its significance in his approach to the topic. Aristotle would suppose that the reader of the *Poetics* would also have studied the *Politics* and the *Ethics*. The point is that a proper reading of the *Poetics* ought to take account of the ideas expounded in these related sources. In a short paper such as this, one can hardly do more than note this requirement as a condition of adequate interpretation or, at least, of an interpretation with a reasonable claim to completeness. I have no intention of embarking on the undertaking here of reading the *Poetics* through an account of the ethical and political writings. It would in fact be a major task simply to consider the explicitly ethical themes, and related presuppositions and implications, within the *Poetics* itself. I have stated a general contention in regard to the interpretation of the *Poetics*. But given that all interpretation has to begin somewhere, at some necessarily limited point, I propose to confine my further remarks to some of the things Aristotle says about character and characterisation in the *Poetics*. This has obvious bearing on ethical considerations in the text and is a large topic in itself.

The inevitable starting point is the *logos* of tragedy (definition/key summary) which Aristotle provides in chapter 6 of the *Poetics* after he has made his entry into the topic:

A tragedy, then, is the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in language with

The Sydney Society of Literature and Aesthetics

pleasurable accessories, each kind brought in separately in the parts of the work; in a dramatic, not in a narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions.

A little further on in this chapter he proposes that 'Tragedy is an imitation not of persons but of action and life, of happiness and misery ...'

The emphasis on happiness (*eudaimonia*) in this passage immediately places tragedy within the domain of ethics. Morality, as Aristotle conceives it, is concerned with promoting human good. That is to say, it is concerned with promoting the conditions in which human beings act well and live well which are in turn the conditions of wellbeing or happiness. Happiness as *eudaimonia*, as the passage quoted from the *Poetics* makes clear, has a primarily active sense: it conveys broadly the sense of an overall situation in which a person *acts* well. But it draws in also the idea of a personal and social context in which things go well for a person in the major respects of life. The primary condition for this possibility in the Aristotelian framework lies in the possession of a complex set of excellences or virtues conceived as dispositions for action and feeling exercised in choice and responsibility. Virtue is what makes it possible for a person to act well in any sustained sense. Nevertheless, while the possession of the moral virtues or excellences ensures that a person is morally good and acts well, it cannot ensure happiness in the full sense. *Eudaimonia* depends on other things as well, external conditions such as the sort of society and times one lives in, for example, and on one's having a degree of luck in matters over which one has little or no control.

The particular interest and force of tragedy in this context for the Aristotelian conception of ethical and political life is that tragedy typically portrays a situation in which moral virtue and the external conditions for happiness come apart. Commonly in Greek tragedy, a person who is happy in the full sense, possessing good fortune, status and success along with the primary requirement of virtue, is confronted dramatically with evil times and bad fortune. So Oedipus, or Antigone, or Hecuba. How the person acts in this situation, how he or she copes with the problems and the bad fortune which confront them, is the primary focus of the drama according to Aristotle. This is the basic point to which Aristotle draws attention in saying that tragedy is essentially a *mimesis* of action and life. Action and life as the primary focus of attention, however, have to be related back to the character of the person concerned.

Aristotle discusses character and characterisation in three places in

the *Poetics*. He speaks of it in the context of poetry in general in Chapter 2, and he considers it with particular reference to tragedy in Chapter 6 and again in Chapter 15. Character, *ethos*, in the *Poetics* connotes persons or agents in respect of generic moral quality or standing ; it is used in a more neutral way on occasions to stand for persons or agents as in the phrase 'the characters in a play'; and it is also used to connote characterisation as a property of a play. Aristotle offers a *logos* of the term *ethos* in Chapter 6 (a definition which recurs in much the same terms in Chapter 15):

Character in a play is that which reveals the moral purpose of the agents, i.e. the sort of thing they seek or avoid ... hence there is no room for character in a speech on a purely indifferent subject (1450b810).

It is obvious that this account of character is essentially ethical in its focus. The term which is translated here as moral purpose is *prohairesis*. It is a central concept in Aristotle's ethical writings and might be translated more informatively as something like *deliberate moral choice*. *Prohairesis* is choice involving conscious desire and intention which is based on dispositions for action and feeling which are precisely dispositions of virtue and vice. Character in other words is based on dispositions to act well or badly, that is, dispositions which are classified as either virtues or vices and which are manifested in deliberate choice. In short, Aristotle offers an account of character in the context of poetry (and specifically of tragedy) which draws immediately on his ethical ideas.

This understanding of character is obviously very different from modern conceptions of the notion (and perhaps even more so from post-modern conceptions of character). The essential emphasis on ethical dimensions marks the most obvious difference: dramatic characterisation is made to consist centrally in the portrayal of moral choice. The Aristotelian conception of character is consequently narrow and determinate in comparison with the very general and vague scope of character in modern literature. Does it suffer in comparison in this respect? That is a question I will not seek to pursue here other than to take brief note of two considerations.

First, an admission of the essentially ethical conception of character in the *Poetics* should be accompanied with recognition of the broad scope of the ethical in Aristotle's thought. In contrast to more narrowly conceived modern views about the domain of the moral, the Aristotelian understanding of happiness and misery runs across the whole field of human endeavour. Poetry, as an enrichment of human life, thereby has moral significance. Secondly, Aristotle's

account is offered (albeit unselfconsciously) in the context of Greek poetry, tragedy in particular. In this light, it may be seen as the attempt, not so much to lay down a principle, as to acknowledge the role of Homer and other poets in Greek culture and to capture the poets' own understanding of their art. Thus Aristophanes had declared, in speaking of the calling of the poet: 'We must indeed say things that are good, because to little children it is the schoolmaster who speaks, but to those past puberty it is poets'. Aristotle in effect endorses the ethico-political vocation of the poet, even if he would agree with Plato in holding that the chief place in discourse about the good in human life belongs to the philosopher.

Aristotle's conception of character also differs from modern emphases in that it has little or no place for the psychological conceived as the inner life of the person. He gives a good deal of attention to the importance of thought and emotional response, as well as action, in gauging characterisation in a play (as with the character of Oedipus in *Oedipus the King* for example). Nevertheless, the primary locus of character, revealed in deliberate moral choice, is located in manifest action and feeling. There is also a difference about the way in which the individual is conceived in this context. Aristotelian ethics and Greek tragedy alike place considerable emphasis on the individual and on individual choice of action. But individuals such as Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, Orestes, Oedipus, Antigone, and the like, while they are enough like us to arouse feelings of pity and fear, are enlarged by their social and mythic status and are presented as *types* of human beings. In a related way, the conception of character in terms of virtues and vices is a matter of generic qualities rather than individual traits of personality.

Aristotle's most insistent thesis in regard to character, in drama as in life, is that it is subordinate to action. A tragedy is essentially the acting out of a story; its life and soul is the action (and events) played out in the story, that is, the plot or *muthos*, 'the combination of the incidents, or things done in the story' in Aristotle's words. This emphasis is linked generally with Aristotle's view that character, as marked out by virtue or vice, is the outcome of action. We become just by doing just acts (by being got to do them at first), as we become courageous by acting courageously, and so on for the other virtues. Similarly, character, which is thus brought into being through action, cannot be maintained for long independently of relevant practical activity. Character in short is brought about by action and is properly realised and sustained in action. It thus stands in a direct and fundamental relationship of subordination to action in the first place

and finds its expression in action.

In Chapter 6 of the *Poetics* Aristotle proposes that a tragedy which has a good action-structure and story line but poor characterisation is preferable to one dominated by 'ethical set-speeches' (i.e. 'speeches of character'). This proposal, it can be seen, is not a mere expression of preference for one sort of play over another. It is grounded in Aristotle's general account of the relationship of action and character together with the view that poetic *mimesis* should reflect the main features of human life. A play which consists mainly of ethical set-speeches is necessarily incomplete and unbalanced. In being devoid of action it fails to portray the substantial element of life within which character is formed and properly realised.

What Aristotle offers is an agent-centred view of tragedy with the primary focus on purposive (moral) choice and action. It follows that the main figure of tragedy cannot be a passive victim, totally overwhelmed by circumstances outside his or her control. Aristotle is surely not wrong in this contention. Nevertheless, an emphasis on the tragic character as agent could run into problems in acknowledging the necessary element of suffering in tragedy and in allowing sufficient play to such elements as chance, the unpredictable consequences of action, the force of history, and the influence of powers outside human agency in the course of human destiny. It is sufficiently clear from other sources, notably *Physics* II, that the Aristotelian conception of the cosmos provides room for chance (in the form of bad luck for example) and unpredictability. In various other respects too, Aristotle is sensitive to the vulnerability of human happiness with reference to both virtue and good fortune. But he has no sympathy for the idea of outside forces in his secularised account of tragedy. The Aristotelian cosmos is one in which human destiny is worked out in the natural world, not in the world of the stars. This is a world in which tragedy is not impossible. Nevertheless, an approach which emphasises rational choice and purposive agency and which takes a predominantly optimistic view of human powers undoubtedly makes tragedy less plausible.

One could still say that the affirmation of agency over passivity is central to Greek tragedy. Agency in this context is characteristically affirmed in the face of severe limiting conditions and crisis. Nevertheless, without agency, there would be no fully human response of which one could properly speak, but merely the portrayal of some overwhelming crisis. Agency, it should be noted, is not in opposition to the emotions either here or elsewhere, for the emotions are tied in with beliefs and with related patterns of behaviour which may, or may

not, make sense in a given set of circumstances. Again, the interest of tragedy lies significantly in the portrayal of how the agent responds in feelings as well as in action to the crisis.

Attention to agency and action might seem to render the idea of character superfluous. This supposition could appear to be given even stronger support by Aristotle's proposal in chapter 6 of the *Poetics* that while 'tragedy is impossible without action, ... there might be one without Character' (1450a24- 5). On the other hand, this claim appears particularly puzzling in the light of what is said about action and character in Chap. 2 in relation to poetry in general. The clear argument in the earlier chapter is that poetry is a *mimesis* of the actions of agents who have a character of some sort, necessarily being in their character either good or bad, or at some point on a scale between goodness and badness (goodness and badness being the criterion on which difference in character rests). It seems to follow that the portrayal of action of any sustained sort, such as in drama, will necessarily include characterisation (that is, *moral* characterisation). Is there a contradiction between what is said about the inescapability of character in any form of *mimesis* in chapter 2 and the supposition in chapter 6 that there might be a tragedy without Character? Attention to context would suggest that rather different concerns are at issue.

The main point of the passage in Chapter 2 is that, in the words of Stephen Halliwell, "the agents of poetry are in general morally characterised, since character is the natural concomitant of most human action of any significance' (p.153). In Chapter 6, by contrast, the focus of attention is directed to the much more specific consideration of the dramatic balance between action and character in a play. There could not be a tragedy, Aristotle says, in which nobody did anything. But there might be one in which, while action occurs (is portrayed), nothing, or nothing of significance, is conveyed about character. This comment, however, has to be understood as a criticism, not as a concession that there are agents who are without character. Aristotle goes on to complain, in fact, that 'the tragedies of most of the modems are characterless', the implication being that they are of poor quality. This is connected precisely with the fundamental link between action and character. The weakness of the all-action/no character play is that, in the absence of characterisation, it is difficult to make sense of the action.

Aristotle's formal and most extended treatment of character and characterisation in the context of poetry is presented in Chapter 15 of the *Poetics*. I propose to conclude this paper with some brief and

unfinished remarks on what is said about character in this chapter. The first remark is that the discussion is, in fact, disappointingly compressed and thin. The treatment of the construction of the plot, which Aristotle sees as 'at once the first and the most important thing in tragedy', runs over some eight chapters in the text (chapters 7-14). The element of character, which is brought under scrutiny in the second place, occupies barely 36 lines.

There are, Aristotle says briskly, four things to be aimed at in characterisation in tragedy: the characters are to be (morally) good, the character attributed to them needs to be appropriate, they should be 'like the reality', and they should appear in a consistent way throughout.

(i) The requirement that the characters be morally good is presented as the most important of these concerns, and it is filled out with the suggestion that target will be met if the speech or action of the person manifests an element of good moral choice. The sole additional observation on this point is that goodness of a sufficient sort is achievable by every type of person, albeit at progressively lower levels of achievement on the part of women and slaves. The prejudicial remark in regard to women and slaves is of a piece with Aristotle's views in the ethical and political writings. With reference to what is said about slaves, he is caught in immediate inconsistency since he comments both that their behaviour can reveal good moral choice and that the slave 'is a wholly worthless being'. Such blatant inconsistency is regrettable, and not merely, one might say, because Aristotle was the founder of logic. There is inconsistency of a less immediate sort in the estimate of women's virtue (as inferior to male virtue) since in the *Rhetoric* Aristotle appeals to Sophocles' *Antigone* as the spokesperson of universal natural justice (*Rhetoric*, 1, 13; 1373b7-11).

The requirement that the characters in tragedy be shown as morally good is curious in another way, inasmuch as it is left unqualified. Taken as it stands, the remark would imply that every character in tragedy is to appear as morally good. One has to suppose that Aristotle could not have meant this since there are so many counter-examples in Greek tragedy. In any case, some forms of moral goodness, especially heroic virtue, arise precisely in response to moral badness. The more reasonable supposition is that Aristotle means that the central characters with whom we are drawn to feel fear and pity need to appear as morally good. Even then, there is a good deal more moral ambiguity in Greek tragedy than Aristotle seems willing to acknowledge.

There is a remark earlier in the *Poetics* (in chapter 2) to the effect that one of the distinguishing marks of tragedy as against comedy is 'that one would make its personages worse, and the other better, than the men of the present day' (1448a16f). While the point is picked up again in chapter 15 ('tragedy is an imitation of personages better than the ordinary man'), one would not do Aristotle a service in taking this as an absolute claim or in worrying excessively about it as a universal truth. There is a sense of the main figures of tragedy as somewhat larger than life (though not so far from us that we cannot feel fear and pity on their behalf), members of a royal household in many cases, men and women caught up in some dreadful crisis in which high moral choice becomes peculiarly possible. Aristotle's concern, in Stephen Halliwell's words, 'is partly with what might be called the generic tone or ethos, with the gravity and ethical seriousness of tragedy's characteristic material' (p.158).

The requirement for characters in tragedy to appear as morally good almost certainly reflects a basic Aristotelian conviction that tragedy should lend support to basic moral standards. How else could it be so central, along with music, in the moral development of the young? But certainly in comparison with Plato, Aristotle is sensitive to dramatic context in the portrayal of moral behaviour and he takes a relaxed attitude in regard to truth and exactness (as in what is said about the gods). To go back again finally to the requirement for moral goodness, the best interpretation of Aristotle's view is related, as Halliwell proposes, to the centrality of undeserved suffering in tragedy:

over and above the generic attribute of seriousness, goodness of tragic character is required precisely (and unplatonicly) because at the crux of the ideal plots defined in the *Poetics* lies the idea of *undeserved* suffering, whether actual or threatened: and it is on this premise that other features of the theory, such as the distinctive combination of tragic emotions, depend. (p.158-9).

(ii) The requirement that the character attributed to a person be *appropriate* is treated succinctly and tellingly by Aristotle: 'the character before us may be, say, manly; but it is not appropriate in a female character to be manly, or clever' (1454a21f). This is based importantly on a strong connection in Aristotle's thought (and in Greek thought generally) between moral character and types of temperament on the one hand and personal status on the other, especially such considerations as one's sex, age, political status, and one's nationality. Aristotle's account of temperament and emotional qualities in respect of age for example (the young, the middle-aged,

the old) is explored especially in the *Rhetoric*. But canons of appropriateness, it can be seen, include a peculiarly moral emphasis.

In his ethical and political writings, Aristotle speaks of a nature and goal for human beings quite generally (the 'human good'), and clearly intends his ideas to have general application. In fact, his account of morality has a very definite, historically shaped cultural setting. Aristotle's morally mature human being is male rather than female, a free man rather than a slave, a Greek rather than a barbarian, a man who is at once the head of a household and a citizen in a *polis* with a part to play in government, a man well enough off to enjoy a degree of cultivated leisure, hence not a craftsman or a manual labourer. Those who are excluded from the privileged group are not thereby excluded from a certain level and style of moral life, but in one sense or another they are held to fall short of the standard of completeness. Thus, in a variety of ways, status governed appropriateness in respect to morality. (Aristotle's example in which manliness is said to be inappropriate to a woman character is particularly telling since the Greek word for the virtue courage, *andreia*, means 'of a man, manliness'). While much of what Aristotle says, or assumes, about the connection between status (etc) and moral virtue can be readily exposed as unsatisfactory, we would be wrong to conclude that the moral basis of his conception of character is thereby undermined. For one thing, inclusion in the privileged group was certainly no guarantee of moral achievement, as is clear from the fact that Aristotle was critical of the conventional mores of his social class, the well born and the well to do.

(iii) About the third requirement for character—that characters be made 'like the reality'—Aristotle says nothing other than that, in his sense of the term, it is not the same as characters being good or appropriate. One interpretation supposes that likeness to reality refers to a fit between the dramatist's portrayal of a character and the character in the original mythical source. This is unlikely, however, if one takes account of Aristotle's relaxed attitude to truth as correspondence in this context. The function of the poet, he says in Chapter 9, is to describe not the thing that has happened, but a kind of thing that might happen (1451a36). There would in any case be considerable difficulty in settling on the right account of the original.

One possibility is that being 'like the reality' has the generic force of 'being true to life'. Later in the chapter, Aristotle argues that tragedy, as a rule, should avoid improbability among its incidents and not rely too much on stage artifice. Again, picking up the point from chapter two that tragedy is an imitation of personages better than

ourselves, he proposes that 'we should follow the example of good portrait painters, who reproduce the distinctive features of a man, and at the same time, without losing the likeness, make him handsomer than he is' (1454b9 11). The Greek tragic dramatist is concerned with a tradition in which the tragic characters are mythical figures who are larger than life in their status and moral significance. (Consider Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, Orestes, Iphigenia, Oedipus, Antigone, Hecuba). What is asked, nonetheless, is that these characters be portrayed as true to life, or as genuinely possible human beings who are sufficiently like a contemporary audience for the latter to recognise in them a common humanity and moral affinity and to grasp the momentous crisis in their lives and be drawn into the (morally appropriate) experience of fear and pity in response to their situation.

(iv) Aristotle refers in the final place to the requirement for consistency in characterisation throughout the drama (making a character consistently inconsistent if that is what is appropriate). This condition is associated most directly with the Aristotelian emphasis on overall intelligibility within a play, in terms of which a plot, along with elements of the unexpected or strange, holds together and gathers a compelling sense of inevitability. Consistency could then be seen as mainly an epistemological or aesthetic requirement. But in drawing attention to this point, Aristotle returns to his insistence that tragedy is concerned most deeply with the portrayal of behaviour of a morally good sort (in conditions involving suffering and crisis). One's sense of the action, however, rests on the portrayal of character in the drama and on the ways in which action is shown as the outcome of character.

Aristotle's brief discussion of character in Chapter 15 could be filled out, while remaining in the *Poetics*, by reference back to what is said about plot structure in the preceding chapters. This applies in particular to the treatment of the emotions of pity and fear. The observation that 'pity is occasioned by undeserved misfortune, and fear by that of one like ourselves' (1453a4) leads on to the conclusion that tragedy is best concerned with characters who are neither outstandingly good or bad, but 'the intermediate kind of personage, a man not preeminently virtuous and just, whose misfortune is brought upon him not by vice and depravity but by some fault, of the number of those in the enjoyment of great reputation and prosperity; e.g. Oedipus, Thyestes ...' (1453a6-10).

The reference to fault (*hamartia*) in this passage opens up a question of vast dispute in the history of discussion of the *Poetics*. The notion clearly has some bearing on the idea of moral character.

But I will not discuss it here other than to suggest that Aristotle's notion of *hamartia* is not a matter of *moral* fault or of defect of moral character in the person concerned. Tragedy deals most generally with an individual (or a family) undergoing a dramatic change of fortune, typically a change from good fortune to bad. But Aristotle does not suppose that the source of things going wrong can be traced back to a moral fault in the person (or family) concerned. His focus on character as ethical is concerned rather with the way in which agent-characters of tragedy respond, how they feel and what they do, in the face of their unhappy situation .

Prof. Paul Crittenden is Dean of the Faculty of Arts and a member of the Department of General Philosophy, University of Sydney. He is the author of *Learning to be Moral: Philosophical Reflections on Moral Development* and of many papers on moral, social, and epistemological topics especially in the field of education.

