

Catharsis and vicarious fear

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to give a new interpretation of Aristotle's account of the emotions evoked in the course of engaging with tragic narratives that would give rise to a coherent account of catharsis. Very briefly, the proposal is that tragedy triggers vicarious (or other-centered) emotions and catharsis is the purgation of such emotions. I argue that this interpretation of "fear and pity" as vicarious emotions is consistent with both Aristotle's account of emotions and his account of catharsis and also with his choice of examples for tragedies that trigger catharsis.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Aristotle somewhat cryptically says that tragedy is the "mimesis of a serious and complete action, having magnitude [...], which through pity and fear bring about a catharsis of such emotions" (*Poetics* 6, 1449b24–28).¹ There is a library-sized literature devoted to almost every word in this sentence—what is meant by "fear and pity?" What is meant by "catharsis?" What is meant by "such?" And so on.

As a result, some have despaired of the entire endeavor—as Voltaire suggested, if it is so difficult to find a coherent interpretation of this concept, why should we take such "gibberish about the purgation of emotions" (Voltaire 1764/1837, p. 337) seriously? But dismissing Aristotle's account of catharsis do not have to go as far as Voltaire's provocative statement—it often takes a milder form. Maybe Aristotle did not intend catharsis to be a defining or necessary feature of our engagement with tragedy (Daniels & Scully, 1992; Else, 1986). Maybe he did not write this sentence at all—maybe it was a later addition (Scott, 2003).

The aim of this paper is to give a new account of what Aristotle meant by catharsis. This may seem like a fairly hopeless endeavor given the size of the literature on every aspect of catharsis. Nonetheless, I will argue that if we accept a richer account of emotions than the one normally present in the discussion of catharsis, we may be able to give an account of catharsis that is consistent with Aristotle's account of emotions, his account of catharsis, and, importantly (something that is often ignored in the catharsis literature), also explains his choice of examples for tragedies that trigger catharsis. Very briefly, the proposal is that tragedy triggers vicarious (or other-centered) emotions and catharsis is the purgation of such emotions.

A quick note about terminology: We can engage with tragic narratives in a number of ways: read a tragedy, go to see the theater performance of a tragedy, listen to a recording of a performance of a tragedy, and so on. To preserve generality, I will not talk about our (audiovisual) experience of a theater performance, but rather, in more general terms, about our engagement with tragic narratives.

2 | E1 → E2 → E3

Here is a very schematic way of thinking about catharsis. The spectator is in an emotional state before beginning to engage with the tragic narrative. I call this emotional state E1. Then, while engaging with the tragic narrative, she is in a different emotional state, namely, the one characterized by fear and pity. This is E2. And finally, as a result of the “catharsis of such emotions,” she arrives at a final, third, emotional state, E3. So here are the three states:

- E1. the original pre-engagement emotional state
- E2. emotional state during engagement with tragic narrative—fear and pity
- E3. post-cathartic emotional state—after the catharsis of such emotions

Every theory of catharsis must be able to give a characterization of each of these three emotional states and explain the transitions between them, with a special emphasis on the transition between E2 and E3, which is where the actual catharsis of such emotions happens.

And every theory of catharsis is subject to various constraints with regard to each of these three emotional states. After highlighting some of these constraints, I argue that if we accept a richer account of emotions than the one normally present in the discussion of catharsis, we may be able to give an account of catharsis that satisfies all these constraints.

E1 is the emotional state of the spectator before she starts engaging with the tragic narrative. She may be happy or sad or nervous or worried. There are no real constraints here. But the reason why E1 matters is because of the debate about whether catharsis is a form of the education of our emotions or morals. This thought has been influential in a variety of forms: It has been argued that catharsis is the purgation or purification or the education of our emotions (Golden, 1976; Halliwell, 1986; House, 1956; Nussbaum, 1986—these accounts are, of course, radically different, but they all share the common assumption in question). But if we are to understand the theory of catharsis as a general theory of the emotions triggered by tragic narratives, then we should not assume that E1 is in some ways a negative emotional state—an emotional state that needs to be improved upon. As Jonathan Lear argued at length, Aristotle's theory applies to all citizens, even the most virtuous ones—ones who are in no need of any emotional or moral education (Lear, 1988). But this is only possible if we remain as neutral about E1 as possible—E1 may be desirable or undesirable and it may be pleasant or unpleasant. Further, the fact that E1 is not necessarily an undesirable emotional state will put some further pressure on explaining how catharsis can provide a worthwhile experience even for those virtuous people whose emotional lives are perfectly fine.

One of the most widespread (but by no means the dominant) interpretations of catharsis is that it involves the purgation of fear and pity by evoking these emotions. According to this picture, we start with an emotional state, E1, which then gets worse because of the fear and pity that the tragic narrative evokes in E2. But then as these emotions are purged, we end up in an emotional state, E3, that is not only better than E2, but also better than the initial emotional state, E1. The often invoked medical analogy of taking, say, laxative works on this same model.

Whether or not we endorse this medical analogy, the question is whether we should commit to the more general picture according to which E2 is somehow worse than E1, and E3 is better than either of these (under *some* understanding of “better” and “worse”)? I would like to remain agnostic about the relation between E1 and E2. Maybe someone's E1 is so awful that E2 can only be an improvement—maybe by distracting the reader/spectator. I do not see why this should rule this person out from experiencing catharsis.

But all the other relations are subject to some constraints. First, E3 is an improvement on E2. It is difficult to see how E3 could be construed as worse than E2. If this were so, then the catharsis of the emotions that constitutes E2 would be a bad thing—but it clearly isn't. Further, E3 also seems to be an improvement on E1—otherwise it would be difficult to explain why people engage with tragic narratives at all. There may be some unpleasant experiences on the way, but the whole experience should be worthwhile even for those whose E1 is an extremely happy emotional state.

In short, E3 is supposed to be better than either E1 or E2. After all, achieving this final emotional state is what catharsis is all about and the *telos* of tragedy is to get us in this superior E3 state. But what is meant here by better? I have been pretending that there is a simple ordering of emotional states from better to worse. But things are much more complicated. And emotion can be more pleasant but less morally praiseworthy. For the purposes of this paper, I will bracket the moral dimensions of these emotions. As David Hume says:

It seems an unaccountable pleasure which the spectators of a well-written tragedy receive from sorrow, terror, anxiety, and other passions that are in themselves disagreeable and uneasy (Hume, 1987, p. 216).

Hume wanted to understand the pleasure we experience in E3 from, and despite, the displeasure of E2. I will follow this Humean approach when I emphasize that E3 is supposed to be better than either E1 or E2 (which also seems to be Aristotle's take, see *Poetics* 14, 1453b12). And my aim is precisely to account for this "unaccountable pleasure" by inquiring more deeply into the emotions we experience when engaging with tragic narratives.

3 | REAL FEAR, IMAGINED FEAR, VICARIOUS FEAR

E2, as we have seen, is the emotional state where the tragic narrative engages our fear and pity. But what is meant by fear and pity here? In the catharsis literature, we can find all variations of possible views about these emotions: Maybe Aristotle was really talking about fear and not pity, maybe he was really talking about pity and not fear, maybe he was talking about emotions in general and not about these more specific emotions, maybe he thought that by evoking fear, the tragic narrative triggers our pity,² or maybe the other way round, our pity leads to fear (about our own future; Belfiore, 1992, esp. p. 231).

To make things worse, Aristotle himself thought of fear and pity as very different. Fear is a self-centered emotion, whereas pity is an other-centered emotion (see esp. *Rhetoric* 2.8.13, 1386a24–28). As he says in the *Rhetoric* (2.5):

Fear may be defined as a pain or disturbance due to a mental picture of some destructive or painful evil in the future. Of destructive or painful evils only; for there are some evils, e.g. wickedness or stupidity, the prospect of which does not frighten us: I mean only such as amount to great pains or losses. And even these only if they appear not remote but so near as to be imminent: we do not fear things that are a very long way off: for instance, we all know we shall die, but we are not troubled thereby, because death is not close at hand (Rhetoric 2.5, 1382a21ff).

How about pity? Pity, for Aristotle, seems to be the other-centered counterpart of fear: "Speaking generally, anything causes us to feel fear that when it happens to, or threatens, others cause us to feel pity" (*Rhetoric* 2. 5, 1382b26 ff). But then what is it that we feel when engaging with tragic narratives: a self-centered emotion, such as fear, or an other-centered emotion, such as pity? Or both? If so, what is the relation between them?

Let us focus on fear first. Feeling fear can mean two different things: feeling fear for oneself or feeling fear for someone else. We can call these two subcategories of fear "self-centered" and "other-centered" or "vicarious" fear. If I see a bear attacking me, I feel self-centered fear. If I see you being attacked by a bear, I feel other-centered or vicarious fear. And the same goes for all other emotions, which all have a vicarious counterpart. If I see a slug climbing up my left leg, I feel disgust. If I see a slug climbing up your left leg, I feel vicarious disgust. And so on. Vicarious fear, to put it very simply, is feeling fear for someone else (Nanay, 2013, 2016).

What is then evoked by tragic narratives? Self-centered fear or vicarious fear? While the former view has had its proponents in the catharsis literature, the latter seems much more promising. If I see or read about a fictional character being attacked by a lion, I will not feel fear for myself: I am sitting safely and comfortably in the theater or on my sofa. I feel fear for the fictional character.

This way of thinking about fear also seems, at least on the face of it (see Nehamas, 1992, pp. 301–304 for some worries), consistent with Aristotle's line in the *Poetics* that fear is aroused by the misfortune of a man like ourselves—

not ourselves, but someone else who is like us (see *Poetics* 13, 1453a5–6). As many commentators are quick to point out, Aristotle emphasizes the self-centered aspect of fear in the *Rhetoric*, whereas he focuses on the other-centered aspects of fear in the *Poetics* (see esp. Nehamas, 1992). This difference is understandable in the light of the general project of these works (Ferrari, 1999).

All this seems to suggest that the fear in E2 is *primarily* vicarious fear, not self-centered fear. Is it possible that this vicarious fear then gives rise to some other self-centered emotion? Very much so. Some people avoid dark alleyways after watching scary movies, for example. More importantly, our other-centered fear can give rise to genuine worries about or insights to our own fortune or our own self.³ But such self-directed emotions are secondary or indirect; they are the downstream consequences of the primary emotion triggered by tragic narratives in E2: vicarious fear.⁴

But if fear in the definition of catharsis is to be understood as vicarious fear, then we have encountered a significant interpretative problem: in the quote above, Aristotle made it very clear that fear is to be contrasted with pity: the former is a self-centered emotion, the latter is an other-centered one: “anything causes us to feel fear that when it happens to, or threatens, others cause us to feel pity” (*Rhetoric* 2. 5, 1382b26 ff). So could we even make sense of the concept of vicarious fear in Aristotle’s theory of emotions?

Two points need to be noticed. First, in his official definition of fear, Aristotle seems to be neutral about whether he talks about self-centered or vicarious fear. He says that “Fear may be defined as a pain or disturbance due to a mental picture of some destructive or painful evil in the future”—no specification added about whom this “destructive or painful evil in the future” will happen to. He gives a lot of further wrinkles to this definition—about what is meant by “destructive or painful” and about how this “destructive or painful evil” should not be either too distant or too immanent—but on the face of it, it does not seem to be a constraint on fear that this destructive or painful evil must happen to me: to the person experiencing fear. So Aristotle’s official definition seems to be consistent with vicarious fear.⁵

Second, remember the seemingly odd concatenation of fear and pity in the definition of catharsis. This, as we have seen, is one of the big challenges for any interpretation as fear and pity just seem so different (in the sense that the former is self-centered, whereas the latter is other-centered). But if we interpret fear as vicarious fear, then this asymmetry disappears. We have seen that every (self-centered) emotion has its vicarious counterpart. But what is pity in this theoretical framework? The most straightforward way of making sense of pity is as vicarious sadness. If your partner has broken up with you, you feel sad. If you know that Bill’s partner has broken up with him, you feel pity for Bill. Pity is vicarious sadness.⁶

In other words, according to the interpretation of fear and pity I am proposing here, both fear and pity are vicarious emotions. This restores the symmetry between these two seemingly very different emotions and would explain Aristotle’s at first glance surprising concatenation of them in the definition of tragedy. Both vicarious fear (the kind of fear relevant in this context) and pity are vicarious emotions; I will assume that fear and pity is Aristotle’s way of referring to prototypical vicarious emotions. In other words, we could rephrase Aristotle’s definition as “through *vicarious emotions* tragic narratives bring about a catharsis of such emotions.”

In order to substantiate this interpretation, more needs to be said about vicarious emotions in general and vicarious fear in particular. One important point that needs to be emphasized is that vicarious fear is not the same as imagined fear. It has been argued that the fear tragic narratives trigger is not “real” fear, but rather imagined fear or “quasi-fear.” This has also been suggested as a possible interpretation of how fear in Aristotle’s account of catharsis should be understood, most famously by Alexander Nehamas, who says that “this is really an imaginative fear for myself” (Nehamas, 1992, p. 203).

The suggestion is that when we are engaging with a narrative where someone walks down a dark alleyway, we do not feel real fear—we feel quasi-fear, that is, imaginary fear: we imagine being afraid. Quasi-fear relates to real fear in the way imagination relates to belief (and maybe as mental imagery relates to vision). We can still call quasi-fear a genuine emotion (see esp. Walton, 1990), but it is very different from real fear. So it is important to point out that vicarious fear is not the same as quasi-fear.

One could argue that if we think of imagining feeling fear as a version of “imagining from the inside,” then vicarious fear will look very similar to quasi-fear: Vicarious fear for someone is a way of imagining this person from the

inside—a way of feeling imagined fear (see Currie & Ravenscroft, 2002; Darwall, 1998; Gordon, 1995a; Ravenscroft, 1998; Walton, 1990, p. 255; Wollheim, 1974, p. 187, for suggestions along these lines). I will argue that this way of understanding vicarious fear does not work: Vicarious fear is very different from quasi-fear. Imagining someone from the inside is a way of emotionally engaging with others, but a very different one from vicarious fear.

This contrast is also crucial for understanding how my account differs from other interpretations that emphasize the other-directedness of fear in Aristotle's description of catharsis (Curran, 2016, pp. 183–189; Halliwell, 1986, pp. 176ff). To put it very simply, while others emphasize the engagement with other people's (and fictional characters) real or imagined emotions, my account is silent about what emotions the other person (or fictional character) may have. This difference will be crucial when explaining the choice of Aristotle's examples (of epistemic asymmetry scenarios) in the next section.

Suppose that you see that a bear is about to attack your neighbor from behind. Your neighbor is unaware of the threat. In this situation, you are likely to experience vicarious fear: fear for your neighbor. But can this instance of vicarious fear be described as imagining your neighbor from the inside? I do not think so. Imagining from the inside is normally cashed out as imagining oneself being in the other person's situation (see Gaut, 1999, 2010; Smith, 1997; Williams, 1973, the idea goes back to at least Adam Smith, see Smith, 1759/2002, p. 11), where, given that this is supposed to be an instance of emotional engagement, the other person's situation is understood as the other person's emotional situation. But if I imagine myself in my neighbor's emotional situation, this will not result in any kind of fear, let alone vicarious fear. My neighbor, as we have seen, is unaware of the bear, so his emotional situation, whatever it may be (depressed or joyful), has very little to do with the fear of the bear. Imagining my neighbor from the inside will not yield vicarious fear (or any kind of fear, for that matter).

Another, related, way of arguing that imagined fear can explain vicarious fear is by means of the concept of simulation. There are various ways of making sense of the attribution of emotional states to others and one of these relies heavily on imagination—the idea is that attributing an emotional state to someone else amounts to simulating this person: “I imagine myself to be in the other person's position, [...] I simply note that I formed, in imagination, a certain belief, desire or decision, then attribute it to the other” (Currie, 1995, p. 144–145, see also Davies, 1994; Goldman, 1992, 2006; Gordon, 1995a, 1995b; Heal, 1995). Regardless of whether this way of understanding the attribution of emotional states to someone else is correct, what matters from our point of view is that it is very different from vicarious fear. We can feel vicarious fear without attributing any emotional state. If I see the bear attacking you, but you are unaware of it, I can (and would) still feel vicarious fear—I would still feel fear for you—but I would be wrong if I attributed fear to you (remember, you are not aware of the danger). But then vicarious fear can happen in the absence of the attribution of emotional states. Even if the way we attribute emotional states is with the help of some kind of imaginative episode (by means of quasi-fear, say), we can still feel vicarious fear towards someone without anything akin to quasi-fear taking place.

Further, these considerations about the difference between vicarious fear and the attribution of fear are important not only inasmuch as they help us to see that vicarious fear and quasi-fear are different. They help us to find support for the view that E2 consists of vicarious emotions—support from the examples Aristotle gives for tragic narratives that are best suited to induce catharsis (here, I am following the methodology of Ferrari, 1999). This is the topic I turn to in the next section.

4 | ARISTOTLE'S EXAMPLES AND EPISTEMIC ASYMMETRY

We have seen that we can feel vicarious fear towards someone who does not experience (self-centered) fear. This is why vicarious fear is possible without the attribution of fear to someone else. You may not experience fear, but if you are in danger and I know this, then I can (and presumably would) experience vicarious fear. There is an epistemic asymmetry between you and me in this scenario: I know something you do not. And my vicarious fear is compatible with this epistemic asymmetry.

But these epistemic asymmetry scenarios are even more important for the discussion of vicarious emotions. What kind of emotions can we experience in epistemic asymmetry scenarios? Let us use the example of seeing you being attacked by a bear that you are not aware of. As long as I am not in danger (suppose that I am following the events from the safety of my house behind very strong fences), seeing you being attacked by a bear would not trigger self-centered fear. I have no reason to fear for myself—I am as safe as I can be. So the emotion here is not a self-centered one. But it is not an imagined emotion either. If I were to imagine being in your emotional state at this moment, I would not imagine fear—you do not feel fear (because you are unaware of the bear), thus, imagining myself in your emotional state, I would not imagine feeling fear either. But I do experience vicarious fear: I do fear for you—I do have an other-centered emotion. In short, emotions in these epistemic asymmetry scenarios can only be vicarious emotions (not self-centered emotions or imagined emotions).

And now, we can turn to the examples Aristotle gives for tragic narratives that are best suited to induce catharsis. The example Aristotle turns to by far the most often is *Oedipus Tyrannus*. But what made Aristotle choose this play? What is distinctive about the narrative of *Oedipus Tyrannus* is that it is all about an epistemic asymmetry scenario: Throughout this narrative, the reader/spectator knows something the hero does not. But if the only emotions epistemic asymmetry scenarios can trigger are vicarious emotions, then *Oedipus Tyrannus* is a prime example of a narrative that would not be possible to engage with without vicarious emotions. If by fear and pity, Aristotle had meant self-centered fear, then he should have chosen examples where the danger befalling the hero is something that could happen to any of us any time. This is not true of the narrative of *Oedipus Tyrannus*. And if by fear and pity, he had meant imagined fear, then he should have chosen examples where the spectators/readers are supposed to directly simulate the emotional state of the hero (as maybe in *Antigone*). But if we did this while engaging with *Oedipus Tyrannus*, we would miss out on the most important emotional impact of the narrative. In short, the fact that Aristotle chose *Oedipus Tyrannus* shows that in his account of catharsis, E2 is constituted by vicarious emotions.⁷

An argument somewhat similar to this was given by Lessing in his Hamburg Dramaturgy, where he also emphasized the surprising emotional force of epistemic asymmetry scenarios:

For one instance where it is useful to conceal from the spectator an important event until it has taken place there are ten and more where interest demands the very contrary. By means of secrecy a poet effects a short surprise, but in what enduring disquietude could he have maintained us if he had made no secret about it! Whoever is struck down in a moment, I can only pity for a moment. But how if I expect the blow, how if I see the storm brewing and threatening for some time about my head or his? ... (Lessing, 1767/1879, p. 377).

Lessing clearly saw the potential emotional impact of epistemic asymmetry scenarios—like and the narrative of *Oedipus Tyrannus*. As he summarizes, “the author let the spectators foresee all the misfortunes that were to befall his personages, in order to gain their sympathy” (Lessing 1767/1879, p. 382).

There are strong nonhistorical reasons to think that epistemic asymmetry scenarios are very suitable to induce a high degree of audience engagement. In fact, we have a name for genres where the key element is that the audience knows more than the protagonist—just like in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, which Aristotle chose as the prime example of a tragedy that successfully triggers fear and pity. It is called suspense. Giovanni Ferrari argued at length that Aristotle's account of tragedy is really an account of suspense (Ferrari, 1999, see also Sayers, 1935/1946) and that catharsis is the relief we feel “when the suspense that has been tightening throughout the play is suddenly released” (Ferrari, 1999, p. 196). I argue that if we consider fear and pity to be vicarious fear, this allusion to suspense could be made even more convincing.

Here is what Hitchcock said when he was asked how suspense works:

Even in this case [where we know that there is a bomb concealed in a briefcase in the July 20 plot on Hitler's life] I do not think the public would say, “Oh, good, they're all going to be blown to bits,” but rather, they'll be thinking, “Watch out. There's a bomb!” What it means is that the apprehension

*of the bomb is more powerful than the feelings of sympathy or dislike for the characters involved. [...] Let's take another example. A curious person goes into somebody else's room and begins to search through the drawers. Now, you show the person who lives in that room coming up the stairs. Then you go back to the person who is searching, and the public feels like warning him, "Be careful, watch out. Someone's coming up the stairs." Therefore, even if the snooper is not a likeable character, the audience will still feel anxiety for him. Of course, when the character is attractive, as for instance Grace Kelly in *Rear Window*, the public's emotion is greatly intensified (Truffaut, 1967, p. 21).*

The described scenario is a scenario of epistemic asymmetry—just like the one in *Oedipus Tyrannus*. And, as I argued above, we do feel various vicarious emotions: As Hitchcock says, we feel anxiety for the protagonist. But anxiety for the protagonist is vicarious anxiety. Again, we do not feel self-centered anxiety: sitting in the audience, eating popcorn, I am not anxious about anything concerning myself. Nor am I experiencing imaginary or make-believe anxiety: I do not imagine myself in the protagonist's shoes and imagine his anxiety—the protagonist may feel no anxiety, so if I were to imagine myself in the protagonist's shoes, I would not experience any anxiety at all. The only appropriate emotion when engaging with suspense (and the emotion we are likely to actually feel, especially if the suspense is a well-crafted one) is vicarious anxiety.

And just as the appropriate emotion in the face of suspense narratives is vicarious fear (or other vicarious emotions, such as vicarious anxiety), the appropriate emotion in the face of tragic narratives is also vicarious fear. This is, I argue, what Aristotle meant by fear and pity.

5 | BACK TO CATHARSIS

The last, and in some ways the most important, question to consider is the transition from E2 to E3—the process of catharsis proper. In E2, we have some emotional states. In E3, these emotional states are no longer present and this gives rise to a positive experience. How could we describe this transition?

One straightforward way of describing this transition from E2 to E3 is as relief (Sifakis, 2001). If the emotional experiences in E2 were unpleasant, then the transition to E3 is by definition a positive experience as in E3, we no longer experience these unpleasant emotions. But one could argue that at least on some interpretation of what is meant by relief here, this explanation trivializes catharsis. As Daniels and Scully (1992) note, "To seek the negative emotions of pity and fear so one can then have a catharsis and be free of them is like knocking one's head against the wall in order to have the subsequent relief of ceasing to do so" (p. 206). This problem, already noted by Rousseau,⁸ puts a constraint on any account of catharsis in terms of relief: It should highlight the ways in which catharsis is different from ceasing to knock one's head against the wall.

But how can we resist this way of interpreting the transition from E2 to E3? We could deny that the emotional experiences in E2 were unpleasant. Maybe the fear and pity we experience while engaging with tragic narratives is not so terrible. This way of understanding E2 would help us to avoid the problem of likening catharsis to ceasing to knock one's head against the wall. But now the problem becomes one that also has a long history going back to even earlier than Rousseau, to Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle, who, focusing on pity, found it difficult to understand why we should feel obliged to be purged from pleasant and morally praiseworthy emotions.⁹ More generally, if the emotional experiences in E2 were genuinely pleasant, would not the process of catharsis proper be one whereby a pleasant emotional experience is cut short? This interpretation would be very difficult to square with assumptions about the central role of catharsis in our engagement with tragic narratives.

Thus, it seems that we are facing a dilemma: If the emotional experiences in E2 are unpleasant, then we are facing a "ceasing to knock one's head against the wall" interpretation of catharsis, whereas if they are pleasant, then catharsis becomes an undesirable and unpleasant process.

And here, the claim I argued for in the previous section about vicarious fear could help us. I argued that the emotions that tragic narratives trigger in E2 can be described as vicarious fear. Hence, the transition from E2 to E3 amounts to the purgation of vicarious fear. Now, what can we say about this process?

I argued above that vicarious fear is very different from self-centered fear—the latter is about oneself, whereas the former is about another person. But there is an undeniable physiological and phenomenal similarity between vicarious fear and self-centered fear. Both lead to heightened adrenalin levels, a sharp decrease of peripheral skin temperature and positive voltage changes in event-related brain potentials, for example. And they “feel” similar—they are both often accompanied by some cramping of the stomach, fast breathing, and so on (see Manini et al., 2013 for an overview of the experimental results on this).

What matters from our point of view is not really the physiological and phenomenal similarity between vicarious fear and self-centered fear but rather the physiological and phenomenal similarity between the *cessation* of vicarious fear and the *cessation* of self-centered fear. But if vicarious fear and self-centered fear are similar, we have good reasons to think that the relief we feel after our vicarious fear is gone is similar to the relief we feel after our self-centered fear is gone.

In other words, I want to endorse a version of the “relief” interpretation of catharsis, but a very specific version thereof. When experiencing catharsis, one experiences something very similar to the relief felt after self-centered fear, but without having to undergo self-centered fear. It is basically a way of experiencing relief “on the cheap”—without really paying for it.¹⁰

Thus, we do feel relief when undergoing the transition from E2 to E3, but the emotions in E2 are not fully unpleasant. The relief we feel is not like the relief we feel when we stop knocking our head against the wall. It is like the relief we feel after experiencing self-centered fear, but we do not actually have to experience self-centered fear to experience this relief.

One tempting way of analyzing catharsis if we accept the interpretation of fear and pity as vicarious fear would be to say that by evoking vicarious fear, we are purged from our self-centered fear. While it may be tempting to understand catharsis this way, I think it is misleading. As we have seen, we have no reason to suppose that we have had self-centered fear to begin with (in E1). E1 could have been a fully idyllic (and fear-free) emotional state.

But this mistaken proposal could help us to formulate a more plausible way of understanding catharsis. By evoking vicarious fear, we are not actually purged from our self-centered fear (because we may not have had any such fear). But by evoking vicarious fear, we have an experience that is very similar to being purged from our self-centered fear.¹¹

ENDNOTES

- ¹ I am using Stephen Halliwell's translation of *Poetics* (although I depart from it occasionally, based on the original). I use G. A. Kennedy's translation of *Rhetoric* (ditto).
- ² “I hear it said that tragedy leads to pity through fear. So it does; but what is this pity? A fleeting and vain emotion which lasts no longer than the illusion that produced it” (Rousseau, 1758/2004 p. 268)
- ³ See Curran, 2001, 2016 and Riggle 2017 for a contemporary take on the self-involvement of aesthetic engagements of this kind.
- ⁴ I am grateful to an anonymous referee for raising this issue. It should also be noted that Aristotle could be read as highlighting these downstream (and strictly downstream) self-directed consequences of other-directed emotions in *Rhetoric* 2.5.1382b25–26 and 1386a27–29.
- ⁵ Here is a major wrinkle: Aristotle says in *Rhetoric* 2.5.1383a28–30, right after giving the official definition highlighted above that “from this definition it will follow that fear is caused by whatever we feel has great power of destroying us, or harming us in ways that tend to cause us great pain.” On the face of it, this sentence seems to suggest that fear here is understood as self-centered fear (as it is talking about “destroying us,” “harming us,” and so on). It needs to be pointed out, however, that even this addition to the definition is consistent with my claim that the concept of fear in the *Rhetoric* is neutral about whether it is self-centered or other-centered as whatever has “great power of destroying us” also has great power of destroying people like ourselves (the “other” of other-centered fear in *Poetics* 13.1453a5–6). I am grateful to an anonymous referee for pushing me to clarify how this sentence fits my interpretation.

- ⁶ Again, with the proviso that the vicarious emotion of pity can give rise to the downstream self-centered emotion of fear for ourselves, as Aristotle himself emphasizes in *Rhetoric* 2.5.1382b25–26 and 1386a27–29.
- ⁷ As before, these vicarious emotions could give rise to self-centered emotions further downstream.
- ⁸ “I have difficulty understanding this rule. Is it possible that in order to become temperate and prudent we must begin by being intemperate and mad?” (Rousseau, 1758/2004 p. 265)
- ⁹ “I never understood the idea of the purging of emotions with the help of the same emotions, so I would not say anything about this. If someone is purged this way, good for them, but I have no idea what is so good about being purged of pity.” (Fontenelle, 1645/1790, p. 144)
- ¹⁰ It needs to be emphasized that this does not mean that vicarious emotions are necessarily weaker or less salient than self-centered ones. But the strength of our vicarious emotions clearly depends on our relation to the other agent. As the studies in Manini et al., 2013 show, the vicarious emotions one feels towards one's child are much stronger (and much more similar to self-centered emotions) than the vicarious emotions one feels towards strangers. Vicarious emotions towards fictional characters would presumably be even weaker.
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