The Fragility of Goodness

Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy

Revised Edition

Martha C. Nussbaum

University of Chicago
Contents

Preface to the revised edition
Preface
Acknowledgements
Abbreviations
Chapter 1 Luck and ethics
A preoccupation of Greek ethical thought: the good human life is dependent on things that human beings do not control. The search for self-sufficiency through reason; its limits. Why these questions, important for us, are seldom treated in modern ethical writing. Three sub-problems: vulnerable components of the good life; contingent conflict of values; the ungoverned elements of the personality. Sketch of the argument. Why works of literature are an indispensable part of a philosophical inquiry into these questions.

Part I Tragedy: fragility and ambition

Chapter 2 Aeschylus and practical conflict
Greek tragedy's depiction of practical dilemmas as serious and not resolvable without remainder: the charge that this is a sign of primitive and illogical thought.
I A sketch of the problem. Factors we usually consider important in the assessment of these cases. Reasons for not making the moral/non-moral distinction central to our discussion.
II Some philosophical 'solutions' to the problem.
III Two cases of tragic conflict in Aeschylus: Agamemnon at Aulis, Eteocles before the gates.
IV The plays' implicit view of proper response in such cases. What it means to say that these experiences might give learning.
V This tragic view confronted with the theories of the philosophers of Section II. The positive achievement of the Aeschylean account.

Chapter 3 Sophocles' Antigone: conflict, vision, and simplification
Could a rational person plan a life so as to avoid the situations of Chapter 2 as far as possible? One way of doing this would be to simplify and narrow the scope of one's commitments.
I The guard: an example of ordinary practical reason, torn and conflicted.
II Creon. Tension among values precluded by recognizing only one value. His clever redefinitions; strange consequences for love and religion. The motivation for this strategy; its failure.
viii Contents

III Antigone. Her conception of value narrows in a different way. Her re-interpretation of certain terms and conceptions. Why her strategy, though flawed, is superior to Creon's. 63

IV Hegel's suggestion that the play points to a synthesis in which justice is done to both of the competing spheres of value. The choral lyrics help us to scrutinize this claim. The paradox: eyes and seeing, simple and complex. The ode on the human being: the depth of the grounds of conflict in civic life. The Danae ode: its pessimism about our relation to contingency. A higher-order conflict concerning conflict itself. Schopenhauer's pessimistic response. 67

V Tiresias and Haemon: a flexible human rationality. Its relation to harmony; to luck. The invocation of Dionysus. 79

Conclusion to Part I
Tragedy on the vulnerability of individual values. 83

Part II Plato: goodness without fragility?

Introduction
The continuity of Plato's thought with tragedy. Two methodological problems: philosophical development over time, the dialogue form. 87

Chapter 4 The Protagoras: a science of practical reasoning
The antithesis between technē and technē (art or science) and mythic stories of the saving power of technē: a hope for human progress. 89

I The dramatic setting: problems of technē. 91

II The general concept of technē in Pre-Platonic Greek science. 94

III Protagoras's story of human progress over technē. What technē does he teach, and how does it make progress with our problems? 100

IV The science of measurement: what motivates it, what progress it could make. The akrasia argument: the role of pleasure as standard of choice. How commensurability of values works to eliminate akrasia. 106

V A Socratic conception to Protagoras's myth. 117

Interlude 1 Plato's anti-tragic theater
The philosophical dialogue as a new kind of writing. The absence of any antecedent distinction between the philosophical and the literary. The poet as ethical teacher. The dialogue's positive debt to and repudiation of tragedy: Plato's stylistic break expresses a profound moral criticism. 122

Chapter 5 The Republic: true value and the standpoint of perfection
The dialogue's opening: a question about what is truly worth pursuing. 136

I The alleged insufficiency of Plato's arguments to support his ranking of the contemplative over other lives. A profound, though puzzling argument concerning need and intrinsic value. Republic IX; parallels from Gorgias, Phaedo. 138

II A defense of asceticism: how activities that are not truly valuable undercut those that are. Phaedo and Republic. 151

III Questions about the standpoint from which true judgments of value are reached. Its relevance to aesthetic judgment; to moral education. 158

IV How harmony among values is achieved. 158

Part III The tragic argument

Chapter 9 Symposium
The char of this must be seen as an argument for:

I The core of the Symposium's argument is that酒 of its authors disagree.

II Aristotle's prospect of the Symposium's argument as a self-suffic self-suffic.

IV The argument as a kind of therapeutic image. 113

V The image of the Symposium. 112

Chapter recants
The apparent place of:

I Mados' speech in Symposium.

II Socrates as imperfect function of the human condition. 90

III The general position of this part of the Symposium. 89

IV The discussion of the Symposium as an example of poetic tragic argument. 79

Part IV The tragic argument

Introduction
The role of the poet.

Chapter 10 The Tragic Argument: philosophical literature.

I Aristotle's philosophical approach to the Symposium.

II How the Symposium relates to Plato's notion of the good life. 120

III The Symposium as a defense of the Platonic doctrine of the good principle. 118

IV The Symposium as a history of philosophical literature. 105
Part I  The problem of motivation. Plato's use of negative and positive arguments. 16c

Chapter 6  The speech of Alcibiades: a reading of the Symposium 165
The charge that Plato neglects the love of one unique individual for another: this must be assessed against the whole of the dialogue.
I  The construction of the dialogue. Dramatic dates. 161
II  Aristophanes' speech: love of unique individuals for one another; its prospect and its problems. 167
III  Diotima and the ascent of love. Its practical motivations. The enabling role of judgments of qualitative homogeneity. How the lover achieves self-sufficiency. 171
IV  The entrance of Alcibiades. His claim that he will tell the truth through images. The story of a particular love; the lover's desire for knowledge. 184
V  The indictment of Alcibiades. Eros and slavery. A confrontation between two conceptions of value. 195

Chapter 7  'This story isn't true': madness, reason, and recantation in the Phaedrus 200
The apparent distance between the Phaedrus and the middle dialogues on the place of love and madness in the good life.
I  Madness: what it is, how it is criticized in other dialogues. The first two speeches develop certain elements of the position for which Plato has seriously argued in middle dialogues. 203
II  Socrates' praise of certain sorts of madness. The non-intellectual elements as important sources of motivational energy. Their guiding and even cognitive function in our aspiration towards the good. The intertwining of love and understanding. Personal passion as an intrinsically valuable part of the best life. Implications for Plato's view of the soul and personal identity. The action of the dialogue in relation to its ethical views. 213
III  Moral psychology in the condemnation of the poets. To what extent poetic speech is now restored to a place of honor. Philosophy and its style. 223
IV  Motivations for this recantation. The status of its truths. 228

Part III  Aristotle: the fragility of the good human life 233

Introduction 237
The role of the general discussions of method and action. 237

Chapter 8  Saving Aristotle's appearances 240
Aristotle's announced intention to philosophize within the confines of the phainomena (appearances). Why there is difficulty in reconstructing and appreciating this view.
I  What phainomena are. Their connection with language and ordinary belief. 243
II  How the method works. How appearances are gathered and which are relevant. Puzzles. The return to appearances: the role of the competent judge. 245
III  The most basic appearances of all. The principle of non-contradiction defended as necessary for thought and discourse. How refutation of a principle can take place within the appearances. 251
IV  The method defended against a charge of laziness and conservatism. The
negative and the positive tasks of Aristotelian philosophy: a contrast with Wittgenstein.

Chapter 9 Rational animals and the explanation of action
Connections between ethical questions and a theory of action. The apparent oddness of Aristotle's way of proceeding: a 'common explanation' for all animal movements.
I Ordinary (Greek) beliefs about the causal explanation of animal movement. The intentionalism of belief and desire.
II A physiological model of causal explanation in early science; its reductionistic tendencies and their implications. Plato's criticisms; his defense of a model of psychological explanation that isolates intellect from the other faculties of the animal.
III Aristotle's interest in a generic conception of desiring. The word ἀρετή; its function in rescuing ordinary notions of intentionality. A connection between goal-directed motion and the absence of self-sufficiency.
IV Explanation by cognition and desire. The combination of a logical and a causal connection between explanantia and explanandum seen as an advantage, not a defect, of Aristotle's account. Why a physiological description is not a causal explanation.
V This explanation seen as an account of 'voluntary' motion. Its connections with issues of ethical and legal assessment.

Chapter 10 Non-scientific deliberation
Practical wisdom is not scientific understanding; the criterion of correct choice is the person of practical wisdom. The apparent connection of these claims with Aristotle's attack on Platonic self-sufficiency.
I The anthropocentrism of the search for the good life.
II The attack on the commensurability of values.
III The Platonic demand for generality. Aristotle's defense of the priority of the concrete particular.
IV The role of the non-intellectual elements in deliberation. Aristotle and the Phaedrus compared.
V The person of practical wisdom and an apparent problem of circularity.
VI An example of Aristotelian deliberation. How this view leaves the agent vulnerable to contingency.

Chapter 11 The vulnerability of the good human life:
activity and disaster
Endaimonia 'stands in need of good things from outside': which things? when? to what extent?
I Two extreme positions on luck: Aristotle's dialectical method.
II The first extreme position: luck is the single decisive factor in having a good life. How this view is rejected; fact and value in an Aristotelian inquiry.
III The opposing view: a good human life is completely invulnerable to luck. Two versions of this position. Aristotle's attack on the 'good-condition' view: cases of complete or severe impediment to activity.
IV Partial disruption of good activity: the case of Priam. Related tragic cases.
V Damage to good states of character themselves.
VI The role of risk and material limitation in constituting the value of certain important virtues.

Chapter 12 The virtue of relational goods
Relational constituents of the goods.
I Political activity and affiliation.
II Plato as 'the greatest of types and sources of its value'.
III Aristotle's ethical thought.

Appendix to Part III
Concluding evidence in Aristotelian ethics: of an overall and the specific case of Nicomachean Ethics.

Interlude 2 Luck and character
A controversial passage in Nicomachean Ethics. Aristotle's attack on the nature of character and its irrational and useless for the recognition of the Aristotelian wisdom.

Epilogue Tragedy
Chapter 13 The be
Euripides' Hecuba
The ghost of a murdered good character cannot do: Hecuba's speech about the position of the character. Polyphemon and the tragic death.
I Hecuba's speech. Polyphemon.
II The play's unity. Polyphemon.
III Revenge as Hecuba's...
Chapter 12. The vulnerability of the good human life: relational goods

Relational constituents of the good life: their special vulnerability.

I Political activity and affiliation. Its instability. Its instrumental value in the development and maintenance of good character. Consequences for political theory. Its intrinsic value. The political management of conflict.

II Philia as 'the greatest of the external goods': The nature of philia. The types and sources of its vulnerability. Its instrumental value in the development and maintenance of good character; in continuity of activity; in self-knowledge. Its intrinsic value.

Appendix to Part III Human and divine

Conflicting evidence in Aristotle for a more god-centered Platonist position. Evidence of an overall ranking of lives in terms of their goodness. The special case of *Nicomachean Ethics* x.6–8; their incompatibility with the rest of Aristotle's ethical thought.

Interlude 2 Luck and the tragic emotions

A controversial passage in the *Poetics*: the primacy of tragic action linked to thoughts about character and action in *eudaimonia*. The connection of this with Aristotle's attack on the good-condition theorist and the Platonist. Tragedy explores the gap between being good and living well. Why pity and fear are irrational and useless for the opponents of luck, but valuable sources of recognition for the Aristotelian. Luck and tragic *katharsis*. Aristotle's own writing.

Epilogue Tragedy

Chapter 13 The betrayal of convention: a reading of Euripides' *Hecuba*

The ghost of a murdered child. Rejection of this play by those who believe good character cannot decline.

I Hecuba's speech about the firmness of good character in adversity. Her position in the nature-convention debate. Connections with Thucydides on Corcyra. Polyxena an example of noble simplicity.

II The play's unity. Polyxena's crime. The dislocation of Hecuba's character.

III Revenge as Hecuba's new 'convention'. Its structure and point.

IV The play's connection with Aristotelian views.

V Nothing human is trustworthy. The significance of this thought, both negative and positive. Hecuba's rock as a guiding mark for sailors.

Notes

Bibliography

General index

Index of passages