

UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF CATHARSIS IN ARISTOTLE

Francis, Terna Patrick

Department of Philosophy

Ahmadu Bello University

Zaria, Kaduna State

ternapfrancis@gmail.com

DOI: [10.13140/RG.2.2.10452.14720](https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.10452.14720)

Abstract

There has been controversy over the true meaning of the term catharsis as used by Aristotle. Aristotle is said to explain the meaning of “catharsis” basically in the definition of tragedy in the Poetics. Thus, there are other Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian contexts in which the term has been used and understood. For this reason, a number of diverse interpretations of the meaning of this term have arisen over the ages. This study analysed Aristotle’s catharsis and the various interpretations that it could entail in contemporary milieu ranging from the dramatic, intellectual clarification, ethical, aesthetic, therapeutic, purgation and purification use of the term. The study was a qualitative work and so adopted the qualitative research design by relying on secondary sources for data collection. Thereafter, the expository and comparative evaluative methods were used for data analysis. The study found out that since Aristotle did not leave a clear definition of the term, it has resulted in centuries of discussion, commentary, and debate, which has contributed to the development of theories such as aesthetics, psychology, drama, and artistic ethics. That notwithstanding, the most common interpretations of the term are purgation and purification, which are still widely used today.

Keywords: Catharsis, Aristotle, Politics, Psychology, Aesthetics

Introduction

Like many concepts, the notion of catharsis is attributed to Aristotle. Catharsis is a term in dramatic art that describes the effect of tragedy or comedy and quite possibly other artistic forms, principally on the audience. Nowhere does Aristotle explain the meaning of “catharsis” as he is using that term in the definition of tragedy in the *Poetics* (1449b21-28). G. F. Else argues that traditional, widely held interpretations of catharsis as “purification” or “purgation” have no basis in the text of the *Poetics*, but are derived from the use of catharsis in other Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian contexts. For this reason, a number of diverse interpretations of the meaning of this term have arisen over the ages. This study sets out to analyse Aristotle’s catharsis and the various interpretations that it could entail in contemporary milieu.

Catharsis: A General Overview

Etymologically, Catharsis is derived from Greek *katharsis*, meaning “purification” or “cleansing” or “clarification”. From this standpoint, catharsis refers to the purification and purgation of emotions - particularly pity and fear - through art or any extreme change in emotion that results in renewal and restoration (Belfiore 89). It is a metaphor originally used by Aristotle in the *Poetics*, comparing the effects of tragedy on the mind of a spectator to the effect of catharsis on the body.

The word *catharsis* drops out of the *Poetics* because the word *wonder*, *to rhaumaston*, replaces it, first in chapter 9, where Aristotle argues that pity and fear arise most of all where wonder does, and finally in chapters 24 and 25, where he singles out wonder as the aim of the poetic art itself, into which the aim of tragedy in particular merges. Ask yourself how you feel at the end of a tragedy. You have witnessed horrible things and felt painful feelings, but the mark of tragedy is that it brings you out the other side. Aristotle's use of the word *catharsis* is not a technical reference to purgation or purification but a beautiful metaphor for the peculiar tragic pleasure, the feeling of being washed or cleansed (Berndtson 102).

The tragic pleasure is a paradox. As Aristotle says, in a tragedy, a happy ending doesn't make us happy. At the end of the play the stage is often littered with bodies, and we feel cleansed by it all. We all feel a certain glee in the bringing low of the mighty, but this is in no way similar to the feeling of being washed in wonderment. Aristotle is insistent that a tragedy must be whole and one, because only in that way can it be beautiful, while he also ascribes the superiority of tragedy over epic poetry to its greater unity and concentration (ch. 26). Tragedy is not just a dramatic form in which some works are beautiful and others not; tragedy is itself a species of beauty. All tragedies are beautiful (Golden 124).

In ancient Greek tradition, catharsis referred to religious rituals performed to “purify” criminals and those who violated established religious codes in order for them to be allowed to return to a society. Similar practices are found in almost all cultural traditions. In the ancient medical practices of Hippocrates and others, catharsis referred to medical treatments that involved cleansing poisonous liquids or discharging body fluids through vomiting and diarrhea (Lucas 117).

Socrates took the “purification of the soul” as the primary task of philosophy. For him, the purification of the soul meant to remove all undesirable stains and contaminations of the soul caused by immoral acts driven by bodily desires. Socrates characterized philosophy as a practice of dying, which was a departure of the soul from the body, indicating the purification of the soul. Aristotle offered the first philosophical elaboration of catharsis, particularly in relation to its role in tragic dramas. The many analyses of catharsis in Aristotle's theory of drama have had a lasting influence on intellectual history. Catharsis has been a universal theme adopted in diverse traditions including mysticism (Else 90).

The Greek philosopher Aristotle used the term “catharsis” twice, in *Politics* and the sixth book of *Poetics*: “We also say that music should be used to procure not one benefit but several. It should be used for education and for catharsis and thirdly as a pastime, to relax us and give us rest from tension” (Aristotle, *Politics VIII: 7; 1341b 35-1342a 7*). For every feeling that affects some souls violently affects all souls more or less; the difference is only one of degree. Take pity and fear, for example, or again enthusiasm. Some people are liable to become possessed by the latter emotion, but we see that, when they have made use of the melodies which fill the soul with orgiastic feeling, they are brought back by these sacred melodies to a normal condition as if they had been medically treated and undergone a purge [catharsis]. Those who are subject to the emotions of pity and fear and the feelings generally will necessarily be affected in the same way; and so, will other men in exact proportion to their susceptibility to such emotions. All experience a certain purge [catharsis] and pleasant relief. In the same manner cathartic melodies give innocent joy to men (Aristotle, *Politics VIII: 7; 1341b 35-1342a 8*).

Afterward, a whole body of explanatory literature was written about the meaning of the term “catharsis,” for which Aristotle did not offer a clear definition. Philologists do not agree on the exact meaning of the word. Some commentators interpret catharsis as an experience which purges and cleanses the spectators of emotions like pity and fear, as they observe the actions of the characters on stage, and leaves them in a calmer and more mental balanced state. Aristotle may have been defending music and the dramatic arts against Plato’s charge that dramatic poets were a danger to society because they incited the passions and overshadowed reason. Aristotle may also have been referring to the religious role of drama; ancient Greeks performed dramas for religious purposes. Aristotle admired Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, and Sophocles was an Asclepian priest in Athens (Lucas 67).

During the Renaissance, when interest in Aristotle was revived, the interpretations of many commentators were influenced by religious, namely Christian, concepts of catharsis. Centuries of discussion on the meaning and significance of catharsis have contributed significantly to the theories of aesthetics, psychology, drama, and artistic ethics.

Dramatic Uses of Catharsis

There are various nuances inherent in the meaning of the term Catharsis. Lucas recognizes the possibility of catharsis bearing some aspect of the meaning of "purification, purgation, and 'intellectual clarification'" More recently, in the twentieth century, the interpretation of catharsis as "intellectual clarification" has arisen as a rival to the older views in describing the effect of catharsis on members of the audience (Powell 151). However, Catharsis could refer to any of the following:

Catharsis as Purgation and Purification

Chisholm 86 reports that in his works prior to the *Poetics*, Aristotle had used the term *catharsis* purely in its literal medical sense, usually referring to the evacuation of the *katamenia* - the menstrual fluid or other reproductive material (122). The *Poetics*, however, employs *catharsis* as a medical metaphor. First of all, the tragic catharsis might be a purgation. Fear can obviously be an insidious thing that undermines life and poisons it with anxiety. It would be good to flush this feeling from our systems, bring it into the open, and clear the air. This may explain the appeal of horror movies, that they redirect our fears toward something external, grotesque, and finally ridiculous, in order to puncture them. On the other hand, fear might have a secret allure, so that what we need to purge is the desire for the thrill that comes with fear. The horror movie also provides a safe way to indulge and satisfy the longing to feel afraid, and go home afterward satisfied; the desire is purged, temporarily, by being fed. In the first sense of purgation, the horror movie is a kind of medicine that does its work and leaves the soul healthier, while in the second sense it is a potentially addictive drug. Either explanation may account for the popularity of these movies among teenagers, since fear is so much a fact of that time of life. For those of us who are older, the tear-jerker may have more appeal, offering a way to purge the regrets of our lives in a sentimental outpouring of pity. As with fear, this purgation too may be either medicinal or drug-like (Kohn 71).

For Aristotle, this idea of purgation, in its various forms, is what we usually mean when we call something cathartic (187). People speak of watching football,

or boxing, as a catharsis of violent urges, or call a shouting match with a friend a useful catharsis of buried resentment. This is a practical purpose that drama may also serve, but it has no particular connection with beauty or truth; to be good in this purgative way, a drama has no need to be good in any other way. No one would be tempted to confuse the feeling at the end of a horror movie with what Aristotle calls "the tragic pleasure," nor to call such a movie a tragedy (Berczeller 95).

Catharsis in Greek can also mean purification. While purging something means getting rid of it, purifying something means getting rid of the worse or baser parts of it. It is possible that tragedy purifies the feelings themselves of fear and pity. These arise in us in crude ways, attached to all sorts of objects. Perhaps the poet educates our sensibilities, our powers to feel and be moved, by refining them and attaching them to less easily discernible objects. Some people turn to poetry to find delicious and exquisite new ways to feel old feelings, and consider themselves to enter in that way into a purified state (Brunius 89). It has been argued that this sort of thing is what tragedy and the tragic pleasure are all about, but it doesn't match up with actual experience. Berczeller presents this aptly, "Sophocles does make me fear and pity human knowledge when I watch the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, but this is not a refinement of those feelings but a discovery that they belong to a surprising object. Sophocles is not training my feelings, but using them to show me something worthy of wonder" (127).

Catharsis as Intellectual Clarification

In the twentieth century a paradigm shift took place in the interpretation of catharsis with a number of scholars contributing to the argument in support of the intellectual clarification concept. The clarification theory of catharsis would be fully consistent, as other interpretations are not, with Aristotle's argument in chapter 4 of the *Poetics* (1448b4-17) that the essential pleasure of mimesis is the intellectual pleasure of "learning and inference" (Lucas 99).

It is generally understood that Aristotle's theory of mimesis and catharsis are responses to Plato's negative view of artistic mimesis on an audience. Plato argued that the most common forms of artistic mimesis were designed to evoke from an audience powerful emotions such as pity, fear, and ridicule which override the rational control that defines the highest level of our humanity and lead us to wallow unacceptably in the overindulgence of emotion and passion. Aristotle's concept of catharsis, in all of the major senses attributed to it, contradicts Plato's view by providing a mechanism that generates the rational

control of irrational emotions (Lucas 122). All of the commonly held interpretations of catharsis, purgation, purification, and clarification are considered by most scholars to represent a homeopathic process in which pity and fear accomplish the catharsis of emotions like themselves.

Ethical and Aesthetic Uses of Catharsis

The ethico-aesthetic interpretations probably started in 1634 with the presentation of the official rules of the French Academy for dramatic composition, which were centered on the notion of the audience's emotional purgation (i.e., catharsis) as the main function of tragedy (Powell 107). For this to happen though, the public had to absolutely believe in what they saw on stage. By rationally comparing it to their own life (and finding out other people experienced the same and even worse situations) the audience, then, could feel relieved from their painful emotions. But this could only be achieved if the author used the rule of the three "dramatic unities" (those of action, time and place) attributed to Aristotle. The dogmatic view imposed on all dramatic works started the 200-year epic battle of "*des anciens et des modernes*". It divided French (and European) thinkers into two camps, according to whom they thought superior - Greek/Roman authors or contemporary ones. René Descartes vs. Blaise Pascal and Pierre Corneille vs. Jean Racine are just a few of the examples of that "war of the titans" which ended in the obvious victory of the "*modernes*" (Scheff 109).

Therapeutic Uses of Catharsis

Catharsis has not only been in drama in modern times but also in various fields. In psychology, the term Catharsis was first employed by Sigmund Freud's colleague Josef Breuer (1842-1925), who developed a cathartic method of treatment using hypnosis for persons suffering from intensive hysteria (Lucas 162). While under hypnosis, Breuer's patients were able to recall traumatic experiences, and through the process of expressing the original emotions that had been repressed and forgotten, they were relieved of their hysteric symptoms. Catharsis was also central to Freud's concept of psychoanalysis, but he replaced hypnosis with free association (97).

The term *catharsis* has also been adopted by modern psychotherapy, particularly Freudian psychoanalysis, to describe the act of expressing, or more accurately, *experiencing* the deep emotions often associated with events in the individual's past which had originally been repressed or ignored, and had never been adequately addressed or experienced (Powell 127).

Equally, there has been much debate about the use of catharsis in the reduction of anger. Some scholars believe that “blowing off steam” may reduce physiological stress in the short term, but this reduction may act as a reward mechanism, reinforcing the behavior and promoting future outbursts (Kohn 134). Legal scholars have linked "catharsis" to "closure", which entails an individual's desire for a firm answer to a question and an aversion toward ambiguity, and "satisfaction" which can be applied to affective strategies as diverse as retribution, on one hand, and forgiveness on the other (Chisholm 92).

There has also been a social explanation of catharsis. Here it is held that emotional situations can elicit physiological, behavioral, cognitive, expressive, and subjective changes in individuals (Lucas 108). Berczeller corroborates this by stating that “affected individuals often use social sharing as a cathartic release of emotions” (79). Bernard Rimé studies the patterns of social sharing after emotional experiences. His works suggest that individuals seek social outlets in an attempt to modify the situation and restore personal homeostatic balance (Else 79). Rimé found that 80–95% of emotional episodes are shared. The affected individuals talk about the emotional experience recurrently to people around them throughout the following hours, days, or weeks. These results indicate that this response is irrespective of emotional valence, gender, education, and culture. His studies also found that social sharing of emotion increases as the intensity of the emotion increases (Golden 106).

An Evaluation

The term “catharsis” was used in a philosophical sense by Aristotle to describe the effect of music and tragic drama on an audience. Aristotle did not leave a clear definition of the term, resulting in centuries of discussion, commentary, and debate, which contributed to the development of theories such as aesthetics, psychology, drama, and artistic ethics. **Catharsis** is largely seen as the purification or purgation of the emotions (especially pity and fear) primarily through art. In criticism, catharsis is a metaphor used by Aristotle in the *Poetics* to describe the effects of true tragedy on the spectator. Aristotle states that the purpose of tragedy is to arouse “terror and pity” and thereby effect the catharsis of these emotions (Scheff 215). His exact meaning has been the subject of critical debate over the centuries. The German dramatist and literary critic Gotthold Lessing (1729–81) held that catharsis converts excess emotions into virtuous dispositions (Else 137). Other critics see tragedy as a moral lesson in which the fear and pity excited by the tragic hero's fate serve to warn the spectator not to similarly tempt providence. The interpretation generally accepted is that through

experiencing fear vicariously in a controlled situation, the spectator's own anxieties are directed outward, and, through sympathetic identification with the tragic protagonist, his insight and outlook are enlarged. Tragedy then has a healthful and humanizing effect on the spectator or reader (Nichols and Zax 91).

Conclusion

In dramatic art, the term catharsis explains the impact of tragedy, comedy, or any other form of art on the audience – and in some cases even on the performers themselves. Aristotle did not elaborate on the meaning of “catharsis,” and the way he used it in defining tragedy in *Poetics*. A Catharsis is an emotional discharge through which one can achieve a state of moral or spiritual renewal, or achieve a state of liberation from anxiety and stress. Catharsis is a Greek word meaning “cleansing.” In literature, it is used for the cleansing of emotions of the characters. It can also be any other radical change that leads to emotional rejuvenation of a person.

Originally, the term was used as a metaphor in *Poetics* by Aristotle, to explain the impact of tragedy on the audiences. He believed that catharsis was the ultimate end of a tragic artistic work, and that it marked its quality. He further said, in *Poetics*: “Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; ... through pity [*eleos*] and fear [*phobos*] effecting the proper purgation [catharsis] of these emotions” (c. 350 BCE, Book 6.2). The most common interpretations of the term are purgation and purification, which are still widely used today.

Works Cited

- Aristotle. *Poetics*. Joe Sachs (Trans.). Illinois: Green Lion Press, 1999. Print.
- Aristotle. *Poetics*. Joe Sachs (trans.). New York: Pullins Press, 2006. Print.
- Belfiore, E. *Tragic Pleasures: Aristotle on Plot and Emotion*. Princeton: Ultimate Press, 1992. Print.
- Berczeller, Eva. “The Aesthetic Feeling and Aristotle's Catharsis Theory.” *The Journal of Psychology*. 65. 1967. p. 261-71. Print.
- Berndtson, Arthur. *Art, Expression, and Beauty*. Massachusetts: Krieger, 1975. Print.
- Brunius, Teddy. *Inspiration and Katharsis*. Uppsala: Apex Prints, 1966. Print.
- Chisholm, Hugh (ed.) “Purification”. *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 22 (11th ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911. pp. 660–661. Print.

- Else, Gerald F. *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963. Print.
- Golden, Leon. "Catharsis". *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*. 93: (1962), 51-60. Print.
- Kohn, Alfie. *No Contest: The Cast Against Competition*. Houghton: Mifflin, 1992. Print.
- Lucas, D. W. *Aristotle: Poetics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977. Print.
- Lucas, F. L. *Tragedy in Relation to Aristotle's Poetics*. Indiana: Paulist Press, 1927. Print.
- Lucas, D.W. *Aristotle's Poetics. Introduction, Commentary and Appendixes*. Oxford: Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1968. Print.
- Nichols, Michael P. and Zax, Melvin. *Catharsis in Psychotherapy*. New York: John Wiley & Sons Inc, 1977. Print.
- Powell, Esta. *Catharsis in Psychology and Beyond A Historic Overview*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. Print.
- Scheff, Thomas J.. *Catharsis in Healing, Ritual, and Drama*. California: University of California Press, 1979. Print.