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HAMARTIA

An error of judgement or a character flaw?

Abstract: What is the meaning of ἁμαρτία in Aristotle's *Poetics* (1453a7-22)? It is generally interpreted either as an *error of judgement* or as a *character flaw*, although no firm conclusion has yet been reached. The principal investigative problem lies in the fact that Aristotle offers no definition of ἁμαρτία whatsoever, for in the *Poetics* it is merely stated that the demise of the tragic hero comes to pass neither through badness (κακία) nor villainy (μοχθηρία) of his own, but rather due to some error (δι' ἁμαρτίαν τινά). In order to overcome the interpretative limitations imposed upon us by the lack of relevant textual evidence in the *Poetics*, we intend to analyse Aristotle's use of the cognate word ἁμαρτημα in the *Rhetoric* as well as the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and thereby construct an exhaustive definition of ἁμαρτία itself. Ultimately, it shall be demonstrated that ἁμαρτία is indeed an error of judgement.

Keywords: Aristotle, *Poetics*, *hamartia*, *hamartema*, tragedy.

Ἅμαρτία is traditionally interpreted either as *an error or frailty* or as *an error of judgement*. The former reading, first proposed by S. H. Butcher in his own translation of the *Poetics*,¹ suggests that ἁμαρτία should be understood as a certain moral flaw of the tragic hero which causes his demise.² Accordingly, when Oedipus unknowingly commits patricide and thus unleashes a chain of events which ultimately leads to his own destruction, the murder should be attributed to no other reason than his short temper, a moral flaw *par excellence*. This is the simple gist of the moral interpretation which requires no further explanation.³ Numerous scholars have written against it, and their arguments are generally based upon: (1) our intuitive reception of the extant tragedies, i.e. the impression that the tragic hero is rather the victim than the culprit; (2) the assumption that “a character flaw would lessen the moral quality of the hero and make him unfit for tragedy”;⁴ (3) the fact that

¹ BUTCHER 1932, 45.

² As D. W. Lucas remarks (LUCAS 1968, 299), Butcher is commonly believed to be one of the most renowned exponents of the moral interpretation, in spite of the fact that he does not identify ἁμαρτία exclusively with a moral flaw, but offers a more nuanced view instead (see BUTCHER 1932, 316-333).

³ The moral interpretation has been valiantly defended by HARSH 1945, GREENE 1950 and VINJE 2021.

⁴ VINJE 2021, 582-3.

Aristotle generally uses the terms ἀμαρτία and ἀμάρτημα in order to denote an error of judgement, as attested in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.⁵

Let us now take a closer look at the interpretation of ἀμαρτία as an error of judgement. From a purely chronological point of view, I. Bywater is commonly considered to be the first proponent of this reading, for it was him who introduced the phrase “error of judgement” in his own translation of the *Poetics*.⁶ On the other hand, it was not until the brilliant article of P. Van Braam that the error of judgement interpretation had found its first convincing expression.⁷ In order to elucidate the meaning of ἀμαρτία in the *Poetics*, Van Braam thoroughly examined every appearance of ἀμαρτία as well as the cognate word ἀμάρτημα within the *Nicomachean Ethics*.⁸ On the basis of this analysis, he inferred that ἀμαρτία does indeed signify an error of judgement, whereas ἀμάρτημα stands for the very deed that was caused by the corresponding ἀμαρτία: had Oedipus known that his father was in the chariot, he would never have assaulted him.⁹

A number of other scholars have provided further evidence in favour of Van Braam’s interpretation, and today it is generally accepted that ἀμαρτία should be understood as an error of judgement.¹⁰ Notwithstanding, not only did the moral interpretations never perish¹¹ and GREENE 1950., but contemporary scholarship seems to be gradually departing from the idea that ἀμαρτία ought to be identified with an error of judgement: H. Vinje valiantly defends the reading of ἀμαρτία as a character flaw,¹² while others are arguing in favour of a concept of ἀμαρτία that is based not only upon its intellectual aspect, but various others as well, the most conspicuous example being that of S. Halliwell who asserts that ἀμαρτία “embraces all the ways in which human ability, at its extremes, exposes itself not through sheer, arbitrary misfortune... but through the erring involvement of tragic figures in their own sufferings”.¹³

⁵ The interpretation of ἀμαρτία as an error of judgement has been championed by many scholars: VAHLEN 1866, 14-16, VAN BRAAM 1912, OSTWALD 1958, BREMER 1969, HYDE 1963, GOLDEN 1978, ELSE 1957, 364-407, DAWE 1968, HEY 1928.

⁶ BYWATER 1920, 50.

⁷ VAN BRAAM 1912.

⁸ (1) *Eth. Nic.* 110b28-30, (2) *Eth. Nic.* 115b15-16, (3) *Eth. Nic.* 1142a20-22, (4) *Eth. Nic.* 1142b7-11, (5) *Eth. Nic.* 1148a1-3, (6) *Eth. Nic.* 1135b11-25, (7) *Eth. Nic.* 1137b14-25.

⁹ Van Braam was not the first scholar who argued in favour of interpreting ἀμαρτία as an error of judgement, but he was most certainly the first one to do so convincingly. His predecessors are I. Bywater (see BYWATER 1920, 50) and J. Vahlen (see VAHLEN 1866, 14-16).

¹⁰ In our view, the most convincing are HEY 1928, OSTWALD 1958, BREMER 1969, ELSE 1957, 364-407.

¹¹ For the most part due to the efforts of HARSH 1945

¹² VINJE 2021.

¹³ HALLIWELL 1991, 17. Before Halliwell, T. C. W. Stinton insisted on a broader concept of ἀμαρτία as well (see STINTON 1975).

In our view, the contemporary tendency to not only resurrect the moral interpretation, but also establish a notion of ἀμαρτία broader than the error of judgement, is not grounded in fact, for Aristotle himself, albeit indirectly, provides us with a definition of ἀμαρτία that excludes all the interpretative possibilities other than identifying ἀμαρτία precisely with an error of judgement. As we shall demonstrate, Aristotle renders a comprehensive account of ἀμάρτημα, a concept correlative to ἀμαρτία, the only difference between the two being that the former stands for the erroneous act, while the latter signifies its cause.¹⁴ In our view, the meaning of ἀμαρτία ought to be inferred from that of the ἀμάρτημα, because, broadly speaking, the cause necessarily corresponds with its consequence. In other words, if we, for instance, determine that Aristotle's definition of ἀμάρτημα deems it to be void of any moral shortcomings, that would allow us to derive the conclusion that neither its cause (i.e. ἀμαρτία) can pertain to morality.

Moreover, Aristotle defines ἀμάρτημα by means of employing seven different criteria, which may be deduced from various passages of both the *Rhetoric* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Therefore, the article shall be structured in accordance with those criteria: section (I) pertains to the issue of moral badness; section (II) expands upon the question of morality and introduces an epistemic criterion, namely the question whether ἀμάρτημα occurs contrary to reasonable belief; section (III) looks at ἀμάρτημα through the prism of two additional criteria, causality and the agent's ignorance of specific circumstances with regard to his act; section (IV) entertains both the issue of the agent's voluntariness, as well as his subsequent emotional reaction to the ἀμάρτημα that he committed; finally, section (V) specifies the appropriate reaction of others to the agent's ἀμάρτημα.¹⁵

(I) MORAL BADNESS

We shall begin our analysis by addressing the only two appearances of the word ἀμαρτία within the *Poetics*, where we read as follows (1453a7-22):

(α) ... μήτε διὰ κακίαν καὶ μοχθηρίαν μεταβάλλων εἰς τὴν δυστυχίαν ἀλλὰ δι' ἀμαρτίαν τινά.

... whose misfortune is brought upon him not by vice and depravity but by some error (ἀμαρτία).

¹⁴ There is a broad scholarly consensus that ἀμαρτία, whatever it may be, differs from ἀμάρτημα inasmuch as it does not stand for the act itself, but for its cause (e.g. VAN BRAAM 1912, 270, LUCAS 1968, 299-300).

¹⁵ In the following course of the article we shall refer to I. Bywater's and W. D. Ross' editions of the Greek text of the *Poetics*, *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Rhetoric* (BYWATER 1897, BYWATER 1890, ROSS 1963). Moreover, we will address the *Poetics* and the *Nicomachean Ethics* in the translation of the same two scholars (BYWATER 1920, ROSS 2009), whereas J. H. Freese's translation of the *Rhetoric* will be used (FREESE 1926). Finally, it should be remarked that we have mildly modified all these translations.

(b) ... καὶ μεταβάλλειν οὐκ εἰς εὐτυχίαν ἐκ δυστυχίας ἀλλὰ τούναντίον ἐξ εὐτυχίας εἰς δυστυχίαν μὴ διὰ μοχθηρίαν ἀλλὰ δι' ἁμαρτίαν μεγάλην.

... the change in the hero's fortune must be not from misery to happiness, but on the contrary from happiness to misery; and the cause of it must not lie in any depravity, but in some great error (ἁμαρτία) on his part.

The subject of both sentences is indeed the tragic hero, and Aristotle proclaims ἁμαρτία to be the sole cause of his downfall from happiness (εὐτυχία) into misfortune (δυστυχία), whereas badness (κακία) and villainy (μοχθηρία) are ruled out. It is of essential importance to notice that these two terms are synonymous: both κακία and μοχθηρία fundamentally signify *moral badness*.¹⁶ Furthermore, not only in the *Rhetoric*, but in the *Nicomachean Ethics* as well, Aristotle indirectly states that ἁμαρτία is not related to any moral defect whatsoever.¹⁷ Therefore we may conclude that in the *Poetics*, albeit indirectly, Aristotle does provide us with a definition of ἁμαρτία:

Definition one: ἁμαρτία signifies an act which is not caused by moral badness.

The definition that we have just deduced is in fact an answer to the more general question whether an act stems from the agent's moral badness or not. Interestingly enough, Aristotle poses the very same question in both the *Rhetoric* and the *Nicomachean Ethics* while attempting to define and classify the various kinds of detrimental acts. Let us now turn to these passages, as they shall prove to be exceedingly fruitful for the sake of grasping the meaning of ἁμαρτία.

(II) REASONABLE BELIEF

In the *Rhetoric* we encounter a threefold division of deleterious acts. Aristotle distinguishes between them by employing two criteria: the first pertains to the moral character of the agent, whereas the second is concerned with the agent's reasoning behind the act that he committed. For the sake of brevity, the former shall henceforward be named *the moral criterion*, and the latter *the first epistemic criterion*.¹⁸ In the previous section we have already specified the meaning of the moral criterion: it is simply an answer to the question whether an act stems from the agent's moral badness or not. Conversely, the first epistemic criterion is not quite as transparent, and yet a succinct definition may be deduced from Aristotle's threefold division of deleterious acts:¹⁹

¹⁶ The synonymy of these two words is not only generally attested in dictionaries, but, more importantly, in the works of Aristotle himself (e.g. *Rhet.* 1374b5-10, *Rhet.* 1368b10-15, *Eth. Nic.* 1135b20-25).

¹⁷ *Rhet.* 1374b5-10, *Eth. Nic.* 1135b20-25. This point shall be proven in the next section.

¹⁸ The *first* epistemic criterion because, as we shall see, there is one more to be found.

¹⁹ *Rhet.* 1374b5-10.

(a) ἔστιν ἀτυχήματα μὲν γὰρ ὅσα παράλογα καὶ μὴ ἀπὸ μοχθηρίας.

Misfortunes are all such things as are contrary to reasonable belief and not vicious.

(b) ἀμαρτήματα δὲ ὅσα μὴ παράλογα καὶ μὴ ἀπὸ πονηρίας.

Errors are not contrary to reasonable belief, but are not vicious.

(c) ἀδικήματα δὲ ὅσα μὴτε παράλογα ἀπὸ πονηρίας τέ ἐστιν.

Wrong acts are such as are not contrary to reasonable belief, and are vicious.

Thus, the first epistemic criterion may be stated as the following question: Did the act occur contrary to reasonable belief?

Before we proceed, let us briefly entertain the phrase “an act contrary to reasonable belief (παράλογον)”. For the sake of clarity, an example might be beneficial. A javelin thrower is honing his skills out in the field; with his gaze firmly set upon a distant wooden target he hurls one missile straight towards its goal and – pierces a young lad who had suddenly intercepted the movement of the spear. Could the javelin thrower possibly have expected such an outcome, or did it occur contrary to reasonable belief? Under the assumption that the youth approached the area where the javelin thrower had been hurling his missiles in spite of knowing full well that he may do so only at his own peril, we are safe to conclude that the deceased brought his doom onto himself, since the javelin thrower had no reason whatsoever to look out for any trespassers. In other words, he pierced the youth contrary to reasonable belief.

Now that we have specified the meaning of the phrase “an act contrary to reasonable belief (παράλογον)”, the following step is to remark how Aristotle’s definition of ἀμαρτημα in the *Rhetoric* harmoniously aligns with the definition of ἀμαρτία in the *Poetics*: the latter definition is exclusively based upon the moral criterion, whereas the former takes into account both the moral and the epistemic.

(1) ἀμαρτήματα δὲ ὅσα μὴ παράλογα καὶ μὴ ἀπὸ πονηρίας.²⁰

(2) ... μῆτε διὰ κακίαν καὶ μοχθηρίαν μεταβάλλων εἰς τὴν δυστυχίαν ἀλλὰ δι’ ἀμαρτίαν τινά.²¹

Knowing that πονηρία fundamentally signifies *moral badness*, just like κακία and μοχθηρία, we may now formulate a new definition of ἀμαρτία by employing both of the aforementioned criteria:

²⁰ *Rhet.* 1374b7-8.

²¹ *Poet.* 1453a8-10.

Definition two: ἀμαρτία signifies an act which is not caused by moral badness (1) and did not occur contrary to reasonable belief (2).

Alas, the given definition is not only modest, but also flawed since Aristotle's use of the term παράλογον remains ambiguous. Firstly, is it not peculiar to claim that errors do not occur contrary to reasonable belief? Do we not intuitively perceive an error as an act that has come to pass in spite of our expectations? Leaving this issue aside, if we were to glance over the threefold division between ἀτύχημα, ἀμάρτημα and ἀδίκημα, it would immediately come to our attention that the definition of ἀτύχημα is plain and logical (misfortunes do indeed occur contrary to reasonable belief), whereas the remaining two strike us as faulty because Aristotle applies the term μὴ παράλογον both in the case of ἀμάρτημα and ἀδίκημα. Even if we assume that neither erroneous nor unjust acts are contrary to reasonable belief, i.e. that they are not unexpected, the following question still stands: How could an error not be contrary to reasonable belief in the very same sense as an injustice?

In order to resolve both of the aforementioned issues, we propose a twofold distinction of the term μὴ παράλογον: an act may be not contrary to reasonable belief either *partially* (a) or *wholly* (b). In addition, ἀμάρτημα should exclusively signify the former, while ἀδίκημα should stand for the latter.

- (a) An act is partially not contrary to reasonable belief only if the agent *could have foreseen* it. For example, when a driver hastily takes his eyes off the road in order to answer an incoming phone call and thus causes an accident, the ἀμάρτημα (i.e. the car crash) *could have been foreseen* inasmuch as the driver had known that answering your phone behind the steering wheel comes with a risk, and yet his ἀμάρτημα is only *partially* not contrary to reasonable belief because responding to a phone call while driving does not necessarily lead to road accidents.
- (b) An act is wholly not contrary to reasonable belief only if the agent *must have foreseen* it. When a violent thug strikes someone with his fist, he is completely aware of the fact that the victim will suffer. In other words, the act of inflicting pain was *wholly* not contrary to reasonable belief insofar as the agent had known that a punch would indeed hurt his victim.

Fortunately, the proposed distinction is by no means a bold interpretation, since Aristotle himself, albeit somewhat covertly, claims the very same in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, as we shall demonstrate in the following section.

(III) CAUSALITY AND IGNORANCE OF SPECIFIC CIRCUMSTANCES

In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle provides us with his most elaborate classification of deleterious acts (i.e. injuries):²²

(a) τὰ μὲν μετ' ἄγνοίας ἀμαρτήματά ἐστιν (ὅταν μήτε ὄν μήτε ὁ μήτε ᾧ μήτε οὐ ἔνεκα ὑπέλαβε πράξει).

Those (sc. injuries) involving ignorance are mistakes when the person acted on, the act, the instrument, or the end that will be attained is other than the agent supposed.

(b) ὅταν μὲν οὖν παραλόγως ἢ βλάβη γένηται, ἀτύχημα.

When the injury takes place contrary to reasonable belief, it is a misadventure.

(c) ὅταν δὲ μὴ παραλόγως, ἄνευ δὲ κακίας, ἀμάρτημα (ἀμαρτάνει μὲν γὰρ ὅταν ἢ ἀρχὴ ἐν αὐτῷ ἢ τῆς αἰτίας, ἀτυχεῖ δ' ὅταν ἔξωθεν).

When (sc. the injury) is not contrary to reasonable belief, but does not imply vice, it is a mistake (for a man makes a mistake when the fault originates in him, but is the victim of misfortune when the origin lies outside of him).

(d) ὅταν δὲ εἰδῶς μὲν μὴ προβουλεύσας δέ, ἀδίκημα, οἷον ὅσα τε διὰ θυμὸν καὶ ἄλλα πάθη... οὐ μέντοι πω ἄδικοι διὰ ταῦτα οὐδὲ πονηροί: οὐ γὰρ διὰ μοχθηρίαν ἢ βλάβη.

When the agent acts with knowledge but not after deliberation, it is an act of injustice – e.g. the acts due to anger or to other passions... but this does not imply that the doers are unjust or wicked; for the injury is not due to depravity.

(e) ὅταν δ' ἐκ προαιρέσεως (ἀδικεῖ),²³ ἄδικος καὶ μοχθηρός.

When a man commits an act of injustice from choice, he is an unjust man and a depraved man.

First and foremost, it is necessary to briefly interpret the given definitions:

- (a)' Aristotle's first definition delineates the concept of ἀμάρτημα by positing ignorance (ἄγνοια) to be its cause. Simultaneously, the scope of ἄγνοια is narrowly specified because Aristotle informs us that the agent's ignorance pertains to the following specific circumstances: (1) the object (who or what is on the receiving end of the act), (2) the instruments (the tools which the agent employed in order to execute the act), (3) the goal (the purpose of the act).

²² *Eth. Nic.* 1135b10-25.

²³ The verb is implicit in the quoted fragment.

Now, it is of fundamental importance to understand that this definition outlines the notion of ἀμάρτημα in its most general sense – every error is caused by ignorance of specific circumstances – and Aristotle subsequently introduces the definition of ἀμάρτημα in its narrower sense (the definition (c) above). These definitions are complementary, insofar as both of them refer to the same phenomenon: ἀμάρτημα.

Furthermore, the definition of ἀμάρτημα in its general sense allows us to draw one important conclusion. If Aristotle claims that every error stems from the agent's ignorance of specific circumstances, then we have just discovered an additional criterion that he employs in order to classify all the types of deleterious acts. This criterion may be stated as the following question: Did the agent know all the specific circumstances prior to having committed the act? For the sake of brevity, this criterion shall henceforward be named *the second epistemic criterion*.

(b)' The definition of ἀτύχημα is phrased in exactly the same manner as in the *Rhetoric*: ἀτύχημα is an act that occurred contrary to reasonable belief (παράλογως), the only difference being that the moral criterion remains implicit in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (i.e. Aristotle does not openly state that an ἀτύχημα is by no means a consequence of one's moral badness). Moreover, the definition given in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is broader insofar as Aristotle claims that an unfortunate act has come to pass (ἀτυχεῖ) only if the responsibility for the act may not be causally attributed to the agent (ἀτυχεῖ δ' ὅταν ἔξωθεν (sc. ἡ ἀρχὴ τῆς αἰτίας), as written in the definition (c)).

(c)' The definition of ἀμάρτημα in its narrower sense perfectly corresponds with the definitions that we encounter in the *Rhetoric* and the *Poetics*: ἀμάρτημα is an act that was neither caused by moral badness (ἄνευ δὲ κακίας), nor did it occur contrary to reasonable belief (μὴ παράλογως), though the definition given in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is more elaborate inasmuch as Aristotle remarks that the agent errs only if the cause of his culpability (i.e. the responsibility for the perpetrated ἀμάρτημα) lies within himself (ἀμαρτάνει μὲν γὰρ ὅταν ἡ ἀρχὴ ἐν αὐτῷ ᾖ τῆς αἰτίας).

This definition allows us to draw two significant conclusions. Firstly, by claiming that an agent commits a ἀμάρτημα only if the cause of his culpability lies within him, whereas the act is an ἀτύχημα if the cause lies elsewhere (outside of the agent, ἔξωθεν), Aristotle introduces yet another criterion that allows us to differentiate between the three kinds of deleterious acts, namely the *causal criterion*. As we can see, this criterion poses the question *whether the agent is causally responsible for the act that he perpetrated or not*.

Secondly, the definition of ἀμάρτημα in its narrower sense (c) in conjunction with the definition of the general ἀμάρτημα (a) serves as a proof for our earlier assumption that a ἀμάρτημα may only be partially not contrary to reasonable belief. Indeed, if the agent errs (ἀμαρτάνει) due to his ignorance (ἄγνοια) of specific circumstances (the object, the instruments, or the purpose of the act), the act that he committed cannot be qualified as *wholly* not contrary to reasonable belief, for in that case the agent would not have been ignorant of any specific circumstance. We are merely stating the obvious: an act cannot be wholly not contrary to reasonable belief (i.e. entirely foreseeable) if the agent is mistaken with regard to the object, instruments, or purpose of the act. In other words, *ignorance of specific circumstances implies the fact that an act occurred only partially not contrary to reasonable belief*, and thus ἀμάρτημα is only partially μὴ παράλογον.

- (d)' The fourth definition introduces one of the two kinds of unjust acts (ἀδίκημα). Confusion may arise not only due to the fact that Aristotle does not apply separate names to the two different ἀδικήματα, but also because he explicitly states that there are only three kinds of deleterious acts.²⁴ In spite of Aristotle's claim, the definition (d) does in fact introduce the fourth type of such acts.²⁵ In essence, this concept of ἀδίκημα stands for a wrongdoing caused by any passion (πάθος), and thus it does not imply moral badness of the agent. Since this special case of ἀδίκημα is irrelevant for the purpose of defining ἀμαρτία, we shall refrain from discussing it any further.
- (e)' Finally, the second kind of ἀδίκημα is defined by employing the term προαίρεσις: Aristotle asserts that an act may be qualified as unjust only if the agent committed it ἐκ προαίρεσεως. Now, in order to completely understand the given definition, it is necessary to explain what προαίρεσις means. Unfortunately, this difficult concept plays a fundamental role in Aristotle's ethics and an effort to produce a comprehensive account would lead us far away from the question of ἀμαρτία. Therefore, we are compelled to briefly reiterate the words of U. Wolf, who succinctly interprets προαίρεσις as "das Resultat einer Überlegung (βούλευσις), die ein jeweiliges Streben in einen expliziten Handlungsvorsatz verwandelt".²⁶

The next step is to remark how Aristotle's definition of ἀδίκημα justifies our assumption that, unlike ἀμάρτημα, an injustice is *wholly* not contrary to reasonable belief (μὴ παράλογον): purposive choice (προαίρεσις) implies the fact that the agent

²⁴ *Eth. Nic.* 1135b11–25.

²⁵ This fact is rightly emphasised by SCHÜTRUMPF 1989, 141.

²⁶ WOLF 2007, 117; cf. KENNY 1979, 78 and CHAMBERLAIN 1984, 157.

did not commit his act in ignorance (ἄγνοια) of specific circumstances (the object, instruments, and goal of the act). In other words, when the agent commits an unjust act in accordance with his προαίρεσις, there is no room for any ignorance on his part and nothing is left to chance: the act must have been *wholly* not contrary to reasonable belief. On the other hand, as we have already demonstrated, ἄγνοια is the essential trait of another kind of deleterious acts, errors (ἀμαρτήματα), which are consequentially only *partially* μη παράλογα.

Before we proceed, let us not only concisely recapitulate all the conclusions that we have drawn so far, but also point out the incredible consistency which characterises Aristotle's definitions of the three kinds of deleterious acts in the *Poetics*, *Rhetoric* and *Nicomachean Ethics*. The definitions are as follows:

1. Misfortune (ἀτύχημα):

- (a) ἔστιν ἀτύχηματα μὲν γὰρ ὅσα παράλογα καὶ μὴ ἀπὸ μοχθηρίας.²⁷
- (b) ὅταν μὲν οὖν παραλόγως ἢ βλάβῃ γένηται, ἀτύχημα.²⁸

2. Injustice (ἀδίκημα):

- (a) ἀδικήματα δὲ ὅσα μήτε παράλογα ἀπὸ πονηρίας τέ ἐστιν.²⁹
- (b) ὅταν δ' ἐκ προαιρέσεως (ἀδικεῖ), ἄδικος καὶ μοχθηρός.³⁰

3. Error (ἀμαρτία, ἀμάρτημα):

- (a) ... μήτε διὰ κακίαν καὶ μοχθηρίαν μεταβάλλων εἰς τὴν δυστυχίαν ἀλλὰ δι' ἀμαρτίαν τινά.³¹
- (b) ... καὶ μεταβάλλειν οὐκ εἰς εὐτυχίαν ἐκ δυστυχίας ἀλλὰ τοῦναντίον ἐξ εὐτυχίας εἰς δυστυχίαν μὴ διὰ μοχθηρίαν ἀλλὰ δι' ἀμαρτίαν μεγάλην.³²
- (c) ἀμαρτήματα δὲ ὅσα μὴ παράλογα καὶ μὴ ἀπὸ πονηρίας.³³
- (d) τὰ μὲν μετ' ἄγνοιας ἀμαρτήματά ἐστιν (ὅταν μήτε ὄν μήτε ὁ μήτε ᾧ μήτε οὐ ἔνεκα ὑπέλαβε πράξει).³⁴
- (e) ὅταν δὲ μὴ παραλόγως, ἄνευ δὲ κακίας, ἀμάρτημα (ἀμαρτάνει μὲν γὰρ ὅταν ἡ ἀρχὴ ἐν αὐτῷ ἢ τῆς αἰτίας, ἀτυχεῖ δ' ὅταν ἔξωθεν).³⁵

²⁷ *Rhet.* 1374b6-7.

²⁸ *Eth. Nic.* 1135b16-17.

²⁹ *Rhet.* 1374b8-9.

³⁰ *Eth. Nic.* 1135b25.

³¹ *Poet.* 1453a8-10.

³² *Poet.* 1453a13-16.

³³ *Rhet.* 1374b7-8.

³⁴ *Eth. Nic.* 1135b12-13.

³⁵ *Eth. Nic.* 1135b17-19.

We invite the reader to carefully assess this lengthy quotation, whereby it shall meet the eye that all the definitions are phrased in a strikingly similar fashion. Thus, it is by no means a bold interpretative manoeuvre to assert that Aristotle constantly bears in mind the very same notions of ἀμάρτημα, ἀτύχημα and ἀδίκημα, the only difference being that certain segments of the definitions are implicit in the *Poetics* and the *Rhetoric*, whereas they are explicit in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, or vice versa. Metaphorically speaking, the separate definitions resemble fragments of a mosaic, and putting all the pieces together yields a fruitful result: elaborate definitions of the three types of deleterious acts.

In addition, as we have already demonstrated in the previous sections, Aristotle distinguishes between ἀμάρτημα, ἀτύχημα and ἀδίκημα by means of employing certain criteria. So far, we have discovered four of them:

- (1) *The moral criterion* (Did the act stem from the agent's moral badness or not?)
- (2) *The first epistemic criterion* (Did the act occur contrary to reasonable belief?)
- (3) *The second epistemic criterion* (Did the agent know all the specific circumstances prior to having committed the act?)
- (4) *The causal criterion* (Is the agent causally responsible for the act?)

The first two criteria were deduced from the *Poetics* and the *Rhetoric*, while Aristotle does not only use both of them in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, but herein he also introduces the third and the fourth criterion, which allows us to expand our definition of ἀμαρτία.

Definition three: ἀμαρτία signifies an act which is not caused by moral badness (1), which did not occur contrary to reasonable belief (2), which stems from the agent's ignorance of specific circumstances (3) and for which the agent is causally responsible (4).

In comparison with the previous definitions whose explanatory power is, least to say, modest, the new one is conspicuously more fruitful. Notwithstanding, our account of ἀμαρτία is by no means complete because the causal criterion does not provide us with a definite answer to the question whether an error is *voluntary* or *involuntary*. Indeed, the issue of voluntariness must be taken into consideration in order to provide a comprehensive account of ἀμαρτία. Therefore, the following course of action is to expound the notion of voluntariness by analysing Aristotle's division between voluntary, involuntary, and mixed (neither voluntary nor involuntary) acts.

(IV) VOLUNTARINESS AND REGRET

At the very beginning of the third book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle initiates his analysis of the terms *voluntary* (ἐκούσιον) and *involuntary* (ἀκούσιον).³⁶ In order to explicate their meaning, he delineates three corresponding types of acts: involuntary acts (τὰ ἀκούσια) (1), voluntary acts (τὰ ἐκούσια) (2) and mixed (neither voluntary nor involuntary) acts (τὰ μίχτά) (3). For our purposes, the best course of action is to refrain from rendering an account of voluntary and mixed acts because that would prove to be a fruitless digression on the grounds that ἀμάρτημα definitely falls into the category of involuntary acts, as we shall demonstrate below.³⁷

An act is involuntary (ἀκούσιον) if it was forced (τὰ βίᾳ γινόμενα, βίαιον) (a),³⁸ or if it was caused by the agent's ignorance (δι' ἄγνοιαν) (b).³⁹

(a) A forced act (βίαιον) is defined as follows:⁴⁰

βίαιον δὲ οὗ ἡ ἀρχὴ ἔξωθεν, τοιαύτη οὖσα ἐν ᾗ μηδὲν συμβάλλεται ὁ πράττων ἢ ὁ πᾶσχων.

That act is forced of which the moving principle is outside, being a principle in which nothing is contributed by the person who acts – or, rather, is acted upon.

As we can see, Aristotle defines the concept of a forced act (βίαιον) by employing the causal criterion (i.e. by answering the question whether the agent is causally responsible for the act that he perpetrated). In the previous section we have demonstrated how Aristotle applies the very same criterion in order to distinguish between errors (ἀμαρτήματα) and misfortunes (ἀτυχήματα): in the case of the former, causal responsibility lies within the agent, whereas in the case of the latter, causal responsibility lies outside of the agent (ἀμαρτάνει μὲν γὰρ ὅταν ἡ ἀρχὴ ἐν αὐτῷ ᾗ τῆς αἰτίας, ἀτυχεῖ δ' ὅταν ἔξωθεν). Moreover, Aristotle defines forced acts in accordance with the causal criterion not only in the quoted line from the *Nicomachean Ethics*, but also elsewhere,⁴¹ which allows us to safely deduce two conclusions. Firstly, an act is βίαιον if and only if causal responsibility (ἡ ἀρχὴ τῆς αἰτίας) does not lie within the agent. Secondly and more importantly, ἀμάρτημα cannot be identified with a forced

³⁶ *Eth. Nic.* 1109b30-35.

³⁷ The following works offer a good survey of the meaning of the terms voluntary and involuntary: HARDIE 1980, 153-4, BROADIE 1991, 124-179, SAUVÉ MEYER 2006, RAPP 2010, WOLF 2007, 116-140.

³⁸ *Eth. Nic.* 1109b35-110a1.

³⁹ *Eth. Nic.* 110a1.

⁴⁰ *Eth. Nic.* 110a1-3.

⁴¹ E.g. *Eth. Nic.* 110b15-17, *Eth. Eud.* 1223a30-35. Moreover, Sauvé Meyer offers a comprehensive list of these definitions (see SAUVÉ MEYER 2006, 138).

act (βίαιον), because in the case of ἀμαρτήματα causal responsibility is attributed to the agent (ἀμαρτάνει μὲν γὰρ ὅταν ἡ ἀρχὴ ἐν αὐτῷ ᾗ τῆς αἰτίας).

- (b) Acts caused by the agent's ignorance (δι' ἄγνοιαν) are narrowly defined as acts that occur due to the agent's ignorance of specific circumstances (ἡ (sc. ἄγνοια)⁴² καθ' ἕκαστα).⁴³ Aristotle defines these circumstances in the following manner: (1) who acts (i.e. who is the agent) (τίς πράττει), (2) what does he do (τί πράττει), (3) what does the act pertain to and in which conditions is it executed (περὶ τί ἢ ἐν τίνι πράττει), (4) which instruments does the agent employ in order to fulfil the act (τίνι πράττει), (5) the purpose of the act (ἔνεκα τίνος πράττει), (6) how does the agent commit the act (πῶς πράττει).⁴⁴ Thereafter Aristotle proceeds to claim that nobody who has not lost his mind (μὴ μαινόμενος) (i.e. a sane person) cannot be simultaneously ignorant of all the listed specific circumstances, nor can he not know who commits the act, because in that case the agent would be unaware of himself, which is absurd.⁴⁵ Finally, Aristotle concludes this section by noting that an act is rendered involuntary (ἀκούσιον) through the agent's ignorance of specific circumstances.⁴⁶

Before we move on, it is necessary to remark how the list of specific circumstances given above encompasses the three specific circumstances which, as we have already seen, Aristotle mentions while defining the general sense of ἀμαρτήματα in the *Nicomachean Ethics*: τὰ μὲν μετ' ἄγνοίας ἀμαρτήματά ἐστιν (ὅταν μήτε δὲν μήτε δὲ μήτε ᾧ μήτε οὐ ἔνεκα ὑπέλαβε πράξει).⁴⁷ Moreover, it should be noted that the definition of involuntary acts as those which are caused by the agent's ignorance of specific circumstances is virtually the same as the given definition of ἀμαρτήματα, the only difference being that the former is more elaborate not only because it provides us with a comprehensive list of the specific circumstances, but also because it states that the agent's ignorance in regard to these circumstances warrants the involuntariness of his act. Now, the identification of the two aforementioned definitions provides us with a crucial piece of information for the purpose of rendering a comprehensive account of ἀμαρτία: by establishing that ἀμαρτήματα are involuntary (ἀκούσια), we have specified our definition of ἀμαρτία on the basis of yet another means of distinguishing between various kinds of acts – *the voluntary criterion*.

⁴² The word ἄγνοια is implicit in the quoted segment.

⁴³ *Eth. Nic.* 1103b30–111a2.

⁴⁴ *Eth. Nic.* 111a1–5.

⁴⁵ *Eth. Nic.* 111a6–7.

⁴⁶ *Eth. Nic.* 111a19–21.

⁴⁷ *Eth. Nic.* 1135b12–13.

Before writing down our new definition of ἀμαρτία, it is necessary to take into account Aristotle's further division of involuntary acts that stem from the agent's ignorance. Such an act may be either: ἀκούσιον in the true sense of the word (α) or not voluntary (οὐχ ἐκούσιον) (β). Both of these subclasses are defined on the basis of the agent's subsequent emotional reaction to the act that he committed, whereby yet another criterion of distinguishing between various types of acts comes into play, henceforward somewhat robustly named *the criterion of the agent's subsequent emotional reaction to his act*. The definitions of the two subclasses are as follows:⁴⁸

- (α) If the agent subsequently perceives his act as painful (ἐπίλυπον) and regrets it (ἐν μεταμελείᾳ), the act is involuntary (ἀκούσιον) in the true sense of the word.
- (β) If the agent is emotionally indifferent to the act that he committed (μηδέν τι δυσχεραίνων), then it is not voluntary (οὐχ ἐκούσιον).

The way Aristotle phrases these definitions may sound puzzling, insofar as ἀκούσιον and οὐχ ἐκούσιον, at first glance, seem entirely synonymous, and yet that is by no means the case, for Aristotle employs different terms in order to capture two separate kinds of involuntary acts, namely acts that were committed contrary to the agent's free will (i.e. ἀκούσιον in the true sense of the word) and acts that were committed unconsciously (i.e. not willingly, οὐχ ἐκούσιον). Clearly, ἀμάρτημα has nothing in common with the latter, whereas it perfectly corresponds with the former: how bitterly Oedipus regrets his heinous mistakes!

Now that we have successfully identified ἀμάρτημα with involuntary acts that subsequently cause regret on the part of the agent, we may formulate yet another definition of ἀμαρτία, with regard to the two newly found criteria, namely *the voluntary criterion* and *the criterion of the agent's subsequent emotional reaction to his act*:

Definition four: ἀμαρτία signifies an act which is not caused by moral badness (1), which did not occur contrary to reasonable belief (2), which stems from the agent's ignorance of specific circumstances (3), for which the agent is causally responsible (4), which is involuntary (5) and which the agent subsequently regrets (6).

By taking into account these six criteria,⁴⁹ we have nearly constructed a complete definition of ἀμαρτία. Indeed, an analysis of an act that considers not only the moral

⁴⁸ *Eth. Nic.* 1101b18-24.

⁴⁹ I.e. the moral criterion (Did the act stem from the agent's moral badness?) (1), the first epistemic criterion (Was the act contrary to reasonable belief?) (2), the second epistemic criterion (Was the agent ignorant of certain relevant circumstances prior to committing the act?) (3), the causal criterion (Was the agent causally responsible for his act?) (4), the voluntary criterion (Was the act voluntary?) (5), the criterion of the agent's subsequent emotional reaction to his act (Did the agent subsequently regret his act?) (6).

and epistemic quality of the agent, but also specifies the voluntariness of the act, thereby clarifying his subsequent reaction to the deed that he perpetrated, needs to be expanded only insofar as the question regarding the reaction of *others* to the act of the agent remains unanswered.

(V) PITY AND FORGIVENESS

In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle asserts that there are two types of voluntary (ἐκούσιον) acts: the just (δικαιοπράγημα) and the unjust (ἀδίκημα). Moreover, it is stated that the former merits praise (ἔπαινος),⁵⁰ whereas the latter deserves blame (ψόγος).⁵¹ Bearing these two points in mind, we should, for the sake of clarity, lay down the following definitions of δικαιοπράγημα and ἀδίκημα:

- (1) δικαιοπράγημα is a voluntary act that merits praise.
- (2) ἀδίκημα is a voluntary act that merits blame.

Furthermore, Aristotle remarks that involuntary acts (τὰ ἀκούσια) may be qualified neither as δικαιοπράγημα nor ἀδίκημα,⁵² wherefore the following question arises: What reaction do such acts induce? Fortunately, Aristotle does indeed provide us with an answer: all types of involuntary acts give rise to forgiveness (συγγνώμη) and *occasionally* (ἐνίοτε) to pity (ἔλεος),⁵³ whereas *only* involuntary acts that stem from the agent's ignorance of specific circumstances (ἡ (sc. ἄγνοια) καθ' ἑκαστα, ἐν οἷς καὶ περὶ ἧς πράξεις) are involuntary in the true sense of the word, and thus both συγγνώμη and ἔλεος are necessarily bestowed upon them.⁵⁴ Let us now remind ourselves: What name does Aristotle give to acts that stem from the agent's ignorance of specific circumstances? – Errors (ἀμαρτήματα). Thus, we have successfully inferred the fact that ἔλεος is indeed the appropriate reaction to someone's ἀμαρτήματα. Now that we have broadened our notion of ἀμαρτήματα with yet another criterion (i.e. pity and forgiveness as the suitable reaction of others to the agent's error), we may present our final definition of ἀμαρτία.

Definition five: ἀμαρτία signifies an act which is not caused by moral badness (1), which did not occur contrary to reasonable belief (2), which stems from the agent's ignorance of specific circumstances (3), for which the agent is causally responsible

⁵⁰ Aristotle does not explicitly use this word within the quoted lines, but the context definitely allows us to infer the truism that just acts do indeed merit praise, as attested elsewhere (e.g. καὶ ἐπὶ μὲν τοῖς ἐκούσιοις ἐπαίνων καὶ ψόγων γινομένων (*Eth. Nic.* 1109b31).

⁵¹ *Eth. Nic.* 1135a19-23.

⁵² *Eth. Nic.* 1135a15-18.

⁵³ *Eth. Nic.* 1109b30-35.

⁵⁴ *Eth. Nic.* 1110b30-1111a2.

(4), which is involuntary (5), which the agent subsequently regrets (6), and which induces both pity and compassion (7).

At the outset of the article, we suggested that the notion of ἀμαρτία, as it appears in the *Poetics*, ought to be interpreted by means of thoroughly analysing another, correlative term: ἀμαρτήμα. Moreover, it has been stated that these two terms differ from one another only insofar as ἀμαρτία signifies the cause of an act (i.e. the cause of ἀμαρτήμα), whereas ἀμαρτήμα stands for the act itself (i.e. the consequence of ἀμαρτία). The link between the cause (ἀμαρτία) and its consequence (ἀμαρτήμα) has been determined by Aristotle himself: neither ἀμαρτία (as attested in the *Poetics*), nor ἀμαρτήμα (as attested in the *Rhetoric* and *Nicomachean Ethics*) pertains to any moral defects whatsoever. In addition, as we have demonstrated, Aristotle explicitly claims that ἀμαρτήματα occur due to the agent's ignorance of specific circumstances, thereby specifying the meaning of ἀμαρτία itself: ἀμαρτία stands for an act that the agent could have foreseen (μὴ παράλογον) if only he had not been ignorant of the specific circumstances (ἡ ἄγνοια καθ' ἕκαστα), such ignorance having resulted in an involuntary act (ἀκούσιον) that the agent subsequently regrets (ἐν μεταμελείᾳ), thus deserving both pity (ἔλεος) and forgiveness (συγγνώμη). The conclusion is inevitable: ἀμαρτία is an error of judgement.

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HAMARTIA

Greška u rasuđivanju ili karakterni slabost?

Apstrakt: Šta to znači ἀμαρτία u Aristotelovoj *Poetici*? Iako se obično smatra da Stagiranin pod ovim pojmom podrazumeva bilo *grešku u rasuđivanju* bilo *karakternu slabost*, ipak se još uvek ni do kakvih pouzdanih zaključaka nije došlo, čemu je razlog to što Aristotel ne pruža nikakvu definiciju tražene reči. Naprotiv, u *Poetici* (1453a7-22) nam je rečeno tek toliko da tragički junak pada iz sreće u nesreću ne usled moralnih nedostataka, zloće (κακία) ili rđavosti (μοχθηρία), nego zbog toga što je napravio neku grešku (δι' ἀμαρτίαν τινά). Kako bi se premostile interpretativne poteškoće koje pred nas postavlja odsustvo relevantne tekstualne evidencije u *Poetici*, temeljno ćemo proučiti Aristotelovu upotrebu srodne reči ἀμαρτημα u *Retorici* i *Nikomahovoj Etici*, čime će sama ἀμαρτία biti iscrpno definisana i to u značenju greške u rasuđivanju.

Ključne reči: Aristotel, *Poetika*, *hamartija*, *hamartema*, tragedija.