Chance, Ignorance and Human Agency

In the next two chapters, I continue to focus on the ethical theory of Menander and Aristotle, considering further some issues relating to practical action that have been raised by my previous analysis. In the previous chapters, I have discussed the way in which, according to Aristotle and Menander, emotions and states of mind can influence people's theoretical and practical understanding. More broadly, I have discussed how correct intellectual and ethical education helps to give a clearer insight into how things stand and how we should act. I have focused on cases in which the performing of right and wrong actions or the achievement of understanding depends clearly on the agents' ability to act, think and feel in a way appropriate to the situation. For instance, in Chapter 2, I have shown how, in the Epitrepontes, Habrotonon's careful analysis of the situation brings together hypothesis, evidence and proofs and concludes the process of recognition successfully. In Chapter 3, with respect to the Samia, I have analysed how Demeas' anger and Moschion's shame and lust, by contrast, prevented correct insight into ethical decisions and created the situation around which the complications of the plot unfolded. Accordingly, the comic cases discussed so far, and the parallel discussion of philosophical material, has offered the basis for a comparative study of Menander's and Aristotle's treatment of the individual ability to reason and deliberate on the basis of one's own intellectual and ethical skills.

In this chapter, I consider a different topic: namely, the role of chance and accidental ignorance in people's lives and choices, and the way this is treated by Menander and Aristotle.¹ In these cases, the cause of the agent's factual or ethical ignorance does not consist solely in the agent's ability to handle emotions, for instance in reasoning and understanding correctly. Rather, it depends on something external, as the agent is affected by chance events or accidental ignorance. In this type of situation, the agent is not in a position to achieve an exact knowledge of the particulars of the relevant action, and he finds himself in the middle of a series of unexpected circumstances. Situations of this kind

¹ See also Casanova 2014 and Cinaglia 2014 for a discussion of the topic of luck and ignorance in Menander and Aristotle, their analogies and the implications that these analogies have for the understanding of Menander in its intellectual, social and ideological context. My reflections on the topic are here reconsidered with a different focus and in the context of the broader analogies found between Aristotle and Menander.
are treated by both Menander and Aristotle and the way in which they are presented raises analogous questions: first, what is the role of the agent in these cases; which kind of challenge do chance and accidental ignorance present to the agent’s reasoning and understanding, and how does the importance of the agent’s intellectual and ethical ability differ in these cases in comparison with cases of akrasia as analysed in Chapter 3. Secondly, there is the question whether, with respect to the action, the agent’s intellectual and ethical virtues are presented as a constitutively significant factor in the process of dealing with chance events. Do these virtues determine the agent’s choice and lead to an ethically successful outcome despite chance events that might lead to a different result?

Menander and Aristotle seem to raise the question whether accidental events are to be understood as an inevitable product of fate that determines people’s life or as events that agents can significantly affect by a choice (προαιρεσις) that makes a difference to what the event means for the agents themselves and their ethical life. My overall view is that, from the perspective of Aristotle and Menander, the way in which people respond to and handle accidental events is important and forms a significant part of the presentation of the person as an ethical agent. Accordingly, for both Aristotle and Menander, chance events and cases of accidental ignorance turn out to be indispensable ingredients of the human condition because they challenge human rationality and are significant elements in the evaluation of an agent’s intentions and choices. An accidental event does not have meaning per se: it only acquires significance when we consider how the people concerned respond to the accident. I will start with the analysis of some Menandrian material that is particularly suitable for this kind of inquiry. In particular, I will consider two comedies of Menander, Perikeiromene and Aspis, in which chance and accidental ignorance play a prominent role in the unfolding of the plot. I will then explore these examples together with Aristotle’s treatment of chance and involuntary actions caused by chance and ignorance.

The two comedies I have mentioned contain prologues stated by two peculiar goddess: Tychê (Chance) and Agnoia (Ignorance). My view is that, even though these two figures are presented as divinities shaping the action and controlling the characters on stage, manipulating their state of ignorance or surprising them with unexpected events, in the play itself there are evident signs that point in a different direction. These two divine prologue speakers offer an outside perspective on the figures’ actions: they explain to the audience what is

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2 See Chapter 3, section 2.2.