

Emotions, *Phantasia* and Feeling in Aristotle's Rhetoric

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Over the past three decades, philosophy has seen a remarkable revival of interest in the concept of emotion and with it a reassessment of the role of the *pathê* in the work of Aristotle. Quite a number of scholars claim him as the first philosopher to defend a cognitive approach in emotion theory. I will argue that this claim is one-sided and that his discussions of the passions differ markedly from contemporary cognitive views of emotion.

Introduction

Aristotle was the first philosopher who took the emotions seriously; thus writes William Lyons in *The Handbook of Cognition and Emotion* (Power and Dalgleish, 1999:23). Unlike Plato, who looked upon them with deep suspicion and even outright contempt, Aristotle took a favourable view. He stressed their cognitive function and their role in ethics and politics, and, according to Lyons, can be seen as a forerunner of present-day cognitive emotion theories.

Fortenbaugh (1975), Nussbaum (1996, 2001) and many others join Lyons in his praise for Aristotle. According to Martha Nussbaum (1996:303), in "Aristotle's view, emotions are not blind animal forces, but intelligent and discriminating parts of the personality, closely related to beliefs of a certain sort, and therefore responsive to cognitive modification".

In this paper I examine the role of Aristotle's ideas in the contemporary debate on emotions. I will argue that squeezing Aristotle into a cognitivist mould is a mistake. From various texts dealing with the emotions — not only in the *Rhetoric* but also in *On the Soul* and the *History of Animals* — a more sophisticated account can be pieced together, with important implications for current discussions on emotion theory.

Emotions in the Art of Rhetoric

Pathos (from *paschein*, to suffer or be acted upon) literally means: "something suffered". The notion refers to an event that takes place accidentally, through external

factors, something we undergo as a contingent change. In the sphere of the psychological, *pathos* can indicate any affection or emotion the soul is susceptible to. Aristotle's best known account of the emotional *pathê* is found in the *Rhetoric* (II, 1–11), where he discusses fourteen emotions in detail: anger and gentleness, love and hate, fear and confidence, shame and shamelessness, pity and indignation, benevolence and selfishness, and finally envy and emulation. He defines them as “those things through which, by being turned around, people change in their judgments (*kriseis*), and which are accompanied by pain and pleasure, such as anger, pity, fear, and other such things and their opposites” (1378a19–22).

According to Fortenbaugh (1975), the discovery of an intimate connection between emotion and judgment lies at the heart of Aristotle's division of the soul into a logical part, and a part which is itself non-logical, but listens to reason. While Plato put the passions in the group of irrational bodily feelings, Aristotle saw them as the result of a subtle interplay between the two parts of the soul. He defines anger as “a desire for revenge, accompanied by distress, as a result of (*dia*) an apparently unjustified slight which was directed to oneself or to those near to one” (1378a30–34). Fortenbaugh points out that the emotion of anger includes the thought of a slight that was unjustified, so that this thought is mentioned in the definition. The definition of fear includes the thought of imminent danger, bringing destruction or pain (1382a21–2). Fear is not a primitive bodily disturbance but a complex phenomenon, involving fearful beliefs and judgments that are a necessary condition for the emotion (Fortenbaugh, 1975:12).

The emotion of pity has an even more complex cognitive scenario, as Martha Nussbaum illustrates in her analysis of emotions in the *Rhetoric*. First, we must believe that the person we pity does not deserve misfortune, for if he could be blamed, we would think that he gets what he deserves and feel no pity (85b34–86a1). Second, it must be a misfortune which we believe could strike us too, because a person who thinks he is invulnerable will not feel pity. And finally, we must believe that the sufferings of the victim are serious, otherwise they make too little impression to evoke pity (86a6–7). The list of misfortunes includes death, bodily injury, old age, illness, ugliness, and physical handicaps (Nussbaum, 1996:308–9).

The significance of this analysis for a cognitive theory of the emotions is threefold, according to cognitive philosophers. First, Aristotle makes it clear that “cognitions” (beliefs, thoughts, judgments) initiate the emotional response and are the necessary and in some cases even sufficient conditions of emotion. Fear is my belief that I am in danger, anger my belief that I am insulted, sadness my belief that I suffered a loss, and so on. Second, the emotions are open to reason; they may be called reasonable and can be modified by rational argument. And third, there is a sharp distinction between cognition-based emotions, and bodily feelings, that are only merely accidentally related to beliefs or thoughts (cf. Fortenbaugh, 1979:134; Nussbaum, 1996:303–4).

Over the past three decades, Aristotle has gained a reputation as a pioneer of cognitive emotion theory. The fact that so many scholars have read the *Rhetoric* through

the glasses of contemporary cognitivism is not a coincidence. Since the late 1970s, "cognition"-based theories have been the touchstone for all debates on the subject. The term "cognition" was derived from psychology, where it referred to higher forms of information processing like thinking, evaluating and *problem solving*. After a long period of neglect under behaviourism, cognitive psychologists rediscovered the emotions as intentional phenomena that are based on "appraisals", evaluative judgments in terms of values or concerns (Arnold, 1960).

Aristotle's account is at first sight perfectly compatible with the cognitive approach. Moreover, that there is no mention of bodily processes in the definitions in the *Rhetoric* seems to confirm the thesis that physiology is only contingently connected with emotion and that emotional states can be sufficiently explained without taking into account the underlying bodily changes. Cognitive emotion philosophers are ready to assume that this lack of interest in the physical basis of emotions proves that he is in favour of a proto-functionalist philosophy of mind (Power and Dalgleish, 1997:42–43).

According to psychological functionalism, mental states are identified by their function rather than by what they are made of. Mental functionalists attribute a causal role to consciousness, without making any further ontological claims on the nature of the mental. They say for instance that emotions can be realized in any cognitive system that is suitable *qua* organisation, regardless of whether it is a living body or a computer. According to Nussbaum, this view of the mind-body relation was anticipated in Aristotle's *hylēmorfism*. In Aristotle's psychology, she writes (Nussbaum, 1978:146), "the soul is the form or functional organization of the body, while the various 'parts of soul' are functional material states". Elsewhere she says that for Aristotle the relation between the vital functions and matter is purely contingent, and that the same mental activity can be realized in a variety of specific materials (Nussbaum and Putnam, 1992:33; LaRock, 2002:234).

Animal emotions

Although the cognitive reading has interesting things to say about Aristotle's treatment of the emotions, it also poses some serious problems. For example, if it is true that Aristotle defends a cognitive view and if emotions in Aristotle do listen to reason and argument, how can he ascribe emotions to animals?

In numerous passages Aristotle speaks about emotions like fear, jealousy and love in animals. About the eagle he says in the *Historia Animalium* that "it expels his nestlings because of jealousy, because by nature it is envious and voracious" (*HA* VIII 34, 619b27–31). He also says that animals have a number of psychological characteristics which in humans are called virtues, like being quiet or wild, calm or irritable, courageous or cowardly, fearful or relaxed (*HA* VII, 588a18–31; Shivola, 1996:132).

Aristotle even seems to notice pity in animals. He tells of two dolphins swimming beneath a dead baby dolphin, and each time it threatens to sink to the bottom

they take the little dolphin on their backs — as if out of pity, he writes (*HA* VIII 48: 631a145–200). Aside from this, he often talks about the gentleness and friendliness of dolphins, and how much they love their young. If Aristotle seriously believed that complex mental operations like thinking and judging are necessary conditions for emotions, then animals cannot be jealous or angry or sorry, because in Aristotle's view, animals have no capacity for complex thoughts or judgments.

Although this reads like a real knock-down argument against the cognitive view, it turns out not to be. The problem of animal emotions has been widely discussed over the past ten years, resulting in an interesting modification of the cognitive position (Shivola, 1996). Scholars took a thorough second look at Aristotle's list of emotions and concluded that it contains only one definition with a cognitive term referring to an articulated belief or thought.¹ Most of the other definitions refer to the cognitive component in terms of *phantasia* and the verb *phainesthai*. For instance, fear is defined as a kind of pain and distress as a result of the *phantasia* of a threateningly dangerous or painfully damaging thing (1382a21–3). Aristotle adds that these dangerous things must appear (*phainêtai*) close by, and not far away. It is also necessary that they give the impression (*phainêtai*) of having the great potential for inflicting destruction and suffering (1382a17–19). Anger follows a presumed insult (*phainomenên oligôrian*) and Aristotle writes that people like to phantasize about future revenge, and this *phantasia* is pleasant. Pity is a kind of pain concerning what looks like (*phainomenoi*) a destructive and painful evil that happens to someone who does not deserve it, an evil which can strike oneself too (1385b13–6). And so on.

So it is *phantasia* and not *doxa* that appears time and again as the cognitive constituent of emotion (Shivola, 1996:115–116). Its primary function is to synthesize and interpret sensory observations, to “see something in terms of something”. The main difference from *doxa* is that *phantasia* bridges the gap with the senses (Nieuwenburg, 2002:99). *Phantasia* is usually interpreted as an impression, a vague perception of something which happens at this moment, or occurs in the past or the future (1370a34–5). That means that the *phantasia* may also be an unreflected, half-conscious impression, a memory or a phantasy. The emotion based on *phantasia* need not be linguistically articulated, or susceptible to reason. It may be aroused by vague visual impressions or eerie sounds: we shiver although we know there is no danger ahead, as everyone knows from experience. *Phantasia* can occur in humans as well as in animals, who have, according to Aristotle, *phantasia*, but not *doxa*.

Bodily changes, feelings and irrationality

With this modification of the cognitive component the problem of emotions in animals is solved. By stretching the meaning of the cognitive component and including

¹ Love and friendship, says Aristotle, is wishing for someone else what you think (*oietai*) is good for that person, and not for yourself (1380b35–6).

Plato (left) and Aristotle, a detail of *The School of Athens*, a fresco by Raphael

non-rational, non-reflective judgments or perceptions, we can explain how animals relate emotionally to the world.

Yet, a second, more serious difference with the cognitive view remains. It is the significant amount of attention Aristotle gives to the physical aspect of the emotions — not so much in the *Rhetoric*, but in *De Anima*. There he makes it clear that all *pathê* of the soul are intimately connected with the body, and that the physiology of the passions cannot be considered a secondary or merely contingent matter, as cognitive theorists tend to assume.

In *De Anima* Aristotle calls the emotions *logoi enhulai*, materialized ideas. They can be defined in two different ways (*DA* I, 1 403a2). For the *phusikos*, who concentrates on the material aspect of the emotion, anger is the boiling of blood or another warm substance around the heart (403a25–403b10). For the dialectician, who is interested in the formal side of emotion, anger is a desire for revenge as a result of an unjust insult. Both descriptions refer to what “anger” really is and Aristotle leaves us in no doubt that this emotion cannot arise in a bodiless brain, nor can it be reduced to boiling blood around the heart — what matters is that the blood boils *with anger*. That the emotions are identified both by their physical and by their intentional conditions, leaves no room for an explanation of his *hylêmorfism* in terms of either mental functionalism or materialism (Rorty, 1984; LaRock, 2002).

It becomes clear from another example how crucial the bodily aspect of the emotions is for Aristotle. Some people, Aristotle says, meet serious opposition without

becoming angry, but at other times they are totally enraged by insignificant things. That happens, he says, when “their body is in the same swollen state as when they are angry.” (*DA* 403a19–24). It is not a cognitive belief that triggers the emotion; the anger is already there, as a disposition that has its origins elsewhere. The same can be true for fear: we can be fearful without a reason, which means that the emotion fear can occur without relevant cognitions (*DA* 404a23–25), as a result of somatic or other dispositions. This fear cannot be easily regulated or altered by arguments, let alone dismissed. In the *Rhetoric* (1389b29–32) these kinds of unreasonable, cognitively impenetrable fears are connected with old age and its attendant fall of body temperature; in *Partes Animalium* (650b27–30) Aristotle mentions the role of watery blood.

Just as troublesome for the cognitivist standard view is the fact, directly connected with this, that Aristotle does not bother with the cognitive dogma that *feelings*, on account of their physiological background, should not play a role in the definition of an emotion. From a cognitive point of view *feelings* are subjective sensations produced by the body, resonances of physical changes and of secondary importance. But for Aristotle *feelings* can be essential. From his list in the *Rhetoric* it is clear that he does not hesitate to straightforwardly call some emotions *lupai* — pains, unpleasant feelings; “Let us call fear a *lupê* because of the *phantasia* of a destructive and painful event in the future” (1382a21–2). Here, feeling is not a side effect, but an essential constituent of the emotion, and the relation between emotion and feeling is conceptual and not causal (Leighton, 1996:219–220; Nieuwenburg, 2002:88). Shame and pity are also called *lupai*, just as indignation and envy.

In these cases the feeling quality enters into the definition itself, without however affecting the cognitive structure of the emotion. That is why Aristotle’s description of these painful feelings differs significantly from the cognitivist characterisation: Aristotle’s feelings are not primitive sensations, nor side effects of a cognition, nor perceptions of bodily states, and they are not marginal for the phenomenology of the emotional experience. They are “feelings towards” (Goldie, 2000) or “felt evaluations” (Helm, 2002), that have intentionality and constitute how we find ourselves in the world.

This makes the use of the term “cognitive” for Aristotle’s dealings with emotions in the *Rhetoric* even more problematic — that is, if we take a cognitive theory as a theory that states that the bodily and feeling aspects of an emotion are less important than the cognitive ones and which ascribes to the cognitive component an exclusive and essential role.

Emotions, moods and dispositions

A final difference with the cognitive view is that the *pathê* in Aristotle’s works are not only short term emotional reactions with a well defined cognitive starting point. They also include moods and dispositions that have a longer duration. For instance,

his list in the *Rhetoric* mentions gentleness (as the opposite of anger), confidence (as the opposite of fear), love and hate (1378a18–19), benevolence and selfishness, eagerness to match others — all long-term emotional dispositions, with a diffuse object orientation. For example, gentleness, according to Aristotle, does not usually have a cognitive origin, but is mainly the result of a prosperous and painless life. For an orator such stabler long term moods or dispositions are at least as important as short term occurring emotions. Aristotle says so himself: “We judge not in the same way when we feel unhappy or happy, friendly or unfriendly” (1356a4–6). The audience reacts to rhetorical arguments from a certain background disposition that colours present judgments. But such moods in the background can easily change into abrupt emotions in the foreground: friendliness can turn into anger or hostility, confidence into fear, pity into indignation, with all political consequences involved.

So it is obvious that the phenomena that fall under the emotional *pathê* in Aristotle's works can be long-term or short-term, reasonable or unreasonable, urgent emotional reactions but also stable moods or dispositions. They can show a high or low level of cognitive complexity and they can be specifically human, or we can share them with animals. This heterogeneity is in accordance with the original meaning of *pathos*, as a very broad notion which refers to something that happens to us, an event that takes place through external factors. Aristotle points out that the emotional *pathê* have intentionality and are accompanied by pleasant or unpleasant feelings, but otherwise there is no sharp distinction from psychological *pathê*. As *pathos* has its origin in diffuse common usage, the emotions do not form a natural class of psychological states, as A. Rorty argues (1984:522–3).

In any case, it is clear that Aristotle's *pathos* is much more heterogeneous than the modern “emotion”, which was conceived as a psychological category at the end of the nineteenth century, its meaning coined in a strictly scientific context. In the course of the twentieth century, “emotion” became the new term for phenomena which can be categorized as acute emotional reactions to an object or event that causes a noticeable change in the bodily and psychic balance (Dixon, 2003). Empirical research has carved up this sharply defined emotion into separate, empirically individuated components (cognition, feeling, expression, action readiness, bodily change), in order to develop a comprehensive scientific theory of the emotions which could answer questions about causal relations and necessary and/or sufficient conditions.

Aristotle had an open mind to the phenomenological richness of the passions and saw no reason to isolate a selection of them as the natural class of emotions. He was not interested in a comprehensive scientific theory either, nor did he see emotions as the sum of cognitive, behavioural, and physiological components. Aristotle worked with a pre-analytical vocabulary and studied the emotions in the context of general philosophical questions. In the *Rhetoric* he examined how emotions influence public opinion, in his ethical treatises how they influence moral virtue and

freedom of the will, and in *De Anima* how they relate to our bodily individuation (Rorty, 1984:545).

The fact that Aristotle, in his most extensive study, the *Rhetoric*, devoted so much attention to cognitive aspects of the passions is not evidence for a proto-cognitive or proto-functionalist view on mental states, but is the result of his philosophical preoccupations. As the context is rhetorical, he does not discuss the physiology and biology of the passions, nor does he deal with animals. He introduces the passions in pairs of opposites because orators work with unstable and changeable moods and emotions. Gentleness can suddenly make way for anger at the thought of an insult. In the political context of the *Rhetoric*, the emotion of anger is described in terms of an acute sensitivity to status-based issues, as a response to a belittling slight. As to how far this humiliated anger, eager for revenge, can be generalized towards non-political situations, is open to debate.

Conclusion

In conclusion we may say that Aristotle shares two important insights with contemporary cognitivists, namely, first, that emotions are intentional states that have a cognitive structure, and second, that the various types of emotions (anger, fear, sadness, love, hate, etc.) are individuated on the basis of a cognitive criterion. The cognitivists are wrong, however, to assume that Aristotle's concept *pathos* refers to the same phenomena as our contemporary "emotion". Aristotle did not narrow down the domain of the emotional *pathê* into the group of object-oriented emotions with a high complexity, that are favoured by the cognitivists. In his view, the animal emotions and the cognitively impenetrable, non-rational emotions, feelings and dispositions are just as interesting as the rational emotions of orthodox cognitivism. Therefore, as to the discovery of Aristotle as a cognitivist *avant la lettre*, we may conclude that it is a form of "whiggish history", which says more about the blind spots of contemporary emotion research than about Aristotle.

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