An Aristotelian View of Virtuous Emotions

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I traverse two themes of this conference – but main focus on one...

- Nature
- Morality
- Sociality
- Expression

I focus on the **second** theme, but not possible to say anything constructive about MORALLY VIRTUOUS EMOTIONS in Aristotle without saying something about the first theme also...
Why is Aristotle useful on the morality of emotions?

• The most general reason is that many successful latter-day explorations of emotions have been couched in those very terms (e.g. Nussbaum on grief and compassion)

• The recent surge of interest in the moral value of emotions can most helpfully be traced to the renaissance of (Aristotle-inspired) virtue ethics. Indeed, there is reason to believe that many people are drawn towards virtue ethics primarily because of its facility to make sense of the moral salience of our emotional lives

• By offering an Aristotelian account of potentially virtuous emotions, one brings it into the fold of a respectable moral theory, a theory which can explain why – if a proper form of an emotion is virtuous – not feeling it when the occasion calls for it is evidence of moral failings
The standard port of call on Aristotle’s emotion theory. However...

- The list of emotions on offer there seems haphazard and almost arbitrary; it could easily have been longer or shorter
- If one comes to the *Rhetoric* hoping for the last word on Aristotle’s account of emotions, one’s hopes will be dashed!
- There is a simple reason for this: the *Rhetoric* was not written predominantly as a treatise on emotions but, rather, as a textbook teaching orators methods to persuade an audience
- Still: while the survey of emotions in the *Rhetoric* is meant to be merely illustrative and to serve the purposes of a rhetorician, this work can be taken as a source of information about Aristotle’s considered general account of the conceptual contours and moral nature of emotions
Aristotle’s theory on the nature of emotions

Consensus: **Cognitivist** and **componential** theory

However, was he a **judgementalist** or a **perceptualist** cognitivist?

‘The emotion are those things through which, by undergoing change, people come to differ in their judgements [*kriseis*], and are accompanied by pain and pleasure’, Aristotle says (1378a20–21) – a specification which, at first sight at least, seems to place him in the judgementalist, rather than the perceptualist, camp.

However, for when it comes to characterising individual emotions, he typically circumvents the word *krisis* and relies rather on the verb *phainesthai* (‘to appear’), or its cognate noun, *phantasia* (‘appearance’). It seems, then, that to experience, say, compassion, one does not need to **judge** another person as having suffered undeserved misfortune but only **perceive** of such misfortune as having happened.
A possible reconciliation/neo-Aristotelian reconstruction

• I wonder why Aristotle did not make a distinction – along the lines of his model of the four causes – between the **efficient** cause (that we could call ‘the source’) of an emotion, and its **formal** cause (latching onto its formal object)

• It would seem agreeably Aristotelian to hold that the source (*qua* Aristotle’s efficient cause) of an episode of jealousy is, for example, the perception of a teacher attending more carefully to a fellow-student than to me: something appears to me, given who, what and where I am, as a relative disfavouring of me

• This perception then causes a *krisis*, in the sense of an **evaluative thought** rather than a full-blown judgement about undeserved differential treatment: a thought that draws the mind to the ‘formal cause’ (via the formal object) of the emotion of jealousy, and is then accompanied by the **final** cause of the emotion, its goal-directed activity (to which I turn later, along with the **material** cause)

• So **perception (efficient cause) elicits evaluative thought (formal cause)**
Four advantages of this reconstruction

• It makes use of Aristotle’s own model of the **four causes**
• It allocates a role **both to perception and evaluative thought** in the specification of emotion and thus offers a conciliatory move with respect to the differing interpretations of Aristotle
• It retains the assumption of emotions as possessing **propositional content**, which helps distinguish (at least some of) them from animal feelings
• It tallies with the insight of some well-known contemporary cognitive accounts, according to which evaluative thoughts occur **between the perceived stimulus and the response**, rather than being treated as part of the stimulus (cf. Lyons, 1980; Greenspan, 1988)
When one looks at the emotions that Aristotle describes, those fall broadly into three categories with respect to their targets: emotions directed at **oneself** (like pride), at **other people** (like compassion) or at **external events** (like fear). Notably missing from this list are any emotions directed at **ideals or idealisations**, such as beauty, truth and goodness in the abstract. There is no **awe** – either inspired by a heightened sense of beauty in art/nature, the mystic immensity of the universe or the unconditional goodness of an act of self-sacrifice.

‘Aristotle was not inclined to seek the meaning and end of life outside it, as Plato did, and correspondingly he did not think that detachment from appreciating contingent things and from associated emotions is what philosophy should teach people’ (Knuuttila, 2004)
The ‘feeling’ part of the emotions...

Neo-Darwinians sometimes complain about lack of attention to the phenomenological aspect of emotions in contemporary cognitive theories, with the ‘feel’ of an emotion being, at worst, disregarded or, at best, considered something of a fortuitous add-on to the essential cognitive component.

Such complaints do not hit at Aristotle, for it is clear that he considered the link between emotion and its accompanying pleasure and pain to be a necessary conceptual one. More specifically, emotion is not contingently connected to pleasure and pain; those sensations are part of emotion.

(Also interested in the material causes of emotion, but that theory is obviously outdated!)
The ‘final’ cause = goal-directed activity

A behavioural suggestion, a spontaneous impulse towards action...

Even in the case of an other-directed emotion, such as compassion, I may be incapacitated for various reasons from engaging in any goal-directed activity. I may, for example, be paralysed in wheelchair and not able to do anything about the plight of victims of a famine except to feel their pain.

Aristotelians might continue to say that compassion in this case is still goal-orientated; it just so happens that the goal is beyond my reach. Indeed, I take that to be the coherent Aristotelian view.

But then we begin to understand why it is often difficult to separate Aristotelian emotional dispositions from full-blown virtues although Aristotle himself was eager to preserve the distinction between the two (see later).
Good character is made up of virtues and a virtue, for Aristotle, is that sort of active disposition (*hexis*) which sets a person to act or react in a mean, in situations involving choice (*prohairesis*), following reason (*logos*) as the person of practical wisdom (*phronimos*) does in matters concerning emotions and actions.

**Character education** is understood predominantly, in its early stages at least, to involve emotional sensitisation.
How do emotional traits fit into Aristotle’s virtue theory?

1. Every person’s soul has a rational part (reason) and a non-rational part. The non-rational part is again divided into two subparts. One is ‘plant-like’ and ‘shared [with other living things]’; it is naturally unresponsive to reason. The other part, comprising our appetites and goals/desires (and emotions in so far as they involve goals as well as cognitions), is potentially responsive to reason and can, to varying degrees, ‘share in reason’ (1102a15–1103a3) – which is different from merely being controlled or policed by reason.

2. The degree to which this non-rational part does or does not share in reason, then, determines the extent to which instantiations of the non-rational part – for instance, emotions – can be counted as morally justifiable.

3. ‘Sharing in reason’ can, however, assume different forms according to the developmental level of the moral learner. We initially share in reason by obeying the advice of our moral educators and role models. We then progress by taking joint rational decisions along with them, and finally ‘sharing in reason’ means sharing in the reason of our own fully developed phronesis.
Aristotle on virtuous emotions

Emotional dispositions can, no less than action-dispositions, have an ‘intermediate and best condition [...] proper to virtue’ – when emotions are felt ‘at the right times, about the right things, towards the right people, for the right end and in the right way’ (1106b17–35). If a relevant emotion is ‘too intense or slack’ for its present object, we are badly off in relation to it, but if it is intermediate, we are ‘well off’ (1105b26–28). And persons can be fully virtuous only if they are regularly disposed to experience emotions in this medial way...

The **mediality** (in the sense of neither being too intense nor too slack, too wide or too narrow, etc.) refers to (a) occasions, (b) objects, (c) people, (d) motive (i.e. goal) and (e) way (i.e. degree)
However, emotions are not full-blown virtues

- Specific episodic emotions do not constitute virtues any more than individual actions do. Rather, virtues are settled character states: hexeis. We are praised or blamed for our virtues and vices, but we ‘do not blame the person who is simply angry’ (1105b20–1106a7). The underlying idea is that we cannot control the experience of occurrent emotions once the relevant emotional dispositional trait is in place.

- But dispositional emotions cannot be full-blown virtues either, but rather traits that are ‘characteristic of good people’ (1386b8–12). They are components of virtues: hence ‘virtuous emotions’ is a better term than ‘emotion virtues’
All moral virtues have an emotional component except...

Aristotle makes an exception in the case of the civic virtues of *friendliness, truthfulness and wit* (1126b11–1128b9)

Best understood collectively as a broad-brush disposition towards *agreeableness* in casual human encounters – when ‘meeting people, living together and associating in conversations and actions’ (1126b11–1126b12) – those virtues do not seem to possess any **unique** emotional components, or perhaps **no** emotional corollaries at all

The idea seems to be that these virtues have to do with **manners** rather than **morals** – and for the former, there is no special requirement that ‘our heart be in it’, as long as we behave in an orderly, civil manner
Robert C. Roberts: An alternative take on emotions and virtues

A distinction between five kinds of emotion-relevant virtues, which he admits is not Aristotle’s own, but may still be ‘of some use in our analysis’ (1989, p. 56)

- Some virtues are simply emotional traits in a mean, like compassion; such ‘emotion-virtues’ only require the affective, perceptual and conative elements of virtue without any necessary behaviour or expressive style.
- Other virtues, ‘virtues of will power’, regulate emotions, such as courage which regulates fear.
- Yet other virtues, most notably (poetic) justice, dispose one to a wide range of emotions; Roberts calls those ‘passional virtues’.
- The fourth group are ‘virtues of proper affect’, such as good temper which is about feeling anger optimally.
- Finally, there are ‘detachment virtues’: dispositions towards a lack of specific emotional traits; humility, for instance, is a disposition not to feel vanity.
Intrinsically implicated in moral character...

• Emotions are part of **moral selfhood**
• Rejection of the moral identity **versus** moral emotions conceptions of moral selfhood; emotions (esp. the self-conscious ones like pride and shame) are **identity-conferring**
• Emotions may be **instrumentally beneficial** also but that is not their core moral value. Their core value is to be **constituents** of a good life (**eudaimonia**)  
• Aristotle even apparently wants to maintain that no general emotional trait is **expendable** from the good life. What he seems to be saying there is that there are no general emotional traits, corresponding to morally relevant spheres of human life, that do not admit of a medial state
Quite different from positive psychology on the value of emotions...

Important to distinguish Aristotle’s account of virtuous emotions from standard manoeuvres in contemporary positive psychology to justify the value of emotions **instrumentally**

For Aristotle, an emotion could be instrumentally beneficial, yet **non-virtuous**. For example, *schadenfreude* could, for all we know, serve some important socio-political purposes; yet it is not virtuous.

Or an emotion could fail to be instrumentally beneficial (at least in particular circumstances) and yet be **virtuous** through its intrinsically admirable qualities befitting a *phronimos* (a fully virtuous person, guided by *phronesis*). For example, the compassion of a *phronimos* stranded alone on a desert island would not cease to be virtuous even though it did not benefit anyone!
Example: The justification of ‘poetic justice’

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<tr>
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<th>Good fortune</th>
<th>Bad fortune</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>A: PAIN</strong></td>
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<td><em>Deserved</em></td>
<td>(1) Begrudging spite</td>
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<td><em>Undeserved</em></td>
<td>(3) Indignation</td>
<td>(4) Compassion</td>
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<td><strong>B: PLEASURE</strong></td>
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<td><em>Deserved</em></td>
<td>(1) Gratulation</td>
<td>(2) Satisfied indignation</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Undeserved</em></td>
<td>(3) Happy-for</td>
<td>(4) Schadenfreude</td>
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Conclusion

• Aristotle claimed that the purpose of moral inquiry ‘is not to know what virtue is, but to become good, since otherwise the inquiry would be of no benefit to us’ (1103b27–29). In Aristotelianism, virtue education is not an addition to an understanding of morality or the study of ethics – it is, rather, what such understanding and study are all about.

• So if possessing virtues is what matters most for eudaimonia, then studying the virtues must be an integral part of any good education. For Aristotle that clearly means not only studying them dispassionately, but actually studying them in the sense of acquiring them, just like a violinist studies violin playing by training to play the instrument well.

• I have already mentioned that educating the virtues is, in its early stages at least, more than anything a process of sensitisation to proper emotions; Aristotle does not even distinguish clearly between ‘emotional’ and ‘ethical’ development.

• Unfortunately, however, as I am running out of time, I have to leave the topic that Aristotle himself would probably have found more interesting than anything I have said today: namely, about how to cultivate or educate virtuous emotions!