



The Rationality of Emotions: Aristotle's Emotional Syllogism

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At first glance, it seems to contradict common sense to speak of the possibility of cultivating emotions and of attributing or denying moral appropriateness to emotional impulses and actions. Despite the findings of cognitive psychology and neuroscience on the rational side and on the brain-physiological localization of emotions in the wake of corresponding clinical experiments since the 1960s¹, the judgment, originating from the philosophy of consciousness, that emotions are essentially to be assigned to the realm of the unconscious, i.e., only accessible to the mind to a limited extent, persists - with the consequence that the possibility of a cultivation of affects remains controversial in nature and extent².

In the light of this question, which is also interdisciplinarily controversial, it may help sharpen the view of the main aspects to look once again at the psychology of Aristotle and his explanation of the relationship between reason and emotion, between rationality and emotionality³.

I.

Aristotle deals with the affects, their moral evaluation and their cultivation as a matter of course: In Book IV of his '*Nicomachean Ethics*' he speaks in Chapter 11 about "meekness" (*praótes*), which, in accordance with his doctrine of the ethical ideal of the middle (*mesótes*) as the situational appropriateness, he also concedes to anger in an initially surprising way. He says there⁴: „He who is angry about what he should and to whom he should, and further how, when, and how long he should, is praised." Only a few sentences further Aristotle underlines this also once again *ex negativo*⁵: "He who is not angry where he must, seems just as not clear in his mind, as when he is not angry, how, when and towards whom he must." Two aspects in view of the initial question catch the eye: anger is understood as not only a quite natural mental impulse, but also as an obligation, as evidenced by the formulation of a must (*deí*). Furthermore, Aristotle distinguishes five aspects that constitute an anger for which one even receives praise: When the angry person succeeds in acting out his or her emotion appropriately to the occasion, the object, the mode, the time, and the duration. Implicitly, but abundantly clear, Aristotle already points out here that an emotion - even such a strong, stirring one as anger - presupposes knowledge and experience that one can and should have at one's disposal in order to be emotional in the sense of what is situationally correct, i.e. ultimately morally appropriate⁶.

In order to better understand these formulations, which undoubtedly may seem 'intellectualistic' not only in their succinctness, it is worthwhile to consult Aristotle's

¹ See, e.g., Schachter und Singer, (1962)

² See on this Kristjánsson (2018), 32-50, and Schmitt (2019), 206-215.

³ On the lines of the history of ideas and hermeneutical developments for the reception of Platonic-Aristotelian thought in general and on emotion psychology in particular, see the fundamental study by Schmitt (2012), especially 277-287; see also the monograph on this by Krewet (2011).

⁴ Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea*, book IV, ch. 11, 1125b26ff

⁵ Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea*, book IV, ch. 11, 1126a5ff

⁶ See also Kristjánsson (2021), 5ff: "A distinctive feature of Aristotle's virtue theory is the assumption that emotional reactions constitute essential ingredients in virtue".

'*Rhetoric*'. In the second book of this writing, Aristotle devotes himself to the question of how an orator, in order to achieve his goal, can bring his audience, especially in politics and in court, into a certain emotional state in order to induce the people's assembly or the judges to reach the respective desired verdict. For this purpose, according to Aristotle, the speaker must know not only whom he has before him, but also and even more, in what way which emotion has to be evoked in the audience that leads to the desired vote. In a catalogue-like passage, Aristotle defines one important affect after another in order to highlight the aspects relevant to decision-making and action. He begins with anger: anger, he writes, is a desire for retaliation, associated with displeasure, due to an obvious disrespect for oneself or one of one's own by someone to whom this disrespect is not due⁷. Even though the aspects of mode, timing, and duration of affect do not appear in this core definition - they are dealt with in full detail in the subsequent paragraphs of the '*Rhetoric*' - it becomes clear once again what constitutes the essence of anger for Aristotle: it is

- a) a striving (*órexis*) for reparation,
- b) connected with displeasure (*lýpe*),
- c) triggered by the perception/recognition of an inappropriate slight.

In other words, an emotion, understood as an aspiration, presupposes certain cognitions, being specific to it, and their combination.

In the further course of his argumentation, Aristotle also defines emotions, such as pity, fear, love, shame, envy and others, in a methodically similar way: He highlights for each affect the specific aspects of knowledge, each of which results in a striving associated with pleasure (*hedoné*), as in the case of love, or displeasure (*lýpe*), as in the case of fear, pity, anger or envy. In anger it is the striving for retaliation, fear evokes the urge to flee from a danger, and pity triggers the urge to mourn with someone for an undeserved suffering that could also happen to oneself.

But how does Aristotle understand this process of cognition? Do the described insights and syntheses run intuitively or are they the result of a subsequent reconstruction that can be accounted for as experience? And do such experiences and their subsequent evaluation offer some guarantee of having an appropriate, or better: more appropriate, emotion in the future? Is this, then, where the opportunity for the cultivation of emotions lies?

II.

The obvious elementary connection between a cognition and a resulting specific striving for an action points to parallels with and possible clarifications by Aristotle's theory of action. The so-called 'practical syllogism', which is also described in the '*Nicomachean Ethics*', provides further information: In Book 7, Aristotle examines the causes of unrestraint and passionate action, which actually runs counter to existing 'right opinions' (*dóxai*) the unrestrained person or character has acquired. In this context, he returns to the distinction between the particular and the general as objects of knowledge, which is fundamental to

⁷ Aristotle, *Ars Rhetorica*, book II, ch. 1, 1378a30-32

his philosophy⁸. In the core passage on the 'practical syllogism'⁹ he states that the human (soul) faculty of opinion (dóxa) plays an essential role in the formation of action: One opinion of the agent, according to Aristotle, refers to something general, the other to the individual. His example is the combination of the acquired 'general' opinion that one must taste everything sweet with the concrete opinion, directed to an 'individual' case, that one has just something sweet before oneself. If now both opinions - connected with the idea of enjoyment connected with pleasure - are combined, the acting person, if he is able and unhindered, will also act, i.e. taste the sweetness attainable in front of him. This subsumption of an individual knowledge under a general premise or attitude (héxis), which is formed by learning and experience, Aristotle sees as a quasi-syllogism¹⁰.

Elsewhere, in his writing '*De Motu Animalium*', Aristotle is even clearer on this point¹¹: To the self-posed question, why one acts once when one recognizes something, but does not act another time, he explicitly equates the mental process behind it with the system of the mathematical-logical syllogism: Two premises, put in relation to each other, lead, says Aristotle, in the conclusion to an action. On the basis of several examples, he shows that the connection of a general cognition, so to speak a general premise, with a concrete perception to be grasped under it, leads directly to an action, which he explicitly calls an immediately and directly drawn conclusion (sympérasma)¹². The prerequisites are the availability of general knowledge and the perception of an individual case falling under this general knowledge, which is at the same time recognized as good and achievable¹³. As will become clear, however, this does not mean that such a chain of cognition and action takes place in the same way in the same person in every case and at every time.

Once again it becomes recognizable that Aristotle understands the emergence of action as a highly rational act, in the formation of which a number of mental performances, even of soul faculties are involved, as he shows in his writing '*De Anima*': Perception (aísthesis), imagination (phantasía), the connection of memories (mnémai) of experiences made with the cognition of the just given possibility of a renewed realization (dóxa) - these soul faculties each perform specific distinctions and connections, because they all have a corresponding share in rationality in their respective specific activities¹⁴. And this understanding of rationality is fundamentally different from that of modern epistemology: thinking, says Aristotle in the tradition of Plato, is, just like perceiving, always a distinguishing process (krínein)¹⁵, i.e. a rational act, which the acting person carries out through the soul faculties inherent to him as a human being - unconsciously, but, in the line of Aristotle's claims to appropriate acting and feeling as described above, controllable, or better: in a way to be learnt and thus also cultivable.

⁸ See Schmitt (2012), 395 - 413

⁹ Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea*, book VII, ch. 3, 1147a24-b5

¹⁰ See Cessi (1987), 203ff, and Kenny (1979). Kristjánsson (2021), 21, speaks of "mechanisms that are infused with reason and experience".

¹¹ Aristotle, *De Motu Animalium*, ch. 7, 701a7ff

¹² Aristotle, *De Motu Animalium*, ch. 7, 701a22.

¹³ Aristotle, *De Motu Animalium*, ch. 7, 701a23.

¹⁴ Aristotle, *De Motu Animalium*, ch. 6, 700b17-21, and see Schmitt (2012), 300-326.

¹⁵ Aristotle, *De Anima*, book III, ch. 2, 426b8-16; book III, ch. 3, 427a17ff. On the concept of the philosophy of discrimination, as it has been developed by Plato and Aristotle, see Schmitt (2012), 208-262.

In order to make this theory, which seems unusual or even absurd for modern man, at least a little clearer, it is worthwhile to have a look at the explanations, which the Neoplatonist Plotinus, standing in the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition, makes in his writing '*About Happiness*'¹⁶. There he poses the question whether only the one who is conscious of his happiness is happy and answers with an analogy: Someone who reads does not have to be conscious that he is reading in order to be completely in the reading - on the contrary, one could add in the sense of Plotinus, he no longer reads as soon as he becomes conscious of it. The consciousness, so it is to be summarized here very briefly, is for the philosophy of distinction, for which Plato and Aristotle stand with special effectiveness, a pure epiphenomenon, if it is about the understanding of rationality, about cognition and action.

Even if this cannot be pursued further in this context, an obvious fundamental contrast to a modern concept of rationality becomes apparent here: With the emergence of the philosophy of consciousness and its understanding of inwardness, the beginning of the act of thinking is identified with the "visualization and clarification of objects already given to it"¹⁷, which have been taken up by a preceding unconscious and thus still 'unprocessed' cognition - it is a "dichotomy of the cognitive faculties into a receptive sensuality and a spontaneous mind"¹⁸. As already indicated several times before, Aristotle sees the specific of thinking in the appropriate application of criteria of distinction, which is the responsibility of the acting person. In each of these unconsciously performed acts of thinking, the cognizing person implicitly applies the basic principles inherent in thinking according to Plato and Aristotle: It is the reference to the criteria of unity, multiplicity, identity, difference, sameness, and others that makes possible the rational cognition of something, that is, the acts of discernment. On this way the cognizing person is able to perceive and identify something in its respective definiteness, and by means of further soul faculties to connect it with memories, ideas, opinions and always also a sensation of the pleasant or unpleasant. These syntheses, whose appropriateness and complexity are always situation- and character-dependent, constitute the perception of certain colours, forms, sounds and smells as well as the object cognition, every emotion and every action¹⁹.

III.

In this short description of the origin of action, which might be irritating for the modern reader, there are at the same time all elements which can also lead to the answer of the mentioned questions about the theory of emotions and how to cultivate them: Spontaneously, but unconsciously by means of man's own soul faculties, the agent, according to Aristotle, carries out a perception, subsumes it under an acquired general knowledge or opinion, and acts according to the conclusion about the prospect of pleasure

¹⁶ Plotinus, *Ennead I*, 4,10.

¹⁷ Schmitt (2019), 21-24; 50-55.

¹⁸ Schmitt (2019), 20. On this fundamental turn in the understanding of thinking in the late Middle Ages, not least as a result of the rediscovery of Stoic philosophy, and its hermeneutical consequences, see Schmitt (1994) and (2012), esp. 208-332.

¹⁹ For a detailed view on this concept of rationality and its hermeneutical implications as well as consequences, see Schmitt (2012), 208-262.

or displeasure quasi consistently. How someone carries out the complex process from the perception over the imagination and the opinion up to the affective striving in detail, depends not only on external factors, like constraints, coincidences or other not or hardly influenceable causes. It is also and especially the individual 'educational biography', i.e. the treasure of premises learned, internalized, refined and actualizable over time, which, according to Aristotle, are, not least, shaped by individual perceptions as a criterion-guided distinctions. And these premises, as attitudes (héxis), in turn shape the perception in an individual way - thus making the individual and his character recognizable²⁰. By what one prefers or avoids, as Aristotle puts it, one recognizes his specific shape of character. Consequently, this also applies to the emotionality of an individual, i.e. to Aristotle's ethical demand to observe and practice the appropriateness of affects, as mentioned at the beginning.

IV.

While the roughly sketched psychology and Aristotle's understanding of rationality now allow us to understand that emotions can be cultivated, the question or criticism remains whether this does not establish an intellectualism, i.e. a purely cognitive understanding of a subsumption process into feeling and action that takes place quasi automatically. Against this, Aristotle is interested in understanding and explaining how and for what reasons someone who, despite having formed his character and having already proven his practical wisdom (phrónesis) in certain situations, is obviously not in a position to bring the actually available correct premises and the current individual case into congruence and to feel and act appropriately in relation to the situation. One can ask oneself, Aristotle formulates in book VII of his *'Nicomachean Ethics'*, how one who knows the right thing is nevertheless unrestrained. Some say, he continues, that this is simply not possible for a knower; for it would be disastrous, as Socrates also thinks (according to Aristotle), that despite the existence of an available knowledge of the right something else dominates, overpowers the knowledge and 'drags it around like a slave'²¹. On the basis of the already mentioned example of the prospect of tasting something sweet for an action that is ultimately carried out against better knowledge (sweets harm health) - once again: as the result of a rational, but unconscious conclusion process²² - Aristotle explains that at the moment of perception and the associated imagination of something known to the agent as good and pleasurable (the sweet in the example), the subsumption under an opinion (dóxa) is inevitably required. This faculty of the soul does not only put the mere imagination under one or more general knowledge, which the agent has, but at the same time also provides the insight into the realistic prospect of the attainability of what is recognized as pleasurable: So, while the imagination "is the mere mental realization of something, which is also still without

²⁰ Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea*, book III, ch. 4, 1111b4ff. See also Kristjánsson (2021), 9, who convincingly defines Aristotle's notion of 'attitude'/héxis as "a dispositional state of character, incorporating emotions *and reason* as well as action".

²¹ Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea*, book VII, ch. 2, 1145b21-24. For a detailed exploration of Aristotle's concept of incontinence (akrasía) see Cessi (1987), 210-24, particularly 222ff.

²² Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea*, book VII, ch. 3, 1147a24-b5.

reference to the real presence", "feelings are always connected with an opinion"²³, because with it the actual presence of the good and pleasurable is recognized - or better: can be recognized, provided that one has the knowledge which is contributed by this soul faculty and is able to activate it in a given moment. In the example of sweetness, two such opinions now compete, namely the pleasurable prospect of the cost of the taste known as pleasant and the prospect of a harmful effect of sweetness, which forbids the cost and at the same time elevates a medium-term attainable good to the maxim. At this moment, according to Aristotle, it is easily possible that even the restrained and prudent (*phrónimos*) gives in to the current prospect of sweetness, thus to a certain extent placing his capacity for insight in the service of a short-term pleasure²⁴. This, admittedly, also rationally justified failure to recognize the good or the right in someone who actually should or could know better, Aristotle compares - almost indulgently - with the behaviour of sleeping and drunken people²⁵. The momentary fixation of the acting person in his knowledge on what is immediately available and seems to be good, he calls a kind of non-knowledge (*áгноia*), which, as in the case of a drunk or sleeping person, also dissolves again and makes room for the actual knowledge. Nevertheless, just such a behaviour of unrestraint (*akrasía*) gives information about character dispositions and their solidity - the tendency, recognizable for the observer in action, to always or occasionally prefer the immediately pleasurable, distinguishes the unrestrained (*akratés*) from the prudent (*phrónimos*), who in the end is also not always free of such conclusions²⁶.

V.

With regard to the naturally linked initial question of what constitutes an appropriate or inappropriate emotion, the same is unsurprisingly true for Aristotle: The striving for something good (e.g., retaliation, escape from danger, or consolation for the undeserving sufferer), which is specific to each affect as described before, is also based on cognitions and attitudes (*héxeis*) that are more or less correct, i.e., updated and synthesized according to the situation: Depending on the character's capacity for an emotional syllogism, one could summarize, the perceptions of the actions of another are connected with more or less complex conclusions, which are more or less appropriate to what is observed, as well as at the same time and always with the evaluations of what is pleasant or unpleasant for oneself. Thus, for example, the unrestrained person tends in the anger-triggering perception of an inappropriate disregard in a concrete case - unconsciously and rationally - to a frequently hasty and one-sided conclusion, which can cause a correspondingly excessive or simply misguided anger: It is, according to Aristotle, like a rash servant who already runs away before he has fully heard and understood the order²⁷.

²³ Schmitt (2919), 163f.

²⁴ For the Aristotelian differentiation of striving (*órexis*), which is always immediately preceding an action, into more or less rational forms of striving (*boúlesis*, *epithymía* or *thymós*), see Aristotle, *De Anima*, book II, ch. 3, 414b2, on which Cessi (1987), 113-120.

²⁵ Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea*, book VII, ch. 5, 1147b6ff.

²⁶ On the numerous options of and the reasons for drawing the wrong practical conclusions, see Schmitt (2012), 317-322.

²⁷ Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea*, book VII, ch. 6, 1149a26-33; see Cessi (1987), 245ff.

How this 'rashness' becomes concretely visible is shown for Aristotle not least by well-known characters from Greek literature and tragedy, as they were understood and portrayed by Homer and Sophocles, for example. In his *Poetics* he explains that the tragic, i.e. the failure of the 'tragic hero', is essentially caused by an attributable and avoidable wrong action (hamartía) of the protagonist²⁸. This mistaken action of the main character, who in epic and tragedy is characterized neither by outstanding prudence nor by wickedness, results from a momentary weakness of cognition, which leads via a realization and a hasty conclusion into a corresponding fixation, the consequences of which prove to be devastating and at the same time avoidable: Thus Achilles of the Homeric *Iliad* rightly recognizes Agamemnon's behaviour towards him as an unseemly disrespect and gets into an understandable and, according to the matter, appropriate anger. At the same time, however, he fails to meet the criteria of degree and duration that are important for appropriate anger and that Aristotle describes in the *Rhetoric* and in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, as mentioned above. Fixated on grievance and reparation, he causes the death of many Greeks, and especially that of his friend Patroclus, by deliberately staying away from the battle. Antigone of the Sophoclean tragedy, out of love and the feeling of familial obligation, increases her unconditional will to bury the body of her dead brother Polyneikes lying in front of Thebes - although religious and legal obligations forbid it at the same time, which she can no longer 'see' in her one-sided focus. Her uncle Creon, King of Thebes, is her adversary and is in no way inferior to her in the emotionally conditioned fixation: He insists on the observance of the law and the compliance with his orders without any consideration for Antigone's claims and motivation. The misguided actions resulting from the mutual misconduct ultimately cause the failure of both.

VI.

The latter examples point to the affect-pedagogical role that poetry, in a sense as a 'condensation' of others' experience, takes on as a means in the cultivation of behaviour in general and emotions in particular, as Aristotle suggests in the *Poetics*. This now brings into focus, in conclusion, the question raised at the outset about the formation and cultivation of affect. In his conclusion on the necessity, nature and extent of ethical instruction, i.e. virtue education as a prerequisite for a happy life, in Book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle asks how situationally appropriate, ethically correct behaviour can be taught and learned for the practice of life²⁹. Knowing what is right and good is not enough, he emphasizes. Rather, one must make the right attitudes and their situational actualization one's own also through practical exercise and learning from others' experiences. In doing so, it is indispensable to learn to taste the truly good and the pleasure associated with it³⁰. In summary, it can be stated that the balanced combination of the predisposition of character, the habituation in practice and the most varied and

²⁸ See on the crucial role of the hamartía for the Greek tragedy and for its specific emotions of fear and pity (éleos and phóbos) Aristotle, *Ars Poetica*, ch. 13, 1452b28-53a23. See also the explanations given by Cessi (1987), 257-262, and Schulte-Altendorneburg (2001), 91-207.

²⁹ Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea*, book X, ch. 10, 1179a33-80b28.

³⁰ Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea*, book II, ch. 2, 1104b8-13.

comprehensive guidance or instruction possible is decisive for Aristotle for the education to virtuous behaviour as well as to appropriate emotionality³¹.

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³¹ That this education in the case of some individuals, however, cannot do without authoritarian elements, Aristotle notes as realistically as with regret - parents and teachers, however, are likely to agree with him unreservedly on this point as well ...