On Aristotle's Conception of Fear

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ABSTRACT

Aristotle had not treated autonomously the subject of fear and he had not formulated an independent theory for it. Instead, he chose to handle fear within the differentiated framework of four of his treatises: *Poetica*, *Ethica Nicomachea*, *Rhetorica* and *De Anima*, so as to illuminate the varied aspects of it. In *Poetica*, fear is a singularly emotional situation, aiming at the production of sentiments on behalf of (every kind of) an audience. In *Ethica Nicomachea*, the emotion of fear is related to acts of violence and is defined as the anticipation of the fearful and the evil. In *Rhetorica*, it is defined as the thought, feeling or even instinct of an imminent evil, damaging or able to bring up sorrow, being a product of our fantasy. In *De Anima*, Aristotle elucidates the nature of the physical conditions of fear and classifies it among the passions or affections of the soul. In his scattered references in these works, Aristotle treated the subject of fear as a mental, a psychological and, even, a physical condition – as an emotion, a passion, an act and an action. Aristotle's obscure argumentation in the last two works can be examined and reformulated, so as to reduce the possible inconsistencies and some incomprehensible points found in each case.

In our everyday life, we normally tend to think of fear as the sensation of agony someone feels in the presence or thought of a real or a hypothetical danger. It is the intense concern and penetrating worry for reprimand, criticism and the ultimate deeds of countermeasures or even retaliation, targeting in our adaptation of more submissive performances of behaviour and slowly leading to a life of permanent anxiety, distress and even cowardice. Indisputably, the primary or over-all foundation of all fears is the irrational fear of death being on the lookout every time and everywhere for people, also related to the acknowledgment of God.[1] This ultimate fear of death was alleviated successfully, within the entire philosophical tradition, by Epicurus, when detecting that the irrationality of this horrifying occurrence is ascertained by the fact that while death does not occur as an event throughout the duration of our life, this last is always acknowledged as a past event from the very first moment following our death.[2] This

1 «Ὅτι μέγας ὁ φόβος τοῦ Θεοῦ», Basilii Caesariensis 1681, p. 53; «...ὅτι μέγας ὁ φόβος τοῦ Θεοῦ...», Precationes sive orationes (e euchologio Goari), 20.2.85–86.

2 «οὐθὲν γάρ ἐστιν ἐν τῷ ζῆν δεινὸν τῷ κατειληφότι γνησίως τὸ μηθὲν ὑπάρχειν ἐν τῷ μὴ ζῆν δεινόν· ὥστε μάταιος ὁ λέγων δεδιέναι τὸν θάνατον οὐχ ὅτι λυπήσει παρὼν ἀλλ' ὅτι λυπεῖ μέλλων. ὃ γὰρ παρὸν οὐκ ἐνοχλεῖ προσδοκώμενον κενῶς λυπεῖ. τὸ φρικωδέστατον οὖν τῶν κακῶν ὁ θάνατος οὐθὲν πρὸς ἡμᾶς, ἐπειδή περ ὅταν μὲν ἡμεῖς ὦμεν, ὁ θάνατος οὐ πάρεστιν· ὅταν δ' ὁ θάνατος παρῇ, τόθ' ἡμεῖς οὐκ ἐσμέν. οὔτε οὖν πρὸς τοὺς ζῶντάς ἐστιν οὔτε πρὸς τοὺς τετελευτηκότας, ἐπειδή περ περὶ οὓς μὲν

is actually the reason why our primitive and rudimentary fears cannot be considered, for most of the times, as well-grounded and are considered, every now and then, as phobias by the specialists, able of becoming obsessions, or at least acknowledged as that, easily leading to panic[3] and effortlessly being exploited by individuals and states.[4]

In the Greek lexicography, Fear (Φόβος) was complemented with the Dread (Δεῖμος), a personification of terror. By this association[5] and in the form of fear addressed towards the Gods and the Daemons (δεισιδαιμονία) a sense of piety, of being ashamed of and of reverence[6] was attributed to the semantics of fear, even from the years of Homer.[7] In their mythological status,[8] Fear and the Dread were considered as the two brothers, charioteers[9] of Mars and sons of himself with Aphrodite, escorting their father in the battlefield and occasionally joining Eris, the Greek goddess of chaos, strife and discord.[10] The affinity between the religious and the mythological conditions of Fear and the Dread and their relation to Mars account for the particular worship of them within the civil framework of the Spartan society.[11]

The philosophical perspective of fear was noticed by early Greek philosophers. For the Presocratics, errors should be avoided not because of fear but in a sense of duty (δέον);[12] fear, despite nurturing adulation, cannot necessitate good will;[13] its reciprocity derives from one's inability to be longed for;[14] it may stand as the cause of losing one's mind, calling off judgement and leading even to illness and madness.[15] While fearless was thought as a condition able to match the majestic[16] and as a fitting countermeasure versus the fearless behaviour of the others,[17] fear stands in opposition to our customary associations[18] and, as also sorrow, is ceasable by reason.[19] In its overall perception, it generates terror[20]

οὐκ ἔστιν, οἱ δ' οὐκέτι εἰσίν. ἀλλ' οἱ πολλοὶ τὸν θάνατον ὀτὲ μὲν ὡς μέγιστον τῶν κακῶν φεύγουσιν, ὀτὲ δὲ ὡς ἀνάπαυσιν τῶν ἐν τῷ ζῆν <κακῶν αἱροῦνται», Long 1964, 10.125,1–126,1.

3 «Πανικοῦ φόβου λύσις», Melber & Woelfflin 1887, 26, 2.

4 «ὡς δ' ἀπήλθομεν,χρόνῳ βραχεῖ στραφέντες, ἐξαπείδομεν τὸν ἄνδρα τὸν μὲν οὐδαμοῦ παρόντ' ἔτι, ἄνακτα δ' αὐτὸν ὀμμάτων ἐπίσκιον χεῖρ' ἀντέχοντα κρατός, ὡς δεινοῦ τινοςφόβου φανέντος οὐδ' ἀνασχετοῦ βλέπειν», Dain & Mazon 1960, p. 1651–52. Apart from these psychological parameters relating fear and the concise notion of state, cf. Nock 2001 and Robin 2004.

5 Cf. Democritus, *Testimonia* (Diels & Kranz 1951–1952), fr. 1, 108–9.

6 It is characteristic for the conception of fear as the means of achieving social order that in ancient Sparta there was a special temple devoted to Fear.

7 Cf. Mühll 1962, ξ 389 and χ 39.

8 It is noticeable that Φόβαι are the curled hair, snake looking Gorgons (δρακόντων φόβαι); Maehler 1971, 10, 75.

9 Kerényi 2012, p. 400.

10 Allen 1931, Δ 440, N 299 and O 119.

11 Cf. Epps 1933, pp. 12–29; Lipka 2002, p. 120.

12 Democritus, *Testimonia*, op. cit., fr. 41, 1–2.

13 Ibid., fr.268, 1–2.

14 Ibid., fr. 302, 15–17.

15 Gorgias, *Fragmenta*, (Diels & Kranz 1951–1952), fr. 11, 106–10.

16 Ibid., fr. 19, 6–7.

17 Ibid., fr. 6, 23.

18 Ibid., fr. 11, 103–6.

19 Ibid., fr. 11, 52.

20 Ibid., fr. 11, 56.

and, together with pain and danger, it outlines a state of affairs that we should keep ourselves away from.[21] Within this general scope and in order to confront with one's own fear(s), someone requires the undimmed wisdom (ἄθαμβος σοφίη[22]) and the science of nature.[23] The religious parameter of fear and the affinity of it with piety, primarily noticed from the time of Bias of Priene,[24] was attended by Plato,[25] who, several times, refers in his works to the fear of death. In his own wording Socrates says that to fear death is to think one knows what he does not.[26] While in *Protagoras*, within a discussion on virtues, fear is defined as an expectation of evil or dread,[27] in the *Laws*, and within an appraisal of temperance or modesty as the right attitude towards pleasure and pain, fear is defined as that which preceeds pain.[28]

21 Ibid., fr. 11a, 110–11.

22 Democritus, *Testimonia*, op. cit., fr. 216

23 Cf. Arrighetti 1973, XII & XI.

24 Cf. Diels & Kranz 1951–1952, op. cit., v. 1, fr. 6, 12.

25 The well-known quote, usually attributed to Plato, according to which *we can easily forgive the child who is afraid of the dark; the real tragedy is the adult who is afraid of the light* is not a quotation of Platonic works but rather a modern approach to the Socratic conception of light. The real source of the phrase quoted is the book *The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari. A Fable About Fulfilling Your Dreams and Reaching Your Destiny* of Sharma 1997.

26 Plato, *Apologia Socratis* (Burnet 1900), 29: "to fear death is no other than to think oneself wise when one is not, to think one knows what one does not know. No one knows whether death may not be the greatest blessing for a man, men fear it as if they knew that it is the greatest of evils. And surely it is the most blameworthy ignorance to believe that one knows what one does not know", translated by G. M. A. Gruber.

27 Plato, *Protagoras*, 358 d 8.

I.

The information about Aristotle's conception of fear can be found in four of his treatises, in the *Poetica*,[29] *Ethica Nicomachea*,[30] *De Anima* and *Rhetorica*. In the Poetica, fear is considered as a singularly emotional situation, related to the production of sentiments and leading with pity progressively to the *katharsis* in tragedy.[31] It is considered as one of the emotions aroused in the audience – namely suggested to the readers, the auditors and the viewers – of a tragedy. This fear results, Aristotle suggests, when the audience understand that they, as human beings bound by universal laws, are subject to the same fate that befalls a tragic hero. The most influential reference to fear found in Aristotle's *Poetica* is found in his definition of the tragedy,[32] where Aristotle mentions the pleasure men take in such "imitations" of the tragic hero, i.e., in make-believe.[33]

On the other hand, nowadays, and on this issue of Aristotle's treatment of fear within the framework of his *Poetica*, one has to bear in mind additionally the political parameter of the audiences

28 Plato, *Laws*, 644 c 10.

29 Aristotle, Poetica, 1452 a 26, 1452 b 1, 1453 a 4–7, 1453 b 12 and 1456 b 1.

30 Cf. Bywater 1894, Γ, 1115 a 6–1116 a 9.

31 Cf. the first of the extracts following this paper.

32 Ibid. 1449 b 27.

33 Cf. Daniels & Scully 1992, pp. 204–217.

involved in the emotion of fear – as also, of course, of pity: being actually citizens of the State – both of its national depiction and of it as considered on global terms as an Hyper-State, the audiences are susceptible to the state-policies of fear and the widely imposed upon them of fear as a tool of motivation and manipulation.[34]

II.

In *Ethica Nicomachea* and within the discussion of moral virtues,[35] Aristotle, treating fear as an emotion, classifies it within anger, confidence, envy, joy, friendship, hatred, longing, jealousy and pity.[36] He refers to the relative character of its nature and implicitly relates it to acts by which violence is imposed[37] and by which the non-compulsory nature of courage emerges.[38] He refers to the calculative fashion in which fear evolves in our everyday intercourse and economy of life, relating it to the notions of illiberalisms, of excess and of deficiency.[39] He admits of the affiliation between fear and modesty (αἰδώς), basing it on the affinity between them, when considered as passions.[40] In his discussion of the appropriateness and justice of reciprocity and of the law of analogical retribution, we may observe that fear, as a fear for the consequences, may occur in the form of the incidental (κατὰ συμβεβηκὸς) both the justifiable and the non-justifiable performances of life and intercourse.[41] Fear is the means to achieve discipline and, in this sense, it opposes nobility in morals for most people.[42] In its ethical conception, according to Aristotle, fear and confidence (θάρρη) stand as two contrasting opposites facilitating courage (ἀνδρεία) as their mediating virtue (μεσότης)[43] – a virtue more particularly displayed in regard towards the objects of fear.[44] Within this conception, fear is defined as the anticipation of the fearful and the evil (προσδοκία κακοῦ), such as disgrace (ἀδοξία), poverty (πενία), disease (νόσος), lack of friends (ἀφιλία) and death (θάνατος), being considered separately on each occasion[45] and differentiating, in some cases, from man to man in magnitude and in degree.[46]

34 This line of thought, and its interrelation with the *Poetica*, is based upon the connection of politics with myth – a subject well elaborated in Aristotle's *Poetica* and related with the function of metaphor – as evolved within the contemporary framework of life; cf. Chris Erickson, *The Poetica of Fear. A Human Response to Human Security*, London, Continuum, 2010. The ultimate foundation of this connection is to be found on Aristotle's conception of *ὑπόληψις*, a term, which Simplicius, commenting on *De Anima* 427 b 21, described rather eloquently: φοβεῖται γάρ [τις] καὶ θαρρεῖ κατὰ τὴν οἴησιν, ἐπειδὴ ἐν πίστει ἡ οἴησις, Hayduck 1882, 11. 207, 3–5.

35 Cf. Aygün 2017, pp. 134–136 & 140.

36 Bywater 1894, op. cit., B, 1105 b 22.

37 Ibid., Γ, 1110 a 4.

38 Ibid., Γ, 1116 a 31.

39 Ibid., Δ, 1121 a 29–b 28.

40 Ibid., Δ, 1128 b 10–13.

41 Ibid., E, 1135 b 2–6.

42 Ibid., K, 1179 b 11–12.

43 Ibid., B, 1107 b 1. Cf. Dimmock & Fisher 2017, p. 53.

44 Ibid., Γ, 1117 a 29–31.

45 Ibid., Γ, 1115 a 4.

46 Ibid., Γ, 1115 b 7–11.

III.

In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle investigates fear as cases or instances performed within the circumstances of life; thus, he refers to fear indifferently as a psychological, a mental and, although not mentioned straightforwardly, a physical occurrence. Fear is defined as the thought, feeling or even instinct of an imminent evil, damaging (φθαρτικόν)[47] or able to bring up sorrow (λύπη). It is a product of our fantasy (ἐκ φαντασίας), a possibility (ἐνδεχόμενον) of something near at hand, in the meaning of danger (κίνδυνος), described in the colors of imminence and of anticipation of the terrible.[48] He differentiates between fear itself and the preliminary signs that instigate it, being mainly preoccupied by them. These preliminary indications of fear and of things redoubtable about it can be restructured in the form of the following cases:

(a) the case of sensing the hostility or the anger of those having the tendency or the will, and therefore being about to have the ability ("ίκανότης) and the power (δύναμις), to do harm;
(b) the case of sensing the inclination to injustice or such intention of the other (ἄδικος τῷ προαιρεῖσθαι) accompanied by the power for it;
(c) causing fear on behalf of the people and in the form of fear as a reactionary behavior or as an act of retaliating, the case of the virtuous man, when, while continuously insulted, is coming in the power of doing harm;
(d) the acknowledgment to people of their own ability to impose harm and evil onto the others, which is a state of affairs preparatory of harmful deeds;
(e) the awareness of most people of the fact that, because of their interdependency with one another, when they yield to profit or cowardice while confronting danger, they will breach their affiliation with their accessories;
(f) the overbalance in power between people as potential subjects or objects of harmful deeds;
(g) the belief or the awareness of being treated in a harmful manner, as it makes people seek the right opportunity to retaliate and counteract;
(h) the constant rivalry for things that cannot be possessed at the same time by both opponents;
(i) the fear imposed to one by the awareness of the capacity of others to cause fear to someone mightier than the first;
(j) the fear of those feared by one mightier than them;
(k) the consideration of weaking of greater people;
(m) the consideration of people confronting people weaker than themselves as potential opponents; and finally,
(n) the consideration of fraudulent people, by those being mistreated and being done injustice.

47 Ross 1959, B,1382 a 21–22 and b 30.

48 «τοῦτο γάρ ἐστι κίνδυνος, φοβεροῦ πλησιασμός», Ross 1959, 1382 a 31–32.

The special conditions of fear are: (a) the impossibility of reparation, (b) the case in which any chance for reparation lies within the opponent, (c) the lack of any possible help and (d) the excitement of compassion by things that occur or are to occur to others. On the overall setting of fear, relating to the parameters of persons involved, of time occurred and of the objective resulted, fear lies within the unreliability, the unsettledness and the doubtfulness of hope on one hand and the definitiveness of the unexpected and the unforeseen on the other. It contrasts also with both the subsistence of any hope or expectation for recovery and of the conviction that nothing worse can happen to the individual.

IV.

One may say that in the above mentioned three treatises Aristotle gives complementary exemplifications of fear. That one should not reflect upon it solely as an emotion, a pathos or a mental state,[49] but one should also include in its perception the psychological and the physical implications of fearful events in the expectation of reason (λόγος ὀρθὸς) to resolve the anxiety caused by them. On the other hand, in his treatise *De Anima*, Aristotle elucidates the nature of the physical conditions and embodiment of fear. There he classifies fear among the passions or affections of the soul, such as anger, gentleness, pity, courage and joy. Through a vague according to himself,[50] argument, Aristotle tries to show that passions, fear included, have also a materialised feature; the way in which fear derives from imagination (φαντασία) as also its physical parameterisation become evident as follows:

i. in most cases the affections (of the soul), whether active or passive, cannot exist apart from the body;
ii. if thinking is a kind of imagination or, at least, is dependent upon it, it follows that thinking cannot exist apart from the body.
iii. if the affections of the soul, in which fear is included, are associated with our mental process, it follows that these passions should be considered associated with the body.

The interrelation between thinking and imagination, which this argument seems to lack, is clarified later by Aristotle in the analysis of imagination: imagination of things perceptible seems to be a blend (συμπλοκὴ) of perception (αἴσθησις) and opinion (δόξα).[51] It is actually an intermediary or intercessor between perceiving and thinking (νόησις), always implying perception and being itself implied by judgement;[52] it is also a motion of the soul caused by sensation, a process that presents an image which may persist even after the perception process disappears. Under

49 The differentiation between these interpretations of fear is evident in the reference καὶ τίνας πῶς ἔχοντες of *Rhetorica* B 1382 a 20 in relation to B 1378 a 20. On these variations in interpreting fear, cf. Garver 1982, p. 228–233 and Ferrari 1999, pp. 181–198.

50 Cf. Ross 1961, A, 403 a 3–6.

51 Ibid., Γ, 428 a 29–30.

52 Ibid., Γ, 427 b 16–17.

this approach this obscure argument could be rephrased as follows:

(a) since the soul considered separately from the body can not suffer any passion or activate one, it follows that sould should always be considered as either inseparable from the body or, at least, as associated with it;
(b) and since, or if, our thinking process or mental activity (νοεῖν) is a special (ἴδιον) or a pre-eminent (μάλιστα) characteristic, a part of or, at least, something associated with our soul;
(c) and since our imagination (φαντασία) can be recognised as either a part of our thinking activity (νοεῖν) or, at least, as something associated with it;[53]
(d) and since the process or movement of the affections of the soul, namely the passions of it including fear, is affiliated with or is a kind of our imagination,
(e) it follows that the affections of the soul cannot exist apart from the body or at least are associated with it;
(f) therefore fear, as one of the possible affections of the soul evolves specific physical conditions and is in its conception an inseparable (ἀχώριστον) trait of the soul, as all passions are formulae expressed in matter (ἔνυλοι λόγοι).[54]

In this series of sentences the third one could also be rephrased as follows and the whole argument could again be reshaped analytically:

1. a soul without a body cannot have or cause any passion;
2. thinking is a formal trait (ἴδιον) of the soul;
3. if thinking is some kind (εἶδος) of imagination or is associated with it;
4. it follows that imagination is associated or may be a part of the body;
5. if the affections, active or passive, belong to the special/formal part of the soul (ἴδια) and are not something common (κοινὸν) between the soul and the being having the soul;
6. it follows that soul could exist separately and independently from the body;
7. since this (6) may not stand;
8. it follows that affections of the soul belong to the common part (κοινὸν) between the soul and the being having the soul.

Offering a simplified form of this whole argument, Aristotle reorganizes his thought in the following, admirably direct and concise mode:

1. since the body is also affected when the affections of the soul appear,
2. thus, all the affections of the soul are associated with the body.[55]

On the subject of Aristotle's assessment of passions as movements of the soul, it becomes evident that while we have the sense of a movement of the

53 Cf. «καὶ γὰρ ὀρμῆς καὶ φόβου καὶ ἔρωτος αἴτιον αὐτοῖς ἡ φαντασία ποιητικόν», Hayduck 1883, 120, 2–3.

54 Ibid., A, 403 a 3–27. Cf. Miller 1999, p. 318.

55 «ἅμα γὰρ τούτοις πάσχει τι τὸ σῶμα»: ibid., 403 a 18–19.

soul, the last is only a mediating device whereby we do the things implied by our passions. Thus the subject of fear is not our soul but ourselves[56] or our heart,[57] while our soul is only the apparatus of this motion; it is not our soul that fears,[58] the movement does not take place in our soul, but sometimes penetrates to it and sometimes starts from it, quite analogically as the power of thinking (νοεῖν) and speculation (θεωρεῖν) are affections not of the mind but rather of the individual possessing the mind.[59] It is evident on this, that underneath the awkward and challenging character of the statements 3 and 4 of Aristotle's analytical version of argument, as also in the abbreviated form of argument that follows, the notions of ἀλλοίωσις as change and of ὑπόληψις as opinionated discernment[60] are realised so that we could better appreciate the kind of "association" or kinship between thinking (νόησις) and imagination (φαντασία) as also between δόξα, ἐπιστήμη and φρόνησις.

Reassessing all the above-mentioned constituents of Aristotle's thought and suggestions one may compile an account, as concise as possible, of his approach to fear and to its aspects. It would definitely be unfair to expect that he would have come up with a concrete theory of fear, as such an enterprise would, obviously, exceed the expectations of his general scope. This is the reason for a certain degree of inconsistency that has been attributed to problematic passages of his treatise *De Anima*.[61] As for the contemporary reader, it would also be unfair to trick him with the manifold dilemma on whether fear should be defined solely as an emotion, a passion, an act or activity. The more comprehensive treatment of the issue, according to which fear should be treated as a mental state, seems fairer, especially if one is to relate it mostly to Aristotle's approach in *De Anima* and, specifically, with the analogical mode employed in explaining it.[62] It is in this view and in this spirit, that Themistius, in his own paraphrasis of *De Anima*, treats fear, among the other passion of the soul, as rules of

56 Ibid., A, 408 a 34–b 18.

57 Ibid., Γ, 433 a 1.

58 On this Hayduck 1897, vol. 15, 154,19–155,35.

59 Ibid., A, 408 b 22–29. On the issue of fear and on the relation between imagination and thinking, cf. Beardete 1975, pp. 612–13.

60 Aristotle prefers at this point not to extend his analysis as for the notion of ὑπόληψις; cf. Aristotle, *De Anima*, 427 b 24–25. Ammonius defines ὑπόληψις as vague and uncertain knowledge, Busse 1895, 79,10.

61 On the inconsistency of certain passages of Aristotle's *De Anima*, cf. Hamlyn 1968; Schofield 1978, p. 129; Watson 1982, pp. 100–113.

62 On this analogical mode, cf. the following observation: "It is doubtless better not to say that the soul pities, learns, or fears, but that the human being does this with his soul"; *De Anima* 2.4.408 b 11–15. Although the soul is a cause of change it is not the subject in which these changes occur. Rather the acts are performed by the natural substance which has the soul. Similarly, on the modern emergence view, a human being (or a human brain) performs certain mental acts because it has a macro-state of consciousness, but the human or the brain is still the agent performing these acts"; Miller 1999, op. cit., p. 329.

engagement (ὅροι συμπλοκῆς) between the affections of the soul and the affections of the body.[63]

63 Heinze 1899, 5.3, 8, 35–37.

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