

# How should we understand pity in Aristotle?

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A research bachelor thesis (15 EC) on interpretations of Aristotle and their implications on ethics

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# Table of contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Chapter 1: What does Aristotle write on pity?</b>	<b>4</b>
<i>Section 1: Pity in the Rhetoric</i>	4
<i>Section 2: Pity in the Poetics</i>	5
<i>Section 3: Pity in the Nicomachean Ethics</i>	7
<i>Section 4: Aristotle on pity in On the Soul</i>	7
<b>Chapter 2: What do Konstan and Nussbaum say about Aristotle?</b>	<b>8</b>
<i>Section 1: Interpretations of the character of fear in pity in Aristotle</i>	8
<i>Section 2: The source of pain</i>	10
<i>Section 3: The relation between pity for others and fear for ourselves</i>	11
<i>Section 4: The relationship between pitier and pitied</i>	12
<i>Section 5: The influence of methodological factors in Konstan's interpretation</i>	13
<i>Section 6: Why is orexis - or desire - not in the definition?</i>	14
<b>Chapter 3: Interpretations of the cause of prosocial action in Aristotle</b>	<b>16</b>
<i>Section 1: What causes prosocial action in Aristotle according to Konstan?</i>	16
<i>Section 2: The argument on philanthrôpon</i>	17
<i>Section 3: Pity as distinct from sympathy</i>	18
<b>Chapter 4: On accepting or rejecting Konstan's solution</b>	<b>20</b>
<i>Section 1: The distinction between reason and passion in Aristotle</i>	20
<i>Section 2: Konstan's argument for accepting rational desire</i>	21
<i>Section 3: Aristotle's ethics and causes for action</i>	22
<i>Section 4: Can we accept prosocial action as caused by rational desire only?</i>	25
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>27</b>

## Introduction

When we try to live together in harmony, it matters how we react and respond to one another. Pity is often thought to play an important role in this process. In Christian thinking, for example, there is a long tradition that emphasizes pity as an important human virtue. Whether the same sort of positive ethical valuation could apply to Aristotle's conception of pity, however, remains a topic of debate. Since many people in philosophy nowadays look at Aristotle for inspiration on ethical thought, as for example in virtue ethics, it matters how we interpret Aristotle and understand what the debate is about.<sup>1</sup>

David Konstan has recently argued that we should understand pity in Aristotle as a self-regarding passion without any direct role in prosocial behaviour or motivation to act in order to help another human being.<sup>2</sup> If we agree that this relationship to action is needed to give anything a role in ethics, this would mean that, unlike the Christian conception of pity, the Aristotelian conception would not be directly related to ethics and we must look for something else if we want to find the source of prosocial behaviour in Aristotle.

However, Konstan is not the only scholar to have interpreted pity in Aristotle. Martha Nussbaum and Elizabeth Belfiore, for example, express beliefs that Aristotelian pity is in fact capable of arousing concern for other human beings and can cause people to act out of regard for another. If we follow their interpretations, our judgement concerning the weight of the role of pity in ethics as well as in a good (Aristotelian) society should significantly differ. In this case, we can still look for the specific role pity might play in Aristotelian as well as contemporary ethical theories.

Although it would be nice to not only study the question of the interpretation of pity in Aristotle in general, but also reflect further on the specific role it might play in Aristotelian ethics and contemporary ethical theories, this broader topic is too big for the scope of my thesis. Nonetheless, weighing the arguments for the interpretations that have been put forward should already be a great step towards clarity on the interpretation of pity, as well as preliminary steps towards the contours of what valuation Aristotelian pity may receive in the aforementioned ethical theories. My research question will therefore be:

How should we interpret the conception of pity in Aristotle?

In chapter one I will give an overview of Aristotle's writings on pity. Chapter two will then look at Konstan's interpretation as opposed to those of Nussbaum and Belfiore. This chapter will address Konstan's key arguments for his conclusions on the nature of pity in Aristotle: the relationship between pity and fear and the character of fear in pity. Chapter three will look at another aspect featuring in Konstan's interpretation: the relation between pity and (virtuous) action. The specific arguments on action and virtues require deeper reflections on Aristotle's ethics. This will be the topic of chapter four. The conclusion will take all of this together and reflect on what we may conclude on basis of what we have seen so far, as well as make some preliminary remarks on potential findings and topics for further research.

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<sup>1</sup> See for example: Stephen Darwall, *Philosophical ethics*, (Oxford: Westview press, 1998), 191.

<sup>2</sup> David Konstan, *Pity Transformed*, (London: Duckworth, 2001), Appendix.

## Chapter 1: What does Aristotle write on pity?

If we want to look at Aristotle's views, what better place to start than in his own works? It should be mentioned, however, that working with ancient texts demands more of an interpretative job than with works from more recent authors. As we will see, for example, with the *Rhetoric on Alexander*, it is often more difficult to determine the true author of these ancient texts. Moreover, the texts have not reached modern times in their original form. They have been copied numerous times, reached people in different translations, and have been interpreted by people with different interests, resulting in conflicting claims, over the centuries.<sup>3</sup>

The two volumes of *The complete works of Aristotle* Volumes 1 & 2, edited by Jonathan Barnes, contain fifteen references to pity.<sup>4</sup> Some of the most extensive references are found in the *Rhetoric* and *Poetics*, but a couple can be found in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and one in *On the soul*. References can also be found in the *Rhetoric to Alexander* and *On the universe*, but these works are nowadays generally considered not to be written by Aristotle and will therefore not be mentioned in further discussions.<sup>5</sup> The other references will be dealt with in this introductory chapter.

### Section 1: Pity in the *Rhetoric*

The setting of this book is the courtroom, and the focus is on presenting a convincing case. In the courts of ancient Greeks, this required a presentation of relevant facts as well as an appeal to the emotions of the judge, or jury. In this context Aristotle writes that an orator must "make his own character look right and put his hearers, who are to decide, into the right frame of mind."<sup>6</sup> The emphasis on his own character is to convince his audience that they can trust him and the appeal to emotions is important because emotions influence judgements, according to Aristotle, either in a potentially beneficial or a potentially destructive manner to the case. Pity, here, is considered potentially beneficial to the case; that is, if one is able to arouse pity, more lenient judgement on the defendant may follow.

Section 2.8 of the *Rhetoric* is completely focused on pity and offers, in a translation by W. Rhys Roberts, the following definition: "Pity may be defined as a feeling of pain at an apparent evil, destructive or painful, which befalls one who does not deserve it, and which we might expect to befall ourselves or some friend of ours, and moreover to befall us soon."<sup>7</sup> Aristotle asks three questions related to the definition here: "what things excite pity, and for what persons, and in what states of our mind pity is felt."<sup>8</sup>

Aristotle also provides answers, starting with the last of the three questions: "if we are to feel pity we must obviously be capable of supposing that some evil may happen to us or

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<sup>3</sup> Christopher Shields, "Aristotle," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (2015), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2015/entries/aristotle/>.

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle, *The complete works of Aristotle: the revised Oxford Translation Volume 1*, and *The complete works of Aristotle: the revised Oxford Translation Volume 2*, edited by Jonathan Barnes, (Chichester: Princeton University Press, 1984), general index: "pity".

<sup>5</sup> See for further discussion on the *Rhetoric to Alexander*: P. Chiron, "The *Rhetoric to Alexander*," in *A Companion to Greek Rhetoric*, ed. Ian Worthington (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 90-106.

<sup>6</sup> Aristotle, 1377b24-25.

<sup>7</sup> Aristotle, 1385b13-16.

<sup>8</sup> Aristotle: 1385b11-13.

some friend of ours”.<sup>9</sup> This, he adds, is impossible either if we are extremely unfortunate for then we believe no further evil may befall us, or when fear is too great: “panic-stricken people do not feel pity, because they are taken up with what is happening to themselves”.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, the extremely fortunate will also not be prone to pity since they will believe no harm may befall them.<sup>11</sup> Chances of being able to feel pity increase when people have more experience with suffering, like old people or cowards, and those with families, for they believe harm might befall wives or children sooner than themselves.<sup>12</sup> Also, when we remember or expect misfortunes like the ones we witness, we feel pity sooner.<sup>13</sup> Also, we have to believe in some goodness, which is, that some people do not deserve their misfortunes, to be able to feel pity.<sup>14</sup>

Then he goes on to answer the question regarding which things excite pity: “All unpleasant and painful things excite pity, and all destructive things; and all such evils as are due to chance, if they are serious.”<sup>15</sup> Examples he gives are old age, lack of food, sickness and death. As well as lack of friends, weakness and “evil coming from a source from which good ought to have come” and suffering any of these more frequently.<sup>16</sup> “Also that either no good should have befallen a man at all, or that he should not be able to enjoy it when it has.”<sup>17</sup>

The answer to the question regarding for whom we feel pity Aristotle offers is: “The people we pity are: those whom we know, if only they are not closely related to us – in that case we feel about them as if we were in danger ourselves.” And this last case may even be terrible, and “cast out pity” and produce the opposite [1386b10: indignation].<sup>18</sup> Aristotle states we will pity those who are like us, for example in age or social standing: “we have to remember the general principle that what we fear for ourselves excites our pity when it happens to others.”<sup>19</sup> When disaster is far removed from the present audience “gestures, tones, appearance, and dramatic action generally, are especially successful in exciting pity: they thus put the disasters before our eyes and, and make them seem close to us [...]. Most piteous of all is when, in such times of trial, the victims are persons of noble character, for their suffering is undeserved and it is set before our eyes.”<sup>20</sup>

## Section 2: Pity in the *Poetics*

Another common setting in which people in an Aristotelian society might witness situations of undeserved suffering before their eyes, is in the theatre. The main topic of interest in Aristotle’s *Poetics* is in fact Greek tragedy. The approach is slightly different than in real life, for Aristotle considers these plays to be imitations of life. In real life, we would turn away from things that would cause aversion, such as ugly things. In imitation, however, we would

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<sup>9</sup> 1385b16-18

<sup>10</sup> 1385b33-34

<sup>11</sup> 1385b19-24

<sup>12</sup> 1385b24-29

<sup>13</sup> 1386a2-4

<sup>14</sup> 1385b35-1386a2

<sup>15</sup> 1386a6-7

<sup>16</sup> 1386a7-12

<sup>17</sup> 1386a15-16

<sup>18</sup> 1386a19-25

<sup>19</sup> 1386a27-28

<sup>20</sup> 1386a32-1386b7

still be able to enjoy even these ugly things. Not because we do not recognize them as being in fact ugly or repellent, but because we are now in a safe place to study them. We can recognize that things from real life are being represented.<sup>21</sup> This ability to learn from them is, according to Aristotle, a cause for joy.<sup>22</sup> In tragedy, however, not only pleasurable emotions arise: “the tragic pleasure is that of pity and fear, and the poet has to produce it by a work of imitation”.<sup>23</sup> Pity, as we have seen in the section on the *Rhetoric*, is considered a kind of pain.

Pity is mentioned in relation to tragedy, even in the definition of it: “A tragedy, then, is the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in language with pleasurable accessories, each kind brought in separately in the parts of the work; in a dramatic, not in a narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions.”<sup>24</sup>

The following paragraphs deal with the different aspects of the tragedy and through which elements or characteristics they lead to pity and fear. For example, Aristotle writes that not only complete action, which involves what speakers say and do over a longer period of the play, but also incidents, single events, can arouse pity and fear, and that “Such incidents have the very greatest effect on the mind when they occur unexpectedly”.<sup>25</sup> Next to this, “tragic fear and pity may be aroused by the spectacle; but they may also be aroused by the very structure and incidents of the play – which is the better way and shows the better poet. The plot in fact should be so framed that, even without seeing the things take place, he who simply hears the account of them shall be filled with horror and pity at the incidents”<sup>26</sup>

The best plot, according to Aristotle, will contain a discovery: “a change from ignorance to knowledge, and thus to either love or hate, in the personages marked for good or evil fortune.”<sup>27</sup> In combination with a reversal of expected fortune, this will arouse “either pity or fear”.<sup>28</sup> However, not all reversal will lead to pity or fear: a story about “an extremely bad man [...] falling from good fortune into bad [...] may arouse the human feeling in us, but it will not move us to either pity or fear; pity is occasioned by undeserved misfortune, and fear by that of one like ourselves”.<sup>29</sup> So a good plot also needs the right personage and change of fortune for the audience to identify and feel pity instead of other feelings.<sup>30</sup>

But there is even more to this. Different settings contribute to different levels of pity: “when enemy does it on enemy, there is nothing to move us to pity [...] except so far as the actual pain of the sufferer is concerned; and the same is true when the parties are indifferent to one another [...]. Whenever the tragic deed, however, is done among friends [...] – these are the conditions the poet should seek after”.<sup>31</sup> All of this implies that a higher degree of

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<sup>21</sup> Jonathan Lear, “Katharsis,” in *Essays on Aristotle’s Poetics*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1992), 322-3.

<sup>22</sup> 1448b5-20

<sup>23</sup> 1453b12-13

<sup>24</sup> 1449b24-28

<sup>25</sup> 1452a3-4

<sup>26</sup> 1453b1-5

<sup>27</sup> 1452a30-31

<sup>28</sup> 1452a38

<sup>29</sup> 1453a2-5

<sup>30</sup> 1453a6-10

<sup>31</sup> 1453b16-21

arousal of pity is desirable in a tragedy and that certain relations between characters can positively contribute to this, as can incident, action, plot, personage, spectacle, structure, thought and character.

### **Section 3: Pity in the *Nicomachean Ethics***

The *Nicomachean Ethics* deals with the concept of the good. It mentions pity a couple of times, but not as often as in the *Rhetoric* or *Poetics*, nor as explicit as other emotions. The first reference is in the context of parts of the soul (passions, faculties and states), where pity is given as an example of a passion: “By passions I mean appetite, anger, fear, confidence, envy, joy, love, hatred, longing, emulation, pity, and in general the feelings that are accompanied by pleasure or pain”.<sup>32</sup>

Further on, pity is mentioned two times in the context of *involuntary* action, of situations where despite one’s best efforts, results are poor and people suffer. They seemingly were unable, for reasons or causes beyond their agency, to do right actions. The first occurrence here is: “excellence is concerned with passions and actions, and on voluntary passions and actions praise and blame are bestowed, on those that are involuntary forgiveness, and sometimes also pity, to distinguish the voluntary and the involuntary is presumably necessary for those who are studying excellence and useful also for legislators with a view to the assigning both of honours and of punishments.”<sup>33</sup> The second occurrence concerns situations that involve ignorance of circumstances of actions or other objects involved: “For it is on these that both pity and forgiveness depend, since the person who is ignorant of any of these acts involuntarily.”<sup>34</sup>

### **Section 4: Aristotle on pity in *On the Soul***

In *On the Soul* Aristotle wonders whether particular affections are matters of body, soul, or both. He considers the body to often be of importance.<sup>35</sup> “It seems that all the affections of soul involve a body – passion, gentleness, fear, pity, courage, joy, loving, and hating; in all these there is a concurrent affection of the body.”<sup>36</sup>

Most of these references in different books point towards a role of the emotions, and pity in specific, in the development of excellence, the moral good for Aristotle. But the most detailed information we have on the emotion of pity is from other contexts, and, as we have seen in the introduction, interpretations on this topic vary. So now we will turn to the topic of interpretation of the role of pity directly, in chapter two.

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<sup>32</sup> 1105b21-24

<sup>33</sup> 1109b30-34

<sup>34</sup> 1111a1

<sup>35</sup> 403a6-10

<sup>36</sup> 403a16-19

## Chapter 2: What do Konstan and Nussbaum say about Aristotle?

Konstan claims two important things in *Pity transformed*. One: we have to understand pity in Aristotle as a self-regarding emotion because of the self-regarding character of the element of fear. Two: because of this nature we must conclude that Aristotle did not have pity in mind to account for acting out of regard for another. In his own words: “Fear is not invoked to explain how one understands or identifies with the painful experience of another, nor does it account for why one might be motivated to assist another in misfortune.”<sup>37</sup>

Both views are directly contested by Nussbaum in an article on Aristotle’s *Poetics*. In this article she concludes: “in pity human characters draw close to the one who suffers, acknowledging that their possibilities are similar, and that both together live in a terrible world of reversals”,<sup>38</sup> which holds that the emotion of pity is related to an understanding of the nature of the world. In the following statement, this idea is illustrated even further: “The language of the play closely connects the painful experience of pity with a new dimension of ethical responsiveness [...] – as the pain of pity causes, in turn, the pain of moral distress that leads, eventually, to his generous and noble choice.”<sup>39</sup> In yet a different phrasing by Nussbaum: “Through their pity and fear, indeed in *those* responses, spectators attain a deeper understanding of the world in which they must live, the obstacles their goodness faces, the need each has for the help of others”.<sup>40</sup> And this realization would then count as motivation to assist another in misfortune.

Because Konstan looked predominantly to the *Rhetoric* and Nussbaum to the *Poetics*, it might just be that Aristotle was inconsistent in his works. But Nussbaum is also able to gather another interpretation of Aristotle’s views on pity from the *Rhetoric*. When we look at their respective arguments, we will see that even when they look at the same texts, they come to different conclusions and interpretations. So we can see that the debate here is focused on interpretation rather than on any potential inconsistencies in Aristotle’s texts.

### Section 1: Interpretations of the character of fear in pity in Aristotle

Konstan provides a number of arguments that support his conclusion that for Aristotle, the element of fear in pity is self-regarding. The conclusion itself, however, follows directly from an argument written down in a section on which persons are, according to Aristotle, liable to pity, and what might be required of them in order to feel that emotion. Konstan argues as follows: “Aristotle simply requires that we believe that we may suffer a misfortune like that now being experienced by the pitied. This belief, which is the sole reason why our prior experience with suffering is relevant, is the source of our fear.”<sup>41</sup>

The phrase “which is the sole reason why our prior experience with suffering is relevant” is by itself a conclusion, while it also functions as a premise for further conclusions.

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<sup>37</sup> Konstan, *Pity transformed*, 134-5.

<sup>38</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, “Tragedy and Self-Sufficiency: Plato and Aristotle on Fear and Pity,” in *Essays on Aristotle’s Poetics*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1992), 267.

<sup>39</sup> Nussbaum, “Tragedy and Self-Sufficiency,” 268.

<sup>40</sup> Nussbaum, “Tragedy and Self-Sufficiency,” 287.

<sup>41</sup> Konstan, *Pity transformed*, 131.

The idea that prior experience with suffering is relevant is taken from Aristotle's claims that the educated and elderly both are generally more prone to feel pity than the young and uneducated. According to Konstan we can make an inference from this: "because they are more aware of human vulnerability to harm [...] they [meaning: the educated and elderly] can better calculate their own susceptibility to harm".<sup>42</sup>

Another option Konstan considers is that Aristotle may have used the relationship between prior experience and susceptibility to pity, to express the belief that we would need experience in order to better be able to relate to the feeling aspect of the experience of the one who is pitied. But, this, Konstan says, cannot be the case because Aristotle says that those who have suffered extreme misfortune are not susceptible to pity either.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, Konstan concludes, we have reason to assume that the interpretation that Aristotle meant to express the idea that experience is relevant because it allows for an improved calculation of one's own susceptibility is right.

But this is moving too fast. Even when we reject, like Konstan, that Aristotle involves the section on experience and liability to pity to relate to another's feelings, and accept, like Konstan, that experience may lead to an increased awareness of human vulnerability; we can still reject that the right interpretation is that this could *only* serve to calculate their own susceptibility. There is in the arguments Konstan uses no ground to conclude that the section has to be there because Aristotle would have needed it to point to vulnerability and not lead to other (more ethically charged) thoughts too – which is the position Nussbaum defends. So a second interpretation on the function of the section on liability to pity and prior experience is also possible. Konstan's phrase: "we believe that we may suffer a misfortune like that now being experienced by the pitied"<sup>44</sup> will then have to be interpreted, not as referring to *we* in a personal sense, but in the sense of us *too*: all of us, human beings, may suffer the same or a similar unfortunate fate.

A third interpretation, offered by Halliwell, even moves beyond the specific importance of human vulnerability. According to him pity is even more defined by cognition: "The pity to be evoked by the complex tragedy is not an emotion felt without qualification for sheer human vulnerability, but, on Aristotle's theory, a precise response to a structure of action in which innocence can be identified within a clear context of human motive and agency."<sup>45</sup>

The problem is that if we only look at what Aristotle writes in the specific section on who is liable to pity, we do not know which interpretation is right or can best be considered right. Only looking at Aristotle here fails to be conclusive: he does not say directly how this section relates to what he says in other writings. We can, however, from looking at the discussion, determine that the conclusive argument Konstan thinks to provide, that we have reason to assume Aristotle meant to refer to the importance of calculating one's *own* particular risks, is in fact inconclusive. There is now reason to look at other arguments on the topic.

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<sup>42</sup> Konstan, *Pity transformed*, 131.

<sup>43</sup> Konstan, *Pity transformed*, 130-1.

<sup>44</sup> Konstan, *Pity transformed*, 131.

<sup>45</sup> Stephen Halliwell, *Aristotle's poetics*, (London: Duckworth, 2000), 174.

## Section 2: The source of pain

Konstan sees strength in his self-regarding conception of pain because it is consistent with explanations of other elements of the definition. One of them is that he is able to identify the source of the element of pain: the thought of imminent harm to ourselves is what explains pain through a weak impression – or *phantasia* – of the fear which is in itself painful. Konstan uses this not only to maintain consistency, he thinks he has in fact found the source of why Aristotle considered pity an emotion, for: if we remove the element of pain, it would no longer be an emotion. Therefore, Konstan comes to the conclusion that pity is an emotion in Aristotle *because* of the element of (self-regarding) fear, which accounts for the pain.

But even if this *phantasia* or painful impression is a successful explanation of the element of pain, it is by itself not proof that Aristotle considered the thought of imminent harm to oneself, self-regarding fear, the single cause of pain associated with pity. In fact, another kind of thought in the pitier, a thought resulting in another kind of fear, namely ‘other-regarding’, may be allowed just as well. Konstan’s arguments do not prohibit it. And when Belfiore looked for causes of pain and pity, she found evidence that Aristotle was of the opinion that thinking in general can cause bodily reactions, as well as pain or pleasure.<sup>46</sup> So, if providing an explanation for the element of pain is what a good interpretation of Aristotle’s pity should do, it can be also be done by interpretations that involve a different conception of the character of fear compared to Konstan’s.

Moreover, Konstan mainly just assumes that the element of fear has to be interpreted as fully self-regarding, in order to come to the conclusions on pain. He does not need it. He does, however, see strength in that he is now able to offer an extra, related, explanation without coming to an inconsistency. The idea that fear needs imminent harm is not in itself wrong, but remains inconclusive on alternative options so it should not have been used to argue in the way Konstan does. Also, it is incorrect that the argument on pity *as an emotion* can be used to ground a special or all-important role for pain. Not in the least because the definition of emotion contained two elements, one indeed refers to an element of pain or pleasure, but the other refers to cognitive modification. This second element is largely ignored by Konstan.

Nussbaum, on the other hand, provides an argument emphasizing the importance of cognition in Aristotle’s ideas on what would make something qualify as an emotion. She cites an example from Aristotle: “The temperate man might perceive that something could be a threat, but that he judges not to be a threat. He is then left with “momentary arousal [...], not emotion and not action.”<sup>47</sup> Despite Aristotle’s mentioning the *appearance* of a bad thing in the definition of fear, which could point to a relationship between action and perceiving rather than with judging in emotion, Nussbaum argues *phantasiai*, in the definition of fear, could just as well be understood as referring to believing. So: “what is stressed is the fact that the way things are seen by the agent, not the fact of the matter, that is instrumental in getting

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<sup>46</sup> Elizabeth S. Belfiore, *Tragic pleasures: Aristotle on plot and emotion*, (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1992), 182-3.

<sup>47</sup> Martha Craven Nussbaum, “Aristotle on emotions and rational persuasion”, in *Essays on Aristotle’s Rhetoric*, edited by Amelie Oksenberg Rorty, (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1996), 307.

emotions going.”<sup>48</sup> Belfiore too believes that *phantasia* in this context is used to denote the fact that it is “something that appears to us in a certain way”,<sup>49</sup> and not just as an empty image, but associated with a judgement of whether we want to pursue some particular thing or not. The way she explains it, is that the perception that we would want to hurt someone is the *phantasia*, a perception interpreted as wanting revenge. In other words: the element of judgement already informs our perception.

### **Section 3: The relation between pity for others and fear for ourselves**

Konstan also finds proof for the importance of a relationship to ourselves in Aristotle’s section on who we feel pity for and why: “Aristotle adds that people pity those who are similar in themselves in age, habits, character, rank and birth, since in all these cases it seems as though the same things could happen to themselves.”<sup>50</sup> While it is indeed obvious that there must be the perception of *some* relationship to oneself, it does not by itself, as Konstan takes it, argue in favour of the conception that it is clearly related to fear for oneself.

Konstan tries to work from the definitions Aristotle provides because he thinks these are more reliably Aristotle’s own views, as opposed to sections where Aristotle deals with the general ideas of his time. In arguing for whom we feel pity, Aristotle is obviously writing from the latter context. But even though a condition for feeling pity is that people have to think whatever has befallen the pitied can happen to them as well, this does not say by itself that this condition can be used to explain how pity works or what role it plays in Aristotle. Does it relate to fear only, or also work via a connection to a profound understanding of human nature and hence to (understanding of) the element of desert in combination with human agency and virtues? The link to oneself might then only function as a trigger for other-concerning thoughts and not be the sufficient link to the arousing of the emotion.

Konstan, however, puts forth yet another section of Aristotle’s writing in support of his strong relationship between pity and fear for oneself. Konstan writes that he is indeed correct to conclude that Aristotle would support the close relationship between pity and fear. The same dispositions would apply to both and even cites a biconditional in favour of this: “in a word, those things are feared which, in the case of others, are pitiable [...]”.<sup>51</sup>

And yet again, Nussbaum takes another view on the same section. She has more to say about it than leaving it as a quote by itself. According to her, to take it as a biconditional is clearly overdoing the proper statement. There are obvious cases when we fear something, like when we behaved badly and expect punishment, which would not lead to pity when confronted with this fear in others even though we might fully realize that we could experience the same.<sup>52</sup>

If we take this into account, we have reason to believe that the element of fortune – or desert – can somehow overrule ideas and feelings we might have based on the element of fear alone. And that can be considered an argument in favour of a more cognitive-focused rather than a feeling-oriented interpretation of the emotion of pity in Aristotle. In fact, Konstan

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<sup>48</sup> Nussbaum, “Aristotle on emotions and rational persuasion,” 307.

<sup>49</sup> Belfiore, *Tragic pleasures*, 182.

<sup>50</sup> Konstan, *Pity transformed*, 132.

<sup>51</sup> Konstan, *Pity transformed*, 134, citing 1382b24-29.

<sup>52</sup> Nussbaum, “Aristotle on emotions and rational persuasion,” 309.

acknowledges the specific importance of the element of desert,<sup>53</sup> but he uses it only in other contexts and not to evaluate his own method. On the use of the comparison as a biconditional by Konstan in general we might say that for a proper understanding of Aristotle's ideas on the different emotions, it might not be enough to stop at how the two emotions are alike, we should also look at how they are different.

#### **Section 4: The relationship between pitier and pitied**

Another benefit Konstan sees of understanding this pain as resulting from the imminent threat rather than from an indirect thought on human vulnerability or something like that, is that the way we experience pity in Aristotle is, according to Konstan, that we feel pain due to the (witnessing of a) painful experience of another person. The feeling of pitier and pitied are therefore of a similar kind, but different degree.<sup>54</sup> But we might not be required to understand it in this way. There are two other ways I will mention.

Nussbaum agrees that pity is a kind of pain, as is fear, but "Nowhere in his analyses does Aristotle ever attempt to individuate emotions by describing varieties of painful or (as the case may be) pleasant feeling. Emotions, instead, are individuated by reference to their characteristic beliefs."<sup>55</sup> And, she continues: "We cannot describe the pain that is peculiar to fear, or say how fear differs from grief or pity, without saying that it is pain at the thought of a certain sort of future event that is believed to be impending."<sup>56</sup> Plus, the element of pain is, according to her, not a necessary condition, but "part of the emotion itself."<sup>57</sup> This view remains, however, an interpretation itself and might not convince Konstan.

Another way of looking at the relationship between the pitier and the pitied involves a more direct argument against the strict self-concerned character of fear in pity that Konstan maintains: if we look at what Aristotle wrote on pity, we can see that it is hard to maintain a strictly *self*-oriented conception of pity, or in fact any emotion in Aristotle, because of the concept of *philia*: "The people we pity are: those whom we know, if only they are not closely related to us – in that case we feel about them as if we were in danger ourselves." And in this last case we can feel terror, which would be able to "cast out pity" and produce the opposite.<sup>58</sup>

Nussbaum also uses this to argue against a fully self-regarding conception of fear: Aristotle mentions that in cases when we judge the threat of fear too closely related to us, such as in cases of *philia*, so when it concerns ourselves too much, too directly, the fear turns to terror, *the difference of degree between pitier and pitied disappears* and we become terrified; a state that according to Aristotle, is incompatible with feeling pity: it has the ability to (temporarily) knock out the possibility of pity.<sup>59</sup> So, Nussbaum continues, we *need* to include at least a significant level of distance. And a way we can do this, in her view, is that we interpret pity as that at least part of the element of fear in it regards the other. So she does

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<sup>53</sup> Konstan, *Pity transformed*, 128.

<sup>54</sup> Konstan, *Pity transformed*, 129.

<sup>55</sup> Nussbaum, "Aristotle on emotions and rational persuasion," 309.

<sup>56</sup> Nussbaum, "Aristotle on emotions and rational persuasion," 309.

<sup>57</sup> Nussbaum, "Aristotle on emotions and rational persuasion," 309.

<sup>58</sup> 1386a19-25

<sup>59</sup> Nussbaum, "Aristotle on emotions and rational persuasion," 309 and Aristotle 1386a22.

not deny the fear relates to oneself, but instead maintains that the fear associated with pity might be relating to oneself “as well”.<sup>60</sup>

What we can take from this discussion on the relationship between the one feeling pity and the subject of someone’s pity is, in fact, that we know very little on Aristotle’s view on how this relationship would work. We only know that when danger (seems to) come(s) too close, fear turns to terror and pity is very unlikely in those cases. This idea of the perception of a distance, rather than a full comparison to just oneself sounds appealing, but is not yet enough to prove Aristotle saw it this way too. What we also see, however, is that what is interesting about the state of terror and being self-occupied is that if one is in this state, one is simply not *able* to act out of regard for, or in order to help someone else. So this suggests that we should look to Aristotle’s theory of this kind of action to see whether this is indeed plausible. Chapter three will do just that, but only after two final sections in this chapter on topics in Aristotle with rivalling interpretations that may still provide definitive answers on which interpretation of fear should be best.

### **Section 5: The influence of methodological factors in Konstan’s interpretation**

One might be tempted to conclude that Konstan’s self-regarding character of the emotion is stronger in explaining the element of expecting the same to befall ourselves than an interpretation involving an other-regarding character of fear in pity. It certainly has an intuitive appeal to it. But I think this is just because we are looking, as Konstan does, at one specific element at a time. Now, as Konstan himself mentions, this way of dissecting and scrutinizing parts was not what Aristotle did himself. So there not only remains interpretation on what different parts may mean, which Konstan sees as a plus,<sup>61</sup> a task for himself, but also on whether we even could look at elements from the definition in isolation, and consider why they were included or some were excluded, and then be able to get to an understanding of Aristotle’s views on pity.

Moreover, we can specifically relate this idea back to a difference of interpretation between Konstan and Nussbaum. Konstan focuses on the element of fear, and makes it of crucial importance because he takes it to be Aristotle’s view that it is *pain* that qualifies pity as an emotion in Aristotle. But when we look at that definition, there are two elements: emotion is associated with pain or pleasure *and* with judgements: “ ‘the emotions are all those things on account of which people change and differ in regard to their judgements, and upon which attend pain and pleasure, for example anger, pity, fear, and all other such things and their opposites.’ ”<sup>62</sup> Whilst Konstan focuses on the element of pain, Nussbaum focuses on judgement or cognition.

This cognitive interpretation is *also* able to explain the element or condition of “expect to befall oneself” but from a different angle: it is not the fully specific personal susceptibility, not merely that one has the exact same bad prospects themselves, that makes a self-concerned thought important in pity; but rather the sight of the specific misfortune has to be recognized, or judged as beyond a person’s rational control or influence in general, in order to function as a reminder of the human condition in general. Somehow we would then only be able to judge

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<sup>60</sup> Nussbaum, “Aristotle on emotions and rational persuasion,” 309.

<sup>61</sup> Konstan, *Pity transformed*, 128.

<sup>62</sup> Konstan, *Pity transformed*, 129.

desert or *misfortune* on basis of a comparison to ourselves, realizing that we too have limited control would serve as a reminder of our *common* vulnerable human nature. And if this is how pity works for Aristotle, the idea that it is closely related to concern for others and a motivation to help them is getting very close.

But, this is only an educated guess at a possibility at this point, merely serving to illustrate that reading only sections of Aristotle by itself is no guarantee that either Konstan's or Nussbaum's interpretation reflect Aristotle's own views. If we are however able to find that the results or conclusions of either of them are highly implausible in context of Aristotle's writings, we might be able to reject or emphasize one or none of the interpretations. The next section will do so by looking at the concept of pity in relationship to action.

### **Section 6: Why is *orexis* - or desire - not in the definition?**

We know by now that Konstan thinks Aristotelian pity is unable to motivate prosocial actions. One point he sees as supporting his position, is the absence of a reference to this specific desire to help someone in the definition of pity, whilst there is a desire for revenge included in Aristotle's definition of anger.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, Konstan's conceptual cut between pity and action provides an answer to St. Augustine's objection that it is impossible to understand tragic pity, the kind of pity that arises from watching a tragedy, as a virtue. Because the witnessing of tragic events in a play would make it impossible for people to act on their emotions, he could not see how this would benefit their moral education or cause moral improvement. In Konstan's explanation tragic pity is no different from ordinary pity but neither of them are related to virtue, at least not if prosocial action is what virtue is thought to consist of.

But Nussbaum is also able to answer the objection, without having to give up the virtuous or beneficial aspect of the emotion. Pity is complex, encompassing understanding, feeling and action, like other complex emotions. If we experience it whilst watching a play, it is not the action that makes it potentially beneficial, feeling it in itself might be part of a process of becoming more virtuous, via *katharsis*. Even though there is a debate on why *katharsis* is considered good, more specifically on what it is exactly, Nussbaum thinks that we have sufficient reason to believe that Aristotle considers the process a good thing for human beings. She says Aristotle emphasizes that the best tragedies are the ones that are best at arousing pity and fear, and that "he clearly makes room for the reversals characteristic of tragedy to be ethically illuminating, and for pity to be a valuable response."<sup>64</sup>

As for the link to action being absent in the definition, there is another perfectly reasonable explanation for this given by Belfiore who does not think that we should cut all ties between Aristotle's conception of pity and social action. For something to be included in a definition, it must always be the case; for example, always a desire to help when we feel pity. But maybe that desire requires another judgement, that is: the idea that we are in a position to help someone. As Belfiore puts it: "Though our taking action might be impeded by

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<sup>63</sup> W. Rhys Roberts' translation, featured in: Aristotle, *The complete works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, offers the following definition: "Anger may be defined as a desire accompanied by pain, for a conspicuous revenge for a conspicuous slight at the hands of men who have no call to slight oneself or one's friends." [1378a31-33]

<sup>64</sup> Nussbaum, "Tragedy and Self-Sufficiency," 273.

a judgement that there is no action we can take (as can happen in the case of fear), we desire to give help if we can.”<sup>65</sup> And we have sufficient reason to assume that, according to Aristotle, when the possibility to act is absent, there would be no desire to do so, just like the case with the emotions where one of the conditions is not met, like a required belief, one will not feel that emotion.<sup>66</sup>

And so again, we see two possibilities but no definitive answer on Aristotle’s ideas. For this, we will need another approach. That will be the way to proceed in chapters three and four.

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<sup>65</sup> Belfiore, *Tragic pleasures*, 188.

<sup>66</sup> Jonathan Lear, “Katharsis,” 317.

### **Chapter 3: Interpretations of the cause of prosocial action in Aristotle**

This part will take another approach: if Konstan is right in interpreting Aristotelian pity as separate from the desire to help someone and perform prosocial actions, we will lose pity's potential of being an ethically relevant emotion. Konstan argues that if we think that Aristotle believed pity would cause actions out of regard for another who is suffering misfortune, we are wrong. The emotion is, according to him, still only felt as a fear for oneself, which would make it impossible to act to help another out of their regard. Moreover, Konstan too, like Nussbaum, recognizes that fear for oneself would by itself be more likely inhibitory than motivating for actions other than looking away or even blaming the victim.

However, Konstan says it is clear that Aristotle allows for the type of prosocial action we are looking for, the kind of action that is set out to help another in times of need, and expresses that it indeed takes place. Rather than accusing Aristotle of being inconsistent or failing to explain this phenomenon, Konstan argues that Aristotle is able to provide an explanation for this type of action that does not involve pity. This chapter will aim at an understanding of this explanation. It will do so first by looking at the concepts Konstan uses, and then at the extra benefits Konstan sees in this interpretation. The fourth and final chapter will then look at whether Konstan's interpretation on this point can hold up if we take the broader context of Aristotle's writings into account.

#### **Section 1: What causes prosocial action in Aristotle according to Konstan?**

Konstan concludes that a good person will "undoubtedly be disposed to be generous."<sup>67</sup> While this is a slightly altered phrasing of the desire to help someone, I will take it to mean the same thing, namely: as being willing and able to perform prosocial actions. Here we see how he offers an alternative explanation for the cause of generous state such as this: "Such a disposition, however, is not a consequence of emotion, but rather of a virtuous character."<sup>68</sup> The way this would work is that someone who "judges that another's misfortune is undeserved might be moved to act out of reason and a sense of what is right, without the stimulus of pain or pleasure that is associated with passion".<sup>69</sup>

In other words: he thinks that Aristotle would allow the elements of perception and judgement to account for the desire to help someone but not the element of pain from fear. And because it was specifically this last element that made pity an emotion, this would make any reaction to help another for whom we feel pity have to be a "dispassionate response"<sup>70</sup>, separate from the emotion of pity itself. What adds strength to this, he argues, is that no notion of the desire to help someone (when we feel pity) is in fact present in the definition of pity, whilst the desire for revenge is in the definition of anger.<sup>71</sup> This makes sense if the desire to help someone is not related to pity, but to something else: rational desire.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Konstan, *Pity transformed*, 134-5.

<sup>68</sup> Konstan, *Pity transformed*, 135.

<sup>69</sup> Konstan, *Pity transformed*, 135.

<sup>70</sup> Konstan, *Pity transformed*, 135.

<sup>71</sup> See note 63 for the (translated) definition of anger in Aristotle.

<sup>72</sup> Konstan, *Pity transformed*, 135.

## Section 2: The argument on *philanthrôpon*

The level of rationality in his alternative explanation, however, does not mean that Konstan believes the emotion of pity is devoid of similar cognitive or rational influences. He addresses the level of cognitive elements in Aristotle's conception of pity; in fact, he thinks that pity has a specific emphasis on the evaluative dimension, not because of fear, but because of the element of desert.<sup>73</sup> He argues that this idea of desert is what distinguishes pity from a related, but more "instinctive" reaction: fellow-feeling, or *philanthrôpon*. It is this *philanthrôpon* that, according to Konstan, accounts for the direct feeling we might have towards another human being in pain, when ideas on desert do not yet play a role.<sup>74</sup>

Konstan deduces this from a remark by Aristotle that we can still feel a kind of pain when something bad happens to a bad person, or someone who deserved it, when we would not be able to feel pity.<sup>75</sup> And Konstan does not only separate *philanthrôpon* from pity, but also from *philia*, which he mentions could start out from a physical reaction (similar to *philanthrôpon*) but still develop into a more cognitively driven relationship of respect and appreciation. So again, he says this *philanthrôpon* is unique because it is an instinctive reaction without a hint of the element of desert.

The word *philanthrôpon* has received a number of different, quite vague, translations. If we look at the translations in the Perseus Digital Library, as well as in the collected works edited by Barnes, we find that the Perseus edition offers "our feelings" and the translation by I. Bywater included in Barnes offers "the human feeling" as a translation in the section used by Konstan.<sup>76</sup> And while all this indeed strongly seems to relate to feeling, there is also context to it, in the case of tragic effect that reversals might "arouse the human feeling – *philanthrôpon* – in one" like "the clever villain [...] deceived or the brave wrongdoer worsted."<sup>77</sup> In these cases the idea of reversal still makes *philanthrôpon* more associated with a feeling of justice than a purely instinctive reaction to suffering.

But Gerald Else still comes to the conclusion that it concerns "a relatively generalized and indiscriminate fellow-feeling for humanity."<sup>78</sup> Even though it is used in the context of reversals in *Poetics*. It also occurs in *Politics*, where it is used in association with legislation, and in the *Nichomachean Ethics* *philanthropous* is mentioned next to an instinctive affection,<sup>79</sup> but itself used to denote the praise we as human beings have *for* such direct natural affections, making it explicitly not as directly instinctive as Konstan would have it. So yes, with Else's support we might conclude that *philanthrôpon* denotes something general about feelings for other beings but that there is no proof for the idea of the "instinctive" reaction Konstan sees. In fact, this idea of common humanity might still be related to pity and the idea of shared human vulnerability we have seen before. This would make *philanthrôpon* very intimately connected with pity, although in a different conception than Konstan's.

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<sup>73</sup> Konstan, *Pity Transformed*, 129.

<sup>74</sup> Konstan, *Pity Transformed*, 129.

<sup>75</sup> Konstan, *Pity Transformed*, 129 and Aristotle, 1453a2-6.

<sup>76</sup> Aristotle, 1452b6 and Johannes Vahlen (1885) via Persues Digital Library.

[www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0055%3Asection%3D1452b.](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0055%3Asection%3D1452b)

<sup>77</sup> 1456a21-22

<sup>78</sup> Gerald F. Else, *Aristotle's Poetics: the argument*, (Wetteren: De Meester Bros, 1957), 370.

<sup>79</sup> 1155a10

### Section 3: Pity as distinct from sympathy

Konstan likes to use contemporary theory to interpret Aristotle. He refers to neurological research on the emotion of fear by Joseph LeDoux, whose analysis of the emotion suggests that there are two neural pathways involved in the emotion of fear: one subcortical, only concerned with general representation of the world and able to cause instinctive reactions, and another to the sensory cortex dealing with the specific details and further conscious evaluation of the situation.<sup>80</sup> Konstan suggests that if the model of two neural pathways is correct, this would implicate that when confronted with the suffering of another we have at first an instinctive, or gut reaction, to it, making us feel a kind of pain, and on top of that have a path to cognitive assessment of the situation, which could potentially override the first reaction.<sup>81</sup>

Konstan then continues with a review of a theory by Planalp that tries to use this brain research to explain behaviour. According to this theory, we all have an instinctive *empathic* reaction to suffering (i.e. we feel *with* the other person), but in some cases this results in a reaction of panic or distress in the witness, which is explained as that person reacting to his own feeling instead, while in other cases this might result in prosocial behaviour, where one goes on to aid others, which is explained as being a *sympathetic* reaction, a reaction to the more cognitive feeling *about* the situation the other person is in.<sup>82</sup> This, Konstan says, would be able to explain why pity is a painful emotion in Greek understanding and if we look at Planalp's explanation, Konstan argues, we can see a link to the Aristotelian conception of pity that involves the cognitive element of desert as well as the element of pain.<sup>83</sup>

Still, Konstan says the meaning of pity varies from context to context and language to language and we should be careful to interpret emotional concepts from the Greeks in our own terms.<sup>84</sup> The cognitive element in emotions such as pity allows for them to be socially constructed or influenced by culture.<sup>85</sup> The cognitive element is stressed very much by Aristotle in the *Rhetoric*, where emotions are related to justice. But, so Konstan warns us, this emphasis may have slighted another use of pity which was also present in Greek times: as an elementary response to suffering or misfortune as such, closer to Planalp's empathy.<sup>86</sup> According to Konstan, this suggests that just as we now have different associations with pity,<sup>87</sup> something similar might have been the case in ancient times. In support of this idea, Konstan finds that Aristotle talks about two different opposites of pity: envy and indignation. This could correspond to the two neural pathways *and* empathy/sympathy model just mentioned.<sup>88</sup>

As support, however, these remarks do not go very far. Konstan does not say how this model could also explain any differences between envy and indignation or to which pathway either one would correspond. And sympathy, moreover, is often interpreted in a different way. A lot of people associate empathy with warm feelings for another and sympathy with cold

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<sup>80</sup> Konstan, *Pity transformed*, 11-2.

<sup>81</sup> Konstan, *Pity transformed*, 11-2.

<sup>82</sup> Konstan, *Pity transformed*, 14-5.

<sup>83</sup> Konstan, *Pity transformed*, 15.

<sup>84</sup> Konstan, *Pity transformed*, 1-2.

<sup>85</sup> Konstan, *Pity transformed*, 16.

<sup>86</sup> Konstan, *Pity transformed*, 18.

<sup>87</sup> Konstan, *Pity transformed*, 5.

<sup>88</sup> Konstan, *Pity transformed*, 18.

rational comparison.<sup>89</sup> But this is not the main point here; that is that we should keep in mind that we are interpreting Aristotle *in Aristotle*. Why would Konstan think Aristotle distinguishes pity from sympathy and in doing this, from the possibility of relating to specific types of action? As we have seen, the scientific model suggests that a cognitive neural path in the brain could “override” the (initial) reaction to the witnessing of pain as such. But whilst the arguments state that this overriding can somehow result in *not* performing a specific act, it does not say what happens to our *feeling*. Do we keep feeling it, do we not form it completely, or might we perhaps modify it via cognition? The answer is not clear from reading Konstan.

Nussbaum’s interpretation argues in favour of the idea that cognition *modifies* the feeling: we attach a different value or quality to it and we merely come to interpret, and hence define and express it differently. She says that when we look at the relationship between these different sorts of feeling and judging and (not) acting, that accounts of pity often *also* appeal to sympathy, a term she argues to be synonymous with fellow-feeling, but translated from a different Greek word: *suggnômosunê*.<sup>90</sup> This idea would work as follows: we might feel one thing, say an instinctive response to suffering, perhaps fellow-feeling, and after a cognitive step, it *becomes* pity. We do not have to *feel pity* at once. But when we do, it makes no sense to say that the *feeling* of pity is not associated with or even separate from something like fellow-feeling. It could encompass it and not only take on the psychical motivation from sensation, but, as Konstan adds, could now also find a source of action in beliefs, potentially resulting in rational desire. But whether Aristotle himself thought something like this as the source for actions motivated to help another in cases where we feel pity will be the topic of chapter four.

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<sup>89</sup> For example Brené Brown, illustrated in this video on Empathy: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw> or her TED-talk on vulnerability: [http://www.ted.com/talks/brene\\_brown\\_on\\_vulnerability](http://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability)

<sup>90</sup> Nussbaum, “Tragedy and Self-Sufficiency,” 266-7.

## Chapter 4: On accepting or rejecting Konstan's solution

In this chapter I will try to determine whether the idea of rational desire as the designated cause of prosocial action, can indeed hold up in the wider context of Aristotle's works. I see problems potentially arising in three areas: one, the idea of a sharp distinction between passion and reason as respective causes for action; two, Konstan's own argumentation; and three, Aristotle's ethics. In the following three sections I will look at each of these areas in more detail and then come to conclusions on whether we can accept or reject Konstan's views on the source of prosocial behaviour in Aristotle in section 4.

### Section 1: The distinction between reason and passion in Aristotle

From looking at the way Konstan provides explanation for action in Aristotle, one might be tempted to say that he ignores complex emotion as a cause for action, because he turns to causes that are more closely related to a modern understanding of *either* a passionate or a rational cause for action, that is: a reaction from *philanthrôpon* or from rational desire.

It is odd that Konstan, by separating the element of pain and rational desire, seems to come to the view that we can distinguish in Aristotle between a part of motivation that is associated with reason and a different part associated with passion. Yet he acknowledged himself, quite explicitly and repeatedly that, for Aristotle, reason and passion are not clearly distinct. We can also see this clearly in the complex definition of emotion: “ ‘the emotions are all those things on account of which people change and differ in regard to their judgements, and upon which attend pain and pleasure [...],’ ”<sup>91</sup> and especially in the definition of pity: “Let pity, then, be a kind of pain in the case of an apparent destructive or painful harm of one not deserving to encounter it, which one might expect oneself, or one of one's own, to suffer, and this when it seems near.”<sup>92</sup>

Still, what Konstan seems to do here is to distinguish between a feeling and a thinking element, the latter being something of a cognitive motivational desire, and the first an instinctive reaction accounted for by the word *philanthrôpon*, or “fellow-feeling”, and then ignore the possibility of acting from emotion in Aristotle. If one separates both feeling and cognition from emotion, and already believes both elements can separately cause actions and reactions, then, we might ask, what is emotion able to contribute to this picture? What role is left? How can we understand emotion if not always associated with or playing a part in actions from either more predominantly passionate or rational causes?

However, this argument is aimed at the role of emotion in Aristotle in general. Konstan only talks about the relationship between emotion and action in the specific case of pity. So no matter how potentially problematic this idea of multiple but strictly separated causes for actions might be for Aristotle's general theory of actions as resulting from emotion, we do not know if pity is perhaps an exception. Looking at Aristotle's theory of emotions in general would be too much of a digression for this thesis, so we just have to consider Konstan's account as still plausible as long as we do not find another reason to reject it. The question remains, however, whether Aristotle allows for people to act merely on the basis of

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<sup>91</sup> Konstan, *Pity transformed*, 129.

<sup>92</sup> Konstan, *Pity transformed*, 6, 94, and 134. The definition of pity can be found on page 128.

reason and a sense of what is right; in other words, does he allow for (mere) cognition to be the cause of action? We will look at Konstan's positive answer to this question in the next section.

## Section 2: Konstan's argument for accepting rational desire

Konstan illustrates the plausibility of the view that Aristotle allows for cognition to be the sole cause of action with an example in Aristotle where, according to Konstan, the action is the result of *courage*. In his translation: " 'when human beings are angry, they feel pain, [...]; but those who fight for such reasons are warlike, yes, but they are not courageous: for they do so not for the sake of what is good or in the manner dictated by reason, but rather out of emotion.'"<sup>93</sup> Because courage is definitely not an emotion, and it has no reference to an element of pain or pleasure in its definition, this proves for Konstan that actions in Aristotle can indeed be motivated by something other than emotion or passion, something more exclusively rational. The example, according to Konstan, illustrates the following: that it is possible to act from courage "in accord with reason and an assessment of what is good and noble".<sup>94</sup>

What I think Aristotle shows in the case of courage is that an action is not a good or *virtuous* unless it is accompanied by the right reason. The reference to the section on courage in Aristotle is not a clear example case of what motivates an action, but one that concerns what renders an action *virtuous*, which is different from motivation. Requiring one to know the right reason for action to make it a virtuous or right (or good) action is by no means the same as saying that actions can be *produced* by these reasons only. Konstan fails to go into the interpretation of the role of motivation in this particular context. Motivation can be what causes an action, but it could also mean that it gives someone reason to do something, without automatically implying that action follows from this.

So it is rather vague what Konstan means by rational desire, as Belfiore puts it: "Konstan [...] does not explain the difference between a "rational desire" and one caused by emotion."<sup>95</sup> And this is important because Konstan claims that Aristotle distinguishes between such a rational desire and the emotion of pity as potential respective causes for action. We may think it is safe to say that Aristotle allows for strong cognitive influences in determining actions, but it remains a question whether he does allow for this action to be (completely) without, or *separate* from, a physical stimulus such as the sensation of pleasure or pain. As we have seen before, it might also be the case that reason and a sense of what is right are in fact the *cause* of or "stimulus" for the element of pain, such as in cases of pity that depend on the element of desert, which makes it all the more complicated if we want pain and pleasure to remain absent. In order to understand what Aristotle himself has to say on this, we need to take a small excursion to his ethics.

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<sup>93</sup> Konstan, *Pity transformed*, 135. Aristotle, 1117a5-15.

<sup>94</sup> Konstan, *Pity transformed*, 135.

<sup>95</sup> Elizabeth, S. Belfiore. "Review of *Pity Transformed*, by David Konstan," *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* (14 April, 2002), 3. <http://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/2002/2002-04-14.html>

### Section 3: Aristotle's ethics and causes for action

Even though there might be issues in general with looking at the *Ethica Nichomachea* as the sole source on Aristotle's ethics in this thesis, I believe we can still look at it to find an overview of what is generally known to be Aristotle's views on the good and the good life and leave the other remarks to other papers. It is still the most studied and is deemed most reliably Aristotle's than all other works on ethics. When it comes to questions of whether Aristotle's ethical views are coherent, systematic or tend to show a development which results in some inconsistencies, I merely leave it at this and will take some precautions when coming to draw any conclusions on this.<sup>96</sup>

When we look at the good, we often ask what is good *in* a human being. Aristotle, however, takes another approach: in the *Ethica Nichomachea* he asks what is good *for* a human being and lets the answer to this question determine what is good. He believes all things have ends, or purposes in life, and they will naturally strive towards the realization of this end. For humans, this results in the idea of human flourishing. For Aristotle, it is clear all humans strive to get a good life: "No one tries to live well for the sake of some further goal; rather, being *eudaimon* is the highest end."<sup>97</sup> "Eudaimon", Aristotle explains, is a particular, long lasting state of happiness, as experienced "in a complete life".<sup>98</sup>

Aristotle distinguishes two kinds of virtues, in accordance with the two highest parts of the soul that can take part in reason: the appetitive (or desiring) and the intellectual.<sup>99</sup> The former deals with feeling in a right way, which associates with what he calls *moral virtues* and he latter with thinking in the right way, which would ultimately be expressed as *intellectual virtues*.<sup>100</sup> When we do look at his ethics, we need to be careful about the interpretations of words. For example, unlike today's associations with good and bad in ethics, in Aristotle's time and for Aristotle himself, the term was associated with good character only.<sup>101</sup> Just like this, the term "right" might be misleading if one associates this with some moral conception of being right; for Aristotle right means exactly the same as what is most beneficial to human life, which is also the same as living up to our highest potential as human beings.

Both kinds of virtues have their own character and way of attaining them. The intellectual virtues can be acquired through education, while the moral virtues will follow from habit.<sup>102</sup> Aristotle assumes that human beings have the potential to become virtuous, but that it is up to us to turn this potentiality into actuality.<sup>103</sup> The way to develop the moral virtues in a good way is through practice: "we become just by doing just acts, temperate by

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<sup>96</sup> Chris Bobonich, "Aristotle's Ethical Treatises," in *The Blackwell Guide to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, edited by Richard Kraut (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 15.

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<sup>97</sup> Richard Kraut, "Aristotle's Ethics" *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, 2014.

<sup>98</sup> 1098a16-18

<sup>99</sup> 1102b29-1103a3

<sup>100</sup> 1102b13-1103a7

<sup>101</sup> Richard Kraut, "Introduction," in *The Blackwell Guide to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, edited by Richard Kraut, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 2. doi: 10.1002/9780470776513.ch

<sup>102</sup> 1103a14-19

<sup>103</sup> 1103a25-26

doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts.”<sup>104</sup> Practice, however, can also lead to the opposite state, bad habits instead of virtue, if we fail to do the right sort of actions. So what we do makes all the difference.<sup>105</sup> Pleasure and pain, or passions in general, may motivate us to do bad things, but can be used in moral education to guide us in the right direction as well.<sup>106</sup> That is why the moral virtues are concerned with feeling delight and pain *rightly*.<sup>107</sup>

As for the intellectual virtues, Aristotle distinguishes between two parts of the rational soul: the deliberative, dealing with what is changeable and the scientific, which concerns itself with what is unchangeable.<sup>108</sup> Because for Aristotle, their excellence (virtue) lies in their nature, they point to different virtues.<sup>109</sup> Both, however, concern themselves with truth.<sup>110</sup> For the purely intellectual part this is mere truth and falsity,<sup>111</sup> for the practical and intellectual it is “truth in agreement with right desire”.<sup>112</sup>

But what is considered action and what causes it? For Aristotle, action – or praxis – can have two different senses: one more closely related to an interpretation as plain behaviour, and one more closely related to a moral interpretation, as concerning deliberative action of a rational being.<sup>113</sup> In ethics, the second sense is predominant: “Now, there are three things in the soul which contain action and truth – sensation, thought, desire. Of these sensation originates no action; this is plain from the fact that beasts have sensation but no share in action.”<sup>114</sup> But in order to understand what he writes on the causes of action, we have to know that Aristotle distinguished four types of causes: material, formal, efficient and final causes. Especially relevant in cases of action are the efficient and final causes. The efficient cause has to do with the principle that produces a state, without any reference to desire, belief or intention, whereas the final cause *is* concerned with reasons and goals.<sup>115</sup> Even with this knowledge, it is hard to understand his views on what causes action from a contemporary perspective, as a longer quote will show:

“The origin of action—its efficient, not its final cause—is choice, and that of choice is desire and reasoning with a view to an end. This is why choice cannot exist either without thought and intellect or without a moral state; for good action and its opposite cannot exist without a combination of intellect and character. Intellect itself, however, moves nothing, but only the intellect which aims at an end and is practical; for this rules the productive intellect as well, since every one who makes for an end, and that which is made not an end in the unqualified sense (but only relative to something, i.e.

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<sup>104</sup> 1103b10

<sup>105</sup> 1103b25

<sup>106</sup> 1104b9-14

<sup>107</sup> 1105a6

<sup>108</sup> 1139a13

<sup>109</sup> 1139a18

<sup>110</sup> 1139b12

<sup>111</sup> 1139a26-27

<sup>112</sup> 1139a30-31

<sup>113</sup> Elizabeth Belfiore, “Aristotle’s Concept of *Praxis* in the *Poetics*,” *The Classical Journal* 79, 2 (1983): 110.

<sup>114</sup> 1139a18-20

<sup>115</sup> Andrea Falcon, “Aristotle on Causality,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* ed. Edward N. Zalta (2015), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2015/entries/aristotle-causality/>.

of something) – only that which is *done* is that; for good action is an end, and desire aims at this. Hence choice is either desiderative thought or intellectual desire, and such an origin of action is a man.”<sup>116</sup>

What we see here is: actions follow from choice, and choice from both thinking *and* feeling; “for good action and its opposite cannot exist without a combination of intellect and character”, where character is used to denote the *moral* state, which involves a right kind of feeling pleasure and pain, and emotion. This implicates that when Konstan says action can follow from rational desire, and this desire is the consequence of *virtuous character*, and I am correct in interpreting his concept of rational desire as something that motivates action without an element of pain, pleasure, or, as a result of this, emotion; it is something that we cannot place in the picture as illustrated in the citation from Aristotle above.

What we can deduce from this is that Aristotle does seem to allow for different causes, and indeed virtuous thoughts or reasons for action that do not by themselves involve pleasure or pain, but that nonetheless have to coincide with another, feeling, dimension in order to bring action about. This is indeed what we see when we look at the specific virtue that is associated with wise action, or decision-making: *phronesis*, or practical wisdom. This is an intellectual virtue, but it still requires one to attain a high level of the moral virtues as well in order to act well.<sup>117</sup> Celano, in trying to offer an interpretation of practical wisdom in Aristotle, writes: “H.H. Joachim describes the good man as one “whose conduct must embody the mean or right amount of feeling (as its material). This amount (μέτρον) fluctuates within certain limits. It is definite in the sense that it is determined by a proportion or rule.”<sup>118</sup>

So virtuous character cannot be the source of an ethical rational desire that is not concerned with pleasure or pain; rather, when we develop virtuous knowledge and receive proper moral training, we will feel the right desires *and* know why they are right. The two cannot be separated. The cause for virtuous action, even if it concerns a rational concern for another human being, will, I think according to this paragraph, for Aristotle automatically be connected to a desire to help someone that cannot be purely rational: the rational belief will cause, or in the virtuous person automatically co-exist with, a character or disposition that concerns itself with feeling pleasure and pain, emotion, in the appropriate way.

What we can conclude from this, is that Konstan’s alternative explanation, turning away from pity, towards rational desire as a result of virtuous character as the cause for prosocial behaviour in Aristotle, failed to point out a true alternative: virtuous character, and rational desire, according to Aristotle, can still be connected to pity. In fact, it is all the more proof that for Aristotle, when it comes to action, and especially virtuous action, knowledge and feeling have to be in line.

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<sup>116</sup> 1139a31-1139b9

<sup>117</sup> Anthony Celano, *Aristotle's Ethics and Medieval Philosophy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 33-34.

<sup>118</sup> H. H. Joachim, *Aristotle the Nicomachea Ethics*, ed. D. A. Rees (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), 163, ad 1138b18–25, as cited in: Celano, *Aristotle's Ethics and Medieval Philosophy*, 14.

#### **Section 4: Can we accept prosocial action as caused by rational desire only?**

Even though I believe the previous section makes a strong case for interpreting Aristotle in a different way than Konstan, the complexities in interpreting his ethics might make it possible that, should Konstan wish to strengthen his case, he will still be able to find some explanation that works in his favour. In that case, however, I will offer a final argument against the belief that rational desire (and not emotion, in this case pity) is what we should take to be the cause for prosocial action in Aristotle. It is aimed at Konstan's starting point: that in the case where we have a strong, non-discriminatory response to suffering a *good* person will be disposed to be generous.<sup>119</sup> Even if we set the debate about what can motivate action aside, we can ask ourselves the question whether Aristotle would refer to virtuous, or *good* people when he is discussing generous action.

Even though having this particular disposition in a particular case might be considered good, this is not by itself enough for Aristotle to qualify as a virtuous person. Becoming virtuous is *hard*, not a lot of people manage to do this, he thinks. Especially when it comes to a practically wise or right action, following from someone who has attained the virtue of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom. As we have seen, this virtue requires one to obtain both the intellectual and moral virtue, so it requires education and habit which both require extensive practice. And is that a requirement that has to be fulfilled before Aristotle would allow for prosocial actions to exist?

I think not. For if he would, it would be extremely hard to understand why Aristotle would encourage people to make appeals to pity in courtrooms. If the judges were virtuous and always right in their responses, why would there be a need to influence them via emotions? Nonetheless, we see that Aristotle allows for judges to change their verdict on account of emotions, and in the case of pity, a more lenient verdict is the expected result. So even if he allows for the possibility of virtuous persons to be motivated, or causing action, from rationality only, the situations sketched by Aristotle are cases where we have the expected kind of prosocial behaviour without especially virtuous persons. The disposition has to be influenced via desert and pity.

We also see that Aristotle emphasizes the point of structure in tragedies to arouse the emotion of pity. While this may start out rationally, the realization of a terrible reversal will be able, he thinks, to move us to pity, an emotion that might influence our further judgements and hence actions. But while the ethical state of this reaction in the viewers remains somewhat vague, seeing as they cannot act directly from emotion when watching a play, it is clear he allowed for prosocial actions, in various circumstances, including court and battlefield, without references to specific virtuous persons. Moreover, the requirement for characters in a tragedy is in fact that they *are not* especially virtuous, but rather like ordinary persons (or a bit better than those). And still, they managed to plea for pity or act generous. And with this we can go to our final reflections and conclusions on the conception of pity in Aristotle.

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<sup>119</sup> Konstan, *Pity transformed*, 135.

## Conclusion

According to Aristotle, pity is an emotion, associated with the feeling of pain when a person liable to pity is witnessing undeserved suffering in another human being, which he or she may expect to happen, in the foreseeable future, to him or herself or one closely related to the person in question. From the arguments on pity as an emotion we can conclude that it is associated with pain, which can come from a number of sources. Pity is closely related to fear, though we are not yet entirely sure how this fear operates, or rather, what it is directed at; people who are without fear are without pity. We are not sure what exactly is felt in pity, except that it is a kind of pain and that it cannot be associated with a very strong impression of fear for oneself, because it would turn into a debilitating state of terror. Even though fear is able, as Konstan points out, to provide an explanation for the element of pain in pity through a painful perception of approaching harm, this does not mean that fear has to be the designated cause for pain in pity. As we have seen, Belfiore argues that for Aristotle thoughts in general can cause physical sensations such as pain as well.

Konstan argued that we have to understand pity in Aristotle as a self-regarding emotion. This would explain the influence of prior experience to suffering on one's susceptibility to feel pity, it can explain the source of pain in pity, it goes along with the tight relationship between pity and fear Aristotle mentions and it is able to explain how pitier and pitied share a similar state, and by looking at specific elements of the definition, it is on top of that able to explain why there is no desire to help another included in the definition of pity. All of these arguments, however, failed to be conclusive: we are also able to provide explanations for each of these issues that involve a conception of pity that is at least partly other-regarding, based on interpretation by Nussbaum, Belfiore and Halliwell.

But, Konstan said, Aristotle does not *need* pity to account for actions aimed at helping another in times of undeserved need, since he offers another explanatory factor: this kind of action would follow from rational desire, not pity. References to an instinctive feeling with the other person, 'fellow-feeling', and a relation to contemporary scientific models of emotion are able to offer support for this view. These, however, did not provide proof that Aristotle saw things in a similar way. We might even ask whether the combination of a rational desire to help someone in need with an instinctive reaction to suffering (regardless of desert) would not end up being classified by Aristotle as the emotion of pity anyway. Unfortunately, if we want to be absolutely sure on this point, one would need to study more topics and sections in Aristotle's works that go beyond the scope of this thesis.

Still, Konstan's solution seems tricky because it comes dangerously close to a separation of reason and passion, which, as he admits himself, seems contrary to what Aristotle thinks. Moreover, his argument that courage is the perfect example of action from rational desire without influence from emotion, failed to convince. This left him without any convincing evidence for the plausibility of rational desire as the cause for pity. I might have interpreted rational desire too strong with the condition that emotion or pain and pleasure would not be allowed to influence the rational desire. But even when we allow it to be mixed, Konstan's explanation that it would be something that a good or virtuous person would have, makes for another problem with the idea of rational desire as the designated cause for prosocial behaviour in Aristotle. Because if we look at virtuous actions, they do not only seem to contain elements from the passions as well as from our reason, but also that virtuous

character is not separate or distinct from feeling emotions. Rather, to a large extent, the ability to feel emotion in the right way is what virtuous character consists of. Rational desire would be the same as pity, only very difficult to bring to action without feeling full-on pity. But while Aristotle expressed the thought that virtue is hard to obtain, he did not think normal people would be incapable of prosocial actions. That is why, I think, when we look at the conception of pity in Aristotle, we need to conclude that it *is* very likely that it is linked to generous action and very unlikely to be separated from it.

With this, we are able to conclude that when Konstan argues that we *have* to understand pity as a purely self-regarding emotion, unable to motivate prosocial behaviour, we come to problems when we look at Aristotle's ethics and the relationship between (virtuous) emotion and (virtuous) action. Aristotle's inclusion of emotions in ethics and virtue seems to prohibit Konstan's interpretation. Nussbaum's version, that we *must* understand pity as an ethically charged emotion for Aristotle on the other hand, is still possible, but it has to deal with a lack of direct evidence of an all-important relationship between pity as an emotion and virtuous understanding of the human condition. Even if prosocial actions are linked to pity, it is yet an extra interpretative step to conclude from this that this is the result not only of other-regarding thought in general, but of thoughts on human vulnerability in particular. At least Halliwell thinks the thoughts involved concern the not sheer human vulnerability, but rather the structure of action, and identification of motive, agency, and innocence altogether.

So how should we interpret pity in Aristotle in combination with action? I think it makes most sense to leave the exact interpretation open, because even though other scholars have been able to bring forward various interpretation, the fact remains that Aristotle's work leaves room for different interpretations, precisely because not everything we would expect from a theory today, is written by him. Konstan was right in warning us that our own contemporary conception of emotion as well as passion and reason make it difficult to fully grasp what Aristotle must have meant in his texts. As for those looking for inspiration on prosocial behaviour in Aristotle, they may continue to look at what brings about cases of pity without fear of stumbling upon nothing but rational desire.

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