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ANAIS DE FILOSOFIA CLÁSSICA

MALIGNANT AND INAPPROPRIATE PASSIONS OVER DIVERSE DOMAINS

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RESUMO: Após recordar brevemente a visão oferecida pela *Ética a Nicômaco* a respeito dos modos pelos quais as paixões podem ser apropriadas, inapropriadas ou malignas, este artigo considera se, como e com que justificação essa compreensão pode ser conciliada com os papéis que as paixões assumem em outros domínios, inclusive na retórica, na poética e na política. O artigo argumenta que a propriedade ou a impropriedade do tipo da paixão e da sua ocorrência nos mais diversos domínios não são determinadas por uma noção geral ou ética do que é apropriado, mas podem variar de acordo com o domínio em causa. Considera-se como isso pode fazer sentido através de exemplos oferecidos para ilustrar e justificar essa compreensão. Ainda assim, casos em que há desacordo, quando aquilo que é inapropriado ou apropriado em um domínio não o é em outro, afiguram-se problemáticos, especialmente quando um desses domínios concerne à ética. Oferecem-se duas estratégias para dar sentido a esse problema, sendo uma delas defendida como a mais promissora. Ainda assim, as feições do pensamento de Aristóteles acerca da inveja como paixão maligna permanecem problemáticas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: paixões; paixões malignas; ética; poética; Aristóteles.

ABSTRACT: After briefly recalling the *Nicomachean Ethics*' view on the ways in which the passions can be appropriate, inappropriate or malignant, the paper considers whether, how and with what justification this understanding can be reconciled with the roles passions take in other domains, including rhetoric, poetics and politics. The paper argues that the appropriateness or inappropriateness of passion type and occurrence over diverse domains is not determined by a general or ethical notion of appropriateness, but can vary with the domain in question. How this can make sense is considered, with examples offered to illustrate and justify this understanding. Even so, cases in which what is inappropriate or appropriate in one domain is at odds with another seem problematic, especially where one of the domains concerns ethics. Two strategies for making sense of this are offered, with one argued to be most promising. Even so, features of Aristotle's thinking about the malignant passion envy remain problematic.

KEYWORDS: passions; malignant passions; ethics; poetics; Aristotle.

Let me remind you of two differences in the *Nicomachean Ethics*' understanding of passions that can be inappropriate or appropriate in their circumstances versus those here to be called malignant or defective passions. One difference concerns the character associated with those who feel them; a related difference concerns the value of their manifestations.

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First, passions that can be inappropriate or appropriate in their circumstances, passions like fear and pity, are felt by the virtuous as well as those of failed character. Those of failed character feel them in inappropriate ways; persons of virtue feel them in appropriate ways. For example, whereas gluttons are overcome by their cravings, the temperate feel the pull of bodily desire in ways that contribute to their health; whereas cowards flee from fear, the fear of the courageous helps to guide them. Second, as the foregoing indicates, manifestations of these passions can be good or bad: inappropriate manifestations are associated with bad character; appropriate manifestations are associated with virtuous character.

For malignant passion, it is different. The character of those who feel these passions is bad (first), as is arousal of these passions (second). Passions such as spite, shamelessness or envy cannot be felt appropriately; there can be no virtue associated with them; no mean of them, only the failed emotion of a failed character. Rather than inappropriate in their circumstances, malignant passions are simply inappropriate, inappropriate whatever the circumstances.

The foregoing picture arises from reflection upon passions' ethical role. In what ways, if any, do matters alter when we look more broadly, beyond ethical concerns, there to revisit passions' inappropriateness?

Aristotle takes it that passions can be inappropriate or appropriate in diverse settings, including rhetoric, aesthetics, dialectic, and politics. Their inappropriateness or appropriateness in these domains is neither obviously nor straightforwardly tied to their ethical value – even though one might say that one is to feel them in accord with the mean, at the right time, in the right place, in the right manner... (cf. *Pol* 1342b12-15, 31-33). Inappropriate or appropriate fear in tragedy, for example, differs from its inappropriate or appropriate realisation on the battlefield, in politics, or in rhetorical persuasion or comedy. Jonathan Lear touches on this when reflecting on tragedy.

Aristotle is keenly aware of the important difference between a mimesis of a serious action and the serious action of which it is a mimesis. The emotional response which is appropriate to a mimesis – tragic pleasure and catharsis – would be thoroughly inappropriate to the real event.¹

Still, how is the inappropriateness or appropriateness of passions found in tragedy to be explained, and reconciled with what is appropriate and inappropriate elsewhere?

¹ Jonathan Lear, *Open Minded*, (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard Univ. Press, 1988), p. 217.

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Any plausible answer should heed the differences amongst domains. Since Aristotle takes it that standards of correctness can differ, and can do so in light of the relevant art (*Poetics* 1460b13-15), a worthy hypothesis maintains that what counts as inappropriate and appropriate can vary, and can do so in light of the relevant art or domain, where this can include changes in what will count as an inappropriate or appropriate passion (type), and in the nature of its appropriateness or inappropriateness.

The promise of this hypothesis can be seen by considering further how Aristotle thinks about tragedy versus more ordinary life. What is appropriate and inappropriate in each is not identical, but alters with the domain in question – as Lear’s observation makes plain. The influence of domain affects not only the ways in which passions are to be realised, but can include the passion types appropriate and inappropriate. Consider that on Aristotle’s view tragedy concerns fear and pity; it allows for other passions, including love, hate, wonder, surprise and compassion; it excludes other emotional responses, explicitly what is monstrous and/or shocking, and others as well.² The exclusion of certain passion types as inappropriate, the inclusion of others as central or relevant, and the nature of inappropriateness or appropriateness is not given by a general or ethical articulation of appropriateness or inappropriateness, but is determined in light of the relevant poetic form.

Let me explain this more fully. Tragedy is the poetical form centred on catharsis through fear and pity, regarding the mimesis of an action that is complete, whole and of magnitude, an action of a better person (though not one pre-eminent in virtue) whose *hamartia* lays waste to the person’s life and those about him or her as the person moves from good to bad fortune. These confines make clear the relevance of fear and pity; they can also help to explain the relevance of amazement, surprise, fellow-feeling, love and hate, appropriate pleasures, and also the inappropriateness of what is monstrous or shocking. If so, the explanation of passions inappropriate or appropriate to tragedy depends (in part, at least) on the poetic form. Further, the roles to be taken by these passions are determined, at least in part, in light of the relevant poetic form. Fear and pity, for example, are to bring catharsis. This role is very different from their appropriate or inappropriate realisations elsewhere, and differently determined. Consider fear’s most prominent role in ethics: there it is central to courage, concerns what is most frightening, namely death in its finest conditions, on the battlefield, and is to facilitate activity there. On the fields of battle fear is not concerned with

² For further discussion and references see Stephen Leighton, “Aristotle’s Exclusion of Anger from the Experience of Tragedy,” *Ancient Philosophy*, 2003, pp. 361-381.

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mimesis, learning, taking delight, *catharsis*, *hamartia*, awe, tragedy's appropriate pleasures or plot (cf. *NE* 1115a7- b6).³

If something along these lines is the right approach, then one can allow that inappropriate and appropriate passion types and realizations in tragedy can prove quite different from ordinary life. It will be different again for comedy. Although we have very little of Aristotle's thinking about comedy, we can surmise that fear and pity will no longer be central, and perhaps not even be appropriate to the form. Moreover, we can expect that other passions become prominent, primarily those that have to do with what is ugly (*αἰσχρόν*) and involve laughter (*γέλοιοι*, *Poet* 1449a31-37), perhaps to include responses shunned in tragedy, e.g. the shocking or monstrous. Here too what counts as an inappropriate or appropriate passion type and manifestation is set, at least in part, in terms of the pertinent form (comedy), rather than by any all-encompassing or distinctly "ethical" notion of inappropriateness or appropriateness. So too passions' inappropriateness and appropriateness in rhetoric, politics, dialectic, and perhaps even in the activities of lovers of wisdom. What is to be counted as inappropriate or appropriate regarding passion, then, has much to do with the nature and goals of the particular discipline – where this can affect both the relevant passion type (fear in tragedy v. comedy) and the relevant passion occurrence (appropriate fear in tragedy v. on the battlefield).

Now, in holding that the inappropriateness and appropriateness of passion type and occurrence in diverse domains is not governed by a general or ethical concern for inappropriateness and appropriateness, the suggestion is not of simple diversity or plural domains – each seen as free standing, independently determined, or wholly disconnected activities. Rather, the diverse spheres of appropriate human activity are located within Aristotle's teleological framework, which subordinates the diversity of human activities to the good (cf. *NE* I.1). Thus, tragedy, comedy, rhetoric, dialectic and any other practice one might consider must be understood in light of this, there related to and limited by human living well and doing well (1095a14-21). Differing domains, practices, activities... may have particular and even unique places, roles, standards of excellence, etc. Nonetheless, Aristotle's teleological framework, grasped by the highest ruling science (political expertise, 1094a10-b9) depicts their place (or places), and therein limits what is inappropriate and appropriate to

³ For further discussion of the conditions and basis for the proper deployment of passions in rhetoric see Stephen Leighton, "Passion and Persuasion," Blackwell's *Companion to Aristotle*, edited by G. Anagnostopoulos, 2009, pp. 597-611.

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them – not unlike the way, for example, that generalship limits what counts as good bridle making (1094a10-15).

If this is the right way to understand passions' appropriateness and inappropriateness over diverse domains, then our opening summary requires qualification. The elucidation of appropriate versus inappropriate versus malignant passions needs to be recast, understood now as the elucidation of *ethically* appropriate versus *ethically* inappropriate versus *ethically* malignant passions. Again, what was counted as simply inappropriate versus appropriate in the circumstances seems better cast as simply inappropriate versus appropriate in *ethical* circumstances; and, perhaps, what was counted as inappropriate whatsoever their circumstances might be better cast as inappropriate whatever their *ethical* circumstances.

These qualifications need elucidation and scrutiny.

It has become clear that the forms of inappropriateness depicted at the outset do not concern inappropriateness as such, but concern ethical inappropriateness and character. It has become clear that there can be and are domains in which inappropriateness and appropriateness of passion arises – where the inappropriateness and appropriateness are not those of ethical development or character, or a global notion of inappropriateness and appropriateness, but are determined in light of their particular activity type as placed in Aristotle's teleological framework. What requires elucidation next is how matters of inappropriateness and appropriateness as set in diverse domains should be seen and understood in terms of one another.

Consider that humour and arousing laughter are bound to be inappropriate to tragedy, of service and disservice to rhetoric (*Rh* 1419b3-9, 1415a34-8, *Rhax* 1441b15-29, *Frag* 82 R3), apt to comedy, and present in everyday life. What gives rise to amusement and amusement taken can be central to comedy, out of bounds in tragedy, appropriate in ordinary life though risky (*NE* 1128a1-b9, *Rh* 1379a28-30). Differences in inappropriateness and appropriateness can have to do with the domain in question, can vary from domain to domain, and can do so both at the level of passion type and passion occurrence.

As well as underscoring the complexities involved with inappropriate and appropriate passion, the foregoing presses the concern for how inaptness or aptness in one domain is to be reconciled with its place elsewhere. Of particular interest will be how ethically inappropriate passion and occurrence is to be reconciled with its likely appropriateness elsewhere.

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Aristotle, we have seen, is not inclined to the hegemony of distinctly ethical considerations or to Socrates' cull of poetry. Indeed, while concerned for the possibility of the corruption of the young, Aristotle seems to allow that the buffoonery of comedy need not threaten the character or activities of its audience.⁴ Yet, how can Aristotle countenance what goes on in comedy (and other domains), especially when what goes on there can be inappropriate in more ordinary life?

One possibility concerns psychological impact. Struck by the power of habituation, Aristotle might simply be more optimistic than was the *Republic's* Socrates about habituation successfully overcoming what goes on in comedy. So seen, one can enjoy the pleasures of comic buffoonery, even if unseemly, and do so without real threat to moral character or subsequent behaviour.

This explanation can fit with Aristotle's views on habituation as developed in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and the place he gives to the fine arts in the *Poetics* and *Politics*. However, it allows that many pleasures of comedic buffoonery remain ethically deleterious. Their acceptability is so *all things considered*. Contra the *Republic's* Socrates, whatever deleterious affects these pleasures bring, they need not seriously impede ethical character or behaviour. So seen, certain comedic displays and arousals of passion remain inapt in a way, but overall are not sufficiently potent to be worrisome.

A different kind of explanation highlights the domains themselves. It draws attention to the fact that differences in domains address different locales within Aristotle's teleological framework, and different circumstances. The circumstances of ordinary life are not those of tragedy, comedy, rhetoric..., and *vice versa*. Their placement within Aristotle's teleological framework differs. This explanation next recalls that differences in circumstance permit that what is inappropriate to one situation is appropriate to another, and *vice versa*. Given all this, there is no justifiable *prima facie* claim that because something is inapt in one domain (e.g. ethics) it is so elsewhere (e.g. comedy) or *vice versa* – just as there is no justified *prima facie* claim, for example, that anger inaptly expressed in one situation is inapt when expressed in another, or *vice versa*. Certainly, what can be inapt in one situation can be in inapt in another, but that it is so requires further argument rather than serves as a presumption.

On a domain understanding, then, there is no supposition that because something is unseemly or deleterious outside of comedy, it is so in comedy, or *vice versa*. In this way,

⁴ Aristotle offers restriction concerning the age at which one sees comedy, including limits on indecent talk (*Politics* 1336b12-34). Still, the drastic and extensive prohibitions and restructuring of society for which Socrates is so well known are absent, e.g. *Republic* 605E ff.

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buffoonery that may be unacceptable outside of comedy need not be so in it. Appropriateness or inappropriateness in a particular domain is determined in light of the ends and form of the domain – where the domain itself is located within and limited by Aristotle’s teleological framework. Different domains and standards of appropriateness need not be in competition. What goes on in comedy can stay there – so long as what is there does not hamper the comedy itself or its place and role within Aristotle’s teleological framework.

I suggest that a domain approach to the differences of appropriateness is preferable to the psychological explanation. It fits well with and can explain why Aristotle has different standards for differing domains. It dispels the presumption that because something is inapt or apt in one domain it must be so in another. It makes good sense of Aristotle’s view that the appropriateness of particular activities can vary with their locales.⁵ Thus, it seems true to the spirit of Aristotle’s understanding of the value of passions and their manifestations in diverse domains, and helps to explain the same.

The explanation from psychological impact is less helpful. While it is available to Aristotle, and coheres with his understanding of habituation, it does not itself help to explain or justify differences amongst domains. Further, it carries with it censure for what goes on in diverse domains if they do not mirror the ethical. That censure is not dispelled, but endured in light of other and overall benefits. Yet, this hardly captures Aristotle’s attitude to the place of passions in diverse domains: he gives various passions roles in these domains, and legitimizes their place there.⁶ Thus, the domain approach provides a preferable explanation.

We have a promising explanation of appropriate and inappropriate passion over diverse domains. The explanation is particularly credible for passions first described as inappropriate, and then spoken of as *ethically* inappropriate, i.e. those passions whose ethical inaptness or aptness is circumstance sensitive, fear, anger, and so forth. What the reflections on diverse domains and activities has added to the initial understanding is that not only are differences amongst ethical circumstances relevant to passions’ evaluation, but also that differences in the activity kind (e.g., comedy, tragedy) bring additional differences (including differences in circumstances) also relevant to the evaluation of passions. The nature of the ongoing activity, and its place in the teleological framework involves differences that can help

⁵ For example, what is appropriate in playing and enjoying music is affected by whether it serves relaxation, excellence or amusement. Again, while the works of Pauson and Polygnotos appear perfectly acceptable in themselves, exposure to the former (but not the latter) provides poor training for youth (*Politics* 8.5-7, cf. *Poetics* 1448a1-6).

⁶ The evidence, of course, is not all on one side. See for example *Rh* I.1 – where passions are repudiated as appropriate to rhetoric. See also *NE* 1134a17-23.

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to explain, for example, why ethical character and ethically appropriate emotional expression need not be threatened by what is barred or permitted in comedy, rhetoric, politics... and *vice versa*. In this way, what is counted as ethically inappropriate expressions of fear, pity or anger might find appropriate places in tragedy, dialectic, rhetoric, and so forth. What about malignant passions?

It is credible that arousing envy, for example, can be useful in rhetorical persuasion, dialectical argument, political recrimination, and so forth. This, in turn, would help to explain the *Rhetoric's* examination of envy in preparation for its use (*Rh* II.10 1387b22-23, 1388a25-28), and his claim that rhetoricians are to arouse it.

After this, when the nature and importance [of the facts] are clear, lead the hearers into emotional reactions. These are pity and indignation and anger and hatred and envy and emulation and strife. (III.19 1419b25-28, translated by Kennedy)

Still, there are difficulties. Malignant passions include baseness within them, are themselves bad, as is the character of those who feel them (*NE* 1107a8-13, *Rh* 1388a34-6). Without further argument, this suggests that there should be no occasion on which they are felt, not simply (as the domain explanation proposes) that there should be no “ethical” occasion upon which they are felt. With what justification do rhetoricians and others arouse malignant passions, passions that are inappropriate to feel?

One possibility is stand with those who see speech as a plaything, a matter of drugging, beguiling, sorcery, a simple agent of persuasion (*Helen* 82B11, 21, 14, 11, *Gorgias* 453a2-3, cf. *Ion* 535e). Although this might satisfy Gorgias or Ion, it is unlikely to satisfy Aristotle. Aristotle takes rhetoric to concern persuasion, but limits what is permissible, disallowing, for example, the unjust use of speech or creating a debased understanding (*Rh* 1355a26-b7). These limits may be vague, but they would seem to prohibit the approaches of Gorgias and Ion. Indeed, were their approaches to reflect rhetoric as it should be, this would place rhetoric beyond the limits of what Aristotle counts as a justified practice or realm (cf. *NE* I.1). If so, this would motivate Aristotle to dismiss rather than foster rhetoric – as it did Socrates (*Gorgias*, 462b). An instrumental defence of malignant passions in rhetoric (and by extension elsewhere) fails to meet Aristotelian requirements for legitimacy.

Alternatively, one might suggest that these worries are over blown – owing too much to the *Republic's* Socrates, limiting what is acceptable in diverse domains by “ethical” concerns. As noted earlier, Aristotle is sensitive to different methods and procedures being appropriate to different domains. Since we have allowed a place for what would otherwise be

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counted as ethically inappropriate expression of passion arising in diverse domains, why not so for malignant passions? Perhaps we should simply take Aristotle to have adopted a hands-off approach. So seen, one can rouse envy, spite or shamelessness in rhetoric, and elsewhere, yet be unconcerned that it is bad, or that its arousal expresses and fosters bad character. This might be supported by arguing that any potential damage in allowing these passions is minimal, the potential benefit is great, and the power of proper habituation is so strong that serious worry about their use in these domains is idle.

This suggestion too is troublesome. It is an amalgam of the psychological impact and domain responses, having all the disadvantages of the former. Moreover, consider making the same argument regarding those actions Aristotle offers as analogous to malignant passions, i.e., murder, theft and adultery. There seems to be no case for supposing that in rhetoric or elsewhere, and with interests other than ethical ones in place, these become appropriate. Perhaps their representations could be appropriate on stage or elsewhere, but they are not. Rather, they are inappropriate full stop, outright wrong. If anything can be said in their defence, it is liable to be that it is only a purported case, or somehow necessary in the circumstance and excusable in light of this. Certainly, the fact that the context might be rhetoric or comedy or dialectic makes no difference.

To reinforce this thought let us return to the *Nicomachean Ethics*' understanding of defective actions, and the rare example of Aristotle arguing with a playful tease.

Hence in doing these things we can never be correct, but must invariably be in error. We cannot do them well or not well – by committing adultery, for instance, with the right woman at the right time in the right way. On the contrary, it is true without qualification that to do any of them is to be in error (1107a15-18, translated by Irwin).

Mustn't Aristotle conclude the same for malignant passions? Feeling envy is not murder or adultery, but each is base, without inherent goodness. Thus, despite its potential usefulness, envy should have no proper place in rhetoric, poetics or elsewhere due to its malignant nature, rhetoric's and other venue's own evaluative limits, and Aristotle's views on what counts as an acceptable human practice.

We have made progress, but remain in a quandary from which I see no proper escape. Explicating the *Nicomachean Ethics*' view of inappropriate passion, we find two distinct cases, inappropriateness in circumstances and inappropriateness full stop. Aristotle's ethical framework has ways of making sense of each.

Where the concern shifts from ethical matters to other domains, the understanding of inappropriateness and appropriateness also shifts, doing so in terms of the relevant domain as

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situated in Aristotle's teleological framework. In view of this, things inappropriate in their circumstances as found in everyday life can prove appropriate elsewhere, and *vice versa*. This occurs without threatening ethical appropriateness or the maintenance of ethical character. Moreover, it indicates that inappropriateness and appropriateness in diverse domains need not be straightforwardly at the behest of what is ethically inappropriate or appropriate.

Matters are different for malignant passions. Their base nature seems to prevent their expression ever being appropriate – whatever the circumstances or domain, no matter how strategically useful or advantageous. Yet, Aristotle's *Rhetoric* both prepares for rousing malignant passions, and gives envy a role. Our best understanding that could allow this has been an explanation *via* psychological impact, but that is not without difficulty. We may understand better that and why the poets were wrong to attribute envy to the gods, but remain puzzled why Aristotle prepares us to deploy it in rhetoric. Our puzzlement can only increase as we recollect that the *Philebus's* Socrates offers a quite different view of *phthonos*, finding it to be unjust, but nonetheless apt to comedy (49-50).⁷

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