

Fear as a Destructive Pain

Human Nature and Violent Affections in the *Eudemian Ethics* of Aristotle

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Abstract In the discussion on bravery in *Eth. Eud.*, III, 1 Aristotle determines the objects that are absolutely dreadful by means of an explicit reference to 'human nature'. This reference has not received much consideration from scholars in the field. The present paper argues that the reference under discussion entails a notion of 'human nature' that corresponds to a human being's psychological disposition to endure fearful emotions – that is to say, painful emotions that imply the representation of a pain capable of destroying a human being – up to a certain degree of intensity. Furthermore, this article claims that the same notion of 'human nature' is implied in *Eth. Eud.*, II, 8 in the discussion of involuntariness concerning the cases of mixed actions where Aristotle refers to the 'nature' of the agent as a criterion to determine the involuntariness of an action.

Keywords Aristotle. Human nature. Sou. Disposition. Fear. Sensible affections. Physical pains.

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1 Introduction

Aristotle's ethics may be characterized as 'naturalistic' in the sense that they assign to nature an explicative and evaluative role.¹ Having in mind this definition, the most representative thesis of Aristotle's ethical naturalism may be identified by the famous definition of happiness as an "activity of the soul in accordance with virtue" (*Eth. Nic.*, I, 6, 1098a 7; Ross 1984).² This definition in *Nicomachean Ethics* I, 6 is the result of an argument in which the natural function (*ergon*) of the human being is identified with the activity of the rational soul. Various scholars have argued that the '*ergon* argument' is based on a fundamental principle of Aristotle's metaphysics: the principle according to which in natural substances 'nature' corresponds to the essence and to the end; that for the sake of which the process of generation takes place.³

The definition of happiness of *Eudemian Ethics* (*Eth. Eud.*), concerning the idea that happiness is an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue, does not present relevant differences with regard to *Eth. Nic.*; however it does not contain the reference to human nature. In any case, the idea that the reason of a human being corresponds to a 'nature' is unequivocally stated in other points of *Eth. Eud.*⁴

In this paper I will not address the acknowledged Aristotelian acceptance of 'human nature' as a rational principle. I will instead attempt to show that in some passages of *Eth. Eud.* - the discussion on bravery in III, 1 and the discussion on the involuntary in II, 8 - Aristotle uses another notion of 'human nature': a notion which concerns the sensible affections and serves as a criterion for the ethical evaluation in certain circumstances.

1 Miller (1995, 27). I am really thankful to Cristina Viano and Carlo Natali for the challenging discussions and sharp comments on this paper. I thank the audience of the Venice workshop (especially Pierre-Marie Morel and Francesco Binotto) and I show deep gratitude to Iain MacPherson for the careful linguistic revision without which this English version would not have been possible. This English version of the paper has also benefited from its presentation at the 5th FINO (Consorzio di Dottorato in Filosofia Nord-Ovest) Graduate Conference held in Pavia in September 2018.

2 The definition of happiness of *Eth. Eud.*, is formulated in a slightly different way: it is the "activity of a perfect life according to a perfect virtue" (*Eth. Eud.*, II, 1, 1219a 38-39; Rackham 1981).

3 See Natali 1989, Miller 1995, Annas 1996 and Irwin 2007. A non-naturalistic interpretation of the *ergon* argument, that is a reading according to which the notion of 'nature' in *Eth. Nic.*, I, 6 does not have an ontological relevance, is defended for example by Ackrill (1974), Destrée (2002), Murgier (2013).

4 "The spirit as a whole both in the uncontrolled and in the self-controlled man acts voluntarily, and in neither case does the man act under compulsion, but one of the parts in them so acts - for we possess by nature both parts; since rational principle is a natural property [...] and also desire is natural [...]. Therefore, each of the two persons in a way acts not in accordance with nature, but absolutely each does act according to nature, though not according to the same nature" (*Eth. Eud.*, II, 8, 1224b 25-1225a 1).

In more detail: (1.1) I will argue that the mention of ‘human nature’ presented in *Eth. Eud.*, III, 1 (1228b 24-26), in the discussion on the objects ‘absolutely’ fearful, entails a notion of human nature which is determined as a psychological limit of endurance regarding fear; (1.2) I will remark that fear is an affection involving a representation of a physical psychological pain which is destructive for a human being, accompanied by a pain of the same kind; (2) taking as a piece of evidence another passage of III, 1 (1229b 13-21), I will argue that an aspect of human nature may be more precisely defined as a disposition of the human soul to forbear fearful emotions up to a certain limit; (3) I will show that the notion of human nature mentioned in *Eth. Eud.*, III, 1 appears also in the section of *Eth. Eud.*, II, 8 on involuntariness in the cases of mixed action; (4) and finally I will draw some concluding remarks on the ethical implications of the Aristotelian characterization of human nature as related to pains that undermine the physical integrity of a human being.

1.1 Human Nature as a Criterion for Determining Fearful Objects

In the *Eudemian Ethics* there is one explicit reference to ‘human nature’. In III, 1, 1228b 24-26, in the discussion on bravery, ‘human nature’ is referred to as a criterion for the discernment of objects that are absolutely fearful.⁵ As far as I can see, this reference has not received much consideration from scholars in the field of Aristotelian studies.⁶ In my opinion it deserves more attention since it introduces a notion of human nature conceived of as a psychological limit of endurance regarding fear.

The passage of *Eth. Eud.*, III, 1 which contains the reference at issue constitutes the solution of an *aporia* presented at the beginning of the discussion of bravery. The *aporia* concerns the behaviour of

⁵ Even though the full expression (‘human nature’) is missing, the word ‘nature’ is used in some other passages of *Eth. Eud.* to denote the nature of a person or, seemingly, of human beings. See II, 8, 1225a 18-19, 1225a 20-24, 1225a 25-26, on the ‘voluntary’ and ‘involuntary’; II, 3, 1221a 19-22, on temperance and the opposite vices of profligacy and insensitiveness; and II, 5, 1222a 36-38 on the determination of virtue as a middle state. I will consider the occurrences of ‘nature’ in II, 8 later on.

⁶ I am here in particular referring to the major twentieth and twenty-first century commentaries on the *Eudemian Ethics*: for example Dirlmeier 1962, Décarie 1978, Donini 1999, Kenny 2011, Wood 2013 and Inwood 2013 where I did not find any specific comment regarding the expression ‘human nature’ in the passage under discussion (III, 1, 1228b 24-26), nor any attempt to grasp its meaning. A greater interest among scholars has been generated by the reference to the ‘nature’ of the agent in the discussion on the involuntary of *Eth. Eud.*, II, 8. On this point see for example Lefebvre (forthcoming) and Charles (2012); I will discuss this issue later on in the text. A more general analysis, devoted to the notion of ‘nature’ in the so-called ‘common’ books (that is *Eth. Nic.*, V-VII), is provided by Donini (2014).

the courageous person: more particularly the link between the courageous person's emotional reaction and the entity of the fearful event to which he reacts. The structure of the *aporia* may be reconstructed as follows:

A) Aristotle enumerates some opinions of other people on the brave person and the coward. These opinions emphasize an asymmetry between the intensity of the emotional reaction - of both the brave person and the coward - and the dimension of the frightful event. It is believed that:

- (1.1) The courageous person is *fearless*;
 - (1.1.1) Or fears only *slightly* things of great *magnitude*;
- (1.2) The courageous person endures things *very* fearful;
- (2.1) The coward is *prone to fear*;
 - (2.1.1) And fears *everything*, and *intensely* so;
- (2.2) The coward does not endure anything, even things that are *only slightly* fearful. (italics added)

B) Aristotle develops dialectically the implications of the cited opinions in order to refute them. Commenting on the opinion (1.2) - "the courageous person endures things very fearful" - he asks what are the things the courageous person endures: things that are fearful to somebody else or fearful to himself? If the brave person endured the things that were fearful to somebody else, his behaviour would not be remarkable (in fact, facing those things fearful to somebody else he would not test himself). If he endured the things that were fearful to himself, what would be fearful to him - Aristotle states - would be many things of great magnitude (*Eth. Eud.*, III, 1, 1228b 11-13). The opinion (1.2), indeed, established that the courageous person endured things highly fearful; but:

fearful things are productive of fear in the particular person to whom they are fearful - that is, if they are very fearful, the fear they produce will be violent, if slightly fearful, it will be weak; so it follows that the brave person's fears are great and many. (*Eth. Eud.*, III, 1, 1228b 12-15; transl. Rackham 1981)

Following the reasoning quoted above, the courageous person seems to be someone who feels multiple and significant fears. But this goes against the opinions (1.1) and (1.1.1) which established that the brave person was fearless or had only slight fears regarding few objects (extremely fearful things). From here arises the unsolvable question: does the courageous person not fear anything, or a few things and slightly, or does he feel multiple and significant fears?

The claim that I underlined with the quotation “fearful things are productive of fear in the particular person to whom they are fearful”⁷ seems like a tongue-twister but has a theoretically relevant content: it summarizes a conception of fear that I will call ‘intentional’, a conception that – as we will see – Aristotle will draw on in his solution with some fundamental specifications. According to the conception in question, a fearful object produces fear in a person that feels it; which means that the fearful object is always fearful to somebody.⁸ A further implicit claim of the mentioned view is that the fearful impression is connoted by a certain degree of intensity, in reason of which the object might be said to be fearful to a certain degree. The conjunction of the two conditions (the fact that fear produced by an object is: 1. always produced in a certain subject; and 2. characterized by a certain degree of intensity) entails that the intensity of fear produced by an object is always provoked in a subject, and thus shows itself in the emotional reaction of the person in which the impression is produced. As a consequence, according to the view in question, a very fearful object produces strong fearful impressions in a subject, whilst a slightly fearful object produces weak impressions in him.⁹

Aristotle’s solution to the *aporia* (if the courageous person does not fear anything, or a few things and slightly, or instead feels multiple and significant fears) consists in the distinction of two meanings of ‘fearful’: fearful ‘absolutely’ and fearful ‘to a particular person’. The text is the following:

But perhaps ‘fearful’ is an ambiguous term, like ‘pleasant’ and ‘good’. Some things are pleasant and good absolutely, whereas others are so to a particular person but absolutely are not so, but on the contrary are bad and unpleasant – all the things that are beneficial for the base, and all those that are pleasant to children *qua* children. And similarly, some things are fearful absolutely and

⁷ φόβου ποιητικὰ ἐκάστῳ ᾧ φοβερά (*Eth. Eud.*, III, 1, 1228b 12).

⁸ With the word ‘intentional’ I am not referring to a phenomenological concept; I refer, instead, to the idea according to which an object is always fearful to somebody. Furthermore, I suggest that this idea sheds light on a necessary condition of the fearful phenomenon, that is on the fact that the fearful occurrence is necessarily subjected to a subjective representation of something as fearful. Exposing such an idea, in my opinion, Aristotle assumes the perspective of a phenomenological analysis of fear in the sense that he focuses on fear *qua* phenomenon.

⁹ The view introduced in *Eth. Eud.*, III, 1, 1228b 12-13 consists of the idea that the intensity of fear provoked by an object depends, at least to a certain extent, on the subject who feels the emotion. This dependence concerns the fact that fear necessarily manifests itself through an inner representation of the object in the subject. The emotional reaction of the subject therefore – at a phenomenal level of analysis – is the measure of the intensity of fear produced by an object, that is the capability of the object to produce fear.

others to a particular person: thus the things that the coward *qua* coward fears are some of them not fearful to anybody and others only slightly fearful, but things that are fearful to most people, and all that are fearful to human nature, we pronounce to be fearful absolutely. But the brave person is fearless in regard to them, and endures fearful things of this sort, which are fearful to him in one way but in another way are not – they are fearful to him *qua* human being, but *qua* brave not fearful except slightly, or not at all. Yet such things really are fearful, for they are fearful to most people. (*Eth. Eud.*, III, 1, 1228b 17-30)¹⁰

1.2 Human Nature as a Capacity of a Human Being to Feel Fearful Affections

The things that the coward fears are not fearful absolutely, but fearful to him; for most people they are not fearful, or only slightly so. The things that are fearful to most people and to human nature, on the contrary, are absolutely fearful.

Compared to the intentional conception of fear exposed a few lines before (the view according to which the fearful event entails a representation of an object as fearful to a subject), Aristotle's own conception presents an important specification, or rather a correction: (1) the representation is not always faithful to the reality in question, which implies that (2) the reality is the point of reference for the adequacy of the representation.¹¹ The representation varies according to the subject; more particularly it depends both on the character of the singular individual and on some characteristics of human nature. To this point I shall return in a moment.

To define the objects objectively fearful, Aristotle is not content with a statistical argument; he does not only claim that the objects objectively fearful are those that appear fearful to most people. He mentions also: "all [the things] that are fearful to human nature"

10 In the cited passage the analogy with the 'good' is used to explain and solve the semantic ambiguity of the term 'fearful'. A comparison between the dialectical analysis of the two notions shows an interesting difference in the Aristotelian solutions. According to Aristotle what is good absolutely (that is good in the true sense) is good for the *spoudaios*, the virtuous man; what is 'fearful' absolutely, on the contrary, is fearful to most people. In the case of goodness, then, the criterion is the behaviour of a human being who constitutes an exception compared to the average person; in the case of fearfulness, instead, the criterion is the behaviour of the average person.

11 If the intentional conception of fear presented in *Eth. Eud.*, III, 1, 1228b 12-13 corresponds to an analysis of fear *qua* phenomenon, the Aristotelian conception integrates the results of such an analysis (the idea according to which the fearful emotion necessarily entails a subjective representation of the object as fearful) in a wider conception, whose aim is to define what it is that, in itself, is a fearful reality.

(*Eth. Eud.*, III, 1, 1228b 25).¹² It seems to me that this remark, placed beside the data concerning the majority of people, involves a deeper level of analysis; it goes beyond the quantitative observation of different cases and designates an intrinsic structure of things. The mention of human nature, therefore, in my opinion entails an ontological conception of human nature pertinent to the context of argumentation that requires its use, namely the examination of fearful objects.

First of all, I think that the expression 'human nature' in *Eth. Eud.*, III, 1, 1228b 25 stands for a universal characteristic, a characteristic that concerns all people as they belong to the human species. This interpretation flows from the example which explains how the two meanings of 'fearful' (fearful 'absolutely' and 'to a particular person') may solve the *aporia* concerning the behaviour of the brave:

the brave person is fearless in front of them [the things absolutely fearful] and endures the things that in a sense are fearful to him and in another not: they are fearful to him *qua* human being, but *qua* brave not fearful except slightly, or not at all. (*Eth. Eud.*, III, 1, 1228b 26-30)

The things objectively fearful – that is the things fearful to human nature – in the particular case of the brave person, are the things that are fearful to him '*qua* human being' and not fearful to him '*qua* brave'. In other contexts of dialectical clarification, based on similar distinctions between a universal and an individual term – taken as two different descriptions of the same thing – the universal term stands for the corresponding genre or species. Considering the contraposition with the expression '*qua* brave', it seems clear to me that the expression '*qua* human being', in the quoted example, designates the brave as he belongs to the human species, distinguishing him logically from the brave as he is a person with a certain character. If (1) the expression '*qua* human being', in the given example, clarifies in what sense an object may be fearful for human nature, and if (2) the brave '*qua* human being' is the brave as he belongs to the human species, it turns out that (3) in the Aristotelian argument the notion of human nature corresponds logically to the one of human species.

How and to what extent does belonging to the human species influence the emotional reaction of the brave person?

From an Aristotelian point of view, a fearful emotion entails a representation of the object as fearful and the object itself constitutes the point of reference for the adequateness of the representation. This means that the intensity of the emotional reaction toward a cer-

¹² τὰ δὲ τοῖς πλείστοις φοβερὰ, καὶ ὅσα τῇ ἀνθρωπίνῃ φύσει, ταῦθ' ἀπλῶς φοβερὰ λέγομεν (*Eth. Eud.*, III, 1, 1228b 25).

tain object depends, at least in part, on a determinate disposition of the object to produce fear. It is indeed only because the object itself possesses a capacity to produce fear up to a certain degree of intensity that a certain emotional reaction might be adequate to it. For example, if a human being sees an ant, normally, he does not feel fear because the ant is not such as to provoke in him a fearful emotion.

According to Aristotle's view, the capability of the fearful object to provoke a fearful impression, in turn, is measured by human nature. Going back to the example above: the ant does not provoke fear in human beings because it is not fearful for human nature.

If the intensity of fear toward a certain event is, at least partly, determined by the real capacity of the object to produce fear, and if the real capacity of the object to produce fear is in turn measured by human nature, it follows that 'human nature' is in some way characterized by the disposition or capacity of undergoing an impression of the object as productive of fear (in other words as fearful), and that the fearful emotion may be produced in such a capacity. 'Human nature', conceived of in such a way, is one of the elements on which depends the potential reaction of a human being toward the objects of the surrounding world. In some cases, as with the sight of an ant, human beings do not feel fear and therefore it is possible to see nature at work, as an element determining the action. In other cases, as for the coward trembling in front of the ant, nature is, on the contrary, not recognizable as a determinant factor of the action.

2 Human Nature as a Disposition of the Soul to Endure the Perception of a Destructive Pain

But how should human nature be construed so that for a human being it would be possible to feel fear? A passage further on in the text (*Eth. Eud.*, III, 1, 1229b 13-21) at the end of the discussion of fearful objects helps, I think, to clarify this point.

In the part of text examined so far, the objects 'absolutely' fearful have been characterized by means of a reference to human nature. Afterwards, they are defined "in a more precise way" (*Eth. Eud.*, III, 1, 1229a 32-33), with reference to the emotion which they provoke. The definition presented in the course of this second discussion is recapitulated at the beginning of the passage which I here quote:

(1) The fearful things therefore in relation to which we speak of a person as brave are, we have said, those that appear likely to cause pain of the destructive kind, (2) provided that these appear close at hand and not far off, (3) and are or appear to be of a magnitude proportionate to a human being; (3.1) for some things must

necessarily appear fearful to every human being and throw everybody into alarm, since it is quite possible that, just as heat and cold and some of the other forces are above us and above the disposition of the human body, so also are some mental sufferings. (*Eth. Eud.*, III, 1, 1229b 13-21)

(1) In the first part of the passage, Aristotle recapitulates the definition of the fearful objects given in “the more precise examination” which has just ended: the fearful things are those that appear likely to cause a pain of the destructive kind.

It has already been pointed out that a fearful event entails a fearful perception of the object, in other words a representation in the subject of the object that produces fear. In this passage, and in the discussion that it recapitulates, a new element comes into play: a representation to produce fear must be a representation of a pain, more precisely of a destructive kind of pain. A destructive pain, as it has been explained some lines before by Aristotle, is a pain whose nature seems likely to destroy life and hence to lead to death (*Eth. Eud.*, III, 1, 1229a 39-1229b 10). What frightens enormously in death, indeed, is the perception of it as capable of destroying, destroying physically.

The pains of a destructive kind which are the cause of fear are therefore pains capable of producing physical destruction: physical pains that we could call ‘violent’. The representation of other kinds of pains, for example psychological pains related to shame, or envy, are identified with other emotions and provoke a different pain from the one generated by fear (*Eth. Eud.*, III, 1, 1229a 35-1229b 1). This latter point has a great theoretical relevance: the representation of a destructive pain is fearful also in the sense that it is accompanied by a true pain. This pain, truly experienced, is typical of fear; it is different from the pains felt in other emotions, which in turn entail a representation of a pain different from the destructive one. It is a psychological pain of the same kind as the one that is envisaged.

(2) In the second part of the passage under analysis, Aristotle adds that the things capable of provoking a destructive pain may generate a pain, on condition that they appear upcoming. This remark on the imminence of pain implies clearly a further point; fear is always a forecast of pain; a forecast which consists in feeling in advance a pain that is expected as upcoming.

(3) In the third part of the passage, Aristotle presents a final condition concerning the fearful objects: the fearful objects, as it concerns their magnitude, must be, or must appear to be, proportionate to a human being. Taking into account the intentional character of fear, the reference to the fearful object’s magnitude regards the intensity of the emotion that that kind of object provokes.

As it will be remembered, in the course of the discussion on the objects ‘absolutely’ fearful, the view according to which human na-

ture is the measure of the fearful objects was used to explain the possibility that the fear experienced by the coward or the brave person was too much or too little compared to the effective capacity of an event to generate it. In that part of the discussion, the question was the adequacy of the representation regarding reality. Here, in the present passage, the discussion is enriched by new implications.

The research field has been cleared of 'apparent' fearful objects: in other words, the objects fearful 'to somebody'. What is at issue here is the relationship between the representation of an object absolutely fearful (that is a representation faithful to reality) and human nature. The fearful emotion has already been characterized as relating to an upcoming pain which undermines the physical integrity of a human being. Now, to define the fearful objects with reference to the fearful emotion that they produce, one must exclude the case in which the fearful representation is not commensurate to a human being in reason of an excess of intensity.

Before going on with my commentary, an ambiguity in the Aristotelian text needs to be clarified. Given that fear is an emotional representation, namely a representation combined with pain, the reference to the proportion of fear with respect to a human being, in my view, does not mean only that the pain represented must be commensurate to a human being. Since the fearful representation is accompanied by a true pain, it means that even the pain accompanying the representation must be such.

The fact that Aristotle has in mind fearful objects whose magnitude exceeds human nature is quite clear, in my opinion, in the final part of the passage. This part contains a justification of the position previously established according to which the fearful objects must be of a magnitude proportionate to a human being. Commenting on it, Aristotle argues (3.1):

for some things must necessarily appear fearful to every human being and throw everybody into alarm. (*Eth. Eud.*, III, 1, 1229b 17-18)

The statement is exemplified by means of a comparison between the body and the human soul which allows us to explore a hypothesis that seems very plausible for the philosopher. As heat, cold and some other natural forces can be stronger than the disposition of the body to receive them, nothing prevents a similar situation taking place as regards the affections of the human soul.¹³

13 οὐθὲν γὰρ κωλύει, ὥσπερ θερμὰ καὶ ψυχρά, καὶ τῶν ἄλλων δυνάμεων ἐνίας ὁ πὲρ ἡμᾶς εἶναι καὶ τὰς τοῦ ἀνθρωπίνου σώματος ἕξεις· οὕτω καὶ τῶν περὶ τὴν ψυχὴν παθημάτων (*Eth. Eud.*, III, 1, 1229b 19-21).

Referring to the things that must necessarily appear “fearful to every human being and throw everybody into alarm”¹⁴ Aristotle alludes to a class of fearful objects not mentioned before.¹⁵ Until now he has discussed: 1) the objects fearful to somebody, which appear fearful to a determinate individual in reason of a determinate character; and 2) the objects absolutely fearful, which are fearful for the majority of people and for human nature. The new class without name is constituted by the objects which appear and are fearful to every human being, and throw everybody into alarm, even the brave person *qua* brave. These objects, following the Aristotelian comparison, are such as to produce an extremely fearful affection, so fearful to exceed the disposition of the human soul to endure it. If we assume the notion of disposition in the acceptance of ‘capacity’, we can say that the fearful emotions in question are those which exceed the capacity of the human soul to feel fearful emotion; they exceed it because they are so powerful as to be unbearable.

The extremely intense fear to which Aristotle alludes here entails a foresight of a destructive pain which is so intense that a human being cannot forbear its ‘sight’. Considering that the sight is not just cognitive, but it is also accompanied by a pain of the same kind as the one represented, the fearful objects which terrify the human being are also such as to exceed the capacity of the human soul to forbear the pain which accompanies their representation.

The reference to the disposition of the human soul to forbear fearful affections up to a certain degree of intensity, to which Aristotle alludes in his example, fits perfectly to the notion of ‘human nature’ as a criterion for the definition of the objects absolutely fearful employed in the previous part of the discussion. In this part of the discussion, it will be remembered, ‘human nature’ was mentioned to indicate a disposition or capacity of a person, as being a member of the human species, to be affected by an object, as it is capable of producing fear.

14 ἕνα γὰρ ἀνάγκη παντὶ φαίνεσθαι ἀνθρώπῳ φοβερὰ καὶ διαταράττειν (*Eth. Eud.*, III, 1, 1229b 17-18).

15 The expression διαταράττειν (throw everybody into alarm) has a double effect in the context of the passage here under analysis. On the one hand it shows that the class of objects discussed in such a passage falls within the group of the fearful objects: in the *Rethoric*, indeed, the concept of ‘throwing into alarm’ figures in the definition of fear (*Reth.*, II, 5, 1382a 21-22). On the other hand, the fact that the expression in question appears only at this point of the examination on fearful objects (*Eth. Eud.*, III, 1, 1229b 17-18) confirms that the class of object here examined is characterized by the production of fearful impressions that are exceptionally intense – and for this reason it results as heterogeneous compared to the previous ones.

3 Human Nature as a Criterion for the Determination of the Voluntariness in the Cases of Mixed Actions

The notion of 'human nature' mentioned in the discussion on the fearful objects of *Eth. Eud.*, III, 1, in my opinion, is involved also in the famous examination of the cases of mixed action of *Eth. Eud.*, II, 8. More particularly the discussion in *Eth. Eud.*, II, 8 provides a concrete example of the circumstances in which human nature, characterized as a limit of endurance for a destructive pain, constitutes a determinant element for acting and for ethical evaluation. My aim now is to show that in the two mentioned passages, *Eth. Eud.*, III, 1 and *Eth. Eud.*, II, 8, Aristotle refers to the same notion of human nature.

In the discussion on the 'involuntary' of II, 8, the examination of mixed actions follows the examination of an *aporia* on the self-controlled and the uncontrolled which can be summarized as follows: the self-controlled and the uncontrolled do they act under force, as they are determined by an external principal, or do they act voluntarily (*Eth. Eud.*, II, 8, 1224a 30-36)? Emphasizing the distance from this examination, Aristotle presents the examination of mixed action saying that it will concern the cases in which:

people are said to act under compulsion and of necessity without a disagreement between rational principle and appetite, when they do something that they consider actually painful and bad but they are faced by flogging or imprisonment or death if they do not do it. (*Eth. Eud.*, III, 1, 1225a 1-6)

The problem is to determine if these actions are forced or voluntary, because in principle:

it is open to them [the agents] not to do them but to endure the penalty threatened. (*Eth. Eud.*, III, 1, 1225a 6-8)

We are here confronted by a group of cases in which the action seems determined by external circumstances; the agent is led to accomplish an action, considered painful and bad, to avoid a threat. In other words, the action is accomplished under the effects of a fearful feeling provoked in the agent by an external threat. According to Aristotle, these kinds of actions may be classed as voluntary or involuntary depending on the case. They are voluntary if the resolution to act rests with the agent: that is if the agent may decide not to act and to undergo the pain threatened. On the contrary, they are forced and so involuntary - at least in a certain way- if the resolution to act or not to act does not rest with the agent. Even if the principle of the action is not external to the agent, the action is forced whether the alternative to it appears as an evil more painful than the action it-

self, so painful as to compel psychologically the agent to act (*Eth. Eud.*, II, 8 1225a 8 - 1225a 19).¹⁶

The meaning of 'forced' introduced in the discussion on mixed action is theoretically framed by means of a reference to the notion of 'end'. Aristotle argues that the action is forced, not 'absolutely', but 'for the sake of an end'; the agent's choice, indeed, does not concern the action itself but the end for the sake of which the action is done. The action is forced when something evil is done for the sake of something good, or rather to avoid a greater and more painful pain (*Eth. Eud.*, II, 8, 1225a 16). The violent and compulsory element of the action lies in the fact that the end is chosen on the basis of something external to the agent, a threat of a terrible pain, more powerful than the agent's own capacity to forbear it.

In the following part of the text, it is explicitly stated that in the cases at stake what determines the act is the nature of the agent, which then turns out to be characterized as a limit of endurance for painful affections:

For what rests with himself - and it wholly turns on this - means what his nature is able to bear; what his nature is not able to bear and what is not a matter of his own natural appetition or calculation does not rest with himself. (*Eth. Eud.*, II, 8, 1225a 25-27)

4 Conclusion

My analysis has shown that the reference to 'human nature' as a criterion for the definition of the fearful objects, presented by Aristotle in *Eth. Eud.*, III 1, entails a notion of human nature conceived of as a universal characterization of the human species. This characterization concerns the sensible affections. More particularly it concerns fear, as fear involves a representation of a physical pain destructive for a human being and is itself a psychological pain of the same kind. Going into more detail my analysis has shown that human nature, in *Eth. Eud.*, III 1, might plausibly be identified with a disposition of the human soul to endure fearful emotions up to a certain degree of in-

¹⁶ Since the starting point of the action is not external to the agent, the action is not forced with reference to the meaning of 'forced' established in the previous part of the discussion, cf. *Eth. Eud.*, II, 8, 1224a 30-36. Aristotle's solution to the problem of the determination of the voluntariness and involuntariness in the cases of mixed action is complex. For reasons of space I provide here only a simplified sketch of the argument. One of the principal interpretative problems is to understand what does 'to rest with the agent' mean. Furthermore, it is ambiguous if that which rests on the agent is the content of the decision between acting or not acting, or if it is even being in the objective situation which implies a decision between the two options. For the former reading (that I put forward here) see Woods 2013; for the latter Simpson 2013.

tensity. The characterization of certain objects as objectively capable of producing fear in a human being, and the reference to 'human nature' as that in respect of which these objects are objectively fearful, both entail implicitly a conception of human nature as in some way capable of measuring, and thus undergoing, fearful impressions. To this conception perfectly corresponds the Aristotelian description, at the end of *Eth. Eud.*, III, 1, of a disposition of the human soul to forbear certain kinds of affections up to a certain limit of intensity.

In *Eth. Eud.*, II, 8, in the discussion on the 'involuntary', nature is mentioned as a criterion for establishing the involuntariness in the cases of mixed actions: in other words the cases in which the determination to act is compelled by an external threat. Aristotle claims that an action is involuntary (at least to a certain extent) as it has been accomplished to avoid a physical pain or death, inasmuch as the physical pain in question and death are a greater evil than the action which must be accomplished. Ultimately the agent cannot choose to undergo such great evils because they are unbearable for his nature.

In *Eth. Eud.*, II, 8 the nature of the agent is characterized as a limit of endurance concerning certain representations of destructive pains. Since the same notion is identifiable in *Eth. Eud.*, III, 1, it seems to me that in the two passages, *Eth. Eud.*, II, 8 and *Eth. Eud.*, III, 1, the very same notion of human nature is at work. This notion is conceived of as a disposition of the human soul to endure fear up to a certain limit of intensity. Fear, indeed, is a painful affection which consists in the representation of a pain destructive for a human being.

In the ethical domain emotional reactions and the behaviours following on from them are subject to a moral evaluation. A human being scared to death in front of an ant is a coward, whilst a human being who faces death for the good of the state is brave; similarly, an individual who acts to avoid terrible tortures does not act freely but under force and involuntarily. In the examined passages of *Eth. Eud.*, III, 1 (1228b 24-26) and II, 8 (1225a 25-27) human nature serves as a criterion for ethical evaluation: it allows one to determine when an action is brave, and who is a brave person, and to establish the involuntariness of the action in certain circumstances. In my view, an interesting point is that the notion of nature which serves as an ethical criterion is related to sensible affections and not to the rational element of a human being. More particularly, the sensible affections, in respect to which human nature is characterized, are of a painful kind. Furthermore, they do not correspond to any kind of pain but to a particular kind: a pain whose nature is that of being destructive for a human being. Aristotle, it seems to me, has pointed out the ethical relevance of a particular kind of pain: the pain which undermines the physical integrity of a human being.

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