

ON PASSION AND DESIRE:  
CONFRONTING AN AMBIGUITY IN ARISTOTLE'S ETHICS

*Sobre pasión y deseo: despejando una ambigüedad de la ética aristotélica*

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ABSTRACT

One of the most relevant topics in the Aristotelian moral philosophy for contemporary ethics is the reflection about emotional motivation and the link established between emotions and moral virtue. The Aristotelian vocabulary, that said, is unfortunately quite unclear as to that respect. In this paper, we will try to outline a taxonomy of the emotional lexicon in order to set up the semantic borders between desire and passions. Having established these limits, we may advance some of the most relevant features without which we would not be able to interpret correctly the Aristotelian theory of action and his conception of virtue. In order to attain this goal we will examine the motivational role of passions, the epistemological implications of desire and the occasional relation of synonymy between these notions.

*Key words:* Aristotle; Ethics; Passion; Action; Desire; Virtue.

RESUMEN

Uno de los asuntos de la filosofía moral de Aristóteles que tiene más relevancia para la ética contemporánea es la reflexión sobre la motivación emocional, así como sobre el vínculo que se establece entre las emociones

y la excelencia moral. El vocabulario aristotélico, por decirlo de alguna manera, es desgraciadamente algo ambiguo en este punto. En este trabajo, trataremos de desarrollar una taxonomía del léxico emocional aristotélico para así poder establecer las fronteras semánticas entre deseo y pasiones. Una vez establecidos dichos límites, podremos proponer algunos de los rasgos más sobresalientes sin los cuales no sería posible interpretar correctamente la teoría aristotélica de la acción ni su concepción de la excelencia. Para conseguir dicho objetivo, examinaremos el rol motivacional de las pasiones, las implicaciones epistemológicas del deseo y la relación ocasional de sinonimia entre estas dos nociones.

*Palabras clave:* Aristóteles; Ética; Pasión (πάθος); Acción; Deseo; Excelencia (ἀρετή).

## 1. PASSION IN ARISTOTLE'S ETHICS

As an heir to an intellectual and cultural context that predates ours by twenty-five centuries, Aristotle was far from conceding a moral relevance to the passions in the sense we understand them today in contemporary philosophical debates. In spite of this fact, it is particularly significant that the great philosopher from Stagira provides an extensive discussion of the passions and makes them central in his works on ethics (in the *Eudemian Ethics* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*) and in his *Rhetoric*. The importance of the passions is fully supported by his entirely conclusive assertion at the beginning of book III of the *Nicomachean Ethics* in which he claims that “excellence is concerned with passions and actions”<sup>1</sup>. That actions are the natural object of reflection in moral discourse is evident every time that Aristotle, with the term *πρᾶξις*, refers to a concrete type of action distinguished by being the consequence of contingency and *deliberate choice* (*προαίρεσις*). However, the singular nature of the passions prevents us from attributing, in an immediate manner, a moral rule<sup>2</sup>. To describe this

1. NE 1109b30. Already at NE 1103a15, this relation is restricted to the ethical virtues.

2. The philosophical and moral relevance that Aristotle accords to the passions goes well beyond this mere textual reference, which, in itself, could be interpreted as an incidental assertion. In Aristotle, the passions are not simply the object of praise and censure—for which, to be sure, he immediately requires the condition of voluntariness—but rather, taking a step further, he goes on, also in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, to assert that *ὄρεξις*, the general appetitive structure under which the different forms of passion are subsumed, makes up along with perception (*αἴσθησις*) and the

implication or moral relevance in detail we must adhere, to begin with, to the two fundamental premises that provide the backbone of Aristotelian ethics and between which, in a certain manner, we witness a sort of reciprocal causality. On the one hand, Aristotelian moral thought exhibits a markedly naturalist character, that is, the premises of his moral argumentation are of a descriptive character and depart from what human reality *is* and not what it *ought* to be. In contrast to Kantian deontology (or an eidetic-transcendental paradigm like that of Plato), Aristotelian ethics begins with an inquiry into the *being* of man in order to develop, from this descriptive evaluation, his ethical theory. In fact, the teleological character of Aristotle's categories and moral concepts result in this naturalism since the good of man (like that of all other things)<sup>3</sup> would not be something distinct from the fulfillment of what man, in a certain way, *already* is. That is, the good of man would consist in the fulfillment of his best possibilities and these remain circumscribed by the terrain of the factually possible: We can only aspire to be what, in effect, we are able to be and what we are able to be is limited by what, *de facto*, we already are.

The inclusion of the passions in moral reflection is justified precisely by the relation Aristotle establishes between the passions and actions given that, in principle, nothing could be more contrary to action than the passions. In fact, he insists, "neither the excellences nor the vices are passions, because we are not called good or bad on the ground of our passions<sup>4</sup>, but are so called on the ground of our excellences and our vices"<sup>5</sup> which, along with

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intellect (νοῦς) the privileged group of elements that govern action and truth. This assertion seems to coincide with the recognition that Aristotle gives to the passions although this quote includes an additional epistemological connotation as it links the passions and truth. The passions, therefore, are not simply related virtue but rather they take on a new significance upon being described in terms of their relation to truth. This link, however, is not entirely novel since Plato already attributed truth and falsity to the passions in the *Phil.* [36c].

3. Thus he begins the *Nicomachean Ethics* by pointing "Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and choice, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim" (πᾶσα τέχνη καὶ πᾶσα μέθοδος, ὁμοίως δὲ πράξις τε καὶ προαίρεσις, ἀγαθοῦ τινὸς ἐφίεσθαι δοκεῖ: διὸ καλῶς ἀπεφήναντο τὰγαθόν, οὗ πάντ' ἐφίεται)", NE1094a1-5. Urmson, J.O. calls the fallacious status of this beginning into question, condensing several earlier analyses, in "A fallacy of Aristotle's about ends". *Argumentation*, November 1995, Volume 9, Issue 4, pp. 523-530.

4. NE 1105b29-1106a2.

5. NE 1105b30.

the neutral characterization of the passions described above, would seem to cancel its moral relevance. However, morality is not a quality inherent in the pure happening of the passions but rather the latter are relevant for practical philosophy to the extent that they influence and determine the carrying out of moral action. In fact, virtue is not predicated of action in itself but rather of the motivational origin of conduct. Logically we encounter references in which Aristotle describes “virtuous actions”, but virtue is not attributed to mere action, but rather depends on the action being the fruit of choice, consciousness, and a stable mode of being. It is in this origin of praxis that the passions are inserted and acquire their moral dimension. Just like actions themselves, the pure emotional happening of a passion, for example, anger, may have little or no moral relevance. However, the moral quality of the act (i.e., being good or bad, noble or ignoble) depends precisely on what its cause and origin is.

Aristotle, as we have already indicated, insists in numerous passages on the close link between ethical virtues and passions<sup>6</sup>. Thus he reasons that “for moral excellence is concerned with pleasures and pains; it is on account of pleasure that we do bad things, and on account of pain that we abstain from noble ones”<sup>7</sup>. These ἀρεταί follow the passions (and actions), however, we cannot conclude from this that the virtues are strictly a form of passion<sup>8</sup>. In fact, the ethical virtues are neither passions nor even faculties but rather modes of being (ἕξις). However, the mode of being or character (ἦθος) depends on the passions to the extent that they are intimately related to pleasure and pain, elements that would also have to determine action.

As Aristotle points out, it is for pleasure that we do the good and we often avoid evil to escape pain. The reasoning put forth in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is clear in this respect: “Again, if the excellences are concerned with actions and passions, and every passion and every action is accompanied by pleasure and pain, for this reason also excellence will be concerned with pleasures and pains”<sup>9</sup>. Thus we can consider an action virtuous or not in view of the quality of the pleasures that each action entails (i.e., be they real

6. NE 1106b25; 1107a7; cfr. 1109a20.

7. NE 1104b10.

8. The virtues are the fruit of προαίρεσις while the passions do not require role of deliberate choice. The virtues do not refer us to the passions because they are the consequence of προαίρεσις, since the passions are not the fruit of deliberate choice but rather are, along with deliberation, a constitutive element of said choice or preference.

9. This condition is satisfied in NE 1104b15.

or merely apparent). Therefore Aristotle distinguishes between the mere carrying out of an action and the manner and causal motivation of each behavior. In fact the just man is the one who obtains pleasure in the exercise of justice and not merely the one who acts justly.

We see, therefore, that the moral relevance that Aristotle accords to the passions is justified in light of two fundamental reasons. On the one hand, he establishes in *De Anima*<sup>10</sup> that the causal determination of movement, before any other form of purely rational activity, is desire. That is to say, action is, before strict deliberation, the fruit of desire. In other words, the role of deliberation is morally desirable but the role of desire turns out to be absolutely indispensable for movement. The true principle of movement is therefore the desired object (τὸ ὀρεκτόν)<sup>11</sup> and not a form of rational activity<sup>12</sup>. Thus, to act on the basis of a purely passional imperative would be reprehensible and, to a certain extent subhuman because such is the behavior of beasts<sup>13</sup>. That said, despite the fact that this form of action is reprehensible it remains possible. In this way, desire is in general described as an indispensable element given that without the desired object the movement of which moral action is the consequence would not be initiated. According to this description, we can imagine an irrational action, but we could never conceive of a movement without a desired object or, therefore, without desire.

## 2. DESIRE AND ITS DIFFERENT TOPOLOGIES

In ordinary language, as well as in the work of Aristotle, there is an apparent vagueness when we distinguish between the concept of *passion* and the disposition, something more generic, that we often signify with the term *desire*. Feeling a passion for something is an expression close to desiring something; although the term passion seems to reflect normally a higher degree

10. DA 432b27, ff: «for mind as speculative never thinks what is practicable, it never says anything about an object to be avoided or pursued, while this movement is always in something which is avoiding or pursuing an object. No, not even when it is aware of such an object does it thereby enjoin pursuit or avoidance of it; e.g. the mind often thinks of something terrifying or pleasant without enjoining the emotion of fear».

11. Paraphrasing Hesiod, Aristotle suggests that «the beginning is thought to be more than half of the whole». NE 1098b7 in reference to Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 40.

12. Cf. SORABJI, Richard. "Body and Soul in Aristotle". *Philosophy*. Vol. 49, n.º 187 (Jan 1974), pp. 63-89.

13. NE 1111b7.

of intensity. Desires are passions or are related to passions in a certain way given that, as we have seen, both concepts seem to have to do with pleasure and pain. In fact, in Greek this confusion is aggravated given that there are various terms that, in some way or another, signify an appetitive and desiderative disposition, which, in turn, seems to overlap with the meaning of the term *πάθος*. Aristotle himself is not especially clear in his use of these terms, although there is some textual evidence permitting us to distinguish between the concepts of *ὄρεξις*, *ἐπιθυμία*, *θυμός* and *βούλησις*, which are all terms that in certain contexts can be interpreted as synonyms of the term *πάθος*. However, they incorporate a series of nuances that we will have to distinguish.

A large part of the terminological vagueness that we just addressed is due precisely to the manner in which the passions are related to pleasures and to the different descriptions that Aristotle gives of desire. In fact, at times there does not seem to be a difference between what *πάθος* is and what the different forms of desire are. In the relation to pleasure that is common to desire and the passions, *ὄρεξις*, for example, is described in numerous passages<sup>14</sup> as an appetite for pleasure, while, in other places, this definition becomes somewhat redundant, once it is established that *ἐπιθυμία*, *qua* desire, is always an appetite for pleasure<sup>15</sup>. Apparently these definitions would not create any problems if it not were for the fact the Aristotle uses very similar descriptions for different concepts. Thus men that are guided by passions seem to try insistently to attain pleasures, much like what seems to occur, as we have just seen, with *ἐπιθυμία* and *ὄρεξις*. In addition, if *βούλησις* determines the end of our action and, as Aristotle asserts in other places, the incontinent man makes the pleasures the aim of his conduct, the descriptions of *βούλησις* and *πάθος*, as well as those of *ὄρεξις* and *ἐπιθυμία*, would seem to overlap. Therefore, we should figure out if *ὄρεξις*, *ἐπιθυμία*, *θυμός* and *βούλησις* are synonymous with the term *πάθος*, if they are concrete cases of the general form of passion or constitutive elements of different passions.

We may begin to solve this terminological distinction on the basis of what Aristotle states explicitly at different moments in his work. Thus, for example, the *ἐπιθυμία*, *θυμός* and *βούλησις* are described in numerous passages as constitutive elements of desire. Aristotle says: “the *ὄρεξις* is sub-divided into three: *ἐπιθυμία*, *θυμός* y *βούλησις*”<sup>16</sup>, and this description

14. *Rhet.* 1370a.17 and DA 414b5. Also Plato, *Phaed.*, 237d.

15. EE 1223a34: ἡ γὰρ ἐπιθυμία τοῦ ἡδέος.

16. EE 1223a: ἀλλὰ μὴν ἡ ὄρεξις εἰς τρία διαιρεῖται, εἰς βούλησιν καὶ θυμὸν καὶ ἐπιθυμίαν. Cf. 1225b24- 26.

also occurs in *De Anima*, the *Rhetoric*, *On the Motion of Animals*, and the *Politics*<sup>17</sup>, although it is completely absent in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. We can conclude, therefore, that what is at stake are three different species of desire that are gathered under a common genus. However, this first division only resolves the relation between ὄρεξις and ἐπιθυμία, and θυμός and βούλησις, but nothing tells the way in which these forms of desire are related to pleasure and in what sense they are linked or form part of the catalog of the passions. Hence perhaps it is best to define each one of these concepts with a view toward articulating them according to the way in which they are subsumed, or not, under the most general definition of passion.

Aristotle coins the term ὄρεξις to refer to a general and non-specific form of desire, which serves<sup>18</sup>, as we will see below, to denote one of the parts of the soul. Thus, the disciple of Plato calls “ὄρεκτικός” the part of the soul that, despite being irrational (ἄλογος), is able to listen to and obey reason “ὄρεκτικός”<sup>19</sup>. The case of the vegetative part of the soul is the opposite, which, because it is entirely irrational<sup>20</sup>, is by no means and in any grade rational. Despite this fact, in the first book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle already warns us of the risk entailed when one lets himself be guided exclusively by ὄρεξις.

Although this form of desire is capable of cooperating with reason, there also exists the possibility that we obtain everything in accordance with its dictates, which is what occurs in the case of children and incontinent men, who precisely exhibit an excessive attachment to pleasure<sup>21</sup>. In addition, ὄρεξις acquires a singular ontological and epistemological importance since,

17. DA 414b2, 432b5-6; 433a22-26; MA 700b19; *Rhet.* 1369a1-4; *Pol.* 1333b17-25.

18. HUDSON Stephen D. states: «The term *orexis*, usually translated as “desire” has two different significations. In its narrow sense it is (roughly) coextensive with ‘appetite’ or ‘need’ in the sense of bodily appetites (needs) that are associated with some natural physiological function of a living organism (DA, 414b14). In its wider sense it functions as a generic term for desires, under which Aristotle places three species: (i) wish (*boulesis*), (ii) passion (*thumos*), and (iii) appetite (*epithumia*) (DA, 413a32f; 432b5-7; NE, 111b1 Of; EE, 1223a28; 1225b25; MM, 1187b37; *Pol.* 1334b22f)», «Reason and Motivation in Aristotle». *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Mar., 1981), p. 119.

19. NE 1102b30. It is striking that in this passage Aristotle typifies ἐπιθυμία as a rational, or, at least, not entirely irrational, recourse.

20. On this point, we should underline the fact that the Spanish term ‘irracional’ preserves the nuance that privative conveys in Greek. Thus, irrational should not necessarily be interpreted as anti-rational.

21. NE 11119b.

as a motivating principle of behavior, it is distinguished along with *noûs* and sensation as one of the three things that govern action and truth.

With the term ἐπιθυμία Aristotle usually refers to one of the species of behavior into which ὄρεξις is divided and which can be chiefly distinguished as a form of desire that is particularly committed to bodily pleasures. Thus he will employ the term ἐπιθυμία to signify the desire to drink in the thirsty man or the sexual appetite<sup>22</sup>. These connotations have traditionally led this form of desire to be identified as the most basic and instinctive. In fact, in the tripartition of the Platonic soul<sup>23</sup>, the lowest part, that which comprises the appetites and bodily drives, is called τὸ ἐπιθυμητικόν, while in Aristotle, as we will see, ἐπιθυμία does not seem to be distinguished in such negative terms. It is true that ἐπιθυμία is an appetite for pleasure and that this form of desire is mainly employed by Aristotle to refer to purely bodily pleasures. There are, of course, concrete references that seem to support the idea that ἐπιθυμία is a form of negative desire. Thus, for example, Aristotle notes that the continent man (ἐγκρατής) is distinguished in that he knows that the appetites are bad (φάῦλαι) and therefore lets reason<sup>24</sup> govern his conduct and a large part of the tradition following Aristotle has insisted on the irrational dimension of ἐπιθυμία. It is clear that the Aristotelian description of ἐπιθυμία identifies it as a certainly more basic form of appetite than θυμός or βούλησις although, however, I do not believe that we can characterize ἐπιθυμία as a purely irrational appetite. This *appetitus concupiscibilis* is proper, in its most excessive dimension, to beasts, children, and incontinent men<sup>25</sup>. However, Aristotle warns in Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics* that the only part of the soul that we can consider irrational is the vegetative. Thus, as he asserts, the appetitive (i.e., what concerns the appetite or ἐπιθυμία) and the desiderative in general are able to listen to and obey reason. This

22. NE 1147 a 15 and EE 230 b 27.

23. KAHN, Charles H. explains the Platonic influence behind this Aristotelian doctrine, although in the case of the Athenian philosopher there is no common genus to gather the different forms of desire. Thus the term ὄρεξις never appears in the Platonic dialogues. The Platonic tripartition would be specific partition of the soul while in the case of Aristotle it is, instead of a partition, a question of a specific taxonomy of the different types of desires. See "Plato's Theory of Desire", *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 41, n.º 1 (Sept., 1987), pp. 77-103. Kahn also identifies the origin of the term in Democritus (fr. B 72; 284 y B 219) in "Democritus and the Origins of Moral Psychology". *The American Journal of Philology*, Vol. 106, n.º 1 (spring, 1985), p. 19 (11-31).

24. NE 1145b.10

25. *Pol.* 1254b 5; 1260a 10-15; 1254b 24; 1287a 28-31. EN L.III 2.



description corresponds exactly to the division carried out earlier given that ἐπιθυμία is identified as a part of ὄρεξις, and hence ἐπιθυμία cooperates with reason as much as desire does, in general (ὅλως), in every one of its specific forms<sup>26</sup>. Therefore the risk is not that ἐπιθυμία will operate as a desiderative mechanism but rather that it will rule or govern (κρατεῖν) our action as a whole. Therefore ἐπιθυμία can also have noble actions as its object and can therefore be laudable.

The term θυμός presents an even more complicated case. It is a concept that has been translated equally as spirit and impetus and, at times, has been defined as a form of anger (ὀργή)<sup>27</sup>. The term already acquires a specific prominence in the work of Homer and Heraclitus, for his part, referred to θυμός as the origin of desire. In the ascending gradation of desires, θυμός occupies a higher place than ἐπιθυμία, from which it is distinguished precisely because it can listen to and come to the aid of reason. We just showed that Aristotle also accorded a certain participation in reason to ἐπιθυμία but in the case of θυμός this relation is even more evident. Aristotle says that θυμός listens to reason although it does not follow the dictates of reason well because, much like what goes on in the case of appetite, at times it does not listen to what is ordered of it<sup>28</sup>. It seems therefore to be a hybrid form of ὄρεξις that again welcomes the possibility of attending to reason but that also reflects the risk of generating a specific form of incontinency. Following this hierarchical ordering, Aristotle specifies that it is more embarrassing to be incontinent with respect to ἐπιθυμία than with respect to θυμός because in case one or another desire becomes the governing principle of our conduct, the imperative of θυμός would be, in a certain way, a dictate remote from reason although it is perceived in a distorted light; ἐπιθυμία, however, can autonomously and completely govern the conduct of the incontinent man. In this sense, θυμός is characterized as a hybrid desire, capable of motivating condemnable and excessive conduct but also capable of standing out as an ally of reason<sup>29</sup>.

Of the different forms of desire addressed by Aristotle, βούλησις is, without doubt, defined with the most imprecision and vagueness although paradoxically it is identified, strictly speaking, as the most relevant form. Generally, βούλησις has been interpreted as a form of desire that is close to

26. NE 1102b30.

27. *Rhet.*, 1378b4 y 1379a.

28. NE 1149a30.

29. In this sense, the Aristotelian description of θυμός is very close to the one that Plato offers in the *Republic* (cf. 440b, ff.).

reason or even as a form of rational desire<sup>30</sup>. Thus Thomas Aquinas refers to it with the term *appetitus intellectivus*<sup>31</sup> and today it is not uncommon to translate βούλησις as *rational desire* or *rational appetite*. Contravening the express doctrine put forth in his moral texts, in *De Anima* Aristotle situates βούλησις –in contradiction with the multiple references that we pointed to earlier that locate it in connection with θυμός and ἐπιθυμία– in the rational part of the soul, thus distinguishing it from the other forms of desire.<sup>32</sup> In the interpretation that he offers in his psychological treatise, this form of desire would not be another component of ὄρεξις but rather an element completely different from θυμός and ἐπιθυμία. This description, along with the one we find in the *Topics*<sup>33</sup>, has lent support in the Aristotelian tradition to considering βούλησις as a purely rational apparatus. Current authoritative voices, such as Christine Korsgaard, have defended it<sup>34</sup>. Although it is true that in line with the hierarchical ordering of the distinct components of ὄρεξις, it would be reasonable to accord a greater degree of rationality to βούλησις than to other forms of desire, it does not seem so clear that we can characterize βούλησις (at least not in a conclusive manner), as a rational mechanism in the strict sense. An attentive examination of the textual references reveals, in effect, that the confusion is inherent in Aristotle's own description of this form of desire. In addition to the aforementioned passages from the two ethical treatises, he also insists in the *Politics* on categorizing βούλησις as a concrete species of ὄρεξις<sup>35</sup>, which runs contrary, as we have just seen, to what he asserts in *De Anima*. Taking up the e. a. by Plato in *Cratylus*, J. P. Vernant has suggested that there exists a connection between the terms βούλησις and βούλευσις<sup>36</sup>, which seems to

30. There is, moreover, a difficulty when it comes to interpreting βούλησις as a rational desire given that such is the definition that Aristotle gives to προαίρεσις: ὄρεξις διανοητική and ὄρεκτικὸς νοῦς. Cf. NE 1139b4-5. In his excellent essay “Conceptualized and Unconceptualized Desire in Aristotle”, Thomas M. Tuozzo will opt for denominating βούλησις as “conceptualized desire”, arguing that the sole use of the adjective “rational” applied to said form of desire be ignored. *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 32, 4 (1994): 525-549. Cf. pp. 542, ff.

31. ST, Ia 2ae, Q. 22, ad. 3.

32. DA 432b5.

33. *Top.*, 4.5.126A13.

34. “Aristotle on Function and Virtue”. *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, Vol. 3, n.º 3, July 1986, pp. 262.

35. *Pol.*, 1334b 22-25.

36. Cf. “Myth and Tragedy.” In *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics*. Ed. A. O. Rorty. p. 46.

approximate the concepts of free choice and deliberation. However, as we will also examine in detail below, deliberation or βούλευσις is a process that indeed necessarily requires the work of reason (νοῦς and διάνοια) as well as of the work of βούλησις. But we find only one description that situates it above ἐπιθυμία and θυμός placing it, occasionally, in the rational part of the soul. It does not seem easy therefore to decide in what way βούλησις is to be distinguished as a rational desire or as a desire that attends to the dictates of reason.

### 3. SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

Much like what would happen in the case of other terminological issues, in view of a cautious interpretation, we will limit ourselves to Aristotle's moral texts. In fact, the well-established tendency of opting to describe βούλησις as "rational desire" continues, after all, to take it as a desire. Therefore, and *quia* desire, βούλησις is also capable of generating excesses like the motivational element of moral action, thus establishing error-prone and unrealizable intentions.

As we have seen, ἐπιθυμία, θυμός, and βούλησις share a number of features in common<sup>37</sup>, although the Aristotelian definition is far from complete. Following the usual strategy in Aristotle, it seems that at the moment of sketching the semantic threshold of these terms Aristotle does clearly define the genus of these forms of desire. However, he does not manage to establish precisely what is to be taken as the specific difference of these forms of desire. The most probable ordering, with reference to the texts, seems to order in hierarchical relation each one of these determinations of ὄρεξις to the extent that they all seem to cooperate in a certain way with reason. The status of ἐπιθυμία is particularly problematic given that it can operate in a way that is absolutely external to reason and βούλησις also seems to exhibit a hybrid and imprecise nature, at least, if we adhere to Aristotle's later texts like *De Anima*. In the case of θυμός we find a certain indetermination given that, as we mentioned above, at times it seems to be equivalent to anger, while in other passages it is characterized as a natural ally of man's rational dimension.

If we have opted to describe in detail some of the distinctive features of these forms of desire, it is because these concepts, in turn, seem at times to reflect a close kinship to the concept of πάθος. Thus, following Aristotle's

37. pts. in "Plato and Aristotle on Belief, Habit, and Akrasia". *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 7, n.º 1 (Jan, 1970), pp. 50-61. Cf. p. 54.

very brief definition, the passions are characterized by being accompanied by pleasure and pain and also being in a middle term the determination that pertains to virtuous action. These characteristics, however, are also attributable to ἐπιθυμία, θυμός, and βούλησις. Each one of these forms of desire is related to pleasure to the extent it allows for the achievement of a determinate type of ἡδονή. Σπιθυμία is defined, strictly speaking, as a form of material or bodily desire; while βούλησις is distinguished as a form of desire closer to the good (be it genuine or merely apparent). Yet this difference is mitigated in the moment that we also recognize that we can have an appetite for noble things and be mistaken regarding the disposition of our will. In addition, βούλησις, as much as ἐπιθυμία, would desire in accordance with nature; the one will opt for the proper pleasures, the other for the proper good, but the achievement of the good would also result in a form of pleasure. And hence, in a certain sense, they seem to be very similar structures, as their common belonging to ὄρεξις suggests. However, this common belonging to ὄρεξις is another typical characteristic of the passions, since they refer to the desiderative part of the soul and not to the vegetative or to the rational parts. The ethical virtues indeed adhere to ἦθος, but the latter is part of the irrational part of the soul, which can obey and listen to reason. And hence the passions and desires, in addition to sharing a relation to pleasure and pain, have in common, at the least, the fact that they are located in the soul.

Concerning the description that Aristotle introduces in his moral texts, the passions and the distinct forms of desire seem to have terribly porous boundaries. This conceptual overlapping is emphatically evident in the case of ἐπιθυμία given that this form of desire is also included as a specific passion in the list of the passions that Aristotle puts forth in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the *Eudemian Ethics*, and the *Rhetoric*. In addition, incontinence (ἀκρασία), a blameworthy attitude with respect to the passions, is predicated as particularly persistent of those who harbor an excess of this specific form of desire. At the same time, ἐπιθυμία seems to be defined as a form of desire but also as a form of passion. Amelie O. Rorty tries to surmount this difficulty by defending a special rule for ἐπιθυμία<sup>38</sup> and goes on to assert (while confronting what is literally said in the text) that there are reasons not to take ἐπιθυμία as a form of passion. One of her arguments consists in linking the passions with ψυχή in order to establish a specific relation between ἐπιθυμία and the body. In this way, the desire for pleasure would be rooted exclusively in our somatic dimension while the passions, by definition, were identified

38. RORTY, A.O. *Op. cit.*, pp. 220, ff.

as occurring within the soul (along with ἔξις and δύναμις)<sup>39</sup>. I believe that this argument turns out to be insufficient to justify the exclusion of ἐπιθυμία from the catalog of passions, since the passions, although they occur, as we have pointed out, within the soul, are also characterized as having a manifest corporal implication (as Aristotle says in *De Anima*)<sup>40</sup>. The attempt to exclude ἐπιθυμία from the catalog of the passions, does not seem convincing also because, according to Rorty, ἐπιθυμία does not require for its appearance the intervention of one or the other sensation. As we have stated, the relation to pleasure and pain is the distinctive quality of the passions. Again, as precise as this assessment may be, we indicated that, in Aristotle as much as in Plato, pleasure does not have to be identified exclusively with the body but rather with all forms of activity (ἐνέργεια) among which the activities of the soul, in an especially relevant manner, would have to be considered. For this reason, I believe we can take ἐπιθυμία as a specific form of passion that overlaps, at least in one sense, with the extension of the meaning of passion and desire in Aristotle.

We find a similar, yet more complex, case referring to θυμός, that is, a type of desire that has been interpreted in Greek culture as a paradigm for πάθος. Also, in Aristotle θυμός closely approximates the definition of anger (ὀργή)<sup>41</sup>. In fact, θυμός not only resembles anger but is also described as a characteristic close to virility or bravery (ἀνδρεία), which, however, is a form of virtue that we can also identify as a passion (this is how Aristotle denominates the passions in the *Eudemian Ethics*, where he lists different passions in terms of excess, defect, or balance, while identifying virtue as a middle term)<sup>42</sup>. Thus, the brave man stands out also for being θυμοειδής, that is, for harboring θυμός as a form of desire that contributes in carrying out an action in conformity with virtue<sup>43</sup>. In the *Eudemian Ethics*, restricting this form of bravery to barbarian warriors, Aristotle manages to point out that θυμός, in addition to collaborating with bravery, is capable of generating some type of pleasure (an argument that runs parallel to the one he puts forth with respect to ὀργή in the *Rhetoric*). However, in the *Politics*<sup>44</sup>, θυμός is distinguished not as a

39. NE 1105b20.

40. DA 402b5-10.

41. Cf. *Rhet.* 1379a5 where he inserts, in the context of describing anger, some verses from the *Iliad* in which reference is made to θυμός.

42. EE 1221a. Thus, δύναμις is distinguished as a form of virtue to the extent that it is a stable disposition to act in accordance with this passion.

43. NE 1116b26.

44. *Pol.*, 1327b30-40.

passion, but rather as a condition for affect. That is, it is no longer a concrete affection, but a capacity or faculty for accommodating different passions. This argument is endorsed by Barbara Koziak, who, in line with Eugene Garver, asserts that θυμός is the capacity –δύναμις– that allows us to accommodate anger, pain, and piety as well as the rest of the passions<sup>45</sup>, thereby extending its definition beyond the particular passions and situating it as a condition or general definition of a form of affection.

In the case of βούλησις<sup>46</sup>, there is less evidence to consider it as a particular form of passion, although it is hard to doubt that, with more or less participation on the part of reason, there are common characteristics that make it reasonable to link the passional dispositions with this form of desire. Thus, placed under the common genus of ὄρεξις, this specific form of desire is included in the same place as the various passions: the desiderative part of the soul. Another characteristic that seems to link the will to πάθος is, to the extent that it represents a form of desire, the fact that it would have to be related, in one way or another, to pleasure and pain (since it is a typical characteristic of human beings to desire pleasurable things). However, the sole and equivocal characterization that Aristotle puts forth of βούλησις has led authors like Stephen Leighton to believe it is justified to distinguish between the passions and the will, arguing, in fact, that βούλησις cannot be taken to be a passion. According to Leighton<sup>47</sup>, Aristotle avoided making any reference to βούλησις in his various lists of the passions (see above) since βούλησις does not seek to attain any pleasure and hence its definition would be compatible with the one Aristotle gives to the passions. Literally, Leighton points out that βούλησις does not pass the pain-pleasure test<sup>48</sup>.

Let us briefly pay attention to this argument. If ἐπιθυμία had pleasure for its object, βούλησις was defined in turn as having the good as its object. This is related, moreover, to the desiderative apparatus that sets the end of a given action, although it is possible to think that with this finalist characterization Aristotle means to refer to a *télos*. In a more elaborate sense, of what is at work in more basic mechanisms like ἐπιθυμία, given that the attaining of a specific pleasure can also function as a final cause in the carrying out of an action.

45. ZOZIAK, B. *Retrieving Political Emotion*. NYC: Cambridge U.P., 1987, p. 95 and GRAVER, E. *Aristotle's Rhetoric, op. cit.*, p. 113.

46. Cf. *Met.* 1071a25.

47. LEIGHTON, S. "Aristotle and the Emotions". *Phronesis*, Vol. 27, n.º 2, 1982: p. 160.

48. *Loc. cit.*

However, it seems reasonable to conclude, with Nussbaum or Cooper<sup>49</sup>, that the specific object of βούλησις is not a form of pleasure but rather is a question of the *good itself* (however this concept may be defined). By pointing to this difference we do not wish to assert that βούλησις functions as an infallible mechanism that always aspires to an authentic good –only the good man has as the object of his will the authentic good<sup>50</sup>– but rather the object of βούλησις and of ἐπιθυμία reflect a different level of complexity, which, however, does not entail a necessary negative characterization of ἐπιθυμία nor a positive one in the case of βούλησις. In fact, we are capable of appetitively desiring (in accordance with ἐπιθυμία) noble pleasures<sup>51</sup> and also we can err in the object of our βούλησις. Therefore, with respect to these forms of desire, there is room for virtuous behaviors as well as morally blameworthy behaviors although βούλησις seems to stand out as an effectively more elaborate and complex mechanism than pure appetite since although we can conclude that it is entirely rationally it does participate to a large extent in reason. However, the criterion for demarcating the passions to which Leighton refers (the link to pleasure and pain) also does not seem completely conclusive. It is true that there is no passage in Aristotle that links βούλησις directly to pleasure and pain but he does recognize that the will has the good for its object. Pleasure could be considered a good to the extent that Aristotle warns that “to enjoy the things we ought and to hate the things we ought”<sup>52</sup> and hence we could trace the identity between pleasure and the good to the extent that certain pleasures constitute a good in conforming to virtue.

As is well known, the definition of the good in Aristotle is also not free from certain nuances and hence. Although we will not delve into a concrete and specific analysis of this problem, we should stop to take a close look at his reasoning. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he specifically states that the bodily pleasures are merely accidental goods given that, in the best of cases, they

49. NUSSBAUM distinguishes them in the following manner: ἐπιθυμία: desire of pleasure/βούλησις: desire of an end or of the good/ θυμός: an intermediate case, without a specific determination. The Fragility of Goodness, p. 273. This commentary is also taken up by ZOZIAK, Barbara in *Retrieving Political Emotion: Thyμός, Aristotle, and Gender*, *op. cit.*, p. 93. We find a similar interpretation in COOPER, J. *Reason and Emotion: Essays on Ancient Moral Psychology and Ethical Theory*, *op. cit.*, p. 266, ff., although, in opposition to Nussbaum's thesis, Cooper situates the beautiful and the noble (τὸ καλόν) as the specific object of θυμός.

50. NE 1113a25.

51. NE 1175b29.

52. NE1172a20.

function as a way of restoring a lack or as a remedy to a need<sup>53</sup>, an assertion that in principle seems to support Leighton's thesis. However, Aristotle specifically states that the pleasures should not necessarily be identified with the bodily pleasures and relying on this distinction he elaborates a complex theory with respect to the qualification of the pleasures<sup>54</sup>. In the following pages we will look in detail at this description of the different types of pleasures, yet, in view of discerning the relation that is established between the passions and βούλησις, it suffices to refer to the mode in which Aristotle situates the supreme Good as a form of pleasure.

It seems obvious, and this may be the source of more than a few confusions, that the bodily pleasures in a certain sense have monopolized the very name of pleasure that everybody takes part in, and tends toward them most of the time<sup>55</sup>. However, Aristotle stresses that pleasure is necessarily a good<sup>56</sup> and this is evidenced by the fact that humans as much as animals –and even God, who always enjoys a sole and simple pleasure (διὸ ὁ θεὸς ἀεὶ μίαν καὶ ἀπλῆν χαίρει ἡδονήν)<sup>57</sup>– are naturally inclined toward attaining pleasure. Obviously, every nature will have to enjoy the pleasures that are proper to it and hence, in Aristotle's work, we can find numerous references that are critical of the pursuit of certain types of pleasure. Therefore, the quality of pleasure is what determines its moral adequacy, but, to the extent that it is oriented along the lines of reason and the most excellent constitution of man, natural pleasure –as in the pleasure of theorizing in the case of man– must be recognized as the most perfect good. In this manner, if pleasure (in the sense that we are putting forward here) can be considered a good or, at least, in the most mitigated form of this argument, as a constitutive element of the supreme good that is the *eudaimonia*, we may reasonably conclude that it can be distinguished as a specific object of βούλησις. In fact, βούλησις is defined by the disposition of the soul which has a good for its object. At the same time, it serves as the end of man's action, which again confirms the relation between pleasure and βούλησις, since Aristotle recognizes the teleological function

53. NE 1154a30 y ss.

54. Here I rely on Julia Annas' expression, who speaks of "qualified pleasure". Cf. "Aristotle on Pleasure and Goodness" in Rorty, A.O. (Ed.): *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*. L.A.: University of California Press, 1980. p. 298.

55. NE 1153b32: ἀλλ' εἰλήφασι τὴν τοῦ ὀνόματος κληρονομίαν αἰ σωματικαὶ ἡδοναὶ

56. NE 1153a5: ἀνάγκη οὖν τὴν ἡδονὴν ἀγαθὸν τι εἶναι.

57. NE 1154b26. Cf. 1175<sup>a</sup>12.



of pleasure when he asserts that “pleasures are not processes<sup>58</sup> (...) they are activities and ends”<sup>59</sup>.

#### 4. Conclusions

After examining the different species that make up ὄρεξις, it seems that ἐπιθυμία, θυμός, and βούλησις share certain characteristics with Aristotle's definition and treatment of the passions. The case of ἐπιθυμία seems to be the most obvious, given that its presence in Aristotle's various lists of the passions warrants, in fact, our taking it as a paradigmatic form of πάθος. Although there is no explicit reference, θυμός seems to be identified with ὀργή—as we noted above—and it is also distinguished as a disposition that is comparable, or, at least, contrasting, to other forms of passion (and virtue) as in the case of ἀνδρεία. The references to βούλησις are less frequent and, of course, vaguer, but although it also forms part of ὄρεξις it exhibits a particular characteristic that perhaps prevents us from categorizing it as a passion.

Thus, the power of ἐπιθυμία and θυμός in Aristotle are essential traits of the incontinent man (ἀκρατής), but, with respect to βούλησις, moral evaluation seems to no longer depend on its degree of influence, but rather on the adequacy of its object. In fact, the just man as well as the licentious one act in accordance with their will but virtue or defects in character will not depend on whatever the ruling part of action and decision is but rather on the mode in which βούλησις governs man's actions. Therefore, although in certain contexts ἐπιθυμία and θυμός cannot be recognized as passions, their joint relation to βούλησις would seem to situate them more precisely as constitutive elements of the passions or as appetitive dispositions that corresponds, to different degrees, to the human passions. In this manner, pleasure and pain determine the definition of the passions but in virtue of the quality of these pleasures and pains and of the mode in which these feelings are pursued, one form of desire or another will be activated. Thus, in a basic passion like ἐπιθυμία the pure force of this appetite describes a form of passion. However, passions such as anger (ὀργή) or compassion (ἔλεος) or justice will require the intervention of more complex desiderative dispositions like θυμός or βούλησις.

58. In Book X, he will go on to describe how they accompany certain activities.

59. NE 1153a8. This thesis, defended by Aristotle, contrasts with diametrically opposite position that he attributes to other philosophers at 1152b.