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Minimizing the Distance? On Pity and Emotional Detachment

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The danger of getting lost in translation – whether from one language to another or one culture to another – is a truism that points to recurrent challenges that classicists, among others, have to face. This is no less the case with emotion-terms. The debate about whether certain emotions are “basic”, hard-wired, and thus (more or less) easily translatable across cultures has a long history and continues today.[1] Following the so-called cognitivist approach – that is, the understanding that the emotions are complex processes that are based on beliefs which are historically and culturally contingent – I would like to turn to two passages that indicate some of the challenges we face when we attempt to understand *oiktos* and *eleos*, the ancient Greek terms usually translated as pity. For the purposes of this post, I would like to point to two different types of pity, what we can call the self-oriented and the altruistic or creative type. The altruistic or creative type of pity refers to an emotional experience that entails understanding of the other’s suffering and consequent action that has a deep effect on both pitier and pitied. It also contrasts with common use in modern English according to which pity tends to imply a feeling of superiority and often condescension.

When we turn to the 4th c BCE, Aristotle’s extensive definition of pity in his *Rhetoric* is often taken as representative of how pity is understood more broadly in the classical period. By defining the emotions that the orator should know how to evoke in order to win his audience over to his side, Aristotle analyzes the kinds of evaluation and affect that constitute different emotions. He defines pity as follows:

Let pity (ἔλεος) then be a kind of pain excited by the sight of evil, deadly or painful, which befalls one who does not deserve it; an evil which one might expect to come upon himself or one of his friends, and when it seems near. For it is evident that one who is likely to feel pity must be such as to think that he, or one of his friends, is liable to suffer some evil. [...] Wherefore neither those who are utterly ruined, are capable of pity, for they think they have nothing more to suffer, since they have exhausted suffering; nor those who think themselves supremely fortunate, who rather are insolent. For if they think that all good things are theirs, it is clear that they think that they cannot possibly suffer evil, and this is one of the good things. Now those persons who think they are likely to suffer are those who have already suffered and escaped (εἰσὶ δὲ τοιοῦτοι οἳ νομίζουν παθεῖν ἂν, οἳ τε πεπονθότες ἤδη καὶ διαπεφευγότες). [...] And, generally speaking, a man is moved to pity when he is so affected that he remembers that such evils have happened, or expects that they may happen, either to himself or to one of his friends (καὶ ὅλως δὴ ὅταν ἔχη οὕτως ὥστ’ ἀναμνησθῆναι τοιαῦτα συμβεβηκότα ἢ αὐτῷ ἢ τῶν αὐτοῦ, ἢ ἐλπίσαι γενέσθαι αὐτῷ ἢ τῶν αὐτοῦ). [...] The persons men pity are those whom they know, provided they are not too closely connected with them; for if they are, they feel the same as if they themselves were likely to suffer (ἐλεοῦσι δὲ τοὺς τε γνωρίμους, ἔαν μὴ σφόδρα ἐγγὺς ὣσιν οἰκειότητι· περὶ δὲ τούτους ὥσπερ περὶ αὐτοὺς μέλλοντας ἔχουσιν). This is why Amasis is said not to have wept when his son was led to execution, but did weep at the sight of a friend reduced to beggary, for the latter excited pity, the former terror. The terrible is different from the pitiable, for it drives out pity, and often serves to produce the opposite feeling. [...] in general, here we may also conclude that all that men fear in regard to themselves excites their pity when other are the victims. (2.8.2-14) (trans. J.H. Freese)

According to the Aristotelian definition, then, there are two main prerequisites for pity: a) an evaluation that the victim’s suffering is undeserved; and b) a certain distance between pitier and pitied. Such a distance ensures that the pitier does not currently feel threatened by the victim’s misfortune. At the same time, he sees himself as similar enough with the victim to appreciate that such a misfortune may afflict him in the future. The alternative is that the pitier has already experienced a similar misfortune and the recollection of it renders him responsive to his fellow’s undeserved suffering. In David Konstan’s terms “the subject and object of pity do not merge but rather maintain distinct emotions – that of the pitier is precisely pity – and perspectives: the pitier is always an observer rather than a participant in the experience of the other, and views the suffering of the pitied from the outside, as it were. [...] We must pity, then, from a distance, as onlookers, if we are to pity at all”. [2] By establishing this kind of detachment as necessary, Aristotle’s definition of pity seems to eliminate the possibility of both self-pity and empathy, that is, of taking on the victim’s emotional perspective.[3] At the same time, despite this detachment or distance, the similarity between pitier and pitied also eliminates the condescension that we tend to associate with the notion of pity today.

A brief example from Thucydides’ *History* raises interesting questions regarding precisely the terms of such detachment or distance. At the beginning of the Peloponnesian War the plague infects the Athenians who have barricaded themselves within the city-walls and spreads through the city with unanticipated speed and force. Realizing that they have no control over it, they break all civic and religious customs and norms and attempt to take as much pleasure as they possibly can for as long as they remain alive. In the utter lawlessness that takes over, nobody is willing to help friends and relatives out of fear of contagion and death – with very few exceptions:

But still it was more often those who had recovered who had pity for the dying and the sick, because they had learned what it meant and they were themselves by this time confident of immunity (ἐπὶ πλέον δ' ὁμως οἱ διαπεφευγότες τὸν τε θνήσκοντα καὶ τὸν πονούμενον ὠκτίζοντο διὰ τὸ προειδέναι τε καὶ αὐτοὶ ἤδη ἐν τῷ θαρσαλέῳ εἶναι); for the disease never attacked the same man a second time, at least not with fatal results. And they were not only congratulated by everybody else, but themselves, in the excess of their joy at the moment, cherished also an empty hope with regard to the rest of their lives that they would never be carried off by any other disease (καὶ αὐτοὶ τῷ παραχρῆμα περιχαρεῖ καὶ ἐς τὸν ἔπειτα χρόνον ἐλπίδος τι εἶχον κούφης μὴδ' ἂν ὑπ' ἄλλου νοσήματός ποτε ἐπὶ διαφθαρῆναι).[4] (2.51.6) (trans. C.F. Smith with modifications)

It remains unclear whether the Athenians who have recovered are close relatives, friends, or just acquaintances of the people they feel compelled to help. Interestingly, these pitiers meet some of Aristotle's criteria but not all. As Aristotle requires, they have already been infected but have escaped the fatal effects of the plague (διαπεφευγότες is the term used in both excerpts). The memory of the experience is also still very fresh in their mind, creating the proximity necessary for pity. But when it comes to their expectations or fears for the future, Aristotle's criteria are not necessarily met. The Athenians who have survived the plague conceive of themselves as exceptionally fortunate and empowered; so empowered that they cherish "an empty hope" that no disease will affect them ever again. It is, therefore, both a deep understanding of their fellow-men's suffering because of their personal past affliction and the exceptional empowerment they experience because they survived that triggers their pity and motivates them to act on it. Even though they are equal to their fellow-citizens, temporary superiority – which they actually perceive as lasting – constitutes a crucial element in their experience of pity.

The follow-up question is, of course, why the difference between the two ancient texts is worth our attention. The different nuances in the experience of pity transcend the easy association of pity with power or superior status. They rather point to the direction of creative pity that I mentioned earlier. In classical Athens, *eleos* or *oiktos* factors explicitly not only into personal decisions (as is the case in the example from the narrative of the plague) but also in public political and judicial deliberations. Defendants explicate the appropriateness of pity in law-court cases; politicians address the role of pity in deciding domestic and international policy. For this reason, there seems to be a constant negotiation of the power-dynamic between pitier and pitied (irrespective of whether these are individuals or states) and ongoing attempts to redefine superiority or equality, detachment or identification, empathetic understanding and, potentially, co-operative action. As scholars have pointed out, there is often a fear in our sources that pity can be easily manipulated because of the lack of intellectual rigor that often characterizes it.[5] My reading of pity in the *History* suggests that Thucydides' text brings out ways in which pity can be seen as close to empathy.[6] Even though it may involve a sliver of self-assurance and gratification, it can remain dignified and genuinely invested in the other. As such, it has the capacity to render self-assurance (because of the empowerment experienced through supporting others) conducive to collective welfare (through the enactment of support) and social cohesion. Thus ancient Greek *oiktos* and *eleos* cover the modern notions of pity, sympathy, and empathy with different emphasis in different contexts.[7] And this potential range of emotional experience and action is cultivated in the different public fora in Athens – the assembly, the courts, and the theater of Dionysus included.

[1] The debate gained new momentum with the "affective turn", a turn to extensive examination of affect and sensation as essential aspects of emotional experience and a reconsideration (and often questioning) of the predominantly cognitive apparatus of emotions. See e.g. two collections of representative essays: Patricia T. Clough and Jean Halley (eds.) (2007) *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*; and Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (eds.) (2010) *The Affect Theory Reader*. For an approach to ancient emotions that is well-informed and critical of contemporary debates, see David Konstan (2007) *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks: Studies in Aristotle and Classical Literature*, esp. his first chapter on "Pathos and Passion" (pp. 3-40).

[2] David Konstan (2001) *Pity Transformed*. pp. 60, 65.

[3] Konstan makes this argument for Aristotle's understanding of pity and also suggests that such an understanding is substantiated by examples in numerous genres.

[4] Aristotle uses the term ἔλεος while οἶκτος is the term used in the Thucydidean passage on the plague. Even though there are differences in the nuances of the two terms, Thucydides appears to be using them interchangeably. A good example that includes both terms is 3.39.2-3: "[...] you should not reverse your former decision or be led into error by pity (οἶκτω), delight in eloquence, or clemency, the three influences most prejudicial to a ruling state. For compassion (ἔλεος) may rightly be bestowed upon those who are likewise compassionate and not upon those who will show no pity in return (οὐτ' ἀντοικτιούντας) but of necessity are always enemies" (trans. C.F. Smith).

[5] See e.g. Rachel H. Sternberg (2005) "The Nature of Pity" esp. pp. 42-43 in Rachel H. Sternberg (ed.) (2005) *Pity and Power in Ancient Athens*. Cambridge

[6] The interpretation I suggest for the brief example above is also supported by the role I see pity playing in the Mytilenean Debate and the narrative of the Sicilian Expedition. See my paper on "Collective Emotion in Thucydides" at <http://symposium.chs.harvard.edu>.

[7] For a similar approach applied specifically to theater audiences, see Ismene Lada-Richards (1993) "Empathic Understanding: Emotion and Cognition in Classical Dramatic Audience-Response." *PCPhS* 39: 94-140.

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About Eirene Visvardi

Eirene Visvardi (PhD Stanford University) has been Assistant Professor of Classical Studies at Wesleyan University since 2009. Before that she held a two-year joint fellowship in the departments of Classical Studies and Theater Arts at Brandeis University. Her research interests include the conception and interpretation of emotional experience in Greek drama and philosophy of the classical period, modern theories of the emotions, Greek lyric poetry, ancient aesthetics, questions of genre, and performance and political

theory. She has written on the politics of pity in Euripides' *Hecuba* and *Trojan Women* and on his *Alcestis*. While at the CHS, she will be completing a manuscript titled *Dancing the Emotions: Pity and Fear in the Tragic Chorus* in which she turns to the quintessential tragic emotions from the perspective of the tragic chorus – the element that Aristotle essentially ignored. She argues that the choral discourse of pity and fear problematizes and expands the emotional discourses that pervade the public spaces of Athenian civic life (esp. the political assembly as we know it from Thucydides and the courts of the orators) and suggests new ways to envision and practice social and political participation.

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