

On the Function of Pleasure in  
Aristotle's Philosophy of Mind

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This paper is an attempt at an outline of the general function of pleasure in Aristotle's philosophy of mind. It seems to me that sketching out the general function of pleasure would help in addressing these specific issues:

- (1) how the pleasures of animals and of God are to be distinguished from those of men;
- (2) how the goodness or badness of different pleasures is to be evaluated;
- (3) and how the ontological status of pleasure relates to Aristotle's theory of reality.

In what follows, I shall first give a rough overview of what I take to be the general function of pleasure in Aristotle's philosophy of mind. Then, with this overview in mind, I shall turn to various Aristotelian texts to buttress the case for it. Finally, I shall make some remarks about the relevance of the general function of pleasure to the three issues mentioned above.

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## I.

Men and other animals are hooked up to their environment in such a way that pleasure accompanies two fundamental and necessary bodily functions, those of nutrition and reproduction. More precisely, pleasure accompanies the bodily processes by which these functions are carried out - eating and drinking for nutrition, and sexual intercourse for reproduction. The processes of eating and drinking are pleasurable replenishments of painful bodily lacks, while the process

of sexual intercourse is the pleasurable discharge of a painful bodily surplus. But the pleasure associated with any process is only "incidental" to it. "By nature," this pleasure actually is, completes, enhances, or stimulates the exercise of those natural states, powers, or faculties involved in, for example, the replenishment process or reproductive function. Put another way, pleasure actually stimulates and helps to perfect the faculties of sense perception, desire, imagination, and memory that are necessary aides to the nutritive and reproductive functions of all animals. The general function of pleasure, for animals, is to be a "catalyst" of those activities and powers that serve the good of the animal.

In man, the practical intellect and the contemplative intellect are also stimulated and perfected by pleasurable exercise. The perfection of these two faculties enable man to achieve his own good, which includes other things as well as the nutritive-reproductive good of animals. "Brutish" men, in whom neither rational faculty is perfected, cannot attain the full human good, but do, as we shall see, achieve a slightly higher good than that of animals. The perfected practical intellect, however, while it enables man to achieve part of his full good, also makes possible moral evil, something that "brutish" men and animals, living by their senses and imagination alone, are incapable of.

A man with a perfected practical intellect can pursue "by choice" that which animals or "brutish" men would refrain from "by nature": bodily pleasures beyond what are necessary for replenishment and reproduction.

Because pleasure is in some sense responsible for moral evil in men, some philosophers have argued that men ought to avoid all pleasure, or at least the bodily pleasures. Aristotle responds, though, that men ought not to avoid bodily pleasures as a way of preventing evil excesses of replenishment or discharge. Only pleasures can stimulate and perfect, in men with capacities for practical reason, the faculties of moral virtue, the faculties of sense perception not always associated with replenishment or discharge, and the faculty of contemplation. Men can learn to discriminate the good pleasures from the bad ones, the true good from the apparent good. Men can be directed by pleasures that stimulate the right faculties, whose proper exercise constitutes the complex and diverse activities that make ~~up~~ the good of man. In other words, only pleasure can catalyze the development of man's practical reason and other faculties, in a way that will enable him to achieve his bodily good and his political good without impeding, to the extent possible for man, that activity that constitutes his distinctive good - contemplation. The pleasure enhancing this activity, in itself God's

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pleasure in thinking himself, and to which man's pleasure in thinking is the closest approximation, is a rough model or paradigm for all of the "unqualified" pleasures serving the catalyzing function for men and animals, and touch need to be enhanced and stimulated by proper pleasures.

## II.

Men who by nature are thoughtless and live by their senses alone are brutish, like some races of distant barbarians. Since these men lack reason, their self-preservation requires that their senses of sight, hearing, and smell be more discriminating than the corresponding sense-perceptive beings have, whatever other senses they may also have, pleasure begins to play its function as the catalyst of faculties involved in nutrition and reproduction stimulating these senses first manifest themselves among these men, while unqualified pleasure, as the unimpeded things are animals, from ~~protozoa~~ <sup>single</sup> to man. All animals also possess desire, or the capacity to pursue pleasure and to avoid pain. The pleasures proper to animals other than man are only those supervening on the senses of touch and taste,<sup>2</sup> and the proper pleasure of each animal species other than man would be the pleasure associated with eating its particular food or mating with its own kind.<sup>3</sup> The pleasure that each animal other than man takes in seeing, hearing, or smelling its food or mate is only "incidental" to the seeing, the hearing, or the smelling. "By nature," this pleasure is anticipated or remembered as the actual tasting

activities of seeing, hearing, and smelling<sup>8</sup> may be impeded by the "foreign" pleasures of taste and touch associated with nutrition and reproduction. But the catalyst-function of pleasure in the purely sensuous life will have only occasional setbacks, relative to the good of that kind of life. For the bad man, who "will do ten thousand times as much evil as a brute,"<sup>9</sup> the continual pursuit of pleasures associated with replenishment and discharge implies a continual impediment to the activity and perfection of the noble senses. Civilized men, or men with practical reason, can, by choice and forethought, eat, drink, and copulate beyond what is necessary to satisfy the replenishment and discharge needs of animals or "brutish" men. The aim of the moral virtue of temperance is thus, in a sense, to reduce the level of "foreign" or impeding bodily pleasures in civilized men to that of "brutish" men.

Several problems remain, however, for the man secure from the impeding pleasures of self-indulgence. Firstly, because man's nature is not simple, or because it possesses several sense faculties, the pleasurable exercise of one faculty may impede that of another, even when these are both noble senses, such as sight and hearing. Secondly, the best exercise of a faculty requires an appropriate object for its exercise,<sup>10</sup> so the pleasure obviously depends on whether or not the object turns up in the environment.

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Thirdly, the exercise of human faculties depends on natural processes occurring within the bodily organs. When these organs are not in good health, the pleasure in their exercise diminishes; when they are in good health, they can become worn out by continual exercise.<sup>11</sup>

Though one might think that a highly developed faculty of practical reason would be necessary to cope with the above problems even in a purely sensuous life, a few simple prescriptions might do the job just as well. The appropriate objects of the senses might be made available by living where primitive men live. Moderation, though already a moral virtue, would keep the organs healthy, and relaxation could prevent them from wearing out. The problem that does not go away seems to be the impinging of the pleasure of one sense activity on another, because of man's complex nature. The same problem applies, looking beyond "brutish" men who have acquired moderation, to civilized men who possess all of the other moral virtues. For example, the pleasure of courageous actions may impede the performance of liberal actions, or the exercise of seeing may impinge pleasantly on the performance of just actions.

It seems, then, that just as moderation prevents, to the extent possible for men, the impingement of bodily pleasures on the exercise of the other faculties, some other power, perhaps practical wisdom, is needed to coordinate and

to regulate the exercise of all of the faculties, moral and bodily, in such a way that their proper pleasures interfere with each other as little as possible. At this point, though, man <sup>will</sup> has achieved only the practical good. He <sup>will</sup> has reached ~~ed~~ a higher good, and ~~can~~ have better pleasures, to be sure, than animals or "brutish" men can have, ~~not to~~ <sup>especially if</sup> mention that he has immunized his character against the bad pleasures of the vicious. Man's full good, however, includes the activity of thinking or contemplation, the exercise of the theoretical intellect, an exercise that constitutes the best element of man's complete good. Good,  
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All of the elements of the practical good aim at leaving the theoretical intellect free for unimpeded exercise. The nature of this activity and the pleasure proper to it are modeled on the activity and pleasure of God; or perhaps God's activity and pleasure are hypostatizations of man's best and most pleasant activity. God's "is a life such as the best which we enjoy, and enjoy for but a short time (for it is ever in this state, which we cannot be), since its actuality is also pleasure."<sup>12</sup> God's nature is simple: it is a continual thinking whose object is thinking itself, in the sense that this thinking always actively possesses its object, rather than ever being only capable of receiving it.<sup>13</sup> "If the nature of anything were simple, the same action would always be most pleasant

to it. This is why God always enjoys a single and simple pleasure."<sup>14</sup> God is always in as good a state, or always in a better state, as or than the best state that man is sometimes in.<sup>15</sup> Thinking, or knowing rather than inquiring, is the most self-sufficient and unimpeded activity of which man is capable. The moral virtues require other objects, such as wealth, friends, or political power for their exercise; the senses require a clean, beautiful environment. Only thinking requires just itself as the object of its exercise, or an object no better or worse than itself. Furthermore, thinking is characterized by the most pure leisureliness and, as far as is possible for man, unweariedness.<sup>16</sup> K

For Aristotle, what is best and most pleasant for man, then, is not a purely sensuous life, but a life of reason, or the closest approximation thereto.<sup>17</sup> Or put another way, in so far as a man thinks, he participates in God's thinking and pleasure, or the divine thought and pleasure manifest themselves in the man.<sup>18</sup> God's activity of thinking is not only a model of the best pleasure, but also of "most of the nature of happiness": God performs no morally-virtuous actions;<sup>19</sup> and animals and, presumably, "brutish" men, who have no share in contemplation, have no share in happiness.<sup>20</sup> Does this mean that the practically wise, though they experience all of the noble pleasures but that of thinking,

are not happy? They are happy, says Aristotle, but only "in a secondary degree."<sup>21</sup> Perhaps, in a strange way, the man who occasionally contemplates, is moderate, but leads a "brutish", purely sensuous life most of the time is closer to Aristotelian happiness than the statesman or the soldier. *They can occasionally contemplate too, e.g. Balfour or Smuts,*

### III.

True Aristotelian pleasures are characterized by self-sufficiency, unimpededness, and completeness at any moment of their duration. They are activities, even when, as the exercise of faculties involved in processes of replenishment and discharge, the pleasures are apparently "of" these processes.<sup>22</sup> The pleasures of men, of animals, and of God are all activities, and so they have the same general ontological character. "And perhaps they actually pursue ... the same pleasure; for all things have by nature something divine in them."<sup>23</sup> However, the pleasures of God, men, and animals can have different ranks or statuses within this general ontological character.<sup>24</sup>

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d The extent to which an activity or the exercise of a faculty depends on organ processes or movements, and the extent to which they depend on their corresponding objects, seem to be the decisive factors for ranking the corresponding pleasures ontologically. Animals can be expected to have the

lowest ontological grade of pleasure, because their only true pleasures are those of the exercise of the senses of taste and touch, which in turn, of all of the senses, depend most for continued health and unimpeded exercise on processes of replenishment and discharge. The pleasures of "brutish" men include those of sight, hearing, and smell, and thus are an ontological grade above those of animals. These pleasures are better, not only because the corresponding senses are sometimes not associated with processes of replenishment, but also because these senses are not as dependent as those of taste and touch on processes of replenishment. The eyes, ears, and nose require less "diet" and "gymnastic" than the organs of taste and touch for continued healthy functioning. While a gain, in terms of relative independence from organ processes, is made for these senses as compared with those of taste and touch, a loss seems to occur on the side of the objects sensed. The objects of sight, hearing, and smell are of a higher grade than those of taste and touch, but are also more varied. Many times, the best of such objects are not available in the environment. The same relative gain in independence from bodily processes and in dependence on environing objects occurs in the move to the pleasures of morally virtuous actions. Virtuous states of character, with the exception perhaps of temperance and bravery, do not seem

to depend on bodily processes for their exercise to the extent that the senses do. However, the exercise of moral virtues requires wealth, friends, political power, and other objects well beyond those required by the senses. Perhaps this is why Aristotle focuses mainly on the dependence of the activity on its object, when he compares the activity of any moral virtue with that of thinking. At any rate, the activity of thinking is the highest grade of pleasure for man. The exercise of the contemplative intellect seems to depend even less on organ processes than the exercise of any moral virtue, and requires no external object at all, for the object of thinking as an activity is just itself. In the latter respect, of having no dependence on an external object of exercise, human thought can be identical with God's thinking. In the former respect, of depending, even to a remote extent, on a bodily process for continued healthy exercise, human thought falls short of God's thinking. God's pleasure, as an exercise of a faculty on the exercise itself as object, and as independent of all bodily processes for its continued and unimpeded activity, is of the highest ontological grade.

The goodness or badness of the different pleasures roughly corresponds to their ontological status in a relative sense, and to their role in the functioning of animals, men, and God in an absolute sense. Pleasures

serve their functional role in so far as they enhance and stimulate the appropriate activities of animals, men, and God. Pleasures arising from the exercise of any faculty make~~s~~ its exercise easier and more perfect.<sup>25</sup> The more perfect and facile the exercise of the appropriate faculty, the more the good of the animal, the man, or God is served. (though God's activity (always is perfect and facile). Thus, while the pleasures of taste and touch are of low ontological grade, they are absolutely good for the functioning of animals. The same pleasures are only relatively good for the functioning of man, while the pleasures of the other senses and of the moral virtues are both ontologically of medium grade and relatively better for man's functioning. Finally, the pleasure of thinking is of the highest ontological grade, and is also absolutely good for man's functioning.

## Notes

1. Aristotle, De Anima (D.W. Hamlyn trans.), 414<sub>a</sub>32, 414<sub>b</sub>6.
2. Aristotle, Nichomachean Ethics (W.D. Ross trans.), 1118<sub>a</sub>25.
3. Ibid., 1176<sub>a</sub>4-10.
4. Ibid., 1118<sub>a</sub>17-23.
5. Ibid., 1149<sub>a</sub>10.
6. Ibid., 1153<sub>a</sub>10. *from where?*
7. Quoted in Drinnon, Richard, Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-hating and Empire-building, Minnesota, University of Minnesota Press, 1980, p. xvi.
8. Aristotle, supra note 2, 1176<sub>a</sub>1-3.
9. Ibid., 1150<sub>a</sub>7.
10. Ibid., 1174<sub>b</sub>17.
11. Ibid., 1175<sub>a</sub>3-10.
12. Aristotle, Metaphysics (W.D. Ross trans.), 1072<sub>b</sub>14-16.
13. Ibid., 1072<sub>b</sub>20-24.
14. Aristotle, supra note 2, 1054<sub>b</sub>25-27.
15. Aristotle, supra note 12, 1072<sub>b</sub>25.
16. Aristotle, supra note 2, 1177<sub>a</sub>25-<sub>b</sub>25.
17. Ibid., 1178<sub>a</sub>5.
18. Ibid., 1177<sub>b</sub>26.
19. Ibid., 1178<sub>b</sub>10-20.
20. Ibid., 1178<sub>b</sub>24-30.

21. Ibid., 1178<sub>a</sub> 8.
22. Ibid., 1152<sub>b</sub> 33, 1154<sub>b</sub> 17, 1153<sub>a</sub> 30.
23. Ibid., 1153<sub>b</sub> 31.
24. Ibid., 1173<sub>b</sub> 23-30, 1175<sub>a</sub> 23-27, 1175<sub>b</sub> 25-30, 1176<sub>a</sub> 1-3.
25. Ibid., 1153<sub>a</sub> 21, 1154<sub>b</sub> 18.

Lambert

A. Ambiguous: "itself" could = object or = thinking; and if the latter, a few words should be said to make this dark saying less mysterious. (I know what A. means, but ~~you~~ what you write should be understandable by a general philosophical reader who hasn't just taught or taken an Aristotle seminar.)

B. But pleasure doesn't enhance God's thinking, it is God's thinking; and God has no faculties to enhance. I suspect you're slurring over the differences between the accounts of pleasure in N.E. VII and X as irrelevant to your main points. That's OK, but you should acknowledge it in a footnote.

A very good account of Aristotle's views, clear, well-organized, and polished. You trace a number of insightful connections. My only objection is to the complete lack of any reference to or discussion of the secondary literature; one aim of this course is for you to learn how to use existing Aristotle scholarship. Many of your points could be usefully related to the literature; and a reference to Owen's article in BSS2, e.g., would take care of the point in B above. Still, this paper was a pleasure to read.

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