Pleasure Rough Notes

Coherence and Plausibility of Aristotle's Account

At VII.11-14, Aristotle appears to defend a conception of a pleasure as an unimpeded activity of a natural state. Aristotle imagines that pleasure is either an activity or a process, and (characteristically) attacks the Platonic account of pleasure as a perceived process of coming to be (by being restored) in a natural state. The argument in favour of pleasure as a sort of activity rather than as a sort of process is that a pleasure is complete in form at any time, and this is true of activities but not pleasures. Some thing's form is, roughly speaking, its definition, or what makes it the thing that it is. Some thing is complete in form at some time iff at that time it (in some sense) possesses all the elements of the form, i.e. it has all of what makes it what it is. According to Aristotle, the form of a process, i.e. what makes some process the process that it is, consists in its starting point, its ending point, and some description of the change it involves. So for example, the process of walking from the library to the examination hall is made such a process by its starting from the library, ending at the examination hall, and proceeding by walking. In contrast, an activity does not have a starting point or ending point, and roughly speaking, is entirely characterised by an instantaneous description. So an activity is complete in form at any point in time because at any point in time it possesses all that makes it the activity that it is, but a process is not complete at any point in time (that it is occurring) because it does not possess its ending point. For example, at any point in time that one is looking at a temple, one's so looking is complete (in the ordinary, non-Aristotelian sense of being fully a looking) whereas at any point in time that one is building a temple, one's so building is not complete. According to Aristotle, pleasure is an activity because it is complete in form at any time (that it is occurring). A pleasure is fully a pleasure at any time that it is occurring, it does not take time to acquire all that makes it the pleasure that it is. This seems plausible. Intuitively, at any time that one is pleased, there is nothing "missing" from one's being pleased. Having argued that a pleasure is a sort of activity rather than a sort of process, Aristotle substitutes "perceived" in the Platonic conception for "unimpeded" and "coming to be in a natural state" in the Platonic conception for "of a capacity in a natural state". Admittedly, this seems ad hoc, and motivated by an inclination to remain close to the Platonic conception. But it is also quite reasonable to think that, generally, not any activity is pleasant, so certain qualifications are appropriate. Aristotle's qualifications are patently plausible. For example, the activity of attending a concert is only a pleasure if it is unimpeded by faulty instruments or poor acoustics, and one's capacity for enjoying music is in a good condition and not distorted by tiredness. In summary, Aristotle defends a conception of a pleasure as an unimpeded activity of a capacity in a natural state in VII.11-14, and this is not patently implausible.

At X.1-5, Aristotle appears to defend a different conception of pleasure as something that completes an activity, when that activity belongs to a capacity in good condition and has an excellent object. As in VII.11-14, Aristotle argues against associating pleasure with processes and in favour of associating pleasure with activities. Unlike in VII.11-14 however, Aristotle here explicitly rejects that pleasure is a sort of activity. "Pleasure would seem to be neither [the activity of] thought nor [the activity of] perception, for that would be absurd." The sense in which Aristotle thinks pleasure "completes" such an activity is not clear. Aristotle offers two clues to what is meant by "complete". First, Aristotle writes that the way pleasure completes an activity is different from the way a capacity in good condition and an excellent object complete an activity, and that this difference is similar (or analogous) to the difference between the way health makes a person healthy and the doctor makes a person healthy. Second, Aristotle writes that pleasure completes an activity not as the state does, but as a sort of supervenient end, as the bloom (hora) supervenes on youth (akme). Presumably the "state" here refers to the capacity's being in good condition and the object's being excellent.

On the supervenience reading of Aristotle's account at X.1-5, pleasure supervenes on an activity's belonging to a capacity in good condition and with an excellent object. The pleasure in an activity is its completeness, and what makes an activity complete is its belonging to a capacity in good condition and having an excellent object. For example, the pleasure of listening to a concert is the completeness of so listening, and what makes so listening complete is one's capacity of hearing being in good condition and the concert being an excellent object. This interpretation is sensitive to the synonymity of "hora" (bloom) and "akme" (youth) in Greek, in which the former can be translated also as "youngness". To say that someone has youngness is simply to say that that person is young. On this reading, Aristotle means that to say that an activity is pleasant is simply to say that it is complete. The "health" comment can be understood as follows. Belonging to a capacity in good condition and having an excellent object make an activity complete in the way that a doctor makes a person healthy. To say that an activity is pleasant is simply to say that it is complete in the same way that to say that a person is in good health is to say that that person is healthy.

On the "further occurrence" reading of Aristotle's account at X.1-5, to say that something is pleasant is not simply to say that it is an activity belonging to a capacity in good condition that has an excellent object. Some such activity's being pleasant is something else about that activity, in the same way that the good state that generally accompanies being young is not simply

being young. On this reading, Aristotle does not tell us what this "something else" is. This interpretation is less sensitive to the potential synonymity of "hora" and "akme" in Greek, and interprets this clue roughly as follows. Pleasure accompanies an activity's being in a good state in the same way that youthfulness (in the sense of being energetic and cheery) accompanies being a young person. On this interpretation, the "health" comment is interpreted as simply illustrating the point that there are multiple ways that an activity can be made complete, just as there are multiple ways that a person can be made healthy.

One reason for favouring the latter reading is that it seems more plausible to the modern reader. Pleasure does in fact feel like something in addition to an activity's belonging to a capacity in good condition and having an excellent object. Belonging to a capacity in good condition and having an excellent object seems to be too "thin" a condition for a concept as "thick" as pleasure. We are inclined to think "surely something's being pleasant is not such a simple matter". And like Aristotle, we struggle to describe precisely what this "something else" is.

But this reason should not be decisive. We think that pleasure is something in addition to an activity's belonging to a capacity in good condition and having an excellent object, and that it is something "thicker" than that, in no small part because we imagine that there are activities belonging to capacities in good condition with excellent objects that are not in fact pleasant. For example, we imagine that a seasoned concert-goer whose capacity of hearing is in good condition, listening to an excellent concert could still "somehow" take no pleasure in it. We imagine that something necessary for pleasure could still be missing. But Aristotle certainly does not share this view. Aristotle is explicit at X that pleasure necessarily accompanies an activity in such a state, and that even if it is some further occurrence, it is some necessary further occurrence. So the modern reader's reason for thinking the latter reading more plausible is no reason for thinking that Aristotle in fact intended the former reading.

One reason for favouring the former reading is that it remains closer to the account that Aristotle appears to offer in VII.11-14. According to the account in VII.11-14, a pleasure is an unimpeded activity of a capacity in a natural state. According to the first reading of the account in X.1-5, a pleasure is an activity's belonging to a capacity in good condition and having an excellent object. The change from "natural state" to "good condition" appears to be no more than a change of wording. Plausibly, "natural state" is used in VII.11-14 so the account given there would sound closer to the Platonic account of pleasure that Aristotle there rejects. There is admittedly a difference between an activity's being unimpeded and it's having an excellent object, but the idea that underlies both restrictions seems to be that appropriate "external" conditions are necessary for pleasure. The most significant difference between the two accounts is that, under the former, pleasure is the activity when it satisfies the relevant conditions, whereas under the latter, pleasure is the activity's satisfying the relevant conditions. But in no case is there "something else" apart from the activity and it's satisfying the relevant conditions. So the account in X.1-5, on the supervenience reading, is in some sense, nothing more than a more sophisticated, less hasty version of the account in VII.11-14 that relocates pleasure among the elements Aristotle already posits in VII.11-14 (the activity and its satisfying the relevant conditions). In contrast, on the "further occurrence" reading of the account at X.1-5. Pleasure, even if it necessarily accompanies any activity that satisfies the relevant conditions, is distinct from these. The account in X.1-5 posits the existence of "something else" other than the activity and it's satisfying the relevant conditions. So the supervenience reading leaves the account in X.1-5 "closer" to the account in VII.11-14. This is a virtue of the supervenience reading even if Aristotle did not intend the latter account as an improvement on the latter (which almost certainly is not the intention, given that neither account shows any awareness of the other).

We should reject that it is a virtue of the supervenience reading that on this reading, the account in X.1-5 remains closer to the account in VII.11-14 because in the two discussions, Aristotle, knowingly or otherwise, is answering different questions about pleasure. I argue with Owen that Aristotle's account in VII.11-14 is an account of pleasure in the sense that is relevant when we describe chess as a pleasure, and that Aristotle's account in X.1-5 is an account of pleasure in the sense that is relevant when we say such things as "chess brings me much pleasure". In X.4, when Aristotle's positive account of pleasure is first introduced, Aristotle speaks exclusively of perception and thought, and appears to restrict pleasures to those associated with these activities. This restriction would only make sense if Aristotle here has in mind pleasures as a sort of feeling or mental phenomena, rather than as activities like chess. Further, in X.4, Aristotle's argument for pleasure's being associated with activity rather than process is that it does not make sense to speak of being pleased quickly or slowly. Aristotle also argues for associating pleasure with activity rather than process in VII, but does not rely on this argument. Again, this argument would only make sense if Aristotle at X has in mind pleasures as a sort of feeling or mental phenomena, rather than pleasures like chess and swimming, which can obviously be done quickly or slowly. There is no indication in VII.11-14 that Aristotle has in mind pleasure as a sort of feeling or mental phenomena, and the explicit account of pleasure as an activity suggests that Aristotle has in mind such things as chess and swimming. So Aristotle's two discussions of pleasure are two answers to two different questions, and it is no virtue of the supervenience reading that it remains marginally closer to the account in VII.11-14. Both the account in X.1-5 on the supervenience reading and on the further occurrence reading are more than satisfactorily consistent with the account in VII.11-14.

On Owen's interpretation, Aristotle's account of pleasure in the sense of pleasant sensations is implausible. The activities of eating and drinking are sometimes pleasant in this sense, but we do not ordinarily think their being so pleasant consists in their belonging to a capacity to eat or drink that is in good condition and having an excellent object. It would be unrealistic and snobbish to think that when we find eating and drinking pleasant, we find eating and drinking to be in the relevant sense complete. And we often find eating a simple meal or drinking a mediocre wine to be pleasant. When we find eating and drinking pleasant, this pleasure consists in some positive mental sensation rather than the completeness of any activity.

One Aristotelian response concedes that the above account is not a plausible account of pleasure in general, but is a plausible account of unqualified pleasures. What the excellent person, whose tastes are suitably refined, would find pleasant is not the "kick" he gets from eating and drinking, but in the completeness of eating and drinking. The excellent person would be the unrealistic snob.

This retreat is unsuccessful because it does not make sense to speak of unqualified pleasures as pleasures of the excellent person.

Aristotle's apparent account of pleasure in the sense of pleasant activities is also implausible. Not all unimpeded activities belonging to capacities in natural states are pleasures in this sense. The ordinary act of drinking water seems neutral, neither pleasant nor unpleasant. But when we drink water, generally, our capacity for drinking is “in a natural state” and not distorted in some way, and we do not seem to be impeded by anything in our drinking. Further, many ordinary acts are the unimpeded actions of some undistorted capacity, for example, waking up in the morning, and walking to class. Neither of these seem necessarily pleasant, and are in fact sometimes painful. Aristotle seems to overestimate how pleasant an ordinary life, which consists of many unimpeded activities belonging to natural states, would be. It seems Aristotle would have done better to say that pleasant activities are those activities from which we derive pleasure, and treat pleasure in this latter sense as primitive.

Goodness of Pleasure and Aristotle's Response to Hedonism

Aristotle, quite misleadingly, writes that pleasure is, in some sense, the supreme good. But Aristotle is a eudaimonist and not a hedonist, so Aristotle does not mean that pleasure is the supreme good in the sense that it is what a good life consists in. What Aristotle means (in VII.11-14 at least, when Aristotle writes this) is that eudaimonia is a pleasure, so in some sense, pleasure is the supreme good. Presumably, Aristotle writes that pleasure is in some sense the supreme good in order to sound "close" to the "common beliefs" that Aristotle is rather deferent to throughout the Nicomachean Ethics. It is part of Aristotle's method to, roughly speaking, find as much truth as possible in what is commonly said. So Aristotle thought it important to be less than entirely dismissive of the hedonist position. Aristotle's argument for eudaimonia being a pleasure rests almost entirely on the account of pleasure defended (or at least introduced) at VII.11-14. There, Aristotle argues that pleasure is an unimpeded activity of a capacity in a natural state. This is in obvious contrast to the Platonic account of pleasure as a perceived process of coming to be (by being restored) in a natural state. Aristotle's argument for this conception of pleasure, against the Platonic conception, is exceedingly brief.

Aristotle argues against hedonism in X.1-5. Aristotle's primary argument here is that pleasure is not "self-sufficient" but we think eudaimonia is. In X.2 Aristotle borrows the Platonic argument against hedonism that pleasure cannot be the supreme good because the compound good of pleasure and prudence is better than the simple good of pleasure alone. But we think that eudaimonia is "self-sufficient", i.e. the supreme good cannot be made better by compounding it with another good, because the compound good would then be better than the supreme good. So pleasure cannot be the supreme good. Aristotle offers a similar argument at the end of X.3. There, Aristotle argues that no one would choose to live a pleasant life with a child's level of intellect rather than an ordinary life, and no one would choose to live a pleasant life consisting of shameful actions. But we would choose such things as seeing, hearing, remembering, and having the virtues even if these brought us no pleasure. Recall that in I, Aristotle argued that eudaimonia is most choiceworthy.

The latter argument seems to be inappropriate because Aristotle there appears to trade on an ambiguity in "choiceworthy" which can be meant in two senses. In one sense, that something is choiceworthy means that it is worth choosing, that it is valuable, that it is good. "Choiceworthy" in this sense is normative. In another sense, that something is choiceworthy means that it is in fact sought after. "Choiceworthy" in this sense is positive. That we would choose an ordinary life over a pleasant life with a child's level of intellect does not imply that an ordinary life is better than a pleasant life with a child's level of intellect. Similarly, that we would choose pleasureless seeing, hearing, remembering, and virtue does not make these things good. Some thing's being popular does not make it good.

The latter argument seems inappropriate only if and because one interprets it too ambitiously. Aristotle's argument is not that such things as intellect, seeing, hearing, remembering, and virtue are better than pleasure, and so pleasure cannot be the supreme good. Rather, Aristotle's argument is that such things are more choiceworthy than pleasure, so pleasure is not most choiceworthy, so pleasure cannot be the supreme good. That eudaimonia is most choiceworthy simply follows from our

"formal" understanding of eudaimonia, i.e. of how we think eudaimonia stands in relation to other concepts such as completeness, self-sufficiency, and choiceworthiness. In other words, whatever we think the supreme good consists in, be it study, pleasure, or activity of the rational part of the soul in accord with virtue, we think eudaimonia should be complete (sought for its own sake and not for the sake of any further good), self-sufficient (not made better by compounding with any other good), and most choiceworthy (most sought after, in the sense that if offered a choice between, for example, a lollipop and eudaimonia, everyone would choose eudaimonia). Our understanding of eudaimonia in this way is, in some sense, prior to our "substantive" views of eudaimonia, and almost needs no defence. So, that pleasure is not most choiceworthy is sufficient to disqualify pleasure as a candidate supreme good.

Aristotle argues against antihedonism in VII.11-14. There, Aristotle primarily responds to objections to the goodness of pleasure. Aristotle also apparently offers three positive arguments for the goodness of pleasure. First, Aristotle appeals to the uncontroversial badness of pain. Second, Aristotle appeals to the universal choiceworthiness (in the more positive sense of being sought after rather than the more normative sense of being good and worth choosing) of pleasure. Third, Aristotle appeals to the uncontroversial necessity of pleasure in a eudaimon life.

On Aristotle's account, the relationship between eudaimonia and pleasure is as follows. The goodness or badness of a pleasure derives from (or is associated with) the goodness or badness of the associated activity. Aristotle thinks that this is so because the nature (more generally) of a pleasure quite evidently derives from (or is associated with) the nature of its associated activity. For example, "one could not chance to get the pleasure of (say) reading poetry from stamp-collecting". This is patently plausible, and Aristotle goes further to defend the relation between the nature of a pleasure and the nature of its associated activity by discussing proper and alien pleasures. The pleasure proper to some activity is conducive to that activity, while an alien pleasure detracts from that activity. For example, a lover of flutes would struggle to pay attention to a conversation if he catches the sound of a flute, because the pleasure he takes in listening to the flute is an alien pleasure to the activity of conversation. Similarly, if a person enjoys doing geometry, then this enjoyment makes geometry more engaging. And when we enjoy one activity, we are not easily distracted, so people eat nuts in theatres most when the actors are bad. Admittedly, that the nature of a pleasure derives from or is associated with the nature of its associated activity does not imply that the goodness or badness of a pleasure so derives, but the former certainly suggests the latter, and leaves logical room for the latter. On Aristotle's account of pleasure in X (under any reasonable interpretation), pleasure and activity are very closely related. The relation between pleasure and activity is closer than the relation between desire and activity at least in that pleasure and activity are at least contemporaneous while desire and activity need not be. We ordinarily think that a desire is good if it is a desire for some good activity. So deriving the goodness or badness of a pleasure from the goodness or badness of its associated activity is certainly reasonable.

Aristotle's distinction between proper and alien pleasures is not plausible. According to Aristotle, a proper pain is similar to an alien pleasure in that it distracts one from the associated activity. For example, a person who finds geometry painful would struggle to remain engaged in geometry, and would be easily distracted from geometry. But this analysis clearly fails to generalise. Consider the pains of thirst, which would seem to be associated with the activity of drinking. The pains of thirst do not distract one from thirst, from thoughts about drinking, or from drinking itself. In fact, these pains do the opposite, and focus one's mind on one's thirst, and on one's drinking if one happens to be drinking at the time. This difficulty in Aristotle's account appears to flow from Aristotle's conflation of two senses of pain (and pleasure). Aristotle fails to distinguish between the sense of pain that is relevant when it is said that geometry is a pain, and the sense of pain that is relevant when it is said that one's dry throat is causing one pain. The former sort of pain is an unpleasant activity while the latter is an unpleasant sensation. It is the former sense of pain (and pleasure) to which Aristotle's account of proper and alien pleasure applies, not the latter. It seems that the latter sort of pain draws our attention to the activities that would alleviate them. So, at best, Aristotle's theory about proper and alien pleasures requires qualification.

But the plausibility of Aristotle's theory of proper and alien pleasures is independent of the plausibility of Aristotle's claim that the nature of a pleasure derives from the nature of its associated activity. This remains true regardless of the sort of pleasure or pain that one has in mind. One could not chance to get the pleasant sensations of reading poetry from stamp-collecting. And stamp-collecting is a pleasure of a different nature from the pleasure of reading poetry. Aristotle's theory of proper and alien pleasures is a hastily drawn implication and/or a redundant shoring-up of this patently plausible insight.

Aristotle then characteristically attempts to find some truth in the hedonist view (and the "common belief") that all pleasure is good. This argument relies on Aristotle's distinction between qualified and unqualified pleasures, which Aristotle also describes as the real, really human, pleasures and those that are not so. Aristotle first notes that different species of animals have different proper pleasures, so there will be a pleasure proper to humans as well. That there is a pleasure proper to each species of animal seems to mean that for each species of animal, there are some things that it characteristically finds pleasant. For example, "an ass would choose chaff over gold". Aristotle turns to a familiar method for identifying the pleasure proper to human beings. This, Aristotle tells us, is what the excellent person finds pleasant. That the excellent person sets the

standard is not defended here, but the thought seems to be that the excellent person is the person with the human excellences, and so is in some sense the most human, so what the excellent person finds pleasant is the best guide to what humans as such characteristically find pleasant. The excellent person would not find excessive bodily indulgences pleasant, and would find study pleasant, for example. More generally, it seems reasonable to think that all the things the excellent person would find pleasant are also good, in other words, the excellent person would not find bad things pleasant. Then, Aristotle can say that all unqualified, truly human pleasures are good, and so find some truth in the hedonist view.

This attempt to find truth in the hedonist view is unnecessary, it is a symptom of Aristotle's excessive deference to the "common beliefs", it is not in fact essential to Aristotle's positive account of pleasure, and it is implausible because it makes no sense to speak of an unqualified pleasure. The qualification that Aristotle drops when speaking of unqualified pleasure is the qualification "to such a person at such a time/under such circumstances". Every pleasure is a pleasure to some person at some time and/or under some circumstances. And it seems the only natural reason to drop the qualification is linguistic rather than philosophical. We drop the qualification simply when we generalise over persons, times, and circumstances. So, for example, when it is said that spring weather is (unqualifiedly) pleasant, it is meant that spring weather is pleasant to most people, at most times, under most circumstances. We certainly do not mean that spring weather is pleasant to the best of us. Even if it did make sense to speak of unqualified pleasures as the activities an excellent person finds pleasant, Aristotle seems optimistic (or to defend an excessively narrow conception of excellence) in thinking that such a person and the things such a person would find pleasant are unique. We think intuitively that people can be differently excellent, and that differently excellent people would find different things pleasant. So there is no single excellent person who can be taken to be some sort of authoritative judge on the matter. Regardless, it is simply implausible to think that unqualified pleasures are the pleasures of the excellent person, and so Aristotle cannot find truth in the hedonist view by claiming that all unqualified pleasures are good.

Aristotle in VII.11-14 argues that the bodily pleasures are good only up to a certain point, this constitutes one deviation from hedonism. Aristotle appeals to the uncontroversial badness of bodily pains in defense of this claim. Bodily pain is uncontroversially an evil, and what is contrary to an evil is a good.

This solution is unattractive because there is no "excess" or "satiation point" for the sadistic pleasure from torturing children. Such pleasures are simply bad, regardless of their magnitude or amount. So Aristotle's insight that the nature of a pleasure derives from the nature of its associated activity is correct.