

# Pleasure Reading

## Condensed Notes on Aristotle, 1999

Aristotle (1999) *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by T. H. Irwin. Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing.

- VII.11 Questions about Pleasure
  - §1-2 Aristotle motivates the discussion of pleasure by noting that eudaimonia involves action in accord with virtue, which includes the virtues of character, which in turn involves taking pleasure in and being pained by appropriate objects.
  - §3-6 Aristotle notes three objections to the goodness of pleasure. The strongest objection denies the goodness of any pleasure, the next objection denies the goodness of some pleasure, and the weakest objection denies that the supreme good is a pleasure. Aristotle will want to refute these objections.
- VII.12 Pleasure and Good
  - §1-2, 7 Aristotle distinguishes between qualified and unqualified pleasures and applies this distinction in response to three arguments for the strong objection.
    - That the temperate person avoids pleasures is no reason to think that no pleasure is good because the temperate person avoids only bodily pleasures, which are only qualifiedly pleasures.
    - That the prudent person does not pursue a pleasant life is no reason to think no pleasure is good because the pleasant life not pursued is only qualifiedly so. The prudent person an unqualifiedly pleasant life.
    - Similarly, the pleasure pursued by children and beasts is qualified pleasure, not unqualified pleasure.
    - Aristotle's warning at VII.13§6 that "pleasure" should not be misunderstood as referring exclusively to bodily pleasure is relevant here.
  - §2-3 Aristotle rejects the Platonic conception of pleasure as a **perceived process of coming to be in a natural state** in favour of a conception of a pleasure as an **unimpeded activity of a natural state**.
    - The Platonic conception appears attractive because the Platonic "pleasures" are "coincidentally" pleasures because the processes of coming to be in a natural state coincide with an unimpeded activity of a natural state.
  - §4-6 Aristotle responds to the remaining objections to the goodness of pleasure. These are apparently less important.
- VII.13 Pleasure and Happiness
  - §1, 5-7 Aristotle launches a number of positive arguments for the goodness of pleasure. First, the goodness of pleasure follows from the uncontroversial badness of pain. Second, that pleasure is universally sought constitutes evidence for the goodness of pleasure. Third, that we intuitively think pleasure is necessary in a eudaimon life is evidence for the goodness of pleasure.
  - §2-4 Aristotle takes a detour to justify the necessity of fortune and external goods for eudaimonia. A deficit of fortune and external goods impedes activity of the rational part of the soul in accord with virtue, then such activity is incomplete, and such an impeded life is not eudaimon.
- VII.14 Bodily Pleasures
  - §1-4 Aristotle responds to the objection that denies the goodness of all pleasure, in particular, the goodness of bodily pleasure. Aristotle argues here that bodily pleasure is good in moderation. Aristotle's argument is from the uncontroversial badness of bodily pains.
  - Aristotle also explains that the bodily pleasures appear more choiceworthy (attractive, tempting) because the bodily pleasures crowd out bodily pains and are amplified by their contrast against bodily pains.
  - On this account, the apparent badness of bodily pleasure is accounted for by some pleasure's being actions of a base nature, and some pleasure's being remedies for some deficiency.
  - §7 Aristotle clarifies that "natural" pleasures are pleasures with no corresponding pain, and that one cannot go to excess in partaking in. "Coincidental" pleasures are those with corresponding pains, that one can go to excess in partaking in.
  - §8 There is a variety of natural pleasures because human nature is complex and has many elements, and the unimpeded activity of each element is a natural pleasure.
- X.1 The Right Approach to Pleasure
  - This chapter primarily serves to motivate the subsequent discussion of pleasure.
- X.2 Arguments about Pleasure
  - In this chapter, Aristotle presents and responds to Eudoxus's argument that pleasure is the supreme good. Aristotle rejects this hedonist position. Aristotle's rejection is ultimately grounded in the Platonic argument that the combination

of pleasure and prudence is better than pleasure alone, so pleasure is not "self-sufficient" as the supreme good is.

- X.3 Pleasure Is a Good but Not the Good
  - In this chapter, Aristotle responds to antihedonist arguments more generally (rather than the antihedonist arguments specifically against Eudoxus). One such argument that Aristotle pays particular attention to is the Platonic antihedonist argument. Aristotle rejects this because Aristotle rejects the Platonic conception of pleasure.
- X.4 Pleasure Is an Activity
  - Aristotle continues to argue that pleasure is not a process.
  - Aristotle defends a conception of pleasure as that which "completes" an activity when that activity is an activity of a capacity in a good state and has an excellent object.
  - Aristotle suggests that this account explains why no person is continuously pleased, and why we desire pleasure.
- X.5 Pleasures Differ in Kind
  - §1 Pleasures differ in kind because activities differ in kind, so the kind of thing that completes one kind of activity is different from the kind of thing that completes another.
  - §2-6 Aristotle discusses proper and alien pleasures.

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- VII.11 Questions about Pleasure
  - §1-2 Aristotle motivates the discussion of pleasure by noting (1) that eudaimonia involves action in accord with virtue, including the virtues of character, which in turn involve appropriate feelings, and so are intimately connected with pleasure and pain, and (2) the common belief that eudaimonia is closely related with pleasure.
  - §3 Aristotle notes three "objections to [the goodness of] pleasure": (1) no pleasure is good, (2) not all pleasures are good, and (3) the supreme good, eudaimonia, is not a pleasure.
  - §4-6 Aristotle briefly introduces the arguments for each of the three above objections:
    - (1a) a pleasure is some process of replenishment that restores the body to its natural state, so no pleasure is itself good, rather it is the natural state the pleasure restores that is good.
    - (1b) the temperate person avoids pleasure, and the supreme good, eudaimonia, requires temperance, then eudaimonia requires avoiding pleasure. If some pleasure is good, then it is a necessary element of eudaimonia (because eudaimonia is complete). By reductio, the pleasure is not good.
    - (1c) the prudent person pursues what is painless, not what is pleasant. Eudaimonia requires prudence, and we think that a eudaimon person would pursue what is good. Then, if some pleasure is good, we expect a eudaimon person, who is also prudent, to pursue (at least) this pleasure rather than what is merely painless.
    - (1d) pleasures impede prudent thinking, but intuitively, good things do not impede prudent thinking.
    - (1e) every good is the product of some craft, but there is no craft of pleasure.
    - (1f) children and animals pursue pleasure, but we do not think children and animals pursue the good.
    - (2a) some pleasures are shameful and reproached. These pleasures cannot be good.
    - (2b) some pleasures are harmful and cause disease. These pleasures cannot be good.
    - (3) the supreme good, eudaimonia, is an end, and an activity, and not a process, but a pleasure is a process of replenishment that restores the body to its natural state, so eudaimonia cannot be a pleasure.
- VII.12 Pleasure and Good
  - §1-2 Aristotle's first response distinguishes between qualified and unqualified pleasures. Aristotle supports this distinction by noting that we find different things pleasant depending on whether we are in a natural state, or are being restored to a natural state. For example, we find bitter medicine pleasant when we are ill but not when we are healthy. The suggestion here is that only the things we find pleasant in a natural state are unqualifiedly so. Aristotle does not immediately state which arguments this distinction is intended as a response to.
    - §7 Aristotle deploys this distinction in response to arguments (1b), (1c), and (1f). The temperate person avoids qualified pleasures but still pursues unqualified pleasure. The prudent person pursues a qualifiedly painless life and not a qualifiedly pleasant life, but still pursues an unqualifiedly pleasant life. Children and beasts pursue qualified pleasure, not unqualified pleasure.
  - §2-3 Aristotle rejects the Platonic conception of pleasure as a perceived process of coming to be in a natural state. The primary ground for this rejection is the apparent counterexample of the pleasure of study, which involves no such restoration.
    - According to Aristotle, a pleasure is some unimpeded activity of a natural state. Where Plato goes wrong is in failing to distinguish between activities and processes.

- Aristotle then argues that the Platonic pleasures are pleasures "coincidentally" because they coincide with an activity of a natural state (though not the natural state that is being restored, because activity of that state is impeded by that state's requiring replenishment).
- Aristotle demonstrates awareness of a distinction between a pleasure as a pleasant thing and a pleasure as arising from a pleasant thing, in writing "for as pleasant things differ from one another, so the pleasures arising from them differ too."
- §4 Aristotle responds to argument (2b) by noting that some thing's being bad for health is not inconsistent with it's being unqualifiedly good. For example, even study (which Aristotle maintains is unqualifiedly good) is some times bad for health, which is to be bad in a qualified way.
- §5 Aristotle responds to argument (1d) by noting that only alien pleasures impede prudent thinking, and the pleasure proper to prudent thinking does not. More generally, Aristotle's belief is that the pleasure proper to some activity does not impede that activity, and only alien pleasures do so.
- §6 Aristotle responds to argument (1e). On Aristotle's account it is unsurprising that pleasure is not the product of a craft because no activity is the product of a craft. Aristotle's account is consistent with the crafts of perfumery and cooking being crafts of pleasure. The precise argument here is not clear and apparently not particularly important.
- VII.13 Pleasure and Happiness
  - §1 Aristotle argues positively for the goodness of pleasure. It is uncontroversial that pain is bad. Then, it follows that pleasure, the contrary of pain, is good. Aristotle rejects Speusippus's view that pleasure and pain are both bad extremes and only an intermediate between pleasure and pain is good. Speusippus's view implies that pleasure, like pain, is essentially bad. This implication is implausible.
  - §2 Aristotle deploys the conception of pleasure as unimpeded activity of a natural state (rather than a perceived process of coming to be in a natural state) in response to argument (3). In I, Aristotle argued that eudaimonia is an activity and that eudaimonia is complete. Aristotle argues (or asserts) here that no activity is complete if it is impeded. Then, eudaimonia is an unimpeded activity, so eudaimonia (the supreme good) is a pleasure (even if not all pleasures are good).
    - This accounts for the common belief that a eudaimon life is a pleasant one.
  - §2-4 Because eudaimonia is a complete activity and an activity is complete only if it is unimpeded, eudaimonia requires good fortune and external goods because a scarcity of these impedes the corresponding activity (of the rational part of the soul in accord with virtue, in a complete life).
  - §5-6 The universal (among men and beasts) pursuit of pleasure constitutes evidence of the goodness of pleasure.
  - §6 Aristotle warns against understanding "pleasure" as referring exclusively to bodily pleasure. According to Aristotle, this misunderstanding is tempting because the bodily pleasures are most commonly aimed at, and are universal among men and beasts.
  - §7 Aristotle presents a final positive argument for the goodness of pleasure (in response to objection (1)). If pleasure were not good, it would not be necessary in a eudaimon life, and a thoroughly painful life could well be eudaimon (because if pleasure is not a good, then pain is not a bad). But we think that pleasure is necessary for a eudaimon life, and that a thoroughly painful life is not eudaimon, so we should think that pleasure is a good.
- VII.14 Bodily Pleasures
  - §1-2 Aristotle responds to objection (2) that not all pleasures are good, in particular, that the bodily pleasures are not good. Aristotle argues that even the bodily pleasures are good, but only in moderation. It is uncontroversial that the bodily pains are bad, so the bodily pleasures are good. The bodily pleasures are good only in moderation because the bodily goods are good only in moderation.
  - §3-4 Aristotle proceeds to account for why the bodily pleasures appear more choiceworthy (in the sense of desirable and tempting, rather than good). This is because the bodily pleasures crowd out bodily pains and are amplified by their contrast against bodily pains.
    - This also accounts for the common belief that the bodily pleasures are not choiceworthy (in the sense of good and excellent). "First, some pleasures are the actions of a base nature." Second, some pleasures "are cures for something deficient", in particular, the bodily pleasures are sought to push out pains. Because it is better to be in a good state than to be in a deficient state for which a cure is required, bodily pleasures appear bad by association with such states.
  - §7 Pleasures with no corresponding pains have no excess, such pleasures are "naturally" rather than coincidentally pleasant. Aristotle here clarifies the use of "coincidental". This clarification validates the earlier hypothesis that a "coincidental" pleasure is one that coincides with a process of being restored to a natural state. Pleasures (unimpeded activities) are naturally pleasant if they do not so coincide, when the activity is of a person in a natural state.

- §8 Aristotle accounts for the common belief that we pursue variety in pleasure. On Aristotle's account, we pursue variety in pleasure because human nature is complex and has multiple constituents, and the unimpeded activity of one of our natures is sometimes against another one of our natures.
- X.1 The Right Approach to Pleasure
  - §1 Aristotle again motivates the discussion of pleasure, apparently unaware of the discussion in VII.11-14. Aristotle apparently has a number of motivations for the discussion of pleasure, but the primary motivation seems to be that virtue of character consists in taking pleasure in and being pained by the appropriate sorts of things, and is necessary for eudaimonia.
  - §2 Aristotle notes that the goodness of pleasure is controversial.
  - §2-4 Aristotle detours to discuss the practice of proclaiming that pleasure is bad while not fully convinced of this, in the interest of steering ourselves in away from excess in the direction of pleasure. Aristotle thinks such proclamations are counterproductive.
- X.2 Arguments about Pleasure
  - §1-2 Aristotle presents Eudoxus's argument that pleasure is the supreme good. In this chapter, Aristotle's objective is apparently a partial defense of Eudoxus's argument.
    - Eudoxus's argument for pleasure being the supreme good consists of four sub-arguments. (1) What is choiceworthy (in the sense of being sought after) is good, and what is most choiceworthy is the supreme good. Pleasure appears universally choiceworthy because men and beasts alike seek pleasure, so pleasure appears to be most choiceworthy, hence the supreme good. (2) Pain appears to be universally avoided, so pleasure is universally choiceworthy, and by a similar argument, pleasure is the supreme good. (3) Pleasure is choiceworthy in itself because we do not ask a person what he seeks pleasure for. The supreme good (and only the supreme good) is sought for its own sake. So pleasure is the supreme good. (4) When pleasure is added to any good, the combination is better than the original good.
  - §3 Aristotle does not agree with Eudoxus, but also does not respond to the above arguments directly. Instead, Aristotle repeats an argument from Plato against the claim that pleasure is the supreme good. Pleasure can be made better by the addition of prudence, so pleasure is not the supreme good.
  - §4-5 Aristotle responds to mistaken objections to (1) and (2). The mistaken objection to (1) is a denial of the inference from some thing's being universally sought after to that thing's being good. The mistaken argument to (2) is a defence of the good as intermediate between pleasure and pain. This is mistaken because it implies that pleasure is essentially bad, as pain is. But we seek pleasure and avoid pain, so that is not possible.
    - Aristotle does not defend Eudoxus's argument here, and his responses can be interpreted as a rejection of antihedonism, not as a defence of hedonism. Aristotle's position is intermediate between the two.
- X.3 Pleasure Is a Good but Not the Good
  - Aristotle in this chapter responds to the common beliefs about pleasure.
  - §1 Aristotle passes from antihedonist arguments specifically directed against Eudoxus to more general antihedonist arguments. The first such argument Aristotle considers is that pleasure is not a good because it is not a quality. "Quality" here refers to such things as kindness, fairness, honesty, i.e. qualities of persons. This argument conflates two senses of "good". "Good" is used in one sense in "a good person" and in another sense in "good for a person". To be a good person is to have some sort of quality, so pleasure indeed is not the supreme good in this sense. But this sense of "good" is not what Aristotle, the hedonists, and the antihedonists are interested in.
  - §2-3 Aristotle responds to the antihedonist argument that pleasure admits of degrees, but what is good for a person does not. The objection and response are not clear, but do not seem particularly important.
  - §4-7 Aristotle responds to the antihedonist argument from the Platonic conception of pleasure as a perceived process of coming to be in a natural state.
    - The Platonic antihedonist argument is as follows. What is good is complete in the sense that it is for its own sake, and not for the sake of any further end. Pleasure is a process, of coming to be in a natural state, so it is for the sake of this natural state, and not for its own sake. So pleasure is not complete, hence it cannot be a good.
    - Aristotle rejects the Platonic conception of pleasure on the ground that every process can be fast or slow (in the sense that it is coherent to talk about the speed of some process), whereas it is not coherent to describe someone as pleased quickly or slowly (although it is coherent to describe someone as becoming pleased quickly or slowly, but to be pleased and to become pleased are different).
    - §5 Aristotle rejects the Platonic conception of pleasure also on the ground that it is not clear what pleasure comes to be from, i.e. the original state of the process of pleasure.
    - §6 Aristotle rejects the Platonic conception of pleasure also on the ground that it is implausible that pleasure consists in the body coming to be in its natural state. Because then, the process of pleasure is a process of the body, so it will be the body that is pleased in this process of replenishment. But we think it is the soul not the

body that is pleased. So, at best, pleasure coincides with such a process, but is not such a process. Further, the pleasures of sights, sounds, smells, memories, expectations, and mathematics do not apparently involve some sort of replenishment. Then, it is not clear what the original state of the process of pleasure is.

- §8 Aristotle then responds to argument (2a) (though he does not refer to the discussion in VII.11-14) that pleasure is not a good because there are disgraceful pleasures. Aristotle's apparent objective here is not to refute (2a) and objection (2), but to account for disgraceful pleasures.
  - Aristotle offers three such accounts. First, that such pleasures are pleasant only to vicious persons who are in a bad condition. Their appearing pleasant to such people is no evidence for their in fact being pleasant in the same way that some food's tasting bitter to a sick person is evidence for that food's in fact being bitter.
  - §9 Second, that such pleasures are bad because they derive from bad sources.
  - §10 Third, that such pleasures are bad by their nature (and pleasures have different natures because they have different sources).
- §11-13 Aristotle here appears to be satisfied with the argument for the goodness of pleasure, and argues that pleasure is not the only good, nor the supreme good.
  - Aristotle's argument for this is that no one would choose to live with a child's level of thought in exchange for a life of pleasure, nor to live a pleasant but thoroughly shameful life, and "there are many things we would be eager for even if they brought us no pleasure—for instance, seeing, remembering, knowing, having the virtues.

#### • X.4 Pleasure Is an Activity

- §1 Aristotle argues (or asserts) that pleasure is complete in form at any time.
  - "Something achieves its form to the extent that it acquires the character that makes it the kind of thing that it is." "An enjoyment does not take time to acquire all that makes it [an] enjoyment. Though certainly I might prefer my enjoyment to be prolonged, it is no more an enjoyment by being prolonged."
- §2-4 Pleasure is not a process because a process is not complete in form at any time.
  - "Each process is incomplete during the processes that are its parts, i.e. during the time that it goes on; and it consists of processes that are different in form from the whole process and from one another". "We cannot find a process complete in form at any time [while it is going on], but [only], if at all, in the whole time [that it takes]".
  - §4 "This also seems true because a process must take time, but being pleased need not; for what is present in an instant is a whole". Because a pleasure is a whole at any time, it is not a coming to be, since only divisible things come to be.
- §5-11 Aristotle (again) offers a conception of pleasure.
  - §5 Every capacity, when it is active, is active in relation to some object, and is completely active when it is in a good condition, and is active in relation to an excellent object. Every capacity has a pleasure proper to it. The most (properly) pleasant activity of some capacity is the most complete activity of that capacity, which is activity of that capacity in a good condition in relation to an excellent object.
    - Aristotle apparently expects readers to find this intuitive. When our hearing is in a good condition, and we are listening to an excellent concert, our so listening is pleasant.
  - Pleasure completes the activity.
  - §6 An activity is also completed by the corresponding capacity's being in a good condition and the corresponding object's being excellent. Pleasure completes the activity in a different way "just as health and the doctor are not the cause of being healthy in the same way".
  - §8 "Pleasure completes the activity—not, however, as the [excellent] state [of the capacity and object] does, but as a sort of consequent end, like the bloom on youths." If the capacity is in good condition and the object is excellent, then the activity will necessarily be pleasant.
  - §9 On this account, it is clear why no person is continuously pleased. This is because we get tired and are not capable of continuous activity "hence no continuous pleasure arises either, since pleasure is a consequence of the activity." It is also clear, on this account, why some things are pleasant only initially. This is because we are initially stimulated and our capacities are intensely active, but are later less so.
    - Note here that Aristotle does not identify pleasure with the activity.
  - §10 On this account, it is clear why we desire pleasure. We desire pleasure because it completes the activities which constitute life, and we desire life, so we desire life's being complete.
    - This argument is not very clear but apparently not very important.

#### • X.5 Pleasures Differ in Kind

- §1 Pleasures differ in kind because activities differ in kind, and different things are completed by different things.
- §2 One instance of such a difference is the difference between pleasures of thought and pleasures of perception. And the pleasures of different kinds of perception differ from each other too.

- The "one-to-one" relationship between an activity and its pleasure is evident also in the relationship between an activity and a proper pleasure. The proper pleasure "increases" the activity. Taking pleasure in philosophy makes us more attentive and diligent philosophers, whereas taking pleasure in drink does not make us more attentive and diligent philosophers.
- §3 A flutist catching the sound of a flute can destroy a conversation. §4 "People who eat nuts in theatres do this most when the actors are bad". §5 "The proper pleasure makes an activity more exact, longer, and better, whereas an alien pleasure damages it." The effect of an alien pleasure is similar to that of a proper pain.
- §6 The pleasure proper to an excellent activity is decent and the pleasure proper to a base activity is vicious. This is analogous to the desire for an excellent activity being decent and the desire for a base activity being vicious.
  - Aristotle remarks that the relationship between pleasure and activity is closer than the relationship between desire and activity because the former is unattenuated by time and "nature". §7 It is because of this close relationship between pleasure and activity that they are sometimes thought to be the same.
  - Aristotle's argument here is critical, and explains why Aristotle is not a hedonist. The eudaimonic value of a pleasure is not evaluated by consideration of the pleasure alone, but by evaluation of the activity it accompanies.
- §9-11 What one person finds pleasant another finds painful. But this is unsurprising. The same can be said for ordinary qualities like sweetness. What is truly, unqualifiedly pleasant is what the excellent person finds pleasant. So the shameful pleasures are not truly, unqualifiedly pleasant, but are only pleasant to the corrupt (this is to be pleasant in a qualified way).
- §11 Aristotle ends by hinting at a distinction between complete (teleia) eudaimonia and eudaimonia in a secondary way (deuteros) in noting that the pleasures that complete the activities of the blessedly happy (makarios) man are most fully human pleasures, while the pleasures that complete the other activities are human pleasures in a secondary way.

## Bostock, 2000

Bostock, D. (2000) Aristotle's Ethics. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 143-166.

- Neither discussion of pleasure suggests any awareness of the other. In both discussions, Aristotle rejects the Platonic conception of pleasure as a process (of coming to be in a natural state) in favour of associating pleasure with activities. In VII.11-14, Aristotle defends a conception of a pleasure as an unimpeded activity of a capacity in a natural state. In X.1-5, Aristotle defends a conception of pleasure as something that completes an activity of a capacity in good condition, with an excellent object.
- Aristotle's primary interest in both discussions seems to be whether, and to what extent, pleasure is good.

## The goodness of pleasure

- In VII.11-14, Aristotle responds to three objections to the goodness of pleasure. The first **strong objection** denies that any pleasure is good, the second **weak objection** denies that all pleasure is good, the third **specific objection** denies that pleasure is the supreme good.
  - It is clear (from VII.13) that Aristotle believes that eudaimonia is a pleasure (because it is an unimpeded activity of a natural state), and so in some sense, pleasure is the supreme good. **Aristotle rejects the specific objection.** This claim is usually taken in the hedonist sense, which Aristotle rejects.
    - The argument here rests on a rejection of the Platonic conception of pleasure, and a conception of a pleasure as an unimpeded activity of a natural state. It seems that eudaimonia quite straightforwardly is such an activity, and so is a pleasure.
    - So Aristotle does defend the positive claim that (in some sense) pleasure is the supreme good.
  - It is also clear that Aristotle believes that some pleasures are good, and so **rejects the strong objection.**
  - **Whether Aristotle rejects the weak objection is not clear.** Aristotle can be interpreted as defending this view in VII.12. At the start of VII.12, Aristotle distinguishes between qualified and unqualified pleasures, and appears to suggest that qualified pleasures are only qualifiedly good (if some thing is pleasant only for some person at some time then it is also good only for that person at that time) and unqualified pleasures are unqualifiedly good. Aristotle goes on to write that some apparent pleasures are in fact not pleasures. This would do some work in meeting potential counterexamples.
    - Bostock finds it more plausible to interpret Aristotle here as offering a hypothetical defense of the universal goodness of pleasure because a more plausible, more moderate position is given in VII.14.
  - On Bostock's interpretation, in VII.14, Aristotle is primarily concerned with defending the claim that unqualified pleasures are unqualifiedly good, but that qualified pleasures, including the bodily pleasures, which can be taken to

excess, are good only up to a point.

- Aristotle "then goes on, in the rest of the chapter, to explain why, when most people think of pleasure, they think only of such bodily pleasures".
- Aristotle does not repeat the claim (that according to Bostock, Aristotle does not in fact endorse) that qualified pleasures, including the bodily pleasures when they are pleasant to some person are also good for that person, or that such pleasures are only apparently pleasures.
- On Bostock's interpretation, Aristotle in X defends a "moderate" position, **rejecting both the hedonist view that all and only pleasure is good and pleasure is the supreme good, and the antihedonist view that no pleasure is good.**
  - Aristotle's **main argument against Eudoxus, the hedonist**, is that pleasure cannot be the supreme good because a combination of pleasure and prudence is better than pleasure alone, so pleasure alone is not "self-sufficient", whereas we think that the supreme good is. This argument is first given in the middle of X.2 and repeated at the end of X.3. At the end of X.3, Aristotle's examples are sight, memory, knowledge, and virtue (rather than prudence).
  - The claim that eudaimonia is a pleasure is simply not mentioned in X.
- In X.3, Aristotle **responds to antihedonist arguments**, paying particular attention to the Platonic argument. Aristotle then, having apparently refuted both the hedonist and antihedonist arguments, considers **the problem of accounting for "disgraceful" pleasures.**
  - Aristotle offers three responses. First, that the disgraceful pleasures are pleasant only to corrupted persons, who are in a bad condition, and are not in fact pleasures. Second, that such pleasures are in fact bad, but can be distinguished by their source. Third, that such pleasures are in fact bad, but can be distinguished by their nature (because pleasures with different sources have different natures, as Aristotle explains more fully in X.5).
- In X.5, Aristotle's primary argument is apparently that **the goodness or badness of a pleasure derives from (or is at least associated with) the goodness or badness of the associated activity.**
  - Aristotle's discussion is mostly spent defending the claim that the nature of a pleasure derives from the nature of the associated activity. "One could not chance to get the pleasure of (say) reading poetry from stamp-collecting." A "by-product" of this claim is Aristotle's understanding of proper and alien pleasures.
  - This does not imply that the goodness or badness of a pleasure derives from that of the associated activity, but does leave logical room for it.
- Bostock thinks that the discussion of unqualified, truly human pleasures that are the pleasures of the excellent man at the end of X.5 is best ignored. This claim, according to Bostock, is implausible because there is no reason to think that all excellent men take pleasure in the same things, such that there is a single "excellent" judge of what is truly pleasant for humans.
  - Aristotle's argument here is that each sort of being has an activity proper to it, so the pleasure proper to each sort of being is the pleasure that completes this activity.

## Process and activity

- According to Aristotle, a process is something that takes time, and has a starting and ending point, so it is complete only at the time when it has reached its ending point. These, and the manner of the change (e.g. "by walking", "by jumping") constitute the definition of the process, which Aristotle describes as its form.
  - So a process is not complete in form at any point (that it is occurring) because at any such point, it has not reached its ending point, so it does not "contain" this element of its form.
- In contrast, an activity does not take time, nor does it have a starting and ending point.
  - So an activity is complete in form at any point (that it is occurring) because at any such point, there is no element of the form that it does not contain.
  - More plainly, an activity does not require any interval of time to "acquire all that makes it" the activity that it is. For example, a journey is a process because it is only completely a journey when its ending point has been reached. In contrast, a scream is an activity because at any point in time that it is occurring, it is completely a scream.
  - Note that Aristotle uses "activity" (*energeia*) in two senses. In one sense, activity is in contrast to process. In another sense, activity is in contrast to state, capacity, or (mere) potentiality.
  - In X, the activities Aristotle has in mind are the activities of perception and thought. It is not clear whether this is intended as an exhaustive list.
- The difficulty with Aristotle's rejection of the Platonic conception is that Aristotle is then committed to the view that one cannot enjoy a process such as quenching a thirst.

## The relation between pleasure and activity

- The relation between pleasure and activity, on the account in VII.13, is clear. A pleasure simply is an unimpeded activity of a natural state. For example, a pleasure is listening to a concert when one's hearing is in a natural state (unimpaired by nasal congestion) and when this is unimpeded (for example, by poor acoustics).
  - Irwin interprets Aristotle differently, as saying that pleasure is some activity that accompanies an unimpeded activity of a natural state. The difficulty with Irwin's interpretation is that on this interpretation Aristotle could not argue that eudaimonia is a pleasure, but this appears to be the argument in VII.13§2. According to Irwin, the argument there is not that eudaimonia is a pleasure, but that it remains possible that it is.
- X.5 is explicit that the pleasure is not simply the activity though the two are closely related.
- Bostock comments that the opening paragraph of X.4 can be interpreted as a suggestion that pleasure is an activity. But this is not explicit, and Aristotle only states that pleasure is closely related to an activity. Further, the idea of one activity completing another seems odd.
- What is obscure in Aristotle's account of pleasure in X is the notion of a pleasure "completing" an activity.
  - Aristotle uses "complete" in at least three different senses in the Nicomachean Ethics, and at least two different senses in the discussions of pleasure. In the discussions of eudaimonia in I and X, Aristotle describes eudaimonia as "complete" and "most complete" in the sense that it is sought for its own sake, and not for the sake of anything else. In the discussions of pleasure, specifically the rejection of the Platonic conception of pleasure as some sort of process, Aristotle argues that pleasure is an activity because it is "complete in form" at any time. This means that a pleasure, at any time (that it is occurring), has everything that makes it a pleasure. In X, when describing pleasure as some thing that completes an activity whose capacity is in good condition and object is excellent, Aristotle clearly uses "complete" in a different sense.
  - Aristotle offers two clues to what is meant by "complete" in this setting.
    - 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.
  - The clues Aristotle leaves do not make it much clearer in what sense pleasure "completes" an activity.
  - Two competing interpretations differ in their sensitivity to the synonymy of "hora" and "akme" in Greek. On one interpretation, the second clue is best translated as "as youngness supervenes on being young". On another interpretation, the second clue is best translated as "as the flourishing of youth supervenes on being young (in the thin, formal sense of being below a certain age)", where "flourishing" refers to the good state that generally accompanies being young.
  - On the first interpretation, pleasure is not truly something "extra" to an activity's belonging to a capacity in a good state and having an excellent object. To say that something is pleasant is simply to say that it is an activity belonging to such a capacity and having such an object. So an activity is pleasant iff it has such a capacity and such an object, pleasure is an activity's being complete in this sense. Pleasure is not a further occurrence, but a further fact.
  - On the second interpretation, pleasure is something "extra" to an activity's belonging to a capacity in a good state and having an excellent object. On this interpretation, the first clue is meant as no more than an illustration that there are multiple senses in which some thing can be complete, just as there are multiple senses in which one thing can cause another. So pleasure is a further occurrence that does not necessarily accompany an activity's being complete in the sense of having a good capacity and an excellent object.
- Bostock favours the first interpretation.
  - Aristotle is explicit that if an activity belongs to a capacity in good condition and has an excellent object, then it is invariably pleasant. This suggests that the relationship between having such a capacity and such an object, and being pleasant is necessary and not contingent. So the former reading of the second clue is more appropriate because it is not possible to have youngness while not being young but it is possible to not have the flourishing of youth while being young.
  - Another reason for favouring the first interpretation is that on this interpretation, Aristotle's accounts in VII and X are more consistent. On this interpretation, both accounts agree that, when an activity satisfies certain conditions, a pleasure is present (either as the activity itself, or as some further fact that completes the activity). In VII, the conditions are that the capacity is in a natural state and its exercise is unimpeded. In X, the conditions are that the capacity is in a good state and its object is excellent. Plausibly, Aristotle means the same thing by a "natural state" and a "good state" and Aristotle uses "natural state" in VII to remain linguistically close to the Platonic conception of pleasure as a process of coming to be in a "natural state". Aristotle certainly thinks that such a state is good. An



activity's being unimpeded and its having an excellent object are admittedly different things, but the idea that the activity must be suitably active appears common to both.

- On Owen's interpretation, the second interpretation of X is correct, and the two discussions of pleasure are consistent because "they do not give different answers to the same question; rather, it is the question that changes".
  - "Pleasure" in Greek as in English has two uses. "Pleasure" is used in one sense when it is said that "chess is a pleasure" and in another sense when it is said that "chess gives me pleasure". The former use of "pleasure" denotes what is enjoyed, the latter use denotes what it is to enjoy something.
  - Evidence for this interpretation is found in the arguments Aristotle offers in X against the Platonic conception of pleasure as a process of coming to be in a natural state. Aristotle there argues that one cannot be pleased quickly or slowly, and that it is the body that is replenished to a natural state but the soul that has pleasure. These seem plausible only for pleasure in the latter sense of what it is to enjoy something. Swimming, the pleasure, can be fast or slow, and it is the body that swims not the soul.
  - But this also suggests that Aristotle is not aware of the distinction because the Platonic conception of a pleasure is clearly a conception of a pleasure in the sense of what is enjoyed, so the above arguments are not relevant.

## Pleasures and activities

- According to Bostock, Aristotle believed that we could in fact only enjoy activities and not processes. Aristotle believed this because Aristotle believed that we only enjoy perceptions or thoughts, and these are activities and not processes. That we only enjoy perceptions or thoughts is only a reasonable thought because Aristotle failed to distinguish between pleasures in the sense of what is enjoyed and the sense of what it is to enjoy something. Because the latter is evidently some thing mental, Aristotle thinks falsely that the former is also some thing mental.
- We should hesitate in attributing to Aristotle the view that only activities and not processes are pleasant because this view seems implausible, and Aristotle seems to be aware of obvious counterexamples. The most problematic counterexamples that Aristotle is apparently aware of are eating and drinking, which Aristotle takes to be processes of bodily replenishment. So Aristotle must think that these are not enjoyed, but that seems implausible. That we enjoy eating and drinking is a "common belief" and a key motivation for the Platonic conception of pleasure. So we would expect that Aristotle has some account of this appearance.
  - Here Bostock discusses what appears to be **fundamental in Aristotle's conception of pleasure, that pleasure (the things that we enjoy) are mental, in the sense that they are thoughts and perceptions.**
  - Aristotle discusses these pleasures in VII.13, in rejecting the Platonic conception. Aristotle writes that these pleasures are coincidental in the sense that the process of replenishment coincides with an activity belonging to some thing in a natural state.
  - Aristotle does not tell us what it is that is in a natural state, whose activity constitutes the coincidental pleasure. But it is natural to think that when the body is in need of replenishment, it is the soul that remains in a natural state. The unimpeded activity of the soul in this case is perception.
  - In summary "we all speak, of course, of enjoying drinking; but this is a loose way of speaking, for what is actually enjoyed is not the drinking itself but the perception of it; and this perception takes place in the mind, not in the body." This generalises not only to eating and drinking but other apparently pleasant processes like writing and building.
  - This interpretation is supported by Aristotle's discussion of the intemperate man in III.10. There, Aristotle describes the intemperate man as the man who pursues pleasure to excess, and distinguishes the pleasures into mental and bodily pleasures, and then categorises the bodily pleasures into the categories of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. This maps the pleasures onto thought and perception. So Aristotle seems to think that all pleasures are pleasures of thought or perception, which are activities.
- Bostock does not think Aristotle's conception of pleasure (in the sense of what is enjoyed) is defensible.
  - One reason for Aristotle's thinking that pleasure (in the sense of what is enjoyed) is mental (thought or perception) is that pleasure (in the sense of the enjoyment we get out of such things) is in the mind. But this simply does not follow. If we distinguish the two sorts of pleasure, then there is no reason to think this inference valid. And we should distinguish the two because, for example, some pleasant thought is pleasant to one person but not to another, so a pleasure of the latter sort does not necessarily accompany a pleasure of the former sort.
    - One response to this objection is that, at least in Bostock's example, it is not the thought of some compelling counterargument that a skeptic takes pleasure in, but his being vindicated by this counterargument.
  - Another reason for Aristotle's thinking that pleasure (in the sense of what is enjoyed) is in the mind is that awareness is necessary for pleasure. Aristotle infers from this that it is awareness that is pleasant.
  - Another difficulty with Aristotle's conception is that the perception of a process is necessarily a process itself, but is surely pleasant. For example, listening to a concert is not completely "listening to a concert" at any point in time

because the definition of listening to a concert will include listening to the start of the concert and listening to the end of a concert.

- Bostock concludes that Aristotle's account of what pleasure is is not defensible, and Aristotle's account of the goodness of pleasure is more defensible and more relevant. On Bostock's interpretation, Aristotle's claim that pleasure is closely related to activity rather than process is not fundamental, rather Aristotle's account of pleasure fundamentally claims that all pleasures are either pleasures of thought or perception.

## Urmson, 1988

Urmson, J. O. (1998) "Pleasure," in J. O. Urmson (ed.) *Aristotle's Ethics*. Oxford, England: Blackwell, pp. 97-108.

- The discussion of pleasure in VII makes sense following the discussion of akrasia, in which pleasure leads the akratic agent to knowingly act poorly. The discussion of pleasure in X makes sense leading up to the discussion of eudaimonia, because Aristotle is presumably interested in dismissing the competing hedonist conception of the supreme good.
- Urmson discusses Aristotle's response to the antihedonist argument that all pleasures are bad (or at least no good).
  - Aristotle's response to the argument that all pleasures are bad because pleasures interfere with or undermine more important things is to note that only alien pleasures do so. The pleasure proper to prudent thinking enhances prudent thinking. Only alien pleasures like the pleasures of food and drink make prudent thinking laborious. So that some pleasures interfere with important things is no reason to think that pleasures are bad.
  - Aristotle argues that the thought that all pleasures are bad is attractive because the bodily pleasures have "taken over the name" because these pleasures are tempting and universally sought after. These are bad only when taken to excess.
- Urmson clarifies and evaluates Aristotle's distinction between activities and processes.
  - Urmson offers three tests for distinguishing activity from process.
    - First, if A's X-ing entails that A has X-ed, then X is an activity, otherwise it is a process. So Tom's looking at a temple entails that Tom has looked at a temple. But Tom's building a temple does not entail that Tom has built a temple.
    - Second, an activity may last for some time but does not take time, whereas a process takes time. So it does not make sense to ask how long it takes to look at a temple, but it does make sense to ask how long it takes to build a temple.
    - Third, an activity is complete at any time that it is occurring, but a process is complete only when it has terminated. So if Tom is looking at a temple, he is as much looking at it in the first instance as he is at any other time. But if Tom is building a temple, his building it is more complete at a later time and only entirely complete when he has stopped building.
  - One reason for Aristotle's associating pleasure with activity rather than process is that Aristotle will want to defend a conception of eudaimonia that is pleasant (presumably in part because this better accommodates the common beliefs) and eudaimonia is "self-sufficient" so cannot involve any deficiency, and so cannot involve any process of replenishment that constitutes the Platonic conception of pleasure.
  - Another reason Urmson suspects for Aristotle's associating pleasure with activity rather than process is that activities have their end in themselves, and are for their own sake, whereas processes are for the sake of the end states that come to be upon the completion of a process. Presumably (neither Urmson nor Aristotle say) pleasure is sought for its own sake, so pleasure must be an activity rather than a process.
  - This conception of activity and process (putting together the tests above and the teleological claims), is not plausible. It is not usually, let alone necessarily, the case that people solve crossword puzzles for the sake of contemplating the finished product. But it is certain that solving a crossword puzzle is a process, by the above tests. So Urmson thinks Aristotle's conception of pleasure rests on an implausible conception of activity and process, and is itself implausible.
- Urmson clarifies and evaluates Aristotle's positive conception of pleasure.
  - Urmson appears to treat the accounts of pleasure in VII and X as not meaningfully different.
  - Urmson's interpretation of Aristotle's positive account of pleasure in X is as follows. A pleasure is an activity and not a process. When an activity belongs to a capacity in good condition and has an excellent object, the activity's having these things constitutes the perfection of the activity. Then, also, it is pleasant, and this pleasure is an additional perfection. This additional perfection is the "frictionless zest with which the activity will be performed when it is enjoyed", and is barely distinguishable from the activity itself.
    - "If someone works away at it oblivious of his surroundings and his own bodily condition, totally unwilling to be distracted from it and without ulterior motive, such as payment, how could it be denied that he is enjoying it?"
  - Urmson connects Aristotle's discussion of alien pleasures making some activity laborious to the idea of impedance in the discussion of pleasure at VII.11-14.

- Urmson alleges that Aristotle conflates pleasures as activities and pleasures as things gotten from activities, and this causes problems for Aristotle's account of intemperance and Aristotle's account of proper and alien pleasures.
  - "While solving a mathematical problem one may be so absorbed in it that one does not notice one's feelings; but, when one has solved it, might one not feel a most exhilarating feeling of pleasure as a result of solving it? Swimming, however enjoyable itself, may also on a hot day produce an agreeable sense of coolness and invigoration."
  - "It is clear that the distress caused by thirst, which is alleged to be the opposite of the pleasure of drinking, is not like the disagreeableness that some find in doing geometry, which is the opposite of finding geometry enjoyable. When we find geometry disagreeable, on Aristotle's analysis, we tend to avoid geometry and are distracted from it with the greatest of ease. But he cannot claim that the distress caused by thirst is such that we find it hard to attend to it and are easily distracted from it."
  - "The reason for these facts is clear: the pangs of thirst are unpleasant sensations caused by thirst and not the unwelcomeness of thirst, and the pleasure of drinking is not the frictionless ingestion of liquid but a pleasant sensation caused by drinking when thirsty."
  - "It is the feelings that are enjoyed by the intemperate, not the activities that engender them. But Aristotle fails to make this point explicit in his analysis of pleasure; he persuades himself that the intemperate pleasures are to be distinguished from others because they involve the sense of touch, and thus fails to see that what he needs is a distinction between the enjoyment of activities, whether of touch or other sense or of intellect, as such and the enjoyment of the feelings and sensations that they may produce."
  - "Aristotle makes the uncommon mistake of treating the enjoyment of produced states as being a special case of enjoyment of activity."

## Frede, 2005

Frede, D. (2005) "Pleasure and Pain in Aristotle's Ethics," in R. Kraut (ed.) *The Blackwell Guide to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 255-275.

- According to Frede, the accomplishment in Aristotle's account of pleasure is Aristotle's success in integrating pleasure in the good life (rather than, on the one hand, excluding pleasure from the good life, and on the other hand, taking pleasure to be constitutive of the good life).
  - This integration occurs early in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, specifically, in I, where Aristotle remarks that a just person will find just actions virtuous, and likewise for the other virtues. So eudaimonia, which consists in activity of the rational part of the soul in accord with virtue in a complete life will be pleasant (but eudaimonia does not consist in pleasure).
- The relevant part of Frede's chapter appears to be a discussion of four limitations of Aristotle's account of pleasure, that Frede apparently takes to be the account offered in X.1-5.
- The first limitation Frede identifies is in what Aristotle appears committed to thinking about ordinary pleasures such as eating and drinking.
  - "Though eating, drinking, and sexual delights are sensual activities and therefore involve the soul, the pleasures they provide are not aspects of a perfect and unimpeded performance. [...] It would take quite some training and aesthetic connoisseurship to achieve such a state of mind. To most human beings, it would sound snobbish to claim that one does not enjoy the taste, but "the act of tasting," or whatever other pleasure one may describe in that way."
  - "Be that as it may, it seems that the life of ordinary pleasure is concerned with what we would normally take it to be: namely just sensuous feelings, "the kick," or whatever one may prefer to call it."
  - Aristotle also appears committed to overidentifying pleasures in ordinarily neutral or even painful activities. Not all natural unimpeded activities are pleasures. 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.
  - "It would be quite a bad ad hoc explanation that neutral sense experiences lack pleasure because of some unknown impediment in their performance."
- The second limitation Frede identifies is to do with Aristotle's restriction of pleasure to activities and not processes.
  - Aristotle appears to have overreacted to the Platonic conception of pleasure as a sort of process. On Aristotle's account (under Owen's interpretation, although the problem is more general), because playing a piece of music or climbing a mountain is a process, neither of these are pleasures, nor is there any pleasure that completes them.
  - Aristotle would respond that what is enjoyable is not playing a piece of music itself, or climbing a mountain itself, but our engagement with these processes. The mental and/or physical engagement while we play a piece of music or climb a mountain is an activity, and so it is this that is a pleasure, and that pleasure completes.

- The third limitation Frede identifies is in what Aristotle appears committed to thinking about the pleasures of recipients and the pleasures of immoral agents.
  - The argument here is neither clear nor clearly compelling.
- "The final point takes up a peculiarity that has emerged in the discussion of the "vulgar pleasures" but not been pursued any further, namely that in certain moral actions pleasures and pains play a significant role at two different levels."