

TWO LECTURES ON VARIETIES OF PLEASURE IN PLATO AND ARISTOTLE

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LECTURE II : ARISTOTLE'S *ETHICS*

1. THE NATURE AND GROUND OF PLEASURE

A famous formula in *NE* 7 runs as follows (12, 1153^a13-15):

οὐ καλῶς ἔχει τὸ αἰσθητὴν γένεσιν φάναι εἶναι τὴν ἡδονήν, ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον λεκτέον ἐνέργειαν τῆς κατὰ φύσιν ἕξεως, ἀντὶ δὲ τοῦ αἰσθητὴν ἀνεμπόδιστον.

(‘It is not right to say that pleasure is a perceptible process (γένεσις): it should rather be called an activity (ἐνέργεια) of the natural state, and instead of “perceptible” “unimpeded”.’)

Equally celebrated are some lines in *NE* 10 (4, 1174^b23-33):

οὐ τὸν αὐτὸν δὲ τρόπον ἢ τε ἡδονὴ τελειοῖ καὶ τὸ αἰσθητόν τε καὶ ἡ αἴσθησις, σπουδαῖα ὄντα ... τελειοῖ δὲ τὴν ἐνέργειαν ἢ ἡδονὴ οὐχ ὡς ἡ ἕξις ἐνυπάρχουσα, ἀλλ' ὡς ἐπιγινόμενόν τι τέλος, οἷον τοῖς ἀκμαίοις ἢ ὥρα.

(‘Pleasure does not perfect it [sc. the activity, ἐνέργεια] in the same way as the object perceived and the faculty of perception do, if they are good ... Pleasure perfects the activity not as the inherent state does but as an end which supervenes – as the bloom of youth does on those in the flower of their age.’)

These passages can be reconciled: we can take Bk 7 to be characterizing *pleasures* (plural), whereas Bk 10 tries to place *pleasure* (singular). 7 fails to distinguish these, but does not identify them. 7’s ‘unimpeded’ may be closely related to 10’s ‘perfect’. Perfection may be a condition of pleasure, which is then a second perfection; analogously, impediment gives rise to pain, itself a further impediment.

Pleasure is not a distinct phenomenological factor that might, conceivably, be absent though the activity is good of its kind, or present though it is bad of its kind. That would make the relation between the experience of pleasure, and its objective preconditions (notably, the good state of organ and object), a contingent one, whereas Aristotle declares that the second guarantees the first: ‘There will always be pleasure’ (10. 4, 1174^b30). Yet what supervenes is *added*.

This does not exclude identifying pleasure with the perfection of activity that is constituted by its being good of its kind. (Call this initial perfection *perfection*₁, in possible distinction from a further perfection, constituted by pleasure, that is *perfection*₂.) For what exactly does pleasure supervene upon in 1174^b31-3? If it supervenes upon the subjacent goodness of subject and object, it could itself be as intimately related to the perceptual activity to which they give rise as one could conceive: it could even be identical to the *perfection*₁ of that activity. Rather as a bloom emerges out of the youth and health of young men, the *perfection*₁ of the activity could emerge out of the standing qualities of its subject and object.

However, it may be better to identify pleasure with a second perfection (perfection₂) which accompanies perfection₁. One can support this suggestion by reflection upon the relation between pleasure and the noble (or ‘fine’, καλόν). If what attracts a man as his goal is acting nobly, and he enjoys so acting in so far as he achieves that goal (3. 9, 1117^b15-16), he surely enjoys the nobility that constitutes the perfection₁ of his action. The man who desires *to* act nobly *as such* is also a man to take pleasure *in* acting nobly *as such*. If the pleasure that he takes in a virtuous action were identical to its perfection₁, it could not be this *in which* he takes pleasure. Thus pleasure indeed constitutes an *extra* perfection. (Compare a young man who *is* healthy, without qualification, and so *looks* healthy.) Perfection₂ is experiential but not accidental; it enhances the activity, already conscious, of which it is an inseparable companion.

So we read, ‘If both the thing perceived and the thing perceiving are of the best there will always be pleasure’ (10. 4, 1174^b29-30). This is implausible if Aristotle only has in mind the condition of the sense-organ, and the quality of the object perceived. (Think of a migraine.) I suggest that he must have in mind an indefinite range of conditions that extends beyond what would intuitively count as qualities of organ or object. These may even include such an impediment as the presence of an alternative and distracting pleasure.

What is it for an object of sense to be ‘finest’ or ‘most beautiful’ (κάλλιστον, 10. 4, 1174^b15) and ‘best’ (σπουδαιότατον, ^b22-3)? Helpful here is *De anima* 3. 2, 426^a27-^b6. Since ‘voice and hearing are in a way one, and a concord is a proportion’, it turns out that ‘hearing too will be a certain proportion’ (^a27-30). Now ‘in general what is mixed, a concord, is pleasant rather than the high or the low’ (^b5-6); hence the hearing of a voice is a pleasure. So there can be a structure common to perceptual activity and its object which helps to explain why some perceivings are more pleasant than others. This carries over to active pleasures. The virtuous agent is motivationally *such as* to enjoy acting virtuously. His pleasure is a *sign* (cf. *An. Pr.* 2. 27) of his state of character (*NE* 2. 3, 1104^b3-5).

2. A MISCELLANY OF PLEASURES

So Anthony Kenny missed the point when he wrote, ‘The most sensitive nose in the world put in front of the most powerfully smelling manure in the world will not necessarily find the experience pleasant.’ What he describes hardly achieves concord or proportion. In fairness to Aristotle, we should rather think not of the most blatant perceptual properties, but of those which demand a discrimination that is unusually perceptive of ‘many differences between things’ (*Metaph.* A. 1, 980^a27).

What of low or perverse pleasures? Aristotle writes as follows (10. 5, 1175^b24-8):

διαφερουσῶν δὲ τῶν ἐνεργειῶν ἐπιεικεία καὶ φαυλότητι, καὶ τῶν μὲν αἰρετῶν οὐσῶν τῶν δὲ φευκτῶν τῶν δ’ οὐδετέρων, ὁμοίως ἔχουσι καὶ αἱ ἡδοναί: καθ’ ἐκάστην γὰρ ἐνέργειαν οἰκεία ἡδονὴ ἔστιν. ἢ μὲν οὖν τῇ σπουδαίᾳ οἰκεία ἐπιεικῆς, ἢ δὲ τῇ φαύλῃ μοχθηρά.

(‘Since activities differ in respect of virtuousness and baseness, and some are desirable, others to be avoided, and others neutral, so too are the pleasures; for to each activity there is its proper pleasure. The pleasure of a serious activity is virtuous, and that of a base activity depraved.’)

Thus, in the case of perception, what is required is a correspondence between subject and object such that his sense-organs can function in a way that best approximates to that of the normal subject. In the case of action, virtuous or vicious, we can say something that is loosely analogous: vicious action is pleasant to the vicious agent to the extent that he stands to it as the virtuous agent stands to virtuous action – which, in Aristotle’s view, will be imperfectly. His pleasures will come into conflict since they are unnatural (1. 8, 1099^a11-13), and he will be full of regrets (9. 4, 1166^b5-25). As we may put it, he will fail to *identify* fully with what he does.

What, finally, of the relation, central to Plato’s account, of pleasure to process (*genesis*)? In Book 7, Aristotle is concerned to reject any Platonic argument that pleasure, being a process towards a goal, has no value in itself (cf. *Phileb.* 54^c2-^d3). In the passage surrounding the sentence that I quoted from 7. 12, he relates pleasures to processes of a kind without making them either equivalent, or mutually exclusive (1153^a9-17):

οὐ γὰρ γενέσεις εἰσὶν οὐδὲ μετὰ γενέσεως πᾶσαι, ἀλλ’ ἐνέργειαι καὶ τέλος: οὐδὲ γινομένων συμβαίνουσιν ἀλλὰ χρωμένων: καὶ τέλος οὐ πασῶν ἕτερόν τι, ἀλλὰ τῶν εἰς τὴν τελέωσιν ἀγομένων τῆς φύσεως. διὸ καὶ οὐ καλῶς ἔχει τὸ αἰσθητὴν γένεσιν φάναι εἶναι τὴν ἡδονήν, ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον λεκτέον ἐνέργειαν τῆς κατὰ φύσιν ἕξεως, ἀντὶ δὲ τοῦ αἰσθητὴν ἀνεμπόδιστον. δοκεῖ δὲ γένεσις τισὶν εἶναι, ὅτι κυρίως ἀγαθόν: τὴν γὰρ ἐνέργειαν γένεσιν οἴονται εἶναι, ἔστι δ’ ἕτερον. (‘For pleasures are not processes, nor do they all involve process: rather, they are activities and ends, and they attend not acquisition but use. Not all pleasures have an end different from themselves, but only the pleasures of persons who are being led to the completing of their nature. This is why it is not right to say that pleasure is a perceptible process: it should rather be called an exercise of the natural state, and instead of “perceptible” “unimpeded”. It is thought by some to be a process because they think it is good strictly speaking; for they think that an activity is a process – which it is not.’)

The claim is that pleasures do not *all* ‘involve process’. There can be pleasure in movement, even if it is less than pleasure in rest. This removes any bar to an accommodation of the pleasures, privileged by Plato, of restoration, though Aristotle needs to reinterpret them. In their case, he proposes, ‘the activity at work in the appetites concerns the remaining part of our state and nature’ (7. 12, 1152^b35-6). This activity contingently subserves a natural goal that lies outside itself (such as recovery from illness), but it is not this that defines its essence. It will have a natural terminus, viz. when other pleasures return (1153^a2-3), but it does not follow that it is a process. Thus convalescence is complex, involving at once the recovery of a desirable state, and the exercise of a residuum of health; it is the second that is a pleasure.

Aristotle takes it to be an indication of this ‘that men do not delight in the same things when their nature is being replenished as they do when it is in its restored state’ (1153^a2-3). He instances that, during such replenishment, ‘they enjoy even sharp and bitter things’ (^a5). The thought must be this: a thirsty man will enjoy even bitter ale (its bitterness ceasing to be an impediment while he is thirsty, since what then is salient is its simple *liquidity* and associated *potability*); and yet, once his thirst is quenched, he will take pleasure only in something palatable. In all such cases, a part of the subject that is still functioning well, or well enough, responds to an aspect of the object that fits it. Once his functions improve, he will shift to a

different activity which provides more satisfaction for an agent who has become more exacting or energetic.

Yet it becomes problematic that there are cases where a pleasure, in the sense of something that one enjoys, would seem itself to *be* a process or movement, defined by a point of departure and a point of arrival. Among the things that we are allowed to enjoy are playing dice and hunting (9. 12, 1172^a4), acting virtuously (10. 3, 1173^a15, ^b29-31, 1174^a6-8), and house-building (5, 1175^a34); and yet one might take each of these to be a process. There are various possible ways of sorting this out. One is to generalize from the focus upon perceptual pleasures within the analysis of pleasure in 10. 4: perhaps what one enjoys is always thinking or perceiving (1174^b14-26, ^b33-1175^a1). Perception cannot itself be fast or slow, even when, e.g., the musical performance to which one listens is fast or slow. Alternatively, it is entirely faithful to Book 7's treatment of incidental pleasures to propose that what one really enjoys is exercising one's present capabilities. This involves no essential change *to oneself*, even if it causes real change *outside oneself* (as when one is house-building, cf. 10. 4, 1174^a19-21). And the second solution permits the enjoying of action in addition to thought or perception.

3. SENSATION, EMOTION AND ATTITUDE

Dorothea Frede has distinguished *adverbial* from *adjectival* pleasure. When I take a praline that it is good for me to take, I have a double pleasure, enjoying both how it tastes (adjectival), and tasting temperately (adverbial).

The contrast becomes sharper when we have a conjunction of adjectival pain and adverbial pleasure, as easily arises with courage on the battlefield (3. 9, 1117^a35-^b16):

οὐ μὴν ἀλλὰ δόξειεν ἂν εἶναι τὸ κατὰ τὴν ἀνδρείαν τέλος ἡδύ, ὑπὸ τῶν κύκλω δ' ἀφανίζεσθαι ... ὁ μὲν θάνατος καὶ τὰ τραύματα λυπηρὰ τῷ ἀνδρείῳ ... καὶ ὅσῳ ἂν μᾶλλον τὴν ἀρετὴν ἔχη πᾶσαν καὶ εὐδαιμονέστερος ἦ, μᾶλλον ἐπὶ τῷ θανάτῳ λυπήσεται ... οὐ δὴ ἐν ἀπάσαις ταῖς ἀρεταῖς τὸ ἡδέως ἐνεργεῖν ὑπάρχει, πλὴν ἐφ' ὅσον τοῦ τέλους ἐφάπτεται.
(‘The end which courage sets before it would seem to be pleasant, but to be concealed by the attending circumstances ... Death and wounds will be painful to the courageous man ... And the more he is possessed of virtue in its entirety and the happier he is, the more he will be pained at the thought of death ... It is not the case, then, with all the virtues that the exercise of them is pleasant, except in so far as it reaches its end.’)

Here we either have a single complex activity with multiple aspects, or a multiplicity of closely related activities:

- (a) Being wounded, which it is painful to feel.
- (b) Dying, which it is distressing to anticipate.
- (c) Acting nobly, which it is itself pleasant to achieve.

Here we have pleasure or pain variably as a sensation (A), as an attitude (B), and as what Frede counts as adverbial (C). The agent suffers pain at the wound, feels distress at the prospect of losing his life (especially if it is a good one), and takes pleasure in the thought of acting nobly.

To mild pain, we could apply a passage from the *De anima* (2. 11, 424^a2-10):

διὸ τοῦ ὁμοίως θερμοῦ καὶ ψυχροῦ, ἢ σκληροῦ καὶ μαλακοῦ, οὐκ αἰσθανόμεθα, ἀλλὰ τῶν ὑπερβολῶν, ὡς τῆς αἰσθήσεως οἷον μεσότητός τινος οὔσης τῆς ἐν τοῖς αἰσθητοῖς ἐναντιώσεως. καὶ διὰ τοῦτο κρίνει τὰ αἰσθητά. τὸ γὰρ μέσον κριτικόν· γίνεται γὰρ πρὸς ἑκάτερον αὐτῶν θάτερον τῶν ἄκρων· καὶ δεῖ ... ἐπὶ τῆς ἀφῆς μήτε θερμὸν μήτε ψυχρόν.

(‘We do not perceive an object that is equally hot or cold, or hard or soft, with ourselves, but only the excesses, the sense being a sort of mean between contrary qualities present in its objects. That is why it discriminates between its objects; that which is intermediate can discriminate, because relatively to each of the extremes it plays the part of the other extreme ... So the organ of touch must be neither hot nor cold.’)

Thus the subject can feel the hot or the hard, say, when these contrast with his present state to a degree that affects his sense of touch unpleasantly without overwhelming it in an intensity of painful sensation.

Very different are cases of really acute pain. Here, one may compare this (*DA* 2. 12, 424^a29-32): τῶν αἰσθητῶν αἰ ὑπερβολαὶ φθείρουσι τὰ αἰσθητήρια (ἐὰν γὰρ ἢ ἰσχυροτέρα τοῦ αἰσθητηρίου ἢ κίνησις, λύεται ὁ λόγος – τοῦτο δ' ἢν ἢ αἴσθησις – ὥσπερ καὶ ἡ συμφωνία καὶ ὁ τόνος κρουομένων σφόδρα τῶν χορδῶν).

(‘Excesses of the sensible qualities destroy the sense-organs (for if the change produced is too strong for the organ, the proportion, i.e. the sense, is destroyed, as harmony and pitch are if the strings are struck too hard).’)

Here the subject is overcome by a sensation of such intensity that it swamps his power of perceptual discrimination.

As for (B), the emotion can be intense without in any way confusing the perception that detects an occasion or the imagination that conceives a response. If the emotion is intense and the conditions of perception indistinct, a shadow may be misperceived through fear as an enemy, or through love as the loved one (*De insomniis* 2, 460^b3-7). Emotion magnifies the impact of the appearance of the enemy as threatening or of the loved one as alluring.

With regard to (C), we could shift the focus from action to perception, specifying that the agent’s awareness of the nobility of his action is a fully unimpeded case of incidental perception, since his moral sense is alive to the ethical quality of his action. We would then not need not ask whether his *action* is unimpeded. However, according to Aristotle, it is *acting* bravely that the brave man enjoys, and not only *being aware* of the nobility (3. 9, 1117^b13-16). Yet he concedes that a fatal exercise of courage is only pleasant ‘in so far as it reaches its end’ (^b16). How are we to understand this qualification? It makes better sense applied to gladness than to enjoyment. (I may be glad to lay down my life *insofar as this is noble*, though not otherwise; but I either enjoy it, or I don’t.) We need to distinguish *enjoying doing* a thing, and *being glad to do* it. A requirement that the hero enjoy his death is surely too much; it should be enough that he is glad to die for the sake of others.

However, we meet no such distinction in Aristotle; and this a flaw both in his conception of ethical virtue, and in his account of pleasure.