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PLEASURE AS PERFECTION:
NICOMACHEAN ETHICS 10. 4–5

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ELIZABETH ANSCOMBE famously remarked, concerning the concept ‘pleasure’:

The ancients found this concept pretty baffling. It reduced Aristotle to sheer babble about ‘the bloom on the cheek of youth’ because, for good reasons, he wanted to make it out both identical with and different from the pleasurable activity. Generations of modern philosophers found this concept quite unperplexing. . . . The reason is simple: since Locke, pleasure was taken to be some sort of internal impression.¹

Aristotle devotes a great deal of attention to issues about pleasure in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The text contains two long discussions of the topic: one in book 7, chapters 11–14, and the other in book 10, chapters 1–5. These discussions are rich with remarks concerning, for example, whether pleasure is in any way good, and whether pleasures differ in kind. But it is notoriously difficult to extract from these discussions Aristotle’s view of *what pleasure itself is*, an issue which he clearly means to be addressing in 10. 1–5, and which would seem to be crucial to the coherence of his theory of pleasure as a whole. As the above quotation from Anscombe indicates, Aristotle has often been charged with being inconsistent, confused, or impossibly equivocal about the issue of what pleasure itself is.²

Anscombe’s charge that Aristotle wanted to make pleasure out to be both identical with and different from pleasurable activity points to the central challenge that an interpreter of Aristotle on this issue

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¹ G. E. M. Anscombe, ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’, in *The Collected Philosophical Papers of G. E. M. Anscombe*, 3 vols. (Minneapolis, 1981), iii. *Ethics, Religion and Politics*, 26–42 at 27.

² e.g. W. F. R. Hardie, *Aristotle’s Ethical Theory*, 2nd edn. (Oxford, 1980), 314; C. C. W. Taylor, ‘Pleasure: Aristotle’s Response to Plato’, in R. Heinaman (ed.), *Plato and Aristotle’s Ethics* (Aldershot, 2003), 1–20 at 19–20; D. Bostock, ‘Pleasure and Activity in Aristotle’s Ethics’, *Phronesis*, 32 (1988), 251–72 at 251.

faces: finding the middle ground between, on the one hand, identifying pleasure with pleasurable activity and, on the other hand, making them too distinct from each other. At 1175^b30–3 Aristotle emphatically denies that pleasure is identical to pleasant activity while maintaining that they are nevertheless not separate from each other. Pleasure is intimately related to the activity it arises in connection with, but the two are in some sense distinct.

What sort of account does Aristotle's contrast with when he insists that pleasure is not separate from activity? Anscombe notes that in modern times it has become commonplace to think of pleasure as an 'internal impression'. She has in mind the idea that pleasure is a certain feeling that is caused by various sorts of activity but that is separate from these activities and is similar in all cases. J. C. B. Gosling gives a succinct account of this view's central commitments in his 1969 book *Pleasure and Desire*:

'Pleasure', then, is a word used to refer to a certain sort of feeling, identified by the way it feels, not by context. Learning the word, therefore, is a matter of learning to identify this feeling and distinguish it from others. In this it resembles butterflies in the stomach. Unless a person has had such a feeling and observed its peculiar feel, he is very likely to misapply this description. Similarly, if a person has failed to note the special feel of pleasure, he will be likely to claim to enjoy things which he does not in fact enjoy at all.³

Gosling's example of 'butterflies in the stomach' is well chosen. This feeling might be caused by anticipation of public speaking, by an unexpected encounter with someone one has romantic feelings for, or by the approaching summit of a roller coaster's first hill, but in all cases it is phenomenally similar. According to theories of pleasure in this vein, pleasure is a particular feeling that we are naturally attracted to and that we experience as a result of engaging in certain activities.

I hold that, for Aristotle, pleasure is not a feeling that our activities give rise to, but rather is an aspect of the activities themselves. This is why it might seem that Aristotle makes pleasure both identical to and distinct from the activity that it arises in connection with: it is an integral aspect of the activity, but it is distinguishable from the activity as a whole. Aristotle develops his account of what pleasure itself is in the second half of *NE* 10. 4 (particularly

³ J. C. B. Gosling, *Pleasure and Desire: The Case for Hedonism Reviewed* (Oxford, 1969), 30–1.

1174^b14–1175^a3).⁴ In this passage Aristotle gives an account of what it is for an activity of awareness (i.e. an activity of thought or perception) to be perfect, and says that pleasure is what in some sense *perfects* such an activity. This discussion culminates in the passage Anscombe calls ‘sheer babble’, the notorious simile of the bloom:

Pleasure perfects [τελειοῖ]⁵ the activity—not, however, as the state does, by being present in (the activity), but as a sort of supervenient perfection [ἐπιγινώμενον τι τέλος], like the bloom on those in the prime of youth. (1174^b31–3)⁶

Although it is difficult to see what Aristotle means in this passage, I think that if it is interpreted in connection with a close examination of the immediate context it is possible to extract from it an account of what pleasure itself is that allows it to be distinct from pleasant activity, and yet does not make it out to be something separate from such activity. A perfect activity of awareness is one where a capacity in a good condition is active in relation to a fine object. The view I shall ultimately defend is that for Aristotle pleasure is a certain aspect of perfect activity of awareness, namely, *its very perfection*. That is, pleasure is the character that such an activity has in virtue of the good condition of the capacity being activated and the fineness of the object it is active in relation to. This view contrasts sharply with interpretations that have previously found

⁴ One might think that he gives another account in 7. 12, where he writes, ‘[Pleasure] should instead be called an activity of the natural state, and should be called not perceived, but unimpeded’ (1153^a14–15). Following G. E. L. Owen, ‘Aristotelian Pleasures’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 72 (1972), 135–52, I take it that in this context Aristotle is not talking about pleasure itself, but rather about that which is pleasant.

⁵ Irwin translates τελειοῖ as ‘completes’ and τέλος as ‘end’ (T. H. Irwin (trans. and comm.), *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics [Nicomachean Ethics]* (Indianapolis, 1999)). I substitute ‘perfects’ for ‘completes’ and ‘perfection’ for ‘end’ because Irwin translates other words in the passage related to τέλος as ‘perfect’ rather than ‘complete’ (with good reason, as I shall argue), and I do not see any reason to translate the word in two different ways in this context. Moreover, although ‘perfection’ is admittedly a highly tendentious translation of τέλος, ‘end’ is no less so. If τέλος is understood as ‘end’, the passage heavily favours the view that for Aristotle pleasure is the final cause of an activity (a view that Irwin endorses in his note on this passage). The word τέλος does not always mean ‘end’ or ‘goal’; it can also mean ‘completion’, ‘fulfilment’, or ‘perfection’, and, as I shall argue in sect. 3, it seems that in this context Aristotle uses it to mean something along the lines of ‘perfection’.

⁶ Translations of passages from the *Nicomachean Ethics* are based on Irwin’s but have sometimes been modified. Translations of passages from other works of Aristotle’s are based on those in J. Barnes (ed.), *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, 2 vols. (Princeton, 1995).

favour. Commentators have generally taken Aristotle to be saying either that pleasure is in some sense a *cause* of perfect activity, or that it is some kind of special quality of awareness (something like a warm glow or fuzzy feeling) that is separate from the activity it arises in connection with.

This paper will proceed in four stages. First, I shall examine the passage preceding the simile of the bloom in detail and reconstruct Aristotle's account of what it is for an activity to be perfect. I shall defend this account against the objection that it implausibly excludes many activities that we ordinarily think are pleasant. Second, I shall discuss the three ways of interpreting Aristotle's account of pleasure that past commentators have favoured, and I shall discuss the analogy Aristotle draws concerning pleasure and health, which is a central piece of evidence for two of the three views. I shall argue that all three views are unattractive. Third, I shall present and defend my interpretation of Aristotle's account of what pleasure itself is and of the simile of the bloom. Fourth, I shall present an interpretation of Aristotle's claim that pleasures differ from one another in kind. According to this interpretation, the way that pleasures differ in kind is explained by their nature as the perfection of the activities they arise in connection with. I shall argue that this interpretation fits very well with the relevant texts and that this should be counted as a strong consideration in favour of the interpretation of Aristotle's account of pleasure on which it is based.

1. Perfect activity

In the passage beginning at 1174^b14 Aristotle explains what it means for an activity to be perfect.⁷ He writes:

Every perceptual capacity is active in relation to its perceptible object, and perfectly active when it is in good condition in relation to the finest of its

⁷ The word 'perfect' (*τέλειος*) is being employed differently here from its usage in the first half of *NE* 10. 4 (e.g. 1074^b7). In the first half of 10. 4 it is used to mean 'complete in form', i.e. to refer to the sense in which a certain type of activity, contrasted with process, is complete during every stretch of time when it is being performed (if one does any amount of *seeing* it follows that one *has seen*). This idea is spelt out more fully in *Metaph.* Θ 6. An activity can be perfect in this sense but fail to be perfect in the sense explicated in the passage quoted. *All* activities of seeing are complete in form, but clearly not all of them meet the conditions for being perfect that Aristotle specifies in this passage.

perceptual objects. For this above all seems to be the character of perfect activity, and it doesn't matter if we ascribe it to the capacity or to the subject that has it. Hence for each capacity the best activity is the activity of the subject in the best condition in relation to the best object of the capacity. This activity will be the most perfect and the most pleasant. For every perceptual capacity [*aisthēsis*] and every sort of thought [*dianoia*] and study [*theōria*] has its pleasure; the most pleasant activity is the most perfect;⁸ and the most perfect is the activity of the subject in good condition in relation to the most excellent object of the capacity. (1174^b14–23)

We can see from this passage that when Aristotle speaks of 'activities' in this context, he means activities that involve the activation of a capacity for some mode of awareness (as opposed to a capacity of the nutritive soul). In order for such a capacity to be perfectly activated, the capacity must be in the best condition, and must be active in relation to the finest type of object that it by nature engages with. There must be, as it were, a 'fit' between object and capacity, such that when a capacity in such a condition is active in relation to such an object, the resultant activity will involve the fullest possible exercise of the capacity.⁹ Take, for example, the activity of listen-

⁸ Aristotle's use of the superlative here indicates that the characteristic he refers to with the term *τέλειος* comes in degrees. One might think, on this basis, that 'perfect' is an inappropriate translation of the term. Perfection is, after all, a superlative state. While I recognize this difficulty, I think that 'perfection' is nevertheless the best choice overall. 'Completeness' (or 'completion') is not an unreasonable translation, but does not convey the notion of 'fit' as strongly as 'perfection' does. More importantly, 'completeness' should be reserved to translate uses of *τέλειος* that refer to the notion of completeness in form (see n. 7). 'Fulfilment' has merits, but risks misleadingly suggesting the Phileban idea that pleasure involves the replenishment of a lack. I opt, then, for 'perfection' with a caveat: something can be perfect in a given context, but still be said to be less perfect than something else according to a cross-contextual standard of perfection. The example of fit between lock and key is helpful: a simple key fits a simple lock perfectly, whereas a more intricate key fits a more intricate lock perfectly. The fit between the more intricate key and the more intricate lock is in a sense *more perfect* than the fit between the simple key and simple lock, because the requirements for the key to fit perfectly are more demanding in that case—there is more *room* for perfection. This does not imply that something could fit the simple lock better than the simple key; its fit is (superlatively) perfect in that context.

⁹ It is not entirely clear how Aristotle accounts for the phenomenon of distraction in a case where a capacity in the best condition is active in relation to a fine object. He writes at 1175^b3–6: 'For lovers of flutes, for instance, cannot pay attention to a conversation if they catch the sound of someone playing the flute, because they enjoy flute-playing more than their present activity; and so the pleasure proper to flute-playing destroys the activity of conversation.' The idea might be that when Aristotle gives his account of perfect activity he does not make explicit the condition that the subject who performs the activity must do so with attention and must not be engaged

ing to music. In the most perfect case, the listener will be someone with flawless hearing who has had a great deal of practice listening to complicated pieces and whose capacities for listening have been perfected thereby. The piece of music that serves as the object of her activity of listening will be among the finest things to hear, and therefore will be such as to make full use of her perfectly developed capacities for listening when they are active in relation to it.

It might in the context seem strange that Aristotle says that a perfect activity results when a capacity in the *best* condition (or at least a *good* condition) is active in relation to the *finest* or *best* of its objects. When we think of occasions when we experience pleasure, many involve capacities in an unremarkable condition engaged with less than exceptional objects, such as a cup of diner coffee or a film about pirates. Moreover, there are clearly many cases where people whose capacities are in a thoroughly *bad* condition take pleasure in something in no way fine. Gerd Van Riel, in his book *Pleasure and the Good Life*, objects to Aristotle's theory along these lines:

On the other hand, it is not clear why only a perfectly performed activity can yield pleasure. Pleasure can have the opposite effect: it can bring (short) relief from the impediments that prevent a perfect performance of an activity. My activity of listening does not have to be perfect in order for me to be able to enjoy music. Even if my ear is affected by a serious disease and I can hardly hear, I can still enjoy music.¹⁰

Aristotle's account of what pleasure itself is focuses on the case of maximally perfect activity,¹¹ which is presumably what leads Van

in a competing activity. Alternatively, the idea might be that part of what it is for a capacity to be in a good condition is that its exercise must not be impeded by lack of attention or by a competing activity. The former interpretation is supported by the consideration that it would be strange to think that when we are engaged in one activity and become distracted by another one, this distraction somehow constitutes a new deficiency in the capacity exercised by the first activity. The latter interpretation is supported by the consideration that it allows us to take Aristotle to mean exactly what he says when he writes, 'Every perceptual capacity is . . . perfectly active when it is in good condition in relation to the finest of its perceptual objects.' I favour the latter interpretation. In *De sensu* 7 Aristotle characterizes the soul's faculties of awareness as in a way constituting a unity. When the exercise of one faculty impedes the exercise of another, this impediment can be thought of as a deficiency in the condition of the impeded faculty, in so far as the condition of the impeded faculty is partly constituted by its relations to the other faculties with which it forms a unity.

¹⁰ G. Van Riel, *Pleasure and the Good Life: Plato, Aristotle and the Neoplatonists* (Leiden, 2000), 77.

¹¹ When I say 'maximally perfect activity', I mean to invoke the caveat given in

Riel to think that Aristotle holds that only such activity is pleasant; but, as I shall argue, Aristotle thinks that perfection comes in degrees, and that a less perfect activity can be pleasant. His account of what pleasure itself is focuses on maximally perfect activity because, as we shall see, he thinks that the *most fully human* pleasures will arise in connection with such activity. He holds that less perfect activities cannot give rise to fully human pleasures, *not* that they cannot give rise to any pleasures at all. Before elaborating further, it will be worthwhile to say more about why Aristotle thinks that a maximally perfect activity requires 'the best condition' and 'the finest object'. This will shed light on Aristotle's reasons for focusing on the case of maximally perfect activity in his account of what pleasure itself is.

I have characterized a perfect activity as one where a capacity in the best condition is active in relation to the finest of its objects and is thereby fully exercised. The fact that an activity involves the full exercise of a capacity is not, however, sufficient for the activity to be perfect. This is vital to the plausibility of Aristotle's account, since all sorts of activity would seem fully to utilize various capacities but fail to be pleasant. It might take just as much listening acumen to sort out the sounds in a crowded restaurant as it does to digest a Mozart composition, and it might be just as complicated a task to discern the flavours of a pile of rotting leftovers as it is to savour a gourmet meal. As Anthony Kenny put it, '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.'¹²

It is one of the central presuppositions of Aristotle's ethics that human beings have an essential nature and that some activities count as proper realizations of it while others do not. Aristotle thinks that a correlative claim holds for pleasure:

Each animal seems to have its own proper pleasure just as it has its own proper characteristic activity; for the proper pleasure will be the one that corresponds to its activity. (1176^a3-4)

n. 8. Such an activity is a maximally perfect way of activating a given capacity, according to a cross-contextual standard of perfection that applies to the range of ways in which the capacity can be activated. A maximally perfect activity is possible only when a capacity is in an optimal condition, thereby creating more room for perfection than when it is in a deficient condition.

¹² A. Kenny, *Action, Emotion and Will* (London, 1963), 149.

When Aristotle says, ‘Every perceptual capacity . . . is completely active when it is in good condition in relation to the finest of its perceptible objects’, he means that the capacity is in an appropriate condition for some aspect of the proper realization of human nature, and that the object, in virtue of being fine, is apt to facilitate the full exercise of a capacity in such a condition. A perfect activity is not merely one that thoroughly exercises a capacity; it is one that does so in such a way as to achieve the proper realization of the capacity’s nature as the capacity that it is and as a part of human nature more broadly.

Why does Aristotle think that a capacity must be active relative to the *finest* of its objects to achieve a proper realization of its nature? The Greek word for fine, *kalon*, is often translated as either ‘beautiful’ or ‘noble’. ‘Fine’ is a good common ground between these translations, as it captures both the aesthetic and the moral connotations of the term. How exactly the notion of the fine should be understood is an extremely complex and controversial issue, but I can say a few things that will help to elucidate the role that fineness plays in *NE* 10. 4. In *Metaph. M* 7, in the context of claiming that the mathematical sciences say and prove things about the fine, Aristotle writes, ‘The chief forms of fineness are order and symmetry and definiteness’ (1078^a36–^b1). I suggest that Aristotle thinks that the suitability of an object fully to activate the relevant capacity is linked with its order, symmetry, and definiteness.¹³

Aristotle famously claims in *NE* 1. 7 that excellent performance of the human characteristic activity consists in activity of the soul expressing virtue. In 2. 6 he gives a characterization of virtue:

Virtue, then, is a state that decides, consisting in a mean, the mean relative to us, which is defined by reference to reason, that is to say, to the reason by reference to which the practically wise person would define it. It is a mean between two vices, one of excess and one of deficiency. (1106^b36–1107^a3)

The proper realization of human nature involves a certain kind of proportionality and orderliness. It lies in finding the mean between

¹³ Alternatively, one might think that fine objects are required for perfect activities simply because well-developed people have a predilection for the fine. This would be a simpler, less theoretically loaded way of interpreting Aristotle’s idea. I am not disagreeing with this view, but rather I am suggesting a way of understanding why it should be the case that well-developed people have such a predilection. It is important to take this further step, because it helps us to see more precisely the sense in which fine objects *fit* with the capacities of well-developed people.

excess and deficiency in all areas of human life. In the practical domain, the proper realization of human nature involves an agent, e.g. assigning proportionate importance to the various demands that weigh upon her in a set of circumstances.¹⁴ The capacities of the virtuous person are in a condition such that they require fine objects—ones that have the right kind of order, symmetry, and definiteness—for their full activation. This suggests a connection between virtue and taking pleasure in the fine. Aristotle makes this connection explicit in *NE* 1. 8:

Now the things that please most people conflict, because they are not pleasant by nature, whereas the things that please lovers of the fine [i.e. virtuous people] are pleasant by nature. Actions in accord with virtue are pleasant by nature, so that they both please lovers of the fine and are pleasant in their own right. (1099^a12–15)

The practically virtuous agent expresses her practical wisdom by reasoning about fine actions and outcomes, and takes pleasure in doing so. There are also virtues of the theoretical intellect and virtues of character (i.e. of non-rational desires and feelings), and these are similarly related to fineness. The fullest realization of human nature requires that the practical, theoretical, and non-rational aspects of a person's soul be in a virtuous condition, such that their full activation requires engagement with the finest objects.

One might worry that while the picture I have been developing makes sense in application to pleasures that involve refined taste and judgement, it does not seem apt for simple pleasures, such as the pleasure of eating a candy bar. It would seem bizarre to think that candy preferences will track fineness in the case of a virtuous person. Suppose an especially virtuous person enjoys Twix bars but is not especially fond of Snickers bars, and a non-virtuous person has the opposite preference. Is the pleasure the former takes in eating a Twix bar somehow more proper to humans than the pleasure the latter takes in eating a Snickers bar? I take it that what Aristotle would say here is that there is a fairly wide range of ways one's taste for such simple pleasures could develop that are compatible with being a well-developed human being. Aristotle writes:

¹⁴ Here I am indebted to Gabriel Richardson Lear, who defends a similar (but more fully developed) view about the connection between virtue and the fine in chapter 6 of her book *Happy Lives and the Highest Good: An Essay on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics* (Princeton, 2004).

Sight differs from touch in purity, as hearing and smell do from taste; hence the pleasures also differ in the same way. So also do the pleasures of thought differ from these; and both sorts have different kinds within them. (1175^b36–1176^a3)

Peter Hadreas has argued—I believe correctly—that this ranking of sense modalities and other forms of cognition in purity is based on the extent to which each apprehends order.¹⁵ The class of objects appropriate properly to engage a virtuous person’s capacities is more determinate for purer sense modalities and forms of cognition than for less pure ones. There is not much order and definiteness to be had for simple activities of touch and ingestion of foods, and so the greater affinity that virtuous people have for fineness will not distance them very much from non-virtuous people with respect to such pleasures. The salient difference between a virtuous and a non-virtuous person with respect to such pleasures is not as to which ones the person prefers, but rather as to the way in which the person partakes of them. The virtuous person will partake of Twix bars in a moderate way, and indeed will take pleasure in awareness of the moderate character of his activity in addition to the pleasure he takes in the activity itself. The pleasure the virtuous person takes in the moderate way he enjoys his Twix bar is what separates him from the non-virtuous person (the non-virtuous person will not enjoy *this* pleasure at all), and he might as well be eating a Snickers bar rather than a Twix bar as far as this other pleasure goes.

At 1176^a10–29 Aristotle distinguishes between fully human pleasures and pleasures that are human in a secondary (or even more remote) way:

But what about those pleasures that seem to be respectable? Of these, which kind, or which particular pleasure, should we take to be the pleasure of a human being? Surely it will be clear from the activities, since the pleasures are consequences of these. Hence the pleasures that perfect the activities of the perfect and blessedly happy man, whether he has one activity or more than one, will be called the fully human pleasures to the fullest extent. The other pleasures will be human in secondary, or even more remote, ways, corresponding to the character of the activities.

The activity or activities of the perfect and blessedly happy person constitute the fullest possible realization of human nature (which

¹⁵ P. Hadreas, ‘The Functions of Pleasure in *Nicomachean Ethics* x 4–5’, *Ancient Philosophy*, 24 (2004), 155–67 at 161–3.

is precisely why the person counts as perfect and blessedly happy), and so the pleasures that arise in connection with the activity or activities of such a person are the most fully human pleasures. Aristotle's account of what pleasure itself is focuses on maximally perfect activity because the most fully human activities are maximally perfect ones.¹⁶ They involve the exercise of capacities in the best condition in relation to the finest objects. We must bear in mind that Aristotle's account of pleasure is given in the context of a work about the human good, and that his primary concern in giving an account of pleasure is to give an account of the most fully human kind of pleasure. He makes it clear that he does not mean to deny that activities of awareness that are less than maximally perfect can be pleasant. He uses superlatives in his account of perfect activity: 'Hence for each capacity the *best* activity is the activity of the subject in the *best* condition in relation to the *best* object of the capacity. This activity will be the *most* perfect and the *most* pleasant' (1174^b18–20). He says that maximally perfect activity is the *most* pleasant activity, but there is no reason to interpret him as saying that it is the *only* pleasant activity. He allows that activities that are in some way inferior to maximally perfect activities can attain some degree of perfection. The most perfect activity will be the most pleasant one, but all of the activities that Aristotle delineates in the passage quoted above as those that 'seem to be respectable' are pleasant in a straightforward, unproblematic sense. If a person's capacity for listening is in a good condition (but not the best one) and is active in relation to a piece of music that is only moderately fine, but that is apt fully to exercise the person's capacity in the condition that it is in, that person's activity of listening is perfect and therefore pleasant.¹⁷

¹⁶ This is not to say that all maximally perfect activities are fully human. It is clear from *Metaph. A 7* that Aristotle thinks that the activity of the prime mover is maximally perfect, but obviously it is not a human activity. Moreover, there might be maximally perfect activities that are human in a secondary way. For instance, it might be the case that a maximally perfect activity of the sense of touch (e.g. the world's finest backrub received when one is most able to appreciate it) is not one of the activities that make up a blessedly happy life, and so is not fully human.

¹⁷ The lock and key analogy introduced in n. 8 above is helpful. The fit between a capacity in a merely good condition and a moderately fine object is perfect, but less so than the fit between a capacity in an excellent condition and a very fine object, just as the fit between a simple lock and key is perfect, but (in a sense) less so than the fit between an elaborate lock and key. One might worry about cases where a capacity in a fair or poor condition is active in relation to a very fine object. Can someone not enjoy a gourmet meal when suffering from a head cold? In such cases

It could also happen, of course, that a person whose capacity for listening is in the very best condition listens to a piece of music that is fine, but not among the finest. In such cases the object is not apt *fully* to activate the person's capacity, but it is apt to activate it to a high degree. In such cases the fit between object and capacity is imprecise and the activity is less pleasant than it would be if the object were better suited fully to exercise the capacity. It might happen that when an object fails fully to engage a capacity a person becomes bored and her attention becomes lax, and this lapse of attention constitutes an impediment to the exercise of the capacity and thus puts the capacity in a worse condition. The object may be apt fully to exercise the capacity in this worse condition. Take, for example, a case where a very astute fan of films goes to see one that turns out to be mediocre. The person may initially be bored by it, but may end up enjoying it as a piece of light entertainment watched with a relaxed attitude and not with the focus and concentration with which she would watch a better film.

Aristotle distinguishes, at 1176^a10–29, between activity that is pleasant without qualification and activity that is pleasant in a qualified way:

In fact, however, the pleasures differ quite a lot, in human beings at any rate. For the same things delight some people, and cause pain to others; and while some find them painful and hateful, others find them pleasant and loveable. . . . But in all such cases it seems right that what is really so is what appears so to the excellent person. If this is right, as it seems to be, and virtue, i.e. the good person in so far as he is good, is the measure of each thing, then what appear pleasures to him will also really be pleasures and what is pleasant will be what he enjoys. And if what he finds objectionable appears pleasant to someone, that is not at all surprising; for human beings suffer many sorts of corruption and damage. It is not pleasant, however, except to these people in these conditions. Clearly, then, we should say that

one does not apprehend the object in its full fineness. Someone with a head cold may enjoy a gourmet meal while failing to pick up on many of the subtle flavours that they would have perceived if their faculties had been in a better condition. The meal itself is a very fine object, but the meal as one experiences it when one has a cold is only moderately fine. If one does in some cases enjoy the same object in the same way when one's capacity is in an excellent condition as when it is in a poor one, it is because for the mode of awareness and class of objects in question there is not enough determinacy for the poor condition of the capacity to matter (as in the candy example above—one may well enjoy a Twix bar to the same extent and in the same way whether or not one has a head cold).

the pleasures agreed to be shameful are not pleasures at all, except to corrupted people.

I brought up the concern earlier that it may seem as though Aristotle is committed to denying that the activities of someone whose capacities are in a bad condition and are active in relation to objects that are in no way fine could be pleasant. This would be a wildly implausible position. Some vicious activities, such as gorging on fast food or committing adultery, are clearly sometimes pleasant for the people who engage in them. It may seem as though Aristotle is denying this when he writes, 'Clearly, then, we should say that the pleasures agreed to be shameful are not pleasures at all, except to corrupted people.' When Aristotle says that shameful pleasures are not pleasures at all, he does not mean that there is no sense whatsoever in which they are pleasures. After all, he says in this very sentence that they *are* pleasures for corrupted people. Aristotle sometimes says that X is not Y when he really means that X is not Y without qualification.¹⁸ His remark here should be understood in this way. He is saying that shameful pleasures are not pleasures without qualification, but that they are pleasures for corrupted people. He illustrates his point at 1173^b22–4:

For we should not suppose if things are pleasant to people in a bad condition that they are pleasant, except to these people, just as if things are healthy or sweet or bitter to sick people we should not suppose that they are healthy, sweet, or bitter except to them.

Take, for example, chemotherapy. The drug treatments in chemotherapy are not healthy for a person in a normal condition. What is healthy for a person in a normal condition provides the standard of what is healthy without qualification, and so the drug treatments in chemotherapy are not healthy without qualification. For some people with cancer, however, these drug treatments are healthy, and so it is correct to say that they can be healthy for someone with cancer.

In the case of pleasure, a shameful activity that is pleasant for a vicious person but is not pleasant for human beings who have developed in the natural way is pleasant only *for the vicious person*. The qualification 'for the vicious person' must be added when we call

¹⁸ A clear example is *NE* 7. 4, where Aristotle says that someone who is akratic about spirit or wealth is not akratic, when what he means is that such people are not akratic without qualification.

such an activity pleasant, and so the activity is not pleasant without qualification. It is not immediately clear, however, from what Aristotle says in this passage, how it could be that base activities are pleasant even for the vicious person, given that such activities involve capacities that are in defective conditions being exercised in relation to non-fine objects. It might seem that such activities fail to be perfect to any extent whatsoever. I suggest that although he does not explicitly say so, it is reasonable to speculate that Aristotle does in fact think that certain base activities are perfect in a way. They are perfect in the sense that they bear a certain resemblance by analogy to activities that are perfect in the primary sense. In *Metaph.* Δ 16, Aristotle writes:

And thus we transfer the word 'perfect' to bad things, and speak of a perfect scandal-monger and a perfect thief. (1021^b17–19)

Things, then, that are called perfect in virtue of their own nature are so called in all these senses, some because they lack nothing in respect of goodness and cannot be excelled and no proper part of them is found outside, others in general because they cannot be exceeded in their several classes and no part proper to them is outside; the others are called perfect in virtue of these first two kinds, because they either make or have something of the sort or are adapted to it or in some way or other are referred to the things that are called perfect in the primary sense. (1021^b30–1022^a3)

Perfect activities involve a 'fit' between a capacity in the best condition and the finest of objects, such that the capacity is perfectly exercised. There may also be a fit in cases of shameful activity, but the fit will be between a capacity in a corrupted condition and an object that is apt fully to exercise a capacity in such a condition. A thief who is superlatively good at thievery can rightly be called a perfect thief. He is not a perfect thief in the primary sense of perfect, since his thieving ability is not strictly speaking *good*, but he is a perfect thief in so far as his thieving ability stands to the art of thievery in a way that resembles by analogy the way that, for example, a perfect doctor's medical abilities stand to the art of medicine. Likewise, an activity that involves the full exercise of a capacity in a corrupted condition can rightly be called a perfect activity even though it is not perfect in the primary sense, since it resembles by analogy activity that is perfect in the primary sense. Aristotle's account of perfect activity can therefore be extended to the case of shameful activity. This is not to say that Aristotle counts certain

shameful activities as pleasant merely because they are in some respects analogous to pleasant activities. Just as chemotherapy can be genuinely healthy for a person with cancer, shameful activities can be genuinely pleasant for a person in a corrupt condition. The term ‘perfection’ is extended to such activities by analogy, but the activities involve a character of awareness that the person who performs them finds attractive, just as activities that are perfect in the primary sense do. A shameful activity can indeed be genuinely pleasant for the person who performs it, but the pleasantness of such an activity depends on the corrupted condition of the capacity it activates, just as the healthiness of chemotherapy for someone with cancer depends on the person’s illness, and so shameful activity is not pleasant without qualification, just as chemotherapy is not healthy without qualification.¹⁹

It seems clear that this is enough to answer Van Riel’s objection that Aristotle’s account does not allow that some activities that we intuitively consider to be pleasant are in fact pleasant. Aristotle does not claim that only maximally perfect activity is pleasant, he just focuses—for clear and understandable reasons—on this type of pleasure in his main account of what pleasure itself is. A respectable activity that is perfect to some degree but not maximally perfect is pleasant without qualification; it is just not one of the quintessentially human pleasures. A shameful activity is not pleasant without qualification, but may be pleasant for the person who performs it.

¹⁹ My interpretation of Aristotle on this point contrasts with an interpretation suggested by Julia Annas in her paper ‘Aristotle on Pleasure and Goodness’, in A. Oksenberg Rorty (ed.), *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics* (Berkeley, 1980), 285–99: ‘For Aristotle, one cannot pursue pleasure regardless of the moral worth of the actions that are one’s means to getting it. Rather it is the other way round: it is one’s conception of the good life which determines what counts for one as being pleasant’ (288). I disagree with Annas that what one finds pleasant is determined primarily by one’s *conception* of the good life. In many cases, the condition of non-rational aspects of one’s soul plays the primary role in determining what one finds pleasant. This is especially evident in cases where an agent exhibits *akrasia*, or lack of self-control. In such cases, what one takes pleasure in is directly at odds with one’s conception of the good life. Annas thinks that the possibility of *akrasia* creates a serious difficulty for Aristotle’s theory of pleasure (294). This concern is removed if one accepts the interpretation of this aspect of Aristotle’s theory of pleasure that I propose.

2. Three prominent interpretations of Aristotle's account of pleasure

Following the account of perfect activity of awareness that I have been discussing, Aristotle gives his most direct statement in *NE* 10. 1–5 of what pleasure itself is:

Pleasure perfects the activity—not, however, as the state does, by being present in (the activity), but as a sort of supervenient perfection [*ἐπιγινόμενον τι τέλος*], like the bloom on those in the prime of youth. (1174^b31–3)

Gosling and Taylor outline the three ways in which the view expressed in this passage has traditionally been interpreted:

Here there have been three styles of view. First, that of the majority of commentators holds that pleasure is the formal cause of actualization; secondly, not always distinguished from this or the following has been the view that pleasure is some subtle extra perfection added to the perfection of actualization; and thirdly, there is the view adopted by Gauthier and Jolif themselves, that pleasure is the final cause of (perfect) actualization.²⁰

I shall argue that all three of these ways of interpreting Aristotle's view are unpromising, beginning with the second type of interpretation, according to which Aristotle sees pleasure as a 'subtle extra perfection', over and above the perfection of the pleasant activity. This style of interpretation relies heavily on Aristotle's statement that pleasure is a 'supervenient perfection', which may indeed seem to suggest that pleasure is something 'extra'. I believe that this statement can be understood in a different, better way, and given that this type of view is unattractive for independent reasons, it seems best to do so.²¹

Proponents of this type of view will find themselves hard pressed to clarify what precisely the 'subtle extra perfection' in question is, given that Aristotle himself does not explicitly describe any such thing. Gosling and Taylor indicate at pp. 209–13 that proponents of this type of interpretation typically make pleasure out to be some kind of feeling or fuzzy glow that perfect activity gives rise to. Van Riel endorses a version of this view:

²⁰ J. C. B. Gosling and C. C. W. Taylor, *The Greeks on Pleasure* (Oxford, 1982), 241–2.

²¹ I give my own interpretation of what Aristotle means when he calls pleasure a 'supervenient perfection' in sect. 3 below.

Pleasure is of this kind: it is not the intrinsic perfection of an activity, but rather a surplus, a quality that supervenes on it. Aristotle thus clearly acknowledges that activity and pleasure are not identical. Pleasure may be an extremely desirable and gratifying surplus, which makes us perform an activity even more ardently but the activity as such can be performed without the pleasure.²²

Van Riel concludes from his interpretation that Aristotle, by his own lights, should maintain that a perfect activity can fail to be pleasant. He thinks that Aristotle should say that pleasure is a surplus quality that may normally be caused by the perfection of an activity but that, given its discrete psychological existence, sometimes might not be (74–5). Aristotle in fact rejects this claim and maintains that perfect activity of awareness is necessarily pleasant (1174^b29–31). Van Riel thinks that Aristotle has failed to follow his account of pleasure to its final consequences and has therefore got this point wrong. It seems to me that this consequence of Van Riel's interpretation, rather than leading us to conclude that Aristotle misunderstood the ramifications of his own view, should be taken to indicate that the interpretation itself is incorrect. Indeed, this issue highlights what is wrong with any interpretation of Aristotle's account according to which pleasure is taken to be something like a 'subtle extra perfection' or 'surplus quality': such interpretations fail to appreciate Aristotle's commitment to the idea that pleasure is not something separate from activity. He makes this commitment clear at 1175^b30–5:

The pleasures in activities are more intimately related to the activities than the desires for them. For the desires are distinguished from the activities in time and in nature, but the pleasures are close to the activities, and so little distinguished from them that disputes arise about whether the activity is the same as the pleasure. Still, pleasure would seem to be neither thought nor perception, since that would be absurd. Rather, it is because pleasure and activity are not separated that to some people they appear the same.

Pleasure is not a feeling or quality of our awareness that is independent of the activity that it arises in connection with. Rather, as I shall argue, it is an aspect of perfect activity of awareness, and so cannot exist separately from such activity. Moreover, it is an *essential* aspect, and thus if one engages in a perfect activity of awareness then *ipso facto* one experiences pleasure.

²² Van Riel, *Pleasure and the Good Life*, 58.

Another strong reason for rejecting interpretations according to which pleasure is something over and above the activity it arises in connection with is that they are incompatible with what Aristotle says in *Metaph. A 7*. In that chapter Aristotle states at 1072^b22–6 that the activity of the prime mover is pleasant (indeed the most pleasant of all activities), and then states at 1073^a5–7 that the prime mover is indivisible and without parts. If the pleasure yielded by the prime mover’s activity were something over and above the activity itself, then the prime mover would have two ‘parts’: its primary activity and the resultant pleasure.²³ If *Metaph. A 7* is supposed to be consistent with *NE 10* (which is *prima facie* suggested by the fact that Aristotle echoes the claim from *Metaph. A 7* that contemplation, i.e. activity expressing wisdom, is the most pleasant activity in *NE 10. 7* at 1177^a22–5), then Aristotle’s view in *NE 10* should not entail that pleasure is something separate from the activity it arises in connection with.

The first and third types of interpretation that Gosling and Taylor summarize are based on different ways of understanding an analogy Aristotle draws that is usually taken to compare pleasure to health. After giving the account of perfect activity that I discussed in Section 1, Aristotle goes on to write:

Pleasure perfects the activity. But the way in which pleasure perfects the activity is not the way in which the perceptible object and the perceptual capacity perfect it when they are both excellent—just as health and the doctor are not the cause of being healthy in the same way. (1174^b23–6)

This analogy has often been understood as part of Aristotle’s positive account of what pleasure itself is. The Greek word *aition*, trans-

²³ The context indicates that Aristotle is most concerned to deny that the prime mover has *material* parts, but he does not qualify his statement that it is without parts to indicate that this is *all* he means to deny. The prime mover is a maximally perfect activity of knowing, and that is all that it is. Part of what makes it count as the most perfect of all beings is that it is unified and non-composite. It could not be considered purely non-composite if, in addition to its activity of knowing, it were experiencing some kind of surplus fuzzy feeling or warm glow. This would be a separate element of its being that would form a composite with its primary activity. Moreover, it is not clear that Aristotle would even consider the experience of a feeling possible without an underlying (material) physiology. He indicates in *De anima* 1. 1 that all psychological activities except thinking (and even thinking when it involves imagination) involve underlying physiological processes. Given that the prime mover is immaterial, its activity could only be thought divorced from imagination, and so the pleasure that it experiences must be an aspect of its activity of thinking.

lated as 'cause', has a broader meaning than the English word. An *aition* is something that can be referred to as an explanation. Aristotle discusses four types of *aitia* in *Physics* 2. 3: formal, final, material, and moving. In the passage quoted above, the doctor should be understood as the moving cause of being healthy, in that he contributes to bringing it about that a patient is healthy by intervening to make changes in the patient's body. Health has been understood as either the formal or the final cause of being healthy.²⁴ Most commentators think that Aristotle means to claim in this passage that the capacity being activated and the object it is active in relation to, taken together, stand to pleasant activity as the doctor stands to being healthy, whereas pleasure stands to pleasant activity as health stands to being healthy. Commentators who favour the first type of interpretation outlined by Gosling and Taylor think that Aristotle's point is that pleasure perfects a perfect activity not by bringing about or contributing to its perfection, but rather by being its formal cause. Commentators who favour the third type of interpretation interpret the passage similarly, but think that the way in which pleasure perfects a perfect activity is by being its final cause.

I disagree with both of these ways of interpreting the passage. It is not obligatory to infer from the analogy Aristotle draws between pleasure and health that Aristotle thinks that pleasure is in any way a cause.²⁵ Indeed, it is not obligatory to understand the analogy as part of Aristotle's positive account of what pleasure is. It is more natural to understand the point being made as a purely negative one, given that Aristotle says that the way in which pleasure perfects the activity is *not* the way in which the capacity and object perfect it,

²⁴ The idea that health is the final cause of being healthy (i.e. that the condition of being healthy has as the goal it aims at by nature the good of health) is very strange, and it is hard to believe that this is what Aristotle has in mind, but Gauthier and Jolif argue that the analogy should be interpreted in this way (R. A. Gauthier and J. Y. Jolif (trans. and comm.), *Aristote: L'Éthique à Nicomaque* [*L'Éthique à Nicomaque*], 2 vols. (Louvain, 1970), ii/2. 839–41). The evidence they adduce is unimpressive. They point to two places in the *Nicomachean Ethics* where Aristotle refers to health as a final cause, namely 1094^a8 and 1145^a7–9. In both passages Aristotle says that health is the end aimed at by the art of medicine. The art of medicine is the art of bringing it about that people become healthy, and so it does aim at health as its goal. This clearly does not imply that health is the end or goal of *being healthy*. Irwin holds that pleasure is the final cause of perfect activity, but acknowledges that in this analogy health should be understood as a formal rather than a final cause (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 305–6).

²⁵ Here I am in agreement with Van Riel, *Pleasure and the Good Life*, 55–6, and Hardie, *Aristotle's Ethical Theory*, 313.

and then says that ‘health and the doctor are not the cause of being healthy in the same way’ to elucidate what he means by this. A doctor is the cause of being healthy by making changes in a person’s body that help to bring it about that the person be healthy. Health is a cause of being healthy as well, but not by helping to bring it about that a person be healthy. Likewise, the capacity and object perfect an activity by contributing to or helping to bring about its perfection. Pleasure perfects the activity, not by contributing to or helping to bring about its perfection, but rather in some otherwise unspecified way. There need be no implication that this other way involves being a different kind of *cause*.

On this more natural way of reading the passage, Aristotle’s point is not that pleasure stands to pleasant activity as health stands to being healthy, and so there is no reason to infer that Aristotle thinks of pleasure as a cause. This is an attractive result, as both the view that pleasure is a final cause and the view that it is a formal cause face serious difficulties. The final cause of an activity is its end or goal. Even if we were to grant that in all cases pleasure is a goal of perfect activity (which is not obvious), characterizing pleasure as a goal of perfect activity does not tell us anything about what pleasure itself is. It merely gives us a relation that it bears to perfect activity in all cases. Aristotle begins the chapter by saying, ‘What pleasure is, or what kind of thing it is will become clearer if we take it up again from the beginning’ (1174^a13–14). His aim is clearly to give an account of what pleasure itself is, and not merely to give an account of its relation to activity.

Moreover, at 1175^a15–17 Aristotle writes:

Pleasure perfects [people’s] activities, and hence perfects life, which they desire. It is reasonable to think, then, that they also aim at pleasure, since it perfects each person’s life for him, and life is choiceworthy.

Proponents of the view that Aristotle’s account of pleasure at 1174^b14–1175^a3 makes it out to be a final cause interpret the simile of the bloom as saying that pleasure perfects activity by being an end or goal of such activity.²⁶ That is to say, they think that the way in which pleasure perfects an activity is by being among its goals. The passage I have just quoted, however, indicates that this is not right. Aristotle says there that pleasure is a goal *because* it

²⁶ Irwin, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 306; Gauthier and Jolif, *L’Éthique à Nicomaque*, ii/2. 842.

perfects activity, which is unacceptably circular if the way in which pleasure perfects activity is by being among its goals.

The view that Aristotle thinks that pleasure is the formal cause of perfect activity is also unattractive. The formal cause of an activity is something like the set of features of the activity that make it the activity that it is. Aristotle makes at least one remark in book 10 that indicates that he does not think of pleasure in this way. He writes:

For nothing human is capable of continuous activity, and hence no continuous pleasure arises either, since pleasure follows [*ἔπεται*] the activity. (1175^a4–6)

In this passage Aristotle speaks of pleasure as ‘following’ activity. It is not immediately clear exactly how he understands ‘follow’ here, but 1175^b30–3 makes it clear that he thinks that pleasure is not temporally distinguished from activity, and so he cannot mean that pleasure follows activity in the sense that it comes after it in time. The thought seems to be that pleasure follows activity in the sense that it depends on activity for its being, such that one cannot experience pleasure if one is not engaged in activity. This way of understanding ‘follows’ makes the inference Aristotle is making clear: continuous pleasure is impossible because pleasure cannot occur without activity and continuous activity is impossible. Aristotle’s choice of words would be very strange if his view were that pleasure is the form of pleasant activity. The form of an activity is what makes it the activity that it is in the first place; it would be strange to speak of it as following the activity or as depending on the activity for its being. The interpretation I favour, which I am about to spell out in detail, is much better equipped to accommodate the sense in which Aristotle thinks that pleasure ‘follows’ activity. Pleasure, on my interpretation, is a particular aspect that an activity of awareness has when it is performed under certain conditions. It does not come after the activity in time, but it depends on the activity for its being, and so it can rightly be described as ‘following’ the activity.

3. Pleasure as perfection

The three types of interpretations of Aristotle’s account of pleasure that past commentators have favoured are unattractive, and none of them, it seems, is supported by conclusive evidence. My own view

is that, for Aristotle, pleasure is simply the perfection of a perfect activity of awareness, the very perfection that is brought about by the good condition of the capacity activated and the fine object it is active in relation to. That is to say, it is the character that such an activity has in virtue of the good condition of the capacity and the fineness of the object. Sarah Broadie briefly considers this interpretation, but notes that most commentators think that the simile of the bloom rules it out.²⁷ It is worth quoting the passage containing the simile again:

Pleasure perfects the activity—not, however, as the state does, by being present in [*enuparchousa*] (the activity), but as a sort of supervenient perfection [*epiginomenon ti telos*], like the bloom on those in the prime of youth. (1174^b31–3)

The phrase that Broadie identifies as the major obstacle to the interpretation I favour is *epiginomenon ti telos*, translated here as ‘a sort of supervenient perfection’. She notes that many interpreters think that Aristotle means to say that pleasure is something additional to the activity, and therefore that it cannot be the perfection of that very activity, but must be some extra perfection. Aristotle’s use of the prefix *epi-* may certainly give the impression that pleasure is something over and above the activity it arises in connection with. Moreover, *telos* is typically used in the *Nicomachean Ethics* to mean ‘end’, and an end can be separate from that which it is an end of.²⁸ Taking these two considerations together, the use of *epi-* suggests at first blush that *telos* refers to something in some sense separate from the activity it arises in connection with, and on Aristotle’s standard way of using the word in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, a *telos* can indeed be separate from that which it is a *telos* of.

This worry needs to be taken seriously, but I think there is a very plausible story to tell in defence of the reading I suggest. I have already argued against interpretations of Aristotle’s theory of pleasure according to which pleasure is something separate from the activity it arises in connection with. I have also argued against interpreting the bloom passage as saying that pleasure is an end or goal. In the light of these arguments, it seems that if there is a philologically plausible construal of *epiginomenon ti telos* that does not imply that pleasure is something separate from the activity it arises in con-

²⁷ S. Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle* (New York, 1991), 336–7.

²⁸ For example, victory is separate from generalship (*NE* 1094^a6–9).

nection with, then we should prefer that construal. I shall argue in this section that there is such a construal available, and that it fits very well with the interpretation of Aristotle's account of pleasure that I suggest.

I have suggested that *telos* should be construed as meaning 'perfection', rather than 'end' or 'goal'. The strongest consideration in favour of construing *telos* in this way is that doing so does not require us to look beyond the immediate context to understand Aristotle's meaning. He has just spelt out what it means to say that an activity is perfect, stated that pleasure perfects perfect activity, and clarified that it does not perfect it in the way that the object and the condition of the capacity being activated do. There is already a notion of perfection in play. On the reading I suggest, Aristotle is simply using the word *telos* to refer to that notion of perfection. There are repeated uses of the verb *teleioun* and the adjective *teleios* in the context, and I am suggesting that we take this use of *telos* together with those uses, as referring to the character of perfection that is brought about when an activity is perfected (*teleioun*) and is thereby said to be perfect (*teleios*). There is no allusion in the context to the notion of an end or goal, nor are there any other obvious candidates for what Aristotle may mean by *telos*. If he is using *telos* to mean 'perfection', then he is actually being reasonably clear. He has carefully prepared us for the idea that pleasure perfects activity by being the perfection that it gains when the object and capacity meet certain conditions, and at 1174^b31–3 he expresses that idea. If he is using *telos* to mean something other than 'perfection', then the introduction of whatever notion he means to refer to is abrupt and his reasons for introducing it are obscure.

There are no obviously parallel uses of *telos* in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, but the fact that Aristotle adds *ti* goes a long way towards mitigating any concerns that the lack of a clear parallel may raise.²⁹

²⁹ There do seem to be helpful non-Aristotelian parallels. James Allen argues persuasively in his forthcoming article 'Why There are Ends of Both Goods and Evils in Ancient Ethical Theory' that while 'end' is the dominant sense of *τέλος*, particularly in philosophical writings, the most basic sense of the word is 'fulfilment', 'consummation', or 'realization'. The word is frequently used that way in Homeric Greek and by numerous pre-Aristotelian authors. We find it used in this way together with a form of *ἐπιγίγνεσθαι* by Theognis at 640, *βουλαῖς οὐκ ἐπέγεντο τέλος*. The sense of *τέλος* here is clearly 'fulfilment'; the passage should be translated 'Their plans went unfulfilled'. There is no intelligible way to construe *τέλος* as meaning 'goal' in this passage. It is true that the individuals who made the plans did not attain their goal, but this is not true of the *plans* themselves; it does not make sense to say 'Their plans

He says that pleasure perfects activity by being *a certain kind of supervenient telos*. If he were just using *telos* in the standard sense employed in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, there would be no need to add *ti*. It is likely that Aristotle added it to flag the fact that he is using *telos* in a non-standard way. It seems, then, that it is plausible to take *telos* in 1174^b33 as referring to the perfection that is brought about when an activity is perfected.

I shall now consider whether Aristotle's use of *epiginomenon* at 1174^b33, translated as 'supervenient', creates a problem for my view. The prefix *epi-* suggests that pleasure is in some sense *additional to* the activity it arises in connection with. On my reading, pleasure is an integral element of the activity that it arises in connection with, so one might wonder why Aristotle would describe it as being additional to that activity. The first thing to note is that *epiginomenon* is supposed to contrast with *emuparchousa*. The condition of the capacity being activated perfects the activity by being *in* it (i.e. by being one of the elements that give rise to it and its perfect character); pleasure perfects it by being in some sense *added to* it. I want to suggest that pleasure is added to the activity in the sense that it is the perfection that the activity gains when the condition of the capacity being activated and the object that it is active in relation to make the appropriate contributions. It is not one of the elements that give rise to the activity and its perfect character, but rather *is* the perfect character that is added to the activity such that it is perfected.

The worry that pleasure is too integral to activity to be described as being added to it arises only if this is understood as meaning that it is added to the *already perfected* activity. The sentence does not imply that pleasure is something added to the perfected activity, just that it is added to the activity. If pleasure is the activity's perfection, there is a clear sense in which it is added to the activity: it is the perfection that the activity gains under certain conditions. An

didn't reach their goal'. Allen suggests an attractive picture of how the technical usage of $\tau\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\omicron\varsigma$, where it means 'that for the sake of which', could have emerged from this more basic sense. There is no need to lean on this consideration in interpreting *NE* 1174^b31–3, but it seems plausible to suppose that Aristotle may have been employing the more basic, non-technical sense of $\tau\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\omicron\varsigma$ in this passage (especially given the inclusion of $\tau\epsilon$, which may signal that he does not mean to use the word in the usual technical sense). When an activity is perfect, the capacity in question is fully activated by its engagement with an object that fits with its condition. An activity's perfection can thus be understood as a kind of fulfilment or consummation, in the sense that the activity has reached its peak and is fully exercising the capacity.

activity can be engaged in imperfectly, and thus without pleasure. Pleasure, if it does arise in connection with an activity, is something extra, beyond the bare activity. This does not, however, entail that it is *separate* from the activity. When a capacity is in the right kind of condition and is active in relation to an object that fits with this condition, the condition and the object jointly perfect the resultant activity by bringing about its perfection. Pleasure, on the other hand, perfects the activity in a different way (just as health and the doctor are causes of being healthy in different ways), by being the perfection that is added to the bare activity in virtue of the fit between the capacity and object.³⁰ This seems sufficient to explain why Aristotle would describe pleasure as being additional to the activity that it arises in connection with.³¹

I take it that the point of the simile of the bloom is to elucidate what Aristotle means by *epiginomenon ti telos*. I shall now offer an interpretation of the simile on the basis of the construal of *epiginomenon ti telos* that I have just defended. The bloom is the aspect of youthfulness that a person has in the prime of youth, when they have reached the stage in their development where their maturation from childhood to young adulthood is complete, and when their sexual attractiveness thereby reaches its peak.³² It is not merely the

³⁰ As I argued in sect. 2, there is no need to take the analogy between health and pleasure strictly, in particular because Aristotle does not speak of pleasure as a *cause* of perfect activity. However, it is worth noting that on my interpretation there is a ready parallel between the way pleasure relates to an activity's becoming perfect and the way health relates to a patient's becoming healthy: pleasure is the character that is added to an activity such that the activity becomes perfect, whereas health is the condition that is added to a patient such that the patient becomes healthy.

³¹ It is also worth pointing out that there are three instances in *Metaphysics Z* where the word *ἐπιγίγνεσθαι* is used to describe very integral relationships: 1035^a12, 1036^a31, and 1036^b6. In the first and third cases, *ἐπιγίγνεσθαι* is used to describe the relationship between form and matter; in the second case it is used to describe the relationship between a thing and the matter that it is made of. It seems that if Aristotle is happy to use *ἐπιγίγνεσθαι* to describe these relationships, then it would not be surprising for him to use it to describe the relationship between an activity and its perfection. I do not mean to suggest that Aristotle is using the word in the same way in *NE* 10. 4 as he uses it in *Metaphysics Z*. I just mean to point to three clear cases where he uses the word to describe very integral relationships.

³² The word translated as 'bloom', *ῥοσά*, is usually linked with a young person's sexual attractiveness. Aristotle uses the word in this way at 1157^a8. Van Riel, *Pleasure and the Good Life*, 57, and P. Hadreas, 'Aristotle's Simile of Pleasure at *NE* 1174^b33', *Ancient Philosophy*, 17 (1997), 371–4 at 371–3, think that the simile of the bloom does not in fact refer to the bloom that young people have, but rather to a bloom that comes much later in life. The basis of this claim is that the word translated as 'those in the prime of youth' is *ἀκμαῖοι*, and the *ἀκμή* (or prime) of life is,

set of features they have in virtue of which they count as being in the prime of youth (rosy complexion, the beginnings of a beard, etc.); it is the overall result of the juxtaposition and interrelation of these features. It is not an extra quality that arises in addition to these features, but rather is the cumulative effect that arises on occasion of their coalescence. Likewise, pleasure is the character that an activity of awareness has in virtue of the interplay between the goodness of the capacity being activated and the fineness of the object it is active in relation to. It is the cumulative result of these two perfecting contributions. Each can be described as a kind of supervenient *telos*, in the sense that each is a perfection that is added when certain conditions are in place.

I have argued that, for Aristotle, pleasure is the perfection that is brought about in an activity of awareness when the capacity being activated is in a good condition and is active in relation to a fine object. It is the way we experience the fit between object and capacity. Take, for example, the case of having a cool drink when one's throat is parched after a desert hike. This involves an activity of touch as the drink comes into contact with one's throat. The cool drink is an object that is well suited perfectly to activate one's dried-out and over-heated organ of touch. The pleasure one experiences when the cool drink passes down one's throat is the cumulative effect of the condition of the capacity for touch and the aptness of the drink perfectly to activate it. Take also the case of reading a mystery novel. If a person takes pleasure in reading the novel, it is because the person's cognitive faculties are in a good condition for e.g. puzzling over clues. The pleasure one takes in reading the novel is the result of the novel's aptness to engage faculties in such a condition. In these examples, the pleasure the subject experiences is an aspect of awareness, but it is not some feeling over and above the pleasant activity. It is rather the character the activity gains in virtue of the

according to Aristotle, something that is reached much later. They think that the *ἄρα* is the condition that people at their prime are in, in virtue of being at their prime. Van Riel and Hadreas may be right, but I do not think that the evidence they offer is conclusive. The word *ἄρα* is used in the passage I have just indicated to refer to the bloom of youthfulness, and at *NE* 1118^b11 Aristotle quotes a passage from Homer in which *ἀκμάζων*, related to *ἀκμαῖοι*, clearly means 'being in the prime of youth'. Even if Van Riel and Hadreas are correct, it is still possible to interpret the passage in much the same way as I have suggested. The bloom would be understood as a perfection arising in virtue of the features that a person has at the prime of life (rather than at some younger age).

fit between the condition of the capacity being activated and the object that it is active in relation to.

4. The sense in which pleasures differ in kind

I shall now attempt to strengthen the case for my interpretation of Aristotle's account of what pleasure itself is by arguing that it helps make sense of another puzzling part of Aristotle's theory of pleasure. In *NE* 10. 5 Aristotle claims that pleasures differ from each other in kind, in accordance with differences in kind among the activities that they arise in connection with. This claim would be very hard to make sense of if Aristotle's view were that pleasure is a quality of awareness (such as a warm glow or fuzzy feeling) that is separate from the activity it arises in connection with. Such qualities of awareness do not seem to admit of suitably robust differences in kind. It is hard to imagine that the fuzzy feeling associated with finding an elegant solution to a mathematical problem could differ in kind from the fuzzy feeling associated with hearing a beautiful sound in a way that reflects the difference in kind between the two activities.

The picture I have been developing naturally suggests a way of understanding Aristotle's claim that pleasures differ from one another in kind. Take, for example, the pleasure of studying philosophy as opposed to the pleasure of eating something sweet. The capacity that is activated when we study philosophy is different in kind from the capacity being activated when we eat something sweet. Likewise, the objects that we think about when we study philosophy are different in kind from the objects that we perceive when we eat something sweet. It seems to follow naturally that the characters that the activities of studying philosophy and tasting something sweet have in virtue of the fit between their respective capacities and objects would differ in kind.

I shall proceed in this section to analyse the principal argument Aristotle gives in 10. 5 for the claim that pleasures differ in kind and develop an interpretation of it along the lines that I have just suggested. At the start of 10. 5 Aristotle writes:

Hence pleasures also seem to differ in kind. For we suppose that things that differ in kind are perfected by things that differ in kind. That is how it appears, both with natural things and with artefacts—for instance, with

animals, trees, a painting, a statue, a house, or an implement. Similarly, activities that differ in kind are also perfected by things that differ in kind. Now activities of thought differ in kind from activities of the capacities for perception, and so do these from each other; so also, then, do the pleasures that perfect them. (1175^a21–8)

This passage is difficult to interpret, since Aristotle does not spell out the sense in which natural things and artefacts that differ in kind are perfected by things that differ in kind. It will be helpful to revisit a passage from *Metaph.* Δ 16 that I discussed in Section 1:

Things, then, that are called perfect in virtue of their own nature are so called. . . [in some cases] because they lack nothing in respect of goodness and cannot be excelled and no proper part of them is found outside, [and in other cases] in general because they cannot be exceeded in their several classes and no part proper to them is outside. (1021^b30–1022^a1)

Take the case of an artefact, such as a bed. A perfect bed is one that cannot be exceeded in goodness as a bed, or at least that lacks nothing required for it to be a good bed and that does not lack any element that is proper to it as a bed. A bed that is missing one leg would fall short of being perfect, as would a perfectly functional bed that is too soft to promote good posture while sleeping. A bed is perfected by having all the features that are necessary for it to serve its purpose, and by having features that are sufficient for it to be unable to be exceeded in goodness.

One might worry that *all* of an artefact's features contribute to its perfection, and thus that cordoning off its perfection from its character in general is a vacuous enterprise. This worry can be dissolved if we distinguish between positive and negative ways of contributing to a thing's perfection. In the passage from *Metaph.* Δ 16 quoted above, Aristotle says that in order to count as perfect a thing must be either unable to be exceeded in goodness, or at least lacking nothing required for goodness, and also must have no part that is proper to it outside of it. The idea seems to be that the condition that no part proper to a thing can be outside of it is a negative requirement that must be met for a thing to be perfect, whereas the condition that it must be lacking nothing required for goodness is a positive requirement. That is to say, the condition that no part proper to a thing can be outside it merely establishes that the thing must not have a serious defect or missing essential element; this condition establishes that for a bed to be perfect, it must first be a normally

functioning bed. The condition that a thing must be lacking nothing required for goodness establishes that the thing must have the positive contributions necessary for it to be *good* or *fine*, as opposed to merely functional; it establishes that for a bed to be perfect, it must be very comfortable, offer excellent back support, etc.

Saying that what perfects an artefact or natural thing is its very perfection should be understood as meaning that what perfects an artefact is the character that it has in virtue of the features that make a *positive* contribution to its perfection. Take, for instance, a perfect bed as opposed to a perfect tiger (Aristotle explicitly lists animals among his examples in the 10. 5 passage quoted above). A perfect bed is one that is an optimal thing to sleep on. For it even to count as a bed it must of course have four legs, a mattress, be able to support the weight of a human being, etc. These are the minimal conditions that must be met for it to be a normally functioning member of its kind. For a bed to be *perfect*, it must in addition be soft enough to be comfortable and must also offer appropriate support to the back. These features make a positive contribution to its perfection. The bed's perfection is not merely the set of these features, but rather is the overall effect of their compresence and interplay. It is the bed's character of being optimal to sleep on.

A perfect tiger, on the other hand, is one that (let us suppose) is maximally good with respect to its ability to survive and reproduce. It must first of all be a tiger, and so must have stripes, teeth shaped for tearing into prey, etc. For it to be a *perfect* tiger, it must have stripes that camouflage it *well*, and its teeth must be sharp and strong enough to be *well suited* for tearing into prey. The tiger's perfection is the overall result of the compresence and interplay of these features. It does not seem at all mysterious that Aristotle would count this as something different in kind from a dog's character of being a perfect hunting companion for humans, and certainly not that he would count it as different in kind from a bed's character of being optimal to sleep on. This character of a bed as perfect is something peculiar to *beds*, and is distinct from whatever corresponds as the perfect character of an animal or an artefact of a different kind. It is a character deriving from a specific set of relevant contributing conditions; since these differ in kind from one type of thing to another, the perfect character to which they give rise differs as well.

Aristotle's point is that the same holds true for activities. The

features that contribute to the perfection of an activity of studying philosophy are different in kind from the features that contribute to the perfection of an activity of tasting something sweet, and the overall result of the compresence and interplay of these features is different in kind as well. The pleasure derived from studying philosophy is a perfection of that particular activity, and therefore it is a perfection peculiar to it. It necessarily differs in kind from the perfection of an activity of tasting something sweet.

The basic form of Aristotle's argument, then, is that things that are different in kind are perfected by things that differ in kind (which can be seen clearly to hold in cases of artefacts and natural things), and that this principle holds for activities of awareness. I have suggested a way of interpreting this argument that I take to be both philosophically and exegetically attractive. I hope that the neatness with which this interpretation fits with the interpretation of his account of pleasure that I defend in Section 3 lends additional plausibility to both views.

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