In our chapter, we have considered how pleasure might be viewed as an awareness or appreciation of our conscious experience. Deborah Achtenberg and Jessica Moss bring illuminating textual support for the notion that for Aristotle, pleasure is the direct perception of value. This discussion is somewhat technical, but can bring depth to our understanding of how pleasure functions as an appreciation of that which is valuable in our lives. Let us return to the passage from *De Anima* cited above:

Sense-perceiving then is like bare asserting (*phanai*) or thinking (*noein*); but when the object is pleasant or painful, the soul does something like (*hoion*) affirm (*kataphasa*) or negate (*apophasa*) the object, and then it pursues or avoids it. To be pleased or pained is to activate the perceptual mean toward what is good or bad *as such.* (*De An* 3.7 431a 8-11).¹

This passage suggests that pleasure perceives the good *as* good; we appreciate the value of what we perceive in a direct and non-cognitive manner.² To perceive something as white or sweet is a first-order perception. The perception of value is dependent upon this; we both perceive an object and grasp that it is good for us. The good-making property of an object is the fact that it can contribute to our own flourishing as living beings, and this property appears to us as pleasant:

Things are so constituted that the pleasant appears to the soul (*psyche*) as good and the more pleasant better, the painful bad and the more painful worse. (*EE* 2.10 1227 a 39)

Animals, too, may perceive the value of what will allow them to thrive; when their bodies are parched, they perceive that water will quench their thirst.³ It is not simply that nature has so designed living beings that they take pleasure in what is in fact good for them; the soul actually perceives the value of what is pleasant. Since what is good appears pleasurable to us, every creature desires and pursues it. Even a plant moves toward its good; when it takes in water and nutrients it is active toward its good through its nutritive soul. In addition to this nutritive soul,
animals and humans have a perceptive faculty that can be aware that we want to pursue something; and it is this awareness that marks human and animal pleasure. Finally, human beings can in addition conceptualize pleasure as a good thing; we can conceive with our rational soul that something that is pleasant will promote our growth and flourishing.

We might think that it is far-fetched to attribute to Aristotle the notion that animals and humans can actually perceive value. Jessica Moss points out, however, that this assertion is in line with basic principles of Aristotle’s thought; as Moss expresses it, “in finding something pleasant we are struck by its value and worth.”⁴ Further, for Aristotle, value or goodness is something that is genuinely a feature of an object; the object is in a teleological relation with us as something that can benefit us and help us thrive. Pleasure is “the unconceptualized mental experience of the good;” when we enjoy something, we experience its goodness.⁵

This perspective can help us make sense of the argument made by one prominent scholar of Aristotle, David Bostock, that all pleasure takes place in the mind. Bostock sought to make sense of an apparent contradiction. On the one hand, Aristotle insists that pleasure is not a movement or process (kinesis) or coming to be (genesis); it is more like an activity or actualization (energeia). And yet many of Aristotle’s illustrative examples are in fact processes: building, drawing, writing. Bostock argues that the pleasures of building, drawing, and writing are pleasures of awareness.⁶ The passage from 9.9 on self-reflective awareness bears this out. We are aware of all our psychological activities, and pleasure seems to stem from our appreciation of our activities, even when we are engaged in physical processes. Appreciation—the enjoyment of our sensations and activities—is a psychic phenomenon; it is a function of both sense-perception or awareness (aesthêsis) and thinking (noësis).⁷

We have thus far argued that Aristotle believes that living beings can perceive value and goodness, and that pleasure lies in the awareness of valuable activity. A text from the treatise “On Sleep” brings fascinating confirmation that Aristotle thought of awareness itself as a form of perception. This identification hinges on the dual meaning of the term aesthêsis for Aristotle. In a
strict sense, it can mean perception by means of one of the five senses; in a broader sense, in awareness or consciousness:

We consider the one who is perceiving/conscious (aisthanomenon) to be awake, and every waker to be perceiving/conscious of either something external or some movement within itself. If then being awake consists in nothing other than perceiving/being conscious, it is clear that by the very thing with which one perceives, wakers are awake and sleeping things sleep.⁸

Returning to Bostock’s thesis, then, self-awareness is a form of perception, an activity of the perceiving part of the soul (to aisthetikon). As such, it can be a source of pleasure; through self-awareness, we can take pleasure in the healthy functioning of our own bodies and the virtuous activities of our soul (psyche).⁹ This is kinesthetic awareness, and it is the basis for our pleasure in all the valuable activities in which we are engaged.

The accounts we have explored in the Nicomachean Ethics underline the intimate relationship between pleasure and perception. The Book 7 account suggests that pleasure is the unimpeded activity of a natural state. Book 9.9 tells us that the chief, defining activities of human beings are perception and thought. These two accounts together, then, suggest that unimpeded perceptions and thoughts are pleasures.¹⁰ Likewise in Book 10, pleasure is intimately bound with activities of perception or thought. In all these accounts, pleasurable perceptions are different from non-pleasurable ones. When we perceive without pleasure, our perception is incomplete, imperfect. Complete perception takes in not only the “fact” of an activity, but its value as well. This explains why pleasure is an additional telos or perfection. The perception of something as good adds goodness or value to an activity. When we appreciate an activity’s value, we give the activity our all; we are fully engaged in the experience, whether that of seeing, active listening, learning, or ethical action. Pleasure is thus not just a psychological attitude, but a mode of engagement in activity, a mode of enjoyment.¹¹
I have combined here the translations of David Wolfsdorf and Deborah Achtenberg. Achtenberg’s translation reads: “Now perceiving is like mere saying (phanai) and intuiting (noein); but whenever [a perceptual object is] pleasant or painful, [which is] like assertion (kataphasa) or negation (apophasa), [the soul] pursues or avoids it.” Cognition of Value in Aristotle’s Ethics, 162; David Wolfsdorf, Pleasure in Ancient Greek Philosophy, 132.

What he calls the “perceptual mean” may refer either to the perceptual faculty, the common sense, or an organ of perception.

Throughout his corpus, Aristotle identifies the practicable good with the goal of action. See Jessica Moss, Aristotle on the Apparent Good: Perception, Phantasia, Thought, and Desire, 33.

Aristotle affirms that while reason cognizes universals, perception (aisthesis) is aware of particulars. Moss, Aristotle on the Apparent Good, 30. His assertions that the pleasant appears as good are found, e.g. at Eudemian Ethics 3.4, 1113a33-b2; EE 2.10, 1227a 39, EE 7.2, 1235b-29.


Somn. 454a2-7. Cited by Moss, 214.

Note also the fascinating parallel in the following passage from “On Sleep” to the account of reflexive awareness we have seen in NE 9.9: “Now to every sense there belongs something special to it, and also something common. Thus, seeing is special to the sense of sight ... But all are attended also by a certain common capacity, whereby one perceives that one is seeing or hearing. For it is not by sight, after all, that one sees that one is seeing, nor is it by taste or sight, or both, that one discerns (krinein) or is able to discern that sweet things differ from pale ones, but by some part that is common to all the sense-organs. For there exists a single sense, and the controlling sense-organ is single ... Given this it is manifest that waking and sleeping are an affection of this thing [the common sense]. Somn. 455a12-26). Cited by Moss, 214.

“The movements of pleasures and pains and in general of every perception appear to begin from [the heart] and terminate there.” (Parts of Animals 666a 11-13). Cited by Moss, 43.

As noted above, the phrase “mode of engagement in activity,” is that of David Wolfsdorf, characterizing Gilbert Ryle. For sources in Ryle, see above, note 10. See also George Rudebusch, Socrates, Pleasure and Value, 5; idem, “Pleasure” in A Companion to Aristotle, ed. Georgios Anagnostopoulos: 404-18, at 405.