Philosophies of Happiness

Appendix 4: Aristotle: Pleasure Without Sensation

In Book 3.10, Aristotle attributes pleasure to thinking (dianoia); he writes that though the lover of honor or learning enjoys or takes pleasure (khairei) in the thing he loves, his body is not affected at all, only his thought. As contemporary Aristotelian scholar J.O. Urmson notes, “this remark puzzled the commentator Aspasius to the point of exasperation: ‘What does he mean,’ he protests, ‘when he says that the enjoyment of lovers of learning or honour involves a condition of the intelligence? For enjoyment and the pleasures are not in the intelligence but in the affective (pathetiko) part of the soul.’” Urmson then comments: “Aspasius never understands Aristotle's view that enjoyment of learning is exhibited in the effortless concentration of the intelligence on its problems rather than in getting some feeling as a result or concomitant of one's study.” In other words, Aristotle held a “modal” rather than a “sensate” view of pleasure; pleasure is a mode of engaging in activity, rather than a feeling experienced as a result of activity. When the activity is a sensory one, Aristotle regards pleasure as the enjoyment of sensation, rather than as itself a sensation.

Thus, although in 1.8, he does say that pleasure is among the things “of the soul,” the passage in 3.10 suggests that a thinking being without soul can take pleasure in whatever way it can think without an organ of thought, through understanding (nous) alone. Pleasure does not require sensation; we may take pleasure in a physical sensation, but Aristotle does not seem to regard physical sensation itself as pleasure. Nor does Aristotle define pleasure as a feeling (pathos). As David Wolfsdorf writes, “Aristotle’s view is that pleasure and pain accompany (hepetai) emotions (pathei)—just as they accompany other kinds of activations—not that they are emotions.”

Another example of this way of thinking about pleasure is found in 9.9, where Aristotle writes that to be aware that one is living is among the things pleasant in itself. Being aware is
something we can presumably attribute to the Unmoved Mover as pure thought or understanding (nous).

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⁴ *Hedesthai ton psukhikon. NE* 1.8, 1099a 8.

⁵ David Wolfsdorf, “Aristotle on Pleasure and *Energeia* in *Nicomachean Ethics* 7.11-14 and 10.1-5,” citing Jamie Dow, “Aristotle’s Theory of the Emotions: Emotions as Pleasures and Pains,” in *Moral Psychology and Human Action in Aristotle*, 2011, 47-74. David Bostock, too, points out that “in so far as he has a general word for feelings it is *pathos*, and his standard examples are (‘bodily’) desires and emotions. He does say that these are followed by pleasure and pain (1105b23), but (so far as I am aware) he never says that pleasure, or pain is a *pathos*. (But perhaps 1105a 3 is an exception?)” 158 note 43. In 2.5 1105 b 23, he writes that “By feelings/emotions (*pathei*), I mean appetite, fear, confidence, envy, joy, love, hate, longing emulation, pity, and in general things accompanied by (*hepetai*) pleasure and pain.” *NE* 2.3, 1105a3 does seem to be the only place where he explicitly characterizes pleasure as a *pathos*. There he writes: “‘Pleasure has grown up with all of us since infancy, and is consequently a feeling (*pathos*) difficult to eradicate, ingrained as it is in our lives. And to a greater or lesser extent, we regulate our actions by pleasure and pain. Our whole inquiry, then, must be concerned with them, because whether we take enjoyment (*kharein*) and pain (*lppeisthai*) in a good or ad way has great influence on our actions.’”

⁶ *To d’aisthanesthai hoti sdoei ton hedeon kath hauto. NE* 9.9, 1170 b 1-2.