Philosophies of Happiness

Chapter 1 Aristotle: Supplementary Notes

5. What does it mean to say that other goals are not complete, and that happiness is complete or final? There is a debate among scholars as to Aristotle’s view. Are pleasure, honor, virtue and understanding means to the end of happiness, or are they constituents of happiness? Is the relationship between the two that of means to an end, or parts to a whole? We can choose pleasure and virtue without thinking about the fact that they will bring us happiness; we would choose them even if they did not bring us anything else. Thus they are not purely instrumental, like an unpleasant medical treatment, or drudgework in a factory, which no one would choose if they were not means to a further end. Moreover what is only chosen for itself and never for the sake of something else is unconditionally complete; happiness alone seems to satisfy this criterion. While we choose pleasure, honor, virtue and understanding both for themselves and for the sake of happiness, we never choose happiness for the sake of something else. See Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle*, 31.

9. How does the criterion of self-sufficiency factor in? Gabriel Richardson Lear suggests that self-sufficiency is a part of what we intuitively recognize as happiness. We associate happiness with being deeply satisfied or content. It is clear that fortune can affect our sense of happiness, so that we can never be completely self-sufficient in the sense of invulnerable to need for others or to turns of fortune. The happiness that is the worthy telos of our lives gives us the confidence not that we will always get what we desire, but that “no matter what life may bring, [we] will be able to make something of it that is worth choosing.” Gabriel Richardson Lear, *Happy Lives and the Highest Good: An Essay on Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, 70. When our life has a worthy aim, we can make of it a worthy life, no matter what fortune brings. We have developed the sense of inner strength and life purpose that will create happiness no matter what comes our way. We can navigate tragedy and misfortune because we have a worthy sense of purpose in our lives. Happiness is a self-sufficient goal not because it includes every good worth having, but because as a target goal of one’s life it makes life worth living.

22. One might object that we do study because we have a lack, which is ignorance; this is Plato’s argument in Book 9 of the *Republic*. Perhaps Aristotle’s response is his affirmation in Book 10 that the pleasure of those who know is greater than that of those who seek knowledge. When we feel frustrated by our inability to grasp advanced physics, we are not able to enjoy a lecture about the mysterious properties of subatomic particles. Contemplation is best enjoyed by those who do not come from the lack that is ignorance, but from the pure joy of discovery and expressing our capacity to know and understand. Aristotle’s argument is that genuine pleasure consists in enjoying sufficiency, rather than making up for a sense of lack or deprivation. He offers an additional argument against taking restoration as the model for pleasure. We do not even enjoy the same pleasure while our nature is being restored as when it has been restored; when we are hungry we may enjoy something bitter that we would never enjoy in our natural state. The pleasure of enjoying something bitter, or of taking medicine when sick, is not an absolute or ideal pleasure; it is pleasant only relative to our less than ideal state of deficit. It is an extrinsic, not an intrinsic good; we enjoy it as a means to an end, not as an end in itself. We thus cannot take restoration as a model for pleasure; it is not a good measure of what is pleasant for a healthy person.

29. By this Aristotle seems to mean the restorative or mixed pleasures discussed by Plato. As we have seen, Aristotle does not regard these so-called pleasures as genuine pleasures, because they are purely remedial; they depend on a prior lack, rather than a healthy, intact state. Genuine pleasure does not consist in the body being restored from a defective condition to an ideal one, but in the body fully exercising its faculties. David Wolfsdorf argues that Aristotle holds that while the nutritive faculty experiences restoration of a deficiency, the appetitive part of the soul engages in the healthy exercise of its nature,
which Aristotle identifies with the genuine pleasure. See David Wolfsdorf, *Pleasure in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, 125-6.

30. Thus, he addresses Plato’s notion that some restorations of the body are not perceived; they are only pleasurable when they come to our awareness. In Plato, for example, the body’s slow healing from illness is not perceived and so does not rise to the level of our awareness as a pleasure. Pleasure, according to the *Philebus*, only exists when it is intense enough to rise to consciousness. In his early account in the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle seems to accept this definition; here he rejects it. Pleasure is not the perception of a process of restoration to a natural state. Rather it is the unhindered expression of our natural activity.

Aristotle then addresses another misconception. To some, it seems that pleasure is a process because it is a good in the fullest sense [and hence an activity], and they think that an activity is a process, though in fact these are different. In other words, some think that pleasure is a good and an actualization, as Aristotle does. But these people make the mistake of identifying process and activity, whereas Aristotle is very careful to distinguish activity (energeia) from process. Aristotle may be thinking of Plato’s *Theaetetus* 152d-153d, which expresses the notion that to be in a good condition is to be perpetually coming to be. See Broadie, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 402. For Aristotle, activation or exercising of one’s potential is not a process of coming to be, but of activity or actuality. This statement may also suggest that this was a very live debate in the Academy, one that Aristotle wants to address forcefully. This debate is reflected in the sources noted above in note 32. See Dorothea Frede, “*Nicomachean Ethics* VII. 11-12: Pleasure”, *Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics, Book VII: Proceedings of the Symposium Aristotelicum*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, (2009), 185, 196-7.

41. This is a direct response to the argument of Callicles in Book 2 of Plato’s *Republic* and to the common Stoic notion, also alluded to by Epicurus, that “one can be happy on the rack.” Virtue is a necessary but not sufficient condition for happiness. Happiness is unhindered activity, and one is hindered by extreme misfortune, torture and poverty. Aristotle is also sensitive to the fact that good fortune is another necessary but not sufficient condition for happiness, since excessive “good fortune” can even be an impediment to happiness, and should in that case not by right even be called good fortune. For example, winning the lottery can bring all kinds of unforeseen problems.

48. Epicurus argues that pleasure per se is good, while Aristotle does not. For Aristotle, it is only some kind of pleasure that is inextricably tied to the chief good—the pleasure of excellent activity, and he is careful to say, not bodily pleasures. It is true that Epicurus, too, qualifies that while all pleasures are good, we do not choose every pleasure—for example, we do not choose pleasures that have painful consequences. His highest good is stable, katastematic pleasure, the pleasure of the organism functioning smoothly in its healthiest condition; this view has close affinity with Aristotle’s unimpeded activity of the natural state. But while Epicurus appears to endorse wholeheartedly the cradle argument—the notion that we know pleasure is the good, because all beings naturally choose it from birth—Aristotle’s endorsement is more qualified (Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*, 129; Aristotle NE 7.13, 1153b 25-27). For Aristotle, the fact that all beings pursue pleasure shows that it is “some sort of evidence for its being in some sense the chief good”—pleasure is not the good *per se* but an aspect or signal of the good. Thus while both Epicurus and Aristotle take a positive view of pleasure, pleasure plays a different role in their respective ethical theories. Epicurus places pleasure as the chief good, higher even than virtue. For Aristotle, the highest good is the full expression of virtue or excellence. Pleasure also happens to be the unimpeded expression of such excellence, or perhaps a signal or awareness that such excellent activity is taking place.

49. Nevertheless, Aristotle believes that is our telos and that we have within us the drive for the highest realization of our telos, even if we need to work to take pleasure in the highest realization. Thus someone brought up to take pleasure in poor nutrition and lack of exercise will not initially enjoy more healthful
ways of living. With practice, they will learn to take pleasure in what is genuinely healthy. Aristotle believes this will bring a great degree of pleasure and happiness, and that it is our innate desire to realize this highest form of health or flourishing, even if we may not all be in touch with our highest desire. As David Roochnik pointed out to me, Aristotle begins the Metaphysics saying that all human beings desire to know; this is a normative statement. This does not mean that every person is in touch with this deepest human drive. I thank David Roochnik for helping me articulate this view.

69. Megalopsuchia is not merely one virtue among others: "it seems to be a kind of adornment of the virtues, for it makes them greater" (Nicomachean Ethics 6.3, 1124al-2). Megalopsuchia is a kind of pride in one’s virtues; is involves the evaluative perception of them as fine and beautiful. One might be troubled—as is Moss—by the potential implication of vanity and egoism in holding up the virtue of great-souledness as a model. However, we can offer a response to such a critique. It is true that all of Aristotle’s ethics are grounded in eudaimonism; we cultivate virtue because that is what makes for our own well-being. But this is what it is to flourish as a human being: to value and actualize the objectively good human state. It is also true that he emphasizes that we take pleasure in life, a good thing, being our own; this might seem egoistic (NE 9.9, 1163 b33). Above all, however, it is the intrinsic goodness of life that we appreciate within us. For note that it is not only virtue that we enjoy observing in ourselves; it is also pleasant to simply observe life itself. We take pleasure in both our own ethical realization and in the goodness of life that we have the fortune to embody. Jessica Moss, Aristotle on the Apparent Good, 217-19.

81. Matthew Strohl suggests that pleasure is an aspect of awareness, but not something additional to the activity. It is “not some feeling over and above the pleasant activity. It is rather the character the activity gains in virtue of the fit between the condition of the capacity being activated and the subject that it is active in relation to.” Strohl, “Pleasure as Perfection,” 282-3.

91. Aristotle has told us that life is determinate, and also that pleasures of different kinds impede one another. The pleasure proper to an activity makes the activity more intense and refined, while the pleasure of a foreign activity impairs activity. Broadie thus suggests two possible models: there might be a single vital energy that is channeled in one direction or other, or there might be a clash between two different funds of energy, in which the stronger overpowers the weaker. Broadie, “Philosophical Introduction,” 70-71.

94. In the view of Strohl, therefore, the bloom is not merely the set of features a person has in virtue of being in the prime of life, but rather “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 (Strohl, 282).” See also Gerd Van Riel, “Does a Perfect Activity Necessarily Yield Pleasure? An Evaluation of the Relation between Pleasure and Activity in Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics VII and X,” International Journal of Philosophical Studies Vol 7 (2) 211-224, who speaks of “the effects of the culminating point of life: success, strength, prestige, etc,” 216.

99. This is the interpretation of Sarah Broadie, Francisco Gonzales, David Wolfsdorf, and Peter Hadreas. See Broadie, Nicomachean Ethics, 73 and 138; Francisco Gonzales, “Aristotle on Pleasure and Perfection,” Phronesis, Vol 36/2: 141-159, especially 151-159; David Wolfsdorf, Pleasure in Ancient Greek Philosophy, 134-5: Peter Hadreas, “Pleasure in Nicomachean Ethics 10 4-5,” 160-61.Wolfsdorf, following Broadie, explains that cognitive purity depends on degree of freedom of involvement with matter. This is important if humans are to attain the highest degree of cognition, which is understanding
of abstract, formal entities such as universals, mathematical objects, and God. Sight, hearing, and smell take place at a remove from our bodies, while touch and taste depend on close contact with our bodies; the former senses are thus considered more “pure.” Gonzales also speculates that completeness has to do with the ability to attain full union with the object. God’s pleasure is most complete, because God’s intellect is one with the objects of intellection. Gonzales, 156.

104. Thus the standard of what is genuinely good, appropriate, and pleasing is that which the good person finds pleasing. The things that seem to the good person to be pleasures are genuine pleasures, and the things the good person enjoys are what we account as objectively pleasant for human beings. Hence we use the term pleasure in two ways—to describe normatively what are genuine human pleasures, and to acknowledge the many kinds of activities that people find pleasurable. However, Aristotle insists that the disgraceful “pleasures” are not really pleasures at all, except to those whose natures have been corrupted.

105. We have seen a similar grading of degrees in Aristotle’s discussion of happiness in the first and last books of the Nicomachean Ethics. The account in Book 1 tells us that eudaimonia is the activity of the soul in accordance with excellence, and if there is more than one excellence, in accordance with the best and most complete. Book 10 concludes that happiness in the fullest sense is the best and most complete activity, the activity of contemplation.