

Pleasure and the Nature of Complete Activity

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Abstract: In this paper I will investigate two points: first, how activities that are processes (e.g. building) can be understood as pleasurable, and second, how exactly pleasure completes activity, which will sharpen our understanding of the relationship between processes and pleasures. Aristotle states that pleasures arise from activities that exhibit their form in a moment and are not evolving towards it. I will argue that processes, which Aristotle says cannot be sources of pleasure, can be viewed as pleasurable on account of the fact that their forms have some connection to the end states they strive towards. I will also argue that we can tie the concepts of pleasure and processes closer together by noting how both are like the activity of contemplation.

In X.4 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle uses the intriguing phrase “the nature of complete activity”¹ to describe the kind of activity during which people experience the most pleasure. Pleasure can arise from this kind of activity but is not itself a process, the form of which requires time to manifest itself in full.² When we experience pleasure, the form of pleasure is present in an instant; there is no difference between the beginning and the end of our experience of pleasure, as there is between the beginning and the end of a process. This account of complete activity will bring us a great deal of confusion when we recognize that it renders a process as somehow less of an activity than “complete activities,” and thus not as pleasurable as they. In this paper I will investigate two points: first, how activities such as building can be understood to be pleasurable once we refer to Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* Theta 6. This should assuage some worries we might have about the plausibility of Aristotle’s account, since saying that pleasures are not processes runs contrary to our experience of various processes as pleasurable, such as the processes of building, painting a picture, growing plants, or cooking. This first question leads to a second inquiry, namely, how exactly pleasure completes activity, and how this adds to our understanding of the relationship between processes to pleasures. This will require a discussion of the different ways in which Aristotle uses the term “completion.”

Aristotle offers us a negative and a positive characterization of pleasure. Providing us the negative one first, he says, “... [pleasure] is not a process either, since every process—building, for example—takes time and has an end, and is complete when it has produced what it aims at, it is complete, therefore, in the whole time it takes, or at the final moment”.³ Processes necessarily evolve towards something. The stages in a process differ in form, and their form is only manifested in their final moment when they have reached their end, whereas the entire form of pleasure exists in a moment. When positively characterizing pleasure, Aristotle writes, “but the form of pleasure is complete at any given moment, so it is clear that it is different from a process, and that pleasure is something whole and complete”.⁴ Thus, Aristotle makes a distinction between the form of pleasure and the form of a process, which casts doubt on the possibility of pleasure being a process. Furthermore, at the conclusion of X.4 he notes that pleasures can only arise from activity and are specific to the activities from which they come.⁵ What is crucial about pleasures is that they arise from activities that exhibit their form in a moment, and are not evolving towards it.

Aristotle also provides us with a few words on the nature of complete activity. He offers a contextual definition of complete activities as those in which, “every sense engages in activity in relation to its object, and its activity is complete when it is in good condition

in relation to the noblest of its objects”.⁶ Thus, we see that senses have objects that are suited to them specifically. Seeing is Aristotle’s paradigmatic example of a complete activity, because the form of the activity of seeing is present in its fullness in the moment in which we are seeing something. In other words, unlike building, there is no further end that the activity of seeing is working towards in the moment when I am seeing something, other than my seeing the object I am looking at. We could certainly be looking at something, such as a page, for the purpose of reading the words on it and acquiring some knowledge, but this acquiring of knowledge is distinct from seeing. After describing complete activity, Aristotle articulates the relationship between complete activity and pleasure when he writes, “When both object and subject of perception are at their best, there will always be pleasure, since what will produce it and what will experience it are both present”.⁷ Aristotle does not say how difficult it is for us to get our senses to operate at their best, or how difficult it is to fix our attention upon the noblest of objects, but he later says that it is impossible for us to be engaged in complete activity constantly, indicating that we find ourselves busy with this special kind of activity in an inconsistent way.⁸

The initial question as to how we can make sense of the pleasure we derive from processes is a question about whether we can derive pleasure from activities that are not complete, even if these are not the most

pleasant undertakings. If we look to Aristotle's *Metaphysics* Theta 6, there is an explanation of processes in which a process's end is present in it in a potential way. Aristotle writes:

Actuality means the existence of the thing, not in the way which we express by 'potentially'; we say that potentially, for instance, a statue of Hermes is in the block of wood and the half-line is in the whole, because it might be separated out, and even the man who is not studying we call a man of science, if he is capable of studying.⁹

Here we see that the end towards which something is moving exists in that object as it moves towards that final point. This is an end that exists in an object before the process that is working on this object is brought to completion in its final moment, presumably by the agent carrying out the process. Aristotle says that processes are made of parts that differ in form,¹⁰ but while there is certainly a difference between "placing stones together and fluting a column, and these are both different from the production of the temple",¹¹ these can both be viewed as steps in the more general process of building a temple. The successful production of the temple Aristotle says is complete, but the process of building the temple is not. Thus, in that sense, one could say that these activities share the form of the process of building a temple, in addition to their own respective processes of collecting stones in a single

place and cutting stone. The early stages of a process can be viewed as pale shades of the form of the final product, which would be the production of the temple.

This passage from the *Metaphysics* acknowledges that objects that are being worked on in processes are in states of potentiality with respect to their final state of completion, even though it does not give us the grounds to say that pleasure is a process. It does, however, provide a more optimistic account of how objects that are in states of potentiality can be an image of their completed end. This view from the *Metaphysics* approaches processes from a different angle than the angle from which they are discussed in the *Nicomachean Ethics* by emphasizing not their incompleteness, but rather their proximity to their end. The discussion of potentiality here is not meant to conclude that pleasure is now a process; rather it is only meant to suggest a positive account of how, despite the fact that processes are evolving towards their forms, they could be pleasurable because their forms have some connection to the end states that they strive towards.

One commentator, David Bostock, provides an explanation of how processes can be pleasurable in his paper, "Pleasure and Activity in Aristotle's *Ethics*," that supports the view I have proposed here. In his argument he discusses whether restorative pleasures originate in the body or in the mind, but I will focus on his discussions of the idea of restoration. He uses

Aristotle's discussion of restorative pleasures in Book VII to argue that the pleasure from processes is like the pleasure of replenishment.¹² He notes that Aristotle believes that the pleasures that we derive from restorations are pleasures that arise from the part of us that is not depleted, the part that is not in need of restoration.¹³ Rather, the pleasures arise from the perception of this restored and healthy part of us.¹⁴ If we are hungry, this could simply be the perception of being full, of being hungry no longer. The suggestion I have made is that we can experience pleasure when we are engaged in a process because the process still has a connection to its end, which can be viewed on the restorative pleasure model as the part of us that is not lacking, the part that is completed. There is no other end in mind that our process could have other than one towards which it is working. Stages of potentiality towards an end can be viewed as lacks, such as hunger or thirst. Just as Aristotle thinks that we find incidental pleasure in restorative pleasures from the part of us that is not lacking, so we find pleasure in processes coming from the image of the end that is inherent in the process and that which gives the process its form. A process's motion towards the completion of its form should be viewed on the model of restoration.

Thus, if activities that are processes do contain their end, in a mitigated way, then perhaps we can then say that these activities can actually be pleasurable. Still, one could reasonably object that the half completed

building is very different from the finished building insofar as the latter has attained the end of building, while the other one has not. One is still complete and the other is not. At this point, it is important to note a particular feature of Aristotle's teleology, namely, its objectivity. Aristotle's discussion of pleasure reveals that there are at least three senses of completion with respect to activities. One sense can be easily understood because it is the goal that we consciously aim towards: the end of the activity of building is to have a final build house. The other understanding of completion that Aristotle has provided is that in which the senses are operating well and have taken on the best objects for themselves. However, the next sense of completion is at a higher level, which is more in terms of the activities that Aristotle thinks we are meant to undertake in our lives, whether or not we want to perform them. Aristotle asserts that there is a chief good, and that this will be the most complete, that is "complete without qualification" and is something we pursue for its own sake.¹⁵ Since we aim at ends when we perform actions, we see a hierarchy of ends, and therefore a hierarchy of activities, taking shape based upon those that are chosen for the sake of other things, which are at the lower end, and that which is chosen for the sake of nothing else, at the top. Ends can thus be compared with one another and we can judge the completeness of an end based upon whether or not we choose it for its own sake. Thus, the activities that we undertake, be it

building or seeing—those that are processes and those that are not—fit into a hierarchy of activities and ends. Aristotle says that there is only one activity that we undertake for its own sake, and that is contemplation, “since nothing results from it apart from the fact that one has contemplated.”¹⁶ While he does not provide a simple definition of contemplation, he does say that it is “the life in accordance with intellect.”¹⁷ It is the activity of the exercise of knowledge, rather than the pursuit of it. Thus, if we are going to give a thorough assessment of processes and activities in terms of completeness, we need to broaden our horizons and not only compare them to one another, but also judge them in light of the vast array of activities we can undertake.

Thus far I have suggested that processes can be viewed as aiming at their end, which allows us to view them as a version of complete activity, or at least not completely unrelated to it. This understanding of a process brings the notion of process and complete activity closer together, which in turn can bring the notion of process and pleasure closer together. This can make it possible to see how on Aristotle’s view, processes can give rise to pleasure because they are shades or versions of the end that they are approximating. I want to draw another connection between processes and complete activity in this second part of the paper so as to argue at greater length that the concepts of process and pleasure are not incompatible. I hold that there is a certain closeness between processes and pleasure, and thus processes

and completion, which can be illustrated through their similarities to the activity of contemplation. Processes require some activity of the intellect that is like the activity of contemplation. Pleasure completes activities in a way that makes them like contemplation, namely, by making the end of an activity less of our focus.

For Aristotle, the activity of the gods was contemplation, which he considered to be the greatest activity that we could undertake. Contemplation is the complete activity that combines both the finest operation of the highest element in us, our intellect, with the objects that are “the highest objects of knowledge.”¹⁸ It should be noted that this definition of contemplation lines up quite closely with the definition of complete activity, and thus the most pleasurable activity, provided earlier in X.4. Indeed, Aristotle writes, “... for a human being, therefore, the life in accordance with intellect is best and pleasantest, since this, more than anything else, constitutes humanity.”¹⁹ Verity Harte supports this assessment of contemplation and pleasure in her article, “The Nicomachean Ethics on Pleasure,” where she says that, “For Aristotle ... human experience of the most valuable pleasures – like eudaimonia in general, at least according to NE x 7 – is a respect in which humans exceed their animal nature and share in the life of gods.”²⁰ Since contemplation is the activity that “constitutes” our humanity, it seems right to say that we should be trying to practice as much contemplation as we can. This leads us to regard all of

our other activities in light of this greatest instance of activity.

If we look at the process of building closely, we can notice that it is composed of parts, and that those parts require the operation of the intellect. Building requires that we make designs and blueprints of the thing we want to construct, that we determine and obtain the supplies that we want, and that we choose the best methods of construction. I am not claiming that within each process there is an experience of contemplation, that is, an experience of full intellectual activity. This would be a mistake, since many processes need external goods, while contemplation is self-sufficient. Furthermore, our intellect is likely operating at a higher level with better objects of thought when we are contemplating than when we are building. However, the activity of the intellect is something that is crucial to contemplation and to processes that require activity of the intellect, such as building. The more we uncover Aristotle's picture of contemplation, the more we see that this is the activity of thinking about thinking itself. Building is certainly not a process of thinking about thinking, but there is a similarity between what we do when we undertake processes, and what we do when we contemplate.

Looking now towards pleasure and complete activity, Aristotle does provide us with a description of what it is that pleasures do that makes activities less like processes. He writes, "And since activities are made

more rigorous, longer lasting and better by their proper pleasure, and impaired by foreign pleasures, it is clear that the two kinds of pleasure are very different."²¹ The comments about foreign pleasures aside, pleasure has the ability to put the end that we are working towards out of view, the end that, once reached, will bring the activity to an end. Pleasure sustains an activity and makes us want to continue doing it. It makes us want to rest in the activity rather than hurry to the end, and in that way it hides or submerges the end from view. Similarly, Aristotle writes that contemplation is, "also the most continuous, since we can contemplate more continuously than we can do anything."²² It, like pleasure, has a quality of timelessness about it. Like pleasure, it also puts the end out of view insofar as there is no end that is being worked towards. Aristotle notes that contemplation has to be liked for its own sake, since "nothing results from it apart from the fact that one has contemplated."²³ Thus in a certain way pleasure makes our activity more like the activity of contemplation, because pleasure submerges the end we are pursuing from our view and in doing so, makes it seem as though there is nothing beyond or ulterior to our present activity, which is precisely our experience when engaging in contemplation. In addition, it is a feature of pleasure that is over and above activity insofar as it completes activities that are already technically complete, in the first sense of "complete" in that the senses are functioning well and have the

noblest objects as their own. Aristotle remarks that, “Pleasure completes the activity not as the inherent state does, but as a sort of supervenient end, like the bloom on the faces of young men.”²⁴ Contemplation seems to be the same way with respect to our human activities insofar as it is this activity that is both proper to us as human beings and something that is in a way superior to human life.

An objector might counter that my attempt to derive an explanation of how processes can be pleasurable by resorting to a more abstract hierarchy of activities and our capacity for intellectual activity, would compel me to say that Aristotle would claim that we are always engaged in activity, since we are frequently exercising our intellects in some way. This would be a problem since Aristotle explicitly denies that we are capable of continuous activity.²⁵ However, this objection can be countered when we recognize that another feature of the perfectly complete activity that is contemplation is that it is self-sufficient. Building, although it might be an exercise of our rational capacities, is certainly not a self-sufficient or self-contained activity, since it requires building materials, tools, and space to build, to name a few requirements. Thus, we can be engaged in processes where we exercise our rational capacities, without having then to claim that we are constantly in a state of complete activity.

In X.7 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle offers some peculiar remarks about the activity and the end

that is most proper to us. He says that the greatest life for us is both the exercise of our intellectual capacity, and therefore something that seems very proper to us as human beings, but Aristotle also writes of the life of contemplation that, “such a life is superior to one that is simply human, because someone lives thus, not in so far as he is a human being, but in so far as there is some divine element within him.”²⁶ One might be given to think that the human end would be something particular to human beings, but Aristotle claims otherwise. Our lives have a goal that is beyond the ends that we choose to aim at; even complete activities, such as seeing, are only relative ends in a hierarchy of ends and activities that, as human beings, we are meant to recognize and respect. This claim of Aristotle’s furthers the idea that his teleology is not entirely relativized to human beings’ immediate interests. It includes the idea that we perform activities and aim at ends that are distant from even our own human natures. Although we can say that some ends of our activities pertain more to our immediate aims, and that we often take the ends of those activities to be the satisfaction of those goals we have, such as completing a building or a painting, we can also see how this hierarchy that our activities are a part of gives them a certain value based on what is good for us as human beings, not just on what we want. With this hierarchy, Aristotle can be defended from the charge that all processes are incomplete activities and lack pleasure, since they

require activities that participate in the most complete and pleasurable activity we as human beings could perform, namely, the exercise of our intellects. Their completion and pleasure are not derived from the ends that we take them to have, but from ends that exist at a more abstract level.

Much has been left unsaid in this account of Aristotle's view of pleasure, processes, and complete activity, perhaps most importantly an account of the objectivity of Aristotle's teleology and what we desire as the ends of our actions versus what is good for us as human beings, regardless of our desires. If, through a study of Aristotle's teleology, we can demonstrate that Aristotle thinks that processes have more ends than solely the ends we desire when we engage in those processes, then perhaps we will find a way of viewing processes as more similar to complete activities than we initially thought. Still, I hope to have illustrated how processes and pleasure are not so at odds with one another as it may first seem in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Processes bear the image of their ends in them, putting them in contact with their end and with the completeness necessary for pleasure to arise. Similarly, processes require the operation of the intellect, which is precisely the operation of the most complete and most pleasurable activity we could undertake. Pleasure does not complete activity in one sense in that it does not sharpen the senses to perform to the best of their abilities, or put them in touch with the noblest objects;

yet, it does make activities more like the greater end of our lives, contemplation. Pleasure will follow on the completion in the first sense if the senses of the agent are at their best and are engaged with the best objects for them,²⁷ but given that processes employ our rational faculties, it seems possible that we can also derive some pleasure from processes because in undertaking them we exercise the faculty that is the most suitable for us to exercise.

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