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Aristotle on How Pleasure Perfects Activity (*Nicomachean Ethics* x.5 1175a29-b14): The Optimising-View

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Abstract: This article offers a new interpretation of Aristotle's ambiguous and much-discussed claim that pleasure perfects activity (*NE* x.4). This interpretation provides an alternative to the two main competing readings of this claim in the scholarship: the addition-view, which envisages the perfection conferred by pleasure as an extra perfection beyond the perfection of activity itself; and the identity-view, according to which pleasure just is the perfect activity itself. The proposed interpretation departs from both these views in rejecting their assumption that pleasure cannot perfect the activity itself, and argues that pleasure makes activity perfect by optimising the exercise of one's capacities for that activity. Those who build or play music with pleasure do so better than those who do not delight in these activities. The basis of this interpretation is Aristotle's little-read remarks from the following chapter, i.e. *NE* x.5, about how pleasure "increases" the activity.

1 Introduction: 'Pleasure Perfects Activity' – Context and Controversies

In his theory of pleasure in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle denies Plato's conception of pleasure (*hêdonê*) as a "process" (*kinêsis*) of replenishment, and advances his own original theory according to which pleasure is closely related to "activity" (*energeia*): "the two things appear to be yoked together (*sunexeuchthai*), and not allow themselves to be separated; without activity pleasure does not occur, and every activity is perfected by pleasure (*pasan energeian teleioi hê hêdonê*)" (1175a20–22) [T1].¹ Unfortunately, Aristotle does not provide a clear

¹ Throughout, the translations follow Broadie/Rowe 2002, with minor modifications.

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explanation of what he means by the claim that pleasure “completes” or “perfects” activity (PPA claim). What he offers are only two remarks in which he briefly explains it in negative terms, by pointing out that the way in which pleasure perfects activity is *not* the “way” (*tropos*) in which one’s intrinsic psychological dispositions (e. g. sight) and the object of the activity (e. g. the object seen) perfect it:

[T2] And pleasure is what perfects activity. But pleasure does not perfect it in the same way that the sense-object and the sense do so, when they are good of their kind, any more than health and a doctor are causes in the same way of being healthy. (1174b24–26)

τελειοῖ δὲ τὴν ἐνέργειαν ἡ ἡδονή. οὐ τὸν αὐτὸν δὲ τρόπον ἢ τε ἡδονὴ τελειοῖ καὶ τὸ αἰσθητὸν τε καὶ ἡ αἰσθησις, σπουδαῖα ὄντα, ὥσπερ οὐδ’ ἡ υἱεία καὶ ὁ ἰατρός ὁμοίως αἰτία ἐστὶ τοῦ ὑγιαίνειν.

[T3] Pleasure perfects activity not in the way *the indwelling disposition* perfects it, but as a sort of supervenient end, like the bloom of youth on those in their prime. (1174b32–33)

Or: Pleasure completes an activity not as *the disposition does by being present in something* but as a sort of supervenient end, like the bloom on men in their prime of youth. (Reeve 181)

τελειοῖ δὲ τὴν ἐνέργειαν ἡ ἡδονὴ οὐχ ὥς ἡ ἔξις ἐνυπάρχουσα, ἀλλ’ ὥς ἐπιγινόμενόν τι τέλος, οἷον τοῖς ἀκμαίοις ἡ ὥρα.

As the two above versions indicate, *hê hexis enhuparchousa* in T3 has been construed and translated in two slightly different ways by the commentators. Rowe or Crisp take *enhuparchousa* attributively and translate as an adjective, i. e. “indwelling disposition” or “inherent state”. But other translators, including Irwin and Reeve, construe *enhuparchousa* circumstantially or adverbially, as specifying in what sense, capacity or way the state completes the activity, i. e. as something that is inherent, rather than supervenient.² This is a subtle point, perhaps, but we shall see later on that it is of relevance for the philosophical interpretation of the PPA claim.

There has been vigorous discussion in the scholarship about how these remarks should be interpreted. But what most commentators seem to agree on is that there is a sharp division of labour between one’s indwelling dispositions and the object on the one hand, and pleasure on the other hand, in what each contributes to the activity’s perfection. The widely held view has been that dispositions and object perfect the activity in a primary respect of making it a good of its

² Grammatically, both options are possible, even though the adverbial construal is perhaps the more natural way of reading the phrase. The attributive participle, unlike the adverbial, typically goes with an article; hence we would expect ὥς ἡ ἔξις ἡ ἐνυπάρχουσα for the attributive reading rather than what we have in the text.

kind, while pleasure perfects it in some other, secondary respect: “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” [T4] (Strohl 2011, 276).

Where interpreters diverge is in their views about what this ‘unspecified way’ amounts to. There have been, broadly, two kinds of view, each prioritising one of Aristotle’s two perspectives on the relationship between activity and pleasure: either it is something *added* to perfect activity (even though in practice inseparable from it), or it is this perfect activity itself.³ Let me label these views the ‘addition-view’ and ‘identity-view’, respectively. This duality of interpretive options can be traced back to an important ambivalence in Aristotle’s theory of pleasure. Whereas in *NE* vii he defines pleasure as an “unimpeded activity”, implying that pleasure is identical with activity, in *NE* x he defines pleasure as something which “supervenes” on activity, and is in this sense something added to it.

If pleasure is an extra addition to an already perfect activity, then it itself “yields a *supplementary* perfection, in addition to the perfection that the activity has in itself” (van Riel 2000, 56). The different respects in which the dispositions and pleasure perfect activity correspond to two different *kinds* of perfection (e.g. Price 2017, 191), so that the perfection conferred by pleasure is an extra, secondary kind of perfection, added to the primary perfection that the activity already possesses by virtue of the dispositions and object. So, to cite one recent reading, the presence of pleasure “does not change the character or quality of the seeing in terms of what is seen and what sort of seeing it is”; but it does change “the character and quality of the experience for the seer” [T5] (Harte 2014, 305). It has also been proposed that the additional perfection amounts to an “attitude” to the activity (Wolfsdorf 2013, 132f.), or to how the activity looks to external observers (Price 2017, 192f.).⁴ A characteristic consequence of the distinction between two kinds of perfection is that an absence of pleasure would not diminish an activity’s

³ The prevalent view in recent scholarship has been that these views are ultimately compatible, even complementary (e.g. Pakaluk 2005, 304 f.; Shields 2011; Price 2017, 189 f.). The same cannot be said, however, about the different interpretive strands of the PPA claim outlined below. If there is an interpretation of the PPA claim that combines elements of both these views in a reconciliatory manner, such an interpretation would seem to be *a priori* desirable.

⁴ Referring to the word *telos* in the second of the above passages, a number of interpreters have held that the distinctive kind of perfection added by pleasure is a certain “end-like” character, and that pleasure can be understood as a final cause (Gauthier/Jolif 1958/9; Irwin 2000; Harte 2014).

primary perfection; the activity would still be perfect in the primary sense even in the absence of pleasure.⁵

For the proponents of the identity-view, this consequence is unacceptable, not because, as we might expect in light of the above consensus, pleasure would *make* the activity perfect in the primary respect, like an efficient cause, but because pleasure is a characteristic and formally necessary aspect of this perfection. Your activity cannot be perfect in the absence of pleasure any more than you can be healthy in the absence of health. The most influential version of the identity-view has assimilated pleasure to the formal cause of an activity's perfection, while the dispositions have been taken to stand for the efficient cause of the perfection. Being a formal cause, pleasure does not really add a further, secondary perfection, but is rather the characteristic form of an activity's primary perfection.⁶ Pleasure thus does not perfect an activity by conferring on it an extra perfection, but still perfects it in a different way than the dispositions do.

2 A New Interpretation: the Optimising-View

My objective is to establish an alternative interpretation of the PPA claim that does not coincide with either of these two major strands. I shall call it the “optimising-view”. It agrees with the addition-view, against the identity-view, that pleasure actually does something to an activity and adds somehow to its perfection; but it also agrees with the identity-view, against the addition-view, that there is no need to explain this impact of pleasure by postulating an additional, extra kind of perfection beyond the primary perfection of good seeing or good thinking. What pleasure contributes to an activity is that it increases its primary perfection, and does so mainly by *optimising* the exercise or actualisation of the indwelling dispositions.

Pleasure optimises this exercise in two different but closely related ways: it *improves* the level and quality of the exercise, and it also *strengthens* it in terms of augmenting activity's intensity and duration. The optimising-view thus rejects the widely held view that pleasure, whatever it does, does not contribute or help to bring about an activity's own perfection (see T4), and cannot play a role akin

⁵ van Riel 2000, 58; Harte 2014, 306; Aufderheide 2016, 297, 301.

⁶ This interpretation goes back to Aquinas, and has been re-stated by Gosling/Taylor 1982, 209–213; 241–250 (see also Bostock 2000). More recently, another version of the identity-view was proposed, according to which pleasure is a certain distinctive character of the activity, namely a fit between capacities and object (Strohl 2011).

to efficient causality.⁷ What the optimising-view accepts is that pleasure may also play the role of formal and final cause; but it holds that the perfecting role of pleasure need not be limited to the roles ascribed to it by the addition-view and identity-view.

The main evidence for this interpretation is a longer passage from the beginning of the next chapter, i. e. *NE* x.5, in which Aristotle mentions the idea of “perfection” again and suggests that pleasure “increases” (*sunauxêtai*) the activity on which it supervenes. Unlike the above remarks from x.4, this passage has received little attention. This is perhaps because Aristotle’s official objective here is not to explain or supplement the PPA claim from the previous chapter, but to defend his claim that pleasures “differ by kind”. In contrast to the technical account from x.4, he uses rather casual language and draws on simple, common-sense observations about the influence of pleasure on one’s activity. Given the lack of conclusive evidence about the PPA claim in *NE* x.4 itself, I suggest that this account deserves closer attention than it has generally received. What exactly does Aristotle mean by “perfecting by increasing”, and how does it bear on his account from the preceding chapter?

It is possible that he here provides us with a free-floating account of what pleasure does to an activity that is more or less independent from the official account from *NE* x.4. But it is also possible, as has been suggested by J. A. Stewart, that the term “*sunauxousa* seems to express, more distinctly than the term *teleiousa*, what *hêdonê* does [to an activity]” (Stewart 1892, 422–433). If it is the case that *sunauxêsis* is “an increase in perfection” (Broadie 1991, 337), then indeed we might expect that the idea of “perfecting by increasing” could add, ex post, a more positive characterisation of how pleasure perfects activity, and shed light on Aristotle’s difficult remarks from the preceding chapter. The latter possibility is clearly more attractive because it would make the PPA claim less ambiguous and enigmatic.

I shall draw on Stewart’s suggestion and propose that *sunauxêsis* is a process of optimising⁸ that characterizes a specific way of contributing to an activity’s

⁷ Some interpreters have made suggestions gesturing in this direction (Broadie 1991, 336; Shields 2011), but have never systematically pursued them.

⁸ *Sunauxêsis* specifies in what way pleasure “optimises” activity. While I use “increasing” and “optimising” as identical in terms of content, the word “optimising”, more than Aristotle’s “increasing”, has connotations that are favourable for defending the claim that “increasing” is a kind of “perfecting”. Firstly, it connotes that an activity must already be good of its kind if it can be pleasant, and thus pleasure can only make it even better. Secondly, it draws attention to the fact that, as we shall see, the increase is not only a quantitative change, but also a qualitative one, which again makes the link between increasing and perfecting more plausible.

perfection (*teleiôsis*). This process of optimising is distinctive of pleasure, in contrast to indwelling dispositions and an object, which do not perfect activity by “increasing” it, but in some other way. *Teleiôsis* can thus be understood as a generic term, and *sunauxêsis* is one peculiar kind of *teleiôsis* that characterizes how activity is perfected by pleasure, rather than by an object or dispositions. My basic objective is to establish that the optimising-view is both a possible and plausible interpretation of the PPA claim. In the concluding section, I shall also briefly suggest the grounds for thinking that it is, in addition, superior to the two established interpretations.

The remainder of this article has the following structure. In Section 3, I make some preliminary remarks about the crucial word *sunauxein* as well as about the relationship between *NE* x.4 and *NE* x.5. Sections 4 and 5 offer a close reading of the relevant passages from *NE* x.5 that brings out the two aspects of optimising: improving and strengthening, respectively. Finally, in Section 6, I identify and respond to two possible objections one might raise against the optimising-view.

3 Preliminary Remarks on *sunauxêsis* (*NE* x.5) and its Relevance for the PPA Claim (*NE* x.4)

To characterise the positive effect that pleasure has on an activity in *NE* x.5, Aristotle uses the verb *sunauxein*. In the context of Aristotle’s theory of pleasure, the term *sunauxêsis* has been translated variously as “increasing”, “augmenting” or “enhancing”. In the *Metaphysics*, *auxêsis* is defined as a specific kind of “change” (*metabolê*), namely quantitative change (*kata to poson*).⁹ Most occurrences of this word in the Aristotelian corpus are in the physical and biological works, where it means “growth”, sometimes in contrast to “qualitative change” (*alloiôsis*) or “coming-to-being” (*genêsis*).¹⁰ A contrast between *auxêsis* and *genêsis* is also implied in Aristotle’s account of habituation in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where Aristotle distinguishes between the *genêsis* of virtues and their subsequent *auxêsis*.¹¹ This fits the relationship between an activity and its pleasure well: pleasure by itself cannot bring the activity into being, but it can augment it once the activity is already happening.

⁹ *Met.* 1069b11; 1088a31. See also *De gen. et cor.* 320a14; *Phys.* 211a15.

¹⁰ E. g. *Phys.* 223b20, 241a33; *De gen. an.* 771a28, 775b20.

¹¹ *NE* ii.1 1103a 16; ii.2 1104a27; see also *EE* 1220a33.

The implication of the prefix *sun-* is twofold. One is that one thing is being increased together or along with something else being increased.¹² In case of pleasure increasing activity, this could mean that pleasure increases the activity along with increasing itself, or as it itself is being increased.¹³ But it could also mean that, when pleasure is increasing activity, there is something else with which pleasure cooperates in so doing, just as nature cooperates with male fish in increasing the quantity of their milt (*De gen. an.* 757a27). There are two possibilities for what pleasure could cooperate with in increasing activity. It could cooperate with the indwelling dispositions and the object; but it could also cooperate with the activity itself, in the sense that pleasure and activity mutually reinforce each other: the stronger the pleasure, the more it increases this activity; but this increase in activity, in turn, further increases the pleasure, which in turn again further increases the activity. I favour this latter possibility for two reasons: firstly, it can accommodate the first implication of “increasing together with”; secondly, as I shall argue below, dispositions and the object, strictly speaking, do not “increase” the activity and hence cannot cooperate with pleasure in doing so.

There are two possible worries about Broadie’s suggestion that *sunauxêsis* can be understood as an “increase in perfection”. One worry rests on an intuition that has strongly informed both the addition-view and the identity-view. This intuition is that perfection as such seems to be, by definition, not subject to gradation or further increase. This is at least suggested by some instances of the use of *teleios*, such as the “complete” syllogism, that do not allow for degrees.¹⁴ And yet Broadie and other commentators have presupposed, on good grounds, that the process of becoming perfect can be conceptualized in terms of a degree-by-degree increase akin to growth.¹⁵ On several occasions in his works Aristotle uses the word *teleios* in comparative and superlative forms.¹⁶ In the first book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he talks about the good of the city as the “more perfect” thing than the good of an individual (1094b8); the chief good, or *eudaimonia*, must be something *teleion*, “and if there are more such things than one, the *teleiotion* of these” (1077a29–30); and this is the activity in accordance with the “most perfect” (*teleiotion*) excellence (1098a18). Whatever exactly are the attributes in

¹² See *Phys.* 212b24.

¹³ See Reeve 2014, 344, for this suggestion.

¹⁴ E. g. *An. pr.* 24a13, 25b34.

¹⁵ See Strohl 2011, 267 f.; Price 2017, 189.

¹⁶ *De gen. an.* 733b1, 763b21; *Phys.* 813b33; *Met.* 1092a13.

virtue of which something is said to be more or less perfect,¹⁷ these occurrences imply that something may be perfect without necessarily being most perfect, and hence that it is in principle possible for something which is already perfect to further increase its perfection.

The second worry is that *auxêsis* and *teleiôsis* refer to different kinds of development: the latter is typically an increase in quantity or size, whereas the latter is an increase in quality or goodness. But *auxêsis* does not have to be a purely quantitative increase in bulk or size, as implied by the fact that Aristotle talks about *auxêsis* of virtue, which is rather suggestive of a process of strengthening and acquiring firmness and stability.¹⁸ Another consideration in favour of this view is that the attributes characteristically conferred on activity by the process of increasing, namely being “exact”, “longer-lasting” and “better” (x.5 1175b13–15), are clearly qualitative attributes that Aristotle elsewhere associates with the notion of perfection.¹⁹ Thus, the fact that *auxêsis* typically has connotations of quantitative increase does not mean that it cannot also refer to an increase in quality; rather, these connotations suggest that an increase in quantity can result in, or be coextensive with, an increase in quality (as I shall suggest in Section 5).

The fact that *sunauxêsis* confers on activity the attributes associated with “perfection” supports our hypothesis that the discussion of *sunauxêsis* advances the notion of perfection from x.4 and could shed light on the PPA claim. There are further considerations in favour of the continuity or progression between x.4 and x.5. *NE* x.5 begins (1175a23) but also ends (1176a27) with the “perfection” motif. This indicates that, even though x.5 has a different explanandum than x.4, the idea that pleasure perfects activity continues to be an important theme throughout the chapter. At v.5 (1175a30), Aristotle moves easily, within one sentence, from saying that pleasure “perfects” activity to saying that it “increases” it, without indicating any significant shift in meaning. This gives the impression that they are understood in broadly synonymous terms.²⁰ It is true that, strictly considered,

17 Aristotle’s discussion in *NE* i implies that there are two criteria for perfection: finality, so that the thing that is most perfect is always an end and never instrumental to anything else; and non-improvability, where the thing which is (most) perfect cannot be made any better by adding anything to it. Both these criteria might be at work when assessing the perfection of an activity, but Aristotle is not clear about this.

18 In *NE* ii.4, one of the three characteristic conditions of acting virtuously is doing virtuous actions from a “firm and unchanging state” (*NE* 1105a34).

19 The perfect, indeed the most perfect activity, is contemplation, and one reason for this is that it is the “most continuous” activity (*NE* 1177a22). Being long-lasting is one of several attributes that makes the friendship between virtuous persons “perfect” (*NE* 1156b34).

20 Similarly in *De gen. an.* 752b18, he also uses the two words side by side in a broadly synonymous sense.

the subsequent discussion of *sunauxêsis* (in texts T7 and T8 below) is supposed to illustrate the idea that pleasures are “closely bound up” (*sunôikeiôsthai*) with their activities, rather than the notion of perfection mentioned in the same sentence. At the same time, it is plausible that the notion of “being closely bound up” further articulates the idea, mentioned at the end of x.4, that pleasures and activities are “yoked together” (*sunexeuchthai*) (T1) – and here the idea of activity being perfected by pleasure is mentioned explicitly as the characteristic feature of this close interconnection. So, just as *sunôikeiôsthai* specifies the vaguer *sunexeuchthai*, so *sunauxêsis* specifies the vaguer *teleiôsis*.

4 Increasing by Improving

At the beginning of *NE* x.5, Aristotle first states in general terms the claim he is going to argue for. If pleasure perfects activity, then, since activities differ in kind (*tôi eidēi diapherein*), pleasures must differ in kind as well:

[T6] This is also, it seems, why pleasures differ in kind. For we think that where things differ in kind, what perfects them is different (this is evidently the case with both natural and artificial objects: animals and trees, a picture, a statue, a house, a piece of furniture), and similarly with activities too: if they differ in kind, we think of what perfects them as differing in kind. But the activities of thought differ in kind from those involving the senses, and they themselves from each other; so then do the pleasures that perfect them. (*NE* x.5; 1175a22–28)

The first argument he gives to support this claim is that each activity is “increased” by its own specific pleasure. To increase an activity means, it turns out, to improve it:

[T7] And therefore pleasures also seem to differ by kind [...] This will be apparent also from the closeness with which each of the pleasures is bound up with the activity it perfects. For the activity’s own pleasure contributes to increasing the activity. It is those who are active and take pleasure in it that are more discriminating and precise in relation to a given subject, e.g. those who delight in geometry are the ones that become experts in geometry, and are always more able to see things, and similarly the lover of music, or of building, or whatever it may be – each gets better at his own task through taking pleasure in it. (*NE* x.5; 1175a22–35)

ὅθεν δοκοῦσι καὶ τῷ εἶδει διαφέρειν. ... φανερὴ δ’ ἂν τοῦτο καὶ ἐκ τοῦ συνωκειῶσθαι τῶν ἡδονῶν ἐκάστην τῇ ἐνεργείᾳ ἣν τελειοῖ. συναύξει γὰρ τὴν ἐνέργειαν ἡ οἰκεία ἡδονή. μάλλον γὰρ ἕκαστα κρίνουσι καὶ ἐξακριβοῦσιν οἱ μεθ’ ἡδονῆς ἐνεργοῦντες, οἷον γεωμετρικοὶ γίνονται οἱ χαίροντες τῷ γεωμετερεῖν, καὶ κατανοοῦσιν ἕκαστα μάλλον, ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ οἱ φιλόμουσοι καὶ φιλοκοδόμοι καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἕκαστοι ἐπιδιδόασιν εἰς τὸ οἰκεῖον ἔργον χαίροντες αὐτῷ.

This passage makes it clear that the aspect of activity that pleasure is supposed to increase is its primary, objective quality, rather than an internal feeling or attitude of the agent. This is confirmed by repeated references to sharpness and the enhanced apprehension of one's perceptual and intellectual activities. It is not, or not only, "the character and quality of the experience for the seer" (T5 above), or some other additional features besides the primary perfection of activity, such as its look or our attitude to it, but (also) "the character or quality of the seeing" itself. This is confirmed a few lines later when Aristotle says that "pleasure makes activities sharp, longer-lasting and better" [T8] (*NE* x.5 1175b13–15). The increased duration has more properly to do with what I shall discuss below as increasing in terms of strengthening, or quantitative increase; but the increase in sharpness and goodness refers to the increase in quality.

Aristotle does not state explicitly how precisely pleasure improves the activity. There are two possibilities: pleasure can improve activity by improving the corresponding dispositions themselves; or it can improve the activity by enhancing the way that the dispositions are actualised. It is the latter option that is more salient in the context of *NE* x.5, and it is also more directly conducive to establishing the optimising-view. But T7 also suggests that pleasure improves the dispositions themselves, and not only via enhancing their actualisation. I shall address this suggestion briefly, and then turn to improving the activity via enhancing the actualisation.

The idea that pleasure improves the activities by improving the corresponding dispositions is indicated by Aristotle's observation that those who are lovers of certain activities, i.e. who habitually exercise these activities with pleasure, are the ones who "become experts" in these activities. This does not have to mean that being a lover of F-ing is the necessary condition of becoming an expert in F-ing. We can plausibly think of a craftsman who is an expert in his field without necessarily enjoying his job.²¹ At the same time, being a lover of F-ing typically facilitates the process of becoming an expert in F-ing; lovers of F-ing are by default in a more favourable position to become experts in F-ing than non-lovers.²²

²¹ See Aufderheide 2016, 297.

²² One might wonder whether the optimising-view also applies to activities such as seeing, which are not associated with any expertise. This question can be answered in two steps. Firstly, there is a scope for discussion as to whether there are after all any cognitive activities that are entirely dissociated from expertise of some sort. Even seeing, or at least some kinds of seeing that are adjacent to an expertise (e.g. the seeing of an art connoisseur), are arguably subject to learning. Secondly, even if we grant that there are expertise-unrelated cognitive activities that typically cannot be optimised in the qualitative sense, it is still possible that pleasure optimises them in the quantitative sense (see Section 5 below).

A plausible way to explain this effect of pleasure is that pleasure in F-ing motivates the lovers of this activity to exercise it more often. As Aristotle puts it elsewhere, one becomes expert in an activity by repeatedly performing it: “People become builders by building, and cithara players by playing the cithara” [T9] (*NE* ii.1; 1103a31). And he also says that those who are fond of an activity are likely to do it more often.²³ It follows, then, that pleasure can improve the dispositions for F-ing by motivating us to actualise them more frequently.

This explanation raises the question of whether non-expert learners are, after all, in a position to enjoy an activity which they have not yet fully mastered. For Aristotle argues in x.4 (*NE* 1174b18–20) that such an activity is “most pleasant”, “best” and “most perfect” that is exercised by “those who are in the best condition” (*tou arista diakeimenou*). One might worry, for this reason, that pleasure is the exclusive preserve of those who have become fully accomplished in the given domain, and hence it is not yet accessible to learners. But this does not necessarily follow. In order for an activity to be pleasant, one needs to be in a “good condition” (*eu diakeimenos*; 1174b15), but not necessarily in the best one; the best condition is required only if the activity is to be “most pleasant”.²⁴ As long as one’s dispositions are somewhat good, there will be some pleasure in the activity, and this pleasure will make the activity, in turn, even better. This gradual increase can be conceived as a spiral movement: If I enjoy F-ing, say, with a score of 6/10, then I attend better to the activity and perform it better; but this increase makes it more enjoyable, say to a score of 7/10; and so forth.

The full development of one’s dispositions via repeated and frequent exercise is a long-term process. But T7 also talks about a short-term or even immediate effect that pleasure has on the quality of one’s activity. Those who enjoy doing geometry are bound to become expert geometricians not only because they do geometry more often, but also because they do it better on each and every occasion they do it: this effect seems to take place via optimising the way that one’s dispositions are actualised, and does not have so much to do with the motivation to embark on an activity, but with a peculiar cognitive surge elicited by pleas-

²³ “Living is a sort of activity, each person being active in relation to those objects, and with those faculties, to which he also feels the greatest attachment: the musical person, e.g., with hearing in relation to melodies, the lover of understanding with thought in relation to objects of reflection, and so on in the case of every other type too” (*NE* x.4; 1175a12–15). See also *NE* x.5 1175b17–20 for the converse case in which pain deters one from exercising the dispositions.

²⁴ The idea that activity can be pleasant to a greater or lesser degree is consistent with the view that pleasure as such comes in degrees, implied by the superlative “most pleasant”, and the claim that pleasure is essentially “indeterminate” (*aoristē*), and hence comes in degrees, is expressed in *NE* x.3 1173a15–16.

ure in an activity while exercising it. A remark from x.4 indicates that this surge is owed to an invigorating effect that pleasure has on the mind. We enjoy some things because they are new to us, and then our mind (*dianoia*) is stimulated (*parakeklêtai*) by this pleasure and stretched to a full exertion (*diatetamenôs*) (*NE* x.4, 1175a5–6). Pleasure will presumably have a similar effect on the mind also when elicited by one's dispositional love of certain activities, i. e. in cases when the activities are already familiar to us. The word *epididoasin* (1175a35), which describes the improvement of those who do their activities with pleasure, has been mostly translated in this context in the sense of “making progress”, but the basic meaning of the word, i. e. to “give besides” or “give in addition to”, may also be relevant. Pleasure goes hand in hand with a dedication to the activity, so that the lovers dedicate more of their psychological resources to the activity than the non-lovers, which results in an improved performance.

We can glean a more articulate psychological explanation of the mechanism behind this cognitive surge from the passage that immediately follows:

[T10] But this will be still more evident from the way activities are impeded by the pleasures from different ones. Lovers of pipe-music are incapable of paying attention to a discussion if they happen to hear someone playing the pipes, because they take more pleasure in the pipe-playing than in their present activity. This happens in a similar way in other cases too, when someone is simultaneously involved in two activities; for the more pleasant one pushes the other out of the way, and the more so if the difference in pleasure is large, to the point where the other activity ceases altogether. Hence the fact that when we are deriving intense enjoyment from whatever it may be we are hardly inclined to do something else, and if we do turn to other things, it is when we are only mildly engaged, as e. g. those who eat titbits in the theatre do it most when the actors are no good. (x.5 1175b2–14)

ἐτι δὲ μᾶλλον τοῦτ' ἂν φανείη ἐκ τοῦ τὰς ἀφ' ἑτέρων ἡδονὰς ἐμποδίου τὰς ἐνεργείαις εἶναι. οἱ γὰρ φίλαυλοι ἀδυνατοῦσι τοῖς λόγοις προσέχειν, ἐὰν κατακούσωσιν αὐλοῦντος, μᾶλλον χαίροντες αὐλητικῇ τῆς παρούσης ἐνεργείας: ἢ κατὰ τὴν αὐλητικὴν οὖν ἡδονὴν τὴν περὶ τὸν λόγον ἐνέργειαν φθείρει. ὁμοίως δὲ τοῦτο καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν ἄλλων συμβαίνει, ὅταν ἅμα περὶ δύο ἐνεργῇ: ἢ γὰρ ἡδίω τὴν ἑτέραν ἐκκρούει, κἂν πολὺ διαφέρῃ κατὰ τὴν ἡδονήν, μᾶλλον, ὥστε μὴδ' ἐνεργεῖν κατὰ τὴν ἑτέραν. διὸ χαίροντες ὅψοιεν σφόδρα οὐ πάνυ δρῶμεν ἕτερον, καὶ ἄλλα ποιοῦμεν ἄλλοις ἡρέμα ἀρεσκόμενοι, οἷον καὶ ἐν τοῖς θεάτροις οἱ τραγηματοῖζοντες, ὅταν φαῦλοι οἱ ἀγωνιζόμενοι ᾧσι, τότε μάλιστα αὐτὸ δρῶσιν.

The more intense the pleasure, the more likely it is that we will keep on engaging in the corresponding activity, and the less susceptible this activity is to being undermined by a pleasure belonging to another activity. The crucial role in explaining this relation is played by the notion of “paying attention” (*prosechein*). The attention is what an activity needs in order to flourish: to be active in a certain domain, one needs to pay attention to that activity. It is arguably a single-minded, undisturbed focus on a particular activity that enables, and indeed promotes, the fullest possible actualisation of the corresponding cognitive capacities. Pleasure

makes us fully dedicated and immersed in a single activity, and thus silences, as it were, all possible external distractions, and channels our entire attention into a single activity. Insofar as paying attention to an activity is the prerequisite for doing it well, by controlling attention pleasure commands all the relevant cognitive resources at hand and concentrates them into a single preoccupation.

5 Increasing by Strengthening

It has been noted by Sarah Broadie that in moving from T7 to T10 Aristotle shifts to a somewhat different, and perhaps broader, view of how pleasure increases its activity (or undermines it, if it is weak): pleasure increases activity “not only in its quality but in its being” (Broadie 1991, 337). A different way to construe this contrast, inspired by the above remarks about the use of *auxêsis* in the Aristotelian corpus, would be in terms of qualitative versus quantitative increase: pleasure not only improves the activity but augments it, so that there is *more* of the activity. Both essential and quantitative increase seem to have some support in the text, but I prefer to describe the increase in question in terms of a less metaphysically loaded notion of increase in strength, which, after all, could encompass both the essential and the quantitative increase. Besides making it better, pleasure also makes its corresponding activity stronger.

The vocabulary of strength and weakness is strongly suggested by T10, where the relationship between simultaneously experienced pleasures, along with their corresponding activities, is portrayed in terms of an existential power struggle. Each pleasure increases, i. e. strengthens, its own activity at the expense of another simultaneously experienced pleasure and the activity on which it supervenes. It is the role of “attending” (*prosechein*), again, that is crucial in the process of strengthening. Since the volume of our overall attention is, presumably, limited, a portion of attention flows into an activity always at the expense of another activity. Hence, once the pipe-lover’s attention is caught by the pipe, the activity of listening to the pipe destroys (*phtheirei*) the activity of listening to the conversation because it deprives it of attention. If a pleasure in an activity is intense, then it channels one’s entire attention into this single activity and starves out other competing activities.

This account implies that pleasure strengthens activity in two slightly different but complementary respects. It makes it immune to external distractions, so that the activity is not easily abandoned for the sake of other activities. But it also protects the activity from being discontinued due to the fatigue of the agent. Aristotle notes that it is difficult for humans to be “continuously” (*sunechôs*)

active, since they are susceptible to fatigue, but pleasure seems to counteract this susceptibility by its invigorating effect on the mind (x.4, 1175a5–6).²⁵ Both these aspects of strengthening confer on an activity a certain robustness that results in the activity being more long-lasting (*chronios*).

The strengthening aspect of increasing, too, seems to be principally applicable in the practical realm of virtue-related activities. Those who strongly enjoy virtuous activities, in contrast to those who enjoy them only mildly or not at all, are not susceptible to distractions by possibilities for other, non-virtuous activities, and are not subject to motivational conflict. Those who enjoy excessive bodily pleasures do so only because they are incapable of enjoying other kinds of pleasures (vii.14, 1154b2–4). Aristotle's account in *NE* xi.8 implies that the good man, as the true self-lover, will gladly give up pursuit of values that might conflict with virtuous action because he feels "intense pleasure" in acting virtuously (1169a22–23). The reason why self-controlled and incontinent persons are susceptible to motivational conflict is not only that their bad appetites are too strong, but also that an important element of their rational motivation, namely the pleasure in virtuous action, is absent or too weak. Their virtuous activities do not have the same protection that the activities of the virtuous person have.²⁶

An important advantage of describing the latter aspect of increasing in terms of strengthening is that it bears out its close interrelation to the increase in terms of improving. It is plausible to say that an activity becomes better as it becomes stronger. That improving and strengthening go hand in hand is implied by Aristotle's remark that pleasure makes activity "longer-lasting *and* better" (*NE* x.5; 1175b14–15). This interconnection is most clearly captured by pleasure's capacity to direct attention. It is the concentration of one's attention into a single activity that makes this activity stronger, i. e. more enduring and less easily swayed by competing preoccupations. But this is precisely how the activity also becomes better, since in making one's attention more focused the pleasure optimises the actualisation of the relevant cognitive dispositions. In turn, as the activity improves, it becomes even more pleasant, and in so doing it is bound to grow even more in its intensity and duration.

²⁵ The idea that the best activity is the most continuous one, and that continuity is owed to pleasure, which "increases" this activity (*NE* 1177a23–24), again appears later in Aristotle's discussion of contemplative activity in *NE* x.7.

²⁶ That the pleasure in virtuous action belongs to the rational part of the soul has been argued by Coope 2012. She also made a plausible suggestion that pleasure in virtuous action enhances the rational motivation by helping to "persuade" the non-rational part of the soul to follow the commands of reason (cf. Coope 2012, 160 f.).

6 Two Objections Against the Optimising-View

The aim of this intervention has been to show that there is room for an interpretation of the PPA claim that provides an alternative to the two main existing approaches. On this view, pleasure perfects activity in a stronger sense than has generally been allowed in the scholarship. Rather than being merely a formal cause of an activity's objective perfection, or an extra perfection that is located in the subject of the activity or is defined by reference to it, pleasure directly contributes to an activity's objective perfection by optimising the exercise of indwelling dispositions. This section aims at bolstering the plausibility and possibility of this interpretation by identifying and forestalling two objections that could be raised against it.

6.1 The First Objection: *Pleasure must perfect an Activity in a Different way than the Dispositions do*

The first objection is that the optimising-view fails to make sense of T2 and T3, and indeed renders the distinction between the two ways of perfecting superfluous. For if pleasure makes us see better or build better, in the sense of making the activity good of its kind, then the worry is that its way of perfecting activity cannot be altogether different from the way the indwelling dispositions (e.g. good sight or good building skills) perfect it.

Commentators have widely inferred, albeit often tacitly, from Aristotle's expressions that pleasure perfects activity "not in the same way" (*ou auton ton tropou*) or "not as" (*ou hōs*) one's indwelling dispositions, that this rules out the possibility that pleasure could make us see better, think better etc. But the validity of this inference hinges on how we understand the force of these expressions. The inference is valid only when we think that "not as" refers to certain attributes of the activity in virtue of which this activity is perfect. If the distinctive way in which our dispositions perfect activity is indeed defined by reference to some corresponding attributes of this activity, e.g. good seeing or good building, then it follows that the distinctive way in which pleasure perfects activity cannot be defined with reference to these same attributes, because it would then not be distinctive; and in that case pleasure indeed cannot make us see better or think better.

But the difference between how pleasure and disposition perfects an activity does not have to be defined by the attributes of perfection they confer. It may well be defined by the characteristic way that these attributes are conferred, so that the attributes themselves might easily be identical in each case. There are

two options for spelling out this characteristic *tropos*. One would be the specific *modus operandi* of pleasure, in contrast to that of indwelling dispositions. The special *modus operandi* in which pleasure increases an activity's perfection is, as we know, directing attention, enhancing concentration and strengthening motivation. Even though pleasure perfects activity *through* the capacities, by optimising their exercise, it is pleasure – rather than objects or dispositions – that confers on the activity a portion of primary perfection and does it in a special, distinctive way.

The second option is to understand the difference in *tropoi* in terms of the contrast between the ontological status of dispositions and pleasure: whereas dispositions are indwelling or inherent to the activity, pleasure supervenes on it. This interpretation is indicated when we follow the second of the two available construals of *hê hexis enhuparchousa* in T3. What Aristotle wants to say, on this reading, is merely that pleasure perfects activity in the capacity of a supervenient, rather than inherent, entity. It already presupposes that the requisite dispositions are in place, and cannot perfect the activity unless these dispositions already have some baseline level of perfection. The health-pleasure parallel in T2 and the bloom of youth image in T3 can be read in this vein. They do not illustrate *what* kind of perfection pleasure confers on activity, but *how*, or in what capacity, it does it. Both health and the bloom of youth are examples of supervenience. Whereas the doctor brings about the state of being healthy *qua* cause that is independent and prior to the state of being healthy, one's health cannot exist independently of one's actually being healthy. Similarly, the bloom of youth cannot exist independently of the condition of being in one's prime.

Along with the contrast between inherence and supervenience, T3 also implies a contrast between dispositions and end. Pleasure perfects activity not only *qua* any supervenient entity, but, more specifically, *qua* supervenient end. Pleasure does not merely help the corresponding activity to be end-like, but is itself an end of a certain kind; moreover, pleasure seems to perfect the activity through the capacity of its own end-like quality. The optimising-view can accommodate this connection. A plausible way to understand the claim that pleasure is a *telos* is that pleasure is something for the sake of which we do other things (e. g. NE x.2, 1172b20–23). As such, pleasure naturally enhances our motivation to exercise activities that we find pleasant, which is the effect that has been associated with how pleasure improves and strengthens activity. There is thus a non-arbitrary connection between pleasure itself being an end and its optimising effect on our activities.

6.2 The Second Objection: the Optimising-View Conflicts with the Supervenient Status of Pleasure

The second objection is that the optimising-view ascribes to pleasure a role of efficient cause, which seems to be at odds with its metaphysical status of something that “supervenes” on activity. The word *epignesthai* marks causal and existential dependence: to say that A *epignetai* on B amounts to saying that A emerges from B, and, moreover, can exist only insofar as B exists as well.²⁷ Now, the worry is, as Christopher Shields put it, that “it is reasonable to assume that if Ψ supervenes on Φ , then A’s being Ψ cannot bring about B’s being Φ , at least not in the manner of an independently existing efficient cause” (Shields 2011, 206). This is, presumably, why efficient causality has not been considered by the majority of interpreters as an attractive option for specifying the impact of pleasure on activity.

But in fact, as has been argued convincingly by Shields 2011, 202–209, himself, there is no reason why pleasure could not have this kind of effect on the activity on which it supervenes. The fact that pleasure cannot do it *qua* an independently existing cause, such as the capacities in the subject, does not mean that it cannot impact, in the manner of an efficient cause, upon the activity on which it supervenes. Shields himself suggests a metaphor of a choir singing in a church to illustrate this possibility. The role of pleasure is akin to that of the overtones of a sound produced by a choir in a reverberative church: the overtones supervene on the sound produced by the choir, but they do add an extra quality to that sound. If this image adequately captures the metaphysical relationship between an activity and the pleasure we take in it, then it supports the optimising-view in a twofold sense. Firstly, just as the overtones contribute directly to the quality of a sound, instead of conferring an extra kind of perfection, e.g., how it is experienced by the audience, so does pleasure contribute directly to the quality of an activity, instead of conferring an extra perfection such as an attitude to the activity or its look. Secondly, just as it is intelligible to say that overtones perfect the sound in a different way than the voices of singers do, even though it does so by having a peculiar effect on the sound produced by these voices, so it is intelligible to say that pleasure perfects an activity in a different way than the dispositions, even though it can do so only by having an effect on the exercise of these dispositions.

²⁷ For references to other occurrences of this term in Aristotle’s works and its implications for his theory of pleasure, see in particular Shields 2011 and Price 2017.

If we think of the contribution of the indwelling dispositions and the object of an activity in terms of efficient causality, then pleasure plays a role of another, auxiliary efficient cause. But this interpretation does not prevent pleasure from also serving as the formal or final cause. In *Physics* ii.7, Aristotle argues that the final, formal and efficient causes may be coextensive (*erchetai eis hen*); in fact, what he says is that they are “often” (*pollakis*) co-extensive (*Phys.* 198a25). So one’s default perspective, if one thinks that pleasure plays the role of a final or formal cause, should be to actively look for the possibility that it might also be akin to an efficient cause. The optimising-view responds to this call.

7 Concluding Remarks

To conclude, I would like to suggest that the optimising-view is not only a possible interpretation of the PPA claim, but might also be superior to the competing interpretations. It has at least three advantages. Firstly, it gives the PPA claim more substance and common-sense plausibility than other interpretations. Pleasure is not a mere bonus or embellishment, but actually helps us to do more of what we are doing and do it better. This is consistent not only with everyday experience, but also with the important role in motivating action that Aristotle consistently attributes to pleasure in ethics and elsewhere.

Secondly, the optimising-view accommodates the strengths of both competing views while avoiding their pitfalls. The strength of the addition-view is that it takes seriously the textual evidence indicating that pleasure confers on an activity an extra substantive perfection that cannot be reduced to a purely formal feature of that activity; the pitfall of the identity-view is that it has to sideline or tweak this evidence. The pitfall of the addition-view is that it must postulate a speculative hypothesis about what this perfection amounts to; not having to do so is a strength of the identity-view. The advantage is that the optimising-view can satisfy the evidence in favour of a substantive perfection without having to resort to such speculations.

Thirdly, the optimising-view can satisfy two different definitions of pleasure found in Aristotle’s theory: pleasure as identical with activity, and pleasure as something added to (or supervening on) activity. To the extent that the perfection conferred by pleasure is identical with the primary perfection of the activity, and not something added to it, it reflects the idea that pleasure is identical with the corresponding activity. The fact that the activity would lack a portion of its primary perfection in the absence of pleasure reflects the

view that pleasure, while dependent on the activity, is something different from it.²⁸

An. pr.	<i>Prior Analytics</i>
De gen. an.	<i>On the Generation of Animals</i>
De gen. et. cor.	<i>On Coming to Be and Passing Away</i>
EE	<i>Eudemian Ethics</i>
Met	<i>Metaphysics</i>
NE	<i>Nicomachean Ethics</i>
Phys.	<i>Physics</i>

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