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Pleasure and the Nature of the Ethical Subject

In contemporary moral theory, pleasure is a topic that has fallen out of fashion. Historically, this wasn't always so. My dissertation uses the ethical theories of Aristotle and Kant, two frameworks foundational for contemporary ethical thought. The centrality of the topic of pleasure within these two historical philosophical accounts raises an important question: why is pleasure an essential topic for them and not for us?

I argue that pleasure *is* an important and necessary topic for ethical theory. My defense of pleasure as important for ethical theory does not proceed by defending one conception of pleasure as the right way to think about pleasure. Rather, I'm doing something prior and more fundamental. My examination of these historical figures aims to show how and why each of these figures defends the claim that morally good action is intrinsically pleasant. The work of the dissertation is to mark out the conceptual stakes for Aristotle's and Kant's theoretical accounts of pleasure in order to begin to answer what about our ethics and our action theory has made pleasure go missing.

I understand Aristotle and Kant to be motivated by the same outrageous idea: life is supposed to be pleasant. Both figures are very aware of the outrageousness of this idea in all its ethical and political implications. To take seriously the thought that life should be pleasant requires each philosopher to investigate the kind of grip pleasure has on us: what kind of goodness does pleasure have and what about pleasure makes us think it is necessarily present within a good human life? But neither Aristotle nor Kant rest satisfied with an account of how pleasure is good-in-itself; pleasure must also be shown

to be compatible with our concern for morally good action. The ambition of both Kant and Aristotle is to provide a theoretical account of a neglected truth from hedonism, that the attainment of our good is pleasant, but to utilize this truth in defense of the virtuous life as the best, most pleasant life.

A useful way of conceptualizing the similarities and differences of how these two figures use pleasure in their ethical theories is through what I call *the problem of the value of pleasure*. The problem of the value of pleasure is that we have reasons for thinking both that pleasure is good and that pleasure is bad.

On the one hand, we think pleasure is good. We desire pleasure as good-in-itself, we pursue pleasure as good-in-itself, and we enjoy pleasure as good-in-itself. In other words, we think pleasure can, in some cases, justify an action as good and worth doing: that an action is pleasant or secures pleasure can be a good reason for doing that action. The goodness of pleasure suggests pleasure has some important conceptual relation to morally good action. Insofar as we want to defend morally good action as cases where the agent acts well and does well, it is important that these actions not be devoid of pleasure. If the morally good life is not an intrinsically pleasant life, this would jeopardize our understanding of the morally good life as a good life to live, that is, as a desirable life. These intuitions concerning pleasure's goodness are summarized by two interrelated claims: pleasure sometimes justifies an action as a good thing to do, and pleasure is good, and so must make some contribution to the good life.

On the other hand, we think pleasure is bad. We think pleasure is bad in the sense that pleasure often tempts us to do bad actions. It is obvious that for at least some actions, the fact that the action was pleasant to the agent in no way justifies that action as

a good thing to do. In fact, far from justifying or redeeming bad actions, pleasure in a bad action seems to make things worse. It is bad to do vicious actions, but it seems even worse to take pleasure in vicious actions. That pleasure amplifies the badness of vicious actions suggests that some pleasures are bad as such.

There are two obvious responses to the question of pleasure's value: subjectivism regarding pleasure and normative hedonism. However, neither a subjectivist account of pleasure nor a normative hedonistic conception of pleasure like is able to do full justice to the complexity of the question of pleasure's value in human life.

A subjectivist understanding of pleasure, which is how I would describe many of our contemporary intuitions regarding pleasure, retreats from the demand for a judgment regarding pleasure's value. The subjectivist's agnosticism about pleasure's goodness amounts to a denial that pleasure has any intrinsic value. Pleasure may be taken in good actions, pleasure may be taken in bad actions. This is taken to imply that there is no necessary connection between the moral goodness or badness of the action and the presence of pleasure. The subjectivist is able to comfortably straddle our conflicting intuitions regarding pleasure's goodness.

However, the subjectivist's account of pleasure is unable to explain how pleasure *justifies* some actions as good and worth doing. One large question for philosophers working in moral psychology is pleasure's intentionality, that is, whether pleasure is always about something or always taken in something. The many different ways of characterizing pleasure's function and nature suggests the experience of pleasure is heterogeneous: some pleasures may have no informational content or broad functional role, whereas some pleasures are intentional and so cognitively rich. However, simply

the recognition that pleasure can bear representational content does not on its own succeed in explaining how pleasure can be a genuine reason for action. It is still common for philosophers to think first, that pleasure is a subjective feeling that arises in response to some mental item; second, that pleasure has no strong connection to an agent's understanding of what is good, since this subjective feeling is merely passive and not within the agent's control; and third, that there are no constraints upon and no interesting unity to what may be experienced as pleasant. These three assumptions completely sever the experience of pleasure in an action from the question of whether or not that particular action is a good thing to do. This means we are still unable to explain why some actions are justified and so worth doing simply because they are pleasant.

By contrast, the normative hedonist, like Sidgwick, can easily explain pleasure's ability to justify actions as good. Normative hedonism, the view Sidgwick defends, is the claim that in acting, we ought to do those actions that result in the most pleasure, or in other words, the normative hedonist says that what makes an action good is that it produces pleasure. The normative hedonist asserts that all pleasure is valuable, since pleasure is constitutive of the goodness of good actions.

However, the normative hedonist is forced to deny our common sense intuition that there are some pleasures that are bad as such. For the normative hedonist, pleasure is essentially good, which means bad pleasures are those pleasure that ultimately bring about more pain than pleasure. To give an example of the difficulties involved in getting the hedonistic calculus to work, consider a solitary adult man, taking an inappropriate sexual pleasure while looking at a picture of a young child. Insofar as we want to deny that this is good, valuable pleasure, regardless of its connection to or isolation from

further pleasures or pains, this puts pressure on the normative hedonist's claims about pleasure's inherent goodness.

In sum, the subjectivist account of pleasure can't explain how some pleasures have good-making properties, while the normative hedonist can't explain how some pleasures have bad-making properties. What we need is to escape these all-or-nothing answers regarding pleasure's goodness, to find some way to differentiate pleasures, so that all pleasures are not given equal value.

Aristotle and Kant are able to do this, to differentiate pleasures as having different value, through their conceptions of what I call an "ethical subject". A conception of an ethical subject is a metaphysically rich picture of our nature as ethical agents. In the light of this metaphysically rich picture of our nature as ethical agents, Aristotle and Kant can claim that some activities are intrinsically pleasant for us, according to our nature, even though some people may not experience these pleasures. Moreover, Aristotle and Kant are able to argue that pleasure is intrinsic to good, virtuous action, without pleasure thereby constituting what good action is for the ethical agent.

In **Chapter I**, I explain how a misguided interpretive approach has prevented fruitful engagement with Aristotle's conception of pleasure. Aristotle scholars have been stymied by the question of what pleasure is for Aristotle. I suggest that if we shift gears, and focus instead on the dominant concern motivating Aristotle's treatment of the topic of pleasure, we can see that Aristotle is trying to explain how pleasure is good.

Aristotle defends an understanding of pleasure as having essential goodness by making a distinction between true, genuine pleasure and mere appearances of pleasure. This assertion of pleasure's natural goodness requires that experiences of pleasure are not

transparent to the agent – we lack first person authority about our pleasures. Just as importantly, Aristotle argues that despite appearing pleasant to those in a deformed condition, vicious actions do not secure true, genuine pleasure. But this distinction between genuine pleasure and mere appearances of pleasure is metaphysically costly. In order to understand how some guises of pleasure are revelatory of pleasure’s nature and how some guises mislead us about what pleasure really is, we need a metaphysically robust story about pleasure’s nature.

For Aristotle, pleasure either is activity or supervenes on activity. In **Chapter II**, I argue that we should understand Aristotle as defending a hierarchical, metaphysical relation between process and activity, where the norms of the process inform the norms of the activity arising from the doing of the process. Since pleasure is attached to activity for Aristotle, the norms of the process constrain the possibilities for true pleasure. Activity and the pleasure that arises from activity cannot be properly instantiated when the norms of the process are not respected. The hierarchical relation between process and activity explains how we take pleasure in a process, and also how pleasure is connected to and constrained by the human good.

In **Chapter III**, I explain how Aristotle’s picture of the relation between process and activity can explain both why pleasure is essentially tied to virtuous activity, and how the pursuit of pleasure pulls us into vicious habits. Since pleasure is connected to activity and not process, pleasure encourages us to keep going, even when the conditions necessary for good instantiation of the process no longer hold. Pleasure is a mode of engagement with the action; for every appearance of pleasure, the agent takes the action to be an end-in-itself. In merely apparent pleasures, the agent is wrong to take this action

to have value-in-itself. Because Aristotle understands the experience of some object as pleasant to be a contentful relation that is reflective of the agent's understanding of the good, we can explain why only the virtuous person's pleasures are truly pleasant: only the virtuous person has the right understanding of the value of this action within the good life and so the right understanding of herself and her pleasure.

Aristotle's solution to the problem of the value of pleasure is to make a distinction between true, genuine pleasure and mere appearances of pleasure. This distinction between true and apparent pleasures allows for a strongly unified view of the relation between pleasure and our good. For Aristotle, what is genuinely pleasant for us completely coincides with what is genuinely good for us.

By contrast, Kant's solution to the problem of these contrary intuitions regarding pleasure's value is to divide pleasure into three different kinds. My reading of Kant is thus opposed to a commonplace understanding of Kant's ethics. This commonplace view insists that Kant sees no place for and has no concern for forging a connection between pleasure, including the pleasurable condition of happiness, and moral goodness. I argue that this characterization of Kant's view of pleasure is too crude. Instead, Kant's division of pleasure into different kinds allows Kant to hold onto the idea that pleasure is necessarily connected to morally good action, even though most pleasures are morally neutral, and in fact tend to pull against morally good action.

Unlike Aristotle, Kant understands the nature of the ethical agent to be fundamentally riven. Accordingly, our experiences of pleasure are divided into kinds. In **Chapter IV**, I set forth the three kinds of pleasure according to Kant: pleasure in the agreeable, pleasure in aesthetic judgment (which encompasses pleasure in the beautiful and pleasure in the

sublime), and pleasure in the moral. Each kind of pleasure has a unique functional role within the life of the finite dependent rational being (a category inclusive of, but not limited to, humans), which is the nature in question for Kant's ethical inquiry.

I understand Kant to be a hedonist regarding all non-moral action. For Kant, there are two motives for action: duty and pleasure. When we are not acting from and for the sake of duty, we are being motivated by our desire for pleasure. In **Chapter V**, I show that the pleasure that serves as the motive for any and all non-moral actions is what Kant calls pleasure in the agreeable. Importantly, though, while pleasure is what supplies the impetus for action when we are not acting from duty, Kant does not think that pleasure in the agreeable is *determinative* of what the agent pursues. Reason is operative in setting an end to be pursued, even if the motive for pursuit is pleasure. Because reason plays a crucial role within non-moral actions, we can evaluate an agent's reasoning in the non-moral sphere as done well or badly. We can evaluate the agent's choice of ends in pursuing the agreeable, and are not limited to saying whether the agent was successful or unsuccessful in achieving the end she was aiming at.

The second kind of pleasure for Kant, pleasure in aesthetic judgment, does not have any practical bearing. That is, pleasure in aesthetic judgment does not cause the agent to *do* anything. Rather, what the agent enjoys, at least for pleasure in the beautiful, is a harmony between her mental faculties and the purposiveness of nature. I argue in **Chapter VI** that pleasure in aesthetic judgment opens up for Kant the possibility of pleasure that is separate from the agent's faculty of desire. The harmonious mental activity that is the source of pleasure in aesthetic judgment is a fulfillment and furthering of aims the subject has. These aims are present without conscious pursuit by the subject,

because these aims follow from the kind of thing the subject is. Importantly, Kant's account of pleasure in aesthetic judgment enables Kant to argue that there is a pleasure in morally good action because of the kind of creatures that we are, where this pleasure is not the cause that brings the agent to act.

In **Chapter VII**, I argue that for Kant, respect is paradigmatic of a kind of pleasure, pleasure in the moral. Pleasure in the moral does not motivate morally good action, but because pleasure in the moral is the necessary effect of good willing, this pleasure is an expression that morally good action is our most proper end. For Kant, pleasure is intrinsic to actions willed from and for the sake of duty. As the necessary effect of good willing, pleasure in the moral expresses the fact that through continued practice we can become better at and so habituated to dutiful action, and thus explains how virtue is possible for us and natural to us.

Having delineated Aristotle's and Kant's accounts of pleasure, I turn in **Chapter VIII** to the question of the pleasurability of virtue, which drives Aristotle's and Kant's interest in pleasure. For both Aristotle and Kant, pleasure has goodness in a way that is independent of moral goodness. This independence of the value of pleasure is what makes the task each takes on so difficult, to show how the virtuous life is a pleasant life. Both Aristotle and Kant argue that our conception of good, virtuous action is prior to an understanding of pleasure; only the virtuous person has the right account of pleasure's goodness and so pleasure's proper role for practical reason. The virtuous person's recognition of and commitment to the inherent value of morally good action is the excellent functioning of practical reason. For both Aristotle and Kant, the virtuous person's identification of morally good action as the achievement of our good is a form

of self-knowledge because whole-hearted commitment to this practical aim requires knowledge of her nature as an ethical subject. However, Aristotle's virtuous agent achieves a freedom of conflict and freedom of uncertainty not possible for Kant's virtuous agent, because the nature of Kant's ethical agent is fundamentally torn.

What we learn from the problem of the value of pleasure, and specifically pleasure's role in practical reasoning is that pleasure cannot in every case be mere feeling, but that pleasure is tied to the agent's reasoning powers. The true value of our pleasures is a worry for us only because we implicitly understand our experiences of pleasure to be caught up with our conception of good living. This means that the experience of something as pleasant and the pursuit of something as pleasant must, at least in some cases, be more than a merely causal relation between the agent and the pleasurable object. Instead, the experience of some object as pleasant must, in many central cases, be a contentful relation that is reflective of the agent's understanding of the good. This thicker understanding of pleasure's nature and so pleasure's value within our practical pursuits is what Aristotle and Kant are able to articulate through their conceptions of the nature of the ethical subject.

But this investigation into the role of pleasure within Aristotle's and Kant's ethical projects provides more than a better understanding of our experiences of pleasure. In examining how Aristotle and Kant use pleasure within their ethical theories, we also learn how to think about pleasure, why pleasure is important for ethical theory, what an account of pleasure must do. Aristotle and Kant share the ambition to do a certain kind of justice to pleasure, which requires an account of the virtuous life as a truly pleasant life. Aristotle and Kant both aim to combat a moralistic tendency within the study of

ethics, the tendency to dismiss pleasure's importance within our conception of good living. Because of the role pleasure plays in producing bad actions, it is tempting to characterize pleasure as bad, or at least, not of concern in theorizing good action. But Aristotle and Kant understand this denial of pleasure's appeal to produce a deformed account of ourselves, our interest in morally good actions, and so the life of virtue.

The ambition to show the virtuous life to be a truly pleasant life is a response to a worry that can arise for the virtuous agent. This worry is that in some way, morality threatens our humanity. The virtuous life can seem narrow, a constraint imposed upon our desires, interests, and joys. The worry can be voiced as a worry about the depth of the pleasures of the virtuous life: do the pleasures of virtue constitute true happiness, or are these pleasures the result of a forced repression of our nature? The fear is that virtue is the product of conditioning, the pleasures of virtue a surface appearance resulting from the active reconstruction of the individual's interests and aims. The account of virtue Aristotle and Kant aim to provide must show how the virtuous life is a good life in the sense of a desirable life, how the virtuous person is not missing out on something of great value in human existence, how the pleasures of virtue are truly human pleasures.

This worry about the depth of the pleasures of virtue is not a worry that the subjectivist account of pleasure can even get on the table. For the subjectivist, pleasure is just how it seems; there is no sense to be made of asking whether our pleasures have a kind of depth, whether our experiences of pleasure are the expressions of true happiness. In its inability to countenance this question about the true value of our pleasures, subjectivism regarding pleasure reveals itself to be a flawed conception of pleasure, confused about how pleasure matters for us.

The point of the metaphysically-rich pictures of our nature as ethical agents that Kant and Aristotle provide is to answer this worry about the depth of the pleasures of virtue. Kant and Aristotle succeed in answering this worry if the virtuous person can recognize herself and her experiences of pleasure in these pictures. These accounts of the true pleasures of virtue must be felt as providing genuine insight, and not the imposition of a desired shape upon our experiences of pleasure or a contorted image of the life of virtue. Pleasure must not be flattened so as to fit comfortably within the life of virtue, nor virtue defined as what is productive of pleasure.

Whether or not we think Aristotle's and Kant's accounts of the intrinsic pleasure of the virtuous life succeed at doing justice to our interest in and experiences of pleasure, Aristotle and Kant make clear the folly of ignoring pleasure when doing ethics. To dismiss pleasure as of no concern for the ethicist means whatever ethical claims ensue will be deformed fantasy. This worry about the depth of the life of virtue, whether the virtuous life is a good, happy, desirable life, is understood by Aristotle and Kant as central to the task of ethical theory. Moral philosophy must engage with this worry, because this worry characterizes our relation to morally good action as such. Fruitful engagement with this worry about the depth of the life of virtue necessitates grappling with the complexity of pleasure. The task of the moral philosopher demands more than an explanation of what morally good action is, but an explanation of how morally good action matters for us, how morally good action constitutes a good, pleasant life.