

Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Winter 1997

Volume 24 Number 2

- 135 Robert D. Sacks The Book of Job: Translation and
Commentary
- 171 Marc D. Guerra Aristotle on Pleasure and Political
Philosophy: A Study in Book VII of the
Nicomachean Ethics
- 183 Mark S. Cladis Lessons from the Garden: Rousseau's
Solitaires and the Limits of Liberalism
- 201 Thomas Heilke Nietzsche's Impatience: The Spiritual
Necessities of Nietzsche's Politics
- Book Reviews*
- 233 Eduardo A. Velásquez *Profits, Priests, and Princes: Adam Smith's
Emancipation of Economics from Politics
and Religion*, by Peter Minowitz
- 239 Charles E. Butterworth *Something To Hide*, by Peter Levine
- 243 Will Morrisey *Jerusalem and Athens: Reason and
Revelation in the Works of Leo Strauss*,
by Susan Orr

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libraries and all other institutions \$48
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Aristotle on Pleasure and Political Philosophy: A Study in Book VII of the *Nicomachean Ethics*

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I

The speeches on moral and political science in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, its author reports, will be “pointless and unprofitable” to young men.¹ The reason for this is that the teaching offered in the *Ethics* belongs to a specific kind of practical science. The form of reflection called for by this science requires one to have experience of the types of actions that human life entails as well as to have mastery over one’s passions so as not to chase slavishly after pleasures. These are two qualities which the young necessarily lack. Young men therefore are capable of listening to the finest speeches on these matters and yet remain unaffected, since the end of this study is not knowledge but action (1095a6).

According to Aristotle, the correct audience to hear speeches on moral and political science would be comprised of men who “have received a proper upbringing in moral conduct”(1095b6). These men have been trained from the cradle by both their parents and their political community to shun what is base and to act in accordance with what is generally considered to be right and just. Such men readily accept the “facts” that support the moral and political life. Indeed, the training possessed by morally cultivated men runs so deep that they do not need to hear speeches on why they act as they do(1095b8).

Aristotle thus appears to provide a reasonably sound account of the reader who will benefit from studying the *Ethics*. Or does he? On the one hand, Aristotle has presented a compelling case for the reason why the young will be impervious to the teaching he here sets forth. On the other hand, Aristotle has effectively admitted that the man who is ripe for this teaching would find it superfluous. Given these circumstances, there seems to be no need for a book like the *Ethics*. Why then Aristotle would write a lengthy treatise on moral and

The seed for this essay was first planted during a reading of St. Thomas Aquinas’s *Commentary on Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics* under the direction of Ernest L. Fortin at Boston College. The following essay is deeply indebted to those meetings and to Fortin’s “The Paradoxes of Aristotle’s Theory of Education in the Light of Recent Controversies,” *Laval Théologique et Philosophique* 13, no. 2 (1957): 248–60. The limitations of the present study, however, are to be attributed to its author.

political science and who this work is written for are something of a puzzle. It is with this question in mind that we here turn to Aristotle's teaching on pleasure in the seventh book of the *Ethics*.

II

The discussion of pleasure in the seventh book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is directly preceded by a comparison of the continent and the obstinate man. The consideration of pleasure occurs without immediate warning and begins abruptly. It thus comes as something of a surprise to the reader.² Aristotle does, however, preface this discussion with the following remark:

It is the role of the political philosopher to contemplate pleasure and pain. For he is the mastercraftsman of the end to which we look when we call one particular thing bad and another good in the unqualified sense(1152b1–3).³

Aristotle's words here are striking for a number of reasons. To begin with, while Aristotle previously described his inquiry in the *Ethics* as "a kind of *politike*" (1094a27), here, for the first time, he speaks of things that are contemplated by political philosophy. The reader is therefore led to wonder whether there is a difference between Aristotelian "political science" and political philosophy. This question is sharpened once it is recalled that in the second book of the *Ethics* Aristotle had suggested that one should dismiss a discussion of pleasure from an exercise in *politike*(1109b11–12).

Related to this problem is the question raised by Aristotle's statement that the political philosopher is the architect of the end by which men judge whether a thing is either good or bad. In the first book of the *Ethics* Aristotle asserted that "one should think" that *politike* is the "most sovereign and architectonic science"(1094a26–27), and Aristotle had stated in the sixth book that men commonly assume that statesmen are the practitioners of this architectonic science, since "only those who make decrees are said to engage in politics"(1141b28). Yet, here, Aristotle makes the unqualified claim that it is the political philosopher and not the statesman who not only contemplates what is good and bad, but who articulates the various possibilities for others. While the reader is at this point at somewhat of a loss as to what these new considerations may ultimately mean, he has been informed that the discussion that is to follow belongs to the province of political philosophy.

III

Aristotle commences his formal consideration of pleasure in the seventh book of the *Ethics* with a discussion of some of the prevailing opinions of pleasure. The first task he must undertake entails answering objections that

would deny the possibility of pleasure being a good.⁵ Aristotle here explains that “good” is an equivocal term. Something is said to be a good in one of two ways: either we call a thing good in an unconditional sense or we say that it is a good for a particular man. Aristotle further states that it is possible that something that is generally called bad may not only not be bad for a given man but in certain circumstances “even desirable for him”(1152b30). Aristotle’s brief treatment of the two ways in which something can be a good prods the reader to recall the caveat given at the opening of the *Ethics*, namely, that in speaking of things that hold good only as a general rule, but not always, the conclusions reached are of the same order(1094b21–23).

Aristotle immediately proceeds to draw a distinction between restorative pleasures, which are merely incidentally pleasant, and unqualified pleasures. This distinction turns on his observation that the good “is both an activity and a state”(1152b34–35). (Ostwald translates *hexis* as “characteristic.”) Aristotle here reports that restorative pleasures are pleasant only insofar as they return a man to his natural condition. Aristotle thus links restorative pleasures to an ongoing *process* that replenishes a man to his natural state. That these pleasures are not pleasant unconditionally is said to be manifested in the fact that “things which give us joy while our natural state is being replenished are not the same as those which give us joy once it has been restored”(1153a2–3). To illustrate this point, Aristotle offers the example of eating: men who are in the process of being restored to their natural state may take pleasure in either sharp or bitter foods, neither of which are pleasant unconditionally.

Aristotle states that in contrast to restorative pleasures an unqualified pleasure lacks the aspect of taking part in some form of a rejuvenating process. Nor are unqualified pleasures accompanied by either pain or appetite. Rather, a man experiences unqualified pleasure “when nothing is deficient in his natural state”(1153a1–3). Aristotle gives but one example of an unqualified pleasure: the activity of contemplation(1153a1).⁶ This marks the second time in the present consideration of pleasure that Aristotle mentions the activity of contemplation, for he prefaced the entire discussion with a reference to the objects contemplated by the political philosopher. When these two references to the activity of contemplation are viewed together, Aristotle appears to be intimating to his reader that in contemplating pleasure and pain a political philosopher takes part in an activity that is in itself an unqualified source of pleasure.

The movement of Aristotle’s ensuing argument shifts from an explicit discussion of unqualified pleasures to an account of how it is possible that pleasure can be a good that has the quality of an end. Distancing himself from the opinion that all pleasures take part in a process and as such are incapable of being ends, he once again asserts that “there is no need to believe that there exists something better than pleasure”(1153a8–9). Aristotle, however, now makes explicit what he previously had left implicit, namely, that some forms of pleasure are activities that have no “end other than themselves”(1153a12). Aristotle ends this account of pleasure as an activity chosen for its own sake with a

definition of pleasure that makes no reference to any form of a process. “Pleasure,” Aristotle announces, “should be called an activity of our natural state that is not perceived, but unimpeded” (1153a14–15).⁷

Given both its placement and its tone, Aristotle’s definition of pleasure seems at first glance to be simply the summation of all that has been said about pleasure thus far in the seventh book. If the definition is examined closely, however, the reader discovers that it allows him to gain a better grasp of the present discussion of pleasure as well as what was said about pleasure prior to the seventh book. Indeed, it is only after the reader has brought this definition of pleasure to bear on both of these discussions that he detects that Aristotle is affording him the opportunity to glimpse something of the range to which different types of men are capable of living pleasurable lives.

By defining pleasure as the unimpeded activity of a man’s natural condition, Aristotle tacitly invites his reader to reflect on the various ways in which different pleasures can be obstructed. The answer is most visible in the case of bodily pleasures. Aristotle previously had informed the reader that the pleasures most commonly associated with the body, eating and drinking, are restorative pleasures. Such pleasures contain within themselves a restriction that limits the degree of pleasure that a man can derive from them. Simply stated, there comes a point when the further intake of the most delectable foods and the finest of wines ceases to be pleasurable. In a somewhat similar vein, even the intense pleasure a man experiences in sexual intercourse is limited by his body’s ability to take part in the deed.⁸

The manner in which pleasure can be impeded becomes more difficult to see once one turns his attention to the pleasures of the soul. These types of pleasure do not appear to be subject to the same kind of internal limitations as do the bodily pleasures. The question remains, however, as to whether the pleasures of the soul can be restricted by external limitations.

In the third book of the *Ethics*, Aristotle draws a distinction that helps to shed light on this question.

We must first differentiate between the pleasures of the soul and the pleasures of the body. Take, for example, the pleasures of the love of honor and the love of learning: when the man who has attained his honor and the man who loves learning finds joy in the thing he loves it is not his body but his thought that is affected(1117b27–31). (Ostwald translates *time* as “ambition.”)

It is curious that Aristotle here sets a condition on the love of honor that he does not place on the love of learning. The lover of honor is said to experience pleasure “when [he] . . . has attained his honor,” whereas the lover of learning simply “finds joy in the thing he loves.” Aristotle seems to suggest that unlike the man who loves learning, the lover of honor needs to secure things outside of his immediate control in order to experience pleasure.

A partial appreciation of what these things may be is gained once it is recalled that Aristotle somewhat ambiguously identifies the life devoted to honor with the political life in the first book of the *Ethics* (1095b22–23). Aristotle there twice remarks that to participate in this kind of life one must possess certain “external goods,” namely, a sizable amount of wealth and a relatively high birth (1099a31–1099b3; 1101a14–16). Aristotle subsequently observes that men who lack the necessary equipment will find it “impossible or at least not easy” to excel in political life (1099a31–32).⁹

Aristotle’s words about the “love of learning,” however, do not imply that the absence of a large number of external goods inhibits the pleasure derived from this kind of activity. Moreover, he later reveals in the tenth book of the *Ethics* that the philosophic life requires what at best amounts to only a modest sum of external goods (1178b33–1179a32). It seems that the import of Aristotle’s definition of pleasure would suggest that the activity mentioned in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that most satisfies its requirements is contemplation.

IV

The central section of Aristotle’s consideration of pleasure in the seventh book of the *Ethics* contains a defense of pleasure as the supreme good. The arguments presented to the reader here will inform him that the evidence that can be marshalled against the possibility of pleasure constituting the supreme good is not compelling. Aristotle acknowledges that regardless of whether most pleasures are bad in an unqualified sense, this “does not mean that the highest good cannot be some sort of pleasure” (1153b8).¹⁰ In an attempt to bolster this statement, Aristotle asserts that “if” each state has its own unimpeded activity, either the activity of all of them or of the one of them that constitutes happiness would be the most desirable (1153b9–12). Aristotle’s use of the word “if” here would suggest that he is trying to distance himself from the position that each state has its unobstructed activity.

Aristotle, however, already has equated unimpeded activity with pleasure in the definition of pleasure he gave earlier. The significance of this statement would then seem to lie in the fact that Aristotle presently associates happiness with some kind of pleasure. This interpretation is further suggested by Aristotle’s subsequent claim that happiness is something complete or perfect and that obstructed activities do not possess this quality (1153b15–17). The defense of pleasure as the highest good Aristotle here offers thus rests not so much on explicit arguments for the supremacy of pleasure as it does on its implicit identification of happiness with some sort of uninhibited pleasure.

Aristotle proceeds to present an explanation of how it is possible that only a certain form of pleasure constitutes the supreme good, given that all men seek pleasure and that many do this in different ways. Aristotle prefaces this expla-

nation with the curious remark that a possible indication that pleasure is the supreme good is that both rational and irrational animals seek pleasure (1153b25–26). This remark is immediately followed by the pronouncement that although all men seek pleasure, many do not actually pursue the kind of pleasure they believe they pursue.¹¹

The enigmatic character of this statement is heightened by the announcement that directly follows it. Here, in what appears to be *the* explanation of why all men seek pleasure, Aristotle states that “all have by nature something divine in them”(1153b32–33). (Ostwald translates this as “everything has by nature something divine about it.”) With this remark Aristotle closes his account of how pleasure can be the supreme good. The final words of this discussion hint that the universal pursuit of pleasure is in some way connected to the divine. Equipped only with this cryptic remark, Aristotle’s reader is left to wonder what this connection is and why it has been brought to his attention.

V

The consideration of pleasure in the seventh book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* concludes with a response to the charge that most pleasures are bad and that few pleasures are good. Responding to the opinion that most pleasures are bad Aristotle asserts that noble as well as bodily pleasures are good but that physical pleasures are good only “up to a certain point”(1154a13). In contrast to other pleasures, which Aristotle leaves unnamed, the pleasures of the body admit of an excess of the good that they enjoy.¹² Common experience seems to support this position. Aristotle observes that men who seek necessary bodily pleasures are not said to be base; rather it is the man who pursues an excess of such pleasures that other men regard as base.

Aristotle proceeds to provide two explanations why most men readily accept the idea that bodily pleasures are the most desirable kinds of pleasure. Aristotle’s first explanation attributes this to the fact that the pleasures associated with the body are capable of driving out pain. Accordingly, because of their intensity, physical pleasures are widely viewed as remedies for pain. Men are thus wont to pursue bodily pleasures in the hope that an excess of such pleasures will purge their bodies of an excess of pain.

Aristotle’s second explanation maintains that many men are incapable of enjoying pleasures other than those associated with the body. The bodily pleasures therefore have been catapulted to a place of prominence due to the majority of men’s incapacity to experience noncorporeal forms of pleasure. To account for this phenomenon, Aristotle enlists the aid of “the students of natural science” who have discovered that all animals by their very nature are subjected to a constant state of strain and fatigue(1154b7–8). Aristotle’s second explana-

tion appears to suggest that the bulk of men seek bodily pleasures to alleviate the pain that is a natural part of their lives.

Some light is shed on this somewhat biological explanation by Aristotle's subsequent remark that there are two types of men most inclined to pursue an excess of bodily pleasures: the young and those with excitable natures.¹³ Aristotle states that the reason why youths are preoccupied with the pursuit of excessive physical pleasures is because they seek to counter the pain experienced in the growth process(1154b10–11). Aristotle reports that in contrast to the passing afflictions associated with youth, men in possession of excitable (*melancholikos*) natures suffer from a state of perpetual aggravation. Such men are naturally disposed to immoderation due to “an excess of black bile in their constitution” that subjects them to a continuous state of “vehement desire” (1154b13).¹⁴ The *melancholikai* thus require constant pleasure to provide them with a remedy for their affliction(1154b13). Aristotle fails to state what kind of pleasure could perform this service. Yet, in light of his earlier discussion of restorative pleasures, it would seem that the remedy for *melancholikos* could not be found in an excess of the pleasures of the body.

Aristotle's reflection on the plight of the *melancholikai* in some ways resembles his words on the afflictions of the tyrant in the *Politics*(1267a2–16). Aristotle there remarks that injustices that are practiced on a grand scale may be perpetrated for the sake of enjoyment as well as for the satisfaction of desire. Aristotle observes that a tyrant might perform a great injustice merely to sate a desire to enjoy “pleasures unaccompanied by pains”(1267a7). Aristotle there claims that the one possible remedy for the infirmity of the tyrant can be found in philosophy, “for the other pleasures require human beings”(1267a12–13). It seems that philosophy could provide a similar kind of remedy for the *melancholikai*. These men, like Aristotle's tyrant, desire to experience a pleasure that is not accompanied by pain. Whereas the tyrants cured by philosophy would still have cities to rule, however, the *melancholikai* who turn to philosophy would be free from the great external demands that the political life places on men. *Melancholikos* therefore could be something of a mixed blessing. On the one hand, nature afflicts the *melancholikai* with a soul that is tormented with vehement desires; on the other hand, the activity that may cure this malady is the only activity that Aristotle has identified with both unqualified pleasure and happiness.

The consideration of pleasure in the seventh book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* concludes with an account of pleasure as a divine activity. Aristotle's reflection on the relationship between pleasure and divinity here confronts the reader with the most compelling case for leading a life in pursuit of pleasure. Yet it simultaneously informs the reader of the limitations that human nature places on such a life. The discussion commences with Aristotle's observation “that there is not a single object that continues to be pleasant forever” (1154b20–21). That such a cessation must inevitably occur can be attributed to

the nature of man himself. Man is a being in possession of a composite nature, part of which is subject to decay. Human nature therefore promotes a kind of inner motion that causes an internal imbalance in man, since as one element of human nature acts, “it runs counter to the nature of the other”(1154b23). Given that Aristotle has defined pleasure as a state of unimpeded enjoyment, the motion inherent in a composite human nature prevents man from deriving continual pleasure from one activity.

To highlight the restrictions that a composite nature places on man’s ability to enjoy a single pleasure perpetually, Aristotle describes what the divine experience of pleasure would be.

If there is a being with a simple nature, the same action will always be the most pleasant to him. That is why the divinity always enjoys one single and simple pleasure: for there is not only an activity of motion but also an activity of immobility, and pleasure consists in rest rather than motion(1154b24–28).

This description of divinity recalls Aristotle’s depiction of the unmoved mover in the *Metaphysics*(1272b13–29).¹⁵ But such a conception of divinity appears to be alien to much of Aristotle’s preceding argument in the *Ethics*. For example, Aristotle earlier spoke of the possibility that happiness was a gift given to men by the gods(1099b8–14). Here, however, he describes a god that “*always* enjoys one single and simple pleasure.” In fact, the image of god that is presented in the seventh book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* does not suggest that the divinity engages in any activity other than the endless enjoyment of pleasure. This is all the more striking given that Aristotle ostensibly offers this picture of divinity in order to explain why man as a composite being is incapable of constantly deriving pleasure from a single object.

Aristotle nevertheless here candidly informs his reader that *the* characteristic activity of the divinity is the enjoyment of pleasure. This might possibly shed light on his previous enigmatic statement that all men seek pleasure due to something divine in them. The divine thing in man that propels him to pursue pleasure may be that element in him that, like the divine, is simple and hence not subject to decay, namely, his reason. That reason constitutes one part of man’s composite nature may further explain why it is that men seek many pleasures but that only one activity is said to most approximate an unimpeded pleasure for man: man’s composite nature is natural in the sense that man possesses both a soul and a body, yet inasmuch as reason is not composite, man’s composite nature is in some strange way not natural to him. (See Jaffa, *Thomism and Aristotelianism*, pp. 148, 166.)

Connected with this point is the further observation that the limits that a composite nature imposes on man’s ability to partake of the perpetual pleasure of contemplation need not necessarily be viewed as an unconditional defect. Indeed, the very argument of the *Nicomachean Ethics* would seem to suggest

that precisely the opposite is true. While man's composite nature prohibits him from enjoying a purely contemplative life that is "divorced from all external things" (*Politics*, 1324a28), it concurrently opens up a realm of considerations that can be contemplated that would not otherwise be available. In this regard, Aristotle's claim at the beginning of the seventh book's treatment of pleasure that "it is the role of the political philosopher to contemplate pleasure and pain" takes on greater significance. If man did not possess a composite nature, i.e., a nature capable of experiencing both pleasure and pain, such studies would be impossible.¹⁶

VI

The question remains, however, as to why in the seventh book Aristotle introduces a reconsideration of pleasure into the overall discussion of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. It is here suggested that the answer to this question comes to sight once one reflects on the nature of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The *Nicomachean Ethics* presents the dialectical encounter of philosophy with political life. This means that on one level the *Ethics* offers, most visibly in books one through six, a philosophic reflection on and partial correction of existing political life that is addressed to men who are actively engaged in politics. It is in this sense that the reader of the *Nicomachean Ethics* must place sufficient weight on the fact that Aristotle positions the political life at the center of his enumeration of the ways of life available to man (1095b17–18).

To acknowledge this dimension of the *Ethics* is to appreciate that Aristotle's reconsideration of pleasure in the seventh book is of some benefit to his gentlemanly readers. The correction of the earlier dismissal of a consideration of pleasure from an exercise in moral science that occurs here permits the man who understands his life in terms of the political to admit that noble activities are accompanied by a degree of pleasure. Having given such readers an account of the type of virtue they admire in the first six books, Aristotle's argument has thus sufficiently developed to allow for the present rehabilitation of pleasure.¹⁷

Yet it simultaneously must not be overlooked that Aristotle freely describes the teaching contained in the *Nicomachean Ethics* as "a kind of *politike*" and not as *politike* simply. In this regard the *Nicomachean Ethics* is seen to present an introduction to philosophy that takes the form of a *kind* of political reflection. This type of introduction makes use of the generally admitted opinions that lie at the foundation of political life, e.g., the discussion of moral virtue offered in the first six books of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, in order to cast light on their partial claim to truth. Such an introduction is addressed neither to men actively engaged in politics nor to fellow philosophers, but to attentive readers who possess the potential to philosophize about political things.¹⁸ This is the reason why the "fresh start" (1145a15) announced at the beginning of the sev-

enth book of the *Ethics* is followed by a reconsideration of pleasure. The discussion of pleasure submitted there is presented for the benefit of the reader who was intrigued by Aristotle's report at the beginning of the book that certain unnamed men teach that "an excess of virtue can change a man into a god" (1145a23–24).¹⁹ The treatment of pleasure proffered in the seventh book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is designed to perform two services for such a reader: its argument affords him the opportunity to glimpse the unqualified, yet not wholly unproblematic, pleasures associated with the philosophic life and its action allows him, albeit only partially, to take part in the activity that renders this the most pleasant of lives.

NOTES

1. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Martin Ostwald (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962), 1095a5; hereafter cited in the text parenthetically by the page and line numbering of the Bekker edition. I have modified Ostwald's translation only where I believe he has failed to capture the literal meaning of Aristotle's words. In such cases, Ostwald's translation is also supplied.

2. A provocative analysis of the overall argument of the seventh book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is given in David Schaefer, "Wisdom & Morality: Aristotle's Account of *Akrasia*," *Polity*, 21 (Winter, 1988): 221–51. A close textual reading and interesting commentary on the relation of the presentations of pleasure in Books VII and X of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is offered in Aristide Tessitore, "A Political Reading of Aristotle's Treatment of Pleasure in the *Nicomachean Ethics*," *Political Theory*, 17 (May, 1989): 247–65.

I say "something of a surprise" because in the second book of the *Ethics* Aristotle makes the following little-noticed remark. "[T]his entire study is necessarily concerned with pleasure and pain" (1105a5–6).

3. Ostwald here translates *theoresai* as "to study" and *architekton* as "the supreme craftsman."

4. Two different and somewhat opposing views of the relationship of Aristotelian "*politike*" to "political philosophy" are advanced in Carnes Lord, *Education and Culture in the Political Thought of Aristotle* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), and Mary P. Nichols, *Citizens and Statesmen: A Study of Aristotle's Politics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1992). An approach to this matter that navigates something of a middle course between the positions taken by Lord and Nichols can be found in Harvey C. Mansfield, *Taming the Prince: The Ambivalence of Modern Executive Power* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); in particular, see pages 27–28, 39, and 44–46.

This is but one example of the tension that exists between Aristotle's treatment of moral virtue in the first six books of the *Ethics* and his discussion of moral virtue in the last four books of the work. Commenting on what he takes to be Thomas Aquinas's insufficient appreciation of this tension, Harry Jaffa makes the following remark, "He does not take full cognizance of the fact that Aristotle says, at the beginning of Book VII, that he is now making a 'fresh beginning,' and that he does, in fact, proceed to re-discuss the whole subject of moral virtue, although from a different point of view, a point of view for which everything that has preceded is, in some way or other, a preparation." Harry V. Jaffa, *Thomism and Aristotelianism* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979), p. 53.

5. Aristotle there enumerates three common views men have about pleasure: some claim that no pleasure is a good, others say that most pleasures are bad but that some pleasures are good, and, finally, some hold that it is impossible for pleasure to be the supreme good. This list concludes with the statement that the discussion which is to follow "will show that the arguments we have enumerated do not lead to the conclusion that pleasure is not a good, or that it is not the highest good" (1152b25–27). Aristotle's words here curiously omit the second and central position he mentioned, namely, that some pleasures are good but that most pleasures are bad. The statement and its omis-

sion arc striking. Having read the first six books of the *Ethics*, the reader would be inclined to expect Aristotle to defend the position that some, rare pleasures are good, e.g., see 1099a12–13. To read, however, that the author of the *Nicomachean Ethics* intends to show that one need not think that pleasure is not the highest good could come to some of Aristotle's readers as something of a surprise and to others as something of a shock.

Curiously, in this endeavor it would seem that one of the objectors that would need to be responded to is Aristotle himself. Aristotle had significantly depreciated the life devoted to pleasure in the first book of the *Ethics* (1095b17–23), where he identifies the life of pleasure with the kind of life sought after by “the common run of men” (1095b19). It is further said that these types of men “betray their utter slavishness in their preference for a life suitable to cattle” (1095b19–20).

6. Shortly after the example of contemplation is given, Aristotle remarks that “both pleasant and wholesome things are bad in the relative sense mentioned, but that does not make them bad in themselves: even contemplation is occasionally harmful to health” (1153a17–21). It seems that while the activity of contemplation offers an unqualified pleasure, a man “occasionally” can find even this activity to be injurious to his well-being, particularly his physical well-being.

7. Ostwald here significantly adds to Aristotle's words presumably to make his definition of pleasure less cryptic. Ostwald's translation reads: “an activity of our characteristic condition as determined by our natural state,” and instead of ‘perceived’ we should call it ‘unobstructed.’”

8. Aristotle seems to be well aware that the intense pleasures associated with sexual intercourse need to be addressed when one is giving a defense of pleasure. See 1152b16–18.

9. A further possible impediment to the pleasure derived from honor comes to sight when one reflects on Aristotle's treatment of the magnanimous man, *the* lover of honor. Aristotle presents the magnanimous man as the embodiment of all the moral virtues. The magnanimous man's particular virtue is said to be “the crown, as it were, of the virtues” (1124a1–2). The magnanimous man's stature rests in his ability to perform great deeds. Aristotle curiously notes, however, that the magnanimous man is “slow to act and procrastinates, except when some great honor is at stake; his actions are few, but they are great and distinguished” (1124b24–26). In light of Aristotle's observation about the actions of the magnanimous man, perhaps one is justified in saying that the greatest external impediment to the pleasure that can be derived from honor is the failure of a man to live in interesting times.

10. The remaining portion of this sentence reads: “just as the highest good may be some sort of knowledge, even though some kinds of knowledge are bad.” Three observations should be made here. First, when stating that either pleasure or knowledge may be the supreme good, Aristotle only defends the possibility that “some sort” of these may be the supreme good. Second, it is striking that when defending the possibility of pleasure being the supreme good Aristotle shows how something else, namely, some sort of knowledge, *may be* the supreme good. Third, the juxtaposition of “some sort” of pleasure with “some sort” of knowledge raises the question of whether and how these two things are related.

11. This observation reminds one of Aristotle's remark at the opening of the *Ethics* that “the good, therefore, has been well defined as that at which all things aim” (1094a3). Yet unlike in the seventh book, Aristotle here chooses to remain silent about the relationship of the good at which all things aim to the pleasant.

The observation about the pursuit of pleasure is expressed rather ambiguously. Aristotle merely could be stating that men frequently mistake a secondary or peripheral pleasure for the pleasure that is essential to a given activity. Yet Aristotle here may also be suggesting that all men, whether or not they are aware of it, pursue the same pleasure. Whatever the case may be, Aristotle presently invites his reader to question whether he is certain of the pleasure he pursues.

12. It is interesting that Aristotle here withholds the name of those pleasures that do not admit of an excess, particularly since he has mentioned both noble and bodily pleasures at the beginning of this discussion. Given the argument of the preceding section, the reader is inclined to identify these unnamed pleasures with those of contemplation. This curiously raises the question of the relation of the noble pleasures to the pleasures of contemplation.

13. These two types of men bear a close resemblance to the two classes of men that were said

to be incapable of benefiting from a discourse on moral virtue at the opening of the *Ethics*. See 1095a2–13.

14. One cannot fail to notice that Aristotle's words here offer a biological and not a moral reason why some men are inclined to be base. Aristotle presently announces that the very natures of the *melancholikai* seem to prod them to perform base actions. While this explanation might sound plausible to some of the readers of the *Ethics*, it is more than likely that the gentleman who has just read an account of his virtue would consider such an argument to be specious.

15. Despite this similarity, one must not ignore the puzzling fact that Aristotle here begins this description with the word "if."

16. Perhaps this is part of what Aristotle intends to express in his remark at the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics* that "the attainment of the good for one man alone is, to be sure, a source of satisfaction; yet to secure it for a race of men and for a city is nobler and *more divine*. In short, these are the aims of our investigation, which is *in a sense* an investigation of political matters" (1094b7–12, italics added). Along similar lines, it should be observed that the natural cycle of regimes that Aristotle describes in the fifth book of the *Politics* would provide the opportunity to contemplate something eternal.

17. Of the developmental character of Aristotle's argument in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Robert Faulkner observes that "somewhat like a living organism growing to adulthood, earlier stages of discussion can be understood with greater clarity only in light of the final and developed perspective" ("Spontaneity, Justice, and Coercion: On *Nicomachean Ethics*, Books III and V," in *Nomos 14: Coercion*, ed. J. Roland Pennock and John W. Chapman [Chicago: Aldine/Atherton, 1972], p. 85n.).

18. See Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 36; "On Classical Political Philosophy," in *What is Political Philosophy?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 93–94; Fortin, pp. 256–57. Along similar lines, Tessitore comments: "[T]he completion of Aristotle's unfinished treatment of pleasure in Book VII is not to be found in Book X nor in the *Ethics* as a whole. It is offered rather to those students of the *Ethics* who are willing to study Aristotle's explicitly philosophic works—perhaps in large measure because of the way in which he has presented the philosophic life in his political treatises" (Tessitore, p. 254). While I agree with the thrust of his observation here, I believe that Tessitore errs insofar as the movement of the argument of his essay suggests that Aristotle's philosopher ultimately abandons serious reflections on political life; see pages 258 and 261–63. Tessitore's position, ostensibly in the name of Aristotle, seems to reduce the philosopher's concern with the political sphere to the "practice [of] continence or moral virtue with respect to those pleasures that draw [him] away from the best activity." Yet this does not appear to follow necessarily from either Aristotle's teaching on the significance of man's composite nature nor from the many-layered meaning of political philosophy. See Aristotle, *Politics* 1263b29–1264a1, 1279b11–15, and, most importantly, 1282b14–24; Leo Strauss, "On the *Euthydemus*," in *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); "On Classical Political Philosophy," pp. 93–94.

19. This remark appears amid a discussion of brutishness, i.e., a subhuman condition, and divine virtue, i.e., a superhuman condition.