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The Apparent Good, Feelings of Pleasure, and Perceptions of Value in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*

In Book III, Chapter 4 of his *Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle explains, "That wish is for the end has already been stated; some think it is for the good, others for the apparent good." This essay examines the roles played by the apparent and the real good in Chapter III of Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics*. I discuss a possible discrepancy concerning the sense in which Aristotle uses the apparent good in *NE*, and I consider the relationship between feelings of pleasure and beliefs about the good. I argue that a specific consideration of the extent to which feelings of pleasure affect perceptions of value for Aristotle will shed considerable light on the way in which the apparent and the real good should be understood.

Keywords: Aristotle, Pleasure, Apparent Good, *Nichomachean Ethics*, Perceptions of Value

Introduction

The general purpose of this essay will be to examine the roles played by the apparent and real good in Chapter III of Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics*.[1] I shall first discuss various senses in which Aristotle characterizes the relative good, and I shall consider a selection of passages that articulate the different ways in which Aristotle represents the apparent good – a kind of relative good – throughout the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In doing so, I will discuss an ostensible discrepancy concerning the sense in which Aristotle uses the apparent good in *NE*, Book III, Chapter 4. With this in mind, I shall consider the relationship between feelings of pleasure and beliefs about the good, and hence, the question as to what extent feelings of pleasure affect perceptions of value for Aristotle. I argue that this consideration will shed considerable light on the way in which apparent and real good should be understood in *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book III, Chapter 4. It will be helpful to begin with some background information regarding Aristotle's characterization of the role played by wish in practical contexts.

For Aristotle, "since moral virtue is a state of character concerned with choice, and choice is deliberate desire, therefore both the reasoning must be true and the desire right, if the choice is to be good, and the latter must pursue just what the former asserts."[2] The thought is that choice is a kind of desire produced through reasoning. It involves deliberation, which begins with a prior desire; i.e., a wish, which takes as its object something conceived of as good.

[1] *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (NY: Random House, Inc), 1941. All references to Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics* and *Metaphysics* are to this translation.
[2] *Nichomachean Ethics (hereafter NE)*, 1139a25

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The deliberation involved in making a choice is a kind of discursive thinking that takes place in practical contexts.

For Aristotle, the soul is divided into a rational and an irrational part, and the rational part is further divided into a practical (calculative) and a contemplative part. Concerning the contemplative intellect, right reasoning corresponds to truth. Concerning the practical intellect, right reasoning corresponds to appropriate deliberation which gives rise to "choosing aright."[3] So, the good and bad states of the contemplative intellect are "truth and falsity respectively," and the good state of the part of the practical intellect is "truth in agreement with right desire."[4]

Choice, for Aristotle, is the origin and the efficient cause (rather than the final cause) of action. The efficient cause of choice is "desire and reasoning with a view to an end."[5] A combination of intellect and character is a necessary condition for good or bad action, and reason, intellect and a moral state are necessary conditions for making a choice. With this in mind, it will be helpful to consider the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book III, chapter 4.

Distinguishing Between the Apparent, Relative, and Real Good

Aristotle raises the following question in the Nicomachean Ethics, Book III, chapter 4:

> Are we to say that absolutely and in truth the good is the object of wish, but for each person the apparent good; that that which is in truth an object of wish is an object of wish to the good man, while any chance thing may be so to the bad man…for each state of character has its own ideas of the noble and the pleasant, and perhaps the good man differs from others most by seeing the truth in each class of things, being as it were the norm and measure of them…?[6]

The question, then, is whether the object of wish is the real or apparent good, or whether it can be either of these, depending upon whether the person doing the wishing is virtuous or vicious. In the above passage, Aristotle explains that the object of anyone's wish appears to be good. However, in the case that a good person wishes for something, the object of that person's wish will be the real good, as the good person will "choose aright." He explains that if we claim that the real good is the object of wish, it follows that in cases when a person does not "choose aright" we must accept that one does not wish for something that is a true object of wish. For if the real good is the true object of wish, and one chooses properly, that person will indeed wish for the real good. However, if a person does not choose properly, the object of that person's wish will be "bad." Thus, the real good will not be the object of wish in a case such as this. Put another way, if the real good is the object of wish, wish takes a

[3] *NE*, Book III, Ch. 4, 1113a18
[4] *NE*, Book VI, Ch. 2,1139a31
[5] *NE*, Book VI, Ch. 2, 1139a33
[6] *NE*, Book III, Ch. 4, 1113a25

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natural object and not everyone will wish for it. This good is objective, and therefore it is possible for a person, namely a vicious person, to be wrong about it. Therefore, the real good, although it is the object of the virtuous man's wish, is not the object of wish in all cases; i.e., the object of a vicious person's wish is not the real good.

On the other hand, Aristotle explains that if we suggest that the apparent good is the object of wish, we must admit that wish has no natural object, "but only what seems good to each man." The apparent good brings with it the character of subjectivism, since "different things appear good to different people…even contrary things."[7] It is helpful to think of the following example: In certain cases, the true color of something will be seen by the healthy person, but the sick person, when looking at the same thing, will see a different color, which is in fact not the real color; it is merely an appearance that is given rise to by the person's unhealthy state. Again, Aristotle means the real good (something that the virtuous person is capable of seeing) is an objective good, but the apparent good is that which an unhealthy or vicious person mistakenly sees as good because that person lacks the state of virtue that would make them capable of seeing the real good.

Yet, there is more to Aristotle's characterization of the apparent and real good in *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book III, chapter 4. Aristotle goes on to present the passage that follows:

> In the case of bodies…the things that are in truth wholesome are wholesome for bodies which are in good condition, while for those that are diseased other things are wholesome – or bitter or sweet or hot or heavy, and so on.[8]

Here, the wholesome represents that which is good for the body. When a person is healthy, certain things will be good for that person (e.g. particular kinds of food). When one is sick, something different will be good for that person (e.g. suppose the person needs to have an infected limb amputated). However, what may appear to be good to the sick person can be something distinctly other than what is good for that person when that person is sick, and also different from what is good for that person when that person is healthy: For instance, the sick person may, in a delirious state, refuse to allow the amputation of a limb – it may appear good to the person to keep the limb. Therefore, it is important to notice that in this case, there are two sorts of relative good (that which is good for the sick person and that which appears to be good to the sick person). Furthermore, these two sorts of relative good are distinct from the real good, which is something that is good for the healthy person.

Thus far, then, we have seen two senses in which Aristotle contrasts certain kinds of relative good with the real good. In the first case of apparent good that is presented in *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book III, Chapter 4, the apparent good (that which appears to be good because it is incorrectly thought to be the real good) is relative insofar as the various objects that appear to be

[7] *NE*, Book III, Ch. 4, 1113a23
[8] *NE*, Book III, Ch. 4, 1113a28

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good to each particular person are the apparent good. In the second case, concerning the 'wholesome,' Aristotle has presented us with more than one kind of relative good that contrasts with the real good. He distinguishes between something that is actually good in certain circumstances (e.g. good for a person that is unhealthy), but is not the real good (e.g. is not good for the healthy person) and an apparent good, which is something that appears good to the sick person. Furthermore, in his *Metaphysics*, Book XII, Ch 7, Aristotle suggests that there is another sense of apparent good:

> The primary objects of desire and of thought are the same. For the apparent good is the object of appetite, and the real good is the primary object of rational wish. But desire is consequent on opinion rather than opinion on desire; for the thinking is the starting point. And thought is moved by the object of thought.[9]

Here, the apparent good is the object of appetite (*epithumia*), and the real good is the object of wish (*boulesis* – conceptualized desire[10]). Thus, the sense in which the apparent good is used in the above passage is different than the ways we have discussed it used in *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book III, Chapter 4. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book III, Chapter 4, the object of wish qua *boulesis* is the apparent good – not because it is something that appears good in the sensuous mode – but because it is something that appears to be good insofar as it is conceptually but incorrectly *thought* to be good. The apparent good, given the characterization in the above passage from the *Metaphysics*, is the pleasant (insofar as it appears to be good in a sensuous mode – insofar as it is pleasant to someone, as it were), and this conflicts with the way in which we understand the object of wish qua *boulesis*. The apparent good – characterized in this way, as that which appears to be good in a sensuous mode – is not the object of wish qua *boulesis*, but is, instead, is the object of desire qua *epithumia*. As we have seen, then, in the above passage from the *Metaphysics*, the pleasant (that which appears good in the sensuous mode) is the apparent good, and is the object of *epithumia*, while the real good is the object of *boulesis*. Therefore, at this point, we are left with two kinds of apparent good: that which is the object of *boulesis* in *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book III, Chapter 4, and that which is the object of *epithumia* in *Metaphysics*, Book XII, Ch 7.

Yet, things become even murkier. As we have seen, contrary to what is presented in the above passage from the *Metaphysics* (that the real good is the object of *boulesis*), Aristotle suggests, early on in *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book

[9] *Metaphysics*, Book XII, Chapter 7, 1072a27

[10] Cases when deliberation takes place are cases when the subject term of a mental predication (a "mental act relating together two subordinate mental acts in a peculiar way") must be conceptualized. I borrow this interpretation of conceptualized desire from Thomas Tuozzo's "Conceptualized and Unconceptualized Desire in Aristotle." He explains, "What makes a mental predication a desire is its conative predicate." Most desires "share the same, unconceptualized conative predicate: the pleasant. The desire which is different in kind, from all these, and which, as desire, is characteristically human, contains a conceptualized conative predicate:" The "mental exercise of the concept 'good.'" For a thorough discussion of this material, see Thomas Tuozzo's "Conceptualized and Unconceptualized Desire in Aristotle," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 32 (1994).

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III, Chapter 4, that the apparent good is the object of *boulesis*. However, the end of the chapter, Aristotle goes on to suggest that the pleasant – something that cannot be the object of *boulesis* – is the apparent good. He writes:

> In most things the error seems to be due to pleasure; for it appears a good when it is not. We therefore choose the pleasant as a good, and avoid pain as an evil.[11]

This passage suggests that the majority of people have the wrong conception of the good. They confuse the good with the pleasant because the pull of their desires (in this case, the influence of the pleasant, appetite, *epithumia*) has affected their conception of the good. With this passage, and the above arguments which show that Aristotle distinguishes two different kinds of apparent good in mind, how is it, exactly, that we are to understand the apparent and real good in *Nicomachean Ethics,* Book III, Chapter 4?

We are now in a position to discuss the extent to which feelings of pleasure affect perceptions of value for Aristotle, and the relationship between feelings of pleasure and beliefs about the good. I shall proceed with an eye to some related literature, and in doing so, I aim to shed light on the original query regarding the role of the apparent and real good in *Nicomachean Ethics,* Book III, Chapter 4.

The Relationship between Pleasure and the Good

Consider the following passage from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, Chapter 8:

> Lovers of what is noble find pleasant the things that are by nature pleasant; and virtuous actions are such, so that these are pleasant for such men as well as in their own nature. Their life, therefore, has no further need of pleasure as a sort of adventitious charm, but has its pleasure in itself.[12]

M.F. Burnyeat, in "Aristotle and Learning to be Good," suggests that, for Aristotle, the things we love, are in this sense, the things in which we take pleasure. Aristotle does indeed argue that "virtuous actions must be in themselves pleasant,"[13] and this, I suggest, gives us reason to believe that the pleasant should, insofar as it is truly pleasant, be understood as a kind of impetus toward the real good. As Burnyeat explains, "there is learning to enjoy something, and it is not sharply distinct from learning that the thing is enjoyable."[14] By learning, Aristotle means not only acquiring information, but experiencing a thing for oneself. When we experience the pleasure, we begin to

[11] *NE,* Book III, Ch. 4, 1113b
[12] *NE,* Book I, Ch. 8, 1099a13
[13] *NE* Book I, Ch. 8, 1099a20
[14] M. Burnyeat, "Aristotle on Learning to be Good," in A. Rorty ed, *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* (Berkeley 1980) pp. 76

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cognize it as good, and we can learn to recognize the good. We can then go on to learn to appreciate something properly, in a way other than merely taking pleasure in the thing. We can learn to take pleasure in sensuous things in a temperate way. For example, Aristotle states that "all men enjoy in some way good food and wine and sexual intercourse, but not all men do as they ought."[15] Burnyeat sheds further light on the matter:

> Aristotle holds that to learn to do what is virtuous, to make it a habit or second nature to one, is among other things to learn to enjoy doing it, to come to take pleasure – the appropriate pleasure – in doing it. It is in the light of whether a man enjoys or fails to enjoy virtuous actions that we tell whether he has formed the right disposition toward them.[16]

The virtuous person enjoys practicing virtues for that person's own sake. The practice of virtue requires actions that can only be enjoyed if they are seen as noble and virtuous, and if the agent delights in them as such. There is a sense in which the pleasant is truly good: the really or truly pleasant (in contrast with that which merely appears to be pleasant to someone) is truly good. For example, certain foods that are truly good for the healthy person are truly pleasant, but what characterizes these foods as truly good for the healthy person is their being consumed in the right amount. Eating must be a noble and virtuous action in which the appropriate pleasure is taken by a virtuous person. Eating, for this person, is truly pleasurable. So the pleasant can be good, if it is approached properly: It must be enjoyed temperately and delighted in by a virtuous agent who sees, as it were, the real good. The virtuous person sees the real good and experiences true pleasure in noble action, and ignoble actions do not even appear pleasant to that person. Burnyeat explains that this "is why his enjoyment or lack of it is the test of whether he really has the virtues."[17] Consider the following passage from *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II, chapter 4:

> The agent must be in a certain condition when he does [virtuous actions]; in the first place he must have knowledge, secondly he must choose the acts, and choose them for their own sakes, and thirdly his action must proceed from a firm and unchangeable character.[18]

Aristotle tells us that it is common to all virtuous actions that they are chosen because they are noble.[19] People who have been brought up or trained the right way will take pleasure in the right things – they "acquire a taste" for noble actions. Those who chose to pursue the apparent good – to follow the feelings of the moment will find no enjoyment in noble actions. Thus, that which is pleasant to the vicious person will be distinct from that which is truly pleasant.

[15] *NE*, Book VII, Ch. 14, 1154a17
[16] Burnyeat, pp. 77
[17] Burnyeat, pp. 77
[18] *NE* Book II, Ch. 4, 1105a31
[19] *NE* Book II

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I suggest, then, that we can draw an analogy between this characterization of the way in which feelings of pleasure affect perceptions of value and the case of the wholesome from *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book III, chapter 4 in the following way: The truly virtuous person sees the real good, and to this person, ignoble actions will not appear pleasant. To this person, truly pleasant things will be pleasant. This is analogous to the way in which truly good things are good or wholesome to the healthy person. The apparent good is that which is mistaken for the real good by someone who chooses to pursue only that which appears to be pleasant. This is analogous to the sick, or perhaps delirious, person to whom something absurd may seem or appear to be good. Lastly, analogous with the sort of relative good that is good only in certain circumstances (e.g. the amputating of an infected limb is good for the sick person) is the sort of thing that is good for the continent person, who indeed does what is truly good, but does not yet see the real good.

Still, understanding the apparent good as Aristotle presents it in *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book III, chapter 4 will require that we look more closely at the pleasant. How is it that the pleasant can be the apparent good if the apparent good is the object of *boulesis*? As we have seen, the problem with the pleasant is that it can be good insofar as it is truly pleasant, but it appears good (pleasant to someone) even when it is not, and people choose to pursue it only on the grounds of its apparent goodness. In the *Eudemian Ethics*, Aristotle explains:

> The object of desire and wish is either the good or the apparent good. Now this is why the pleasant is an object of desire; for it is something that appears good. For while some people have this opinion of it, to others it appears good, even if they do not have this opinion of it. For appearance and opinion do not reside in the same part of the soul (1235b25).

The pleasant, here, is again distinguished as one kind of apparent good. The key to solving the problem lies in the distinction between perception and thought. It seems, then, that in Book III, Chapter 4 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle uses the apparent good as the object of *boulesis* since it is in attempting to fill our desire (*boulesis*) for the good, that we think something is good, and if we are mistaken, then we have achieved only the apparent good. This is the sense in which the apparent good is the object of *boulesis* in *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book III, Chapter 4. If, on the other hand, we do indeed think of (or see as the virtuous person sees) the real good, the real good is the object of *boulesis*. This is the sense in which the real good is the object of *boulesis* in the passage above from the *Metaphysics*. The apparent good is the object of appetite in that passage in the sense that, there, Aristotle is referring to things that appear good in a sensuous mode when he discusses the apparent good. It is through perception that we experience the pleasant, and that pleasant things appear good to us. Hence, in the *Metaphysics*, the pleasant is the apparent good, and the object of *epithumia*. When truly perceived, the pleasant is a nonconceptualized cognition of the good. Therefore, the pleasant, which involves a nonconceptual mental experience of the good through sense perception, is also an object of *boulesis* in *Nicomachean Ethics* Book III,

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Chapter 4. Depending upon whether or not the pleasure in question is something that is truly pleasant or something that is merely apparently pleasant to someone, it can be either the real or the apparent good. Furthermore, in "Conceptualized and Unconceptualized Desire in Aristotle,"[20] Tom Tuozzo explains:

> Boulesis…requires at least one concept, that of the good…Th[e] nonconceptualized cognition of the good [sense perception] serve s as the experimental basis for [a] child's coming to possess the concept 'good.' It would seem natural for [a] child's first boulesis to have much the same objects as its epithumiai.[21]

This would explain, then, one case in which a pleasant thing could be either an object of *boulesis* or an object of *epithumia*. For Aristotle, the fundamental cause of motion is desire, and an object of desire is something that is cognized. Consider the following passage from Aristotle's *On the Motion of Animals*:

> For all living things both move and are moved with some object, so that this is the term of all their movement, the end, that is, in view. Now we see that the living creature is moved by intellect, imagination, purpose, wish, and appetite. And all these are reducible to mind and desire. For both imagination and sensation are on common ground with mind, since all three are faculties of judgment though differing according to distinctions stated elsewhere.[22]

Cognition of the good can occur in sense-perception, imagination, or thought. Tuozzo explains that "In Aristotle's theory of action, it is the cognition of the good that initiates motion; here [Aristotle] tells us that the form cognition of the good takes at the sensory level is precisely perception of the pleasant. The unconceptualized mental experience of the good is the experience of being pleased."[23] Thus, at the level of the pleasant, the mental experience of the good is unconceptualized, but at the level of thought, the mental experience of the good is conceptualized. The pleasant, allowing us to recognize the good, can be an impetus to a person's eventually seeing the real good.

Our original discrepancy in was that if the pleasant is good (insofar as it appears good sensually and insofar as we perceive it to be pleasant) this seems to conflict with the object of wish qua boulesis, or conceptualized desire (something that is thought to be good). However in light of the fact that there exists a kind of case in which a pleasant thing could be either an object of boulesis or an object of epithumia, this inconsistency dissolves. Although the apparent good can be the object of boulesis, this is not inconsistent with the

[20]Thomas M. Tuozzo, "Conceptualized and Unconceptualized Desire in Aristotle," pp. 525-49.
[21]Tuozzo, pp. 354
[22]Aristotle, *On the Motion of Animals*, Part 6, trans. A.S.L. Farquharson, http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/motion_animals.html
[23]Tuozzo, pp. 345

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apparent good also being the pleasant, insofar as being pleased involves a nonconceptual cognition of the good.

Therefore, the above analysis of various ways in which Aristotle characterizes the apparent good in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and of both the extent to which feelings of pleasure affect perceptions of value for Aristotle, and the relationship between feelings of pleasure and beliefs about the good between feelings of pleasure, has, at the very least, shed considerable light on our original question as to how, exactly, the apparent good should be understood in the Nicomachean Ethics, Book III, Chapter 4.

The idea that a person first comes to understand the concept good through the pleasant, gives rise to the need for moral education because a person will need to progress from this stage of coming to understand the good, and eventually see more than merely the apparent good. This is the reason that a person must have established the right relationship between feelings of pleasure and beliefs about the good. One must make virtuous activity a habit and learn to enjoy it. This means one must properly appreciate the relationship that pleasure has with the good; a person must learn to see the real good, to habitually train oneself to be in the right condition to choose virtuous activity, which is in itself pleasant and is chosen for its own sake.

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