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GILES PEARSON, *Aristotle on Desire* (Cambridge:
Cambridge University Press, 2012),
pp. ix + 276

A. W. Price

I : INTRODUCTION

Giles Pearson identifies three considerations that have motivated the topic of his book: first, Aristotle's views on desire have been neglected or misunderstood; secondly, they are central or relevant to his accounts of many other things; thirdly, desire remains a crucial concept within contemporary philosophy. While the final two chapters open up wider perspectives, I think it fair to say that in general the first consideration is dominant. What most attract his interest are cruxes that are hard to resolve, and debatable attempts to resolve them. This goes with some selectivity of focus. He remarks (p. 203), 'Aristotle identifies the *orektikon* [faculty of desire] as the part or capacity of us in virtue of which we are moved to intentional action', citing *De Anima* III 9-10, and referring back to an earlier section (ch. 1, § 5) which was in fact largely given to a relatively minute discussion of how specifically desire relates to locomotion. There is no discussion of how Aristotle's failure ever to focus upon *intention* must affect his view of how desires issue in action. Not very much can be said about choice [*prohairesis*], defined in the *NE* as 'deliberative desire of things in one's power' (III 3, 1113a10-11), without a treatment of deliberation, though its relation to wish [*boulēsis*] is discussed judiciously (pp. 183-8). The upshot is austere, but also heroic: it is precisely *problems* that attract Pearson, and in proportion to their intractability. He will hold the attention of those to whom at least their context is familiar; others may wonder why we pay Aristotle so much attention, and may be advised to turn to authors who take wider views and pursue paths with less pitfalls.

Thus Pearson's book will best suit those readers who are least easily persuaded; it will help them greatly in identifying problems, and selecting solutions. He discusses what can count as an object of desire, how desire relates to the good, how Aristotle distinguishes three species of desire and how widely each species extends, how some desires count as rational while others do not, whether desires are explanatory of action, and whether the desires of a virtuous agent can stand in tension. I shall raise some points arising with two of Aristotle's species of *orexis* [desire], viz. *epithumia* [appetite], and *boulēsis* [commonly translated as 'wish'], not in criticism of the book, but in order to exemplify how it will stimulate alternative responses.

II : APPETITES AND THE GOOD

Appetites are primarily directed at the physical pleasures of touch and taste that are the field of the virtue of temperance. Yet the category is extended to take in desires for a wider range of bodily pleasures, and perhaps even for an indefinite range of higher activities – to the extent that these are pursued for the pleasure they bring. One uncertainty, which has been much debated recently (with reference to Plato as much as to Aristotle), is whether even appetites pursue their objects under the guise of the good. Aristotle makes a familiar contrast between wishes that aim

at the good (for references, see p. 140 n. 2), and appetites that aim at the pleasant (see p. 91 n.). And yet he also says things such as the following: (a) ‘the pleasant is an *orekton* [object of desire], for it is an apparent good’ (*EE* VII 2, 1235b26-7); (b) ‘the *orekton* is always either the good or the apparent good’ (*DA* III 10, 433a28-9); (c) ‘what is immediately pleasant appears both pleasant without qualification and good without qualification’ (*DA* III 433b8-9). Pearson raises a difficulty for those who orient even appetite ultimately towards the good: Aristotle cannot make the good at once the object of *all* desire, and the *distinguishing* object of wish. His preferred solution well focuses upon what we mean by ‘good’ (a question that has received too little attention in this context). He proposes to distinguish a ‘narrow sense’ of ‘good’ that correlates it with wish, and a ‘broad sense’ that correlates it with desire of any kind, rational or non-rational (p. 71). The narrow sense he links, with accidental inelegance, to ‘objects of serious concern’ that are ‘distinctively human concerns’ (p. 164); the broad sense applies to any natural object of human desire, including innocent pleasures pursued by appetite.

This is an attractive solution, and merits attention; yet it faces the objection that Aristotle must then be read as switching senses without warning, on occasion even recurrently within a few lines (as at *EE* VII 2, 1235b18-30). While no path here is without its puddles, this might lead one to look instead to remarks like this: ‘In most things the error [about the really fine or pleasant] seems to be due to pleasure; for it appears a good when it is not. We therefore select the pleasant as a good, and avoid pain as an evil’ (*NE* III 4, 1113a33-b2). As Pearson agrees (pp. 82-3), that identifies how judgement and wish become corrupted, and not how appetite is oriented by nature. This may suggest, as an alternative to be explored, a series of glosses upon (a) to (c) that reserve an association with the good for wish.

(a) comes immediately after the phrase ‘the object of desire and of wish’ (1235b25-6), where the *kai* is restrictive rather than conjunctive (as is idiomatic with *kai* as it isn’t with ‘and’), and so may be explaining why pleasure too becomes an object of *wish*.

(b) and (c) both need to be scrutinized within their context. Take that of (b) first:

nous does not appear to move without desire (for wish is a desire, and whenever a thing is moved in accordance with reasoning, it is moved also in accordance with wish), but desire also moves contrary to reasoning; for appetite is a form of desire. *nous* is all correct; but desire and *phantasia* are correct or incorrect. Therefore it is always the object of desire that moves, but this is either the good or the apparent good (433a22-9).

(b) may mean that non-illusory pleasures that are natural objects of desire show up as being good, without implying that even appetite pursues them *as* good; for it may be that it is when an object of appetite becomes also an object of wish that it presents itself as an apparent good. Now in context there is an obvious difficulty: when an appetite moves an agent to act *contrary* to reasoning, how can its object become an object of rational desire? Yet there is a distinction to help us, not between things ‘good’ in different senses, but between what presents itself to wish as *good* (*NE* V 9, 1136b7-8), and what presents itself to choice as *best* (cf. *NE* III 3, 1112b17). We may take Aristotle to have in mind here appetites which have as their objects pleasures that are natural and even necessary (VII 4, 1147b23-4). An agent who counts as *acritic* without qualification (*haplōs*, b32-3, 1148a10-11) pursues to excess things that, being naturally pleasant in themselves, remain *good in a way* even on occasions when they are not choiceworthy (since the context makes them excessive or inopportune). Hence they can become objects of an *idle wish* even as they are rejected by the choice that derives from an end which is the object of a

practical wish that has generated deliberation concluding in a negative overall practical judgement.¹

The context of (c) I quote with Irwin's punctuation:²

Desires arise that are contrary to one another, and this happens whenever the *logos* and appetites are contrary, and this arises with those who have a perception of time; for *nous* tells us to hold back on account of what will ensue later, while appetite tells us <to act> on account of what is immediate. (For what is immediately pleasant appears both pleasant without qualification and good without qualification, because of not seeing what will ensue later.) (433b5-10)

It is crucial to hold these two sentences apart, since the first describes the general predicament of agents who have a perception of time that exposes them to mental conflict in cases when it extends well into the future, whereas the second describes the particular situation of agents who, being unable to look far into the future, are free of such conflict. Pearson takes these agents to be lower animals who lack a perception of time; but how then can they have a conception of the 'absolutely pleasant' and 'absolutely good' (which is how he translates the phrases)? His answer has to treat the text rather freely: 'What is immediately pleasant for these creatures *has the force* of something that would be absolutely pleasant and absolutely good *for us*' (p. 74). It seems to me easier to distinguish 'have a perception of time', which applies to all human beings, from 'see what will ensue later', which they are sometimes unable to do. We can then understand that, when men are ignorant of long-term consequences, they tend to view what is immediately pleasant both as pleasant without qualification, and as good without qualification (which, as Irwin comments, is an additional error), and hence to choose it erroneously as best in context, because they fail to predict its later costs. If this is right, Aristotle's concern here is with a distortion of judgement and motivation by human fallibility.

All I would conclude is this: the interpreter may have alternatives.

III : THE RATIONALITY OF WISHES

Wishes are in a way a wide category. Their objects can be the ends that generate a search for means that terminates in making a choice (*prohairesis*). They can also be things that be outside one's control (as that a particular athlete or actor should win the prize), or even humanly impossible (as that one should live forever).³ Wish is distinguished from both appetite and anger (*thumos*) by being a *rational* desire. But what does this mean? One possibility is that desires are rational, just like actions (cf. *NE* III 1, 1111a33-b1), if they arise *out of* reasoning. Pearson argues against this that appetites, and other desires classified as 'non-rational', can, on occasion,

¹ This seems to me clearly the right thing to say of a pleasure that is inopportune; cf. my *Virtue and Reason in Plato and Aristotle* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2011), p. 51 n. 28. I concede that it is more questionable of a pleasure, however natural in kind, that is excessive; however, the agent may idly wish to pursue it *without* excess. An alternative proposal, to the same general effect, is that such an object *appears* good to the agent's rational part without his *holding* it to be good; so Ben Morison within his notice of Jessica Moss's *Aristotle on the Apparent Good* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 'Book Notes: Aristotle', *Phronesis* 58 (2013), pp. 307-8 of 301-18.

² See his *Aristotle's First Principles* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 366 with pp. 597-8 n. 20.

³ However – as Pearson also notes (p. 5) – the standard translation of *boulēsis* as 'wish' is unhappy in many respects, of which these are two: the term *boulēsis* is never applied to wishing that something *had happened*; and the possibility of idle desires serves in the *Ethics* to distinguish *boulēseis* from choices, and not from appetites or other irrational desires, which may equally be idle.

be prompted by reasoning also. He also notes, though very briefly and in a footnote (p. 185 n.), that wishes can relate to goals that are basic and not derived, and that they are crucial in *prompting* deliberation. Instead, he proposes that ‘a desire is rational if grasping its object requires one to be a rational creature’ (p. 190). This faces the obvious objection that appetites can take on highly sophisticated objects (such as a particular variety of wine, p. 191), and anger can arise from the sophisticated perception of a slight. Pearson’s response is that what counts here is ‘not the specific content or particular object of the desire’, but ‘the general or basic end of the desire’ (p. 192), which it shares with all desires of the same type. The basic ends of appetite and anger – pleasure and retaliation – are accessible to the lower animals, but not the *good*, in the narrow sense, that is the distinguishing end of wish. This may seem artificial, and yet Pearson very nicely compares how, within the function argument of *NE* I 7, Aristotle rules out perception as an element within the human good on the ground that we share it generically with the lower animals, even though many human perceptions (notably of incidental objects, such as ‘son of Diares’, *DA* II 6, 418a21) may be distinctively human. And yet Aristotle can also observe that *both* parts of the human soul to which he assigns desires are distinctively human (*EE* II 1, 1219b37-8), though he counts one of them as non-rational (e.g., 1220a10). So it *may* matter for him that appetite and anger as general types of response are shared with the lower animals; and yet his classification of them as non-rational will be better grounded if he can appeal to more than that thought.

Perhaps one should return to a familiar Aristotelian thesis: in the *Rhetoric* (I 10, 1369a2-4), he associates the notion of ‘rational desire’ with the fact (also stated at *NE* V 9, 1136b7-8) that one can wish for a thing only if one *thinks* it to be good. Now the relation between *pathē* and beliefs is debated. Some even hold that *pathē* depend upon perception and imagination, and only contingently and indirectly upon belief. That seems to me overstated: Aristotle’s account of *pathē* in *Rhet.* II is full of references to associated beliefs, and never seems to envisage that, for instance, one man could be genuinely angry without *thinking* that he had been slighted. However, the statement that I cannot wish for a thing without thinking it good is not paralleled by any statement that I cannot have an appetite for a thing without thinking it pleasant, or be angry with a man without thinking that it is incumbent on me to put up a fight (cf. *NE* VII 6, 1148a32-b1). Rather, just as the sun may look a foot across even to a man who knows its real size (*DA* III 3, 428b3-4), so a man may feel an appetite for what he knows not really to be appetizing, or suffer a fit of anger even when he knows that it is unmerited. Aristotle associates all desires with evaluations of one kind or another, but he never requires *evaluative belief* for appetite or anger as he does for wish.

It would further seem that, even if we admit a broad sense of ‘good’ that wish attaches to its own good, and appetite to pleasure, this fails to constitute a new target in either case. Aristotle must have in mind not only that a man never wishes for what he doesn’t think good, but that, when he wishes for a thing, this is *because* he thinks it good. Analogous in the case of appetite would be that, when he has an appetite for a thing, this is *because* he imagines it as pleasant. Now how are we to think of ‘good’ in the broad sense? Does it connote what is *generic* as opposed to what is *specific*, or what is *determinable* as opposed to what is (relatively) *determinate*? Aristotle’s anti-Platonic remarks about the semantics of ‘good’ (*NE* I 6, 1096b21-9) would appear to exclude the first. So it would seem that, if appetite conceives of its object as good, this *adds no further goal* to its conceiving it as pleasant. Equally if wish conceives of its object as determinably good, this adds no further goal to its conceiving it as determinately good. This makes a vacuity of the thesis that there is a broad sense of ‘good’ that both wish and

appetite apply to their distinctive objects (though the thesis might still be needed simply as a way of accommodating certain Aristotelian texts). Thus the alleged ‘good’ of appetite differs from the familiar ‘good’ of wish in being not motivating but idle. Which could further indicate that wish is more rational than appetite.

What else might we say to privilege wish? One possibility is to relate a man’s wishes to his conception of *eudaimonia*. This may be implausible of idle wishes (though Pearson tries to make it less so), but true of wishes of a kind to motivate deliberation for the sake of choice. For there is explicit evidence (though the matter is debated) that all actions – but deliberate actions must be meant – aim ultimately at *eudaimonia* (e.g., *NE* I 12, 1102a2-3), which is also the final goal of choice (VI 2, 1139b3-5). Choice has a double object, being *of this* and *for the sake of that* (*EE* II 1, 1227b36-7): an act is chosen for the sake of an end that is the object of a practical wish. Thus *eudaimonia* becomes the ultimate end of Aristotelian wishes (other than idle), choices, and actions (if chosen). This could then help, within practical contexts, to clarify Pearson’s proposal that wishes aim at the good in a narrow sense that connotes ‘serious’ and ‘distinctively human’ concerns (p. 164). However, Pearson is himself resistant. He recognizes that the role of *eudaimonia* in guiding choice and action can be variously conceived. On one view, which Broadie labels the ‘Grand End’ view, the agent consciously regulates how he acts according to a blueprint of the good life. Pearson finds that tending to absurdity (p. 153). On another view, of which we meet variants in Broadie and McDowell, the agent has an implicit conception of *eudaimonia* that is *embodied* in his choices and actions. At least if he has a fixed character, there will be a pattern to his preferences that makes his life of a piece; and Aristotle may have this in mind when he equates *eudaimonia* not just with *acting*, but with *living*, well. He will then select options not just in a patterned way, but with a concern to live a life that he can stand by and answer for. He will thus have a conception of *eudaimonia* that is not idle, even if it is in many ways inarticulate.

Why does this fail to satisfy Pearson? He gives several grounds, of which all deserve attention, but none, to my mind, is cogent. The most substantial arises out of his own form of words: ‘On this view, *boulēseis* need not make direct reference to the agent’s conception of *eudaimonia* – indeed, they can have any number of specific ends – just so long as they reflect that conception, that is, flow or stem from it in some way’ (pp. 143-4). He rightly objects to this that if, as is required for full virtue in contrast to self-control, non-rational desires ‘obey’ and ‘harmonize with’ reason (*NE* I 13), they too will ‘flow or stem from’ such a conception – and we are no closer to identifying what makes wishes distinctively rational. However, the wording is Pearson’s own, and his reasoning arguably misdirected. He had earlier written more felicitously of how choices and actions that display a character ‘amount’, when taken together, ‘to a more or less coherent conception of *eudaimonia*’, even in the absence of ‘any explicit grasp of that conception’ (p. 142). Now *amounting to* is surely a closer relation than *reflecting* (or *flowing* or *stemming from*). Pearson lists alongside choosing and acting undergoing certain emotional states, viz. *pathē*, as if in anticipation of his later argument. Yet that seems out of place, for *pathē* do not help to make up a conception of *eudaimonia*, even when they fall into line behind one.⁴ How an agent wishes (non-idly), chooses, and acts goes to *constitute* his conception of how to live. What Aristotle counts as rational desires, whether they be wishes or choices, are thus privileged by their internal relation to a conception of *eudaimonia*. This seems to me a

⁴ It is irrelevant to this point that an agent who does the right thing conflictedly cannot count as acting *well*, since his action is impeded.

promising way of fleshing out at once their rationality, and their relation to significant, and distinctively human, concerns.

IV : CONCLUSION

Such comments should not be interpreted as reservations about Pearson's intelligent and tireless book; rather, they are illustrations of the impact that it deserves to have within, perhaps, a fairly narrow circle of readers.⁵ It more than earns its place even among the continuing plethora of treatments of Aristotle's ethics and moral psychology. Others may agree with its conclusions more or less than I; no one who is ready to read it should fail to benefit greatly from the experience.

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⁵ This review has been greatly assisted by comments made by Pearson upon a sequence of drafts; where he and I still diverge, it is in opinion, and (I know in my own case) without confidence.