Aristotle on Desire, Its Objects, and Varieties

A. W. Price
Department of Philosophy, Birkbeck College, London, UK
a.price@bbk.ac.uk.

Giles Pearson


I Introduction: Giles Pearson identifies three considerations that have motivated him in selecting 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 cruces 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 fewer 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 desire [orexis], viz. appetite [epithumia], and wish [boulēsis], not in criticism of the book, but in order to exemplify how it will stimulate thought.

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); and (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