In both of his main discussions of pleasure (in books VII and X of our Nicomachean Ethics) Aristotle associates pleasure very closely with a special kind of ἐνέγρεια, a word which I shall translate (following Ross)¹ as ‘activity’. In book VII the special activities in question are said to be those that are activities of the natural state (τὴς κατὰ φύσιν ἔξως) and are unimpeded (ἀνεμπόδιστοι). In book X the relevant activities are said to be those that are complete (τελείαι). It may well be argued that this shift should be understood as more a change in terminology than a substantial change of doctrine, and I think that this is probably correct, though I shall not argue the point here. What does appear to be more like a change of doctrine is the fact that in book VII Aristotle claims that a pleasure simply is an activity of the special kind, whereas in book X we find no such identification. Instead, book X, which speaks of ‘complete’ activities, says that pleasure is what completes them, and there is some dispute over how this is to be taken. (Roughly, on one interpretation – which I take to be correct – the fact that a certain activity is pleasurable just is the fact that it is complete; on the rival interpretation, it is an ‘extra’ fact, but one that is invariably present when the activity is complete.) For my purpose, I do not need to enter into this dispute, for on either view the doctrine of book X is that there is pleasure where and only where there is a complete activity. But what does Aristotle mean, in this context, by a ‘complete activity’ (τελεία ἐνέγρεια)? He does indeed tell us something of what he here means by ‘completeness’, but he gives no explanation of ‘activity’, and we have to conjecture his intentions from hints and probabilities. But if my own conjecture is right then Aristotle’s account of pleasure is even more surprising than is usually taken to be.

I shall concentrate mainly upon the account in book X, since it is fuller, more clearly organised, and (on the whole) better argued. (It is also, I

¹ I shall generally cite Ross’s translation, except where I wish to disagree with it.

believe, the later account; but nothing in my discussion will rely upon that view.) At a crucial point I shall need to invoke a claim that is only made in book VII, but we may anyway begin with book X. In chapters 1-3 Aristotle has introduced the topic, set out some of the opinions on it, and discussed and criticised various arguments that are given for them. Then in chapter 4 he makes a fresh start, aiming to clarify 'what pleasure is, or what kind of thing it is', and the discussion goes like this.

Sight, he begins, is complete in form at any time (sc. at which it is occurring), and the same, he says, holds for pleasure. For that reason, pleasure is not, as I shall say, a process (νινης. One might equally translate 'a change' or—following Ross—'a movement'). A process has a goal (τέλος), takes time to complete, and can only be said to be complete (τελείος) in the whole of that time or at the end of it. In any part of that time, only a part of the whole process is completed, and that part is not the same in form as the whole. This is illustrated first with the building of a temple and then with walking. A part of a walk may itself be a walk, but Aristotle will not allow that it is the same in form as the whole, since it is part of the form of any movement that it proceeds from one place to another, and the parts of a movement will not have the same termini as the whole. So Aristotle concludes that pleasure differs from a process in this respect: it is one of those things that are whole and complete in form (sc. at any time at which it is occurring). He goes on to observe that one might reach the same result by noting that one can be said to be pleased at a moment of time, rather than during a stretch of time, whereas (according to him) this cannot be said of a process. For example, one cannot say that a thing was moving at a moment, but only that it was moving during some stretch of time. Finally, he adds that since pleasure is something whole and lacking parts there is no coming-into-being (γενοης) of it, just as there is no coming-into-being of sight, or of a point, or of a unit. (Aristotle always construes a coming-into-being as a process, taking place over a stretch of time, during which first one part is brought into being and then another.) (1174a13-b14)

Notice that the only positive characterisation of pleasure so far is that it is something whole, lacking parts, and hence complete in form at any time. In this it is like sight, but also like a point and a unit. Presumably the comparison with a point and a unit is not intended as specially revealing, but as we read on we find that the comparison with sight seems rather more relevant.

Aristotle goes on to say that perception is an activity, and every mode of perception may occur completely (τελειως), namely when the faculty of

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2 See e.g. Physics VI 234a24-b9, 237a11-17, 239a23-b4.

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