

## MISKAWAYH ON PLEASURE

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**Abstract.** This paper provides an analysis and translation of a previously edited, but otherwise unstudied work by Miskawayh (d. 1030) entitled *On Pleasures and Pains* (*Fī al-Laddāt wa-al-ālām*). After a brief orientation regarding the Aristotelian account of pleasure in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which is Miskawayh's main source, the theory of pleasure set out in *On Pleasures and Pains* is compared to the discussion of pleasure in Miskawayh's better known *Refinement of Character* (*Tahdīb al-aḥlāq*). Despite considerable harmony between the two texts, their treatments of pleasure differ in that the *Refinement* accepts, whereas *On Pleasures and Pains* rejects, the "restoration" theory of pleasure of Plato's *Timaeus*.

**Résumé.** Cet article propose une analyse et une traduction d'un ouvrage de Miskawayh (m. 1030) déjà édité mais non étudié par ailleurs, et intitulé *Des plaisirs et des douleurs* (*Fī al-Laddāt wa-al-ālām*). Après une étude préliminaire concernant la doctrine aristotélicienne du plaisir dans l'*Éthique à Nicomaque*, qui est la principale source de Miskawayh, la doctrine du plaisir présentée dans le traité *Des plaisirs et des douleurs* est comparée à la discussion du plaisir dans l'ouvrage mieux connu de Miskawayh *La réforme des mœurs* (*Tahdīb al-aḥlāq*). En dépit de l'harmonie globale qu'il y a entre les deux œuvres, leur traitement du plaisir diffère en ce que *La réforme* accepte la conception du plaisir comme restauration issue du *Timée* de Platon, alors que le traité *Des plaisirs et des douleurs* la rejette.

You do not have to be a Benthamite utilitarian to think that reflection on ethics ought to involve reflection on pleasure. It was already at the center of ethical reflection in antiquity, occupying a prominent place in such Platonic dialogues as the *Gorgias* and *Philebus*, and in Aristotle's *Ethics* which contains not one, but two substantial discussions of pleasure. Plato and Aristotle of course reject hedonism, while also making a place for pleasure in the best life. Drawing on Greek sources, authors of the formative period of philosophy in Arabic (*i.e.* up to the time of Avicenna) duly devote considerable attention to the subject of pleasure. They tend to condemn the lower, bodily pleasures derived from such things as food and sex, but follow Plato and Aristotle in recognizing a higher sort of pleasure linked to intellectual contemplation. The highest kind of pleasure can be expected in the afterlife, when we are freed from the body. Thus al-Kindī (d. after

870), presenting what he claims to be the view of Pythagoras, says that after death the soul receives light from God, so as to:

Enjoy at that time an everlasting pleasure which is above any pleasure provided by food, drink, sex, hearing, seeing, smelling or touching, for these are unclean pleasures of sensation and lead to harm. On the other hand that pleasure is divine, spiritual, and heavenly, leading to great nobility.<sup>1</sup>

Nonetheless, it is rare to find authors in this period devoting treatises specifically to the topic of pleasure. One example is now unfortunately lost. This was the work on pleasure by Abū Bakr Muḥammad Ibn Zakariyyā' al-Rāzī, known only through later reports.<sup>2</sup> At least part of al-Rāzī's intention was to respond to another thinker, the more obscure Šuhayd ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Balhī, who wrote a treatise *On the Superiority of the Pleasures of the Soul*.<sup>3</sup> Judging from the title this must have followed the sort of line taken by al-Kindī in the quote above, but again the work is sadly lost.

Another example which does survive comes to us from the polymath historian and philosopher Abū 'Alī Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Ya'qūb Miskawayh (d. 1030). Entitled *On Pleasures and Pains (Fī al-Laddāt wa-al-ālām)*, it is transmitted in an Istanbul manuscript, Rajep Paşa 1463.<sup>4</sup> It is a short treatise, written on fols 1a-3b of the manuscript and taking up only 7 pages in the printed edition of Badawī.<sup>5</sup> The treatise should be compared with remarks on pleasure in Miskawayh's more frequently read ethical work, *The Refinement of Character (Tahdīb al-aḥlāq)*. In both contexts, Miskawayh considers an originally Platonic analysis of pleasure, according to which pleasure results from the removal of harmful conditions. The *Refinement* endorses the Platonic analysis wholeheartedly, at least when it comes to bodily

<sup>1</sup> Al-Kindī, *Discourse on the Soul*, at *Rasā'il al-Kindī al-falsafiyya*, ed. M. 'A.H. Abū Rīda, 2 vols (Cairo, 1950, 1953), vol. 1, p. 277. Translation taken from P. Adamson and P.E. Pormann, *The Philosophical Works of al-Kindī* (Karachi, 2012), p. 116 (§IV.4). Cf. *On Dispelling Sorrows* §II.1 in Adamson and Pormann. A definition of pleasure offered by al-Kindī (at *On Definitions and Descriptions of Things* §70C in Adamson and Pormann) suggests that pleasure may in fact be an evil, but then adds that this applies to "what people call pleasure" namely the pleasures of sensation.

<sup>2</sup> The evidence is gathered at al-Rāzī, *Rasā'il falsafiyya (Opera philosophica)*, ed. P. Kraus (Cairo, 1939), pp. 139–64.

<sup>3</sup> See al-Rāzī, *Rasā'il*, p. 147. For him see further D. de Blois, "Šuhayd al-Balkhī, a poet and philosopher of the time of Rāzī," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, 59 (1996): 333–7.

<sup>4</sup> For a translation and study of another work by Miskawayh in the same manuscript, see P. Adamson and P.E. Pormann, "More than heat and light: Miskawayh's Epistle on soul and intellect," *Muslim World*, 102 (2012): 478–524.

<sup>5</sup> 'A. Badawī (ed.), *Dirāsāt wa-nusūṣ fī al-falsafa wa-al-'ulūm 'inda al-'Arab* (Beirut, 1981), pp. 98–104. Despite some errors this is superior to the earlier edition of M. Arkoun, "Deux épîtres de Miskawayh," *Bulletin d'Études Orientales*, 17 (1961/2): 7–74, at pp. 1–9 (Arabic pagination). References to the work are to the section numbers of my English translation below.

pleasures. By contrast, *On Pleasures* seems to reject it, labeling it pejoratively as the theory of certain “naturalists.” A further significant point of conflict between the two treatises is that the *Refinement* explicitly excludes pleasure from God Himself, while *On Pleasures* associates pleasure with the Creator and even states that God is pleasure. It seems that these differences can be explained in terms of the sources Miskawayh is using. Unlike the *Refinement*, *On Pleasures* makes direct use of the theory that pleasure is a perfection, which is of course taken from Aristotle’s *Ethics*. Its forthright rejection of the restoration theory and association of pleasure with God also link *On Pleasures* to Aristotle’s *Ethics*.

Given the importance of the Greek background to Miskawayh’s views on pleasure, before turning to a discussion of this unstudied text I will first need briefly to sketch the far better-known ideas about pleasure we find in Plato and Aristotle (section 1 below). I will then look at what the *Refinement* has to say on the subject (section 2), before presenting a detailed analysis of *On Pleasures* (section 3). I conclude with an annotated English version of *On Pleasures*, which to my knowledge is the first translation into any language.

### 1. THE GREEK BACKGROUND

In *Nicomachean Ethics* VII.11, Aristotle announces his intention to discuss three anti-hedonist views of pleasure (1152b8–12), arranged in order of their increasingly positive evaluation of pleasure.<sup>6</sup> By “anti-hedonist” I mean that all three views involve denying that pleasure is the single end or good at which everyone aims, or should aim.<sup>7</sup> First in Aristotle’s list is the outright denial that pleasure is good. Second is the view that although there are good pleasures, not all pleasures are good (in fact, Aristotle mentions that on this view, most pleasures are bad: αἱ δὲ πολλὰὶ φαῦλαι). Finally the third view accepts (perhaps just for the sake of argument: εἰ καὶ) that all pleasures are good, but not that pleasure is the best thing (τὸ ἄριστον).

<sup>6</sup> The literature on Aristotle’s treatment of pleasure is extensive. See for instance A.O. Rorty, “The place of pleasure in Aristotle’s *Ethics*,” *Mind*, 83 (1974): 481–93; J.O. Urmson, “Aristotle on pleasure,” in J.M.E. Moravcsik (ed.), *Aristotle: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Garden City, NY, 1967), pp. 323–33; J. Annas, “Aristotle on pleasure and goodness,” in A.O. Rorty (ed.), *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics* (Berkeley, 1980): 285–99; D. Bostock, “Pleasure and activity in Aristotle’s *Ethics*,” *Phronesis*, 33 (1988): 251–72; G. van Riel, “Aristotle’s definition of pleasure: a refutation of the Platonic account,” *Ancient Philosophy*, 20 (2000), 119–38; C.C.W. Taylor, “Pleasure: Aristotle’s response to Plato,” in R. Heinaman (ed.), *Plato and Aristotle’s Ethics* (Aldershot, 2003), pp. 1–20; M. Weinman, *Pleasure in Aristotle’s Ethics* (London, 2007); C. Natali (ed.), *Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics Book VII* (Oxford, 2009); J. Aufderheide, “Processes as pleasures in *EN* vii 11–14: a new approach,” *Ancient Philosophy*, 33 (2013): 135–57.

<sup>7</sup> I here adapt the formulation of Annas, “Aristotle on pleasure and goodness,” p. 288.

Despite the fact that the first and third views seem quite far apart, the same consideration is given in support of both: that pleasure is a coming-to-be ( $\gamma\acute{\epsilon}\nu\epsilon\sigma\iota\varsigma$ ). This is given pride of place at the head of six arguments for the first view, that no pleasure is good:

*Nicomachean Ethics* VII.11, 1152b12–15: It is not a good at all, because every pleasure is a perceived coming-to-be, and no coming-to-be is of the same type as the ends; for instance house-building [is not of the same type] as a house.

The same consideration is given more briefly against the third anti-hedonist view that pleasures are good but pleasure is not best: “because [pleasure] is not an end ( $\acute{\tau}\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\omicron\varsigma$ ) but a coming-to-be ( $\gamma\acute{\epsilon}\nu\epsilon\sigma\iota\varsigma$ )” (1152b23).

As Aristotle proceeds, it becomes clearer what this objection to hedonism might amount to. He speaks in the next chapter of “being restored to the natural state” (1152b34) and corrects the general claim being made here by the anti-hedonists, by saying that “not all [pleasures] are distinct from the end, but only those leading to the perfection of nature” (1153a11–12). He is here alluding to a conception of pleasure found in Plato, in the *Timaeus* (64c-d) and other dialogues.<sup>8</sup> According to this conception, we feel pleasure when an unnatural affection ( $\pi\acute{\alpha}\theta\omicron\varsigma$ ) that has suddenly befallen us departs, leading back to the natural state ( $\epsilon\iota\varsigma$  φύσιν). If this process occurs slowly it is not perceived, but if it happens quickly then we will notice it. This is why Aristotle’s anti-hedonist argument identifies pleasure as a *perceived* coming-to-be ( $\gamma\acute{\epsilon}\nu\epsilon\sigma\iota\varsigma$  αἰσθητή)<sup>9</sup>: this rules out comings-to-be that are too gradual to yield pleasure.

On this conception, the purpose of eliminating the unnatural affection is to reach a certain end, namely of course the restoration of nature. For instance, if the affection is dryness, drinking will feel good as it moves me towards a natural degree of moisture in the body. That natural state is the purpose of the drinking, but it is neither pleasant (since just being in the natural state involves no coming-to-be) nor painful (since it involves no unnatural affection).<sup>10</sup> Rather, the pleasure lies in the perceived process of restoration to the natural state. In fact on this “restoration theory,” as we might call it, the pleasure is actually *identical* with the  $\gamma\acute{\epsilon}\nu\epsilon\sigma\iota\varsigma$  αἰσθητή. Hence the

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Republic* 584c and *Philebus* 31d–32b, 33d–34a, 51b. I have mentioned the *Timaeus* more prominently not to suggest that it was the text Aristotle primarily had in mind (in fact the term  $\gamma\acute{\epsilon}\nu\epsilon\sigma\iota\varsigma$  connects this passage especially to the *Philebus*, 54c) but because it was the dialogue known to authors writing in Arabic.

<sup>9</sup> I follow for instance D. Wolfsdorf, *Pleasure in Ancient Greek Philosophy* (Cambridge, 2013), p. 123, in translating αἰσθητή as “perceived” rather than “perceptible.” The point is that when we have pleasure we are actually aware of a restoration.

<sup>10</sup> *Republic* 584a insists on this point, though the natural state may *seem* pleasant or painful compared with other conditions.

argument sketched in the text quoted above, which if made fully explicit would go like this:

1. No coming-to-be (γένεσις) is of the same type (συγγενής) as its end (τέλος)
2. Pleasure is a coming-to-be, not the end (the end is rather the natural state)
3. The end is good
4. If X is good and Y is not of the same type as X, then Y is not good  
Therefore pleasure is not good

That is the rationale offered for the first anti-hedonist view. The third view likewise exploits the restoration view, but evidently not in the same way, as this view allows that pleasures are good. Aristotle does not give us much to go on, saying on behalf of this third view simply that pleasure is not an end, but a coming-to-be. The implicit argument is apparently as follows:

- 1\*. The best thing (τὸ ἄριστον) is an end, not a coming-to-be
2. Pleasure is a coming-to-be, not the end (the end is rather the natural state)

Therefore pleasure is not the best thing

Thus the third view retains premise 2 from the argument just outlined, without needing premises 1 and 3, and combines this with the further plausible assumption made in 1\*. Unsurprisingly, given that the third view makes a more modest anti-hedonist claim, it needs to avail itself of less in the way of contentious premises (one might well be dubious about premises 1 and 4 in the first argument).

For Aristotle himself though, neither argument will work. This is because the restoration theory, which is needed to secure premise 2, is false. One problem is that it admits of exceptions: “there are pleasures that do not involve pain and desire, for instance the [pleasures] of contemplation” (ἐπεὶ καὶ ἄνευ λύπης καὶ ἐπιθυμίας εἰσὶν ἡδοναί, οἷον αἱ τοῦ θεωρεῖν,<sup>11</sup> *NE* VII.12, 1152b36). He repeats the point in his second treatment of pleasure in the tenth book, giving a wider range of examples: pleasures of smelling, hearing, and seeing, as well as memories and hopes (*NE* X.3, 1173b15–20). This of course is a point recognized by Plato himself. He speaks in the *Republic* of pleasures not covered by the restoration theory. He gives as examples of “pure pleasures,” that is, pleasures that do not “come from pains,” not only the pleasures of reason but also those associated with certain cases of sensation – for instance smelling a fragrant scent (*Republic* 584b–c).<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> With the modern editors I follow Aspasius in deleting ἐνέργεια after τοῦ θεωρεῖν.

<sup>12</sup> On this example see J.C.B. Gosling and C.C.W. Taylor, *The Greeks on Pleasure* (Oxford, 1982), §6.6.5.

This case of smell also appears in the *Timaeus* (65a). But here, Plato denies that the pleasure of smell is an exception to the theory. In such a case the process of depletion has been so gradual that we did not experience any pain. Nonetheless there is a state of deficiency, and even here pleasure is experienced thanks to a motion towards the natural state (how this works in the case of smell is spelled out briefly at 67a). I would take the *Timaeus* to offer a refinement of the *Republic* account: by introducing the point that gradual depletions and restorations may not come to our notice, Plato is able to accommodate a wider range of bodily pleasures – indeed, apparently all bodily pleasures – within the theory. It is worth noting that the Arabic translation of Galen’s paraphrase of the *Timaeus* makes this point crystal clear: “Returning all at once to the natural state (*al-ḥāl al-ṭabīʿiyya*) is pleasure. But when something happens slowly and gradually, it is not perceived (*maḥsūs*).”<sup>13</sup>

For Miskawayh, it will be important that some bodily pleasures are more “pure” than others. In particular, he wants to see vision and hearing as the most perfect bodily faculties, and to exempt the pleasures associated with these two sense-faculties from the odium that applies to the pleasures of food, drink, sex, clothing and so on. So it is worth noting that Aristotle makes almost the same claim:

*NE* X.5, 1175b36–1176a3 [Ross trans.]: As activities are different, then, so are the corresponding pleasures. Now sight is superior to touch in purity, and hearing and smell to taste; the pleasures, therefore, are similarly superior, and those of thought superior to these, and within each of the two kinds some are superior to others.

It is not entirely clear what Aristotle means here by “superior in purity (καθαρείοτητι).” A plausible reading would be that sight and hearing are less strongly associated with body than touch, taste and smell.<sup>14</sup> Miskawayh would apparently agree. He says that sight and hearing do partake of the bodily but also of the spiritual, so that they help to bring us towards the higher pleasures that involve no bodily faculty at all (see section 3 below).

Now let us return to Aristotle’s treatment of the restoration theory. We have so far seen one objection to the theory, namely that it admits of exceptions. Aristotle’s second objection is more fundamental: pleasures are actually not processes of coming-to-be, but “activities and an end” (1153a9–10). Admittedly pleasure does arise from processes of restoration to the natural state, but these are only pleasures “accidentally” – that is, they seem pleasant to the person undergoing

<sup>13</sup> R. Walzer and P. Kraus (eds), *Plato Arabus I* (London, 1951), p. 19.

<sup>14</sup> See Wolfsdorf, *Pleasure in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, p. 134, following S. Broadie and C. Rowe, *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford, 2002), p. 438.

restoration (1154b18). While these qualified pleasures do have a distinct end, those things that are “by nature” pleasures (1154b20) are those that bring about the action (ποιεῖ πράξιν) of the healthy or natural state. Hence Aristotle famously defines pleasure in book seven as “activity in accordance with the natural state (ἐνέργειαν τῆς κατὰ φύσιν ἕξεως)” (1153a14). In book ten too, pleasure is associated with activity. Here, Aristotle reiterates that pleasure is not a “motion” as Plato claimed (1173a31) but rather that which perfects every activity (1174b23, 1175a20–21).<sup>15</sup> The best pleasures will be those that involve perfection to the highest degree:

*NE* X.4 1174b20–23 (Ross trans. modified): While there is pleasure in respect of any sense, and in respect of thought and contemplation no less, the most complete (τελειοτάτη) is pleasantest, and that of a well-conditioned organ in relation to the worthiest of its objects is the most complete.

Thus, Aristotle offers a view of pleasure that is firmly opposed to the restoration theory. Rather than associating pleasures with always-as-yet-incomplete processes aimed at the natural state, he thinks that pleasure in the strict and proper sense occurs when we are in the natural state already, and when we are active (1175a20–21): “without activity there arises no pleasure.” Non-accidental pleasure supervenes on such natural activities and completes them. Thus Aristotle can agree with the third anti-hedonist view, but for a different reason than that initially offered in *NE* VII.11: as the perfection of activity, pleasure is always good. But even proper pleasure, the pleasure accompanying natural activity, is not the highest good or “best thing (τὸ ἄριστον).” For it always accompanies activities, some of which are better than others. Thus pleasure is not to be identified with the highest good.

This still leaves an opening for the sort of hedonist who holds that the best thing in life is not pleasure in general, but a certain kind of pleasure. If there is a best activity – such as contemplation – then why not say that the ultimate end and best thing for humankind is the pleasure of contemplation? On this point the two treatments of pleasure in the *Ethics* notoriously seem to differ. The book ten account, with its idea that pleasure is only the completion of a natural activity, makes a clear distinction between the activity itself and the pleasure taken in the activity. In book seven by contrast, we find what Christof Rapp has called the “shocking thesis”<sup>16</sup> that a kind of pleasure may after all be the highest good:

<sup>15</sup> On the question whether pleasures must themselves be complete activities see Aufderheide, “Processes as pleasures.”

<sup>16</sup> C. Rapp, “*NE* VII.13–14 (1154a21): Pleasure and *Eudaimonia*,” in Natali (ed.), *Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics Book VII*, pp. 209–35, at p. 218.

*Nicomachean Ethics* VII.13, 1153b7–13: Even if some pleasures are bad, nothing prevents the best thing from being a *certain* pleasure, just as with knowledge, even though some kinds of knowledge are bad. Perhaps in fact it is necessary, if indeed there are unimpeded activities for every state, that whether the activity of all the states or of some one of them is happiness, insofar as it is unimpeded [this activity] should be what is most choice-worthy. So some pleasure would be the best thing.

This passage seems to bring Aristotle alarmingly close to full-blown hedonism, albeit of a very selective kind, so scholars have proposed various ways of defusing the passage.<sup>17</sup> For our purposes it is simply worth noting that Miskawayh, like any reader of the *Ethics*, would be justified in drawing from it the lesson that the best thing of all is a certain pleasure.<sup>18</sup> As we will see, this is precisely what Miskawayh does think.

Before finally turning to Miskawayh, we should recall one last important claim Aristotle makes about pleasure: that God's life is pleasant. In the *Ethics* itself, he makes a remark that will deeply influence Miskawayh's treatment of pleasure:

*Nicomachean Ethics* VII.14, 1154b26–28: God always enjoys a single and simple pleasure. For there is an activity not only of motion, but also of not moving, and there is more pleasure in rest than in motion.<sup>19</sup>

Aristotle does not add more about God's pleasure in this context, but of course he makes mention of it also in the *Metaphysics*. In a celebrated passage in book Λ, he says God's life is "such as the best we can have for a short time only (for he is that way always, whereas this is impossible for us), given that his activity is pleasure" (1072b14–16). He goes on to say that God is performing the best activity (namely intellection, νόσις), and doing so to the furthest possible extent with the best possible object, namely God himself (1072b18–19).<sup>20</sup> Like the passage from *Ethics* book seven, this passage also emphasizes that God is permanently engaging in an activity we can enjoy only fleetingly (1072b24–25). All this corresponds well to the criteria

<sup>17</sup> Apart from pointing to the various caveats in the passage itself – "nothing prevents (οὐδὲν κωλύει)," "perhaps (ἰσως)" – there is Owen's point that here "pleasure" could mean "the activity in which one takes pleasure" rather than "the pleasure one takes in the activity" (for instance the contemplating, rather than the supervenient enjoyment that comes with the contemplation). See G.E.L. Owen, "Aristotelian pleasures," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 72 (1971), pp. 135–52. I am impressed by Rapp's suggestion that Aristotle is making a point about extension: the activity that is the highest good (contemplation) is also incidentally a pleasure. See Rapp, "NE VII.13–14," pp. 219–20.

<sup>18</sup> See the extant Arabic version of the passage at A.A. Akasoy and A. Fidora (eds), *The Arabic Version of the Nicomachean Ethics* (Leiden, 2005), p. 415, using the expression *ladḍa mā*. For the translation see also M. Ullmann, *Die Nikomachische Ethik des Aristoteles in arabischer Übersetzung*, 2 vols (Wiesbaden, 2011–12).

<sup>19</sup> Arabic version at Akasoy and Fidora, *The Arabic Version*, p. 423.

<sup>20</sup> See the Arabic version of the *Metaphysics* in M. Bouyges (ed.), *Averroes: Tafṣīr mā ba'd at-Ṭabī'at*, 3 vols (Beirut, 1938–52), T.39.



offered for the highest pleasure in *Ethics* book ten. There, we are told that the most pleasant activity will be that which is most complete (τελειοτάτη) and has the most estimable (σπουδαιότατον) object (1174b20–23).

Bringing together these passages from *Ethics* VII, *Ethics* X, and *Metaphysics* Λ, we can say that an activity will count as “most pleasant” for Aristotle if it (a) involves rest rather than motion or change, (b) is most completely active, (c) has the best possible object, and (d) is most enduring. On the *Ethics* X account, the highest pleasure will “complete” this activity, and is thus presumably to be distinguished from the activity itself. But the *Ethics* VII account, as we have seen, includes the “shocking thesis” that the highest pleasure might just be the same as the best activity. Of course all these points need to be applied twice over: there will be the most perfect pleasure possible for mankind, and the most perfect pleasure absolutely speaking, namely the one enjoyed by God. But both are “most perfect” because they satisfy conditions (a) through (d), in the human case to the furthest extent possible in human activity, in God’s case to the furthest extent possible in any activity.

## 2. PLEASURE IN THE REFINEMENT OF CHARACTER (TAHDĪB AL-AḤLĀQ)

Unlike the short treatise *On Pleasures*, Miskawayh’s far longer and better-known *Refinement of Character*<sup>21</sup> makes little use of Aristotle on pleasure. We are at first offered little more than negative remarks on the topic of sensory pleasures, against the background of a Platonic psychology.<sup>22</sup> Miskawayh adopts the tripartition of the soul into reason, spirit and appetite and associates pleasures with the lowest of these faculties (15). Pleasure features in a classification of the virtues only as a temptation to be avoided, as when the virtue of steadfastness (*ṣabr*) is defined as the ability to resist desires lest one “be led to shameful pleasures (*qabā’ih al-ladḍāt*)” (20). When Miskawayh turns to a more serious consideration of pleasure, he again draws on the Platonic tradition by offering a version of the restoration theory. This is in the context of a refutation of hedonism (42–46), targeting those who think that “the pleasures of sense-perception (*al-ladḍāt al-ḥissiyya*)” are the “sought good and utmost happiness” (42), and that reason has value only as an instrument for acquiring pleasure

<sup>21</sup> Miskawayh, *Tahdhīb al-aḥlāq*, ed. C. Zurayk (Beirut, 1966). English translation: Miskawayh, *The Refinement of Character*, trans. C. Zurayk (Beirut, 1968). Cited in my translations, and by page number from the Arabic edition (these page numbers are also given in the margins of Zurayk’s English translation).

<sup>22</sup> See M. Fakhry, “The Platonism of Miskawayh and its implications for his ethics,” *Studia Islamica*, 42 (1975): 39–57.

more effectively. He discerns a fatal flaw in the hedonist position, in terms that will seem familiar:

*Refinement* 43–44: [Humans] see with their own eyes how harm is inevitably visited upon them by hunger, nakedness, and all sorts of lacks, and their need for remedies that will deal with them. But when the effects of [these lacks] go away and they get a moment's peace from them, they enjoy this and perceive pleasure from the rest. They don't realize that when they desire the pleasure of eating, they are desiring first [to have] the pain of hunger. For if they had not been pained by hunger, they couldn't enjoy eating. The situation is the same for the other pleasures, although in some cases this is more obvious than in others. We will say elsewhere that there is a single form for them all, and that all pleasures arise for someone who takes enjoyment only after pains were visited upon him, and that any pleasure of sensation is nothing but deliverance from harm or pain.

The last sentence here insists that *all* pleasures (*al-laddāt kulluhā*) are adequately described by the restoration theory. But this is to be understood in light of what follows, where Miskawayh states that he is talking only about “pleasures of sensation.” So he has left open the possibility that there may be some other kinds of pleasure that do not involve sensation, and that may not arise thanks to rest from harm or pain. At any rate, he takes the restoration theory to be an adequate critique of a hedonism of sensory pleasure, saying bluntly that “resting (*al-rāḥa*) from pain is not the ultimate goal or pure good” (45).

In the third section of the *Refinement*, Miskawayh allows that there are indeed other kinds of pleasures, and that these pleasures are choiceworthy. The context is a contrast between two kinds of happiness or virtuous life. One is achieved within the bodily realm by means of practical virtuous action, while the other is “spiritual (*rūḥānī*)” (83).<sup>23</sup> The latter is also described, on Aristotle's authority, as “divine” happiness (94). Both sorts of happiness involve pleasure that is worth having. At the lower level, those who lead lives of bodily virtue enjoy being virtuous (94, 102). Yet this sort of life, admirable though it is, cannot offer complete happiness or unalloyed pleasure. For it is always mixed with pain and loss. By contrast, Miskawayh describes the person who has spiritual happiness as follows:

*Refinement* 85: He is permanently free of the pains and afflictions that are inevitable for someone of the first rank [*sc.* bodily happiness]. He is permanently delighted with himself (*masrūran bi-dātihi*), enjoying his state (*muḡtabītan bi-ḥālihi*) and the emanation of the light of the First that he is constantly receiving. He takes delight only in these pleasures (*laddāt*).

<sup>23</sup> On the two kinds of happiness see further P. Adamson, “Miskawayh's psychology,” in P. Adamson (ed.), *Classical Arabic Philosophy: Sources and Reception* (London, 2007), pp. 39–54, at p. 49.

Famously, there is a difficulty as to whether Aristotle's recommendation of a life of contemplation invites us to neglect the virtues and goods of a more worldly life.<sup>24</sup> Miskawayh, by contrast, leaves us in no doubt as to his stance on the question: higher happiness presupposes lack of concern for bodily things. The completely happy person "takes no heed of the loss of people he has loved in this world" and sees even the goods involved in bodily survival as "a necessity he needs for the sake of his body to which he is bound, and from which he can't be freed until his Creator wills" (85).<sup>25</sup>

Miskawayh would then agree with Aristotle's first objection to the restoration theory, which was that it fails to provide a universally valid account of pleasure. What about Aristotle's more fundamental second objection, that the theory misdescribes even bodily pleasures, like the pleasures of eating and drinking? On this point Miskawayh seems rather to remain faithful to the Platonic account. We already saw him endorsing the restoration theory in the early sections of the *Refinement*, and he alludes back to the theory even after having acknowledged the higher pleasures of the spiritual life. In fact he draws a parallel between restorative bodily pleasures and intellectual improvement: "pleasure, when it is good (*ṣaḥīḥ*), brings the body from deficiency to completion, from illness to health. Likewise the soul is brought from ignorance to knowledge, from vice to virtue" (101). This is not to say that the restorative pleasures of the body are suddenly being seen in a more favorable light. As we saw, when Miskawayh allows pleasure a role in the "first rank" of happiness that involves practical, rather than intellectual virtue, it is only the pleasure taken in virtue itself.

In addition to the restoration critique of bodily pleasures, he offers a further argument against their value. Such pleasures as those taken in drinking, eating, clothing, and sex are only "incidentally" or "accidentally" (*araḍī*) pleasant, whereas the pleasures of intellect are "essential (*ḍāṭī*)" (95). Another way of putting the same distinction is that restorative pleasures are "adorned by falsehood" whereas intellectual pleasures are "true" (94). What Miskawayh means here is not that restorative pleasures presuppose pain or at least a harmfully deficient state that is being corrected (though that too is true), but rather that a restorative pleasure is only pleasant under certain circumstances. In particular, the pleasure of drinking, eating and so on becomes tiresome and even painful if prolonged for too long (94–5, 103, 143, 183). No matter how much you enjoy a certain kind of food, eating it will become downright unpleasant once you have had

<sup>24</sup> For just one example, in this case a defense of the purely contemplative reading of Aristotelian happiness, see R. Kraut, *Aristotle on the Human Good* (Princeton, 1989).

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Plato's notion of "necessary desires" at *Republic* 559b.

your fill. By contrast the spiritual pleasures of intellectual perfection are continuously and completely satisfying – that is to say, pleasant.<sup>26</sup>

This would seem to put Miskawayh in a good position to compare our highest pleasure to that enjoyed by God, as Aristotle had done. But he never makes that move in the *Refinement*. The only direct discussion of God and pleasure is a passage in which he denies that God, or angels for that matter, can experience *restorative* pleasures. Since they are never in a deficient state in the first place, they have no need for the accidentally pleasant experiences of eating and drinking (45). The closest Miskawayh comes to linking pleasure to God is within the discussion of the higher happiness available to humans. For, as we saw already, that sort of happiness does involve pleasure and it is described as “divine.” The higher happiness is also characterized as “active (*fā'il*)” and as “permanent and complete” (102–3), criteria Aristotle gave for the most perfect pleasure. In contrast the bodily pleasures are called “devilish” instead of “divine” (103), a term Miskawayh uses also in *On Pleasures* (§13).

All of this is at least consistent with the thought that God too enjoys utmost pleasure thanks to his permanent, fully active contemplation. But Miskawayh never comes out and says this in the *Refinement*, perhaps because he has no need to raise the issue in the context of a treatise on human virtue. By contrast, the link between God and pleasure will be central in *On Pleasures*. More generally, we might think of *On Pleasures* as providing the theoretical basis for the *Refinement*'s remarks on the place of pleasure in the good life. Some such basis is needed. For the *Refinement* offers no positive theory of pleasure other than the restoration theory, yet it also accepts that there are non-restorative pleasures, namely the pleasures of virtue and contemplation. It seems that, in seeking to provide a theory that could adequately describe such higher pleasures, in *On Pleasures* Miskawayh is led to reject the Platonic restoration theory as a whole.<sup>27</sup> For in *On Pleasures*, he pushes the idea of bodily pleasures' “falsehood” so far as to conclude that the so-called “pleasures” of restoration are in fact no pleasures at all.<sup>28</sup>

### 3. PLEASURE IN *ON PLEASURES AND PAINS*

The Aristotelian basis of this more focused discussion of pleasure is evident from the very first phrase: “pleasures are perfections

<sup>26</sup> Notice that this a different rationale for the conclusion of Aristotle that restorative pleasures are “accidental” (see above, section 1).

<sup>27</sup> This is not to take any particular stance on whether *On Pleasures* was written before or after the *Refinement*.

<sup>28</sup> He seems to go further in an anti-Platonic direction than Aristotle, who grants that pleasures apart from the most perfect ones are indeed pleasures, albeit in a “secondary” way (*NE* 1176a29).

(*kamālāt*)” (§1).<sup>29</sup> As we saw above, in *Ethics X* Aristotle proposed defining pleasure as the completion or perfection of a natural activity, a conception which would replace the restoration theory of pleasure. Nonetheless, Miskawayh does not hesitate to combine this idea with one drawn from the restoration theory: that a process of restoration must be “perceived (αἰσθητή)” if it is to be pleasant. Miskawayh says that it is when we have a perception (*idrāk*) of our perfections that we experience pleasure. Without this perception the pleasure remains “potential.” Rather tentatively, he thus proposes the following definition of pleasure: “it is as if [pleasure] is really (*wa-ka-annahā fī al-tahqīq*) the perfection apprehended by what is perfected” (§1). This may seem to indicate that Miskawayh wants to retain the restoration theory, but the end of the opening paragraph shows that this is not the case. For he says here that pleasure resides in those things that are “always essentially perfect in actuality” and do not need to change to become perfect. These are, he adds, “things that are divine.”

Indeed, throughout *On Pleasures* Miskawayh connects (true) pleasure to the absence of change or motion (*ḥaraka*, at §§2, 4, 14–15, 18). His idea here is that, so long as we are pursuing what we want or love, we have not yet achieved the “perfection” described in §1 and are thus not yet having pleasure. Pleasure arises only once the desired end has been achieved (§2), which is the same thing as the achievement of perfection (§3). At this point, the motion involved in pursuing the end ceases. This means that pleasure coincides with rest (compare to Aristotle’s statement quoted above: “there is more pleasure in rest than in motion,” *NE* 1154b27–28). In fact Miskawayh goes so far as to say that, “just as motions are pains, so rests are pleasures” (§15); and that “rest is true enjoyment, which comes upon its union with its beloved and its object of desire, namely pure pleasure (*ladda*)” (§18). This positive attitude towards the state of rest may seem to be in conflict with what Miskawayh said in the *Refinement*. For as we saw, he there remarked that “resting from pain is not the ultimate goal or pure good” (45). But a closer look shows that there is no tension. What Miskawayh is describing in the *Refinement* is the process of coming to rest, as one is restored from e.g. hunger or thirst. Thus my translation “resting” – the Arabic is *rāḥa*. In the terminology of *On Pleasures* such a process would in fact count as “motion.” When he speaks of “rest” in *On Pleasures* he uses the different term *sukūn*, by which he means the state of being at rest after a desired end or perfection has already been achieved.

Miskawayh uses these ideas about motion and rest to draw, or rather re-draw, the familiar Platonic distinction between “true” and

<sup>29</sup> Cf. the remarks on the use of *kamāl* to translate words related to τέλος at R. Wisnovsky, *Avicenna’s Metaphysics in Context* (London, 2003), pp. 103–6.

“false” pleasures. Insofar as we are still moving towards a state of rest or perfection, we are *not* having true or pure pleasure (he uses the term “true” at §§5, 12, 18, and “pure” at §18; cf. “pure rest” at §15). Here Miskawayh is of course adapting Aristotle’s point that pleasures are properly conceived of as ends, not as processes of coming-to-be. This leaves the motion-involving pleasures of restoration to be “false” pleasures. We saw a similar claim in the *Refinement*. But the reasoning in the two texts is different. In the *Refinement* Miskawayh stated that sensory pleasures like food, drink, and sex are “adorned by falsehood” because they are only “accidentally” pleasant, that is, pleasant in some circumstances but not others (for instance after prolonged exposure to the object of pleasure). Here in *On Pleasures*, by contrast, the restorative pleasures are condemned as being outright false, in any situation. This is because they do not really provide perfection. They may seem to do so, because they satisfy certain desires. But since these desires are false or “unnatural,” the pleasures associated with them are likewise false or unnatural (§3). In fact, as we have seen, they are really pains insofar as they involve motion – thus “the sages call the natural world the world of pains, because it is the world of motion” (§15).

All of this explains the most striking divergence between *On Pleasures* and the *Refinement*. Whereas the *Refinement* accepts the restoration theory for some pleasures and gives it a central role in the critique of hedonism, *On Pleasures* explicitly rejects the theory. Miskawayh ascribes the theory to certain “naturalists,”<sup>30</sup> who “say that pleasure is a return to the natural state” (§11). He then condenses Aristotle’s two kinds of objection to the theory into a brief compass. First, it admits of exceptions: since “divine things” never “depart from their natural state” in the first place the theory does not adequately describe the pleasure they enjoy. Second, the restorative process itself is not really a pleasure, since the process involves motion. These pleasures are a “deception and snare” appropriate to “this world of sophistry” (§11). Instead, as Aristotle too taught, we take true pleasure when we are in the natural state, which Miskawayh considers as a state of “rest”. The restfulness of this state should not mislead us into imagining Miskawayh’s perfect, truly pleasant state as the mere *lack* of deficiency or restorative motion.<sup>31</sup> Rather, Miskawayh envisions a state of rest that involves activity or actuality (*fi‘l*), as he states in §1, without involving motion.

<sup>30</sup> This is not a complimentary term. At *Refinement* 80 it refers to materialists. It is not clear whom precisely Miskawayh has in mind, though as mentioned at the beginning of this paper al-Rāzī endorsed the restoration theory.

<sup>31</sup> This would of course be the position of the Epicureans. Compare for instance Epicurus, *Sententiae Vaticanae* §33 (my trans.): “the flesh cries out for lack of hunger, of thirst, of

This brings us to God. There is no need to belabor the Aristotelian lineage of Miskawayh's understanding of God as unmoving (§15), as purely actual (§1), and as the most final of ends (§5). He is also clearly thinking of Aristotle when he draws the inference that remained, at best, unstated in the *Refinement*: the highest possible pleasure is contemplation of God. As we saw in section 1, Aristotle provided a list of criteria for the most perfect pleasure: it should involve rest rather than motion or change, involve the most completely active activity, have the best possible object, and be most enduring. Miskawayh recapitulates these criteria and agrees that they are satisfied by the contemplation of God (see especially §8). The more straightforward point here is the application to human contemplation: among animals, only man can grasp God intellectually, so humans alone are capable of "the most noble of pleasures" (§9). Miskawayh identifies this as our ultimate end (*gāya*), adopting the purely contemplative vision of perfect happiness also found in the *Refinement* (see above, section 2).

As for God, it is no surprise to be told that He too enjoys the highest of pleasures, in fact a pleasure even better than the one humans can enjoy by contemplating Him. For He has an "apprehension of the most noble of beloveds, with the most noble of loves, though the most noble of apprehensions" (§8, cf. *Ethics* X.4, 1174b20–23, cited above in section 1). But Miskawayh goes further than this, and asserts that God is "the absolute pleasure which is always pleasure in actuality" (§8). From Aristotle we are familiar with the idea that God *enjoys* the highest pleasure. But why would anyone think that God just *is* the highest pleasure? The rationale is reminiscent of the one that led to Aristotle's "shocking thesis" that pleasure is the highest good or "best thing" (τὸ ἄριστον, *NE* VII.13, 1153b13). The shocking thesis derived its plausibility from a failure to distinguish, as book ten does, between the activity being enjoyed and the pleasure that supervenes on the activity. Miskawayh makes the even more dubious move of conflating God with His own perfection ("God is the most perfect perfection and most perfect good," §8, cf. §5). Since he has already stated that pleasure is (perceived) perfection, he thus arrives at what we might call "the even more shocking thesis": God is identical with the highest pleasure.<sup>32</sup>

So far, then, we have found in Miskawayh a fairly neat and broadly Aristotelian theory of pleasures: there are two kinds of pleasure, true and false. True pleasures are those that involve genuine perfection rather than the delusory, apparent perfections offered by sensory

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cold. Having these, and expecting to have them [in the future], he might contend with Zeus in happiness."

<sup>32</sup> Of course, if Miskawayh were clear about the difference between pleasures as objects enjoyed and pleasures as enjoyments taken in those objects, this would not be shocking at all: obviously God is the best *object* in which one can take pleasure.

pleasures. They are to be had above all, and from what we have seen thus far solely, through a perfect intellectual grasp of “divine things.” For only this perfection is utterly free of motion, which is rather associated with the painful pursuit of a desirable end. But it turns out that Miskawayh does make room for other true pleasures. Already in the opening paragraphs of *On Pleasures*, he holds out the prospect of “natural and sensible” goals which could be the object of “correct desire”; to attain such a goal would constitute a “natural pleasure” (§3). Unfortunately he does not provide any examples in this opening passage. But later on (§6) he states that the pleasures of the five senses vary in terms of perfection and deficiency. Worst are the pleasures of touch and taste, that is to say sex, eating and drinking, which of course are the standard examples of restorative pleasures.<sup>33</sup> Vision and hearing are relatively more perfect, and provide correspondingly more perfect pleasures.

Here Miskawayh is obviously drawing on Aristotle, who was in turn responding to the dialogues of Plato. As we saw above (section 1), Aristotle also singled out some senses as being superior: “sight is superior to touch in purity, and hearing and smell to taste” (*NE* X.5, 1176a1). Miskawayh expands on this by treating hearing in particular as a kind of transitional capacity, which can help us to receive “noble” or “divine and psychic” forms (§19). When we hear music we may be drawn away from “natural,” that is bodily, things. This effect can be so powerful as to make the listener swoon or even die on the spot! Here Miskawayh is integrating into his treatment of pleasure already well-entrenched ideas about the powerful effects of music.<sup>34</sup> Still, even if hearing offers a bridge to incorporeal things (the same goes for vision), we are dealing here with a bodily capacity. Hence the pleasures of being transported by music are as nothing compared to the pleasures of intellection (§20).

It would be nice if Miskawayh were more forthcoming on this point. He says only that as a bodily capacity which brings worldly pleasure, even hearing involves “constant motion.” Presumably the same would go for sight. But this is problematic. Miskawayh has after all been contrasting motion, which involves pain, to the pure, “restful” actuality of contemplation. And when Aristotle makes the same contrast between motion, change and coming-to-be on the one hand and actuality on the other (κίνησις or γένεσις vs. ἐνέργεια) he gives eyesight as an example of the latter, not the former (*Metaphysics* Θ.6, 1148b33).

<sup>33</sup> Smell seems to be aligned more with these lower pleasures, given that the pleasure of scent is criticized in the saying ascribed to ‘Alī (*On Pleasures* §23), which Miskawayh sees as fitting with his philosophical account (on this see further below).

<sup>34</sup> See F. Shehadi, *Philosophies of Music in Medieval Islam* (Leiden, 1995), A. Shiloah, *Music in the World of Islam* (Detroit, 1995).



He furthermore flatly denies that the restoration theory applies to smell, hearing and vision (*NE* X.3, 1173b19–20). So what exactly is it that makes the pleasures of sight and hearing defective? Perhaps Miskawayh's thought is that bodily activities always involve a transition from potentiality to actuality (cf. §1). But this would not be enough, since the argument against bodily pleasure turned on the idea that while we are moving towards an end we lack perfection; whereas in the case of seeing and hearing, we have perfection in each moment of exercising the faculty. As Aristotle says, the active seer at once "has seen and is seeing" (*Metaphysics* Θ.6, 1148b33–34).

It seems to me that here we are seeing a tension between Miskawayh's adoption of the Aristotelian theory of pleasure on the one hand, and his broader (Neo)Platonist commitments on the other.<sup>35</sup> Within the Aristotelian theory it may seem a mistake to connect sight and hearing to "motion," especially in a context where so much work has been done by the contrast between motion and actuality (κίνησις and ἐνέργεια). Yet Miskawayh associates the physical world generally with motion or change – this may be the purport of the vague reference to "constant motion" in §20. For him this is reason enough to recognize the pleasures of sight and sound as inferior to those of contemplation. In any case, Miskawayh has given other reasons why contemplation offers a more choiceworthy pleasure: that activity has a better object, is more enduring, and so on. So he is on firm ground when he says, in §22, that the pleasure of hearing cannot stand comparison with the pleasures achieved by the soul through wholly immaterial activity.<sup>36</sup>

Miskawayh concludes his treatise by connecting all these philosophical points to a saying of the Imām 'Alī Ibn Abī Ṭālib (§23). At first glance the saying looks to consist in a vivid rejection of all pleasure "in this world." But as Miskawayh points out, the saying does not mention the pleasures of vision and hearing. This is no mistake, but has to do with the relatively perfect nature of these two capacities.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> As Marwan Rashed has pointed out to me, we might also entertain the possibility of a Neoplatonic source for Miskawayh's whole discussion of pleasure, namely Porphyry's *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*. According to Ibn al-Nadīm's *Fihrist* (Flügel I.252) this commentary was translated into Arabic by Ishāq b. Ḥunayn. Miskawayh cites Porphyry's discussion of Aristotle's *Ethics* at *Refinement* 76, albeit not in the context of discussing pleasure.

<sup>36</sup> Note the implication that God Himself does not engage in hearing or sight, never mind the other sense modalities. While this may seem unsurprising, in fact (as Marwan Rashed reminds me) there was a debate among Islamic theologians as to whether God is *mudrik* in the sense of having sense-perception, in the light of such verses as Qur'ān 4:58, 4:134, and 42:11 (God is "the hearing, the seeing"). On this see J. van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra: eine Geschichte des religiösen Denkens im frühen Islam*, 6 vols (Berlin, 1881–1995), vol. 4, 81, 405, 443.

<sup>37</sup> Whereas Aristotle classed smell among the more superior sense faculties, Miskwayh does not; this could be because the saying of 'Alī alludes negatively to the pleasurable scent of musk.

Sight and hearing “partake of the pleasures of the afterlife” and thus provide a kind of transition to pure intellection, so they are exempted from criticism. Thus we have a neat fit between the account of pleasure Miskawayh has drawn from Aristotle and the words of ‘Alī. With this conclusion to *On Pleasures*, Miskawayh artfully establishes agreement between the resulting philosophical position and Islamic religious authority. And in the little treatise as a whole, he successfully walks a fine line, much as Aristotle had done before him. On the one hand, he manages to retain and to justify the negative attitudes about most bodily pleasure found in the Platonic tradition and in such sayings as the one ascribed to ‘Alī. He shows the falsehood of the hedonist view that pleasure is the good, a position also rejected in the *Refinement* on the basis of the restoration theory. On the other hand, Miskawayh follows Aristotle in rejecting the radical anti-hedonist view that no pleasure is good. To the contrary, the highest good is to be identified with the highest pleasure: the pleasure that is God’s activity of self-contemplation, which ultimately means the pleasure that is God Himself.<sup>38</sup>

#### 4. TRANSLATION OF ON PLEASURES AND PAINS

[A1/B98]<sup>39</sup> (1) Pleasures are perfections, but are potential, actualized only through the apprehension (*idrāk*) of [the perfections] by that which has the perfection. That which has the perfection apprehends them only by virtue of being alive. It is as if [pleasure] is really (*wa-ka-annahā fī al-tahqīq*) the perfection apprehended by what is perfected. It resides in the things that are always essentially perfect in actuality, never in potentiality and then in actuality – namely, things that are divine (*al-umūr al-ilāhiyya*).

(2) Perfection is of two types: relative and absolute. Relative perfection is what is wanted both for its own sake and for the sake of something else. Whereas absolute [perfection] is what is wanted for its own sake, is pursued by things that move towards it in order to reach it, and is loved by the things that pursue it – in such a way that, when those things reach it, they are perfected by it and come to rest, and thereafter cease to move any further or pursue anything else. They come, so long as they remain perfected by it, to embrace it and take pleasure in it.

<sup>38</sup> I received helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper from Joachim Aufderheide and from audiences in Münster, in Munich, and at Columbia University. My thanks to them, and also to members of the Arabic reading group at the Warburg Institute, David Bennett, and especially Rotraud Hansberger for help with the following translation. I would also like to thank the Leverhulme Trust for its support of this research.

<sup>39</sup> In the notes to the translation and page references, A and B refer respectively to the editions of Arkoun and Badawī (see n. 5 above).

(3) Some people describe [pleasure] as a thing's apprehending its perfection insofar as [the perfection] is a perfection for it; others as the desirer's obtaining what he desires. But in reality these come to the same thing, for [A2] what everything pursues is its perfection, or what it believes to be its perfection, so that it is attracted to it by its nature or by its choice (*irāda*). If that object of pursuit is natural and sensible, and is truly a perfection, then its attraction towards it is called "correct desire (*ṣahwa ṣādiqa*)," and its taking pleasure in its obtainment is called "natural pleasure." But if this object of pursuit is not truly a perfection, but only thought to be one when it really is not, then [the pursuer's] attraction and moving towards it are called "false desire," and its taking pleasure in it is called an "unnatural pleasure." If this object of pursuit is spiritual and intelligible, and is truly a perfection for [the pursuer], and [the pursuer's] attraction towards it is excessive, then this is called "love (*išq*)." Whereas if [the pursuer's] attraction towards it is moderate [B99] it is called "affection (*maḥabba*)."<sup>40</sup> But if its attraction towards it is deficient<sup>41</sup> it is called "inclination (*nazā*)."

(4) If there were no such thing as perfection, there would be no pleasure, and if there were no pleasure there would be neither love, affection, inclination nor desire. If these did not exist, there would be no motion, and if motion did not exist, there would be neither generation nor corruption.

(5) Absolute, true perfection, and absolute, true pleasure are those that occur at each moment, indeed before and after each moment. It is this that all things always desire: the absolute good, which is beloved for its own sake and through itself. It is that which all things love, but which does not love anything other than itself: namely God, praise be to Him. So true, absolute pleasure and the true, absolute taker of pleasure are this absolute good. Thus the most perfect of pleasures<sup>42</sup> is the pleasure of him whose beloved is most perfect,<sup>43</sup> whose love for it is most perfect, and whose apprehension of it is most perfect.

(6) Bodily apprehension is of five kinds, namely the apprehensions of the five senses: touch, taste, smell, hearing and vision. Spiritual apprehension is of three types: those of imagination, thought, [A3] and reasoning (*ta'āqqul*). The varieties of simple pleasures are fourteen in number.<sup>44</sup> The apprehensions of touch and of taste are the lowest and most deficient among the bodily apprehensions, so that the pleasures connected to these two are absolutely the lowest and most

<sup>40</sup> Cf. *Refinement of Character* 94.

<sup>41</sup> Reading *yanqušu*.

<sup>42</sup> B erroneously has *al-qāt* instead of *al-laddāt*.

<sup>43</sup> As B notes (99 n. 1) the *min* after *kāna* (retained by A) should be deleted.

<sup>44</sup> This sentence seems rather out of place; perhaps a catalogue of the 14 types has fallen out of the text.

deficient apprehensions. Thus the pleasure of sexual intercourse (which is connected to the sense<sup>45</sup> of touch), and the pleasure of food and drink (since these are connected to the sense of taste), are the lowest and most deficient of the pleasures. Whereas the apprehension of hearing and vision are the most perfect bodily apprehensions, so their pleasure is therefore the most noble and perfect of bodily pleasures. They partake of both the bodily apprehensions and the spiritual apprehensions.

(7) Therefore, since we have shown that perfect pleasure is the lover's apprehending the most perfect beloved, with the most perfect apprehension and most perfect love; and because the most perfect apprehension is intellectual<sup>46</sup> apprehension; and the most perfect beloved is the absolute good; and the most perfect love is setting aside everything else for the beloved; and all love is abundant by not being divided into many loves – it is necessary that the most noble and perfect of pleasures is the pleasure of one who apprehends the absolute good through his intellect, loving it for its own sake and not for the sake of anything else.

(8) He said: because the absolute good is God, the exalted, and pleasure is pleasure only because it is good (given that [B100] pleasures, as we have said, are perfections, and all perfections are goods); and the most perfect of pleasures is the most perfect perfection and most perfect good; and God, the exalted, is the most perfect perfection and good – it is necessary that He, praise be to Him, is the absolute pleasure which is always pleasure in actuality, having never been in any way potential pleasure. Further, because the most noble and perfect of pleasures is the apprehension of the most noble of beloveds, with the most noble of loves, though the most noble of apprehensions; and God, praise be to Him, apprehends His own essence (*li-dātihī*),<sup>47</sup> which is the most noble of beloveds, through His essence, which is the most noble way to apprehend; and He is beloved of His own essence, with the most noble of loves, since He is the beloved of all things; and He loves His own essence and nothing else external [A4] to His essence – it is necessary that His pleasure, praise be to Him, is beyond (*fawqa*) any [other] pleasure in its nobility, perfection, and excellence. Therefore the sages say that the pleasure, delight and joy that the Creator, praise be to Him, takes in His essence is incomparable to [any other] pleasure, delight or joy, and no other bears any relation to these.

<sup>45</sup> Reading *bi-hiss* with B.

<sup>46</sup> B reads *fī lī* ("active") instead of *'aqlī*.

<sup>47</sup> In this passage the word *dāt* could be translated as "essence" or "self" (e.g. "God loves His essence" vs. "God loves Himself").

(9) Because man alone among the animals can apprehend his creator with his intellect, which is the most noble of his apprehensions; and he can show abundant affection and love for Him, praise be to Him – it is necessary that he is distinguished from the other [animals] by virtue of the most noble of pleasures. The most noble of pleasures is when he apprehends his Creator, praise be to Him, with his intellect, and is not distracted from Him by anything else, and when he gives his love, affection and aspiration to Him abundantly. This state is the end (*ḡāya*) and perfection of man, for the sake of which he was made: to reach this perfection and enjoy this pleasure.

(10) The human intellect is never affected by deficiency<sup>48</sup> at all, but only by perfections. For the things it apprehends are the forms which are the perfection of existing things. But the divine intellect is simply never affected, since there is no manner at all in which it might be affected.

(11) The naturalists say that pleasure is a return to the natural state. This is incorrect with respect to divine things, as we have already said, since they do not depart from their natural state. Nor is it correct for natural or psychic things. For among divine things, pleasure is a divine and great goal, while among natural things, it is a natural goal. In the world of generation and corruption, it [sc. pleasure] is made a deception and snare for the living being. For this world of sophistry (*al-‘ālam al-sūfiṣṭā’ī*) consists of nothing but sophistry, trickery, and fraud. [A5] The craving of its inhabitants for what is a profitable benefit for them, even if it works by coercion or deceit, is like what is done with bitter medicine when one wants [B101] children to drink it; for it is sweetened with something that covers up its bitterness.<sup>49</sup> The philosopher of Islam [‘Alī Ibn Abī Ṭālib] has called attention to this by saying that “woman adorns her loveliest part, but one wants her most vile part,”<sup>50</sup> *i.e.* she adorns her face, but one wants her genitals.

(12) True pleasures, though, reside precisely in complete perfections and common ends. It was with these in view that mankind was created, indeed the other animals too, and in fact, all existing things. Of these the truest [pleasure] is divine pleasure, this being the utmost end to which all ends lead: pure and unadulterated being (*wuḡūd*).

(13) As for [...] <sup>51</sup> in this world (*al-dunyā*), it is praiseworthy in one respect and blameworthy in another, since it is impossible for anyone

<sup>48</sup> Reading *naqṣ* for *nafs*, printed by both A and B.

<sup>49</sup> This simile recalls Lucretius’ famous statement that he uses the beauty of poetry to make the teachings of Epicurus more palatable (*De Natura Deorum* I.936–8).

<sup>50</sup> See below, §23.

<sup>51</sup> A word that neither A nor B could read.

to avoid being involved in worldly pursuits in two ways. First, insofar as the world has not given him the life and subsistence it owes to him, through what God made for Him of the service rendered to him by the world [while] he is in it. Second, insofar as the world takes from him what he must pay in recompense to it. Otherwise he will deviate from<sup>52</sup> his Maker. For in nature there is only one way to repay: to give as one has taken, so that there may be justice. For the form of natural things is justice (*adl*), just as the form of divine things, and their activity, is munificence (*fadl*). For divine things give always without taking, whereas natural things give as they take, and take as they give. So the former [*sc.* divine things] do not stray (*ta'dilu*) from munificence, whereas the latter [*sc.* natural things] do not stray from justice. To give and take without justice or munificence is injustice. Now man is either spiritual and divine, and thus munificent, or he is natural, and thus just, or he is devilish (*ṣayṭāniyya*), neither natural nor divine, and is thus unjust. Therefore divine things [A6] are the cause of the world's existence, for their activity is pure generosity. Natural things are the cause of life in this world, because their activity is pure justice. But devilish things are the cause of the destruction undergone by certain parts of the world, because their activity is pure injustice.

(14) Someone who faces<sup>53</sup> towards the utmost perfection sees with the eye of his intellect the Complete, Who attracts [him] towards Himself (*ilā dātihī*) as the beloved does his lover. Hence [the seer] moves towards Him out of desire. For whatever moves from deficiency to perfection does so with a desiring, loving motion towards its primary beloved. With diligence in rising towards [the beloved], he grows somewhat closer to it, and this proximity increases the more effort he makes at each stage.

(15) The sages call the natural world the world of pains, because it is the world of motion; whereas they call the world of the intellect the world [B102] of pleasures, because it is the world of rest. For just as motions are pains, so rests are pleasures. They are what is pursued in motions, because everything that moves does so only in order to rest. Despite moving, the heavenly bodies are at rest due to their permanence, their continuity (*ittiṣāl*), and their immunity to alteration. In the natural world, motion is nobler than rest. Or rather, it is existence, while rest is non-existence. But for the divine, motion is non-existence and rest is existence. The divine [beings] are pure rest, and all rest, whether in the world of intellect or of nature, is a sort of divinity, just as motion in either world is a sort of servanthood.

<sup>52</sup> Reading *an* rather than *min*.

<sup>53</sup> In B there is no connective after the previous sentence.

Likewise, Lordship is made manifest in rest, while servanthood is made manifest in motion.

(16) Melodies are sounds that take on the noble proportions (*munāsabāt*) that constitute the ordering of the world, and the divine decrees (*siyāsāt*) that spread throughout the spiritual and natural existents. [A7] These noble forms, I mean, the relations (*nisab*) that make up the divine order and lordly decree which is the emanation (*ḥayḍ*) upon creation from the Creator, praise be to Him, are the utmost end that is pursued. They [*sc.* the forms]<sup>54</sup> are the beloved of all things, and that which all other existents desire.

(17) In relation to them [*sc.* the forms] existing things are of three types. First, those that are given them [*sc.* the forms]<sup>55</sup> from the very first, namely those things that are originated already perfect, and are never in potentiality: the active intellects and heavenly bodies. Second, those that are not given this from the start (*fī awwal amrihā*), and there is no hope of their reaching the forms or being shaped by them (*al-wuṣūl ilayhā wa-al-taṣawwur bihā*), since they are not given the power for this. For example minerals, plants, savage animals, and meteorological events. Third, what is given the power for this, namely human substances, the power being the rational soul, through which alone the human substance becomes human.

(18) The true lover among people, and the one who desires union (*ittiḥād*) with that divine order and lordly decree, is nothing other than it [*sc.* his rational soul]. His body and<sup>56</sup> hands are wanted only for the sake of it [*sc.* the soul], because it is strengthened by this power and grows stronger through its mediation,<sup>57</sup> until it reaches such a point of power that it can dispense with the body and hands, which are in fact (*fī al-amr*) an affliction. But when [one's] ardor is heightened, [the soul] considers its own motion, though it is pain, to be in truth pleasure, because it gazes upon its beloved towards which it moves and which it pursues. For the condition towards which it moves is more sublime than being free of the burden of any difficulty. This is its rest, which is true enjoyment (*iltidād*), and which comes to it upon its union with its beloved and its object of desire, namely pure pleasure (*ladḍa*).

[B103] (19) Sometimes the soul (*nafs*) of certain people is subtle and exalted in its ardor, although natural things are dominating it [*sc.* the soul]. Then it is transported by those noble forms which come over it from songs [A8] and rhythms, so that they transport it away from natural things entirely, to the point that sometimes the person's soul

<sup>54</sup> Reading *hiya* with B.

<sup>55</sup> The rest of the first category is present in A but omitted in B, without explanation.

<sup>56</sup> The *wa-* is omitted in B.

<sup>57</sup> Reading *wa-bi-tawassuṭihā taqwā*.

streams out and his spirit (*rūh*) leaves, and he dies. We ourselves have seen and heard of people dying upon listening [to music]. Sometimes it makes people go into a swoon, which is the soul's being overcome by the divine forms that flow to the soul in the song, taking it away from natural things for as long he continues listening, until, when the matter is cut off,<sup>58</sup> he ceases to be overcome by divine and psychic forms.

(20) Sometimes the soul is strong, and can dispense with natural things, knowing their weakness and deficiency. So it casts its vision (*baṣar*) towards the active intellect. Then it unites with [the active intellect], at which time the active intellect supports it, and attracts its discernment (*baṣīra*) so as to draw it near to those divine forms which it has loved and desired. It turns towards them with no song,<sup>59</sup> sound or melody as an intermediary, achieving complete rest and enjoying complete pleasure, since it has apprehended the end it was pursuing. So at that point,<sup>60</sup> it becomes what is desired and beloved, after having been what desires and loves. It comes to be loved in making things move towards it, being now at rest after it was moving towards the things; it moves each thing after having been moved by each thing. What then do you think of that pleasure when you compare it to this pleasure of hearing, which is one of the pleasures of this world, albeit that there is an approximation between [worldly pleasures] and pains, because of constant motion?

(21) This end is the promised reward and the praiseworthy station in the abode of eternity, to which the prophets summon, and towards which the sages point. Thanks to the providence (*naẓar*) that the Creator, praise be to Him, has for His creatures, and His attracting them to be with Him, we are graced, through hearing, with a little taste of the sweetness of the reward and a tiny part of the pleasures of the abode of the hereafter, so that the blessed man compares it [favorably] to natural pleasures such as eating and drinking, sex, fine clothes, or scents.<sup>61</sup> For in natural things there is no sort of pleasure apart from these, or if there is, then these [*sc.* food and drink, etc.] are given preeminence and preferred by the adherents of [natural pleasures].

<sup>58</sup> This is a bit puzzling but the idea seems to be that, unlike the person considered in the next paragraph, we are here dealing with someone who needs a physical experience to access the divine forms. With the ceasing of the material basis of the experience, *i.e.* the musical sound (which might be understood as vibration in the air, as in for instance O. Wright [trans.], *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity: On Music* [New York, 2010], ch. 3), the influence of the divine forms also ceases.

<sup>59</sup> Reading *lahn* with B.

<sup>60</sup> Reading '*inda dālika* with A.

<sup>61</sup> A forward reference to §23 below.



[A9] (22) We know that the pleasure of hearing escapes all these [*i.e.* is better than eating, drinking, etc.], being free of the drawbacks of the pains that precede, accompany, or follow the five preeminent natural pleasures. We know too that the pleasure of hearing, despite [B104] these special properties, still cannot be considered comparable to those pleasures which the soul attains “in a sure abode, in the presence of a King Omnipotent.”<sup>62</sup> This calls the soul to disdain<sup>63</sup> these attachments, to cut itself off from natural things, to view them with the eye<sup>64</sup> of disgust and disdain, and to devote itself towards completeness and the end.

(23) The philosopher of Islam [again, ‘Alī] has called attention to this in his statement to ‘Ammār b. Yāsir,<sup>65</sup> who had just breathed a deep sigh: “O ‘Amār, why do you sigh? Is it for the hereafter? Will your sighing about it help your hand to reach it? Has it ever made this possible for you? Or is it for this world? By God, this world deserves not that you sigh for it, because its pleasures reside in five things: food, drink, sex, fine clothes, and scents. The finest thing to eat is honey – found in insects! The finest thing to drink is water – the most valueless thing! The finest thing in clothes is silk brocade – the spittle of worms! The finest scent is musk – mouse blood!<sup>66</sup> As for sex, the finest thing here is one urinary organ being in another!”<sup>67</sup> He did not mention sights and sounds, for they partake of the pleasures of the afterlife and our taste of it, so that we pursue [those pleasures] by way of discernment and understanding.

Praise be to God, Lord of the worlds, and peace upon our leader, Muḥammad the prophet, and his family.

<sup>62</sup> Qurʾān 54:55, Arberry trans.

<sup>63</sup> Reading *buḡḍ* with B.

<sup>64</sup> Reading *bi-ʿayn* with B.

<sup>65</sup> A companion of the Prophet and partisan of ‘Alī. See on him the article by H. Reckendorf in *ET*<sup>2</sup>. The story is also told as involving a different companion, Jābir ibn ‘Abdallāh al-Anṣārī, in a version which has the remark from §11 above placed at the end of the saying. I have not been able to find the anecdote in Miskawayh’s own *al-Ḥikma al-Ḥalida*, ed. A. Badawī (Cairo, 1952), but at 110 he transmits a different remark made by ‘Alī to Jābir ibn ‘Abdallāh, also concerning “this world (*al-dunyā*).” My thanks to Mohammed Rustom for discussion of the anecdote.

<sup>66</sup> This derives from a terminological confusion: the word “mouse” was used for the musk pod. See A. King, “Tibetan musk and medieval Arab perfumery,” in A. Akasoy, C. Burnett and R. Yoeli-Tlalim (eds), *Islam and Tibet: Interactions along the Musk Routes* (Farnham, 2011), 145–61, at 147. My thanks to Charles Burnett for the reference.

<sup>67</sup> Here B correctly ends the quotation, whereas A punctuates as if it carries on to the end of the paragraph. The passage is strikingly similar to one found in Marcus Aurelius: “When meat and other dainties are before you, you reflect: this is dead fish, or fowl, or pig, or: this Palernian is some of the juice from a bunch of grapes; my purple robe is sheep’s wool stained with a little gore from a shellfish; copulation is friction of the members and an ejaculatory discharge. Reflections of this kind go to the bottom of things, penetrating into them and exposing their real nature” (*Meditations* VI.13, trans. M. Staniforth). My thanks to Nico Strobach for the reference.