

Why Pleasure Gains Fifth Rank: Against the Anti-Hedonist Interpretation of the *Philebus*¹

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One of the oldest elements of Greek ethical thought consists in the discussion of *goods*.² ‘Goods’, in this tradition, are things that make a human life go well, and that therefore make the person who has them happy. One way to frame the discussion of goods is the question ‘what is the good?’, or ‘what is the *greatest* good?’ Hedonism can be construed as an answer to this question—namely, as the claim that pleasure is the good, or the greatest good. This claim does not survive the *Philebus*. But as I shall argue, its refutation is not well described as a refutation of hedonism. For it addresses a whole approach in ethics, and it equally applies to the (supposedly) nobler view that ‘wisdom is the good’.

By the time Plato writes what we consider his later dialogues, the question ‘what is the good?’ and the discussion of prominent replies to it are already conventional elements of ethical thought.³ In the *Philebus*, Plato presents a conception of ethics that goes beyond this conventional approach. Of course, Plato’s discussions of goods in other dialogues are not conventional either. But in the *Philebus*, Plato tackles directly the question of what is fundamentally wrong with the way in which human goods are traditionally discussed. Most importantly, he does so in two ways. First, Plato in the *Philebus* argues that the good for human beings is not this or that good, but the good human life. Second, Plato in the *Philebus* puts forward a picture of the task of ethics that supersedes the framework of earlier discussions about different kinds of goods. He proposes that ethics must ultimately be based on an understanding of human physiology and psychology. We must understand how human beings function, how their cognitive capacities and their receptivity to pleasure and pain constitute the kind of mental life that human beings typically have. Based on this understanding, we can then ask how the pleasures and pains and cognitive activities that turn out to be characteristic of human life must be mixed with each other for a human life to go well. Accordingly, neither

¹ In this paper, I am moving in large steps through the dialogue, and a lot of filling in (both with a view to the details of Plato’s discussion, and with a view to the secondary literature) would have to be done.

² See, for example, Herodotus’ *Histories* 1.32, where we find a list of things that are traditionally considered goods (wealth, intact body, health, fine children, good looks, no troubles, etc.). However, it is already part of Herodotus’ discussion to emphasize that people want to *keep* these things until the end, and that not all of these things may go well together (e.g., the wealthy are more likely to get into trouble than the poor).

³ See Plato’s brief reference to “wisdom is the good” and “pleasure is the good” in Rp. V, 505. We get the sense that all kinds of people might hold these views—they are not sophisticated philosophical positions. Rather, they are so well-known that it has already become boring to go through the obvious objections.

the thesis ‘pleasure is the good’, nor the thesis ‘wisdom is the good’ even qualifies as the *right type of answer* to the question ‘what is the good?’

1. Anti-Hedonism in the *Philebus*?

At the end of the *Philebus*, Socrates seems to give voice to a deeply felt anti-hedonist sentiment. The hedonist, he says (and he implies that this is an idiotic thing to do), takes a majority vote. Even worse, the sample the hedonist uses is not a group of philosophers. Rather, he looks at animal life, and therefore he has countless witnesses for the view that pleasure is the good. The cows that happily and mindlessly feast all day are the hedonist’s witnesses (67b). The hedonism that Socrates here apparently hates is a lowly ethical outlook. It is the perspective of those who think that human life is no better, and has no greater potential, than the life of grazing cattle.

However, this passage does not commit us to an anti-hedonist interpretation of the dialogue. Socrates makes a dismissive remark about the people who adopt some crude version of hedonism. But as the dialogue itself has shown, this crude hedonism is at the end of a spectrum of views, and it is certainly not the strongest among them. If one wanted to refute hedonism, one had better engage with a more sophisticated version of it—one that integrates some of the insights that are formulated in the *Philebus*, such as that there are genuinely fulfilling pleasures of reason, or that some pleasures are by their very nature excessive and destructive.

But what about the famous ranking at 65b f., and the fact that pleasure receives the fifth and lowest place? And does it not seem that, throughout the dialogue, reason is shown to be superior to pleasure? In my view, we should think that pleasure, by gaining fifth rank, fares extremely well. The fifth rank in a hierarchy that, apart from pleasure, contains such illustrious members as measure, the well-measured and beautiful, knowledge and reason, as well as the sciences and arts, *elevates* pleasure into a Platonic heaven. To gain fifth rank with such competitors is not to come in last and accept a lowly status. To gain fifth rank among such competitors is to be praised.

Now it might be objected that it is not pleasure in general that gains the fifth rank. Rather, the pure pleasures gain the fifth rank. These pure pleasures are deeply connected to reason. So perhaps the defender of the anti-hedonist interpretation might say that pure pleasures really are not the kinds of pleasures that matter to us when we ask how Plato thinks about hedonism. *We* are thinking of pleasures in a more ordinary sense, and the fact that Plato has some room for the pleasures of reason in a good human life really amounts to no more than that he gives pride of place to reason.

But note that pleasure and reason are on a par here. The cognitive capacities are in various respects superior to pleasure. Without them, we cannot even perceive, remember, or pursue pleasure. They are more akin to order and measure than pleasure is. But this does not discredit all pleasures, and it does not commend all cognitive activities. Not all cognitive activities are part of a well-mixed life either. Both with respect to our cognitive activities, and with respect to the way we integrate pleasures into our lives, measure comes first—only measured, non-excessive, and orderly cognitive activities and pleasures are part of the good mix.⁴ So if we wanted to say that pleasure does not receive an honored place by receiving fifth rank, simply because not all pleasures are included, we would also have to say that rea-

⁴ All good things, whether they are forms of knowing and thinking, or forms of experiencing pleasure, must be limited-unlimited combinations. Cf. 27d7-10; 25e8; 26a4; 26b1. The same references are given by John Cooper, who explores the idea that, according to the *Philebus*, all goods are limited-unlimited combinations. As Cooper points out, this means that not all forms of cognitive activity are good (1999).

son does not receive a high rank in the well-mixed life, because, for example, unlimited day-dreaming and the concocting of delusional ideas are destructive, and are excluded from the well-mixed life. I thus suggest that Plato recognizes the important role of pleasure—and of the *right* pleasures—in a well-mixed life by ascribing fifth rank to pleasure.

If this alternative interpretation is correct, then the discussions of pleasure and pain in the *Philebus* do not add up to one sustained argument against hedonism. But how then are we to read Plato's critique of the thesis that 'pleasure is the good'? As suggested in the introduction, I think that Plato criticizes the thesis that 'pleasure is the good', along with the thesis that '*phronêsis* is the good' (and I deliberately leave *phronêsis* untranslated here), because neither thesis is the right type of answer to the question 'what is the good?'. I now turn to a positive argument for this reading.

2. Five Steps Toward a Reformulation of the Task of Ethics

An ethical theory that begins from a claim of the form 'X is the good' is a conventional and ultimately unsatisfactory theory. This, I suggest, is one of the key ideas that Plato puts forward in the *Philebus*. But how does he propose that we reach a more sophisticated conception of ethics?

A careful phrasing of the two positions at the beginning of the dialogue sets the stage (11b-c). The two competing views about the good are presented in remarkably different ways. The hedonist considers *chairein*, *hêdonê* and *terpsis* as the good. *Phronein* and various other cognitive activities, as well as correct *doxa* and true calculations are what, according to Socrates, is good.⁵ The view that pleasure is the good is thus introduced in the conventional way, as the view that the experiencing and having of pleasure is the good. It is therefore open to the standard critique of this view: that there are good and bad pleasures, a key topic of the *Philebus*. With respect to Socrates' thesis, Plato reinterprets the conventional picture right from the outset, and by doing so, he significantly improves on it. He presents the claim that *phronêsis* is the good as the thesis that the various cognitive capacities are good. At no point does the standard interpretation of this thesis—that knowledge or wisdom is the good—come into full view. Therefore, its standard refutation, a circularity charge, need not be addressed. The conventional claim "knowledge (or wisdom) is the good" can be challenged by the question "the knowledge of *what* is the good?", a question that perhaps must be answered by "the knowledge of the good" (cf. Rp. V, 505b-c). By focusing on the exercise of the cognitive capacities, rather than the having of knowledge or wisdom, Plato makes this objection obsolete.⁶

A second key move consists in the explicit acknowledgment that ethics is concerned with the *human good*. From the very beginning of the dialogue, Socrates and Protarchus are concerned with the human good (11d).⁷ Socrates does not fail to point out that this is not the only question about the good. We could also investigate the question of what the good of the uni-

⁵ Dorothea Frede translates '*phronein*' as 'knowing', and later on uses the phrase the 'life of knowledge'; in: J. Cooper (ed.), *Plato's Complete Works* (Hackett, 1996). But as much as we might on balance like this translation, it is in some sense already too strong. Note that it is a difficult question whether we should use such success-terms as 'knowledge', or whether we should translate in terms of activities ('thinking', etc.).

⁶ This does not mean that the two competing positions could not be referenced in the standard ways ("wisdom (*phronêsis*) is the good", "pleasure (*hêdonê*) is the good"; see 20b7, 20e1-2 and 4-5; see 19c5-6 for the idea that we are comparing human possessions). Cf. Socrates' recapitulation at 60a7-b1, where Socrates says that according to *Philebus*, pleasure is the end (*skopos*) and the good for everyone.

⁷ Even more basically, discussion of the good is at first introduced as discussion of the good for living beings (11b).

verse is, and the question of what the Form or *idea* of the good is (64a). While these questions are arguably not absent from the *Philebus*, they are explicitly distinguished from the ethical question “what is the human good?” This latter question deserves our attention in its own right.

The third key move towards a revised conception of ethics, I think, is that Plato formulates a set of criteria: ‘the good’ must be final, sufficient and choiceworthy (20d; cf. 60c). Neither pleasure nor the cognitive activities meet these criteria. A life of pleasure without cognitive activity is undesirable, in part because in such a life pleasure would not even register with us. A life of cognitive activity without pleasure, however, equally fails to meet Socrates’ criteria. No one would *choose* such a life (21e).

In a fourth important step, the question “what is the good?” is re-interpreted as the question “what is the good human life?” (21d3). From the discussion of completeness, sufficiency, and choiceworthiness onwards, we no longer are searching for the greatest good. Rather, we are concerned with different forms of life. And here, again, we must explicitly note that the claim “X is the greatest good” is not simply replaced by the claim “A life of X is the good life.” Rather, the point of investigating human life is to recognize that many things figure in it, and that the good life must consist of the right kind of mix of them.

Discussion must therefore, and this is the fifth and final step that I want to mention (there are of course more), turn to *causes* (22c)—namely, to what causes a life, which is a mix of many things, to be a good life. This question leads into an ontology and physiology of human life (23c-31b), and thus, I suggest, to the reformulation of the task of ethics that these five steps have been leading up to.

3. The Ontology, Physiology, and Psychology of Human Life

Only the life that is going well—in the terms of the *Philebus*, the well-mixed life—can itself meet the criteria of being final, sufficient, and choiceworthy. The *good life itself* is the human good. The conventional discussion of particular goods is accordingly replaced with a new program of study in ethics: understanding the ingredients of a well-mixed human life, and that which makes their mix a good mix. More specifically, the foundation (in the sense of: the starting-point, and major component) of ethics thus turns out to lie in (a) the ontology of living beings, (b) human physiology, and (c) human psychology.

It is a key result of the ontological discussions in the *Philebus* that the good human life, and the things that are good in it, are limited-unlimited combinations. A good life is composed of measured, and thus of limited, processes and states. The most important result of the passage on physics (28d-31b) for our purposes is that reason is the cause of order. From ontology and physiology, Plato then turns to psychology, or, broadly speaking, to the mental life of human beings and its physiological basis (31b-59b). Again, we see that Plato in the *Philebus* does not view *phronêsis* as a good that human beings might possess. Rather, he turns his attention to the value of our cognitive faculties and their exercise. Pleasure, too, is not studied in the most interesting way if we view it as a good that we either have or do not have. Rather, ethics must explore the way in which human beings experience pleasure and pain. From this perspective, we come to see that the fact that we are motivated by pleasure has something to do with our physiology: we desire the restoration of harmonious states. This supplies us with the beginnings of a theory about which kinds of pleasures are good for us. And even more fundamentally, we see that human life is a life of perceived, foreseen, hoped-for, feared, remembered, etc., processes of generation and destruction. This understanding is fundamental for a theory about the good human life.

4. The Final Ranking

Let me turn to the final ranking. Recall the list:

- (1) Measure,
- (2) the proportioned, fine, complete, etc.
- (3) reason and intelligence,
- (4) the sciences and arts,
- (5) pure pleasures.

Plato does not call the items on the list ‘goods’, and it is not just for verbal accuracy that we should abstain from this expression. The list is heterogeneous. Arguably, only items 4 and 5 can, under certain conditions, be called goods.⁸ Note further the absence of the usual suspects. Think of Plato’s list of human and divine goods in the *Laws*. There, health, beauty, strength, and wealth, are, in this very order, called human goods, and wisdom, moderation, justice, and courage, are called divine goods (*Laws* I, 631b3-d2). Not one of these goods comes up in the list at the end of the *Philebus*. Most strikingly, none of the virtues is part of the list. Does this mean that, for Plato, pleasure is a higher good than virtue? Perhaps pure pleasures, insofar as they are the pleasures of reason, indeed have more value than such virtues as courage or moderation. But why would they have more value than wisdom? The only plausible reason, I think, why wisdom does not figure in the ranking, is that wisdom is, compared to pleasure, a *composite*. Many things figure in wisdom—pleasures and pains, measure, the fine and proportioned, and our cognitive activities. Actually, as we see, *all* the items on the list are relevant to an account of wisdom, and probably also to an account of any of the other virtues.

Let me add some more detail on the issue that only pure pleasure gains fifth rank. The reason why this is complicated is the following. A couple of lines before the final ranking, Socrates admits additional pleasures into the well-mixed life—all those that co-exist with health and with moderation and all of virtue (63e). This is indeed a wide range, for it might seem that the necessary pleasures (think of the pleasures of drinking and eating) figure in health, and that many kinds of pleasures can be limited, and therefore moderate. Does Socrates forget about these pleasures in the final ranking?

My answer to this often-observed seeming inconsistency amounts, I think, to a further argument against considering the ranking as a ranking of goods. The relevant difference between pure pleasures and the other pleasures that might be part of a good life is that pure pleasures themselves are a *cause* of good states of the human being. Like measure, or the proportioned, or reason, pure pleasures are causes of good features of a human life. For if we are in such a condition that we find reasoning pleasurable, this structures and shapes our lives in a rather pervasive way—this kind of motivational set-up makes us live a life of reason. The other pleasures, on the contrary, *need to be made good* by measure and reason, or by being mixed and moderated by pure pleasures. The final ranking, I think, is a list of causes or principles of a well-mixed life, not of goods that add up to a well-mixed life.

5. Plato and Hedonism

The result of the *Philebus*, I think, is a distinction between two ways in which ethics can consider pleasure a key factor and motivator in human life. One way of holding this view—

⁸ Socrates does not use one term in order to summarily refer to all the items on the list. He says that pleasure is not the first *ktêma* (possession), but he does not call all the items ‘possessions’. Indeed, he proceeds with his list without any such general classification.

the hedonist's way—is the thesis that among the various goods, pleasure is the greatest one. Another way of holding this view is to admit that human beings are constantly concerned with pleasure and pain. This, I suggest, is what Plato says in the *Philebus*. On this picture, pleasure is a central topic of ethics. If it is true that pleasure motivates action, and that our activities and physiological processes go along with or produce pleasure and pain, then one central task of leading a good life is to get the things that relate to pleasure *right*—to take pleasure in the right kinds of things, to understand the difference between different kinds of pleasure, and so on.

Plato shares a major premise with hedonism: that pleasure is a key motivator in human action.⁹ He also shares a conclusion with hedonism: that ethics must be centrally concerned with how to pursue pleasure in the right way. So where does Plato disagree with hedonism? The hedonist's way of considering pleasure a key motivator of human action, I suggest, is wedded to the conventional idea that one thing which human beings value could be *the good*—an idea which neither survives Plato's metaphysics, nor his analysis of what the human good consists in. This, however, is a fault that hedonism shares with other conventional views in ethics, including the honorable thesis that wisdom is the good.

⁹ This point would deserve detailed discussion, which I cannot offer in this brief paper.