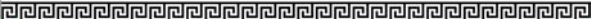


OXFORD

# PLATO'S PHILEBUS

*A Philosophical Discussion*



PLATO DIALOGUE PROJECT

*edited by*

Panos Dimas • Russell E. Jones • Gabriel R. Lear

## Plato's *Philebus*



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PANOS DIMAS,  
RUSSELL E. JONES,  
AND GABRIEL R. LEAR

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# Preface

During a meeting at the Norwegian Institute at Athens in December 2013, Pierre Destrée, Susan Sauvé Meyer and I agreed that Plato scholarship would profit from an undertaking similar in scope and aim to the Symposium Aristotelicum. Fully appreciative of the fact that the Platonic dialogues pose a different and more complex interpretative challenge than do the various Aristotelian texts, we nonetheless concluded that the potential rewards of such an undertaking made it worthwhile. We proceeded to consult with Francesco Ademollo, Christoph Horn, Gabriel Richardson Lear, and Marco Zingano, who endorsed the idea and accepted our invitation to join in the effort to realize the plan. Thus the Plato Dialogue Project (PDP) came to be, with the seven of us as its steering board.

Our aim is for the Plato Dialogue Project to become a central research forum for Platonic scholarship. We plan to hold meetings every third year at different research institutions around the world, with each meeting devoted to a single Platonic work. For each meeting, the text is divided in sections, with each portion assigned to a scholar who has been invited to write a paper about it. The papers are presented at the meeting, where they receive feedback and criticism from the assembled participants, and are subsequently revised for publication in a single volume. Central to this enterprise is the concern that the entire Platonic text under study, not just selected parts, be subject to rigorous philosophical analysis.

The Plato Dialogue Project had its first session at the Anargyrios and Korgialenios School in the Isle of Spetses, Greece in September 2015. The Norwegian Institute at Athens hosted the meeting and we are grateful for its support. The text chosen was the *Philebus* and the volume before you is the result of those deliberations. In addition to the contributors to the volume, the participants included Francesco Ademollo, Paul Kalligas, Keith McPartland, Franco Trivigno, and Marco Zingano.

The PDP steering board:  
Francesco Ademollo, Pierre Destrée, Panos Dimas,  
Christoph Horn, Gabriel Richardson Lear,  
Susan Sauvé Meyer, Marco Zingano

On behalf of the steering board:  
Panos Dimas



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# First Meeting of the Plato Dialogue Project, Spetses, September 1–4, 2015

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# 1

## Revelations of Reason

### An Orientation to Reading Plato's *Philebus*

Sean Kelsey and Gabriel Richardson Lear

The essays comprising this volume are each focused on a relatively brief section of the *Philebus* and are arranged in the order of the passages they discuss. They originated in a week-long seminar, the first of the Plato Dialogue Project, in which the contributors were asked to offer an overview of the argument of their passage, focusing on issues of philosophical significance as they saw fit. The conversation continued over subsequent months, as the contributors exchanged written comments on each other's papers. The result is not and is not intended to be a commentary, nor does it aim to present a unified interpretation. It is instead a series of close, original philosophical examinations, often in conversation with each other, which together provide continuous coverage of the *Philebus*.

As the essays in this volume reveal, the *Philebus* is an extraordinarily creative and profound work of philosophy, addressing questions of philosophical methodology, moral psychology, ontology, and ethics. We cannot vindicate that claim in a brief introduction and in any case that is the cumulative work of the essays which follow, work which it would at best be redundant to summarize. Instead, in thinking about how to introduce this volume, we thought it might be useful to say something about how the parts of the dialogue examined in these essays fit together as a whole, both by way of reminder and because, as we explain below, the argumentative integrity of the *Philebus* strikes us as peculiarly elusive (a feeling evidently shared by many readers). We diagnose two sources of this difficulty and offer a suggestion—our own, not the contributors'—about how to orient oneself to the dialogical whole of which the passages discussed in these essays are parts.

\* \* \*

There being worse places to start than the end, we begin with Socrates' last remark in the *Philebus*, which (apart from a request to be released from the conversation) reads as follows:

In any case [the power of pleasure is] not *first* [in the ranking], not even if all the cattle and horses and all the other beasts, by their pursuit of enjoyment, should say that it is—trusting in whom, as augurs in birds, the many judge pleasures to

be most decisive for our living well, and suppose that the longings of beasts are authoritative witnesses, rather than those of the prophetic statements made under the guidance of the philosophic Muse. (67b1–7)

The remark is interesting for what it hints about Socrates' larger objective in the preceding discussion. Earlier, he let slip that he was fed up with the statement that the good for us is pleasure (66d–e); here he reveals *why* he was fed up: not simply because the statement is false, but because its many proponents have more faith in the testimony of beasts than of philosophically inspired discourse. This suggests that Socrates' own aim was not merely to reach a conclusion about the statement's truth (11c), but also to enhance the credibility of his own star witnesses, whose testimony is revealed by *their* longings and aspirations. That is to say, Socrates wishes not merely to have the testimony of philosophical arguments put on record, but also to increase their standing so that his audience will not only hear but also believe them. We return to this suggestion below, because we think it is helpful in relation to some aspects of the dialogue many readers have found puzzling.

Whatever Socrates' personal objectives, the discussion's official agenda is clear enough. Protarchus, having taken over from Philebus the statement that pleasure is good for all animals, must try to show that pleasure is a "condition of soul capable of furnishing a happy life to all human beings" (11d); Socrates must try to show the same about "wisdom" (*phronēsis*).<sup>1</sup> In addition, it is agreed that, should some other thing prove superior to both pleasure and wisdom, then although both Socrates and Protarchus will stand defeated by "the life firmly possessed of that," still, wisdom will be defeated by pleasure (or vice versa), depending on which is more "akin" (*sungenēs*) to that other (11d–12a, cf. 22d–e). This agenda is made clear at the outset, and when we come to the end of the dialogue, it is these same points that are now taken as settled: as Socrates formulates it there, neither pleasure nor wisdom "is the good itself," and (as compared to pleasure) "reason" (*nous*) "is ten-thousand times more akin (*oikeioteron*) and more attached to the idea of the victor," i.e., the good itself (67a).

## 1. The Dialogue as a Whole

Despite this apparent consonance and clarity of purpose, many readers have found it difficult to grasp the project of the *Philebus* and its argument as a whole. One difficulty is that it is not easy to see how the dialogue's several parts fit together so as to form a single line of argument. Now, it is often an effect of

<sup>1</sup> Earlier Socrates claimed that, for those creatures capable of sharing in it, wisdom is *better* than pleasure, and indeed that it is "the *most* beneficial of all things" (11b–c).

Plato's dialogue form that the conversation between Socrates and his interlocutors meanders from one topic to another, following a structure that is more narrative than it is deductive. However, in the *Philebus* Plato seems to emphasize that there is a single agenda and that every topic Socrates and Protarchus discuss is necessary or at least helpful for securing Socrates' conclusion. That is to say, Plato raises the reader's expectation of a clear line of logical connection among the dialogue's parts. And yet, when we look more closely it is often unclear where or how those discussions are put to use.

A notorious example of this problem first arises near the beginning of the dialogue, the involved discussion of the "divine method," which instructs us not to "let go" of the objects of our inquiries (certain "unities")—not to "release" them "into the unlimited"—before having "told their entire number," i.e., enumerated all of their finitely many kinds (12b–20a). There are many difficulties concerning the proper interpretation of the internal dialectic of this passage—how many problems is the divine method supposed to solve and how is it supposed to solve them?<sup>2</sup>—but we focus rather on how the passage as a whole fits into the larger argumentative flow. The discussion of this method is prompted by the fact that the interlocutors' examination of pleasure founders almost immediately, as Socrates has difficulty securing Protarchus' agreement to his very first point (namely, that pleasure comes in a variety of forms that are unlike and indeed opposed to one another) (12c–13d). One curiosity is that though the principal causes of this difficulty appear to be "moral"—Socrates complains that they've been obstinate, defensive, immature, outrageous, evasive, and partisan (13c–d, 14a–b)—the ensuing discussion of method, which is supposed to help remedy these deficiencies, is introduced as reinforcing a fairly technical point about "one and many," and is touted for its power of steering clear of various difficulties that this point gives rise to (14c, 16a–b). Even more striking, after describing this method, and claiming that *it* is what distinguishes dialectical from eristic discussion (17a), and declaring that the argument "demands" that they show "how [pleasure and knowledge] each are one and many" (18e–19a), Socrates more or less immediately proceeds to disregard it entirely. Instead, without benefit of having collected or divided either pleasure or knowledge into kinds, he argues that "the good" is neither of them but rather "some third thing, different from and better than them both" (20b–c). Though the divine method may be necessary for something, it is apparently *not* necessary for resolving the first point at issue between Socrates and Protarchus, whether it is pleasure or knowledge that is "capable of furnishing a happy life to all human beings." For that point is resolved

<sup>2</sup> See Crivelli, this volume, Chapter 3, for a novel solution that, among other things, sees Plato as trying to maintain the unchanging and non-spatial character of genera and species by conceiving of "collection" and "division" as matters of identifying relations of subordination and disjunction (as appropriate) among genus, species, and sensible particulars.



by Protarchus' intuitive sense that neither the life of pleasure alone nor the life of reason alone would be desirable, with the result that neither pleasure nor reason meets the formal requirement that the good be "complete" (*teleon*), "sufficient" (*hikanon*), and unconditionally desirable (20c–d).<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps the method is put to use in the ensuing discussion of the winner of "second prize"? After all, though Socrates' very next point is that *this* discussion is going to require some *other* "contrivance"—some new "arrows," as it were, different from those employed in the preceding discussions—he also remarks that perhaps some will be the same (23b). The new equipment itself is apparently the division of all beings into four kinds (unlimited, limit, mixture, and cause), which Socrates then uses to classify pleasure, reason, and "the mixed life" superior to both, assigning one each to three of the foregoing four kinds (23b–27c, 27c–31a). But though the first part of this discussion certainly does make use of the vocabulary of division, it is far from a straightforward application of the method described earlier (12b–20a). Socrates turns the method on itself, treating some of its structural features—limit, unlimited—as themselves objects to be collected and divided. Several scholars have doubted whether such a procedure allows for a univocal sense of "unlimited"; and Socrates himself draws attention to his failure actually to delimit or state the determinate number of the category of limit itself (26c–d)!<sup>4</sup>

At any rate, in the second part of this discussion, Socrates (on the strength of the testimony of Philebus) assigns pleasure to the kind "unlimited" and (on the basis of his own argument) assigns reason to the kind "cause," so as to help settle the question of whether wisdom is better than pleasure. Now, it certainly looked as though "second prize" was going to be awarded to the "cause" of the combined life (22d). But—and here is a second example of the problem we are discussing—the argument that assigns reason to the kind "cause" does not, in fact, decide the contest (notwithstanding the importance Socrates attaches to making this assignment correctly (28a)). For it takes them nearly forty Stephanus pages more to reach a final decision. Equally puzzling, the argument that assigns reason to the kind cause is in fact an extended discussion of a divine, cosmic reason, which (it is argued) is responsible for the beautiful order of the cosmos (30c). Fascinating though this may be in itself, however, we might have expected Socrates' argument to focus on *human* reason.<sup>5</sup> The result is an unsettling sense that the foregoing discussion is (at best) out of proportion with its contribution to the particular

<sup>3</sup> Following Meyer, who argues in her contribution to this volume (Chapter 4) that there are indeed three separate criteria of the good at issue in this passage.

<sup>4</sup> Gill emphasizes this point in her contribution to this volume (Chapter 5) as part of a larger (and provocative) argument against the widespread interpretation of all limits as harmonies and all mixtures as good and beautiful.

<sup>5</sup> Whether this divine intelligence is the intelligence residing in the world soul or is rather, as Lorenz argues in this volume (Chapter 6), an intelligence transcending the cosmos and prior to all soul, it is not human intelligence.

question that Socrates professes to be engaged upon settling, as well as considerable unclarity about what precisely the fourfold division of beings is supposed to have accomplished.

Maybe we should look for Socrates to employ the divine method in the subsequent discussions of pleasure and knowledge; after all, these are the “unities” that we were led to think require a full accounting in the first place (19a–b), and the discussion of them comprises more than half of the entire dialogue (31b–59d, 59e–64b). This discussion, and especially the discussion of pleasure, is indeed a tour de force: Socrates describes several distinct kinds of pleasure in glorious psychological detail, and also (though to a lesser extent) several kinds of knowledge. But if he is here employing the method described earlier, he hardly emphasizes that fact. For example, the discussion is at least introduced as an inquiry, not into the various *kinds* of pleasure and knowledge, but into the “seat” and “cause” of each of them respectively (ἐν ᾧ τέ ἐστιν ἑκάτερον αὐτοῖν καὶ διὰ τί πάθος γίγνεσθον, 31b). Moreover, though several “kinds” (*eidē*) of pleasure are indeed discussed in sequence (note e.g., the transition at 32b–c), there is no obvious attempt at any final “reckoning,” such as would “tell the whole number” of either pleasure or wisdom, nor even (perhaps) to collect either of them under a single, common account.<sup>6</sup> Again, many of the different forms of pleasure, and all of the different forms of “reason” or “wisdom,” are distinguished from one another by their varying degrees of “purity” and “truth”—indeed, in retrospect it appears as though this is precisely what Socrates was after all along (55c). But it is at least not obvious that *these* are the differences that divide a “kind” (*genos*) into its “varieties” or “forms” (*eidē*).<sup>7</sup> For example, Socrates earlier spoke as though the different forms of a kind are forms of that kind equally (e.g., the different colors or shapes are equally colors or equally shapes) (12e–13b); it is at least not clear that he would say the same about varieties of pleasure or wisdom that differ

<sup>6</sup> Note that though earlier Socrates concedes, in deference to the testimony of Philebus, that pleasure and pain belong in the kind “unlimited” (τούτῳ δὴ σοὶ τῶν ἀπεράντων γε γένους ἔστων, 28a), his first point in the later discussion of pleasure is that its natural “seat” is the combined class (ἐν τῷ κοινῷ γένει... γίγνεσθαι κατὰ φύσιν, 31c); indeed he goes further, describing pleasure itself as “the natural path” (ἡ κατὰ φύσιν ὁδός, 32a), i.e., “the path to being” of creatures that experience pleasure (ἡ εἰς τὴν αὐτῶν οὐσίαν ὁδός, 32b)—descriptions which evoke his earlier characterization of the third kind as “generation into being” (γένεσις εἰς οὐσίαν, 26d). (We note that the fact that Socrates’ concession to Philebus is just that—a concession—is perhaps anticipated earlier, where he says, *pace* Philebus, that law and order (i.e., limit), far from “effacing” (ἀποκναῖσαι) pleasure, has “kept her safe” (ἀποσώσαι), 26b–c (though see 41d, where the ‘concession’ is recalled and reaffirmed).)

The question of whether or not Socrates articulates or indicates a unified account of pleasure as “filling” or restoration of a harmonious state from a state of deficiency is a subject of dispute among Ogiwara (Chapter 7), Rangos (Chapter 12), and Warren (Chapter 11) in this volume. It is closely related to the question, discussed by Rangos, of the sense in which all pleasures, including the pure pleasures, may be said to be members of the unlimited class in the fourfold ontology.

<sup>7</sup> However, as Moss notes in her contribution to this volume (Chapter 13), comparing kinds of knowledge in terms of their relative purity does suggest that there is some unified account applicable to them all in some way or other. According to her interpretation, knowledge is in every case a matter of measuring or perhaps more generally grasping limits.

substantially from one another in purity or truth.<sup>8</sup> Once again, then, the dialectical method discussed at such length does not obviously find a straightforward application in the dialogue. To be clear, we are not insisting that Socrates makes *no* use of this method, or that he *nowhere* collects or divides either pleasure or knowledge into one or more determinate kinds; our point is just that the method does not shape and control the subsequent discussion in the way we are led to expect, by the fanfare with which it is introduced, by the length at which it is described, and by the importance assigned to it, as shown by the example of those contemporary “savants,” whom “the intermediate [kinds] escape” (τὰ μέσα αὐτοὺς ἐκφεύγει), which kinds “make all the difference for whether or not a discussion is conducted eristically” (οἷς διακεχώρισται τό τε διαλεκτικῶς πάλιν καὶ τὸ ἐριστικῶς ἡμᾶς ποιεῖσθαι πρὸς ἀλλήλους τοὺς λόγους, 17a). To be sure, there are several ways one might try resolving the interpretive challenge this poses—indeed, several essays in this volume make important contributions to our understanding in this regard.<sup>9</sup> Our point is simply that it is indeed a challenge.

Even more striking with respect to the larger point we are making: it is not clear how the magisterial discussions of pleasure and knowledge themselves contribute to the final decision about pleasure and wisdom (and this despite Socrates’ remark, concerning the discussion of false pleasures, that “perhaps we’ll use this” in reaching a final decision (41b, cf. 32c–d, 44d, 50e, 52e)). Recall how that argument goes: Socrates wants to determine which of pleasure or knowledge is more akin to the good. To do that he must first identify the good, something he proposes to do by mixing pleasure and knowledge into a good life and seeing where that life’s goodness lies. Now, the fact that the different varieties of pleasure and wisdom are not equally “pure” or “true” certainly bears on the composition of

<sup>8</sup> Consider that the lowest form of knowledge in the *Philebus*—practices which “the many call crafts”—is a matter of *empeiria* (experience) and *tribē* (knack), rather than of measurement (55e–56a). In the *Gorgias*, Socrates argued that such practices were not in fact crafts at all, but only appear to be. Has he changed his mind? Again, Socrates does claim that “what takes pleasure,” whether rightly or wrongly, “really does take pleasure” (τὸ ἡδόμενον, ἅντε ὀρθῶς ἅντε μὴ ὀρθῶς ἡδύται, τό γε ὄντως ἡδεσθαι δῆλον ὥς οὐδέποτε ἀπολεῖ, 37b); still, he also claims that some pleasures are false, “being laughable imitations of true ones” (μεμμημένα τὰς ἀληθεῖς ἐπὶ τὰ γελοϊότερα, 40c). If these “caricatures” of true pleasures really are pleasures, is it clear that they are pleasures on an ontological par with the genuine article?

<sup>9</sup> Consider, for example, D. Frede’s radical response to this problem: “Why did Socrates so emphasize the demand that the divisions must be complete and numerically exact, if he did not care to follow this rule himself? And why does he stress that no one who does not follow the rules is ever to count as competent at anything, if he thereby denigrates his own effort? The most plausible answer is that Plato wanted to make crystal clear what he is *not* doing in the *Philebus*. He wants to leave no doubt that although *some* use is made of the laws of dialectic, his investigation of pleasure and knowledge cannot be called dialectic proper [...] By foregoing a systematic dialectical treatment of all kinds of pleasure and knowledge, the partners forfeit their claim to expertise in those fields” (1993, xli). By contrast, Fletcher (2017) explains many of the perplexities we have pointed to by casting them as stages of Socrates’ attempt to persuade Protarchus that pleasure is not some single kind of thing at all. His failure to collect a unity and divide it into a determinate number of kinds is not a failure of his application of the method or a forfeiting of a claim to expertise, but rather a failure of pleasure to be a unified kind of the sort concerning which there could even in principle be an expertise.

the “mixture” that is the good life (59e–64b). Whereas all varieties of knowledge are admitted, many (all?) of the false and impure forms of pleasure are not. Even so, the decision that wisdom is better than pleasure is *not* based on wisdom’s making a “greater” or even “better” contribution to that mixture.<sup>10</sup> No, that decision is reached by comparing pleasure as a whole and wisdom as a whole (without explicit reference to their several varieties) to the good-making triple of truth, measure, and beauty (65a–66c). Moreover, even though mixing the good life requires attention to the fact that there are many different kinds of pleasure and of knowledge, Socrates’ characterization of these kinds here is not nearly as fine-grained as his previous discussions permit. Those discussions are far more intricate and involved than is strictly required by the logic of his argument.

We have been trying to convey something of why readers have found it difficult to see how the *Philebus* hangs together—how its various parts combine to make a more or less single, linear, and coherent case for the dialogue’s official conclusions. Those conclusions (again) were two: first, that “the” good is neither wisdom nor pleasure, and second, that wisdom is *better*—“shares in a greater portion of the good,” “is many-times more akin to the idea of it” (60b, 67a)—than pleasure. The difficulty might be put as follows. First, the official arguments for these conclusions, which take up but a fragment of the dialogue (20b–22c and 64c–67b), do not obviously draw *any* of their premises from *any* of the dialogue’s other main sections: not from the discourse on method (12b–20a), not from the fourfold classification of beings and its application to pleasure and reason (23c–31a), not even from the long discussions of pleasure and reason themselves (31b–59d). Second, neither is it obvious how these main sections interact with and depend on one another. It is therefore difficult to grasp what rationally persuasive work these various discussions are intended to do. To be sure, they are all obviously relevant to the dialogue’s broader topic. What is perplexing is rather that, in those passages containing the dialogue’s crucial argumentative cruxes, Socrates does not explicitly appeal to any specific claims established or examined previously.<sup>11</sup> We emphasize that none of this in any way denigrates the inherent philosophical interest of these discussions (no doubt that is why the discussions of dialectic and of pleasure have been the objects of particular scholarly attention). Still, if they do not provide premises or methodologies for later arguments, how exactly are they

<sup>10</sup> We believe this is so even if, as Jones argues in this volume (Chapter 14), the “mixing” passage shows that knowledge has a structurally important role in the good life not played by pleasure. To anticipate a suggestion we will make shortly, the mixing passage does indeed *show* the superiority of knowledge to pleasure, but it is not the official argument for this conclusion.

<sup>11</sup> For example, though one of the most distinctive features of Socrates’ approach to pleasure is to argue that many of its forms are “false,” when it comes time to decide which pleasures are to be mixed into the good life, the pleasures that are refused entry, though contrasted with those pleasures that are “true” and “pure,” are described as “greatest” (*megistas*) and “most intense” (*sphodrotatas*), and are rejected on the grounds, not that they are “false,” but that they are constant companions of folly and vice (ἀεὶ μετ’ ἀφροσύνης καὶ τῆς ἄλλης κακίας ἐπομένας, 63e).

intended to contribute to establishing the dialogue's "official" conclusions? Some might attribute Plato's lack of precision about the overarching argument to the fact that the *Philebus* was likely written late in his life, when his artistic powers were beginning to wane;<sup>12</sup> his *makrologia* (as it might seem) on the topics of dialectic, cosmic *nous*, and pleasure might be attributed to the fact that at this late stage he had many ideas he wanted to put into writing somewhere and the theme of this dialogue provided a relevant venue. We consider these explanations to be interpretations of last resort.<sup>13</sup> We will offer an alternative in a moment, but first let us examine a second problem facing readers of the *Philebus*.

## 2. The Importance of Placing Second

Normally, a good way of grasping the logical structure of a discussion is to get clear on what its point is. But the second problem is figuring out what exactly the project of this dialogue is.<sup>14</sup>

A few things are clear. First, in the *Philebus* Plato has a familiar figure (Socrates) returning to a familiar theme, viz. the contest between two ways of life, one devoted to pleasure, the other to philosophy. It is true that here the contestants are largely shorn of associations prominent in other dialogues: for example, the association of philosophy with justice, or of pleasure with tyranny (the aspiration for which is sometimes disguised as ambition for political distinction).<sup>15</sup> But though the setting and preoccupations of the *Philebus* are, by contrast with many other dialogues, markedly "a-political," its principal topic is a familiar one. For it is at least arguable that the teaching of (say) the *Gorgias* or *Republic* is that while the happy and just are marked by their commitment to reality or truth, the unjust and unhappy are at bottom driven on by desire for pleasure.

Second, in treating its topic, the *Philebus* shows relatively little interest in what we might call "the" good, i.e., the very form or idea of goodness, the good itself. For its declared focus, from the very beginning, is limited: not the good *as such*, but the good *for us*, for us living creatures, above all for us human beings.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> We thank Rachel Barney for pushing us to consider this possible explanation, mentioned also in Barney (2016, 209) in connection with another odd moment in the argument of the *Philebus*.

<sup>13</sup> See likewise Crivelli (2012, 8), who rejects this sort of explanation for a similar problem about how to understand the relevance of the "divine method" to the puzzles raised about the "unities" as "uncharitable."

<sup>14</sup> This problem and the related problem of grasping what is special about the approach to ethics in the *Philebus* are addressed by several essays in this volume, especially Vogt (Chapter 2), Meyer (Chapter 4), Jones (Chapter 14), and Harte (Chapter 15).

<sup>15</sup> Though the unexpected reference to *Gorgias* at 58a–c suggests that political concerns are somehow at issue in the dialogue.

<sup>16</sup> This point is emphasized by Vogt, who argues in her contribution to this volume (Chapter 2) that this starting point allows Plato to adopt a novel approach to familiar ethical themes, an approach focused on the plurality of good making features of the happy human life and calling upon a distinctive metaphysics of mixture.

So, what Socrates and Protarchus are to prove about pleasure or wisdom is that it is “the condition of soul capable of making life happy for all human beings” (ἐξὶν ψυχῆς καὶ διάθελαι... τὴν δυναμένην ἀνθρώποις πᾶσι τὸν βίον εὐδαίμονα παρέχειν) (11d). It is true that the *Philebus* does contain some remarks that are at least ostensibly about “the” good: for example, that it is perfect, choiceworthy, and good in every way, or that it may be grasped by the triple of beauty, measure, and truth (20d–21a; 61a, 64e–65a). But these remarks are in the service of points about the *human* good, i.e., a good that “inhabits” a kind of human life, a “mixture” of both pleasure and wisdom.<sup>17</sup>

Third, and perhaps most distinctively, the bulk of the *Philebus* is addressed to the *comparative* value of pleasure and wisdom. It’s agreed fairly early that neither wins “gold”: that is, that neither is “the” good for us human beings. Thereafter the question is which will win “silver”—a question Socrates apparently cares *more* about than which (if either) wins “gold” (22a)!

It’s just here, we believe, that difficulties arise about making sense of the larger project of the *Philebus* as a whole. One difficulty is simply about what question this *is*, i.e., about the criterion by which it will be decided. Though in places it looks as though the question is *causal*, with second prize going to the item “responsible for” the mixed life (22d), elsewhere it looks as though it will be decided by *similarity* or *kinship*, with second prize going to the item that is “more similar and more akin” to whatever it is that makes the mixed life choiceworthy and good (22d)—or (if this is different) to the idea of the good itself (60b)—while in still other places it looks as though the question is quite simply which is *better*, with second prize going to the item that “shares in a greater portion of” the good (67a). So, how many questions *is* this, and (if they are more than one) how are they related?<sup>18</sup> A second difficulty, connected to the first, is *why care*? What does it *matter*, theoretically or practically, which takes “silver”? Why is this *more* important, at least to Socrates, than which (if either) is “the” good for us human beings?

Despite the fact that the dramatic scene-setting of the *Philebus* is spare by comparison with other Socratic dialogues, its protagonists—Socrates and Protarchus—are drawn richly enough for us to see that something is at stake for them in the comparative question. This is not the pursuit of knowledge for knowledge’s sake alone. So perhaps we can clarify the nature of the project of the *Philebus* if we can understand why answering the comparative question is practically relevant.

It is tempting to assume that the question is practically relevant insofar as the answer to it makes a difference to deliberation. This might be spelled out in several ways. One possibility, familiar to us, though with no obvious textual support, is

<sup>17</sup> So, though divine intelligence may avoid the criticisms leveled against human intelligence, that is irrelevant to their project (22c).

<sup>18</sup> See Meyer (Chapter 4) and Harte (Chapter 15) for discussion of these problems. Their debate focuses in particular on how to understand the idea of being “responsible for” the mixed life.

that knowledge of comparative value matters for calculating the optimal choice. Related to this, and with at least some grounding in the text, is that answering the comparative question might help us determine whether any amount of pleasure is worth the loss of knowledge (63d–64a).<sup>19</sup> Somewhat differently, if second prize goes to the *cause* of the mixed life, perhaps the idea is that we cannot attain the good for human beings if we lack the power to “produce” the life in which it “resides,” in which case perhaps the comparative question is important because the answer to it indicates the first step we should take in pursuing the human good, viz. acquire the power of producing a life with the right “mix” of pleasure and wisdom.<sup>20</sup>

Plato may in fact accept all these deliberative principles. But the issue is whether discovering deliberative principles or pragmatic strategies is his *point* in arguing for the superiority of wisdom to pleasure. We would like to suggest that his framing the discussion in terms of athletic competition and prize-giving suggests otherwise. Consider, for example, Protarchus’ view of what is at stake in the question about “silver.” Socrates says that he would “go to the mat” to deprive pleasure of second prize, even more than to deprive her of first (22c–e); Protarchus *concurs* in this estimate of the relative stakes, explaining that although, as things now stand, pleasure *has* taken a fall (she was competing for the victor’s crown), still, were she to be deprived of second prize too, she would be downright *disgraced* in the eyes of her lovers (ἄν τινα καὶ ἀτιμίαν σχοίη πρὸς τῶν αὐτῆς ἐραστῶν), and that because she would no longer appear so beautiful, *not even to them* (οὐδὲ γὰρ ἐκείνοις ἔτ’ ἂν ὁμοίως φαίνοιτο καλή) (22e–23a). In saying this, Protarchus implies that the point of settling the comparative question is not so much to discover deliberative principles as simply to ensure, for its own sake, appropriate honor (or, if Socrates is right, dishonor) to pleasure. Although Socrates is not so explicit, securing honor for wisdom seems to be his goal as well. In his discussion of the forms of knowledge, for example, he suggests that his purpose is to correct our view of which intellectual accomplishments are “the noblest” (*kallista*), so as to justify assigning the names “reason” (*nous*) and “wisdom” (*phronēsis*)—“names appropriate to the noblest things (*kallista*)” because they are “names most worthy of honor” (ἃ γ’ ἂν τις τιμήσειε μάλιστα ὀνόματα)—to dialectic rather than rhetoric (59b–d). Despite its alleged usefulness, rhetoric is an inferior form of reason.

<sup>19</sup> This might be an implication of Jones’s interpretation of 61c–64b according to which pure knowledge is shown to be invariably good, while pleasure is good only on the condition of the presence of knowledge (see this volume, Chapter 14).

<sup>20</sup> This might be an implication of Meyer’s view that second prize goes to the item that brings about the mixture of knowledge and pleasure (see Chapter 4). A more complicated version of such an account might also be built upon the basis of Harte’s interpretation of the final ranking as a ranking of different kinds of cause (see Chapter 15). Even if neither knowledge nor pleasure is the very best good, if they are causally responsible for the happy life to varying degrees and in different ways, that is presumably something a wise deliberator should know.

Notice that both Socrates and Protarchus associate the superiority question with the question of which contender appears to be and in truth is *kalon*.<sup>21</sup> *Kalon* is a word that can refer to physical beauty, but also to a more spiritual splendor (for which reason it is often translated as “noble” or “fine”).<sup>22</sup> We might say that the *kalon* is excellence manifest: it *deserves* honor and praise because it is excellent and it *elicits* honor and praise because its excellence is *manifest*. The point of an athletic competition or beauty contest is to *reveal* the victors’ superiority, to make their excellence *manifest*; being excellence, when revealed it will *shine*, and thereby attract to itself in fact the admiration and praise that it justly deserves. Put another way, the point of such a contest is to put the contestants on *display*, in competitive performance, so that the superior excellence of the winners may be *revealed*, definitively, not primarily by a final calculation or “tally,” computed afterwards by an impartial and dispassionate “scorekeeper,” but first and foremost by the performance itself, which is sufficient in its own right, not merely to *warrant*, but positively to *draw* to the victors the honor and reverence that their excellence deserves. So understood, there is no expectation that answering the superiority question will make any immediate difference (say) to our deliberations, beyond the decision to give honor where it’s due.<sup>23</sup>

Our suggestion, then, is that the point of discussing the superiority question is not primarily to “decide” but more importantly to *show* which is better and which is worse, both positively *revealing* the superior excellence of reason, i.e., making her appear *beautiful* or *noble* (*kalon*), and also—and not least—exposing the inferiority of pleasure, revealing how much of her apparent beauty is *merely* apparent, inasmuch as so much of her is accompanied by, or even united with, unreality, ugliness, and pain.<sup>24</sup> Read this way, it would be a mistake to think that

<sup>21</sup> Aristotle goes so far as to define the *kalon* as “whatever is praiseworthy [or praised] because it is worth choosing for itself, or whatever is pleasant because it is good” (*Rhetoric* 1366a33–34), but Plato manifests a similar assumption about the intrinsic connection between the *kalon* and praise in the *Philebus*: “It is most just to assign names concerning the noblest (*kallista*) sorts of thing to the noblest (*kallista*) things” and “*nous* and *phronēsis* are names one should especially honor” (59c–d), the implication being that, in being names one should especially honor, these are the noblest names.

<sup>22</sup> As Warren discusses in his contribution to this volume (Chapter 11), the *Philebus* contains several remarks about good or proportionate mixture as the metaphysical basis for the *kalon*. Things that are “beautiful by themselves” are one source of pure pleasure.

<sup>23</sup> This interpretation was suggested to us by Broadie (2007, 154–7). However, whereas Broadie’s ultimate point is (in rather Aristotelian spirit) to criticize Plato for approaching the human good as an object of contemplation *rather than* as an object of practical reason and action, we believe his moral psychology supports this approach as practical.

<sup>24</sup> As Dimas argues in his contribution to this volume (Chapter 8), the “falseness” of false anticipatory pleasure is not so much any sort of false content pleasures may have but rather, in particular, the false conception, typical of an imtemperate, vicious person, of what healthy equilibrium amounts to. Likewise, when Socrates moves on to discussing the false pleasures arising from the juxtaposition of pleasure, pain, and neutral state and the false mixed pleasures, his point is not simply to reveal an illusory aspect of these experiences, but to unmask the most intense and apparently desirable pleasures as entirely unwholesome. (As Pearson shows in his careful reconstruction of this portion of the dialogue (Chapter 9), this is the point of Socrates’ appeal to those “stroppy” characters who insist that pleasure is really just release from pain.) Socrates’ indictment culminates in the especially bitter



the object of such an enterprise is purely theoretical, aimed at producing an impersonal and disinterested contemplation and appreciation. On the contrary, a “competition” that puts the respective merits of pleasure and wisdom on display, thereby making them *manifest*, will immediately involve and engage a variety of affective attitudes—admiration and longing, contempt and disgust—of intense and insistent (though perhaps indeterminate) practical relevance.<sup>25</sup> It is true that the idea of a “contest” for second prize may strike *us* as strange, given the prominence of “calculation,” of deliberation and decision, in contemporary moral philosophy. But though reason (of course) is also a central category of Plato’s ethics, it would be a mistake, in his view, to think we can treat of its virtues, or win it admiration and trust, in isolation from character, which grows from processes of emulation and reaches maturity (or so it might be argued) in a kind of self-knowledge. Put another way, it’s important to *show* that wisdom is superior to pleasure, because it is only if we can be brought to *admire* wisdom that her aspirations and longings will ever become for us “authoritative witnesses,” so that we become the kind of people for whom deliberation and reasoning are decisive for living well.

If the disagreement between partisans of pleasure and philosophy is in part a disagreement about what to honor and admire, then we can understand why it would be important to clarify the ranking of goods below first prize. Since lower goods find their place in the ranking in accordance with their degree of kinship to the best, a mistake about the comparative value of lower goods implies a failure to appreciate the value of the best good. People may nominally agree about what deserves first place but, through disagreements about the ordering of second and third places, reveal that they were appreciating the first place winner in quite different ways.

Now, Socrates and Protarchus do not know what the best good is until the end of the dialogue, and not fully even then. Their investigation concerning second prize proceeds in ignorance of what deserves first prize, as if they could settle the comparative question independently of answering the question about the best good. So Plato’s project in depicting this conversation is unlikely to be that of revealing that hedonism involves an incorrect grasp of the best good. However, there is another, related reason it might be of the utmost importance to settle the

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account of the pleasure of malicious envy (or *phthonos*, a concept usefully clarified by Destrée in Chapter 10) which, according to Socrates, lies at the heart of the urbane and apparently harmless practice of comedy.

<sup>25</sup> See Barney (2010a) for the argument that Plato seeks to transform our attitude towards the good from *desire* to *appropriate* to *admiration*. She points out that when teenagers develop a crush, their longing is often combined with confusion about what to *do* about it—should they follow their crush around? Start wearing the same clothes and listening to the same music? Love desires its object without laying out a clear deliberative route.

comparative question: properly honoring things subordinate to the best good enables us to discover what the best good is. Precisely because there is a relation of kinship or likeness among first and subsequent prize-winners, a person who answers the comparative question incorrectly will from the outset be misoriented in the search for the human good.

### 3. The Logic of Exhibition

We think that understanding the project of the *Philebus* in this way, as a conversation aimed at altering Protarchus' (and our) ethico-intellectual attitudes of honoring and admiration, also suggests a solution to the first problem we raised, concerning the apparent lack of argumentative motivation for the length and detail of many of the dialogue's discussions. In brief, we suggest that the logic of the *Philebus* as a whole is the logic of an *exhibition*—in speech—of pleasure and reason.<sup>26</sup> Although the discussions of the “divine” method, cosmic *nous*, pleasure, and wisdom are more intricate than is strictly required by any subsequent argument Socrates explicitly makes, their length is entirely appropriate for making the nature of the two contenders manifest in a way that immediately alters our attitudes of admiration and trust.

To see that this is so, let us recall a final curious feature of the dialogue's structure. Earlier, we pointed out that Socrates seems to say more than his subsequent arguments strictly require and that it is unclear precisely how earlier moments relate logically to his ultimate conclusions. Note that one reason for this unclarity is that the crucial persuasive cruxes of the dialogue centrally turn on Protarchus' intuition. For example, the identification of the good is established by combining pleasure and knowledge into a well-mixed life in the hopes that the good will be “more evident” (*phanerōteron*) in such a mixture (61b). Indeed, it turns out that it's not difficult “to see” (*idein*) that measure or proportion, beauty, and truth are the cause of the goodness of the mixture (64d–65a). This is not a conclusion which Socrates derives from reasons he articulates; rather (so Plato presents it) it is a truth of which Protarchus and Socrates are immediately aware (*phanerōteron*), once they have gone through the process of mixing pleasure and knowledge into a desirable life. Their previous discussion about mixing seems to have put them in an epistemic position from which the nature of the good manifests itself to their reflection. But notice that Protarchus is able to occupy this position only because he has—in a way that Plato stages quite literally—trusted the testimony of knowledge as it gave voice to its desire not to admit all

<sup>26</sup> Cf. *Statesman* 277c for the idea that *logoi* are the medium appropriate for exhibiting (*dēloun*) living creatures and their virtues.

pleasures into the mixed life indiscriminately, but only certain ones that fit its (wisdom's) full expression (63d–64a).

We believe a similar point holds for the way Socrates and Protarchus settle the superiority question, in the passage which immediately follows. Socrates confirms for Protarchus (what he had already admitted at 59c–d and at 65b says is “clear”) that knowledge is “more akin to the best and more praiseworthy among human beings and gods (65b)” than pleasure simply by asking him to compare the two contenders to each element of the good-making triple of beauty, truth, and measure. “Take truth first, Protarchus, take it and look at (*blepsas*) three things, reason and truth and pleasure, and having held on to them for a long time answer for yourself whether pleasure or reason is more akin to truth” (65c). He should then “look at (*skepsai*) measuredness in the same way and see whether pleasure has more of it than does wisdom or vice versa” (65d). Despite Socrates’ admonition to take his time, Protarchus says no time is needed (65c); this is an inspection (*skepsin*) where it is easy to inspect (*euskepton*, 65d). Protarchus does make a couple of remarks to justify his assessment of pleasure’s relative lack of kinship to truth, but they take the form of noticing the particular “boastfulness” of erotic pleasures, and of appealing to the gods as witnesses who confirm what he sees. Presumably the lengthy discussion of false pleasures lies behind his judgment, but it is interesting that, in calling pleasure *tout court* the “most boastful (*alazonistaton*) of all” (65c), and in focusing on the pleasures of sex in particular, Protarchus is going beyond the terminology and examples that Socrates himself used. It seems that their previous discussion has put him in position to “see for himself,” i.e., to extend their previous thinking. Notice, though, that his intuitive judgment is not dispassionate. When Protarchus reflects on reason, it is admiring reflection; and when he reflects on pleasure, his consideration is disdainful. Consider, for example, his assessment of the contenders’ relative kinship to beauty: “No one could ever see (*eiden*) wisdom and intelligence as ugly,” but “pleasures, on the other hand, especially the greatest ones, when we see (*idōmen*) any one of them being enjoyed and either something ridiculous or incredibly shameful comes from them, seeing (*horōntes*) ourselves we are ashamed and hide and cover them up as much as possible, assigning all things like this to night, as if daylight should not see them” (65e–66a). “Pleasures,” he says earlier, are “like children possessing not the slightest bit of reason” (65d). We are a far cry from an earlier argumentative crux concerning the question whether pleasure or wisdom is the best good. That argument also depended crucially on Protarchus’ intuition. But back then, Protarchus was so enamored of the charms of pleasure as to declare that pleasure was all he needed, overlooking, until Socrates brought it to his attention, that such a life is the life of a mollusk and not of a human being!

Socrates’ discussions of dialectic, ontology, cosmic *nous*, pleasure, and reason have had the effect of transforming Protarchus’ childish delight in eristic and impetuous devotion to pleasure as well as his judgment of pleasure’s value. We are

suggesting that, as Plato depicts it, this change of attitude was necessary in order for Protarchus to grasp the nature of the good as measure, beauty, and truth and then to recognize in reason and pleasure their kinship (or relative lack thereof) to those features. There is nothing mysterious or mystical about his newfound insight. Whereas Philebus calls “the loves of beasts” as witnesses to his hedonistic position, Socrates insists that there are no more “authoritative witnesses” than that of “prophetic statements made under the guidance of the philosophic Muse” (67b), which are precisely what he has been offering throughout the dialogue. (And we, in turn, direct you to the essays in this volume.) Our point, though, is that Protarchus had to come to admire reason and become more disdainful of pleasure in order to be persuaded by the claims of reason. Protarchus is not so hopelessly entranced by pleasure as to be beyond the reach of argument (as Philebus is, 11d), but he is willing to defend it as a partisan. Changing his mind must be at the same time a matter of changing his heart. If pleasure’s “allure” derives from her “luster”—that is to say, her striking appearance of goodness—it is natural to suppose that diminishing that allure will require putting her on display, presenting her in a way that shows what she really is, so as to reveal how much of that splendor is merely apparent. True though it may be that “for the person enjoying any thing whatsoever, random though it may be, there really is enjoyment” (40d), most of our pleasures are “pretty ridiculous imitations of true ones” (40c), depending for their intensity on pain and envy (45b–e; 48b ff.); the most intense of them even lead us (absurdly) to insist that the most debauched, shameful behavior is the height of happiness (47b). Likewise, increasing reason’s allure, at least in the eyes of pleasure’s admirers, will require displaying *her* true nature, so as to reveal that she derives from the divine principle responsible for the beauty of the cosmos, and that her purest human forms far exceed the sort of empirical guesswork or political machinations that commonly garner the name of wisdom and whose value is primarily instrumental.

Our suggestion, in short, is to read the better part of the *Philebus* as a kind of *exhibition*. Read this way, the point of the discussions of dialectic, ontology, pleasure, and knowledge is not primarily to establish premises which can be combined with other premises so as to draw the conclusion that knowledge is superior to pleasure. Socrates never makes such an argument. Instead, these discussions are intended to clarify and put on display the contenders so that we can more accurately see what is (or is not) valuable in them. In this way these discussions contribute towards altering our attitudes, e.g., of admiration and trust, towards the two contestants, at once breaking the spell of the one and earning our respect for the other—not, primarily, by awarding prizes, but in and through the parade of the contestants (a parade orchestrated, magisterially, by reason). Read this way, Socrates’ “project” in the *Philebus* would be to improve Protarchus’ ethico-intellectual orientation. Various topics are pursued to the extent necessary to enable him to “see” and admire the superiority of knowledge to pleasure and,

above all, the measure, proportion, beauty, and truth in which the good resides. After their lengthy displays of pleasure and knowledge, Socrates and Protarchus—and we readers—have started ourselves to become witnesses who prophesy “under the guidance of the philosophic Muse,” admiring lovers of what really is beautiful and good in human life.

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We invite you to read the interpretive essays which comprise this volume for help with understanding the intricacies of these philosophically inspired *logoi* so that you may share in the insight they make possible (or, if you disagree with Socrates' and Protarchus' ultimate verdict, so that you may understand better why you do). One might reasonably read them in order, which is the order of the passages they discuss. However, our suggestion about how to orient oneself to the dialogue as a whole suggests another strategy as well, of reading these essays in three thematic groups. Harte, Jones, Meyer, and Vogt all address the peculiar nature of the dialogue's ethical inquiry: what questions it seeks to answer and the criteria by which it answers them. The magisterial and complex discussion of pleasure is the topic of essays by Destrée, Dimas, Ogihara, Pearson, Rangos, and Warren. Finally, the nature of intelligence, reason, and wisdom is displayed in the passage explicitly devoted to this topic (55c–59d), discussed by Moss, but also in the discussions of dialectic, the fourfold ontology, and cosmology, discussed by Crivelli, Gill, and Lorenz, respectively. At the end of the *Philebus*, Socrates repeats the entire argument of the dialogue as a “third libation” to Zeus the Savior but Protarchus wants still more: “A little yet remains, Socrates. Surely you won't go away before we do; I'll remind you of what's left!” (67b). We like to think these essays would give Protarchus what he was looking for.

## Rethinking the Contest Between Pleasure and Wisdom

*Philebus* 11a–14b

Katja Maria Vogt

The *Philebus* is a philosophical inquiry into the good. The dialogue's interlocutors interpret this investigation as a project in ethics: they aim to find out which life is best for human beings.<sup>1</sup> And yet they embrace, without restraint, inquiries in the philosophy of mind, epistemology, physics, and metaphysics. As I will argue, 11a–14b lays the groundwork for this broad conception of ethics.<sup>2</sup> Two views about the good, familiar from earlier dialogues, compete: that the good is either pleasure or wisdom.<sup>3</sup> These views are formulated, however, in terms that are unfamiliar. First, good is explicitly understood as the good for human beings. Second, a wide range of cognitive and affective goings-on in the human mind is mentioned and thereby flagged as relevant to the current investigation. Third, and picking up on this range, plurality is introduced as a topic that leads directly into metaphysics.

This, then, is the view I defend: the *Philebus* contains a distinctive approach to ethics, one that is—given the difficulties of reconstructing a dialogue that is unabashedly complex and that refuses to take shortcuts—still understudied and underrated. To avoid any unclarity, let me state right away that versions of the ideas that interest me in the *Philebus* also figure in other Platonic dialogues, and in particular in the *Republic*, which too covers psychology, epistemology, metaphysics, and more, in the service of a line of questioning that is primarily ethical. What

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<sup>1</sup> This concern is phrased both in terms of goodness/the best, and in terms of what makes human lives happy. For the purposes of this chapter, I set aside discussion of the difference and relationship between these questions, treating them instead as broadly speaking one.

<sup>2</sup> I argue for this, with a view to the dialogue as a whole, in “A Blueprint for Ethics,” chapter 1 of Vogt (2017a), and briefly in Vogt (2010).

<sup>3</sup> In speaking of earlier dialogues, I stipulate a conventional relative chronology, according to which the *Philebus* is among the latest dialogues.