

Philebus

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Philebus contains Plato's major arguments against considering pleasure to be the goal of life / highest good. This article provides an outline and overview of Plato's attack.

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1. Plato's Arguments In Philebus Against Pleasure As The Good / The Ultimate Goal

The purpose of this document is to reduce the major arguments to a manageable summary. The goal is to include references to the text ([the Jowett text is here](#)) (preferably line numbers, but some means of finding the section; here is [the Adelaide version](#); the Jowett commentary is here).

One way of looking at it is that the arguments divide down along three key words/concepts: (1) "limits" (2) "purity" and (3) "continuity" but each one requires significant explanation to begin to understand the issue. Also there are probably other high-level divisions, and not all of them may be fully expressed in Philebus. But reducing them to series of headings would go a long way toward helping us get a grasp of them.

1.1. Plato's argument from "limits" - that the good / the ultimate goal must be something which has a limit, and Pleasure has no limit, so pleasure is disqualified.

Plato's Argument in the text: ([page 593 of the Jowett text](#))

SOCRATES: I omit ten thousand other things, such as beauty and health and strength, and the many beauties and high perfections of the soul: O my beautiful Philebus, the goddess, methinks, seeing the universal wantonness and wickedness of all things, and that there was in them no **limit to pleasures** and self-indulgence, devised the limit of law and order, whereby, as you say, Philebus, she torments, or as I maintain, delivers the soul. — What think you, Protarchus?

...

SOCRATES: **Have pleasure and pain a limit, or do they belong to the class which admits of more and less?**

PHILEBUS: They belong to the class which admits of more, Socrates; for pleasure would not be perfectly good if she were not infinite in quantity and degree.

SOCRATES: Nor would pain, Philebus, be perfectly evil. And therefore the infinite cannot be that element which imparts to pleasure some degree of good. But now — admitting, if you like, that pleasure is of the nature of the infinite — in which of the aforesaid classes, O Protarchus and Philebus, can we without irreverence place wisdom and knowledge and mind? And let us be careful, for I think that the danger will be very serious if we err on this point.

PHILEBUS: You magnify, Socrates, the importance of your favourite god.

SOCRATES: And you, my friend, are also magnifying your favourite goddess; but still I must beg you to answer the question. ...

SOCRATES: And whence comes that soul, my dear Protarchus, unless the body of the universe, which contains elements like those in our bodies but in every way fairer, had also a soul? Can there be another source?

PROTARCHUS: Clearly, Socrates, that is the only source.

SOCRATES: Why, yes, Protarchus; for surely we cannot imagine that of the four classes, the finite, the infinite, the composition of the two, and the cause, the fourth, which enters into all things, giving to our bodies souls, and the art of self-management, and of healing disease, and operating in other ways to heal and organize, having too all the attributes of wisdom; — we cannot, I say, imagine that whereas the self-same elements exist, both in the entire heaven and in great provinces of the heaven, only fairer and purer, this last should not also in that higher sphere have designed the noblest and fairest things?

PROTARCHUS: Such a supposition is quite unreasonable.

SOCRATES: Then if this be denied, should we not be wise in adopting the other view and maintaining that there is in the universe a mighty infinite and **an adequate limit**, of which we have often spoken, as well as a presiding cause of no mean power, which orders and arranges years and seasons and months, and may be justly called wisdom and mind?

PROTARCHUS: Most justly. The same argument in Seneca

Seneca's Letters – Book I – Letter XVI: This also is a saying of Epicurus: "If you live according to nature, you will never be poor; if you live according to opinion, you will never be rich." Nature's wants are slight; the demands of opinion are boundless. Suppose that the property of many millionaires is heaped up in your possession. Assume that fortune carries you far beyond the limits of a private income, decks you with gold, clothes you in purple, and brings you to such a degree of luxury and wealth that you can bury the earth under your marble floors; that you may not only possess, but tread upon, riches. Add statues, paintings, and whatever any art has devised for the luxury; you will only learn from such things to crave still greater. *

Natural desires are limited; but those which spring from false opinion can have no stopping point. The false has no limits. *

Seneca's Letters – To Lucilius – 66.45: "What can be added to that which is perfect? Nothing otherwise that was not perfect to which something has been added. Nor can anything be added to virtue, either, for if anything can be added thereto, it must have contained a defect. Honour, also, permits of no addition; for it is honourable because of the very qualities which I have mentioned.[5] What then? Do you think that propriety, justice, lawfulness, do not also belong to the same type, and that they are kept within fixed limits? The ability to increase is proof that a thing is still imperfect." "THE ABILITY TO INCREASE IS PROOF THAT A THING IS IMPERFECT."

(Need to add the text [in the GRAPHIC which follows these two here](#))

Philebus' Improper Response

One Two

Epicurean Proper Response

PD3 et al Two

1.2. Plato's argument from "purity"- The pure is more to be preferred than a larger quantity of the impure, and as a result we must have wisdom in order to separate the pure from the impure (which means that something other than Pleasure itself is of the ultimate importance)

Plato's argument in the text:

SOCRATES: ** True, Protarchus; and so the purest white, and not the greatest or largest in quantity, is to be deemed truest and most beautiful?*

PROTARCHUS: *Right.*

To me you get almost a direct reflect of the first part of PD3 when you do that; "PD3. The magnitude of pleasure reaches its limit in the removal of all pain."

Here is more context to give you the background:

SOCRATES: *And now, having fairly separated the pure pleasures and those which may be rightly termed impure, let us further add to our description of them, that the pleasures which are in excess have no measure, but that those which are not in excess have measure; the great, the excessive, whether more or less frequent, we shall be right in referring to the class of the infinite, and of the more and less, which pours through body and soul alike; and the others we shall refer to the class which has measure.*

PROTARCHUS: *Quite right, Socrates.*

SOCRATES: *Still there is something more to be considered about pleasures.*

PROTARCHUS: *What is it?*

SOCRATES: *When you speak of **purity** and clearness, or of excess, abundance, greatness and sufficiency, in what relation do these terms stand to truth?*

PROTARCHUS: *Why do you ask, Socrates?*

SOCRATES: *Because, Protarchus, I should wish to test pleasure and knowledge in every possible way, in order that if there be a **pure and impure element** in either of them, I may present the pure element for judgment, and then they will be more easily judged of by you and by me and by all of us.*

PROTARCHUS: *Most true.*

SOCRATES: *Let us investigate all the pure kinds; first selecting for consideration a single instance.*

PROTARCHUS: *What instance shall we select?*

SOCRATES: *Suppose that we first of all take whiteness.*

PROTARCHUS: *Very good.*

SOCRATES: **How can there be purity in whiteness, and what purity? Is that purest which is greatest or most in quantity, or that which is most unadulterated and freest from any admixture of other colours?**

PROTARCHUS: *Clearly that which is most unadulterated.*

SOCRATES: *True, Protarchus; **and so the purest white, and not the greatest or largest in quantity, is to be deemed truest and most beautiful?***

PROTARCHUS: *Right.*

We can do the same substitution exercise with this example from Socrates: "How can there be purity in

[pleasure/whiteness], and what purity? Is that purest which is greatest or most in quantity, or that which is most unadulterated and freest from any admixture of [pain/ other colours]?

Answer: "clearly, that which is most unadulterated." Two

Philebus' improper response:

One Two

Epicurean Proper Response:

One Two

1.3. Plato's argument from "continuity" - Pleasure cannot be the goal or guide because it is not continuously present. (Need to check whether this in Philebus, or in another Platonic work, or Plutarch?)

Plato's argument in the text

DeWitt: "Neither was he in debt to his teachers for his hedonism. None of them was a hedonist. He was in debt to Plato for suggestions concerning the classification of desires and the calculus of advantage in pleasure,⁴⁷ but differed from both Plato and Aristippus in his definition of pleasure. To neither of these was continuous pleasure conceivable, because they recognized only peaks of pleasure separated either by intervals void of pleasure or by neutral states. In order to escape from these logical dead ends Epicurus worked his way to a novel division of pleasures into those that were basic and those that were decorative.⁴⁸ The pleasure of being sane and in health is basic and can be enjoyed continually. All other pleasures are superfluous and decorative. For this doctrine, once more, he was in debt to no teacher.

DeWitt; Still need to track down cite in Plato: "The apex of the new structure of ethics erected by Epicurus consists in the teaching that pleasure can be continuous. The discovery of a logical basis for this proposition was essential for the promulgation of hedonism as a practical code of conduct for mankind. No philosophy that offered merely intermittent intervals of pleasure would have possessed any broad or cogent appeal for those in quest of the happy life. The predecessors of Epicurus had spent considerable thought upon the analysis of pleasure, but their attitude was in the main merely analytical and academic, lacking relevance to action. Their zeal was not for promoting the happiness of mankind. They were rather in the position of men who give themselves to the study of anatomy without contemplating the practice of medicine. The attitude of Epicurus, on the contrary, was pragmatic from the beginning. The declaration that "Vain is the word of that philosopher by which no malady of mankind is healed" has already been quoted.⁵¹ The desired logical basis for the continuity of pleasure was afforded by the discovery of natural ceilings of pleasures. From this is derived the division into basic and ornamental or superfluous pleasures, corresponding respectively to natural and necessary desires and those that are neither natural nor necessary.

Example in Cicero: "*Since, then, the whole sum of philosophy is directed to ensure living happily, and since men, from a desire of this one thing, have devoted themselves to this study; but different people make happiness of life to consist in different circumstances; you, for instance, place it in pleasure; and, in the same manner you, on the other hand, make all unhappiness to consist in pain: let us consider, in the first place, what sort of thing this happy life of yours is. But you will grant this, I think, that if there is really any such thing as happiness, it ought to be wholly in the power of a wise man to secure it; for, if a happy life can be lost, it cannot be happy. For who can feel confident that a thing will always remain firm and enduring in his case, which is in reality fleeting and perishable? But the man who distrusts the permanence of his good things, must necessarily fear that some day or other, when he has lost them, he will become miserable; and no man can be happy who is in fear about most important matters.*" [need to re-find this cite]

Philebus' improper response

One Two

Epicurean proper response:

One Two