

Plato's Philebus and the Limit of Pleasure

Post by "Cassius" of May 26, 2022 at 7:44 AM

I agree with what is written above, but I also think there is another section on Philebus which is more on point with the question of "why" the absence of a limit to pleasure was significant to Plato in relation to pleasure. The same argument is asserted with even greater clarity in Seneca, which I quote below too, but to me the essence of the argument is the logical point that if a thing has no limit, then it can always be made better. The big point comes down to: Once you admit something has no limit, then you admit it can be made better, and then by definition since it can be made better what you have isn't "the best" or "the highest" possible. To be the "highest good" something must really be the "best possible," and that means (sort of counterintuitively since we consider the word "limit" to be bad) that the best possible must have a "limit." The logical reasoning (which makes sense when you think about the various meanings of the word "limit") is that that which has no limit (no "highest point beyond which you can go no further") cannot be "the best."

As Seneca says it very precisely - ""THE ABILITY TO INCREASE IS PROOF THAT A THING IS IMPERFECT."" In other words, if something belongs to the class which can be increased or decreased, then the quantity of that thing is not "perfect" --

Plato uses [Philebus](#) as a patsy, because [Philebus](#) misunderstands the implications of how "perfect" and "admitting of more or less" fit together. By admitting that pleasure has no limit, and can always be increased, he loses the argument to Plato. It's a point that tripped up [Philebus](#), and it continues to trip up a lot of people today because they equate the "limit" as being a negative thing - when it seems clear when viewed logically that this use of "limit" is not bad at all - any more than saying that the fact that Mount Everest has a highest tip takes away from the fact that it is the highest mountain in the world (or whatever mountain it is that holds that honor).

That is why in my view it was important for Epicurus to show that pleasure has a limit. Unless we can show what that limit is (when all pain is gone from our life) then we have no limit we can point to, and thus, by Seneca and Socrates' reasoning, "pleasure" cannot be the highest good.

From [Philebus](#):

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.