

Plato's Philebus and the Limit of Pleasure

Post by "Cassius" of May 26, 2022 at 10:25 AM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

And then this points also toward what types of pleasures to pursue, and that "natural" pleasures can be fulfilled and are achievable (thus have a limit) -- and give a longer lasting feeling of fulfillment.

Ok I see this as an area of potential confusion that needs clarity.

I do not think that "can be fulfilled" and "achievable" should be viewed as the heart of the discussion in what is being talked about in PD3 or is the issue in responding to Plato as the basis for designating or not designating Pleasure as the greatest good.

It is not "possessing a limit" that itself makes "pleasure" worthy of being designated as the highest good. As Plato lists in [Philebus](#), many things can have a limit. For example, it appears that Plato would say that all of the "virtues" have a limit because they are "superlatives." (See also the statement from Seneca in the post below.)

Virtue is complete in and of itself, in their view. If you're missing some element of virtue, then you're not really virtuous. For this reasoning look back at "in which of the aforesaid classes, O Protarchus and [Philebus](#), can we without irreverence place wisdom and knowledge and mind?"

He is stating that wisdom and knowledge and "mind" are complete in and of themselves, and therefore they are not rightly placed in the category of things of which you can have less or more. You're either "wise" or you're "not wise" -- he's saying that if you can add more wisdom to someone, then that person was not fully wise in the first place.

Unfortunately this discussion in [Philebus](#) is very complex and does not seem to be nearly as clear as it should be. In the part I quoted above I left out a long tangent that ends in this way:

PRO. You are right.

SOC. We have now, then, my friend, pretty clearly shown to what class mind belongs and what power it possesses.

PRO. Certainly.

SOC. And likewise the class of pleasure was made clear some time ago.

PRO. Yes, it was.

SOC. Let us, then, remember concerning both of them that mind was akin to cause and belonged more or less to that class, and that pleasure was itself infinite and belonged to the class which, in and by itself, has not and never will have either beginning or middle or end.

¹ Anaxagoras and probably some now unknown precursors.

⁴ καλῶς T: καὶ καλῶς B.

⁵ νοῦς δήπου Bekker: νῦν δήπου T: νῦν δὴ νοῦς B.

and

of what feeling each of them comes into being whenever they do come into being. We will take pleasure first and discuss these questions in relation to pleasure, as we examined its class first. But we cannot examine pleasure successfully apart from pain.

PRO. If that is our proper path, let us follow it.

SOC. Do you agree with us about the origin of pleasure?

PRO. What do you think it is?

SOC. I think pain and pleasure naturally originate in the combined class.

PRO. Please, my dear Socrates, remind us which of the aforesaid classes you mean by the combined class.

SOC. I will do so, as well as I can, my brilliant friend.

PRO. Thank you.

SOC. By combined class, then, let us understand that which we said was the third of the four.

PRO. The one you mentioned after the infinite and the finite, and in which you put health and also, I believe, harmony?

SOC. You are quite right. Now please pay very close attention.

PRO. I will. Say on.

SOC. I say, then, that when, in us living beings, harmony is broken up, a disruption of nature and a generation of pain also take place at the same moment.

PRO. What you say is very likely.

SOC. But if harmony is recomposed and returns to its own nature, then I say that pleasure is generated,

I don't think we can adequately deal with this whole issue until we get a clear grasp of this argument, and I will be the first to admit that I don't have as good a grasp of it as I would like.

But what does seem clear to me is that we aren't yet talking about "individual pleasures" and we aren't at the level of being concerned with dividing up natural and necessary pleasures and choosing between them,

In this argument we are still at the basic level of whether "PLEASURE" can qualify as the highest good, as against VIRTUE, or PIETY or something like that.

And if we get ahead of ourselves and take this "limit" argument and derive from it that we should somehow "limit our pleasure" in life by means of the choices we make, then I think that's the straight road to asceticism, which is exactly where we DON'T want to end up if "Pleasure" is in fact the goal of life.