

Plato's Philebus and the Limit of Pleasure

Post by "Cassius" of May 26, 2022 at 10:37 AM

Unfortunately as best I can tell Seneca does a much more clear job of stating this issue than does Plato/Socrates. Here is a very clear statement, but even this statement indicates that we need to be careful what we mean by "limitless", because apparently "Limitless" also can be viewed as a definite quantity. It appears that "the ability to increase or decrease," or "the ability to have more or less" is the real problem they are identifying, and so we have to be careful with any definition of "pleasure" that indicates we can have more or less of it.

It appears to me that this is all highly abstract, and not directly related to the choice of particular pleasures on a moment to moment basis. The question of which pleasures should be chosen comes next, AFTER we first identify "pleasure" as the ultimate greatest good / goal / guide (rather than virtue or god or reason).

If we step too quickly from the question (1) What is the greatest good? to the question (2) How should I pursue pleasure? then we're likely to miss the answer to question one entirely, and get confused if we use the answer to question one as the answer to question two. They are two separate questions which the Platonic logical argument (to which Epicurus is responding) is addressing separately.

Quote

but virtue itself does not become less or greater.[4] For the Supreme Good cannot diminish, nor may virtue retrograde; rather is it transformed, now into one quality and now into another, shaping itself according to the part which it is to play. **8.** Whatever it has touched it brings into likeness with itself, and dyes with its own colour. It adorns our actions, our friendships, and sometimes entire households which it has entered and set in order. Whatever it has handled it forthwith makes lovable, notable, admirable.

Therefore the power and the greatness of virtue cannot rise to greater heights, because increase is denied to that which is superlatively great. You will find nothing straighter than the straight, nothing truer than the truth, and nothing more temperate than that which is temperate. **9.** Every virtue is limitless; for limits depend upon definite measurements. Constancy cannot advance further, any more than fidelity, or truthfulness, or loyalty. 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.

This is not a long dialog and this statement is pretty close to the start so it is easy to get the full context by starting at the beginning:

[Moral letters to Lucilius/Letter 66 - Wikisource, the free online library](#)