

Philebus - Plato's Arguments Against Pleasure and Epicurean Responses

Post by “Godfrey” of October 1, 2019 at 9:16 PM

Cassius: you mentioned Plato's [Philebus](#), and have mentioned it in the past. Recently I finally got around to reading it and was amazed by the breadth and depth of Epicurus' engagement with it and how completely he refuted the entire dialogue.

Two points (out of many!):

- 1) Reading [Philebus](#) with Epicurus in mind makes evident the basis of the hostility directed at him.
- 2) [Philebus](#) should be required reading for every Epicurean. It's invaluable to have some understanding of the Platonic world view and how it is bizarre on so many levels.

Maybe this belongs in a separate thread. More to the point, thanks for pointing out that "much of the story begins with Plato and [Philebus](#)".

Post by “Cassius” of October 1, 2019 at 9:26 PM

Godfrey I would be extremely grateful if you could help me get discussion going about this, as i have generally not succeeded in getting much followup comment in the past. If you made any note of important sections or just general comments that would be great and we can split the discussion off into the [Philebus](#) thread. There is a TON of important stuff there - not just "quantity" but also "purity" argument and it would really help if we could get some readable commentary going on that.

I suggest THIS location for discussion of [Philebus](#) in detail: [Philebus - Plato's Arguments Against Pleasure and Epicurean Responses](#)

Post by “Cassius” of October 1, 2019 at 9:34 PM

Of course I have my notes and excerpts that I collected on my original "[Full Cup of Pleasure](#)" [page at NewEpicurean.com](#) but the subject demands a much more detailed analysis, starting with just a basic outline of Plato's arguments against pleasure, and a basic summary of how he tricks [Philebus](#) into making admissions that make it impossible to maintain pleasure as the goal.

I know that there are other Platonic dialogues that contain other relevant arguments, but [Philebus](#) seems to be the ultimate summary of Plato's anti-pleasure argument, and as such it would not be surprising if Epicurus organized his arguments against that document in particular.

Post by "Cassius" of October 1, 2019 at 9:53 PM

Godfrey, while this is on my mind, I recall also thinking that the parts of [Philebus](#) that I pulled out to the "limits" as relevant are pretty clear, but the version of the argument made by Seneca is even *more* clear. To me that's especially true with Seneca's formulation that "THE ABILITY TO INCREASE IS PROOF THAT A THING IS IMPERFECT." I think Plato says the same thing in different words, but Seneca's version is extremely precise. A thing which has no limits cannot be "perfect" and therefore it cannot be the "highest" anything, and since we're talking about the "highest" good - that rules out pleasure!

Once someone gets a handle on the argument that is being made, PD3 and the otherwise troublesome passages of the Letter to Menoeceus as to "limits" make perfect sense.

And the continuation of the argument into the discussion of "purity" is also extremely important, and bears on some otherwise very obscure parts of the [Principal Doctrines](#).

But this is going to take a long and dedicated campaign to bring this observation into wider view.

_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."

Here Seneca explicitly links PD3 to the "limits" argument, but Seneca being the Stoic that he was, chose to focus on the "Tranquility" rather than viewing the result as the uninterrupted enjoyment of the pleasures that filled the cup in the first place:

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Post by "Charles" of October 1, 2019 at 10:16 PM

How ironic, since I feel confident enough to defeat the Stoic argumentation against Epicureanism, I've been wanting to move onto critiquing the more Platonist mindset that is antagonistic towards pleasure. However with anything by Plato, it is a gargantuan task to completely read it properly, much less analyze it to a great extent, but you can include me in this discussion.

Post by "Cassius" of October 1, 2019 at 10:28 PM

Thank you Charles! I am certainly no Plato expert myself, but I think [Philebus](#) is fairly manageable. If I recall correctly I got some good leads from the Gosling and Taylor book, but [Philebus](#) pretty much stands on its own and is written to supposedly be pretty focused.

I think the 2 big arguments about (1) to be the best, a thing must have a limit and (2) something that is "pure" is better than having more of something that is adulterated, are both

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profoundly relevant to the [Principal Doctrines](#). I am pretty sure that I have a good handle on how the "limit" argument relates to PD3 and absence of pain, but the "purity" issue may have even deeper implications for the "fullness of pleasure" and "pure pleasure" arguments of other PDs

Post by “Cassius” of October 1, 2019 at 10:31 PM

i think the Jowett version is probably the standard english version, and i found his intro useful. I also made a copy for cut and paste purposes here : <https://epicureanfriends.com/wiki/doku.php?id=plato - philebus>

Post by “Charles” of October 1, 2019 at 10:33 PM

That's the translation I've been reading, I have a bookmarked section from a file off of Project Gutenberg. But with everything from Gutenberg, it becomes a large wall a of text.

Post by “Cassius” of October 1, 2019 at 10:38 PM

Oh geeze i forgot how the "mixture" issue is also mixed in to the package. Something about how if there are types of pleasure, of which some are better than others, or which are judgeable by outside standards, then that is proof that the knowledge/ wisdom of this outside standard is more important than pleasure itself, since you need it to recognize the best pleasure. If admitted, this once again dethrones pleasure from the top spot as the greatest good. And which therefore means that it is a fatal error to ever admit that there are types of pleasure which are judgeable by anything other than the feeling of pleasure itself. No doubt this is related to the "unity of pleasure" discussed by Dewitt.

Post by “Cassius” of October 1, 2019 at 10:41 PM

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"But with everything from Gutenberg, it becomes a large wall a of text."Yep. We ultimately need an outline of the major arguments.

Post by “Charles” of October 1, 2019 at 10:48 PM

Not only which pleasures are "better than others" but Plato immediately casts aside the argument that pleasure is in itself good and if we have Epicurus in mind, we can easily see the types of pleasure that Plato is grouping with even the most natural; "unnatural and unnecessary", of which his interlocutor asks,

"What do you mean, Socrates [Plato]? Do you think that any one who asserts pleasure to be the good, will tolerate the notion that some pleasures are good and others bad?"

Of course Plato then replies afterwards that this is the "old position" of pleasures and that present and cited examples "do not pierce our dull minds", including "we go on arguing all the same, like the weakest and most inexperienced reasoners?".

In the typical Socratic formula, this is only to get Protarchus to eventually end up admitting self-defeating statements so that Plato's argumentation remains superior.

Post by “Charles” of October 1, 2019 at 10:50 PM

I've been working on an outline of Plato's most important arguments from the text with the following rebuttal from his interlocutor, with my own notes at the bottom of each section.

Post by “Cassius” of October 2, 2019 at 4:37 AM

Excellent! Too late at night for me to absorb at the moment but I will read! This is probably a situation calling for a "collapsible" outline hierarchical format with headings and subheadingsat increasing levels of detail the further out it is opened. Otherwise we deal with the "wall of text"

problem you mentioned earlier.

The Jowett intro is helpful bit it ends up being a wall of text too.

Post by “Cassius” of October 2, 2019 at 7:55 AM

I believe I started on this before but I cannot find my draft. No doubt this deserves many different approaches and many different articles. As for me, what I thought would be most useful in unwinding this was a relatively simple hierarchical outline like this, reducing the major arguments to a manageable handful in summary. It needs to have 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.

Plato's Arguments In [Philebus](#) Against Pleasure As The Good / The Ultimate Goal

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.

1. Plato's Argument in Detail:

1. A thing which has a limit cannot be improved
2. If a thing can be improved, then it cannot be considered perfect
3. *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.

4. The same argument in Seneca

1. 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. ****

2. [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."
3. (Need to add the text [in the GRAPHIC which follows these two here](#))
 2. [Philebus](#)' Improper Response
 1. One
 2. Two
 3. Epicurean Proper Response
 1. PD3 et al
 2. Two
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)
 1. Plato's argument in detail:
 1. *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."

2. Two
2. [Philebus](#)' improper response:
 1. One
 2. Two
3. Epicurean Proper Response:
 1. One
 2. Two
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?)
 1. Plato's argument in detail
 1. 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.
 2. 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.

3. 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]

2. [Philebus](#)' improper response

1. One
2. Two

3. Epicurean proper response:

1. One
2. Two

Post by "Cassius" of October 2, 2019 at 8:10 AM

Just for fun I'll post here a graphic I did previously:

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Image file too large to preview

Post by “Godfrey” of October 2, 2019 at 3:19 PM

Cassius I like the idea of an outline with drop down sections. The format of Socrates quotes followed by [Philebus](#)/Protarchus wrong responses then Epicurus' correct responses is excellent. An alternative to drop down sections would be to summarize each argument and then refer to quotations at the end or in a related document.

Regarding [Philebus](#) as a whole, this is all new to me as I don't have a background in philosophy. [Philebus](#) seems to be pretty concise (at least as much as a dialectic argument can be) and touches on many ideas and methods of Plato in addition to being an argument against pleasure as the greatest good.

For example, dialectic is something Epicurus opposed. My intuitive reaction to it has always been that, while it may have some value, it's also possible to prove, using dialectic and/or logic, that a banana is a didgeridoo or an elephant is a building. Your outline is well structured to combat this by showing the fallacious statements which lead to fallacious conclusions.

Another thing that struck me in reading [Philebus](#) was the idea of the gods. Plato has the monotheistic conception of a universal mind. Understanding this made me realize that, whatever one makes of the [Epicurean gods](#), they didn't create the universe and are not reduced to one all powerful god but are a refutation of the Platonic world view.

Much of my interest in [Philebus](#) is to use it as a Cliff Notes version of Plato from which a list of Platonic ideas and Epicurean responses could be created. The focus is pleasure but there seems to be much more in there to chew on.

When I have some time I'll try to take this further, for what it's worth....

Post by “Cassius” of October 2, 2019 at 4:49 PM

Great points Godfrey. It's obvious that we would all be better off if we were life-long students of the classics with lots of degrees, and if we were we would have lots of context to bring to the discussion. Be we would also likely be "immobilized" as most academics seem to be 😊

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After reading [Philebus](#) a couple of times I agree that it's really not as complicated as these dialogues have the reputation for being. These students of Greek philosophy weren't any smarter than we are now, and it seems to me that these were written for an intelligent audience, but not necessarily specialists. I think we can take the main threads of the arguments pretty much on face value and make a lot of headway in dealing with them even though we are not tenured professors.

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

For example, dialectic is something Epicurus opposed. My intuitive reaction to it has always been that, while it may have some value, it's also possible to prove, using dialectic and/or logic, that a banana is a didgeridoo or an elephant is a building.

I think this is exactly correct. Epicurus was not against "reason" or even "logic" properly employed - he was against the idea that conceptual reasoning could be divorced from the senses and used to generate conclusions that cannot eventually be validated by the senses. Epicurus / Lucretius goes on and on in "De Rerum Natura" about images and illusions, and they certainly understood that people can make mistakes in interpreting the information gleaned from the senses. But in the end "mistakes" are proven to be such because of newer, more accurate and repeated sense observations, not by a chain of conceptual reasoning that never reconnects with reality through the senses.

This is a long and detailed project but what it requires is more "time" than "training" and we can make a lot of progress even without being specialists.

In fact I think the observations we're already making about how Epicurean arguments connect to Plato / [Philebus](#) are already MUCH more practical and important than most of what you read in most modern commentaries (other than Dewitt) about what Epicurus was really talking about.