

Comparison of Plato On Pleasure, Aristotle On Pleasure, and Epicurus On Pleasure

This is the beginning of a post to create a table to compare the major arguments against Pleasure as the highest good set forth by Plato (primarily from [Philebus](#)), then as those arguments were adopted or modified by Aristotle (primarily in Nichomachean Ethics Book Ten), and Epicurus (from a variety of texts. The goal will be to track the major arguments across each of these three philosophers so that their positions can be compared.

Sources for these texts (need versions with line numbers):

Plato's [Philebus](#)
[Perseus - Fowler](#)
[Jowett Translation](#)
[Jowett Translation & Commentary](#)

Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics
[Perseus - Rackham](#)
[Ross Translation](#)

[Epicurus' Letter to Menoeceus](#) (et al.)
[Perseus - Hicks](#)
[Hicks Translation](#)

This is going to take some effort, but the way forward is probably going to be:

- 1 - Identify the major arguments put forth in [Philebus](#) and put them in Column 2.
- 2 - Restate the issue in its general form in Column 1. That will result in the chart being organized according to the way the arguments against pleasure were set forth in [Philebus](#).
- 3 - Find the relevant issue in Nichomachean Ethics and summarize it in Column 3.
- 4 - Find Epicurus' position on the relevant issue and summarize in Column 4.

If anyone would like to help with this please let us know and we will add their user account to the list with permissions to edit this document.

Issue	Plato (Philebus)	Aristotle (Nichomachean Ethics)	Epicurus (letter to Menoeceus et al.)
Is Pleasure a good, or is the good virtue? (wisdom, right opinion, true reasoning)	[11b] Philebus says that to all living beings enjoyment and pleasure and gaiety and whatever accords with that sort of thing are a good; whereas our contention [Plato/Socrates] is that not these, but wisdom and thought and memory and their kindred, right opinion and true reasonings, re better and more excellent than pleasure for all who are capable of taking part in them, and that for all those now existing or to come who can partake of them they are the most advantageous of all things.		

First argument through 13d is that Socrates asserts that pleasures differ one from another. Protarchus refuses to admit that any pleasure is not good; Socrates says this is patently not true by the analogy of color, as both black and white are colors, yet we consider them to be opposites of each other. Socrates says if Protarchus insists that all pleasures are good the argument cannot proceed [13d]. Protarchus collapses and this seals his doom. He says "Let us grant that pleasures are many and unlike and that the forms of knowledge are many and different." [14a]

(discussion of the relationship between "one" and "many" - at least part of the issue being how it is that you decide what is common between things that serves as your basis for categorizing things together. Is that categorization basis simply arbitrary in your mind or does it have some "objective" basis to it? See [15b])

The distinction between the one and the many must be ascertained by reason: "Socrates: We say that one and many are identified by reason, and always, both now and in the past, circulate everywhere in every thought that is uttered. This is no new thing and will never cease; it is, in my opinion, a quality within us which will never die or grow old, and which belongs to reason itself as such." [15d]

Since we say both pleasure and wisdom is one, then the question becomes how do we categorize the elements of pleasure and wisdom. "This, then, is precisely the question which the previous discussion puts to us: How is each of them one and many, and how is it that they are not immediately infinite, but each possesses a definite number, before the individual phenomena become infinite?" [18e] See [19b]: "Consider, then, what we are to do. For I think Socrates is asking us whether there are or are not kinds of pleasure, how many kinds there are, and what their nature is, and the same of wisdom."

[20b] Socrates suggests that maybe it is neither pleasure nor wisdom that is the good, but some other thing:

"Socrates I remember now having heard long ago in a dream, or perhaps when I was awake, some talk about pleasure and wisdom to the effect that neither of the two is the good, but some third thing, different from them and better than both."

[20d] Socrates asserts that the nature of the good is necessarily perfect. "Is the nature of the good necessarily perfect or imperfect?" The answer given is that the good it is both perfect and sufficient.