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Plato on Pleasure and Illusion

PhD thesis

to obtain the degree of PhD at the
University of Groningen
on the authority of the
Rector Magnificus Prof. C. Wijmenga
and in accordance with
the decision by the College of Deans.

This thesis will be defended in public on

Thursday 27 October 2022 at 16.15 hours

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‘[D]er Schmerz fragt immer nach der Ursache, während die Lust geneigt ist, bei sich selber stehenzubleiben und nicht rückwärts zu schauen.’ — Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*

‘But if you take that portion of them by which [these deceptive pleasures] appear [different] than they really are, and cut it off from each of them as a mere appearance and without real being (τὸ φαινόμενον ἀλλ᾽ οὐκ ὄν), you will neither admit that this appearance is right (ὀρθῶς φαινόμενον) nor dare to say that anything connected with this portion of pleasure … is right and true (ὀρθόν τε καὶ ἀληθὲς).’ —Plato, *Philebus*

‘[M]orality, goodness, is a form of realism. The idea of a really good man living in a private dream world seems unacceptable. Of course, a good man may be infinitely eccentric, but he must know certain things about his surroundings. … The chief enemy of excellence in morality (and also in art) is personal fantasy: the tissue of self-aggrandizing and consoling wishes and dreams which prevents one from seeing what is there outside one. Rilke said of Cézanne that he did not paint ‘I like it’, he painted ‘There it is.’ This is not easy, and requires, in art or in morals, a discipline.’ — Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*

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Preface and acknowledgements

Perennial wisdom has it that mastery of a craft requires mastery of one's self. Writing this dissertation has been a tremendous challenge on every level of my being, possibly the most difficult thing I have ever done in my life. Like the great German classicist von Wilamowitz-Woellendorf—these days mainly known for his scathing review of Nietzsche's *Die Geburt der Tragödie*—I have come to understand, experientially, that 'to make the ancients speak, we must feed them with our own blood.' Despite this challenge, or perhaps because of it, living the life of the mind for a significant part of my life has also taught me an awful lot about myself—not in the last place what my weaknesses and limitations are. ´To do philosophy,´ Iris Murdoch once perceptively wrote, ´is to explore one's temperament and yet at the same time to attempt to discover the truth.'

I owe much gratitude to those who have accompanied me on this journey—in whatever shape or form. First of all, my thanks go to Lodi Nauta and especially Tamer Nawar—the two supervisors of this project. Lodi taught me the importance of being more pragmatic, and less perfectionistic, and he constantly urged me to keep the bigger picture in mind—philosophically, exegetically, and existentially. His sobering and supportive presence has meant a lot to me—especially towards the end of the project when I was on the brink of despair and he more or less single-handedly dragged me across the finish line of this academic marathon. It is a delight that the *pater familias* of Groningen's history of philosophy research community is my *Doktorvater*.

Tamer—my day-to-day supervisor—taught me, for a great part by exemplar, what rigorous, precise, and clear thinking looks like

and that there is such a thing as *quality* in philosophy. Indeed, engaging philosophically with Tamer is nothing less than to be reminded of such a standard. Through the unwavering stream of searching, sometimes devastating comments he provided on the countless drafts I sent his way and multiple hours-long, Oxbridge-tutorial-style sessions in which he always seemed to have a better grip on my ideas than I did myself, I slowly but surely got better at developing, finetuning, and polishing the ideas and arguments that make up this dissertation. As Philippa Foot describes her experience of doing philosophy with Elizabeth Anscombe, 'it was like in those old children's comics where a steamroller runs over a character who becomes flattened—an outline on the ground—but the character is there in the next episode, unscathed.' Working together with Tamer did not just shape me as a thinker, it also convinced me how philosophy is best taught—up close and personal, driven by a deep commitment to unearthing the truth and 'following the argument wherever it leads,' and with the gloves off. I am proud to be his first (unofficial) *Doktorkind*.

I also want to thank the members of my reading committee, some of whom I have previously known: Thomas Johansen, Jessica Moss, and Katja Vogt. Thomas kindly hosted me in Oslo for a research visit in the late summer of 2018 and made me feel very welcome in Oslo´s vibrant ancient philosophy community. Ever since I stumbled across her work on Plato on pleasure (and illusion), Moss's work has been a source of inspiration as well as an example of what good Platonic scholarship looks like. I am humbled—and frankly a bit frightened, given her expertise—that she serves on the reading committee. I am also indebted to Katja, lastly, who has an admirable talent for 'making the ancients speak.' Though not a formal supervisor, she has been very generous with her support: she sponsored a visit to Columbia University in the winter of 2019, right

before the pandemic broke loose, gave generous comments on some of the *Republic* 9 and *Philebus* material that can be found in chapters 2 and 4, and convinced me that there is an important difference between non-hedonism and anti-hedonism. Agnes Callard—whose unruly mind has fascinated me ever since I met her during a research stay in Oxford, back in 2017—should also be thanked here. Agnes helped me develop the ideas in chapter 4, when both of us were visiting Oslo in 2018, she has been available for input and discussion ever since our paths crossed, and she introduced me to Fernando Pessoa and Simone Weil—both of whom have become touchstones in my thinking.

I also want to thank Lautaro Roig Lanzillotta, Martin Lenz, and Bart Streumer—my other 'opponents'—and Han Thomas Adriaenssen, Joachim Aufderheide, Milena Bartholain, Amber Carpenter, Luca Castagnoli (who sponsored a visit to Oxford in the winter of 2017), Roger Crisp, Wessel van Dommelen, Job van Eck, Guus Eelink, Brian Embry, Sabine van Enckevort, Mehmet Erginel, Matthew Evans, Emily Fletcher, Dorothea Frede, Sjoerd Griffioen, Zena Hitz, Douglas Hutchinson, Albert Joosse, Matthew Matherne, Corijn van Mazijk, Alexander Mourelatos, Graham Parkes, Sybilla Pereira, Alesia Preite, Jan-Willem Romeijn, Andrea Sangiacomo, Cesar Reigosa Soler, Gerry Wakker, Stephen White, and Steven Willemsen—for inspiration, discussion, and/or support.

Obtaining a PhD, and especially a PhD in philosophy, is such a solitary, self-absorbed pursuit that it is easy to start taking yourself—and especially your identity as a philosopher—too seriously. Whatever context you have arranged for yourself on the surface, though, 'there is always another context that makes that original idea of yourself absurd'—as the poet David Whyte notes. I am blessed with the many non-academics/non-philosophers around me who constantly invite me to inhabit that bigger context. For one, I want to thank my family—especially mom and dad, for their unconditional

support throughout the years, and my dear sister Anne who made me realize, through 'tough love,' that it was high time to bring this project to its end. I generally admire her talent for saying the right things, in the right way, for the right reason, at the right time.

Special thanks go to Maaike Besseling (who kindly helped me with the graphic design of this thesis), Marieke Blaauw (who quickly transformed from a boss into an emotional anchor during the turbulent past year), Aafke Bouman, Karel Hendriks (for his radical curiosity), Maximilian Lohnert (for his warmth, his groundedness, his genuine interest in other people, and his dark humor), Fareeda van der Marel (for keeping our special connection alive), Jan Mars (who appeared seemingly *ex nihilo* in my life, most likely to confirm that there is only one true path—the path with heart), Sönke Matthewes (for our trilingual adventures), 'Kalle' Nonnen (who slowly but surely became 'another self' ever since we randomly met in the Indian Himalayas), Marleen Ritzema (for her unconditional loving presence), Josh Sallet (for his valuable support in all (bad) things academic and much more), Hessel Schaaf (for making me see things I tend to miss), Vincent Steinmetz (simply 'parce que c'était lui; parce que c'était moi'), Wim Jan Trügg (as they say: when the pupil is ready, the guru appears), Roy Veenstra (for his stubbornness, which I simultaneously hate and love, and his passion for conceptual clarification), and many others who hopefully know who they are.

My 'paranimfen' Kimon Lèfas and Lia Döring—who have witnessed the many ups and downs of this PhD trajectory from (far too) nearby—deserve special mention. One of the many reasons why Kimon and me are such good friends is that we share the belief—pun intended—that pleasure should be taken very seriously. More than that, Kimon taught me a lot about Greeks on pleasure. What makes Lia such a fabulous creature is that she dedicates a large part of her life to finding out what it means to be a human being. In a way, then,

the attempt to develop a better understanding of the human struggle with pleasure has always felt like a shared quest. I feel so blessed and so grateful that the two of us are ‘just walking each other home.’

While living in Berlin, back in 2014/2015, I started thinking about the philosophical topics and problems scrutinized in this dissertation. Through a process of trial and error, I also began to discover there—quite Platonically–that neither hedonism nor anti-hedonism are satisfactory solutions to the ethical problem posed by pleasure. It is fitting, I think, that Sholem Krishtalka’s Berghain flyer (March), 2015 can be found on the cover of this dissertation. I thank him for granting me permission to use this beautiful image.

0. Introduction

Pleasure matters. We do not just simply care about feeling good, there also seems to be an intuitive link between the pleasurable (or painful) experiences our life contains and our level of welfare, well-being, or happiness. Pleasure is not just worth having in and of itself, then, it also enhances the value of a life.[1] Additionally, and perhaps less obviously, pleasure matters because it has a tendency to glue us to the objects or activities we enjoy.[2] This stickiness of pleasure explains, among other things, why our pleasures reflect our commitments, interests, and values, thereby reflecting who we really are and what we are 'all about.'[3] By identifying someone's pleasures, we identify what they care about, and by identifying what they care about, we identify the things in the world around which their selves are organised.

Plato's views concerning pleasure might initially look puzzling. On the one hand, he seems to agree with much of what I just said. In the opening moves of the *Philebus*, Plato's Socrates argues that if we had the chance to live our life full of 'intelligence, reason, knowledge, and memory of all things (φρόνησιν μὲν καὶ νοῦν καὶ ἐπιστήμην καὶ μνήμην πᾶσαν πάντων, 21d9–10)' but without pleasures—'living in total insensitivity (τὸ παράπαν ἀπαθὴς πάντων

[1] This close connection between the two indeed explains why hedonism—the idea that well-being or happiness consists in the greatest balance of pleasant over painful experience or that all and only pleasure has positive value—has often seemed an obvious and intuitive view of the good life. For this connection, see e.g. Crisp (2021: § 4.1) and Haybron (2020: §2.1). For recent defences of hedonism, see e.g. Bramble (2016), Crisp (2006), Feldman (2002) and (2004), and Onfray (2015).

[2] Russell (2005: 2).

[3] Callard (2018: 35). For other so-called hybrid theories of valuing, which stress the importance of affective and emotional engagement in our valuing something, see e.g. Scheffler (2010) and Wallace (2013).

τῶν τοιούτων, 21e–2)’—we should not choose this life simply because it is not worth living. In the same dialogue, Socrates concedes that many pleasures are good and worth having (e.g. at 13b1) and he also distances himself from a group of extreme pleasure-haters who deny the existence of pleasure and instead offer a privative theory of pleasure on which pleasure is nothing more than the absence or removal of painful desire (44c1).

Likewise, one of the arguments in book 9 of the *Republic* (580c10–588a6) claims that the rationally integrated, just life is better than the unjust life—seemingly in virtue of the fact that such a life is more pleasant. And in the same bit of text, Plato also differentiates three kinds of pleasure—instead of three different *ways* of getting one and the same pleasure—and claims that these hedonic kinds are inexorably connected with three radically different personality types which are characterized, in their turn, by radically different concerns and cares.

On the other hand, Plato often seems to be extremely suspicious of pleasure. In book 6 of the *Republic*, the suggestion that pleasure might be the good our life is aimed at reaching is immediately discarded and ascribed to ‘ordinary people (τοῖς πολλοῖς ἡδονὴ δοκεῖ εἶναι τὸ ἀγαθόν, 505b5)’ and when Glaucon so much as dares to mention this possibility again, Socrates brusquely silences him: ‘hush! (εὐφήμει, 509a).’ Large parts of the *Gorgias* and the *Philebus* are devoted to attacks on hedonism and the later dialogue is famous for its defence of the surprising thesis that there are various ways in which pleasures can be *false* (36c3–51a1).

Equally, the *Timaeus* describes pleasure as ‘evil’s most powerful lure (μέγιστον κακοῦ δέλεαρ, 69d1),’ whereas pain ‘makes us run away from what is good (ἀγαθῶν φυγάς, 69d2),’ the *Phaedo* suggests that the good life involves detachment from pleasures and appetitive desires as much as possible (83b5–7) because bodily pleasure is responsible for ‘the greatest and most extreme evil (ὃ πάντων μέγιστόν τε κακῶν καὶ ἔσχατόν, 83c1–2).’ The *Republic*,

finally, claims, without offering much in the way of explanation, that pleasure is like a bond or leaden weight that keeps people trapped in the messy and shadowy perceptible or material realm around us (519a7–b5).

Even though the Platonic dialogues contain some of the most sustained, most careful thinking about the nature and value of pleasure that has come down to us from antiquity,[4] twentieth-century scholars have often rejected Plato's views on pleasure as confused, flawed, and not worthy of our attention. A typically harsh write-off can be found in Gibbs, for instance, who suggests that 'the rhetorical, fragmented, and ultimately inconsistent character of [*Republic* 9's pleasure arguments] reflects Plato's own intellectual limitations.'[5] Cross and Woozley similarly believe that so much as paying close attention to the pleasure arguments of *Republic* 9 means giving Plato a 'doubtful compliment'—the doubtful compliment of undeserved philosophical attention.[6]

Two key Platonic claims have especially come under heavy attack. For one, there is the restorative theory of pleasure presented throughout the corpus: the idea, roughly, that pleasure centrally involves a restorative process of returning towards a previously disrupted natural state of harmony and balance. For another, there is the doctrine of false pleasure defended in the *Republic* and the *Philebus*: the thesis, roughly, that there are such things as false or unreal pleasures which get things wrong or which are not what they pretend to be.[7]

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[4] Wolfsdorf (2013-b: 9, 297).

[5] Gibbs (2001: 33).

[6] Cross and Woozley (1964: 265).

[7] These elements of Plato's hedonic theorizing are internally connected. On an infamous Platonic line of thought, which I examine more closely in chapter 2, we experience pleasure just in case our pleasurable mental state—the raw feel of the psychological condition we find ourselves in—is triggered by an underlying

Scholars have criticized the restorative theory of pleasure on the grounds that it is crude and unable to account for the full range of human pleasures.[8] In addition, scholars have argued that this account—and especially Plato's use of it in *Republic* 9—is hampered by a 'fatal ambiguity,' the charge being that Plato suffers from a deficient grasp of the difference between states and processes.[9]

The doctrine of false pleasure has also received significant criticism. Already in antiquity, people complained that the idea makes no sense. According to Theophrastus, the successor of Aristotle in the Peripatetic school, a false pleasure would—*per impossibile*—be a pleasure that is not a pleasure so he concluded that there are no such things as false pleasures: 'all pleasures are true.'[10] More recently, Plato has been charged with conflating different sense of truth in his talk of false pleasure which arguably makes him guilty of 'rank equivocation.'[11]

And others have held that pleasures cannot be false for the simple reason that the introspectively based belief that I am experiencing pleasure is immune to error: whenever I believe I am experiencing pleasure, I *am* experiencing pleasure. Simply put, there is no appearance-reality gap in the affective domain—pleasure is just a bit of felt experience—and this renders Plato's talk of 'false

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restorative process; if such an underlying restorative process is lacking, however, our so-called pleasure is not ἀληθής but ψευδής (misleading, deceptive, false, unreal).

[8] For this line of criticism, see e.g. C. Taylor (2003: 244). Plato's restorative theory of pleasure is often negatively compared with Aristotle's account—most recently by Price (2017-b).

[9] See e.g. Gosling and Taylor (1982: 113–114 and 122–126) and Reeve (1988: 306n30). Tellingly, Gosling and Taylor (1982: 142) offer a long list of 'unsatisfactory points' and 'weaknesses' in the *Republic* account of pleasure in which the restorative model plays a pivotal role. See e.g. Erginel (2011) for a rejoinder.

[10] Theophrastus fragment 85 Wimmer cited by Gallop (1960: 331).

[11] Gosling (1975: 212). See e.g. Fletcher (2018-b) and Strohl (unpublished manuscript) for a rejoinder.

pleasures' incoherent.[12]

In stark contrast to these harsh write-offs, this dissertation offers a more charitable and sympathetic account of Plato's thought concerning pleasure.[13] More concretely, it offers careful and sustained examinations of the inner working of certain Platonic arguments concerning pleasure. One of the central messages I hope to convey is that Plato's thoughts about pleasure are sophisticated, cogent, and deserving of serious attention.

Plato often seems to suggest that pleasure is philosophically and ethically problematic because it is inexorably linked with illusion and deception. Thus, in *Republic* 10, our susceptibility to optical illusions and our desire for pleasure are located in one and the same, lower, cognitively impaired part of the soul—'a weakness in our nature (ἡμῶν τῷ παθήματι τῆς φύσεως, 602d2).' And *Republic* 9 compares the pleasures of ordinary people with '*trompe l'oeil* paintings (ἐσκιαγραφημένη τις, 583b5),' blaming these misleading pleasures on some kind of 'trickery' that brings people under its sway by means of 'untrustworthy appearances' which have nothing to do with the truth of the matter (οὐδὲν ὑγιὲς τούτων τῶν φαντασμάτων πρὸς ἡδονῆς ἀλήθειαν, ἀλλὰ γοητεία τις, 584a9–10).[14]

In a similar vein, the *Philebus* argues that our pleasures can be ψεύδης (deceptive, false, incorrect, unreal) (36c3–51a1) and it dismisses these misleading pleasures as 'quite ridiculous imitations of

[12] See e.g. Gallop (1960) and Penelhum (1964). The typical response often assumes that we can defend the position Plato is trying to refute by simply repeating it. According to Guthrie, for instance, 'the philosopher may say that he enjoys a higher quality of life than the sensualist, but he cannot say that he enjoys it more, *enjoyment being solely a matter of individual preference*.' (1975: 541, my emphasis)

[13] This thesis may thus be seen as part of a welcome scholarly trend that aims to rehabilitate Plato's hedonic theorizing. See e.g. Aufderheide and Erginel (forthcoming).

[14] Note that, at 602d2–4, Socrates connects the two: 'in its exploitation of this weakness of our nature, σκιαγραφία falls nothing short of γοητεία.'

true pleasures (μεμιμημέναι μέντοι τὰς ἀληθεῖς ἐπὶ τὰ γελοιότερα, 40c5). And at the end of that same dialogue, Socrates forces his interlocutor Protarchus—who had started the dialogue as a staunch defender of Philebus's unmitigated hedonism—to admit that pleasure is 'the greatest impostor (ἡδονὴ … ἁπάντων ἀλαζονίστατον, 65c5).' In the *Laws*, finally, the Athenian stranger claims that 'pleasure achieves whatever her will desires by persuasive deceit that is irresistibly compelling (πειθοῖ μετὰ ἀπάτης βιαίου πράττειν πᾶν ὅτιπερ ἂν αὐτῆς ἡ βούλησις ἐθελήσῃ, 863b8–9).'

To be sure, the relationship between pleasure and illusion in Plato has received attention in recent scholarship. Thus, for instance, in a seminal paper, Jessica Moss argued that Plato is predominantly suspicious of pleasure because pleasure is deceptive. As she summarizes her view:

> Pleasure is dangerous because it is a *deceiver*. It leads us astray with false appearances, bewitching and beguiling us, cheating and tricking us. In particular, it deceives us by appearing to be good when it is not.[15]

Moss's reading draws attention to a crucially important yet often overlooked aspect of Plato's hedonic theorizing. As she rightly notes, Plato's mistrust of, and obsession with, pleasure does not stem from mere prudishness or an excessive reaction against contemporary proponents of hedonism such as Aristippus of Cyrene,[16] it is systematic, philosophically motivated, and central to Plato's

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[15] Moss (2006: 504). Before her, Mooradian (1992: 2) already claimed that Plato's hedonic theorizing comes down to the proposal that pleasures can be false and that '[the] falsity of a pleasure consists in its existence or desirability being essentially tied to some sort of illusion.'

[16] Such a less philosophical, downright moralistic, more conventional attack on pleasure can be found in Xenophon (e.g. in *Memorabilia* 2.1.21–34 where Socrates confronts the hedonist and relentless pleasure-seeker Aristippus with the traditional Greek parable of Heracles on the crossroads).

thought.[17] The problem with pleasure, as I would summarize Moss's take on the Platonic view, is that it is a fundamental source of our misalignment with the world. It blurs our vision, it bars us from seeing clearly what confronts us, and it brings about a mismatch between our experience of the world beyond our heads and how that world really is.[18]

Moreover, by focusing on the connection between pleasure and deception—especially the way in which pleasure tricks us about *what matters*—Moss is in a position to offer an elegant story about the genesis of the tripartite moral psychology of the *Republic* and its inner workings.[19] The link Plato discerns between pleasure and illusion, Moss suggests, drives his rejection of the (Socratic) view that all desires are rational desires for the good. Whereas the *Protagoras* and *Gorgias* identify a connection between illusion and (our appetitive desire for) pleasure, the *Republic* turns this finding into a psychological theory which claims that one part of our soul is forced to accept evaluative appearances for what they are, whereas the higher, rational part of our soul can use reasoning (λογισμός) to pierce through these deceptive appearances and work out what is really worth having and pursuing.[20]

It is important to note, though, that evaluative hedonic illusions—situations where pleasure teams up with appetitive desire to represent something bad or neutral as something good—are just one species of Plato's taxonomy of hedonic illusions. Besides the

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[17] Moss (2006: 503–504).

[18] For this line of thought, and these ways of formulating it, I am indebted to Murdoch (1972), Bommarito (2017), Bommarito (2020), and Wright (2017).

[19] See Moss (2006) and especially Moss (2008).

[20] For a more detailed account see Moss (2008). In this paper, she examines the arguments we find in the *Republic* for dividing the soul into a rational part and two non-rational parts (appetite and spirit), trying to discover 'a substantive concept of rationality that explains [Plato's] carving up psychic phenomena the way he does.'

evaluative illusions on which Moss's treatment focuses, Plato claims that there are various other ways in which pleasure deceives us.[21] What is more, some of the other argumentative strands and the types of hedonic illusion they defend are more radical and require a different explanation. Whereas anyone can be brought to see that pleasure does not always reliably track what is ultimately—all things considered—good for us, Plato also discusses more counter-intuitive, less readily acceptable types of hedonic deception.

In the *Phaedo* (82e–84b), for example, Plato suggests that pleasure deceives us by making the sensible world project its identity more forcefully than warranted. When we experience bodily pleasure, the dialogue suggests, we are necessarily forced to believe that the hedonic object—the material, sensible thing we are enjoying—'is most true and most clear, although it is not (τοῦτο ἐναργέστατόν … εἶναι καὶ ἀληθέστατον, οὐχ οὕτως ἔχον, 83c7–8).' In *Republic* 9 (583b1–585a7)—where the attempt to dismantle Thrasymachus's challenge comes to its climax—Plato suggests that not everything that presents itself as a pleasure counts as the real deal. Put differently, we can be mistaken about our own affective experiences or go wrong in our immediate and honest self-ascriptions of pleasure.

And in the *Philebus* (36c3–41a4)—which works its way towards the conclusion that pleasure is 'the greatest impostor (ἡδονὴ … ἁπάντων ἀλαζονίστατονm, 65c5)'—Socrates argues that, like our beliefs, our pleasures can be false—and that such false pleasures are 'ridiculous imitations (μεμιμημέναι … ἐπὶ τὰ γελοιότερα, 40c5)' of true pleasure. In the same dialogue, we find an argument (53c4–55a12) to the effect that, as a restorative process or γένεσις (a becoming or going-on), pleasure is deeply problematic and highly misleading. Those who locate pleasure in the centre of their life and agency are not

[21] To be sure, Moss (2006: 523–33) herself mentions these other types of deception as well but identifies them as avenues for further research.

just mistaken about what they take themselves to be pursuing, Plato argues, their life is not worth living but fundamentally irrational (ἄλογος) and even ridiculous (γέλοιος)—even though this piece of information about their very own miserable predicament is not introspectively available to the pleasure-seeker.

Many existing discussions of Plato's views of pleasure attempt to avoid ascribing these unorthodox, allegedly untenable claims to Plato by replacing them with more comfortable exegetical alternatives, or they simply dismiss them as embarrassing philosophical blunders to be relegated to the graveyard of intellectual history. In doing so, however, I believe that such treatments strip Plato of some of his deepest and most interesting views and arguments without compensating for this radical interpretative measure by making better sense of the textual evidence.[22]

On the reading I will be defending here, Plato believes that pleasure can trick us in a variety of alarming and often unexpected ways. My focus is on the arguments in the *Phaedo*, *Republic*, and *Philebus* I have just briefly described in the preceding paragraph for the simple reason that these are instances where the connection between pleasure and illusion or deception is especially salient and relevant. In all these philosophical discussions, the key suggestion is that pleasure drives appearance and reality radically apart. When not scrutinized rationally and held in check by our higher functions, pleasure casts a falsifying veil between us and the world, thus concealing what directly confronts us.[23] Indeed, or so I will argue, Plato treats pleasure as a prime source of our misalignment with reality: by availing itself of trickery and deception, it sabotages our

[22] Nussbaum (1986: 140–141) is surely right that a good part of Plato's importance as a philosopher lies in 'the depth and severity of his challenge against prevailing beliefs, both of his day and our own.'

[23] Murdoch (1972: 82).

attempt to separate truth from fabrication and see reality face to face.

This perspective clashes with what most people—hedonists especially—believe about pleasure. Untutored, naïve intuition claims that pleasure is too obvious to be contested, let alone to warrant sustained theorizing or scrutiny.[24] To those held captive by this 'simple picture,' as we might call it following Katz, it is introspectively obvious that pleasure is a simple feeling to which we have unfailing access and that this experience is good and worth having—along with everything else that appears 'aglow in its light.'[25] To put in a slogan, the simple picture suggests that pleasure is *authoritative*.[26]

The authority of pleasure has two important aspects. Firstly, when it comes to pleasure there is no room for doubt, ignorance, or error. Whenever I *believe* I am experiencing pleasure, I *am* experiencing pleasure (and it is also often thought, in addition, that whenever I *am* experiencing pleasure, I will *believe* (or *know*) I am experiencing pleasure). This aspect of pleasure—its immunity to error—seems to be the result of the fact that there is no more to pleasure than meets the introspective eye: pleasure is just a bit of experience whose ontology is of the first-person, *esse est percipi* variety and whose reality is exhausted by the phenomenology—the mere raw feel—of pleasure.[27]

[24] Wolfsdorf (2013-b: 9).

[25] Katz (2016: §1).

[26] For a recent defence of 'the authority of affect,' see Johnston (2001).

[27] This idea goes back to the Cyrenaics: because they argued that 'the πάθη are the criteria and that they alone are apprehended and are not deceitful (καταλαμβάνεσθαι καὶ ἀδιάψευστα)'—as Sextus Empiricus (*Against the Mathematicians* 7.191) reports—the Cyrenaics believed that pleasure is something we grasp unfailingly and cannot be in error about. When I report that I experience pleasure, in other words, I do so 'infallibly and truly and firmly and incorrigibly (ἀδιαψεύστως καὶ ἀληθῶς καὶ βεβαίως <καὶ> ἀνεξελέγκτως).' See Tsouna (1998: 31–61) for this epistemological thesis and Irwin (1991), Lampe (2015: 26–55), and Mesquita (2020) for the important role it plays in Cyrenaic ethical theory.

Secondly, our pleasurable experience is self-evidently good and worth having and we are well off while experiencing pleasure. Put a bit differently, the fact that something is pleasant to me gives me, in and of itself, a reason to pursue or have that thing.[28] In such a vein, Philebus—the protagonist of Plato's eponymous dialogue—thinks that it is so obvious that pleasure is good and the life of pleasure counts as the best possible life that he treats the very question as beyond argument and leaves the dialogue before it properly starts.

Plato resists this simple picture and its ramifications—mainly because it proceeds 'as if 'pleasure' were a quite unproblematic concept,' as Elizabeth Anscombe would later put it.[29] In line with one of his more general methodological commitments—the idea that before rushing into evaluating something, we need to give a *λόγος* of the *οὐσία* or an *αἰτία* of that very thing[30]—Plato believes, instead, that before rushing into positing pleasure as (a/the) good, we need to

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[28] In his discussion of Epicurean hedonism, Cicero *(On Moral Ends* 1.30) captures this idea as follows: 'Epicurus denies that there is any need for justification or debate (*ratione neque disputatione*) as to why pleasure should be sought, and pain shunned. He holds that we perceive (*sentiri*) these things, as we perceive that fire is hot, snow white, and honey sweet. In none of these examples is there any call for proof by sophisticated reasoning (*exquisitis rationibus confirmare*); it is enough simply to point them out (*admonere*).' Eudoxus developed a similar argument (recorded in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.2): 'No one asks anyone 'for the sake of what are you pleased (τίνος ἕνεκα ἥδεται)?' This implies that pleasure is choiceworthy in itself (*καθ' αὑτὴν* αἱρετὴν τὴν ἡδονήν).' For contemporary examples of a highly similar line of reasoning, see e.g. Anscombe (1957: 77) and Nagel (1986: 156).

[29] Anscombe (1957: 77).

[30] Cf. *Republic* 534b3–4 for the notion of providing a λόγος τῆς οὐσίας and *Gorgias* 465a2–7 and *Phaedrus* 237c2–3 for the idea that any form of expertise is characterized by the ability to give such an explanatory account. In the *Gorgias* (501a5–6), Socrates applies this general methodological insight to hedonic theorizing: it is impossible to gauge the value of pleasure without having first investigated its nature (τὴν φύσιν) and cause (τὴν *αἰτίαν*).

scrutinize pleasure and provide a thorough account of its underlying nature.

This approach to hedonic theorizing has important consequences. If we investigate pleasure more carefully, Plato claims, we discover that the simple picture is untenable and that pleasure is only authoritative for those who are disinclined or unable to scrutinize how things appear to them. What initially seemed obvious, at least on the simple picture, does in fact not hold up under closer examination: many of the beliefs we have come to adopt as a result of being in the grip of pleasure—beliefs about the world beyond our heads, about the quality of our lives, and even about the psychological state we take ourselves to be in—do not hold up under closer, more careful inspection. Indeed, as Socrates puts it in the *Republic*, people are often 'involuntarily deprived of true beliefs' because they are 'victims of trickery (τοὺς γοητευθέντας, 413c1)' who are 'under the spell of pleasure (ὑφ᾽ ἡδονῆς κηληθέντες, 413c2).'[31]

An Overview of the Chapters

0.1. Cleansing the Doors of Perception: The *Phaedo* on the Dangers of Bodily Pleasure

The *Phaedo* contains some of Plato's harshest remarks on (bodily) pleasure and the threat the pleasures of 'food, drink, and sex' and other base indulgences pose to a good life. In what is known as his second defence (63e8–69e5)—a famous passage in which Socrates explains why he does not fear death—Socrates defines philosophy as the practice of death. The good life, to use a Platonic metaphor, is a life

[31] Pleasure deceives, Socrates points out, and 'everything that deceives seems to bewitch (ἔοικε ... γοητεύειν πάντα ὅσα ἀπατᾷ, 413c4).'

in which we strip our soul naked by detaching ourselves from our body and the material realm in which we find ourselves.

This way of life is composed of two sub-practices: cognitive detachment (distancing oneself from the unreliable deliverances of sense-perception) and affective detachment (distancing oneself from appetitive desire and bodily pleasure). Whereas Socrates specifies the need for cognitive detachment—in brief, the intelligible reality of the Forms can only be accessed by the mind's eye—he merely casually points out that philosophers practice affective detachment too—as if this only serves as a useful illustration of the philosopher's otherworldly existential orientation without being philosophically connected with the philosopher's project of seeing reality face to face.

Traditionally, many scholars have described the ethics of the *Phaedo* as some kind of asceticism without offering much in the way of further explanation or commentary. However, 'asceticism' is an uninformative label (charged with pejorative connotations) and labelling the *Phaedo* as 'ascetic' does little to elucidate Plato's defence of affective detachment. More recently, some scholars have developed sophisticated alternative readings of the *Phaedo*—so-called evaluative readings—on which affective detachment is not a matter of avoiding bodily pleasures. Instead, it is a matter of having the right attitudes and ascribing little or no value to the bodily pleasures we experience (without necessarily avoiding such bodily pleasures).

While evaluative readings raise important questions concerning Plato's motivation for defending affective detachment, in this chapter I argue that such interpretive approaches lack textual grounds and run into philosophical problems and I aim to clarify Plato's defence of affective detachment. In the Deception Argument (83b4–e4), as I call it, Socrates argues that our soul 'gets tricked by bodily pleasures and appetitive desires to the point at which nothing seems to be real for it but the physical (γοητευομένη ὑπ' αὐτοῦ ὑπό

τῶν ἐπιθυμιῶν καὶ ἡδονῶν, ὥστε μηδὲν ἄλλο δοκεῖν εἶναι ἀληθὲς ἀλλ' ἢ τὸ σωματοειδές, 81b3–5).' That is to say, the experience of bodily affect unavoidably lures us into inflating the reality and clarity of the sensible, visible realm. *Contra* other views, I argue that we are dealing here with *ontological* rather than *evaluative* confusion—even though ontological confusion might well have evaluative trickle-down effects. Pleasure makes the perceptible world appear to be real in a manner which it is not. I specify the notion of truth or reality and clarity, vividness, or lucidity Plato is working with in this argument and try to elucidate the mechanics underlying this defective process of belief formation.

If my reading is correct, it suggests that Plato's defence of affective detachment is philosophically motivated and tied to Plato's central positions and concerns—especially his belief in a stark distinction between a world of seeming and a world of being. Like sense-perception, bodily pleasure is deceptive and cannot grant us access to the Forms; unlike sense-perception, and more worryingly, bodily pleasure—best construed here as some kind of cognitive, (quasi-)perceptual, or representational state—is highly authoritative: it silences the demand for justification and dislodges our rational ability to deny the content of our appearances.

While looking at a stick submerged in water that looks bent or two lines of seemingly different length in the Müller-Lyer illusion, I can use the power of λογισμός to deny the content of this perceptual experience—but if pleasure tricks me into taking the object of my pleasure for fully real and fully clear, Plato seemingly argues, I am forced into assent. Crucially, then, bodily pleasure directly undermines the philosopher's attempt to transcend the world of seeming and gain access to the fully real intelligible world and this is why the philosopher practices affective detachment.

0.2. Tricked by Pleasure: Hedonic Fallibilism in Plato's *Republic*

From the moment he barges into the discussion, brusquely dismissing conventional morality as 'another's good (ἀλλότριον ἀγαθὸν, 343c3),' Thrasymachus haunts the *Republic*. Not only does his challenge pinpoint the central topic of the dialogue, the underlying ideas about what makes for a worthwhile life are diametrically opposed to Plato's. Whereas Plato treats the tyrant as the epitome of psychological breakdown, Thrasymachus believes that a tyrannical life of 'complete injustice (τὴν τελεωτάτην ἀδικίαν, 361a6)' and unrestrained greed for the satisfaction of one's own desire (πλεονεξία) is supremely happy.

Book 9 aims to defuse Thrasymachus's challenge. Between 583b1 and 588b5, Socrates presents his 'strongest and most decisive (μέγιστόν τε καὶ κυριώτατον, 583b6)' argument against these rival ideas about what matters. Despite the fanfare with which this third demonstration (ἀπόδειξις) of the superiority of the rationally integrated life is introduced, much remains unclear. It is not clear, for example, how we are to connect the topic of pleasure with the central questions animating the dialogue and how to understand the central claim of the argument that 'besides the pleasure of the ideal, fully actualized agent, other pleasure is neither entirely true nor pure, but like some sort of *trompe l'oeil* painting (οὐδὲ παναληθής ἐστιν ἡ τῶν ἄλλων ἡδονὴ πλὴν τῆς τοῦ φρονίμου οὐδὲ καθαρά, ἀλλ᾽ ἐσκιαγραφημένη τις, 583b3–5).'

The argument itself—and especially its putative defence of what I call hedonic fallibilism—tends to be brusquely dismissed as a philosophical failure because it clashes with the commonsensical thought that we cannot err in our self-ascriptions of pleasure. This dismissive reaction, in turn, explains why most existing treatments

simply skate over the question of how book 9's critical account of ordinary pleasure should be integrated with the *Republic* as a whole.

In this chapter, I aim to make sense of Plato's hedonic fallibilism—the view that what presents itself as a pleasure may not always be the real thing—in the expectation that a proper understanding of this view might also shed light on the way in which this argument integrates with the *Republic* at large and especially the attempt to respond to Thrasymachus's challenge.

Having discussed a standard objection against hedonic fallibilism—namely, that we cannot go wrong in our self-ascriptions of pleasures because we have practically infallible access to our pleasures—I critically examine two readings of the argument that have arisen in the wake of this standard worry: dismissive readings (which reject the argument out of hand), as I call them, and evasive readings (which deny that the argument defends hedonic fallibilism).

I aim to find a middle way between these interpretive alternatives. The reading I defend takes Plato at his word yet also attempts to bring out what it most cogent and most interesting about the Deceptive Pleasure Argument (understood as a defence of hedonic fallibilism). I want to argue, in other words, that there is sufficient textual evidence to suggest that Plato is, in fact, defending hedonic fallibility and that we should strive to make sense of this unorthodox position.

To do so, I offer a careful reconstruction of an important dialectical exchange between Socrates and Glaucon. Having made a distinction between pleasure, pain, and a state of affectively indifferent calm in between the two, Socrates argues that there are situations in which the affectively neutral state appears to be pleasant although it is not pleasant but neutral. In such cases, subjects erroneously report that they are experiencing pleasure.

Taking an infallibilist line, Glaucon resists this suggestion and

claims that these subjects do in fact experience pleasure—arguably drawing on some kind of phenomenal subjectivism about pleasure. If the experience of pleasure exhausts the reality of pleasure, his thought seemingly goes, any situation in which it *strikes* me as if I am experiencing pleasure counts as a situation in which I *am* experiencing pleasure. There is no more to pleasure than what is introspectively available to us in experience, so there are no such things as false or deceptive pleasures.

In response, Socrates offers two arguments: the first dialectical, the second philosophically more substantial. Because Glaucon agreed with Socrates that pleasure and affectively neutral calm are different states—each with their independent, separate essence—he cannot also believe, on pain of contradicting himself, that there are situations in which the neutral state proves itself to be a pleasure.

To resist Glaucon's phenomenal subjectivism, Socrates's second line of argumentation appeals to the idea that, fundamentally, pleasure is a restorative process of having one of our (physical or psychological) needs met. Unless the relevant feeling—which we typically call 'pleasure'—is caused in the relevant way by such an underlying restorative process, we are not experiencing a pleasure but a mere εἴδωλον (a deficient fake or simulacrum) of pleasure, that is to say, a false or deceptive pleasure.

Deceptive pleasure is relevantly similar, then, to perceptual types of illusion where, roughly, something appears other than it really is. Because pleasure signals something else—e.g. need-satisfaction, restoration, improvement in our level of welfare—it can misfire, as happens in Socrates's cases of hedonic fallibility. The mere fact that a stick *looks* bent while submerged in water does not mean it really *is* bent, the mere fact that lukewarm water *feels* cold when contrasted with hot water does not mean it really *is* cold, and the mere fact that—as happens in the Checker shadow illusion—two tiles of the

exact same darkness *seem* to be of different colour when they are partly shadowed by another object does not mean they really *are* of a different colour.

Analogously, in the hedonic case, the juxtaposition of an affectively negative state of pain and an affectively indifferent state of calm creates the illusion of there really being an underlying restorative process, even though, in reality, there is just the neutral state of psychological calm temporarily wearing the mask of pleasure and tricking its victims into self-ascribing a pleasure that is not really there.

0.3. 'The Greatest Impostor': Hedonic Cognitivism, Hedonic Fallibilism, and Deceptive Pleasure in Plato's *Philebus* (36c3–41a4)

In the middle of the *Philebus* (36c3–51a1), the dialogue in which Plato presents his final and most developed thoughts on the nature and value of pleasure and its place in a good life, Plato's Socrates argues that there are four ways in which pleasures can be ἀληθής (true, real) and ψευδής (false, unreal, deceptive). The first type of falsity, which we will study here, concerns pleasures that are false in the same, literal, sense in which our beliefs can be false because they fail to represent the world correctly.

From antiquity onwards, this stretch of argumentation—which I call the Fallibilism Argument and which runs from 36c3 to 41a4—has puzzled readers. It is especially unclear, firstly, how a private and subjective mental state like a pleasure—arguably nothing more than a bit of feeling—could be false in precisely the same way in which a belief can be false. It is also unclear, secondly, what role Plato's defence of hedonic fallibilism plays in the overall economy of the *Philebus*.

My main aim in this chapter is to untangle—or at least elucidate—these puzzles, especially the first. In brief, I am going to

argue that Plato's defence of hedonic fallibilism is predicated upon a position I call hedonic cognitivism. Pleasure can be false, Plato argues, because our pleasures are more than brute surges of affect. Like beliefs, pleasures are psychologically complex cognitive attitudes with representational content in virtue of which they can be true or false.

More precisely, I argue that Socrates develops and finetunes this position in a dialectical back and forth with Protarchus who believes, in sharp contrast, that pleasure is immune to error. When Socrates broaches the suggestion that (anticipatory) pleasures can be false, Protarchus pushes back and claims that all pleasures are true—arguably because he believes that pleasures belong to the phenomenal realm to which we have privileged and infallible access. In response, Socrates presents his First Hedonic Cognitivism Argument (37a1–e7) which argues that, like belief or judgment (δόξα), pleasure has content in virtue of which it can be true or false: true if its content gets things right, false if its content gets things wrong and misrepresents some way the world really is.

When Protarchus resists this idea, again suggesting that pleasure is immune to error, Socrates surprisingly enough weakens his theory and suggests that pleasures are often accompanied by, associated with, or predicated on a false belief. In this case, however, as Protarchus is quick to point out, it is the *belief* that is false, not the pleasure itself—the latter remains immune to error because pleasures are 'just what they are.'

In a next move, Socrates resuscitates his earlier suggestion and develops his Second Hedonic Cognitivism Argument (38b6–41a4) which succeeds at convincing his interlocutor that there are such things as false pleasures ('ridiculous imitations of true pleasures (μεμιμημέναι μέντοι τὰς ἀληθεῖς ἐπὶ τὰ γελοιότερα, 40c5).') This bit of text, I argue, is best understood as an attempt to flesh out what the First Hedonic Cognitivism Argument had merely stipulated and left

unexplained. Drawing on an elaborate metaphor of the human psyche—and mainly focusing on future-oriented, anticipatory pleasures in whose case it is clear that representational elements play a central role—Socrates convinces Protarchus that pleasures are more than mere bits of experience. They have content because they are constituted by representational or cognitive elements (φαντάσματα based on δόξαι) which represent some state of the world. Since any representation can misfire, it follows that pleasures have semantic value: they can be true (if they represent the world correctly) or false (if they misrepresent the world).

With this discussion in place, I seek to see more about the notion of falsity the argument is operating with. Even if we grant Socrates that a pleasure can be false thanks to its false content, what is it that gets misrepresented by such false pleasure? According to a dichotomy currently dominating the literature, we have to choose between a descriptive or an evaluative reading: on the descriptive or factual interpretation, a pleasure taken in some descriptive state of affairs *p* is false if *p* is not the case; on the evaluative or ethical reading, by contrast, a pleasure taken in *p* is false because one considers *p* to be *F* (good or otherwise positively evaluatively charged) although *p* is *not F*.

I resist this interpretive dichotomy for a variety of reasons. No matter whether we construe a pleasure's falsity factually or evaluatively, I argue that a false pleasure is always a matter of misrepresentation: a false pleasure is out of touch with some way the world really is. Experiencing a false pleasure is always a matter, then, of being out of contact with reality. The subject of a false or deceptive pleasure lives in what Iris Murdoch aptly calls a 'private dream world.' What the interpretive dichotomy also misses, I argue, is that any pleasure necessarily involves a factual belief that picks out an object or state of affairs in the world and an evaluative belief—an

appraisal or construal, as psychologists call it—that ascribes positive value to it. Without these two beliefs, a pleasure cannot get off the ground. That being the case, I argue, the interpretive dichotomy turns out to be a false dichotomy.

With this examination in place, I zoom out again and point out that Plato's theorizing in the Fallibilism Argument is not just a perfect manifestation of one of the central findings of the *Philebus*—the idea that cognizance plays a necessary role in any aspect of a life well lived, including pleasure—it also makes trouble for the unmitigated hedonism of Protarchus and Philebus in a variety of ways. Like Nozick's experience machine and the earlier jelly fish *elenchus*, the possibility of false pleasure is meant to trigger the intuition that we care about other things besides pleasure. More precisely, we do not just want to experience pleasure, we want our pleasures to get things right. If that is the case, though, hedonism fails as a theory of the good and pleasure is not sufficient for the good life.

0.4. Problems with the Life of Pleasure: The Γένεσις Argument in Plato's *Philebus* (53c4–55a12)

In the *Philebus*—right after Socrates's examination of the different types of false pleasure—Socrates offers the Γένεσις Argument. This argument moves in three steps: given the fact that pleasure is a γένεσις (a going-on or process of becoming, to give an awkward translation of this tricky phrase) and given the fact that all γενέσεις lack value (in some sense which is to be determined), it follows that pleasure lacks value.

This argument has been variously ignored, criticized vehemently, and found confusing. More recently, scholars have sought to develop more charitable interpretations which tone down

the central claims of the argument—usually because they take a stricter reading to clash with the more conciliatory tone of the *Philebus* at large and its central project of harmonizing extreme, polarized ways of thinking about the value of pleasure. One type of reading suggests that the argument merely ascribes value to a limited class of pleasure (e.g. bodily pleasure) while a different but roughly similar type of reading suggests that the argument ascribes limited or qualified value (e.g. conditional value) to *all* pleasures.

In this chapter, I offer a different interpretation and suggest that the Γένεσις Argument does not concern itself with the goodness of individual, particular episodes of pleasure. Instead, or so I argue, it targets the identification of pleasure as the good around which we ought to organize our lives. Having clarified why Plato treats pleasure as a γένεσις—pleasure counts as a 'becoming' because it is a registered process of return to some previously disrupted natural state of homeostasis that enters conscious awareness—I closely examine the Γένεσις Argument itself.

As I understand it, the argument is composed of two sub-arguments: the Argument From Finality and the Argument From A Life Not Worth Living. Against the backdrop of a proto-Aristotelian axiological framework, the Argument From Finality suggests that, as a γένεσις aiming for some further goal (the stable state in need of repair), pleasure cannot be the good—the good being the overall, completely final or end-like (τέλεος), completely sufficient (ἱκανός), completely choiceworthy (αἱρετός) aim of our actions.

The Argument From A Life Not Worth Living equally suggests that hedonism is a deeply flawed idea. Those who locate pleasure in the centre of their agency are forced to live irrational and even ridiculous lives: their commitments are contradictory, they are forced to pursue and value what they emphatically do not care about (pain), and they can never lay their hands on the thing they aim for. Such a

life does not make any sense, then, and is not worth living and choosing—even though, tragically enough, this predicament cannot be appreciated for what it is from an inside, first-person perspective.

In addition to suffering from a failure in self-knowledge—the pleasure-seeker thinks he is living a worthwhile life although he is not—the hedonistic agent fails to understand what pleasure *is* and what its underlying mechanics are. As a consequence, the pleasure-seeker is mistaken about what he is pursuing (or *thinks* he is pursuing). That is to say, the thing around which he weaves the fabric of his life is ontologically derivative and rests on trouble and imperfection. What is more, it is only once we understand the deeper nature of pleasure as a γένεσις, Plato holds, that we can understand that the pursuit of pleasure is internally inconsistent or self-contradictory, self-sabotaging, and hampered by an insatiability problem.[32]

Instead of being an 'unsatisfactory little argument,'[33] then, or a shoddy and hasty piece of reasoning that, 'in desperation, [Plato] inserted badly in the *Philebus*,'[34] I conclude that the Γένεσις Argument is a cogent bit of argumentation worth taking seriously. Indeed, some of the central ideas of Plato's view on the nature and value of pleasure can be found in concentrated and distilled form in this bit of argumentation. Most notably, we find Plato suggesting that we should get clear on what pleasure is before determining its value and its place in the good life. The argument also suggests that an adequate

[32] This reading suggests that the *Philebus* sheds light on the dispute between Eudoxus and Speussipus, two of Plato's pupils. Against Speussipus, and in favour of Eudoxus and other proponents of pleasure, the *Philebus* argues that pleasures really exist, that some pleasures are in fact worth having, and that a life without pleasure and other affective experiences is not worth living. However, against Eudoxus, and in favour of Speussipus and other critics of pleasure, it also suggests that pleasure cannot be the over-arching good our lives as a whole are aimed at reaching.

[33] Guthrie (1975: 228).

[34] Gosling (1975: 220).

understanding of the nature of pleasure in combination with a solid grasp of the formal features of a good life are going to tell against hedonism. And, finally, the argument shows that most (implicit or explicit) hedonists are less well off, both hedonically and prudentially speaking, than they take themselves to be.