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

At *Philebus* 53c4–55a12—right after the elaborate investigation into the nature and varieties of pleasure—Plato's Socrates puts forward an argument in which he identifies pleasure as a 'becoming' or 'going-on' (γένεσις) rather than a 'being' (οὐσία). He then uses this piece of information about pleasure's allegedly inferior nature to somehow bar it from having value or being good.

This Γένεσις Argument, as I will call it, must be an essential piece of argumentation in the overall economy of the *Philebus*, then, given its sweeping conclusion, its striking consequences for the dialogue's central question of what makes someone's life go best, and its outright dismissal of the hedonism propagated by Socrates's interlocutors, Philebus and Protarchus.[344] What is more, it is the only place in the dialogues where Plato puts one of the guiding concepts of his thinking—the stark opposition between becoming and being—to ethical rather than epistemological use and it must also be the claim Aristotle is wrestling with in the *Nicomachean Ethics* when he emphatically rejects the idea that pleasure is a γένεσις and defines it as an activity or activation (ἐνέργεια) instead.[345]

We have ample reason, then, to try and come to grips with the Γένεσις Argument . Surprisingly, though, the argument has received little in the way of detailed, let alone constructive attention. Dismissive reactions come in roughly two forms. Plato's readers either choose simply not to pay any serious attention to the argument or they discard it as an awkwardly situated, poorly developed, philosophically hampered afterthought, which not only clashes with the rest of the dialogue, but also reeks of a Platonic bias against pleasure in favour of the lofty yet deeply obscure domain of being.[346]

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[344] See e.g. 11b4–6, 60a7–b1, and 66d7–8. References throughout this chapter are to the *Philebus*, unless otherwise noted. Throughout this chapter, my references are to the *Philebus* (unless otherwise noted), my translations are loosely based on Frede (1993), and I go from the Greek text edited by Burnet (1901).

[345] See e.g. van Riel (2000) for a discussion of Aristotle's critical response to Plato's restorative theory of pleasure.

Those, in contrast, who feel we should not downplay or jettison the argument so readily—a minority of voices in what is already a small amount of literature—generally try to soften the argument's sweeping and seemingly disharmonious conclusion by developing readings according to which the argument merely denies value to a limited class of pleasures or on which it does indeed deny value to *all* pleasures, albeit in a qualified way.[347]

The central aim of this chapter is to carve out and defend another way of reading the argument. Let me at the outset advertise two essential features of my interpretation. To begin, my central contention is that the Γένεσις Argument is not about the lack of goodness of individual and particular episodes of pleasure, as most readers have assumed. Instead, I argue, the argument targets the identification of pleasure as the (ultimate, highest) good (τὸ ἀγαθόν/τἀγαθόν), around which we ought to orient, organize, and structure our lives by putting pleasure at the centre of our agency.[348] Put succinctly, Plato aims to show that—due to its unstable and dependent nature as a γένεσις controlled by an οὐσία—pleasure cannot be the good our life as a whole is aimed at reaching.

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[346] The argument is not discussed in any detail by e.g. Carone (2000) (for reasons I will address below), Carpenter (2010) (who nevertheless gives a valuable analysis of what Plato is driving at by calling pleasure a γένεσις), Irwin (1995), Gosling and Taylor (1982), and Wolfsdorf (2013-b). Gosling (1975) and Guthrie (1978), to give two authoritative examples, are highly critical.

[347] For limiting readings, see e.g. Fletcher (2014: 119–20 and 134–35), Fletcher 2017: 202n64), and Taylor (1926: 427–29). Later in her paper, having first pressed a skeptical reading, Carone (2000: 266–70) offers a limiting reading as well. Her tactic to make sense of the vexed γένεσις passage must be two-pronged, then, going something like this: Socrates does not himself appropriate the γένεσις theory that is expounded by other people—but even if he did, hypothetically speaking, the argument would only deny value to a limited class of pleasures. For qualifying readings, see e.g. Aufderheide (2013), Evans (2008-b), Frede (1993: 65), Frede (1997: 306–18), and Russell (2005: 196–99).

Additionally, and this brings me to the second crucial feature of my interpretation, I will suggest that the Γένεσις Argument contains two independent yet closely related sub-arguments I will call the Argument From Finality and the Argument From A Life Not Worth Living. Although both arguments establish that pleasure fails to be the good, they slightly differ in the way in which they arrive at this conclusion. the Argument From Finality (*Philebus* 54c6–d8) offers us an abstract, deductive argument—from the armchair, if you will—purely rooted in metaphysical considerations pertaining to pleasure's inferior ontological status. It suggests that pleasure—as a γένεσις happening for the sake and on account of an οὐσία—is not end-like or final enough to be the good.

An essential feature of the Argument From A Life Not Worth Living (54e1–55a12), in contrast, lies in the fact that it closely examines the messy details of the lives of those who take pleasure as the good and turn it into the overarching, central end their lives are aiming for. Such people necessarily get tangled up in a web of ἀλογία (absurdity, inconsistency, irrationality), Socrates claims, and this means—at least when looking at their life from a clear-headed, well-informed, rational perspective—that there must be something wrong with the premise shaping their way of life, that is to say, that pleasure, again, fails to be the good.

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[348] Taking the argument as addressing pleasure as the overarching good seems to find its first formulation in the ancient (Neo-)Platonist Damascius's *Lectures on the* Philebus 214 and 223–24. More recently, Meinwald (2008: 490) and Delcomminette (2006: 493–505) have understood the passage along similar lines, although the Meinwald's interpretation is rather piecemeal, whereas the one put forward by Delcomminette, while more elaborate, is primarily based on a metaphysical problematization of pleasure as the object of desire and, as such, markedly different from the one I will be developing here. For a refreshing, more general (re-)appreciation of the *Philebus* as a dialogue addressing the good and the good human life, see Vogt (2017: 13–40).

This chapter is organized as follows. In section 1, I introduce the Γένεσις Argument. I explain why Plato identifies pleasure as a γένεσις, unpack this identification, and discuss some recent interpretations. In section 2, I present and defend my own reading, according to which the Γένεσις Argument is designed to establish that pleasure cannot be the good in the centre of our agency and at the core of our way of life: it primarily targets the *life* of pleasure, we might say. In section 3, having briefly examined the conception of the good operative in the *Philebus* (section 3.1), I flesh out this reading and explain how the Γένεσις Argument arrives at the conclusion that pleasure cannot be the good. To do so, I distinguish the Sub-Argument From Finality and the Sub-Argument From A Life Not Worth Living and analyse both carefully (in sections 3.2 and 3.3, respectively). Finally, in section 4, I offer some concluding observations about the philosophical significance of the Γένεσις Argument and situate it in Plato's later thinking about pleasure.

1. Elucidating the Γένεσις Argument

Socrates launches the argument by suggesting that 'pleasure is always a γένεσις and that there is no οὐσία at all of pleasure (ἀεὶ γένεσίς ἐστιν, οὐσία δὲ οὐκ ἔστι τὸ παράπαν ἡδονῆς, 53c5).'[349] When asked to explicate this arcane suggestion, he divides reality into the domain of οὐσία and the domain of γένεσις and then ascribes to them the following features. Whereas an οὐσία (1) exists ‘itself according to itself (αὐτὸ καθ’ αὑτό, 53d3),’ (2) is ‘of supreme worth (σεμνότατον … πεφυκός, 53d6),’ and (3) exists on account or for the sake of (ἕνεκα/χάριν) itself (53e5–7 and 54a7–8), a γένεσις is (1) ‘desiring or aiming for something else (ἐφιέμενον ἄλλου, 53d4),’ (2) ‘inferior (to an οὐσία) (ἐλλιπὲς ἐκείνου, 53d6–7),’ and (3) merely existing or occurring on account or for the sake of (ἕνεκα/χάριν) an οὐσία (53e5–7 and 54a7–8).

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[349] As regards the Γένεσις Argument , note that I am circumventing an interpretative hurdle. Some commentators—most notably Carone (2000: 264–65)—think we should take the argument 'with a pinch of salt': Socrates allegedly just reports the ideas of

The idea at play must be something like this.[350] Whereas an οὐσία is, so to speak, able to stand on its own two feet, a γένεσις depends on an οὐσία for its existence, its identity, and its value. The guiding concept is the notion of *stability*: in sharp contrast to γενέσεις, which need οὐσίαι to exist, to be what they are, and to have value, οὐσίαι rest stably in themselves and do not need anything external to bring about their existence, to give them their distinct identity, and to render them valuable.

Although Socrates boldly takes it for granted that pleasure is a γένεσις and also seems to have a firm handle on the ramifications of this claim, we might wonder *why* this is the case and *what* the

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‘subtle thinkers or ‘smart guys (κομψοὶ τινες)’ (53c6) and casts the argument in a hypothetical, conditional form by using the connective εἴπερ. He is just floating an idea, then, Carone claims, without committing himself to the truth of this idea. However, as Carpenter (2010: 73n2) and Evans (2008-b: 125–26ns10–12) convincingly show, there is good reason to be critical of Carone’s reading: the particle εἴπερ often has causal rather than hypothetical force (especially when used in deductive arguments like the Γένεσις Argument or at 44a9), Socrates expresses immense gratitude to the ‘subtle thinkers’ and slowly but surely even takes ownership of their ideas, and, most importantly, there is strong circumstantial evidence for ascribing a γένεσις theory of pleasure to Plato—as we will shortly see.

[350] I am roughly following Carpenter (2010) here.

identification entails. Scholars almost unanimously agree that Plato identifies pleasure as a γένεσις because he thinks pleasure is intimately bound up with the restoration of a disintegrated equilibrium or harmony.[351] This is how Socrates summarized the restorative model of pleasure and pain earlier in the *Philebus*:

> [T4.1] When we find the harmony in living creatures disrupted, there will at the same time be a disintegration of their nature and a rise of pain (λύσιν τῆς φύσεως καὶ γένεσιν ἀλγηδόνων ... γίγνεσθαι). But if the harmony is regained and the former nature restored, . . . pleasure occurs (ἁρμοττομένης τε καὶ εἰς τὴν αὑτῆς φύσιν ἀπιούσης ἡδονὴν γίγνεσθαι). Every time the natural combination of limit and unlimitedness that forms living organisms . . . is destroyed, this destruction is pain (τὴν φθορὰν λύπην εἶναι), while the return towards the organism's own nature, this restoration, is pleasure (τὴν εἰς τὴν αὑτῶν οὐσίαν ὁδόν, ταύτην . . . τὴν ἀναχώρησιν . . . ἡδονήν). (31d4–32b4)

Note that pleasure's evil twin, pain, is referred to as a γένεσις connected with the disintegration of the living creature's nature, while pleasure is described as a return to the creature's own οὐσία and an instance of becoming (γίγνεσθαι). As the complex metaphysics developed earlier in the *Philebus* suggests, these οὐσίαι figuring centrally in our pleasures must be the harmonious and equilibrious mixtures (μεικτά) of limit (πέρας) and unlimitedness (ἄπειρον) that are constitutive of human nature, such as health and integrity, beauty, strength, harmony, and other good characteristics.[352] That the οὐσίαι involved in pleasure are constitutive of human nature is corroborated by the fact that Plato frequently analyses pleasure and pain in terms of the disintegration and restoration of an organism's *nature* (φύσις),[353] a word that is virtually synonymous with οὐσία in Ancient Greek.

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[351] See e.g. Carpenter (2010: 13–14 and 18–19), Delcomminette (2006: 497–99), Evans (2008-b: 129–30), Frede (1992: 454); (1993: lv), Frede (1997: 306, 314, and 316–18), Gosling (1975: 220–21), and Hackforth (1945: 107).

[352] See e.g. 25b5–26d10, 31c11, and 65a1–5 and compare the expressions γένεσιν εἰς οὐσίαν (26d8) and γεγενημένην οὐσίαν (27b8–9). As Delcomminette (2006: 496) concludes: 'Les membres du troisième genre doivent donc être identifiés à des *ousiai*,

When we stray from such a natural, harmonious, and balanced οὐσία to a disbalanced, inharmonious, and unnatural state of depletion, disintegration, disruption, or destruction and then return to our natural state again during processes of repair, restoration, or replenishment—Plato is frustratingly but perhaps deliberately loose in his terminology—we psychologically experience this return to our baseline state as a pleasure.

Put differently, pleasure consists in the restorative process through which a state of disintegration makes place for a natural state of harmony and equilibrium, provided—as Socrates later adds in an important rider (e.g. at 43b2)—that this restorative process is registered through αἴσθησις (perception or sensation).[354] In still other

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plutôt qu'aux *geneseis* qui y mènent.' This implies that the οὐσίαι restored by γενέσεις are mixtures of unlimitedness and limit, while pleasures themselves—the γενέσεις—typically belong in the unlimited class.

[353] E.g. at 31d5 and 32a6–8.

[354] Recently, some scholars—most notably Fletcher (2014)—have nevertheless resuscitated Gosling and Taylor's suggestion (1982: 132) that 'in the *Philebus* Plato has no general formula to encapsulate the nature of pleasure.' They claim, in other words, that the restoration model—and with it the γένεσις label—does not apply to *all* pleasures. I obviously cannot do full justice to this difficult interpretive issue here, let alone settle it. Let me nevertheless provide two strong considerations in favour of ascribing a wide scope, all-pleasure-encompassing restoration model to Plato. Most importantly, Socrates uses restoration language when he analyses the pure sensory pleasures of sound, smell, and sight and the pure cognitive pleasures of learning: the former are described as 'the perceived *replenishments* of painless and unperceived lacks (τὰς ἐνδείας ἀναισθήτους ἔχοντα καὶ ἀλύπους τὰς πληρώσεις αἰσθητὰς καὶ ἡδείας)' (51b5–6, emphasis added) and the latter are said to be experienced by those who learn things by '*filling themselves* with knowledge (μαθημάτων πληρωθεῖσιν)'

words, pleasure is a γένεσις—the coming to be of a natural, harmonious, and equilibrious state of being—entering our conscious awareness.[355] This explains, then, why Socrates opens the Γένεσις Argument with a blanket identification of pleasure as a γένεσις rather than an οὐσία: according to the restoration model of pleasure, essentially and deep down, all pleasures are γενέσεις.[356]

This identification has multiple important ramifications. At the centre of Socrates's conceptual analysis lies the idea that every γένεσις 'necessarily (ἐξ ἀνάγκης, 54c7)' takes place for the sake of (ἕνεκα/χάριν) an οὐσία, as Socrates repeatedly and emphatically stresses throughout the argument. The fact that Socrates illustrates this

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(52a5, emphasis added). Apart from this seemingly decisive piece of textual evidence, we can take issue with one of the main considerations often put forward for narrowing the application of the restoration model down to a limited group of pleasures. Fletcher (2014: 119–20 and 134–35), for instance, sees the Γένεσις Argument as strong evidence for a narrow scope reading of Plato's restoration model: because some pleasures are called good in the final ranking and because the Γένεσις Argument seems to conclude that pleasures are *not* good, the Γένεσις Argument —along with the restoration model—cannot apply to the pleasures mentioned in the final ranking, on the reasonable assumption that Plato is not contradicting himself within one and the same dialogue. This is too quick, though. If the Γένεσις Argument aims to establish that pleasure cannot be *the* good, as I will argue below, the contradiction vanishes: some pleasures can be *good*, despite being γενέσεις, although, as a γένεσις, pleasure cannot be *the* good our life as a whole is aimed at.

[355] Cf. Aristotle's summary of Plato's take on pleasure in the *Nicomachean Ethics*: 'every pleasure is a registered/conscious/perceived γένεσις toward (the organism's) nature (πᾶσα ἡδονὴ γένεσίς ἐστιν εἰς φύσιν αἰσθητή)' (1152b13).

[356] We might wonder with Hackforth (1945: 105) why Socrates—who has just developed a fine-grained typology of pleasure—suddenly zooms out again and treats pleasure as a unity. Delcomminette (2006: 493) offers a satisfying explanation of this surprising move, based on the nature of Socrates's 'divine method': '[I]l est tout à fait normal que Socrate en revienne au plaisir en général au terme de son analyse: . . . la voie inverse de la méthode divine implique que l'unité du genre ne peut être pleinement déterminée qu'une fois la division en espèces accomplie.'

relation between the two by means of the relation between a lover and his beloved (53d9–10) implies that the relation also allows for a slightly looser construal. Although lovers obviously do not exist *for the sake of* what they love, we might nevertheless describe them as existing *thanks to* what they love, in the sense that to a large degree they depend on it.[357]

This dependency manifests itself in various ways. Most importantly, a γένεσις owes its existence to the superordinate οὐσία: were it not for the disintegrated οὐσία waiting to be restored, there would be no such thing as pleasure in the first place.[358] In this sense, pleasure—the γένεσις—quite literally occurs for the sake of (creating) the οὐσία. This picture entails, furthermore, that pleasure is intimately, if not inextricably bound up with the negative state of being at a distance from the harmony and equilibrium it is trying to restore—a negative state that typically manifests itself, psychologically, as need, lack, desire, or even *pain*.

It also means that pleasures are slippery and episodic: a pleasure dwindles and evaporates once it succeeds in re-establishing the disintegrated οὐσία.[359] (Paradoxically, though, and unlike pain, pleasure is nevertheless attracted to its very own annihilation,[360] like a moth attracted to a light source that kills it.) Lastly, labelling pleasure as a γένεσις taking place for the sake of an οὐσία is tantamount to claiming that the γένεσις derives its value from the value of the οὐσία it is bringing about, in the same way in which the process of building a ship—to follow Socrates's other example (54b1–4)—derives its value from the value of the ship one is trying to create.

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[357] This makes better sense in the Greek, where the expression used to capture this relation between some *x* and some *y* (ἕνεκα/χάριν) is ambiguous: it can both mean 'for the sake of' (*x* occurs *in order to* bring about *y*) or 'on account of'/'thanks to' (*y* *explains* or *justifies* *x*).

[358] The relation between the οὐσία and the γένεσις might seem bidirectional. To be sure, in Socrates's example, the οὐσία (the ship) also owes its existence to the γένεσις (the shipbuilding) and not just the other way around. Things are different, though, in the case of pleasure: pleasure does not create the οὐσία from scratch but merely *re*creates it, bringing it *back* into existence.

[359] As Alexander Mourelatos has pointed out to me, this is confirmed on linguistic grounds by the fact that the verb ἥδεσθαι does not have a known perfect tense. See Owen (1971–172: 149–150) for a similar observation.

With this ontological machinery in place, Socrates offers a compressed argument against the ascription of value or goodness to pleasure (54c6–d8). Call this argument the Argument From Finality. The argument goes something like this. It starts by observing that because pleasure is a γένεσις, it necessarily comes to be for the sake of an οὐσία (54c6–7). We are then given the following axiological principle to assess whether something is good: what comes to be for the sake of something else belongs in 'another class (than that of the good) (ἄλλην μοῖραν, 54c11),' while that for the sake of which something else comes to be is placed 'in the class of the good (ἐν τῇ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ μοίρᾳ, 54c10).' It follows, given these premises, that pleasure does not belong in the class of the good (54d1–3).

This is a sweeping and rather puzzling conclusion, especially in light of the fact that there is ample reason for reading the *Philebus* as a dialogue in which Plato offers us a more nuanced and more welcoming stance toward pleasure and its possible role in the good life. Socrates and Protarchus almost immediately agree, for instance, that the good life will be a mixed life in which both pleasure and cognition have their place and they even dismiss a life without pleasure (yet filled with reasoning) as not worth living for a human being. In addition, at 13b1, it is admitted that pleasure can be good and at other places in the dialogue this is very strongly implied.[361] Finally, Socrates sharply distances himself from 'Philebus's enemies' (44b6), the 'grumpy' (δυσχερεῖς) (46a5) and hard-headed ascetics who not only harbor an 'inordinate hatred' (44c7) of pleasure but even go so far as to deny its very existence (44b9–10).[362]

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[360] I borrow this astute and important observation from Delcomminette (2006: 499) who writes: 'à la différence de la peine, [le plaisir] tend neánmoins vers cet état—c'est-à-dire, paradoxalement, vers sa propre annihilation.'

Somewhat confusingly, though, the Γένεσις Argument seems to arrive at precisely the opposite conclusion, according to which no pleasure deserves to be called good.[363] Readers of the *Philebus* have an interpretive problem on their hands, then, the problem of squaring these seemingly diametrically opposed lines of thought regarding pleasure's alleged (lack of) value that we find scattered throughout the dialogue. Call this the inconsistency problem.[364]

The literature contains, roughly, three ways of dealing with the inconsistency problem. Some scholars throw their hands up and propose we ignore or jettison the Γένεσις Argument , usually justifying this extreme measure by complaining about the disappointing quality of the argument or by taking it as a mere hypothesis Socrates is just toying with for the sheer fun of it.[365] Others have advanced less radical and forbidding ways of dealing with the tension, mainly by claiming that the Γένεσις Argument merely denies value to a *limited* class of pleasures or by claiming that it denies value to all pleasures but only in a *qualified* way. Call these readings *limiting* and *qualifying* readings, respectively.

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[361] E.g. at 21a8–22b9, 28a1–3, 50e5–53c3, 61d1–64b9, and 66c4–7.

[362] I thank Katja Vogt for making me more sensitive to the crucial importance of this bit of text for our appreciation of the fact that the *Philebus* is decidedly milder than other dialogues when it comes to the value of pleasure.

[363] This influential reading goes back to Hackforth (1945: 106).

[364] See Aufderheide (2013) who brings this problem into focus and puts forward a solution with which I will engage below.

[365] See e.g. Carone (2000: 264–65). Likewise, Gosling (1975: 220) complains that 'one gets the impression that Plato had this piece to hand, was unwilling to abandon it, could not blend it in smoothly, so in desperation inserted it badly at this point,' and Guthrie (1978: 228) rapidly dismisses it as 'an unsatisfactory little argument, soon to be refuted by Aristotle.'

If we think we should strive to read Plato as charitably as possible, the limiting and qualifying readings are obviously preferable to the dismissive readings. And if we care about textual support, as we should, the qualifying readings seem preferable to the limiting readings. As I explained earlier, there is no strong indication in the text that a certain class of pleasures falls outside Socrates's blanket identification of pleasure as a restorative process, and the same goes, even more straightforwardly, for Socrates's blanket identification of pleasure as a γένεσις. To repeat: all pleasures consist in a γένεσις or restoration of a disintegrated (bodily or psychological) balance and harmony, provided that this restorative process registers sensorily and passes the threshold of our conscious awareness.

This leaves us with the qualifying readings. When Socrates intimates elsewhere in the dialogue that pleasure can be good, on the qualifying readings he actually means that pleasure can be good *in some qualified sense*. Likewise, when he denies pleasure's goodness in the Γένεσις Argument, he actually means that pleasure fails to be *unqualifiedly good*. Pleasures are not *really* good, then, although they can be, say, conditionally good, dependently good, derivatively good, extrinsically good, imperfectly good, instrumentally good, not good in their own right but good in some other way, remedially good, subsidiarily good, therapeutically good, or whatever other kind of qualification of the good one might come up with.[366]

To see more exactly how such qualifying readings play out, let us examine a recent paper by Joachim Aufderheide that arguably contains the most developed and most sustained version of this type of interpretation. In an attempt to find his way around the inconsistency problem, Aufderheide begins by distinguishing three ways for something to be good. A thing can be good in its own right by either being (1) independently good or (2) dependently good, or a thing can (merely) be (3) derivatively good (by standing in a certain relation to dependent goods). A thing is independently good if, and only if, its goodness is in no way related to anything else (this only holds for the good itself); a thing is dependently good if it shares in what is independently good; and a thing is derivatively good if it stands in a certain relation to a dependent good.[367]

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[366] I have taken these different construals of pleasure's alleged qualified goodness from a variety of sources collected in note 344.

Aufderheide subsequently uses this distinction to argue that, as a γένεσις, every pleasure fails to be good in its own right, although a pleasure might still be dependently good—and thereby good in its own right—with respect to its objects, as Socrates seems to claim outside the Γένεσις Argument . There are, in other words, different ways to determine an entity's value. One way would be to consider the entity's nature or status as either a γένεσις or an οὐσία; another way would be to consider the entity's objects and the share these have in true goodness due to their share in the properties Plato takes to be the hallmarks of the good (beauty, measure, and truth).

A craft like medicine, for instance, may fail to be good in its own right and merely be derivatively good insofar as it takes place for the sake of something else (healing people), while simultaneously it may be dependently good—and hence good in its own right—insofar as it has a share in (scientific) truth. Likewise, pleasures may fail to be good in their own right and merely be derivatively good insofar as they are γενέσεις, while they may at the same time be dependently good—and thereby good in their own right—in virtue of having, say, beautiful objects.

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[367] Aufderheide (2013: 819–20).

What Aufderheide is suggesting, then, is that we should unpack the argument's conclusion that pleasure does not belong in the class of the good as follows: insofar as pleasure is a γένεσις, pleasure is not good in its own right.[368] Crucially, though, this does not mean that a pleasure cannot at the very same time be dependently good and hence good in its own right—as Socrates suggests elsewhere in the dialogue—when evaluated from the perspective of the pleasure's relation with independent goodness through mediating true, beautiful, and/or measured objects.

Before proceeding, let me distinguish three important features of qualifying readings such as Aufderheide's. To begin, they are grounded in sharp distinctions in goodness or value and these interpretations only get off the ground by reading such distinctions into the text of the Γένεσις Argument. Qualifying readings, additionally, take the Γένεσις Argument to be mainly designed to expose the lack of value of *individual* and *particular* instances or episodes of pleasure.

Finally, qualifying readings—especially the one proposed by Aufderheide—typically understand the Γένεσις Argument as an abstract exercise in metaphysics, based solely on ontological considerations pertaining to an entity's nature that are inherently sufficient to bar the entity from having value or being good. They take Plato to be engaged in a project of ethicizing metaphysics or metaphysicizing ethics, as it were, in the sense that he allegedly derives an entity's value solely from its metaphysical nature.[369] Indeed, as Aufderheide himself writes, 'the metaphysical point paves the way for the normative one.'[370]

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[368] Aufderheide (2013: 820 and 835).

[369] Thanks to Agnes Callard for this way of framing the point and for giving me a better handle on what must be driving these different types of interpretation.

[370] Aufderheide (2013: 821).

This also explains why Aufderheide, tellingly enough, ignores the passage immediately following the Argument From Finality in which Socrates firmly dismisses the lives of pleasure-seekers as ἀλογία-ridden and plainly not worth living: he seemingly does not consider this passage an integral and dialectically important part of the Γένεσις Argument as a whole.

2. The Γένεσις Argument and the Life of Pleasure

Although qualifying readings successfully skirt the inconsistency problem by drawing on different construals of the possible goodness of pleasure, I generally disagree with their underlying assumptions and develop an alternative reading in this section. Instead of targeting the goodness of individual, particular instances of pleasure and instead of operating purely on the basis of abstract metaphysical considerations, I contend that the argument concerns itself primarily with the concrete, indeed messy, lives of those who identify pleasure—a γένεσις—as the good (τὸ ἀγαθόν or τἀγαθόν) or whatever we have most reason to do in our lives.

These pleasure-seekers claim that pleasure should lie at the very centre of our way of life and be the one and only final end of our desires, practical deliberation, choices, and actions. The thing, that is, around which we should orient, fashion, and organize our lives in the expectation that doing so will make them go best and turn them into good lives worth living. The argument is about the value of a *life*, then, and it operates largely by examining the absurdity, irrationality, or inconsistency of a life in which pleasure is pursued as if it were the highest, ultimate, one and only good.

This interpretation of the argument—this 'way of life reading,' as we might call it—has many things going for it. It gives us an exegetically attractive and philosophically powerful reading of the passage, it tackles the inconsistency problem identified above, and it is more firmly rooted in the text than the qualifying readings currently dominating the literature. Most importantly, reading the argument as an argument about the quality of a life lived as if pleasure were the good jibes nicely with the rest of the *Philebus* and the character of Platonic and ancient ethics in general. For as Julia Annas has convincingly shown, 'the entry point for ancient ethical reflection is consideration of one's life as a whole' and its fundamental question is 'what should my life be like?'[371]

Readers nevertheless tend to forget that, despite its extensive foray into heady metaphysical doctrines about the ultimate structure of reality and its nitty-gritty analysis of the nature and varieties of pleasure, the *Philebus* is first and foremost a dialogue about precisely this question—the question regarding the good, happiness or the good life (εὐδαιμονία), or what one's life as a whole should be like.[372] As Socrates claims in the opening gambits of the dialogue, his quest for the good is an investigation into the 'state and condition of the soul … that can give all human beings a happy life (ἕξιν ψυχῆς καὶ διάθεσιν . . . τὴν δυναμένην ἀνθρώποις πᾶσι τὸν βίον εὐδαίμονα παρέχειν)' (11d4–6).'

This investigation, in its turn, is nothing but an examination of 'the most loveable or desirable life (τὸν ἀγαπητότατον βίον, 61e7–8)', 'our well-being or living well (τὸ ζῆν ἡμῖν εὖ, 67b4)', or 'the good and choiceworthy life (ὁ βίος αἱρετὸς ἅμα καὶ ἀγαθός, 22d6–7)', to use one of Socrates's multiple expressions to pick out the good.[373] For Plato, then, the questions 'what is the good?,' 'what is happiness?,' 'how should I live?,' and 'what should my life be like?' are virtually synonymous, and this is why he uses them interchangeably throughout the *Philebus*.[374]

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[371] Annas (1993: 329 and 27). See also Annas (2008), Cooper (2012), Hadot (2002), Parry (2014), Price (2017), and Vogt (2017).

[372] See e.g. Frede (1999-b) and Frede (2010) for an argument to the effect that the *Philebus* is primarily a dialogue about εὐδαιμονία. Equally, Vogt (2010) and (2017: 13–40) argues that the *Philebus* is targeting questions concerning the good and the good life.

The intimate connection between the good and the life we live is most present in the trial-of-lives thought experiment found at the beginning of the dialogue (20e1–22c4)—a passage that is strikingly similar to the Γένεσις Argument , as some commentators have recently observed.[375] There, Socrates shifts nonchalantly, and without justification, from questions about the good—whether it is pleasure or cognition—to questions about the lives we would, or would not, consider worth living. Having just realized in a flash of insight that, perhaps, the good is neither pleasure nor cognition but a mixture of the two, Socrates hopes to corroborate this hunch by examining two different hypothetical ways of life—'the *life* of pleasure and the *life* of thought (τόν ἡδονῆς καὶ τὸν φϱονήσεως βίον, 20e1–2, emphasis added)—in which both conceptualizations of the good are fully and maximally realized. Positing x as the good means, in other words, that one should be willing to live a life filled with that x—otherwise x cannot be the good.[376]

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[373] Additionally, Socrates speaks of 'the most beneficial thing there is (ὠφελιμώτατον ἁπάντων)' (11c1–2), 'the best of all human possessions (τῶν ἀνθϱωπίνων κτημάτων ἄϱιστον)' (19c6), 'what is really good for us (τὸ ὄντως ἡμῖν ἀγαθόν)' (21a1–2), 'the completely good (τὸ παντάπασιν ἀγαθὸν)' (61a1–2), 'the best (τοῦ ἀϱίστου)' (65b1), the 'first possession (κτῆμα … πϱῶτον)' (66a5–6), and 'the good itself (τἀγαθόν γε αὐτὸ)' (67a6).

[374] See e.g. Annas (1993), Annas (2008), Irwin (1995: 52–55), and Vlastos (1991: 200–232) for the interrelation between these seemingly disparate questions.

[375] See e.g. Evans (2008-b) and Harte (2008).

[376] For good discussion of this casual shift on Plato's part from questions about the good to questions about good *lives*, see Vogt (2017: 21).

Similarly, in the Γένεσις Argument —right after what I have called the Argument from Finality—Socrates tries to give the Argument From Finality more teeth by having a closer look at the ridiculous life of 'those who ascribe (ultimate) value to pleasure (τῶν φασκόντων ἡδονὴν ἀγαθὸν εἶναι, 54d7)' and 'whose life's fulfilment is in processes of becoming (τῶν ἐν ταῖς γενέσεσιν ἀποτελουμένων, 54e1–2).'[377] These people, who posit pleasure as the end (τέλος) of their life, 'say they would not want to *live* (φασι ζῆν οὐκ ἂν δέξασθαι, 54e6, emphasis added)' without the pleasures attached to restoring disintegrated equilibria. And this means, as it turns out, that they 'would opt for (a life of) destruction and γένεσις (τὴν δὴ φθορὰν καὶ γένεσιν αἱροῖτ' ἄν τις, 55a5–6)' instead of that more balanced kind of life that is not disturbed by the vicissitudes of affective upheaval 'but oriented towards thought in the purest degree possible (τὸν . . . βίον, τὸν ἐν ᾧ . . . , φρονεῖν δ' ἦν (δυνατὸν) ὡς οἷόν τε καθαρώτατα, 55a6–8).'

If these suggestions about the intimate connection between the good and the good life are on target, we should expect the Γένεσις Argument —with its focus on the life of pleasure—to be about the good too and the way in which it shapes our lives. This expectation is indeed confirmed by a remarkable little passage following the Γένεσις Argument (55a12–c3) that is inextricably connected with the Γένεσις Argument itself. In this bit of text, Socrates derives patently weird consequences from the hedonist's identification of the pleasant and the good in order to cast suspicion on hedonism—an argumentative reductio strategy that only works if Socrates is addressing the identification of pleasure and *the* good. Because the Γένεσις Argument segues so seamlessly into this passage, it makes best interpretive sense to assume that the Γένεσις Argument itself is also concerned with the original thesis of Philebus and Protarchus—as even Hackforth is willing to concede.[378]

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[377] I am following Gosling's translation of τῶν ἀποτελουμένων here, which nicely brings out Socrates's emphasis on the life lived by the pleasure-seekers. Others—e.g. Evans (2008-b: 135)—stress the τελ- root of the verb and translate the phrase, for instance, as 'those who find their end (τέλος) in γενέσεις.'

Reading the Γένεσις Argument as targeting pleasure's identification with the good is also more textually rooted: although qualifying readings necessarily operate under the assumption that Socrates is working with a distinction between different types of goodness in the Γένεσις Argument (consider Aufderheide's 'good in its own right,' Evans's 'perfect good,' or Frede's 'good in itself'), we find no indication whatsoever in the text that Socrates is explicitly making such an evaluative distinction or implicitly drawing on it, although he could have done so, had he wanted or needed to.[379]

Nor is there reason or textual support for qualifying Socrates's conclusion, as Aufderheide finds himself forced to do. A more straightforward and parsimonious reading of the argument just takes Socrates's claims at face value without smuggling in qualifying expressions When Socrates concludes at the end of the Argument From Finality that pleasure must be placed 'in another class than the class of the good (εἰς ἄλλην ἢ τὴν τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ μοῖϱαν, 54d1–2),' he is saying just what he seems to be saying—that pleasure cannot be the good, not that pleasure, at least considered qua γένεσις, fails to be good in its own right or good in some other qualified and softened sense.[380]

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[378] Hackforth (1945: 105).

[379] Think e.g. of the sophisticated evaluative distinctions drawn in book 2 of the *Republic* (357b4–d3). Fletcher (2014: 119n14) identifies a similar problem for Frede's qualifying reading.

[380] Indeed, according to LSJ (s.v.), μοῖϱα (with a genitive) is often used periphrastically, citing precisely *Philebus* 20d1, 54c10, and 60b3–4 as examples of this kind of use. Construed this way, Socrates's talk of 'the μοῖϱα of the good' is just a roundabout way of talking about the good *tout court*.

At this point, let me try to alleviate two possible worries one might have. For one, Socrates's double use of ἀγαθόν without a definite article at 54d7 and 55a10 seems to make textual trouble for the reading of the Γένεσις Argument I have just proposed. This worry is easily dispelled, though, if we consider that Plato often uses this expression as a shorthand for τὸ ἀγαθόν/τἀγαθόν. This happens regularly in the *Philebus*,[381] but we find the same use in the *Republic*'s famous discussion of possible candidates for the Form of the Good where Socrates complains about the conceptual confusion of 'those who define (the Form of the) Good as pleasure (οἱ τὴν ἡδονὴν ἀγαθὸν ὁριζόμενοι, *Republic* 505c6).'[382]

One might still wonder, though, why Socrates—at least on the reading developed here—provides yet another argument against Philebus' take on the good. After all, the trial of lives argument had already exploded his bold hedonism and established, in addition, that the good life will be a mixed life. Still, it is undisputable that Philebus' blunt hedonism remains unmitigated and undiluted throughout the dialogue and is constantly lurking in the background of the ongoing discussion. Indeed, as D. Frede claims, it seems to be functioning as 'the counterpoint to the emerging solution to the question of the human good' and remains, in that role, under constant argumentative pressure throughout the dialogue.[383] That is to say, while developing his novel pluralistic account of the good, Plato also felt the urgent need to keep hedonism at bay and the Γένεσις Argument can thus be understood, I take it, as one of the available moves in this larger argumentative strategy.[384]

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[381] E.g. at 11b4, 13e6, and 20e6.

[382] As Shorey (1935: 89n*f*) remarks, 'Plato is supremely indifferent to logical precision when it makes no difference for a reasonably intelligent reader.' See Shorey (1908) for a similar take on Plato's nonchalant use of ἀγαθόν in the *Philebus*.

[383] Frede (1996: 221). Hackforth (1945: 5–6) makes a similar point. For Socrates's critical engagement with hedonism, witness e.g. the reductio of hedonism at 55a12–c3, the extensive typology of false pleasures, Protarchus's concession that pleasure has been exposed as 'the greatest imposter' (65c5) and 'something quite ridiculous, if not outright repugnant or obscene (as well as) embarrassing' (65e9–66a3), and Socrates's

3. Problems with the Life of Pleasure

So far, I have argued that there are powerful exegetical and textual reasons for reading the Γένεσις Argument as addressing the equation of pleasure and the good or the identification of the life of pleasure as the good life. This gives us the following interpretation of the Argument From Finality:

1. Pleasure is a γένεσις.
2. Every γένεσις happens for the sake of something else (an οὐσία), not for the sake of itself.
3. Pleasure happens for the sake of something else (an οὐσία), not for the sake of itself.
4. What happens for the sake of something else rather than for the sake of itself cannot be the good.

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biting remark toward the very end of the dialogue that pleasure can really not turn out to be the good, even if all the animals in the world were to pursue it (67b1–7).

[384] The threat of hedonism seems to have been real, both inside and outside philosophical discourse. As James Davidson (1998) shows, ordinary Greeks in classical Athens were very much obsessed with the pleasures of 'courtesans and fishcakes' and Plato's contemporary Aristippus of Cyrene, who was also a pupil of Socrates, defended—or indeed *embodied*—the idiosyncratic thesis that the human good lies in the experience of (bodily) pleasure rather than εὐδαιμονία. For good discussion, see Lampe (2015).

5. Pleasure cannot be the good.

We are dealing here, then, with the third and rather mild anti-hedonist viewpoint and argument that Aristotle examines toward the end of *Nicomachean Ethics* book 7. Besides recording the view that no pleasure is good and that most pleasures are bad, he also discusses a view on which 'even if all pleasures are something good, pleasure can nevertheless not be the highest good (ὅμως μὴ ἐνδέχεσθαι εἶναι τὸ ἄριστον ἡδονήν, 1152b11–12)' or 'the best thing there is,' on the grounds that 'it is not an end but a γένεσις (οὐ τἄριστον ἡδονή, ὅτι οὐ τέλος ἀλλὰ γένεσις, 1152b22–23).'[385]

3.1. Features of the Good

To get a firmer grip on this argument, we must first better grasp the notion of the good operative in the *Philebus*. To repeat: when Plato speaks of the good, he is talking about what we have most reason to do, the overall end our lives as a whole are aimed at reaching, or happiness or the good life. At multiple points throughout the *Philebus*—but especially at 20d1–11—Socrates formulates structural criteria or formal constraints on what might pass as the good.[386] According to these, for any *x* that wants to qualify as the good, *x* must be:

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[385] To be sure, Aristotle also records the more sweeping argument that, being a γένεσις, no pleasure is good. It is impossible, though, as we have seen, to square such a radical and sweeping anti-pleasure argument with the rest of the *Philebus*. According to Rackham (1956: 430n*c*) and Dillon (1996: 110), this version of the Γένεσις Argument must therefore have been espoused by Plato's rebellious anti-hedonistic nephew Speusippus who—as Dillon (2003: 66–77) at least claims—might also have been the leader of the 'grumpy pleasure-haters' Socrates disagrees with.

[386] Cf. 22a9–b9, 60b10–c5, 61a1–3, and 67a2–9.

1. (most) complete, perfect, end-like, or final (τέλεος) (20d1 and 22b4) or τελεώτατος (60c4);

2. adequate or sufficient (ἱκανός) (20d4 and 22b4);

3. such that ‘everything that has any notion of it hunts for it, desires it, aims for it, and wants to get hold of it and secure it for its own (πᾶν τὸ γιγνῶσκον αὐτὸ θηϱεύει καὶ ἐφίεται βουλόμενον ἕλεῖν καὶ πεϱὶ αὔτὸ κτήσασθαι, 20d8–9),’ that is to say, *x* must be what is chosen, preferable, or worth choosing (αἱϱετός, 22b5).’

Frustratingly, Socrates nowhere defines these criteria, refrains from working out the conceptual relations between them, does not tell us how to use them to assess possible candidates for the good, and tends to lump them together quite recklessly. Still, we can gather some useful information from the way in which he himself applies these criteria when concluding that neither a life chockful of pleasure (yet lacking cognition) nor a life chockful of cognition (yet lacking pleasure) realizes the good, on the grounds that ‘otherwise such a life would have been sufficient, final, and choiceworthy (ἱκανὸς καὶ τέλεος καὶ . . . αἱϱετός, 22b4–5)’ for the subject living it.

His verdict, as John Cooper observes,[387] has two steps: from the fact that a life needs something else beyond what it is currently filled with (πϱοσδεῖσθαι, 20e6; πϱοσδεῖν, 21a11)—its lack of sufficiency, that is—he infers its unchoiceworthiness. A life can only be choiceworthy, then, if it is sufficient and needs nothing in addition. If, as we saw in his verdict, Socrates nonetheless thinks he has shown that neither pleasure nor cognition satisfies the first criterion of finality, it looks as if he must be silently assuming that any good that is not sufficient is also not final or that it is impossible for something to be insufficient and still final.[388]

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[387] Cooper (1999: 272–273).

Sufficiency and finality are so closely connected, it seems, because any good that is insufficient will by its insufficiency show that there is some further, still unachieved end lying beyond or above it; conversely, once you have achieved the good, there is nothing lacking in your life and it can be described as sufficient. Put simply, the idea here is that whatever the good consists in, it must be the best thing there is, for otherwise our lives would be lacking or needing something, and we could continue deliberating about how to go for something even better.[389] This also explains, I take it, why the *Philebus* repeatedly speaks of the good as 'the most beneficial thing there is (ὠφελιμώτατον, 11c1–2),' 'the best of human possessions (τῶν ἀνθρωπίνων κτημάτων ἄριστον, 19c6),' 'the best (τοῦ ἀρίστου, 65b1),' and 'the first possession (κτῆμα … πρῶτον, 66a5–6).'[390]

This means that once you have realized the good in your life, you have reached the place where the deliberative buck stops and where practical deliberation comes to a halt. You have, so to say, found a stable, Archimedean place to stand, from where there is nothing left to do, nowhere left to go, and nothing more to wish for. The good is, in other words, something we can rest in once we have attained it and that does not bring with it further needs, lacks, yearnings, dependence, or cravings, but instead satisfies us.[391] In Socrates's own words, as expressed at the end of the dialogue, 'any creature that was in permanent possession of (the good), entirely and in every way, would never be in need of anything else, but would live in complete sufficiency (μηδενὸς ἑτέρου ποτὲ ἔτι προσδεῖσθαι, τὸ δὲ ἱκανὸν τελεώτατον ἔχειν, 60c3–4).' Or as he puts the same point in the *Gorgias*, to the chagrin of Callicles, 'those who lack nothing are living the good life (οἱ μηδενὸς δεόμενοι εὐδαίμονες, 492e3–4).'[392]

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[388] This must be why Socrates tends to equate the two criteria: at 60c3–4, for instance, finality and sufficiency are nonchalantly lumped together (τὸ δὲ ἱκανὸν τελεώτατον ἔχειν), and at 67a7–8 they are headed under one and the same concept of autonomy or autarky (αὐταρκείας καὶ τῆς τοῦ ἱκανοῦ καὶ τελέου δυνάμεως), at least if we take the καί—along with Cooper—epexegetically or explicatively.

[389] Cooper (1999: 272–73). Adopting Plato's conceptual machinery, Aristotle indeed deduces the (self-)sufficiency constraint from the finality constraint in *Nicomachean Ethics* (1097b7–8): because εὐδαιμονία is final, it must also be (self-)sufficient.

[390] See also *Euthydemus* 278e3–79a4, *Lysis* 219c1–4, *Symposium* 204e2–205a3. Price (2017: 9–32) offers a good discussion of Plato's conception of εὐδαιμονία as the final end of desire and action.

3.2. The Argument From Finality

We are now able to see why Plato thinks pleasure cannot be the good. Because pleasure is a γένεσις, it happens for the sake of an οὐσία rather than for the sake of itself, and because pleasure does not happen for the sake of itself, it is not final, end-, or goal-like (τέλεος).[393] By applying the principle or criterion that the good must be final, it follows that pleasure—or any other γένεσις for that matter—cannot be the good.

This idea can be unpacked in at least two ways. On a more literal understanding of the for-the-sake-of relation between pleasure and the homeostatic state, the γένεσις takes place for the sake of the more final, more valuable οὐσία. It is the οὐσία that might perhaps be a possible candidate for the good, but not the pleasure happening with an eye to this οὐσία.[394] Those who pursue pleasure as if it were an end in itself rather than a γένεσις fail to see that what is actually valuable and worth pursuing is the natural, balanced, and harmonious οὐσία brought about by pleasure rather than the pleasure itself, which is, after all, merely taking place for the sake of this superior state of being.[395]

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[391] For good discussion of this criterion, see e.g. Pakaluk (2005: 70–71).

[392] Aristotle is, again, indebted to Plato: 'We take a self-sufficient thing to mean a thing which merely standing by itself alone renders life desirable and lacking in nothing (τὸ δ' αὔταρκες τίθεμεν ὃ μονούμενον αἱρετὸν ποιεῖ τὸν βίον καὶ μηδενὸς ἐνδεᾶ)' (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1097b14–15).

[393] Cf. e.g. 31a8–10, where having a τέλος is among the features denied to pleasure.

Interestingly, this is precisely the way in which Aristotle will employ his own, very Platonic criteria of finality and self-sufficiency, as laid down in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.7, to critically assess possible candidates for the good.[396] Because honour-lovers 'seem to pursue honor for the sake of (ἵνα) believing themselves to be good' (1095b26–28) and because those obsessed with material wealth use their money instrumentally or 'for the sake of something else (ἄλλου χάριν, 1096a7),' these two takes on the human good violate the requirement that the human good be an ultimate end or something pursued for its own sake so neither honour nor material wealth can be the good we are looking for when doing ethics.

Reading the argument along these lines also elucidates Plato's reasons for openly flirting with the ideal of a pain- and pleasureless divine life in which our οὐσίαι would remain intact and in which we would engage in as much pure thinking as possible, unperturbed by pleasure and pain. Because the οὐσίαι are more valuable and more final than the pleasant γενέσεις leading toward them, a life as far as humanly possible devoted to the valuation and possession of these stable οὐσίαι will be better, more valuable, and indeed more divine than one devoted to the tantalizing pursuit of a slippery γένεσις like pleasure.[397]

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[394] Meinwald (2008: 490) understands the argument in precisely this way, although she refrains from further analysis.

[395] Cf. Socrates's claim in the *Gorgias* that 'if a person does anything for the sake of something, he does not want this thing he is doing, but the thing for the sake of which he is doing it (ἐκεῖνο οὗ ἕνεκα πράττει, 467d8–e1).'

[396] Meinwald (2008: 490) concurs: 'The family resemblance to the setup in the (*Nicomachean Ethics*) (1094a1–22, 1097a15–97b6) is striking.'

Another option is to unpack the relation between the γένεσις, the pleasure, and the οὐσία more loosely, as Socrates himself did when he described lovers as existing on account of or thanks to their beloved. The idea would be that the subordinate pleasure is completely parasitic on the superordinate οὐσία and, as such, lacking the metaphysical features required to ground a good, meaningful, and satisfying life anyone in their right mind would reflectively endorse and choose as a life worth living—thus violating the third criterion, according to which the good should be worth choosing and yield a life worth living.

This point becomes especially clear in the Argument From A Life Not Worth Living (54e1–55a12)—the second line of sub-argumentation of the Γένεσις Argument —where Socrates presses the point that due to pleasure's ontologically inferior and unstable nature, the pursuit of pleasure carries all kinds of problematic and absurd features with it and is unable to generate what would be recognized as a good and choiceworthy human life from the third-person perspective of a rational and informed outsider.

Both arguments seem to be closely related, though, because those who ascribe final value to pleasure in an abstract way and those whose life's fulfilment consists in γενέσεις must be the same people: the connective particle καὶ μήν (54e1) indicates, I take it, that their lives are even more ridiculous than their bizarre theoretical commitment to hedonism or, alternatively, that the ludicrousness of their philosophical commitments becomes especially clear when we examine their lives more closely.[398]

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[397] See e.g. Frede (1999-b), Frede (2010), and Obdrzalek (2012) for discussion of such (semi-)godlikeness in the *Philebus*. This ideal is nicely captured in the *Laws*, written slightly later than the *Philebus*, where 'the right life' (τὸν ὀϱθὸν βίον) is described as 'neither a single-minded pursuit of pleasure nor an absolute avoidance of pain, but a genial contentment with the state between those two (αὐτὸ ἀσπάζεσθαι τὸ μέσον, ὃ νυνδὴ πϱοσεῖπον ὥς ἵλεων ὀνομάσας).' (792c9–d2)

3.3. The Argument From A Life Not Worth Living

In this second part of the Γένεσις Argument , Socrates leaves metaphysical abstraction behind and turns to a close examination of the lives lived by the pleasure-seekers, lives in which he detects such ‘a considerable ἀλογία’ (55a9) that he rejects the premise—pleasure is the good—undergirding and structuring these lives, thus arriving at precisely the same conclusion as the Argument From Finality.[399]

The Argument From A Life Not Worth Living is, in other words, what we might call an ethical or existential *reductio ad absurdum*.[400] The basic idea or argumentative structure behind such a reductio goes something like this. Suppose a person lives, or were to live, life based on a given axiological theory according to which *x* is the good one should aim for in one’s life. Suppose, further, that this person’s life exhibits multiple weird and unattractive characteristics: the life is, all things considered, an absurd life—at least when looked at from a third-person, well-informed, rational standpoint—and because of this absurdity it also counts as an unchoiceworthy life one would not want oneself or one's loved ones to live, 'unless involuntarily, in opposition to what is really worth choosing (τοῦ ἀληθῶς αἱρετοῦ), from ignorance or some unfortunate necessity' (22b6–8). It follows, Socrates claims, that *x* cannot be the good and that the theory identifying *x* as the good to be placed at the very core of our life must be false too—at the very least in its current formulation or form.[401]

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[398] See LSJ, μήν II.2 and Denniston (1934: 351–52).

[399] As Vogt (2017: 29) rightly notes, in the *Philebus*, Plato often sidesteps abstract questions about the metaphysics of value by shifting to the perspective of *agency* and asking the comparatively easier question of ‘what it is that people desire and choose.’

[400] This ties in nicely with the bit of argumentation we find right after the Γένεσις Argument (55b1–c3), which is unmistakably a reductio of the thesis that the pleasant and the good are identical. Because this identification forces the obviously bizarre conclusion upon us that people are bad when, and only when, they are in pain, the thesis giving rise to such ‘extremely bizarre ramifications (ὡς δυνατὸν ἀλογώτατα)’ (55c2–3) must be false.

To see how this reductio strategy takes shape in the Γένεσις Argument , let us have a look at Socrates's depiction of the life of the pleasure-seekers who live their lives as if pleasure were the good and 'posit their highest end in processes of becoming (τῶν ἐν ταῖς γενέσεσιν ἀποτελουμένων, 54e1–2)':

> [T4.2] I am talking about those who cure their hunger and thirst or anything else of the things that are cured by a process of becoming (τι τῶν τοιούτων, ὅσα γένεσις ἐξιᾶται). They enjoy becoming as a pleasure (χαίρουσι διὰ τὴν γένεσιν ἅτε ἡδονῆς οὔσης αὐτῆς) and claim that they would not want to live if they were not subject to hunger and thirst and if they could not experience all the other things one might want to mention in connection with such conditions (τἆλλα ἅ τις ἂν εἴποι πάντα τὰ ἑπόμενα τοῖς τοιούτοις

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[401] Similar reductio-style arguments are at work in e.g. Plato's jellyfish thought experiment developed earlier in the dialogue (21a6–d5), which reduces Protarchus to 'utter speechlessness' by making him realize that a life full of pleasure (yet without reasoning) is actually not worth living; the argument in *Republic* book 4 (445a5–b7), which suggests that those who believe that the unjust life is worth living should also believe the ridiculous (γελοῖον) thesis that life is still worth living after the destruction of the soul's healthy constitution (justice), although they do *not* think life is worth living after the destruction of the *body's* healthy constitution; Nozick's experience machine; and Rawls's genius Harvard mathematician turned grass counter. In all these cases, a life lived in accordance with a certain axiological theory—hedonism, moral nihilism or scepticism, desire-satisfaction theory—is described as a bizarre life not worth living, and this arguably forces us to dismiss the theory giving rise to such a flawed life.

> παθήμασι). (54e4–8)

Due to pleasure's nature as an inferior *γένεσις* that depends completely on a superior *οὐσία*, those who organize their life around the experience of pleasure must necessarily organize their life around restorations of disintegrations of the harmonious and equilibrious *οὐσίαι* that constitute them as persons. To pursue pleasure, they must also pursue the disintegration on which pleasure is parasitic, and this means, as Socrates frames it in slightly more charged language, that they must necessarily pursue 'destruction' (τὸ φθείρεσθαι/ἡ φθορά) too, which is after all the opposite of 'becoming' or 'coming to be' (τὸ γίγνεσθαι/ἡ γένεσις).

All of this, Socrates thinks, is a crystal-clear sign of absurdity, irrationality, or inconsistency (*ἀλογία*):

> [T4.3] [Socrates] Would we not all say that destruction is the opposite of becoming or coming to be (τῷ γίγνεσθαί γε τοὐναντίον … τὸ φθείρεσθαι)?
>
> [Protarchus] Necessarily.
>
> [S.] So whoever makes this choice would choose (a life of) destruction and coming to be or becoming in preference to that third life (τὴν δὴ φθορὰν καὶ γένεσιν …, ἀλλ' οὐ τὸν τρίτον ἐκεῖνον βίον), which consists of neither pleasure nor pain, but is a life of thought in the purest degree possible.
>
> [P.] A considerable absurdity (πολλή τις … ἀλογία) seems to appear, Socrates, if someone posits pleasure as the good (ἐάν τις τὴν ἡδονὴν ὡς ἀγαθὸν . . . τιθῆται)!
>
> [S.] Considerable indeed (πολλή). (55a2–12)

How should we understand Socrates's charge that the pursuit of pleasure as a way of life is extremely *ἄλογος* (absurd, irrational, inconsistent)? The concept *ἀλογία* is strictly speaking typically used to describe a situation in which two opposites somehow clash with each other.[402] Applying this feature to the Γένεσις Argument, Socrates's ἀλογία charge could be understood as follows: because hedonists are committed to pursuing the γένεσις pleasure, they are also committed to pursuing destruction—pleasure's opposite—on which pleasure is ontologically parasitic. It is, after all, only by repairing a previously destroyed οὐσία that pleasure-seekers can experience their beloved pleasure. The absurdity would thus lie in the fact that pleasure-seekers must pursue both *x* and *x*'s opposite *y*.

Worse yet, as Evans points out in a very stringent reading of the absurdity charge, pleasure-seekers must make contradictory commitments by simultaneously pursuing and valuing and *not* pursuing and valuing their own pleasure and fulfilment.[403] As a result of these contradictory commitments, the pursuit of a γένεσις is necessarily tied to the paradoxical, irrational, and frustrating double bind of simultaneously valuing and *not* valuing, pursuing and *not* pursuing their beloved pleasure: the pleasure-seeker drives, so to speak, with accelerator and brake on at the same time.

We can also loosen the ἀλογία concept a bit and take it to refer not to a strictly formal type of irrationality, involving contradictions, paradoxes, and logical mistakes, but to a different, more practical kind of irrationality. Etymologically speaking, any *x* can be called ἄλογος just in case one is unable to give a λόγος—a satisfying rational explanation or account—of *x*.[404] On this construal of ἀλογία, even if the life of pleasure were unassailable on logical grounds, we might still consider it irrational in the sense that, existentially speaking, such a way of life just does not make any *sense*—in precisely the same way in which the ecstatic jellyfish-like life filled with pleasure but lacking cognitive activity or the life of cartoonish mythological archetypes such as the Danaids, Sisyphus, and Tantalus do not seem to make any sense, striking us as crazy or even ridiculous.[405] Indeed, Socrates comments that those who have a grasp of pleasure's deeper nature as a γένεσις are prone to 'make fun of' (καταγελᾷ, 54d7) pleasure-lovers and their way of life. Between 48a and 50d, Socrates offers some interesting observations about τὸ γελοῖον. His central claim is that, 'not only on stage, but also in all of life's …comedies' (50b), ridiculousness comes down to a lack of self-knowledge. That is to say, someone is laughable or ridiculous in so far as he is mistaken, or mistakenly *optimistic*, about how well he is doing.[406] The point, then, is that these pleasure-seekers are worse off than they take themselves to be.

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[402] See LSJ (s.v.) and e.g. *Phaedo* 67e9.

[403] Evans (2008-b: 138–39).

[404] Cf. 63e8, where πολλὴ ἀλογία is not used in any technical, strictly logical sense but merely suggests that it would be senseless or unintelligible to mix foolish and base pleasures into one's life. I owe this observation to Tamer Nawar.

Multiple factors contribute to the weirdness of the life of pleasure and its failure to make sense. Due to pleasure's dependent and unstable nature as a γένεσις, pleasure-seekers must—in pursuit of what they mistakenly take to be the human good—pursue neediness and lack, damage and destruction. This should, in and of itself, raise some doubts in Protarchus and Plato's audience about such a way of life: in pursuit of one's good, one might feel, one should not have to damage or destroy oneself—especially given the fundamental Platonic conviction that the good is 'what is most beneficial (ὠφελιμώτατον, 11c1–2) and 'what preserves and benefits,' while 'the bad is what destroys and corrupts (τὸ μὲν ἀπολλῦον καὶ διαφθεῖϱον . . . τὸ κακὸν εἶναι, τὸ δὲ σῷζον καὶ ὠφελοῦν τὸ ἀγαθόν, *Republic* 608e4–5).'[407]

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[405] In line with the etymological point made above, we can describe the pleasure-seeker as suffering from the kind of irrationality Lear (1998: 81) calls 'reflexive breakdown' which he defines as one's 'inability to give a full or coherent account of what one is doing.' In other words, as Sebastian Gardner (1993: 3–4) puts it, they 'fail the test of self-confrontation': such an irrational person is either unable to provide an 'explanation-cum-justification' of him- or herself or, in doing so, they will betray a 'failure in self-knowledge.'

[406] See e.g. Evans (2008-a: 113) and Vogt (2012: 25–50).

Even more worryingly, though, the neediness, lack, damage, and destruction underlying this pursuit of pleasure will psychologically manifest themselves as *pain*. Consequently, and rather unexpectedly, the pursuit of pleasure turns out to be inseparable from the pursuit of its despised opposite—pain.[408] In the *Phaedo* (60b7–8), Socrates makes a similar point, noting that there is something 'weird (ἄτοπον, 60b3)' about pleasure and pain: one cannot have the one without having the other as well, 'as if the two of them were attached to a single head.' Indeed, as the Buddhists have it, chasing pleasure is like licking honey from a razorblade.[409]

This means, weirdly enough, that in order for pleasure-seekers to pursue what they take to be the good, they must be committed to value and pursue what they—*by their very own standards*—take to be the one and only thing that is emphatically *not* good. Worse yet, pleasure-seekers must pursue destruction and restoration actively, constantly, and repeatedly, having chosen pleasure as the central good and ultimate end around which they centre, orient, and organize their lives. The good is, after all, 'that which every soul pursues and for the sake of which it does all that it does (τούτου ἕνεκα πάντα πϱάττει, *Republic* 505e1–2),' and 'it is in pursuit of the good (τὸ ἀγαθὸν … διώκοντες) that we both walk when we walk and sit when we sit, for the sake of the same thing, the good (τοῦ αὐτοῦ ἕνεκα, τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ, *Gorgias* 468b1–4).'[410]

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[407] In sharp contrast, 'the good will obviously never destroy anything (οὐ . . . τό γε ἀγαθὸν μή ποτέ τι ἀπολέσῃ)' (*Republic* 609b1–2).

[408] Note that this seems to bring us back to Evans's stricter understanding of the absurdity charge: in pursuit of pleasure, the pleasure-seeker is forced to pursue and value pain, pleasure's despised opposite.

[409] Cf. e.g. Śāntideva, *The Bodhicaryāvatāra* 7.64: 'One cannot get enough of the sensual pleasures in cyclic existence, that are like honey on a razor's edge.'

This leads to a troubling, unattractive picture of the pleasure-seeker's life as amounting to little more than a repetitive, cyclical pattern in which self-created neediness and self-inflicted desires, cravings, and pain are every now and then interspersed with the enjoyment of pleasures attached to the restoration of a disrupted balance, the repair of a broken harmony, the satisfaction of an itching desire. Thus, the life of pleasure is also besieged, Plato thinks, by a problem of insatiability, again caused by pleasure's ontologically inferior nature as a γένεσις controlled by an οὐσία.

For every single time pleasure-seekers try to lay their hands on a pleasure, the pleasure is itself, as it were, trying to lay its hands on the οὐσία for the sake and thanks to which it is going on, slowly but surely fading and slipping away—right until the moment the balance and harmony have been restored. Hedonists who identify pleasure as the good and actively organizes their lives around it have no choice, then, but to enter and re-enter a self-perpetuating cycle in which destruction and repair, desire and satisfaction, pain and pleasure alternately make place for one another, chasing the evanescent moments of pleasure they value so highly, 'always advancing and moving to keep erect,' as Schopenhauer would later describe this predicament, 'like an acrobat on a tightrope.'[411]

Since all pleasures are restorative processes, any life that is devoted to the single-minded pursuit of pleasure should strike us as flawed—even if the pleasure-seeker were restlessly pursuing the elevated pleasures of, say, listening to Beethoven's brilliant late string quartets. If that is the case, though, we might wonder why Socrates focuses on the bodily pleasures attached to curing hunger and thirst toward the end of the argument (54e4). This narrower focus might give one the impression that the Γένεσις Argument is in fact merely targeting the life of a certain type of *lowly* pleasure, not the life of pleasure as such.

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[410] As Vogt (2017: 2 and 20), puts it, our desire for the good 'informs and supports all other motivations.' Consequently, 'life is organized around something that is especially important to an agent. . . . Something gets privileged, and other pursuits and values recede in the background.'

[411] Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena* XI.144.

This seems too quick, though. Although Socrates does indeed explicitly mention hunger and thirst, he also speaks of 'all those (other) things fixed by a γένεσις (τι τῶν τοιούτων, ὅσα γένεσις ἐξιᾶται, 54e4–5; cf. 54e7–8),' and this class could surely include the disintegrated οὐσίαι underlying our higher pleasures. The focus on bodily pleasure also makes good dialectical sense: as I explained earlier, this blunt 'Phileban' hedonism was very much in the air when Plato wrote the *Philebus* and it also receives a lot of philosophical attention throughout the conversation.

But, most importantly, although the different types of pleasure share the deeper structural similarity of being γενέσεις, the dialogue's thorough exploration of the nature of pleasure in its different manifestations suggests that there are also subtle differences between them. Unlike their impure and untrue counterparts, Socrates points out that true and pure pleasures—also known as 'the soul's own pleasures (ἡδονὰς … τῆς ψυχῆς αὐτῆς, 66c5)'—are not connected or mingled with pain and they are further characterized by the fact that they 'follow in the wake of cognitive achievements, some of them even in the wake of sensory experiences (ἐπιστήμαις, τὰς δὲ αἰσθήσεσιν ἑπομένας, 66c5–6).'

This suggests that we can only experience such pleasures by focussing our attention on the sophisticated objects involved in them and that we do so for their own sake, experiencing the pleasures, so to speak, as unintended positive side-effects of the intellectual achievement involved in grasping what is truly beautiful or really real.[412]

In other words, because these pleasures piggyback on such strenuous and complex cognitive effort, it seems impossible to pursue them actively and directly. But even if this *were* possible, once one is able to access the elevated objects involved in these pleasures—the sheer beauty captured in, say, Beethoven's 'Heiliger Dankgesang'—there are probably other things one will have come to care about besides merely experiencing pleasure. Accordingly, for those who aim to live a life of pleasure, there seems to be no way around the pursuit of less sophisticated, bodily pleasure.

Taking all this together, then, the problematic aspects of the life of pleasure just examined turn that life into a cartoonish and irrational life that strikes us as defective and not worth living—even if pleasure-seekers themselves go around claiming, mistakenly of course, that 'pleasures are most effective in securing the good life (τὰς ἡδονὰς εἰς τὸ ζῆν ἡμῖν εὖ κρατίστας εἶναι, 67b4)' or that they are living 'the best possible life (εὐδαιμονέστατον)' for the simple reasons that they are 'almost dying with pleasure (ταύταις ταῖς ἡδοναῖς τερπόμενος οἷον ἀποθνῄσκει, 47b3–7).'

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[412] Delcomminette also maintains that 'le plaisir pur . . . ne peut jamais être qu'une *conséquence* de la pensée' (2006: 501, emphasis in original). See Fletcher (2014: 132–33) for an illuminating take on the 'immense cognitive achievement' involved in accessing nothing less than e.g. 'the things that are by their very nature always beautiful by themselves (ἀεὶ καλὰ καθ' αὑτὰ πεφυκέναι) (51c6–7) needed to experience such elevated pleasures. Focusing on the *Philebus*, Harte (2018) offers a more sustained account of these idle pleasures (as she calls them)—the ones we get without aiming at them.

4. Conclusion

The Γένεσις Argument in Plato's *Philebus* has typically been ignored, criticized harshly, or found confusing. In this chapter, I have argued that we can better understand the argument by taking it to address the value of a *life* rather than the value of particular, episodic instances of pleasure. More specifically, the argument takes issue with the idea that pleasure should be the good at the center of human agency, the ultimate object of our pursuits, or the 'right target (σκοπὸν ὀρθὸν, 60a7)' we should 'aim for (στοχάζεσθαι, 60a8)' in all the things we do.

Plato thinks this idea is deeply flawed: whatever the good might ultimately turn out to be, it will not be pleasure. Identifying pleasure as a γένεσις going on for the sake or on account of an οὐσία equips him with the conceptual tools to formulate two independent yet intimately related lines of argumentation against this mistaken idea. The deductive Argument From Finality claims, roughly, that the good should be a sturdy and final target we can reliably desire and aim for, but since pleasure is itself 'desiring or aiming at something else (ἐφιέμενον ἄλλου, 53d4),' it cannot be the good. Likewise, the Argument From A Life Not Worth Living is rooted in the observation that a life built around pleasure seems absurd, irrational, remarkably strange, and not worth living—at least from a rational, well-informed perspective. This means we should reject the axiological theory undergirding this flawed way of life and conclude, once again, that pleasure cannot be the good.

Not only is this reading of the Γένεσις Argument simpler, more straightforward, and more textually grounded than its alternatives, it also elegantly defuses the inconsistency problem that has bothered so many readers of the *Philebus*. The best way to solve this interpretive puzzle, I have proposed, lies in appreciating the fact that the core claim of the Γένεσις Argument is rather modest and less sweeping than many commentators have thought. Even though many pleasures might be good and worth having, the argument suggests that it would nevertheless be a mistake to turn pleasure into the overarching and guiding good of one's life as a whole.

An important upshot of this reading is that, unlike some austere passages in, say, the *Phaedo*, the Γένεσις Argument does not urge us to shun or repress pleasure, nor does it force us to live an otherworldly life of self-denial—all it is trying to convey is that it would be a mistake to posit pleasure as the good and locate it in the centre of our life, from where it would push other projects and values into the background and make us live an irrational and unattractive life. Plato is therefore not inconsistent in simultaneously claiming that some pleasures are worth having because they are good, while also claiming that pleasure as such cannot be *the* good, understood as the dominant object of human pursuits and the thing around which people weave the fabric of their lives.[413]

My reading makes excellent exegetical and philosophical sense, then, of the dynamics of the argument and its place in the economics of the *Philebus* as a whole. Importantly, it also allows for a new and more illuminating perspective on Plato's later thinking about hedonism and the value of pleasure. On the reading of the Γένεσις Argument I have defended, in the *Philebus*, Plato finds a middle way between the extremes of idolizing pleasure on the one hand and downgrading it on the other. *Contra* 'Philebus' enemies,' the pleasure-haters, he argues that there is no point in denying pleasure's existence, that many pleasures are good and worth having, and that a life without pleasure would not be worth living.

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[413] The Γένεσις Argument does not give us enough information, I think, to specify the value of particular pleasures. Given their nature as γενέσεις, all pleasures will be less valuable than the 'supremely worthy (σεμνότατον, 53d6)' οὐσίαι controlling them, but this does not tell us much about the possible difference in value between, say, impure versus pure or bodily versus mental pleasures. For more guidance, see Aufderheide (2013).

But *contra* pleasure-lovers like Philebus and Protarchus, he also argues that a life without reasoning yet filled with pleasure would lack many goods and that a life devoted to the single-minded pursuit of a γένεσις like pleasure is not a life we would reflectively endorse ‘even if all the cattle and horses and the rest of the animals gave testimony by following pleasure (τῷ τὸ χαίρειν διώκειν)’ (67b1–2). As such, we can conveniently describe Plato’s take on pleasure in the *Philebus* as a non-hedonist middle way between the extremes of hedonism and anti-hedonism: even though some pleasures are good and pleasure is not necessarily harmful or bad, this does not mean that pleasure is *the* good.[414]

What is more, although Plato breaks off the *Philebus* before revealing the identity of the good, keeping his audience in suspense and ‘standing on the very threshold of the good (ἐπὶ … τοῖς τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ … προθύροις, 64c1–2),’ the Γένεσις Argument nevertheless contains some important insights into the nature of the good and how best to go about trying to discover it. Regarding these methodological concerns, the argument is a fascinating showcase of how crucial it is to scrutinize *what* something is before one can assess whether or how *valuable* it is. Indeed, a more implicit takeaway message of the argument is that hedonists tend to walk into the trap of declaring the (ultimate) value of pleasure without first developing a solid understanding of the nature of pleasure.[415]

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[414] I borrow this useful distinction from Vogt (2018). Reading the *Philebus* along these lines also fits the speculative interpretive hypothesis that Plato wrote the dialogue to settle the Academic dispute between Eudoxus’s hedonism and Speusippus’s anti-hedonism.

[415] In the *Gorgias* (501a5–6), Socrates makes the similar methodological point that one cannot evaluate pleasure without having first investigated its nature (τὴν φύσιν) and

As to its nature, the true human good, whatever it might turn out to be, should in contrast to a γένεσις like pleasure be something we can strive for without finding ourselves entangled in a web of contradictions, paradoxes, or cartoonish and irrational scenarios. It should not be a γένεσις, then, but something stable and final, something existing autonomously and sovereignly in and of itself. Only such a thing could halt practical deliberation and provide a stable, Archimedean place to stand—a place where the deliberative buck stops, where our lives are stabilized, and where we ‘would never be in need of anything else, but live in perfect sufficiency (τὸ δὲ ἱκανὸν τελεώτατον ἔχειν, 60c3–4). Then, and only then, would we be living the good life.[416]

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cause (τὴν αἰτίαν). Likewise, in the *Meno* (71b3–5), he wonders: ‘If I do not know what something is (τί ἐστιν), how could I know what characteristics (ὁποῖόν γέ τι) it possesses?’

[416] The ideas in this chapter—or earlier, more embryonic versions of them—have been presented in Gainesville, Florida (*Annual Ancient Philosophy Workshop*) (special thanks to Katja Vogt) and Groningen. I am indebted to both audiences. This chapter has been published (under the same title) in *Journal of the History of Philosophy*.