

University of Groningen

Plato on pleasure and illusion

van Zoonen, Derek

DOI:
[10.33612/diss.250286363](https://doi.org/10.33612/diss.250286363)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2022

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

van Zoonen, D. (2022). *Plato on pleasure and illusion*. [Thesis fully internal (DIV), University of Groningen]. University of Groningen. <https://doi.org/10.33612/diss.250286363>

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

5. Conclusion

Ancient ethical reflection especially concerned itself with one's life as a whole and what it should be like.⁴¹⁷ 'It is not a trivial thing we are discussing (οὐ περὶ τοῦ ἐπιτυχόντος ὁ λόγος),' as Socrates captures the structuring question of Plato's *Republic*, 'but the way we ought to live (περὶ τοῦ ὄντινα τρόπον χρῆ ζῆν, 352d6–7).' Given the fact that pleasure is both an obvious ingredient in any life worth living yet at the same time something human beings struggle to come to grips with in their attempt to create a life worth living, it is not surprising that ancient philosophers grappled extensively with the nature and value of pleasure. Indeed, at no point in the history of Western philosophy has the topic of pleasure and its role in a good life been so important.

Of all these ancient treatments, Plato arguably explores the topic with special depth and thoroughness—especially in his *Philebus*. However, Platonic hedonic theorizing has come in for rough treatment. A common view, drawing upon the *Phaedo*, depicts Plato as an otherworldly and staunch anti-hedonist ascetic akin to the Cynic Antisthenes who would 'rather go mad than experience pleasure (μανεῖν μᾶλλον ἢ ἡσθεῖν).'⁴¹⁸ To give a striking example of this common view, Hare—the famous Oxford ethicist—described Plato as a 'stern and ascetic moralist ... [who] would have been at home in a Zen Buddhist monastery, or even in Egypt with the desert fathers.'⁴¹⁹ And C.S. Lewis, the famous writer and Christian apologetic, likewise called Platonism 'at bottom otherworldly, pessimistic, and ascetic; far

⁴¹⁷ See, e.g., Annas (1993), Annas (2008-a), Annas (2008-b), Cooper (2012), Frede (1999-b), Hadot (2002), and Vogt (2017).

⁴¹⁸ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* 6.1.3.

⁴¹⁹ Hare (1982: 25).

more ascetic than Protestantism.'⁴²⁰

Philosophical treatments of Plato's views on pleasure have also often been negative, claiming that Plato's hedonic theorizing is muddled, deeply flawed, and not worthy of our attention. Plato does not just lack a decent grasp of the central concepts that underpin his hedonic theorizing, some modern critics contend, but his restorative theory of pleasure is also unable to account for subtle pleasures (like the pleasures of reason) and cannot even make sense of all physical pleasures (such as the pleasures of sex). More problematically still, the Platonic view that our immediate pleasures can be false is often taken to clash with the strong and widely shared pre-theoretical intuition that error of this sort is absolutely impossible.

In this dissertation, I have sought to offer more charitable and more sympathetic treatments of some of Plato's central yet rather puzzling arguments concerning pleasure. What drives these arguments, or so I have argued, is the notion that pleasure is intimately connected with illusion and deception. To put it in Platonic terms, pleasure is 'the greatest charlatan (ἡδονὴ ... ἀπάντων ἀλαζονίστατον, *Philebus* 65c5)': a 'trickster (γόης)' who avails herself of deception and illusion to rob us surreptitiously of our true beliefs. The problem with pleasure, in a word, is that it often beguiles us with misleading appearances, thus creating a mismatch between our *experience* of the world and *actual reality*.

In chapter 1, I examined Plato's views about pleasure in the *Phaedo*. This dialogue suggests, rather bleakly, that the good life consists in a kind of embodied death: the philosopher distances himself from the unreliable deliverances of sense-perception as well as affective states like appetitive desire and bodily pleasure. Traditionally, this plea for affective detachment has been understood

⁴²⁰ C. S. Lewis (1954: 386).

as a plea for renunciation or asceticism. More recently, though, scholars such as Woolf and Russell have argued that the good life just involves metaphorical abstinence from appetitive desires and bodily pleasures. When Socrates advocates affective detachment, the thought goes, he merely asks us to ascribe little or no value to the body and its affective states.

Having first shown that the evaluative reading is both exegetically and philosophically problematic, my next and more important aim has been to explain Plato's defence of renunciation. This plea for asceticism is not rooted in resentment or developed *ad* or *post hoc*, I argued, it is cogent, interesting, and tied to Plato's central views. In the Deception Argument (83b4–e4), Socrates suggests that bodily pleasure deceives us about the reality and clarity of the messy sensible world around us. While experiencing bodily pleasure, we are surreptitiously tricked into falsely taking the objects of our pleasures—the material, visible things around us—for 'most real and most clear' 'without being aware of this problem (οὐ λογίζεται αὐτό, 83c2–3).' The philosopher—who structures his life around the attempt to transcend the illusory world of seeming—has no choice, then, but to avoid bodily pleasure.

This reading does not just explain Plato's adherence to some kind of asceticism, it also fits the rest of the *Phaedo* and Plato's overarching hedonic theorizing with no rough edges, and it elucidates other passages in the corpus where a connection is drawn between the experience of pleasure and a mistaken sense of reality.

In chapter 2, I examined the discussion of pleasure offered in *Republic* 9. In his famous third demonstration of the superiority of the life of justice and rationality, Socrates seemingly suggests that 'ordinary people'—including Thrasymachus's beloved tyrant—can, and do, go wrong in their immediate self-ascriptions of pleasure. They erroneously claim to be experiencing pleasure but what passes itself

off as a pleasure in their case does not count as the real thing; it is a mere simulacrum—a fake or sham—of genuine, authentic pleasure.

Scholars typically resist this line of argumentation, treating it as an embarrassment to be explained away or rejected out of hand for the simple reason that we cannot go wrong in our honest, immediate self-ascriptions of pleasure. Whenever I believe I am experiencing pleasure, this standard objection holds, I *am* experiencing pleasure. In sharp contrast, I took the argument at face value, assuming that Socrates does indeed suggest that we are hedonically fallible, and aimed to make sense of this hedonic fallibilism. In brief, on the reading I defended here, Socrates argues that pleasure is more than a feeling.

That is to say, the raw feel of the hedonic experience—the feeling tone of our pleasure or that which enters our awareness—just partially constitutes a pleasure; in addition, it takes an underlying restorative process in which one of our physical or psychological needs is met. Because any representation can misrepresent and any appearance can fail to latch onto reality, Plato believes—or so I argued—that there is nothing crazy or counter-intuitive about the idea that there can be errors in our hedonic tone.

If there is the felt appearance of having one's needs fulfilled without the underlying restorative process, we are dealing with a case of deceptive pleasure or hedonic illusion akin to perceptual illusion. It *seems* as if we are experiencing pleasure—as if we undergo some relative improvement—although we are not. In such a situation, as Plato has it, our putative pleasure is a mere trick, εἶδωλον, or *trompe l'oeil* painting: an insubstantial, deficient, specious, false simulacrum of the real deal which misinform us about some way the world really is.

In chapter 3, I examined (part of) Socrates's discussion of false pleasure in the *Philebus*. To counter Protarchus's passionate defence of the idea that pleasures are immune to error, this strand of

argumentation, I explained, suggests that our pleasures are—at least partially—constituted by cognitive or representational elements. This entails that our pleasures can misrepresent objects or states or affairs which means, in turn, that they can be true or false: true if they get things right and represent the world correctly, false if they misrepresent the world and get things wrong.

According to an interpretive dichotomy currently dominating the literature, we have to choose between a factual and an evaluative reading of Socrates's line of thought. On the first construal, a pleasure taken in some descriptive state of affairs p is false if p does not obtain; on the second construal, by contrast, a pleasure taken in p is false if I take p to be F (good or otherwise positively evaluatively charged) even though p is *not* F . I resisted this dichotomy for a variety of reasons. For one, on both construals, false pleasure is a matter of misrepresentation; for another, I argued that it takes both a factual and an evaluative cognition to get a pleasure going in the first place.

While in the grip of deceptive pleasure, the subject is out of contact with some reality beyond their heads. By its nature as a cognitive or representational state, and just like a belief, a pleasure necessarily presents its content as *true*: it suggests that some state of affairs obtains and that this state of affairs is good or otherwise positively evaluatively charged. A false pleasure, then, is a pleasure that misinforms us about some way the world really is. Dangerously enough, though, from an inside, first-person perspective such a false pleasure cannot be told apart from a true pleasure that gets things right and informs us about some way the world really is—and this is what makes it a 'ridiculous imitation (μεμμημέναι τὰς ἀληθεῖς ἐπὶ τὰ γελοιώτερα, 40c5)' of a true pleasure.

Lastly, the *Philebus* also suggests, as we saw in chapter 4, that those who organize their life around the pursuit of pleasure suffer from two grave epistemic defects. Firstly, they think they are pursuing

and experiencing an entity with an independent, intrinsic essence of its own whereas the pleasure they are pursuing is actually nothing more than the mere removal of pain—an ontologically derivative state that rests on trouble and imperfection. What they place in the centre of their life, then, is not what they think it is: they are seriously mistaken about the fundamental nature of the very thing that shapes the contours of their life. Secondly, those who live the life of pleasure think they are living the good life, although they actually find themselves in an irrational, plainly weird, ridiculous predicament: 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.

In all these cases, the subject who is making the hedonic mistake as a result of hedonic deception finds herself in what Iris Murdoch calls a ‘private dream world,’ severed from what is actually going on in the world beyond her. What characterizes this private dream world, in brief, is that there is a mismatch between actual reality and the agent’s experience of the world—even though she is unaware of this misalignment between the two.

To be sure, there are various ways in which pleasure can drive a wedge between us and the world. For one, in the *Protagoras*, *Philebus*, and (parts of) *Republic* 9, Plato suggests that human beings are poor at what contemporary behavioural economists call affective forecasting: they often fail to predict the intensity or size of their future affective states correctly. More specifically, pleasures and pains in the distant future often look larger or smaller than they actually are. For another, as evidenced in the *Protagoras*, *Gorgias*, and parts of *Republic*, Plato also argues that pleasure and pain are unreliable sources of evidence about what matters. Appetitive desire and pleasure have a tendency to represent an indifferent, bad, or qualifiedly good object or states of affairs as (really) good.

These types of hedonic illusion will probably strike most people as acceptable—if only because they are so recognizable. Anyone who has ever suffered from lack of self-control—eating a whole bar of chocolate, say, although you are trying to lose weight—has first-hand experience with the fact that our appetitive desire for immediate gratification can cloud our grasp of what is really good for us and that, when this happens, such immediate pleasure often looks more appealing than it actually is—as we might come to appreciate retrospectively.

However, as I have emphasized throughout this dissertation, Plato also claims that there are other more radical, seemingly less intuitive ways in which appearance and reality can come apart in our pleasures. On the Platonic arguments discussed here, pleasure can mislead us about the reality and clarity of the messy and obscure material world around us; there are cases where what presents itself as a pleasure does not count as the real thing (it is a mere εἶδωλον) or where the pleasure we experience misrepresents some state of affairs in the world (even though this cannot be appreciated from a first-person, inside perspective); and pleasure (a mere γένεσις) also misleads the pleasure-seeker about itself—it is not quite the thing these pleasure-seekers think they are pursuing—and, much worse, their obsession with pleasure also makes them less εὐδαίμονες than they take themselves to be.

Many scholars have tried to reinterpret these more extreme hedonic illusions in terms of the more palatable types of hedonic deception—especially the evaluative hedonic illusion where pleasure misleads us about what matters. The *Republic* can serve as a good example of this interpretive move. Even though the most natural reading of the pleasure argument of book 9 claims that it is possible to go wrong in our self-ascriptions of pleasure, most modern scholarly readings claim instead that Plato's basic message is that pleasure

misleads us about *what is valuable*.

However, as I have argued, such readings do not fit the textual evidence and require that Plato equivocates significantly on the meaning of 'true' and 'false'. Thus, for instance, some readers understand the *Republic's* talk of 'true pleasures' in such a way that the adjective ἀληθής is meant to pick out what is 'truly valuable.'⁴²¹ In the same vein, an increasingly popular reading of the *Philebus* suggests that Platonic claims about pleasures being false are in fact merely saying that such pleasures are *bad*.

These readings attempt to reduce Plato's critique of pleasure to an entirely normative exercise, then, which merely consists in censuring pleasure or certain pleasures (such as bodily pleasures) in much the same way as some moderns may censure certain pleasures or desires as morally blameworthy. I believe this approach misses much of what is most interesting and distinctive in Plato's theorizing about pleasure. In sharp contrast, I have endeavoured to show that Plato's criticism of pleasure is not just a straightforward moral or ethical exercise; it is a moral or evaluative exercise which precisely *consists in* an epistemic exercise that locates pleasure in the space of reasons and analyses whether it makes contact with the world or fails to do so.

If this suggestion gets things right, the tendency to view Plato's theorizing about pleasure as more straightforwardly normative theorizing can be understood as an instance of what is sometimes called 'the moralistic fallacy': 'the imperialistic tendency of moral

⁴²¹ Nussbaum (1986: 458) continues: '[T]o call a pleasure false means not that it is not really enjoyed, but that it is enjoyed only relatively to some contingent deficiency, not from the standpoint of correct judgment.' Similarly, Shorey (1903: 149n147) claims that Plato's use of the predicate 'false' should be understood 'as a mere rhetorical expression of the disdain or pity of the overlooker', that is to say, as something like 'pitiful' or 'pathetic'.

considerations to take over the entirety of the evaluative space.⁴²² Put differently, the thought here is that there are other dimensions for the evaluation of our affective experiences: our pleasures can fall short of other kinds of standards besides propriety or morality. One might try to find out, for instance, whether our pleasures (fail to) accurately represent the world, whether they really count as instances of what they claim to be, or whether they otherwise cast a veil between us and the actual world beyond our heads—especially if you are a Platonist who is convinced that ‘being deceived about the truth is a bad thing, while possessing the truth is good (τὸ μὲν ἐψεῦσθαι τῆς ἀληθείας κακόν, τὸ δὲ ἀληθεύειν ἀγαθόν, *Republic* 413a).⁴²³

As the Socratico-Platonic philosophical project is described in the *Theaetetus* (148e7–151d7), the philosopher’s (in this case Socrates’s) ‘greatest and noblest function is to distinguish between the true and the false (μέγιστόν τε καὶ κάλλιστον ἔργον ... τὸ κρίνειν τὸ ἀληθές τε καὶ μὴ)’ and to tell apart ‘deceptive images and impostures (ψευδῆ καὶ εἰδῶλα)’ from what is true and real for the simple reason that ‘it is quite out of the question for [a philosopher] to accept a lie or allow an imposture and to do away with the truth (ψεῦδος τε συγχωρῆσαι καὶ ἀληθές ἀφανίσαι οὐδαμῶς θέμις)’ or ‘to set more value upon lies and deceptive images than upon the truth (ψευδῆ καὶ εἰδῶλα περὶ πλείονος ποιησάμενοι τοῦ ἀληθοῦς).’

In many dialogues, this attempt to pierce through what is illusory or less than fully real manifests itself in the attempt to identify what is authentically *F* and set it apart from the changing, qualified,

⁴²² D’Arms and Jacobson (2001: 75).

⁴²³ Cf. *Republic* 382a7–b4: ‘[N]o one is willing to tell falsehoods to the most important part of himself about the most important things, but of all places he is most afraid to have falsehood there. ... [T]o be false to one’s soul about the things that are, to be ignorant and to have and hold falsehood there, is what everyone would least of all accept, for everyone hates a falsehood in that place most of all.’

misleading instances of *F*-ness that merely look *F* in certain contexts. This method also informs the attempt—so characteristic of Plato’s earlier, Socratic dialogues—to differentiate genuine ἀρετή or εὐδαιμονία from merely apparent success or accomplishment. The very same approach also animates Plato’s hedonic theorizing, I have suggested, and especially its attempt to identify cases of hedonic deception or illusion where appearance and reality come apart in a similar way.

What makes pleasure ethically problematic for Plato, then, is that defective and deceptive pleasure blurs our vision, casts a veil between us and actual reality, and prevents us from seeing clearly. A certain type of defective, deceptive pleasure makes us accept a counterfeit reality, thus directly undermining our attempt to penetrate the world of appearances and see reality face to face.

However, Plato believes that taking ourselves seriously—as the rational beings and self-interpreting animals we are—centrally involves avoiding mistakes and trying to get things right. This, in its turn, involves not being prepared ‘to accept ourselves just as we come’ as Harry Frankfurt has put it.⁴²⁴ Instead, Frankfurt continues, we want our thoughts, our choices, and our actions to make sense and to get things right. To that end, our aim should be to inform our responses to the world with the clearest possible view of the world.⁴²⁵

Plato’s fundamental insight is that our hedonic experiences are not excluded from this crucial task of making sense and getting things right. One of the key thoughts fuelling Platonic hedonic theorizing is the thought that, like our beliefs, our pleasures should latch onto the world and make contact with reality. Having pleasures that get things

⁴²⁴ As Socrates puts it in the *Laches* (201a6–7), ‘what I don’t advise is that we leave ourselves as we now are (ἐὰν δὲ ἡμᾶς αὐτοὺς ἔχειν ὡς νῦν ἔχομεν οὐ συμβουλεύω).’

⁴²⁵ Frankfurt (2006: 2).

right is not just intrinsically valuable, though, Plato also understood that there is an intimate link between the truth or falsity of our pleasures—whether they get things right or not—and whether our life counts as worth living or not.

Indeed, the idea of a really good, really happy person living in Murdoch's 'private dream world' filled with deceptive pleasures is unacceptable. For just like we would not opt for a supremely pleasurable jellyfish-like life if these pleasures come without the self-intimating belief *that* we are experiencing pleasure, Plato also thinks, conversely yet similarly, that we would not opt for a life in which our pleasures are completely out of touch with reality. This must be one of the reasons why pleasure, and especially the possibility of being *deceived* by pleasure, figure so centrally in *Republic* 9 and *Philebus*—two dialogues in which Plato is seriously concerned with the question what our lives should be like. To put it boldly, Plato seemingly holds that a hedonic experience only enhances the value of a life if it is reality-based.⁴²⁶

If our pleasures fail to make contact with the world—even though this cannot be appreciated from an inside, first-person perspective—we have an inflated, mistaken sense of how well we are doing. As Plato is fond of saying, there is something darkly comic about people in the grip of deceptive pleasure: their false pleasure is a 'ridiculous imitation' of true pleasure and those who think they are living a life worth living because they are living the life of pleasure are the laughing stock of the better-informed people who understand that pleasure is a γένεσις and not what the pleasure-seekers think it is.

In the *Philebus*, between 48a8 and 51a1, 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 (τῆ τοῦ βίου

⁴²⁶ Cf. Sumner (1996: 111).

συμπάση ... κωμωδία, 50b3),’ someone is laughable or ridiculous in so far as he is mistaken, or mistakenly *optimistic*, about how well he is doing.⁴²⁷ The experience of deceptive pleasure constitutes a failure of self-knowledge, then, in at least two ways. Most obviously, the subject of the deceptive pleasure is ignorant, say, about the fact that he actually finds himself in a state of calm masquerading as pleasure, although he takes himself to be experiencing real pleasure. Additionally, his deceptive pleasure makes him ignorant about how good his life actually is. Tragically enough, though, neither of these failures of self-knowledge can be directly seen for what they are from a subjective perspective: necessarily, all our beliefs strike us as true—otherwise we would not hold them.

It is sometimes said that one of the benefits of doing history of philosophy is that it can enable us to free our thought from ‘what it silently thinks’⁴²⁸ by ‘making the familiar look strange, and conversely.’⁴²⁹ I agree: though *prima facie* strange and counter-intuitive, Plato’s hedonic theorizing can serve as a welcome antidote to our familiar ways of thinking about pleasure. Let me canvass three ways in which engagement with Plato’s thoughts about pleasure might allow us to think differently. For moderns in the grip of a roughly Cartesian psychological and epistemological picture, it must come as a surprise, firstly, that Plato held that, in a deep sense, people often do not know their own minds—including their pleasures. Self-knowledge (even of our occurrent states) is not a given, then, it is an

⁴²⁷ Evans (2008-a: 113). See Vogt (2012: 25–50) for a more detailed examination of this type of ignorance.

⁴²⁸ This is Foucault’s (1984: 9) justification for his renewed interest in Greek (and especially Platonic) thought concerning ‘the use of pleasure.’

⁴²⁹ Williams (2000: 478). Wolfsdorf (2013-b: 278) also thinks that history of philosophy can provide ‘conceptual perspective on the present by offering an array of theoretical options within a broader field of conceptual or logical possibility.’

achievement—and an *ethical* achievement for that matter.

Secondly, Plato resists the idea that pleasure is a sensation, feeling, or private and subjective experience (comparable with a tickle or itch). Instead, much of the heavy lifting of Plato's account of pleasure is done by the idea that pleasures are—at least partially—constituted by representational attitudes. Plato treats pleasure as a special way of taking the world to be a certain way—our pleasures are experiences, as McDowell puts it, in which the world reveals itself to us.⁴³⁰

This is philosophically important for at least two reasons. [i] If our pleasures involve cognitive elements, this entails, firstly, that, unlike brute sensations and like our beliefs, our pleasures can be scrutinized, tested, and examined by philosophy—'the cultivation of the soul, based on true reasoning' (as the pseudo-Platonic definitions define the term). Indeed, Plato claims that much ordinary pleasure—such as the deceptive pleasure of the patients in *Republic* 9—involves some kind of thinking disorder that stands in need of correction.

[ii] Plato's account suggests that pleasure is not just a mental state, but that is a complex whole consisting of the agent's enjoyment and some intentional object (which will often be a state of the world). It follows, given this account, that I am not enjoying some intentional object unless that object really exists: in order to enjoy a piece of classical music, say, I must actually be listening to a piece of classical music instead of floating in a tank, having a realistic dream, or being plugged into some kind of simulation machine. Plato can easily account, then, for the intuition that we should not hook ourselves up to Nozick's experience machine. Most moderns, in stark contrast, are held captive by a mistaken picture of pleasure which is why they struggle to explain their reluctance to entering such a simulation.

⁴³⁰ McDowell (1998: 334).

Thirdly and lastly, if Plato is right that we are subject to a variety of errors concerning our present hedonic experience, this puts pressure on the liberal principle that 'all pleasures are equal and must be valued equally (ἐν πᾶσι τούτοις ἀνανεύει τε καὶ ὁμοίως φησὶν ἀπάσας εἶναι καὶ τιμητέας ἐξ ἴσου, *Republic* 561c3–4). The fact that some pleasures are systematically misleading suggests, in other words, that there are situations where we have reason to call into question someone else's pleasures. For instance, we might be inclined to resist an addict's honest self-report that they are experiencing pleasure while getting high if we learn that they merely use their drug of choice to self-medicate and numb the painful feeling of unresolved childhood trauma. Even though liberal moderns might struggle to justify the intuition triggered by this case, Plato's account is in a position to explain it. There is something sketchy about the pleasure at hand, a Platonist might argue, because a true or real pleasure is more than the mere numbing of pain or because the addict's deceptive pleasure fools the agent into thinking that his life is going better than it actually is.