

[*Philebus: Selected Papers from the VIII Symposium Platonicum*, Academica Verlag, 2010, 209-14; penultimate draft]

Plato's description of the philosopher in the *Theaetetus* confirms, for many, the suspicion that philosophers are an incompetent breed (172c-176a). The philosopher doesn't know how to make his bed, isn't sure whether his neighbor is a man or a beast, and is so caught up in heavenly speculation that he finds himself falling into wells. One of Plato's depictions of the philosopher's otherworldly nature stands in an intriguing contrast to the *Philebus*. The philosopher, he writes, does not know his way to the marketplace (173c-d); compare this to the concession in the *Philebus* that the inexact sciences ought to be included in the best human life, lest we not know our way home (62b). The otherworldly focus of the *Theaetetus* appears opposed to the decidedly this-worldly focus of the *Philebus*. While the *Theaetetus* urges us to flee this world so that we can reside among the gods, the *Philebus* eschews a life it describes as god-like, the life of pure knowledge, devoid of pleasure. In the *Theaetetus*, Plato identifies the escape from this world to the divine realm with *homoiōsis theōi*; this passage serves as the basis for middle Platonists' claims that *homoiōsis theōi* was the *telos* of the Platonic system.¹ Plato, in fact, urges us to emulate the divine in dialogues ranging from the *Symposium* through the *Laws*.² Following Annas' and Sedley's³ seminal papers, *homoiōsis theōi* has received increasing attention among Plato scholars; none, however, takes up the puzzling inconsistency with the *Philebus*. Why should Plato set up a divine ideal in this dialogue, then reject it as an end worth pursuing?

Plato makes four references in the *Philebus* to the ahedonic life. The first is at 20e-22c, where Socrates and Protarchus agree that the mixed life is most choice-worthy. Since it is not sufficient on its own, pleasure is not the good; neither, Protarchus points out, is *nous*. This is perhaps true of *his nous*, Socrates retorts, but divine *nous* is otherwise (22c). In the second passage, at 32d-33b, Socrates argues that if deterioration is pain and restitution pleasure, then at some points, living beings will be in a state of neither pleasure nor pain. Nothing prevents one who has chosen the life of pure reason from living in this state, and it would be unsurprising if this life turned out to be the most divine, *theiotatos*, since it would be unseemly for gods to experience pleasure or pain.⁴ In the third passage, at 43b-c, Socrates amends his previous account of pleasure and pain: these occur only when the change undergone is great enough to be perceptible; it follows, Socrates argues, that the ahedonic life is possible. The final passage is at 54d-55a, where Socrates describes the *kompsoi* as ridiculing those who prefer a life of generation to a life without hunger or thirst, pleasure or pain, consisting solely of thinking as purely as possible.⁵ We might, then, wonder why the ahedonic life is not best, why, at the conclusion of the dialogue, Socrates agrees with

¹ E.g. Alcinous, *Didaskalikos*, 28.1.

² The primary passages which accord an important ethical role to following or imitating god are *Alc.* 133c; *Lg.* 716b-d, 792c-d, 906a-b; *Phd.* 80e-81a, 82b-c; *Phdr.* 248a-c, 249c-d, 252d-253c; *Rep.* 500c-d, 501b, 613a-b; *Symp.* 207c-208b; *Tht.* 176a-b; *Tim.* 47b-c, 90b-d.

³ Annas (1999) and Sedley (1999).

⁴ This passage might appear to claim that the ahedonic life is a real possibility, and hence might seem inconsistent with Plato's purported rejection of the purely intellectual life. However, following Hackforth, I believe that the one described as choosing the life of pure reason must be a god, since it does not seem possible for humans to live without ever experiencing pleasure or pain (1945, 63, n. 2). See also Waterfield (1982), 88, n. 1.

⁵ I should note that in the final two references to the ahedonic life, Plato does not mention the divine; perhaps this is because they fall short of the ideal. The life described at 43b-c perhaps does not count as fully divine because, though it is devoid of pleasure and pain, it is not free from undetectable processes of depletion and replenishment, which the gods surely do not suffer. The passage at 54d-55a contains the qualification, *phronein d' en dunaton hōs hoton te katharōtata*. This suggests that the life is not fully pure, and so falls short of the gods', though one wonders whether, devoid of hunger and thirst, it can count as a potentially human life either.

Protarchus that the life of pure knowledge falls short of the good, and that the mixed life—a life which falls short of the divine—is to be given first honours (67a).

Plato's treatment of the ahedonic life parallels his rejection of the life of pure knowledge. At 59d, Plato proposes that *nous* and *phronēsis* only strictly apply to knowledge of unchanging realities. At 62a, its objects are characterized as divine, and at 62b, the state itself is called *theia epistēmē*. Ultimately, though, egged on by Socrates, Protarchus rejects the life comprised solely of divine knowledge and admits its imprecise variants, in order that we may have some sort of a life (62b-c). As in the case of pleasure, so in the case of impure knowledge, we must wonder why Plato admits it into his characterization of the best life. In the case of knowledge, Protarchus indicates that the pure life is not achievable, since humans must live in this world, and so require correct beliefs about it. In the case of pleasure, however, Plato never supplies any reason, beyond Protarchus' insistence that no one would choose such a life (21e). This is not much of an explanation, since the preferences of the many are never taken very seriously by Plato.

That Plato never gives a satisfactory account of the need to incorporate pleasure into the best life suggests one way of explaining his rejection of the ahedonic ideal in the *Philebus*. Perhaps we should take Socrates' endorsement of the mixed life to be ironic, and understand him to be hinting that it really is the unmixed life which is best. This is supported by the fact that it is typically *Protarchus* who insists that no one would choose the life devoid of pleasure. Against this, at the end of the dialogue, when Protarchus concedes that only the purest forms of knowledge and pleasure should be admitted into the best life (62a-b), it is *Socrates* who goads him into including the impure forms of knowledge. The dialogue concludes with *Socrates* recapitulating their conclusion in his own voice, that the mixed life is better than either pure life (66d-67a); this would be odd if he did not himself agree.

There is an alternate explanation of Plato's rejection of the divine life, one which I think gets closer to the truth. As Frede suggests, "the paradox that the most godlike state is not the best one attainable for human beings" is dissolved by the fact that "our needy natures do not permit us to live that way".⁶ Though I think that this second proposal is largely correct, it is somewhat unsatisfying. In other dialogues as well, Plato recognizes that we may not be able to become fully divine, yet he exhorts us to become as divine *as possible*; why, then, does he shy from this in the *Philebus*? Though Plato lets necessary pleasures—those due to eating and drinking when needed—into the good mixture (62e), he also admits non-necessary pleasures, those of learning and of perception (63e). If these pleasures are not necessary for human life, and if they separate us from the divine, then why include them at all? The answer to this requires that we develop a more elaborate version of the second proposal. I shall argue that our mortal natures are such that in the very process of seeking to become like god, we inevitably experience pleasure, and so fall short of the fully divine state.

In order to establish this, the first topic I need to address is who the gods of the *Philebus* are and why they do not experience pleasure. As space does not permit me to delve into the theology of the *Philebus*, I can only declare my intention to follow Hackforth, Brisson and Menn in distinguishing between two divinities, a transcendent *nous*, identical to the demiurge of the *Timaeus* and external to the *kosmos*, and an immanent *nous*, that of the world-soul.⁷ Suppose we grant this distinction: why, then, do the gods not experience pleasure? Plato never tells us, only commenting that it would be *aschēmon* (33b). My proposal is that the reason varies, depending on which god we consider. Turn first to transcendent *nous*. This is just not the sort of thing that could experience pleasure. Plato at times refers to *nous* as *phronēsis* and *sophia* (28d, 30b); consider how odd, how conceptually incoherent, it would be to say that wisdom is pleased. Furthermore, pleasure is a psychic state, but transcendent *nous* is not *in* a soul; rather, it is the cause of *nous* coming to inhere in

⁶ Frede (1993), 33, n. 2.

⁷ Hackforth (1936), 4-9; Brisson (1974), 80-4; Menn (1995).

the world-soul—in that case, it cannot possibly experience pleasure.⁸ This brings us to cosmic *nous*. Cosmic *nous* is in a soul, as Plato tells us at 30c; why, then, can it not experience pleasure? The reason is that this would violate its nature as the most perfect created thing. At *Republic* 381b-c, Plato objects to poetic depictions of divine transmogrification, since the gods are in the best possible state, and this would imply that they voluntarily enter into a worse state. Similarly, in the *Symposium*, Plato argues that Eros cannot be a god, since he is the desire for the good; the gods are happy, and so, by definition, eternally possess the good and lack nothing (202c). Pleasure, according to Plato, is a process whereby some need is satisfied; should the gods experience pleasure, they would reveal themselves to have been lacking, and so less than divine.

Before turning to Plato’s rejection of the ahedonic life, there is one final piece to set into place: what, exactly, is meant by *homoiōsis theōi*? I shall propose five models of *homoiōsis theōi*, which I call the isolationist, mimetic-contemplative, direct-contemplative, ruling and aretaic models. I will provide a few examples of each from throughout the Platonic corpus.⁹

As the digression in the *Theaetetus* demonstrates, one way that Plato understands *homoiōsis theōi* is as flight from this world. Specifically, it is the philosopher’s intellect which flees to a realm of pure philosophical activity (173e-174a). Call this the isolationist model, the model in which we come to resemble god by isolating our intellect from earthly concerns, and thereby from the body and the lower parts of the soul. Sedley maintains that this causes us to resemble god insofar as we solely identify with our intellect, the divine element within us.¹⁰

In devoting ourselves to philosophy, we come to resemble the gods in another way, by engaging in the same activity as them; call this the mimetic-contemplative model. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato presents the gods as contemplating the forms, then states that the soul which imitates god best contemplates the forms as well (248a). On the third model, the *direct-contemplative* model, we resemble the gods not simply because we share in their contemplative activity, but because *they* are what we contemplate. Beholding the divine affects our souls so that they become similar to the gods’. This is suggested at *Timaeus* 90c-d, where Plato claims that we should redirect the revolutions of our heads which were thrown off course at birth by learning the revolutions of the universe and so bringing our understanding into conformity with its objects.

I have been focusing on intellectual activity as a means to approaching the divine but, in fact, Plato predominantly presents the gods as engaged in ordering the universe and as contemplating the forms for the sake of ruling.¹¹ From this emerges my fourth model, the ruling model: we can imitate god’s role as cosmic ruler by ruling our fellow-citizens and, most importantly, ourselves. Thus, at *Phaedo* 79e-80a, Plato claims that the soul is like the divine because it rules over the body, and at *Timaeus* 41c that the rational part of the soul deserves the name “immortal” because it is divine and rules within those willing to follow justice.

I end with the most significant and frequently emphasized model of *homoiōsis theōi* in Plato, the aretaic model. It is closely related to its predecessor; through ruling ourselves,

⁸ Some scholars, taking Plato to claim in the *Philebus* that all *nous* must inhere in soul, deny that he postulates transcendent *nous*. The correct response to this objection is to emphasize that at 30c, Plato only claims that *nous* cannot come into being without soul; transcendent *nous* is, of course, ungenerated. On this, see Proclus *Tim.* I, 402, Diehl, *apud* Hackforth (1945), 56-7, n. 2; Hackforth (1936), 7; Menn (1995), ch. 4.

⁹ Duerlinger distinguishes three paths of assimilation to god: moral training, dialectic and contemplation (1985, 321). However, I see no reason for distinguishing the latter two. Furthermore, I am opposed to Duerlinger’s claim (for which he relies on neo-Platonist evidence) that virtue is only valued as a means to contemplation (321). Though I do not have the space to defend this claim, I believe that for Plato, virtue and contemplation are deeply interdependent.

¹⁰ Sedley (1999), 320.

¹¹ E.g. *Phdr.* 246e, *Tim.* 29a-b, *Lg.* 900d.

we not only mimic the ordering activity of god, but also make our souls resemble his in virtue. In the *Republic*, Plato claims that the gods favour those who make themselves as like god as a human can through adopting a virtuous way of life (613a-b). Similarly, in the *Laws*, Plato writes that sensible men ought to follow god, making their characters resemble his through becoming moderate (716c-d).

Broadly speaking, within these five models of *homoiōsis theōi*, we can detect two strands: models centered on knowledge and models centered on virtue. Though Plato does not explicitly refer to either of these forms of *homoiōsis theōi* in the *Philebus* as such, he does link the acquisition of virtue and knowledge to the divine. We can uncover a reference to the aretaic model in the parallel developed between human and cosmic *nous* (30a). The core function of cosmic *nous* is to order the universe; in that case, we come to resemble *nous* by ordering ourselves. Thus, at 59d-e, Socrates likens himself and Protarchus to *dēmiourgoi*, creating the best possible mixture of pleasure and knowledge; presumably each of us is to engage in this demiurgic function in crafting a good life for himself. Furthermore, at 39e, Plato claims that the man who is virtuous in all respects is *theophilēs*. What about knowledge? At 16c, Plato calls the method of *diairesis* a gift from the gods, and describes the men of old with this knowledge as closer to the gods than ourselves. At the conclusion of the dialogue, he refers to knowledge of the forms as a *theia epistēmē* (62b). So the two models of *homoiōsis theōi* we have uncovered—focused on knowledge and virtue—appear at least compatible with the *Philebus*. At the same time, each of these is explicitly linked to pleasure. In the case of virtue, Plato writes that the pleasures which serve virtue and follow it everywhere are included in the good life (63e). In the case of knowledge, Plato assigns the fifth rank of the good to the pure pleasures associated with knowledge and perception (66c).

Why does Plato take knowledge and virtue to be tied to pleasure? In his discussion of pure pleasures, Plato proposes that there is a pleasure of learning, which results from being filled with knowledge (51e-52b). This analysis bears a strong resemblance to *Republic* 585a-e, where Plato claims that knowledge produces the truest pleasure because it fills an emptiness in the soul with true being. For us, the process whereby we gain knowledge and come to resemble the gods is a pleasurable filling. The gods do not experience such pleasure because, as Plato tells us in the *Symposium*, they are in a state of perpetual knowledge and so do not *philosophein* (204a); we, by contrast, must constantly maintain our knowledge through study (207e-208a).

To turn to our second mode of *homoiōsis theōi*, Plato never explains why the acquisition of virtue should be pleasurable. However, Frede has a helpful observation on 63e. Here, Plato writes that the best human life should include the pleasures “which, becoming attendants (*opadoi*) to complete virtue, as if it were a god, follow it everywhere”. As Frede notes, this calls to mind the image in the *Phaedrus*, where those who were once attendants (*opadoi*) of Zeus strive to become as like the god as they can (252c-253c). This suggests that the pleasures which follow the goddess, virtue, are those involved in becoming as virtuous as possible.¹² Throughout the dialogues, Plato treats virtue as a harmonious state of the soul. In the *Philebus*, he claims that the imposition of limit on the unlimited and establishment of harmony produce many beautiful things in the soul, presumably virtues (26b), and he later develops a link between *symmetria* and virtue (64e). At 31d, Plato claims that the disintegration of harmony is pain, its reestablishment pleasure. If to become virtuous is to become harmonized, then this process will inevitably be pleasant. As with the case of gaining knowledge, it is the *process* of becoming virtuous that we experience as pleasant and which marks us off from the gods; the gods never become virtuous, because they are such eternally.

Before concluding, I would like to turn to a significant objection to my interpretation. What if the gods *do* experience pleasure?¹³ This possibility was first brought

¹² Frede (1993), 78, n.1.

¹³ Due to considerations of space, I cannot extend my discussion of this thesis to other dialogues. There are two passages that I am aware of in the Platonic corpus which can be taken to imply that the gods experience

to my attention in a provocative article by Carone; if she is correct, then the tension which I have been attempting to resolve between the *Philebus* and other dialogues would be entirely diffused.¹⁴ Carone argues that Plato's statement that it would be unfitting for the gods to experience pleasure (33b) is early in the dialogue, when he has yet to introduce the pure pleasures, and is contingent upon a restitution-based analysis of pleasure, which she claims Plato rejects.¹⁵ Indeed, it is hard to see why the pure pleasures of perception need be subject to a restitution-based model; if they are exempt, then there is no obvious reason why the gods might not experience them. Carone concedes that at the end of the dialogue Plato again raises the possibility of the ahedonic life, attributing it to the *kompsoi* (53c), but she contends that this is based upon an analysis of pleasure as a process of generation, an analysis which she, again, takes Plato to reject.¹⁶

In response, I would urge the following. It is true that the claim that it would be unfitting for the gods to experience pleasure is made before Plato introduces the pure pleasures. But which pleasures are absent that the gods might experience? Surely not the restitutive pleasure of learning. But the only other pure pleasures Plato mentions are those of perceiving pure colours, sounds and smells. These are pleasures grounded in perception, and, given Plato's consistent preference for contemplation over perception, I am not convinced that the gods would pursue these. Furthermore, it is possible that the pleasures of perception, like the pleasures of learning are, in fact, restitutive. Plato's phrasing is ambiguous: he lists the pure pleasures as "those related to colours said to be beautiful, to shapes and smells and sounds, *kai hosa tas endeias anaisthētous echonta kai alupous tas plērōseis aisthētas kai hēdeias paradōsin*" (51b). Frede translates this last phrase as epexegetical, revealing that the whole category of pure pleasures are preceded by imperceptible lacks,¹⁷ a reading which receives support from *Timaieus* 46e-47c, where Plato assigns perceptual processes a restitutive role in returning the revolutions of our souls to harmony. In that case, the restitution-based model would still be in place, and Plato's earlier claim that the gods do not experience pleasure would not be overturned. Finally, there is no definitive evidence that Plato disagrees with the *kompsoi*. Unlike the case of the anti-hedonists (44c-d), he does not signal his rejection of their view, and in fact expresses gratitude to them and endorsement of their conclusion (54d).

Generally speaking, my argument relies on a conception of human nature as imperfect. If we could become permanently and unchangingly virtuous and knowing, then, once we got past the initial generative pleasures, like the gods, we too would be in an ahedonic state. What precludes such a possibility is that human nature is inherently unstable and lacking. In the *Symposium*, Plato claims that we do not possess knowledge in the unchanging manner of the gods, but must constantly replenish it, through study (207e-208a). In the *Timaieus*, Plato writes that our souls are crafted by the en-uranean gods to ensure their inferiority (41c); the orbits of our souls are liable to become askew, and require adjustment. In the *Phaedrus*, controlling our soul's horses and sustaining a vision of the forms is a precarious task, requiring constant vigilance (248a). All of this suggests that we are doomed to lives in which we must repeatedly ascend to the sight of the forms, and in which we must

pleasure. At *Phdr.* 247d, the gods are described as feasting upon and enjoying the sight of the forms. And at *Tim.* 37c, the demiurge is delighted when he beholds the universe in motion. Against this, though, it should be noted that Plato never uses *hēdonē* and its cognates in these passages, and that the words he uses, *agapain*, *eupathein*, *agasthai* and *euphrainesthai*, need not be taken as synonymous with *hēdesthai*. By contrast, Plato quite explicitly states in the *Philebus*, as well as in the *Laws* (792c-d) and *Third Letter* (315c) that the gods are ahedonic. In the *Laws*, in particular, Plato writes that god is in a state between pleasure and pain, to which the one who wishes to live like god should aspire.

¹⁴ Carone (2000).

¹⁵ Carone (2000), 262.

¹⁶ Carone (2000), 264-6.

¹⁷ Frede (1993), 60.

constantly attend to our psychic constitutions, struggling to regain and maintain inner harmony.

Ultimately, the *Philebus* strikes me as not so much opposed to the dialogues enjoining us to pursue *homoiōsis theōi*, as differing in focus. In dialogues such as the *Theaetetus*, where Plato exhorts us to imitate the gods, he highlights the ways in which we can come to resemble them. The *Philebus*, of course, is a dialogue about pleasure, and here, Plato's eye is on how we are incapable of the ahedonic state of the gods. Another way of thinking of this is to note, following Russell,¹⁸ that when Plato urges us to emulate god, he typically adds the rider, "to the degree possible".¹⁹ Part of the gap between the *Philebus* and other dialogues lies in which side of this caveat is emphasized: while in the *Theaetetus*, *Republic* and *Laws*, Plato emphasizes how much we can come to resemble god, in the *Philebus*, Plato's focus is on how far we fall short—after all, if we were gods, we would not have to strive to be like them. Surprisingly, though the *Philebus* appears an optimistic dialogue, focused on the happy human life, it contains a pessimistic tinge. Of course, for many of us, the fact that knowledge and virtue can be gained at all, and that they are to be gained with pleasure, as well as hard work, turns out to be occasion for relief and delight, and hardly a cause for regret.

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¹⁸ Russell (2005), 148; see also Rutenber (1946), 38-9.

¹⁹ E.g. *Rep.* 613a-b, *Thi.* 176b, *Tim.* 90c. See also *Phd.* 65a, 67a; *Rep.* 383c, 500c-d; *Phdr.* 253a; *Lg.* 716c-d.

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