

Le Philèbe de Platon. Introduction à l'Agathologie Platonicienne. By Sylvain Delcomminette. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006. Pp. xi + 680. \$209. ISBN 978 9004150 26 3. [<2300 words]

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The *Philebus* is Plato's most difficult dialogue to interpret as a unified, compelling work, to judge from the percentage of its commentators who have asserted such an interpretation is impossible. In this comprehensive commentary, Sylvain Delcomminette makes the case that the *Philebus* contains compelling arguments united by their dialectical development of an account of the good, an account that complements Plato's other work. The book makes a significant contribution to the study of Plato that is essential reading for scholars at work on the *Philebus*.

As a commentary, the book follows the *Philebus* closely, discussing virtually every speech in the dialogue, while the chapter divisions break the dialogue into its different stages. Chapter One opens the debate about the good: Is it pleasure, cognition, or something else? Chapter Two marks a metaphysical transition: when Protarchus objects to Socrates' efforts to distinguish pleasure into intrinsically distinct pleasures, Socrates responds by generalizing Protarchus's objection to a problem of one and many. Chapter Two also describes how Protarchus comes to accept Socrates' hypothesis that any one—not merely a material one like Protarchus or Socrates but even a formal one like Cognition or Pleasure—is many, that the air of paradox is a linguistic phenomenon, and that the hypothesis is a necessary presupposition of scientific research and pedagogical exposition. Chapter Three refutes two identity theses, showing that the good in human life cannot simply be identical either to pleasure or to knowledge. The remaining inquiry is: what is the good, and what is its relation to pleasure and knowledge? Chapter Four articulates four formal tools needed in the inquiry: *the Unlimited, Limit, Mixture, and Cause*. Chapters Five through Ten distinguish the one, Pleasure, as many different kinds of pleasure, including different kinds of intrinsically true and false pleasures as well as pleasures intrinsically either mixed with or pure of pain. Chapters Eleven through Thirteen distinguish different branches of knowledge in terms of their intrinsic precision and certainty. Chapter Fourteen summarizes the progress made in the dialogue in preparation for the climax, namely, an account of the forms of pleasure and knowledge acceptable in a good human life (Chapter Fifteen); the form of the good in relation to other dialogues, in particular the *Republic* (Chapter Sixteen); and the final ranking of intelligence far above pleasure in its likeness to the good (Chapter Seventeen).

Scholarship on the *Philebus* has proliferated since the most recent commentaries, by M. Migliori (*L'uomo fra piacere, intelligenza e bene: commentario storico-filosofico al "Filebo" di Platone*, Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 1993) and D. Frede (*Platon: werke, Übersetzung und Kommentar*, vol. III.2, *Philebos*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997). And these two commentaries themselves were written in ignorance of each other, like great

ships sailing past each other in the night. Delcomminette serves scholarship well, therefore, by drawing together these many discussions of the myriad aspects of the *Philebus* into a single discussion. The references have sufficient breadth and depth to guide the reader through the extraordinary diversity of scholarship in antiquity as well as in modern English, French, German, Italian, and Latin (a 1947 essay on lines 66a7-8), with indexes of both names and passages. There are no references to work in Modern Greek, Portuguese, or Spanish, the most significant omission being Francisco Bravo's *Las Ambigüedades del Placer* (Sankt Augustin: Academia, 2003).

In addition to his huge achievement of inclusive scholarship, Delcomminette makes sensible judgments about the competing interpretations and has many brilliant insights into the particulars of the dialogue, for example, the true pleasures at 51b: "the so-called beautiful colors and shapes and most pleasures of fragrance and sound and all perceived and pleasant fillings of unperceived and painless lacks." Delcomminette rightly sides with those who read this list as an account of true pleasure, giving a definition—felt restoration of unfelt lack—with illustrative examples—colors, shapes, fragrances, and sounds. But this has raised a question: What painless lacks do colors, shapes, and sounds restore? Delcomminette finds the key to the solution at *Timaeus* 47a-e, which "presents vision and sound as divine gifts with the purpose of making human beings capable of attaining inner harmony by contemplating the exterior harmony presented by the beauty of the regular movements of the heavens or of music" (p. 466). People are not pained by this postulated inner disharmony—which is nothing but a lack of virtue—as such. When they contemplate the regularities of audible harmony thanks to the instruments of music and the regularities of the visible motions of the cosmos thanks to the constructions of geometry, their souls recover to some extent the lost harmony. Delcomminette's interpretation gives us a good fit with the text of the *Philebus* and a plausible theory of psychic restoration.

In addition to many insights about particulars, the book makes two breakthroughs towards a charitable view of the dialogue as a whole, with respect to its unity both with itself (Chapter One) and with a project left unfinished in Plato's *Republic* (Chapter Sixteen).

The *Philebus* opens by alluding to a prior debate—off camera, as it were—between Socrates and Philebus: is it pleasure or cognition that makes life good? Scholars often complain that the opening passage presents Philebus's position about pleasure in an indeterminate or perhaps inconsistent way: *either* that pleasure is identical to the good, as Protarchus interprets him, *or* that it is one good, perhaps among other goods, as Socrates interprets him. Some scholars emend or strain the meaning of the Greek text to give a single thesis to Philebus; others express disappointment at the vagary. Chapter One's breakthrough is to accept the text at face value: Socrates and Protarchus differ in their interpretations of Philebus. Such a reading unites this dialogue that has been notorious for its disunity. For, as Delcomminette shows, Socrates refutes two target theses about the good in the course of the dialogue. To refute the Protarchan identity thesis that pleasure is *identical* to the good, Socrates uses

thought experiments to show that neither pleasure without cognition nor cognition without pleasure is sufficient for what any person would want from life (20e-22c). As Socrates says, for this argument they will “not yet (οὐκ ἔτι) need the division-induced forms of pleasure” (20c4-5—another riddle of a passage that Delcomminette is able to solve without emendation). But in order to refute the thesis that all pleasure as such is good—the thesis Socrates (as opposed to Protarchus) attributes to Philebus—as well as to establish Socrates’ own thesis that cognition is far more similar than pleasure to the good, Socrates will use the laborious process of dividing pleasure and knowledge into the many kinds relevant to these questions (31a-59d), which in turn requires the prior metaphysical agreement to talk about one being many (12a-16e), the Divine Method (16c-19c) and the formal ontology of Limit, Limitlessness, Mix, and Cause (22d-30e).

In a second breakthrough, Chapter Sixteen demonstrates a unity of project between the *Republic* and the *Philebus*. The *Philebus* begins with the alternatives both of which the *Republic* (at 505b) found unsatisfactory, namely that the good is either pleasure or knowledge. The dialogue proceeds not hypothetically from unargued postulates, not metaphorically with an image of the sun, but dialectically in a conversation where even basic metaphysics, method, and ontology are under discussion. In the course of that discussion, the good is shown to be neither pleasure nor cognition but a trinity of measure, beauty, and truth. “The investigation of the *Philebus* has succeeded in providing what the *Republic* denied us: the *logos* of the good” (p. 586). Delcomminette shows how the trinity of measure, beauty, and truth corresponds to the *Republic*’s image of the sun and explains in what sense the good transcends all other forms in dignity: the form of the good, as measure, is the cause of the measure of all other Forms yet “is not itself measured” (p. 600) by another.

A work of Delcomminette’s magnitude deserves, more than notice, critical discussion. In conclusion, I attempt to provide such criticism at three points. (I make these and other criticisms in my *Argument Analysis of Plato’s Philebus*, forthcoming online at Archelogos.com.)

I. The book gives an unsatisfactory account of the problem of one and many. Delcomminette’s original reading is that the one is a *logos*, that is, a definition of a species, and the many its parts (p. 36). Such a reading is implausible for at least two reasons. First, it requires clairvoyance on the part of Protarchus, since, according to Delcomminette, this “interpretation of the text can be obtained only when its relation to the method introduced a little later (16c5-17a4) is rightly understood” (p. 22): without clairvoyance, therefore, Socrates’ speech at 15b must be unintelligible to Protarchus when he hears it. Second, Delcomminette must take the divine method of 16c-17a “to *give rise* to” the problems of one and many (p. 29), but the text states, on the contrary, that “there is no better way” (16b) than this method to *avoid* the problems caused by the three controversies by providing “*euporia*,” a solution that works (15c: for further discussion of this problem see also F. Muniz and G. Rudebusch, “*Philebus* 15b: A Problem Solved,” *Classical Quarterly* 2004 vol. 54: 394-405).

2. The book's reading (p. 218) of the *apeiron* as 'indefinite' or 'indeterminate' (a reading that follows e.g. J.C.B. Gosling, *Philebus*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1975) leads to an unsatisfactory reading of Philebus's speech at 27e, where Philebus claims that pleasure is good because of its being "*apeiron* in magnitude." Philebus of course is claiming that what makes pleasure good is that *it can increase ever more in magnitude*, not that it is *indeterminate* in magnitude, so that *apeiron* must mean 'limitless' or 'boundless', not one of those things so indeterminate that "they can never be grasped by cognition" (*qui échappent toujours à l'intelligence*, p. 221).

3. It is unsatisfactory for Delcomminette not to take seriously but to dismiss as "play" (*jeu*, p. 263) the argument that there is a particular cognition—call it 'Zeus'—that rules heaven and earth (28c) and that Cognition is a species of Cause (30d-e). His reading of the argument fails both to identify the argument's inferential structure and to locate the alleged instances of comical or playful inferences or premises. The definition of *organic body* as "a unity of the elements earth, air, fire and water" (29d7-8) is the only false premise I find in the argument. My judgment of this premise's falsity, like Plato's judgment of its truth, depends upon an understanding of the type of chemical organization necessary for organic bodies. Whereas science today finds such life-establishing organization to be lacking at the cosmic level, the science of Plato's day found no such lack. Given a macrocosmic life and the causal priority of the macrocosm to its microcosmic inhabitants (29a-e), the rest of the argument's premises and inferences are plausible. We ought to explain why the argument contains the false definition of organic body by reference to the scientific understanding of Plato's day, which turned out to be false, not by the hypothesis that Plato saw the implausibility of a scientific commonplace of his day and wished to play a game with that commonplace.

Delcomminette asserts that Socrates himself calls the argument a game at 28c3 and 30e6-7 (p. 263). But this is more than the text says. At 28c3 Socrates says that he "stirred up [Philebus] by exalting [his own god, Cognition] *in play*" (*σεμνύων ἐν τῷ παίζειν ἐθορύβησα*). What stirred up Philebus was Socrates' suggestion that, were we to assign the species Cognition to the wrong genus, "we would sin against a god" (*ἂν ἀσεβοῦμεν*, 28a6). Socrates' assumption that Cognition is a divinity against which we might sin draws Philebus back into a conversation he had left, complaining, "You are exalting *your* god" (*σεμνύεις . . . τὸν σεαυτοῦ θεόν* 28b1)—to which Socrates in effect says, "I was just kidding when I suggested Cognition is a god." Socrates thereupon directly proves precisely that Cognition is a god, indeed the supreme god Zeus of the cosmos. This text, therefore, only shows Socrates calling a 'game' his unargued suggestion at 28a6, not his rigorous proof at 29a-30e in answer to Philebus's challenge. Thus this text does not support Delcomminette's interpretation that the argument for Cognition's divinity and causal nature is but a game.

At 30e6-7 Socrates says that "play is sometimes a respite from *spoudē*," that is, from *religious zealotry*, *partisan rivalry*, or any *serious talk*. But it is left to the reader to interpret what exactly he is calling 'play'. His lengthy argument that Cognition is god of the cosmos is an unlikely candidate, since he has just

affirmed that that argument was “nothing idle” (30d6), that it validates the wisdom of men of old (30d7-8), and that it has successfully given Socrates’ answer to his question, since the argument shows that Cognition is a species of Cause (30d10-e3). A much better candidate for the play is in the immediate antecedent to Socrates’ speech, where Protarchus points out that Socrates classified Cognition, “*although the answer escaped my notice*” (καίτοι με ἀποκρινάμενος ἔλαθες, 30e4-5). To answer a man’s question without his noticing it is, unlike an argument from cosmic design, a recognized form of play. And when the answer may offend against the religious convictions of one faction in the audience (by making one god, Cognition, supreme over a rival god, Pleasure), it is clear why such play would be a relief from zealotry. Thus this text supports Delcomminette’s interpretation no more than 28c3.