

## How Plato Saved Pleasures for Philosophy

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Of all Plato's dialogues, the *Phaedo* is considered the most imbued with ascetic views. The image of the real philosopher, who depreciates bodily pleasures and strives for absolute purity and otherworldly wisdom, inspired both later Platonists and Church Fathers. Nowadays, even those researchers who try to reconcile the 'enlightened hedonism' of the *Protagoras* and the attack on bodily pleasures in the *Phaedo*, admit that the 'hedonistic calculus' remains at work here only inasmuch as the intellectual pleasures count more than bodily ones. There is no more room left for the moderate physical enjoyment, once envisaged in the *Protagoras*. Presumably, under Pythagorean influence the *Phaedo* and the *Gorgias* put a considerable emphasis on the soul/body dualism, which in turn entails a negative attitude to bodily pleasures (Gosling and Taylor, 1982, p. 97). Pleasures are a hindrance to cognition, and we must get rid of them completely. Real philosophy, full detachment.

Such an interpretation is difficult to square with the picture given in the *Republic*. There, it is not the 'evil' body which is held responsible for self-indulgence, but the irrational soul, and thus the full detachment from the body, even if possible, would not be a sufficient condition for attaining wisdom. A possible explanation in terms of philosophical development is not entirely satisfactory. Thus, in the *Symposium*, which is written about the same period that the *Phaedo*, Socrates is portrayed as one who "can on occasion enjoy his wine", but who "is not to be overcome by pleasure" (Hackforth, 1955, p. 49). And in the *Republic*, there is no more question of full detachment from the body, but rather of measure and order (Pl. *R.* 586e). Given that, the *Phaedo* emerges as a thin layer of radical and somewhat unparalleled asceticism among the middle dialogues.

In this paper, I contend that Plato's attitude to bodily pleasures in the *Phaedo* is not that unparalleled. Though in the 'apology of Socrates' full detachment is required for attaining wisdom, this position is mitigated as the conversation proceeds. This inner shift may pass unnoticed if we read the dialogue as a treatise whose parts are intrinsically coherent. But they are not. To read the dialogue like this means to ignore completely the psychagogic dimension of the discussion.

Let us now consider the two-stage attack on bodily pleasures in the *Phaedo*.

Stage one (*Phd.* 64c–69e). The real philosopher denounces the so-called pleasures (64d3; 65a7) and releases his soul, as far as possible, "from its communion with the body" (65a1–2; hereinafter transl. by Gallop, 1993). He does so, because his aim is φρόνησις which cannot be attained through sense-perception (65b3–6). Therefore, if the soul wants to "attain the truth" (65b9: τῆς ἀληθείας ἄπτεται), it must examine things "alone by itself as far as possible, disregarding the body" (65c5–9: μηδ' ἀπτομένη), for the body confuses the soul and "doesn't allow it to gain truth and wisdom" (66a5–6; cf. 66d2–7). The 'purity' of cognition is dependent on the remoteness of the soul from the body (65e6–66a1; 66d8–e2). This means that "either knowledge is nowhere to be gained, or else it is for the dead", for only then "will the soul be alone by itself apart from the body" (66e4–67a2).

In the *Phaedo*, we are not informed on the exact nature of pleasure, to which Plato will return later, in the *Republic* IX. In somewhat vague terms we are only told that bodily pleasures are things of no real value (69bc), probably not even pleasures (64d3: τὰς ἡδονὰς καλουμένας), and that they shackle the soul to its prison (65a, 82e, 84a). If they could, real philosophers would prefer a life of no pleasure completely; that is why, in the eyes of ‘the many’, they live with one foot in the grave (65a: ἐγγύς τι τείνειν τοῦ τεθνάναι). Socrates’s thesis that genuine philosophers practice “dying and being dead” (64a) makes Simmias laugh: the Thebans would agree, he believes, that philosophers are indeed nearly dead (64b: θανατῶσι<sup>1</sup>).

Simmias was not the only one to laugh: willingly or not, Socrates repeats here a well-known cliché ridiculed a bit later in Middle Attic comedy. The nameless pythagorists depicted there are normally unwashed and hungry (Alex. Fr. 196-197 Kock). Their poor and bizarre diet is supplemented by intellectual nourishment (Alex. Fr. 220-221 Kock), and their extravagant austerity make them welcomed guests at the symposium with Pluto after death (Aristopho. Fr. 9-12 Kock). Riedweg justly notes that this image “basically confirms Iamblichus’ (Aristotle’s?) statement that the mathematicians recognized the acousmatics’ lifestyle as Pythagoric, but considered their own ‘scientific’ version of Pythagoreanism to be superior” (Riedweg, 2005, p. 108).

This reference to scientific Pythagoreanism is not devoid of interest. Real philosophers hold the body entirely responsible for the ἀφροσύνη, notwithstanding the obvious fact that it is not only the inaccuracy of the senses which causes confusion, but also the very object of research, i.e. the physical world (cf. Bostock, 1986, p. 26). They strive to establish the οὐσία of the things (65e1: ἀπάντων τῆς οὐσίας ὁ τυγχάνει ἕκαστον ὄν), but apply their efforts to the ever-flowing physical world and are frustrated. Despite perpetual frustration, genuine philosophers do not allow for any other type of research but for that in company with the body. This makes them pessimistic as to the possibility to attain wisdom before death, after the soul has been completely purged of the body. Only then will they be able to view “the objects themselves” (αὐτὰ τὰ πράγματα) with the soul itself (66b-67b), for “never will it be permissible for impure to touch pure” (67b: μὴ καθαρῷ γὰρ καθαροῦ ἐφάπτεσθαι μὴ οὐ θεμιτὸν ἦ).

This picture roughly corresponds to the description of Pythagorean philosophy given by Aristotle: despite the fact that they took their principles from non-perceptible (οὐκ ἐξ αἰσθητῶν), i.e. mathematical, objects, “they discuss and wholly make the object of their philosophical inquiry nature (πραγματεύονται περὶ φύσεως)”; they are “in agreement with other natural scientists that what actually exists is what is perceived (τό γε ὄν τοῦτ’ ἐστὶν ὅσον αἰσθητὸν ἐστὶ)” (Arist. *Metaph.* A 8 989b29 sqq; transl. and discussion in Horky, 2013, p. 19). What Aristotle says here might be partially inspired by Plato himself and by Academic discussions on the subject. At least, as far as the *Phaedo* suggests, the source of the real philosophers’ pessimism lies in their πραγματεία (cf. Dixsaut, 1991, p. 64).

Of course, there is no hint yet at this stage that such an unrewarding undertaking is in the least pleasant. On the contrary, the long grumbling monologue of the real philosophers (66b1-67b5) shows that they are far from being happy with their intellectual activity, but tend to blame the body for all the failures.

Stage two (80c–84b). The contrast between the soul and the body is reinforced, and two possible posthumous scenarios are outlined. In scenario A, the soul is separated “in purity, while trailing nothing of the body with it”, for it had shunned it during life; it therefore departs to what is similar to it, “the divine and immortal and wise” (80e2-81e10). In scenario B,

<sup>1</sup> I understand *moribundi* with Burnet, 1911.

the soul is separated polluted, for it “has always been with the body”; such soul is so bewitched that it thinks “nothing else real save what is corporeal” etc. (81b1-d4).

The difference between scenarios A and B is that in A, the soul is released pure, whereas in B — impure. Already this implies that purity, or detachment, from the body, is attained *before* death. And indeed, in 79c2-8 we read that whenever the soul uses the body in its investigations it “is dragged by the body towards objects that are never constant”, and gets dizzy by virtue of contact with them (ἄτε τοιούτων ἐφαπτομένη). On the contrary, “whenever it studies alone by itself, it departs yonder towards that which is pure and always existent” and ceases from its wandering because of contact with such things (ἄτε τοιούτων ἐφαπτομένη). This πάθημα is called φρόνησις (79d1-7).

Two salient contradictions deserve noticing. First, in stage one it is not permissible for impure to touch (ἐφάπτεσθαι) pure (67b2), in stage two it is precisely this contact with pure objects which leads to the soul’s purity. Second, in stage one φρόνησις was said to be unattainable before physical death, i.e. before full detachment of the soul from the body, in stage two it is the contact with the pure during life which is called φρόνησις. Remarkably, in 114c7-8 Socrates urges his interlocutors to “do everything possible to have part in goodness and wisdom (φρονήσεως) *during life*” (emphasis ours — O. A.).

This move from stage one to stage two would have been impossible, if both φρόνησις and κάθαρσις had not undergone a semantic change. From a merely negative characteristic of the ‘detached’ soul, κάθαρσις came to be regarded on a par with a set of positive notions, such as ‘unvarying’ and ‘invisible’ (80d), whereas φρόνησις — with the state of the soul converted to such pure beings. This shift in meaning has been prepared by the first three arguments. Let me briefly restate the essentials. The cyclical argument drew our attention to the constant change in the physical world of becoming (the word γένεσις and its cognates are used 38 times in two pages). The recollection argument has established the existence of the beautiful and “all such reality” (76d8-9). The next argument establishes the affinity between “all such reality” and the soul. Normally taken as the weakest from the logical point of view, this argument is indispensable for Plato’s train of thought. It enables him to establish an object of research which would be most convenient for the soul and would lead it directly to φρόνησις.

The good news is that one need not die in order to study things. The bad news is that the severity of lifestyle as such does not guarantee φρόνησις, unless cognition is turned to a proper object. For Plato, the detachment from the body is, primarily, a correct research program, not a specific diet. The ascetic κάθαρσις of real philosophers has given place to the epistemic κάθαρσις. This is not to say that Plato’s aim is to refute his virtual opponents, though there is, in a fact, a strong polemic element in the discussion. It is significant that the conversation proceeds from the premises adopted by real philosophers, and leads to conclusions ostensibly accepted by them. Therefore, their views on pleasure are corrected rather than rejected.

These corrections are twofold. First, intellectual pleasures are, after all, possible. Towards the end of the dialogue we learn that the life of the philosopher has its enjoyments (114e: τὰς [ἡδονὰς] δὲ περὶ τὸ μανθάνειν): μάθησις is possible despite the soul’s connection to the body. Genuine philosophers failed to recognize the reality of the true pleasures of cognition, because their studies focused on the πράγματα (66b-67b), i.e. objects of natural philosophy, and could not be but frustrating. At 100a, Socrates suggests an alternative methodology: instead of looking at things (πρὸς τὰ πράγματα) with his eyes and trying to lay hold (ἄπτεσθαι) of them with each of his senses, he takes refuge in *logoi*, and studies “the truth of matters” (τῶν ὄντων τὴν ἀλήθειαν) in them. However, he adds, the comparison is, in a certain way, inept: “I don’t at all admit that one who examines things in *logoi* is any more studying them in images than one who examines them in things (ἐν [τοῖς] ἔργοις)”. By turning his in-

terlocutors to the study of the Forms, Plato establishes — *en passant* — the pleasantness of the philosophical life.

Second, the severity towards bodily pleasures is mitigated. Stage two says that philosophers “abstain from all bodily desires” (82c3: ἀπέχονται τῶν κατὰ τὸ σῶμα ἐπιθυμιῶν), as well as “from pleasures and desires and pains”, reckoning that “when one feels intense (σφόδρα) pleasure or fear, pain, or desire” one incurs “the greatest and most extreme of all evils”: the soul “is forced at the same time to suppose that whatever most affects it in this way is most clear and most real, when it is not so” (83c; cf. 81b). In other words, only intense pleasures and pains are now banned from the philosophical life insofar they entail mistakes concerning reality. It is tacitly assumed that more moderate pleasures, if they do not bewitch the soul, might be kept, for they do not hinder cognition.

But why speak of pleasures in the first place? If the good life and philosophy are worth having for themselves, there is no need to search for the benefits resulting from them. To be sure, pleasantness is not the decisive argument in favour of the philosophical life. But two things need to be considered here. First, both here and in later dialogues, Plato insists that philosophical life will necessarily be more pleasant than any other, even if it is not the reason why we choose it. Second, to judge from the *Gorgias*, Plato was aware of the disrepute to which philosophy has fallen not only among ‘the many’, but also among people with education and character, like Callicles. In tune with comic playwrights mentioned above, Callicles thinks that an austere life is good for nothing.

Socrates, in exhorting Callicles to a temperate and orderly life, cites an unnamed sage,<sup>2</sup> whose allegorical interpretation of the Netherworld imagery presupposes that we are already dead and that the body is our tomb (Pl. *Grg.* 493c). On this interpretation, the intemperate are the most wretched of all men, for their insatiable souls cannot be filled, like leaky jars (cf. 496de). Socrates then describes another person, who has his sound jars full, and lives in a perfect state of ἡσυχία (493e6). But Callicles does not buy it: happiness implies constant replenishment, otherwise “stones and corpses would be happiest” (492e; transl. by Irwin, 1979). For Callicles, “that one who has filled up has no pleasure at all any more”, whereas living pleasantly is “in having as much as possible flowing in” (494b).

We find a similar notion of pleasure in the *Republic* IX, where Plato shows that the neutral state, or ἡσυχία, is not to be mistaken for pleasure, which is movement (Pl. *R.* 584d). It is worth underlining that the view that pleasure is a sort of movement<sup>3</sup> has not been renounced by Plato at any stage of his career. Nor is it absent from the *Gorgias*, where Socrates does not subscribe to the ideas of the ‘sage’ unqualifiedly, and accurately mentions them as the actual ‘copyright holders’ in 493c. It is not about the nature of pleasure *qua* movement that Callicles and Socrates disagree, but about the correct choice of pleasures: Callicles is being too unscrupulous, which is a sign of an unhealthy nature for Socrates. In fact, Callicles’s vehement criticism of ἡσυχία signals that Plato is aware of the problems inherent in the doctrine of the ‘sage’ (presumably, his pythagorizing friends). So in the *Phaedo*, he returns to this doctrine to apply the replenishment model to intellectual pleasures as well.

Therefore, intellectual pleasure in the *Phaedo* must correspond to some lack. There are several indications that this lack is ἀπιστία, and the corresponding replenishment is πίστις. Both words are related to πείθομαι (zero vocalism πῖθ-), and this etymological connection is constantly at play in the *Phaedo*. The starting point for the discussion of immortality is the

<sup>2</sup> Presumably, a Pythagorean; see (Kingsley, 1995, p. 104).

<sup>3</sup> See the old, but still indispensable survey in (Taylor, 1928, p. 448 sqq.): “From Alcmaeon the theory passed to the Sicilian school of medicine through Pythagoreanism and Empedocles”. Doxographical tradition (DK 31 A95) ascribes a similar view to Empedocles.

ἀπιστία of the many (69e3;<sup>4</sup> 70e1); one needs πίστις (Gallop: ‘convincing’; Hackforth: ‘persuasive argument’) on this point (70b2). After the recollection argument, Cebes’s ἀπιστία is reiterated (77a9); he needs to be convinced (77b1: πεπεισθαι) not only that the soul existed before birth, but also that it is to exist after death. The third argument does not leave him and Simmias entirely convinced (ἔτι ἀπιστεῖς; cf. 87a8; 87c1; 91c8). After the objections of Simmias and Cebes, Phaedo reports to Echecrates that everyone was “disagreeably affected by their words” (ἀηδῶς διετέθημεν): “We’d been completely convinced (σφόδρα πεπεισμένους) by the earlier argument, yet now they seemed to disturb us again, and make us doubtful (εἰς ἀπιστίαν καταβαλεῖν) [...]” (88c1-4). The effect produced on Echecrates is the same: “What argument shall we ever trust (πιστεύσομεν) now? How thoroughly convincing (σφόδρα πιθάνος) was the argument that Socrates gave, yet now it’s fallen into discredit (εἰς ἀπιστίαν)” (88d1-3). He admits that he lacks (88d6: πάνυ δέομαι) another argument which would convince (88d7: πείσει) him that the soul does not die together with the person who has died. Ἀπιστία is the main concern in the misology interlude (88d8). And, right before the final myth, Cebes says that he has no more doubts left, whereas Simmias is “bound to retain some doubt” in view of the size of the subject (107a3; 107a9; 107b2).

The choice of ἀπιστία as an intellectual lack to be filled must be suggested by earlier theories of pleasure reported in the *Gorgias*. The ‘sage’ Socrates quotes there likened the soul to a sieve because it cannot hold anything (493c2-3: οὐ δυναμένην στέγειν δι’ ἀπιστίαν τε καὶ λήθην), and also to a leaky jar, because it cannot be filled (493b3: ὡς τετρημένος εἴη πίθος, διὰ τὴν ἀπληστίαν). A similar play on ἀπιστία / ἀπληστία can be found in the *Republic* 586b, where a leak-proof vessel is mentioned again in connection with pleasures (586b3-4: οὐδὲ τὸ στέγον ἑαυτῶν πιμπλάντες).

The search for parallels to this theory outside the *Platonic Corpus* goes beyond the scope of this paper, and in any case we must admit a certain degree of generalization on behalf of Plato. Let us simply note that quite a few pre-Platonic texts treat ἀπιστία as a problem calling for philosophical solution. Parmenides contrasts the ‘trustworthiness’ (εὐπειθέος ἀληθείης) of his truth to the opinions of the mortals “in which there is no true fidelity” (τῆς οὐκ ἔνι πίστις ἀληθείης) (fr. 1. 29-30 Coxon).<sup>5</sup> The πιστώματα of the Empedoclean Muse is the antidote against ἀπιστία (fr. B4). The Derveni commentator complains about the ἀπιστίη of those who take part in sacred ceremonies (*Pap. Derv.* Col. V); this ἀπιστίη remains his concern in the commentary to the Orphic poem.

The connection between πίστις and πείθομαι is used by Plato in such a way as to demonstrate the reality of intellectual pleasure. Thereby, in the *Phaedo* Socrates gives a somewhat late reply to Callicles and other mockers: philosophers even die singing (85ab) — and all creatures, even hoopoe, can only sing from pleasure.

<sup>4</sup> This instance, according to some editors, might be an interpolation.

<sup>5</sup> The reading εὐπειθέος is defended by (Mourelatos, 2008, p. 155), who also gives a comprehensive analysis of the παιθ- words in Greek. See also: (Coxon, 2009, p. 283-284) and, more recently, (Lebedev, 2017, p. 502).