

# Philebus



Plato

## INTRODUCTION AND ANALYSIS

The *Philebus* appears to be one of the later writings of Plato, in which the style has begun to alter, and the dramatic and poetical element has become subordinate to the speculative and philosophical. In the development of abstract thought great advances have been made on the *Protagoras* or the *Phaedrus*, and even on the *Republic*. But there is a corresponding diminution of artistic skill, a want of character in the persons, a laboured march in the dialogue, and a degree of confusion and incompleteness in the general design. As in the speeches of Thucydides, the multiplication of ideas seems to interfere with the power of expression. Instead of the equally diffused grace and ease of the earlier dialogues there occur two or three highly-wrought passages; instead of the ever-flowing play of humour, now appearing, now concealed, but always present, are inserted a good many bad jests, as we may venture to term them. We may observe an attempt at artificial ornament, and far-fetched modes of expression; also clamorous demands on the part of his companions, that Socrates shall answer his own questions, as well as other defects of style, which remind us of the *Laws*. The connection is often abrupt and inharmonious, and far from clear. Many points require further explanation; e.g. the reference of pleasure to the indefinite class, compared with the assertion which almost immediately follows, that pleasure and pain naturally have their seat in the third or mixed class: these two statements are unreconciled. In like manner, the table of goods does not distinguish between the two heads of measure and symmetry; and though a hint is given that the divine mind has the first place, nothing is said of this in the final summing up. The relation of the goods to the sciences does not appear; though dialectic may be thought to correspond to the highest good, the sciences and arts and true opinions are enumerated in the fourth class. We seem to have an intimation of a further discussion, in which some topics lightly passed over were to receive a fuller consideration. The various uses of the word 'mixed,' for the mixed life, the mixed class of elements, the mixture of pleasures, or of pleasure and pain, are a further source of perplexity. Our ignorance of the

opinions which Plato is attacking is also an element of obscurity. Many things in a controversy might seem relevant, if we knew to what they were intended to refer. But no conjecture will enable us to supply what Plato has not told us; or to explain, from our fragmentary knowledge of them, the relation in which his doctrine stood to the Eleatic Being or the Megarian good, or to the theories of Aristippus or Antisthenes respecting pleasure. Nor are we able to say how far Plato in the *Philebus* conceives the finite and infinite (which occur both in the fragments of Philolaus and in the Pythagorean table of opposites) in the same manner as contemporary Pythagoreans.

There is little in the characters which is worthy of remark. The Socrates of the *Philebus* is devoid of any touch of Socratic irony, though here, as in the *Phaedrus*, he twice attributes the flow of his ideas to a sudden inspiration. The interlocutor Protarchus, the son of Callias, who has been a hearer of Gorgias, is supposed to begin as a disciple of the partisans of pleasure, but is drawn over to the opposite side by the arguments of Socrates. The instincts of ingenuous youth are easily induced to take the better part. Philebus, who has withdrawn from the argument, is several times brought back again, that he may support pleasure, of which he remains to the end the uncompromising advocate. On the other hand, the youthful group of listeners by whom he is surrounded, 'Philebus' boys' as they are termed, whose presence is several times intimated, are described as all of them at last convinced by the arguments of Socrates. They bear a very faded resemblance to the interested audiences of the *Charmides*, *Lysis*, or *Protagoras*. Other signs of relation to external life in the dialogue, or references to contemporary things and persons, with the single exception of the allusions to the anonymous enemies of pleasure, and the teachers of the flux, there are none.

The omission of the doctrine of recollection, derived from a previous state of existence, is a note of progress in the philosophy of Plato. The transcendental theory of pre-existent ideas, which is chiefly discussed by him in the *Meno*, the *Phaedo*, and the *Phaedrus*, has given way to a psychological one. The omission is rendered more significant by his having occasion to speak of memory as the basis of desire. Of the ideas he treats in the same sceptical spirit which appears in his criticism of them in the *Parmenides*. He touches on the same difficulties and he

gives no answer to them. His mode of speaking of the analytical and synthetical processes may be compared with his discussion of the same subject in the *Phaedrus*; here he dwells on the importance of dividing the genera into all the species, while in the *Phaedrus* he conveys the same truth in a figure, when he speaks of carving the whole, which is described under the image of a victim, into parts or members, 'according to their natural articulation, without breaking any of them.' There is also a difference, which may be noted, between the two dialogues. For whereas in the *Phaedrus*, and also in the *Symposium*, the dialectician is described as a sort of enthusiast or lover, in the *Philebus*, as in all the later writings of Plato, the element of love is wanting; the topic is only introduced, as in the *Republic*, by way of illustration. On other subjects of which they treat in common, such as the nature and kinds of pleasure, true and false opinion, the nature of the good, the order and relation of the sciences, the *Republic* is less advanced than the *Philebus*, which contains, perhaps, more metaphysical truth more obscurely expressed than any other Platonic dialogue. Here, as Plato expressly tells us, he is 'forging weapons of another make,' i.e. new categories and modes of conception, though 'some of the old ones might do again.'

But if superior in thought and dialectical power, the *Philebus* falls very far short of the *Republic* in fancy and feeling. The development of the reason undisturbed by the emotions seems to be the ideal at which Plato aims in his later dialogues. There is no mystic enthusiasm or rapturous contemplation of ideas. Whether we attribute this change to the greater feebleness of age, or to the development of the quarrel between philosophy and poetry in Plato's own mind, or perhaps, in some degree, to a carelessness about artistic effect, when he was absorbed in abstract ideas, we can hardly be wrong in assuming, amid such a variety of indications, derived from style as well as subject, that the *Philebus* belongs to the later period of his life and authorship. But in this, as in all the later writings of Plato, there are not wanting thoughts and expressions in which he rises to his highest level.

The plan is complicated, or rather, perhaps, the want of plan renders the progress of the dialogue difficult to follow. A few leading ideas seem to emerge: the relation of the one and many, the four original elements, the kinds of pleasure, the kinds of knowledge, the scale of goods. These are only

partially connected with one another. The dialogue is not rightly entitled 'Concerning pleasure' or 'Concerning good,' but should rather be described as treating of the relations of pleasure and knowledge, after they have been duly analyzed, to the good. (1) The question is asked, whether pleasure or wisdom is the chief good, or some nature higher than either; and if the latter, how pleasure and wisdom are related to this higher good. (2) Before we can reply with exactness, we must know the kinds of pleasure and the kinds of knowledge. (3) But still we may affirm generally, that the combined life of pleasure and wisdom or knowledge has more of the character of the good than either of them when isolated. (4) to determine which of them partakes most of the higher nature, we must know under which of the four unities or elements they respectively fall. These are, first, the infinite; secondly, the finite; thirdly, the union of the two; fourthly, the cause of the union. Pleasure is of the first, wisdom or knowledge of the third class, while reason or mind is akin to the fourth or highest.

(5) Pleasures are of two kinds, the mixed and unmixed. Of mixed pleasures there are three classes—(a) those in which both the pleasures and pains are corporeal, as in eating and hunger; (b) those in which there is a pain of the body and pleasure of the mind, as when you are hungry and are looking forward to a feast; (c) those in which the pleasure and pain are both mental. Of unmixed pleasures there are four kinds: those of sight, hearing, smell, knowledge.

(6) The sciences are likewise divided into two classes, theoretical and productive: of the latter, one part is pure, the other impure. The pure part consists of arithmetic, mensuration, and weighing. Arts like carpentering, which have an exact measure, are to be regarded as higher than music, which for the most part is mere guess-work. But there is also a higher arithmetic, and a higher mensuration, which is exclusively theoretical; and a dialectical science, which is higher still and the truest and purest knowledge.

(7) We are now able to determine the composition of the perfect life. First, we admit the pure pleasures and the pure sciences; secondly, the impure sciences, but not the impure pleasures. We have next to discover what element of goodness is contained in this mixture. There are three criteria of goodness—beauty, symmetry, truth. These are

clearly more akin to reason than to pleasure, and will enable us to fix the places of both of them in the scale of good. First in the scale is measure; the second place is assigned to symmetry; the third, to reason and wisdom; the fourth, to knowledge and true opinion; the fifth, to pure pleasures; and here the Muse says 'Enough.'

'Bidding farewell to Philebus and Socrates,' we may now consider the metaphysical conceptions which are presented to us. These are (I) the paradox of unity and plurality; (II) the table of categories or elements; (III) the kinds of pleasure; (IV) the kinds of knowledge; (V) the conception of the good. We may then proceed to examine (VI) the relation of the Philebus to the Republic, and to other dialogues.

I. The paradox of the one and many originated in the restless dialectic of Zeno, who sought to prove the absolute existence of the one by showing the contradictions that are involved in admitting the existence of the many (compare Parm.). Zeno illustrated the contradiction by well-known examples taken from outward objects. But Socrates seems to intimate that the time had arrived for discarding these hackneyed illustrations; such difficulties had long been solved by common sense ('solvitur ambulando'); the fact of the co-existence of opposites was a sufficient answer to them. He will leave them to Cynics and Eristics; the youth of Athens may discourse of them to their parents. To no rational man could the circumstance that the body is one, but has many members, be any longer a stumbling-block.

Plato's difficulty seems to begin in the region of ideas. He cannot understand how an absolute unity, such as the Eleatic Being, can be broken up into a number of individuals, or be in and out of them at once. Philosophy had so deepened or intensified the nature of one or Being, by the thoughts of successive generations, that the mind could no longer imagine 'Being' as in a state of change or division. To say that the verb of existence is the copula, or that unity is a mere unit, is to us easy; but to the Greek in a particular stage of thought such an analysis involved the same kind of difficulty as the conception of God existing both in and out of the world would to ourselves. Nor was he assisted by the analogy of sensible objects. The sphere of mind was dark and mysterious to him; but instead of being illustrated by sense, the greatest light appeared to be

thrown on the nature of ideas when they were contrasted with sense.

Both here and in the *Parmenides*, where similar difficulties are raised, Plato seems prepared to desert his ancient ground. He cannot tell the relation in which abstract ideas stand to one another, and therefore he transfers the one and many out of his transcendental world, and proceeds to lay down practical rules for their application to different branches of knowledge. As in the *Republic* he supposes the philosopher to proceed by regular steps, until he arrives at the idea of good; as in the *Sophist* and *Politicus* he insists that in dividing the whole into its parts we should bisect in the middle in the hope of finding species; as in the *Phaedrus* (see above) he would have 'no limb broken' of the organism of knowledge;—so in the *Philebus* he urges the necessity of filling up all the intermediate links which occur (compare Bacon's 'media axiomata') in the passage from unity to infinity. With him the idea of science may be said to anticipate science; at a time when the sciences were not yet divided, he wants to impress upon us the importance of classification; neither neglecting the many individuals, nor attempting to count them all, but finding the genera and species under which they naturally fall. Here, then, and in the parallel passages of the *Phaedrus* and of the *Sophist*, is found the germ of the most fruitful notion of modern science.

Plato describes with ludicrous exaggeration the influence exerted by the one and many on the minds of young men in their first fervour of metaphysical enthusiasm (compare *Republic*). But they are none the less an everlasting quality of reason or reasoning which never grows old in us. At first we have but a confused conception of them, analogous to the eyes blinking at the light in the *Republic*. To this Plato opposes the revelation from Heaven of the real relations of them, which some Prometheus, who gave the true fire from heaven, is supposed to have imparted to us. Plato is speaking of two things—(1) the crude notion of the one and many, which powerfully affects the ordinary mind when first beginning to think; (2) the same notion when cleared up by the help of dialectic.

To us the problem of the one and many has lost its chief interest and perplexity. We readily acknowledge that a whole has many parts, that the continuous is also the

divisible, that in all objects of sense there is a one and many, and that a like principle may be applied to analogy to purely intellectual conceptions. If we attend to the meaning of the words, we are compelled to admit that two contradictory statements are true. But the antinomy is so familiar as to be scarcely observed by us. Our sense of the contradiction, like Plato's, only begins in a higher sphere, when we speak of necessity and free-will, of mind and body, of Three Persons and One Substance, and the like. The world of knowledge is always dividing more and more; every truth is at first the enemy of every other truth. Yet without this division there can be no truth; nor any complete truth without the reunion of the parts into a whole. And hence the coexistence of opposites in the unity of the idea is regarded by Hegel as the supreme principle of philosophy; and the law of contradiction, which is affirmed by logicians to be an ultimate principle of the human mind, is displaced by another law, which asserts the coexistence of contradictories as imperfect and divided elements of the truth. Without entering further into the depths of Hegelianism, we may remark that this and all similar attempts to reconcile antinomies have their origin in the old Platonic problem of the 'One and Many.'

II. 1. The first of Plato's categories or elements is the infinite. This is the negative of measure or limit; the unthinkable, the unknowable; of which nothing can be affirmed; the mixture or chaos which preceded distinct kinds in the creation of the world; the first vague impression of sense; the more or less which refuses to be reduced to rule, having certain affinities with evil, with pleasure, with ignorance, and which in the scale of being is farthest removed from the beautiful and good. To a Greek of the age of Plato, the idea of an infinite mind would have been an absurdity. He would have insisted that 'the good is of the nature of the finite,' and that the infinite is a mere negative, which is on the level of sensation, and not of thought. He was aware that there was a distinction between the infinitely great and the infinitely small, but he would have equally denied the claim of either to true existence. Of that positive infinity, or infinite reality, which we attribute to God, he had no conception.

The Greek conception of the infinite would be more truly described, in our way of speaking, as the indefinite. To us, the notion of infinity is subsequent rather than prior to the



finite, expressing not absolute vacancy or negation, but only the removal of limit or restraint, which we suppose to exist not before but after we have already set bounds to thought and matter, and divided them after their kinds. From different points of view, either the finite or infinite may be looked upon respectively both as positive and negative (compare 'Omnis determinatio est negatio') and the conception of the one determines that of the other. The Greeks and the moderns seem to be nearly at the opposite poles in their manner of regarding them. And both are surprised when they make the discovery, as Plato has done in the Sophist, how large an element negation forms in the framework of their thoughts.

2, 3. The finite element which mingles with and regulates the infinite is best expressed to us by the word 'law.' It is that which measures all things and assigns to them their limit; which preserves them in their natural state, and brings them within the sphere of human cognition. This is described by the terms harmony, health, order, perfection, and the like. All things, in as far as they are good, even pleasures, which are for the most part indefinite, partake of this element. We should be wrong in attributing to Plato the conception of laws of nature derived from observation and experiment. And yet he has as intense a conviction as any modern philosopher that nature does not proceed by chance. But observing that the wonderful construction of number and figure, which he had within himself, and which seemed to be prior to himself, explained a part of the phenomena of the external world, he extended their principles to the whole, finding in them the true type both of human life and of the order of nature.

Two other points may be noticed respecting the third class. First, that Plato seems to be unconscious of any interval or chasm which separates the finite from the infinite. The one is in various ways and degrees working in the other. Hence he has implicitly answered the difficulty with which he started, of how the one could remain one and yet be divided among many individuals, or 'how ideas could be in and out of themselves,' and the like. Secondly, that in this mixed class we find the idea of beauty. Good, when exhibited under the aspect of measure or symmetry, becomes beauty. And if we translate his language into corresponding modern terms, we shall not be far wrong in

saying that here, as well as in the Republic, Plato conceives beauty under the idea of proportion.

4. Last and highest in the list of principles or elements is the cause of the union of the finite and infinite, to which Plato ascribes the order of the world. Reasoning from man to the universe, he argues that as there is a mind in the one, there must be a mind in the other, which he identifies with the royal mind of Zeus. This is the first cause of which 'our ancestors spoke,' as he says, appealing to tradition, in the Philebus as well as in the Timaeus. The 'one and many' is also supposed to have been revealed by tradition. For the mythical element has not altogether disappeared.

Some characteristic differences may here be noted, which distinguish the ancient from the modern mode of conceiving God.

a. To Plato, the idea of God or mind is both personal and impersonal. Nor in ascribing, as appears to us, both these attributes to him, and in speaking of God both in the masculine and neuter gender, did he seem to himself inconsistent. For the difference between the personal and impersonal was not marked to him as to ourselves. We make a fundamental distinction between a thing and a person, while to Plato, by the help of various intermediate abstractions, such as end, good, cause, they appear almost to meet in one, or to be two aspects of the same. Hence, without any reconciliation or even remark, in the Republic he speaks at one time of God or Gods, and at another time of the Good. So in the Phaedrus he seems to pass unconsciously from the concrete to the abstract conception of the Ideas in the same dialogue. Nor in the Philebus is he careful to show in what relation the idea of the divine mind stands to the supreme principle of measure.

b. Again, to us there is a strongly-marked distinction between a first cause and a final cause. And we should commonly identify a first cause with God, and the final cause with the world, which is His work. But Plato, though not a Pantheist, and very far from confounding God with the world, tends to identify the first with the final cause. The cause of the union of the finite and infinite might be described as a higher law; the final measure which is the highest expression of the good may also be described as the supreme law. Both these conceptions are realized

chiefly by the help of the material world; and therefore when we pass into the sphere of ideas can hardly be distinguished.

The four principles are required for the determination of the relative places of pleasure and wisdom. Plato has been saying that we should proceed by regular steps from the one to the many. Accordingly, before assigning the precedence either to good or pleasure, he must first find out and arrange in order the general principles of things. Mind is ascertained to be akin to the nature of the cause, while pleasure is found in the infinite or indefinite class. We may now proceed to divide pleasure and knowledge after their kinds.

III. 1. Plato speaks of pleasure as indefinite, as relative, as a generation, and in all these points of view as in a category distinct from good. For again we must repeat, that to the Greek 'the good is of the nature of the finite,' and, like virtue, either is, or is nearly allied to, knowledge. The modern philosopher would remark that the indefinite is equally real with the definite. Health and mental qualities are in the concrete undefined; they are nevertheless real goods, and Plato rightly regards them as falling under the finite class. Again, we are able to define objects or ideas, not in so far as they are in the mind, but in so far as they are manifested externally, and can therefore be reduced to rule and measure. And if we adopt the test of definiteness, the pleasures of the body are more capable of being defined than any other pleasures. As in art and knowledge generally, we proceed from without inwards, beginning with facts of sense, and passing to the more ideal conceptions of mental pleasure, happiness, and the like.

2. Pleasure is depreciated as relative, while good is exalted as absolute. But this distinction seems to arise from an unfair mode of regarding them; the abstract idea of the one is compared with the concrete experience of the other. For all pleasure and all knowledge may be viewed either abstracted from the mind, or in relation to the mind (compare Aristot. Nic. Ethics). The first is an idea only, which may be conceived as absolute and unchangeable, and then the abstract idea of pleasure will be equally unchangeable with that of knowledge. But when we come to view either as phenomena of consciousness, the same defects are for the most part incident to both of them. Our

hold upon them is equally transient and uncertain; the mind cannot be always in a state of intellectual tension, any more than capable of feeling pleasure always. The knowledge which is at one time clear and distinct, at another seems to fade away, just as the pleasure of health after sickness, or of eating after hunger, soon passes into a neutral state of unconsciousness and indifference. Change and alternation are necessary for the mind as well as for the body; and in this is to be acknowledged, not an element of evil, but rather a law of nature. The chief difference between subjective pleasure and subjective knowledge in respect of permanence is that the latter, when our feeble faculties are able to grasp it, still conveys to us an idea of unchangeableness which cannot be got rid of.

3. In the language of ancient philosophy, the relative character of pleasure is described as becoming or generation. This is relative to Being or Essence, and from one point of view may be regarded as the Heraclitean flux in contrast with the Eleatic Being; from another, as the transient enjoyment of eating and drinking compared with the supposed permanence of intellectual pleasures. But to us the distinction is unmeaning, and belongs to a stage of philosophy which has passed away. Plato himself seems to have suspected that the continuance or life of things is quite as much to be attributed to a principle of rest as of motion (compare *Charm.* *Cratyl.*). A later view of pleasure is found in Aristotle, who agrees with Plato in many points, e.g. in his view of pleasure as a restoration to nature, in his distinction between bodily and mental, between necessary and non-necessary pleasures. But he is also in advance of Plato; for he affirms that pleasure is not in the body at all; and hence not even the bodily pleasures are to be spoken of as generations, but only as accompanied by generation (*Nic. Eth.*).

4. Plato attempts to identify vicious pleasures with some form of error, and insists that the term false may be applied to them: in this he appears to be carrying out in a confused manner the Socratic doctrine, that virtue is knowledge, vice ignorance. He will allow of no distinction between the pleasures and the erroneous opinions on which they are founded, whether arising out of the illusion of distance or not. But to this we naturally reply with Protarchus, that the pleasure is what it is, although the calculation may be false, or the after-effects painful. It is difficult to acquit Plato, to

use his own language, of being a 'tyro in dialectics,' when he overlooks such a distinction. Yet, on the other hand, we are hardly fair judges of confusions of thought in those who view things differently from ourselves.

5. There appears also to be an incorrectness in the notion which occurs both here and in the *Gorgias*, of the simultaneousness of merely bodily pleasures and pains. We may, perhaps, admit, though even this is not free from doubt, that the feeling of pleasureable hope or recollection is, or rather may be, simultaneous with acute bodily suffering. But there is no such coexistence of the pain of thirst with the pleasures of drinking; they are not really simultaneous, for the one expels the other. Nor does Plato seem to have considered that the bodily pleasures, except in certain extreme cases, are unattended with pain. Few philosophers will deny that a degree of pleasure attends eating and drinking; and yet surely we might as well speak of the pains of digestion which follow, as of the pains of hunger and thirst which precede them. Plato's conception is derived partly from the extreme case of a man suffering pain from hunger or thirst, partly from the image of a full and empty vessel. But the truth is rather, that while the gratification of our bodily desires constantly affords some degree of pleasure, the antecedent pains are scarcely perceived by us, being almost done away with by use and regularity.

6. The desire to classify pleasures as accompanied or not accompanied by antecedent pains, has led Plato to place under one head the pleasures of smell and sight, as well as those derived from sounds of music and from knowledge. He would have done better to make a separate class of the pleasures of smell, having no association of mind, or perhaps to have divided them into natural and artificial. The pleasures of sight and sound might then have been regarded as being the expression of ideas. But this higher and truer point of view never appears to have occurred to Plato. Nor has he any distinction between the fine arts and the mechanical; and, neither here nor anywhere, an adequate conception of the beautiful in external things.

7. Plato agrees partially with certain 'surly or fastidious' philosophers, as he terms them, who defined pleasure to be the absence of pain. They are also described as eminent in physics. There is unfortunately no school of Greek