Illusions of Pleasure

Abstract:

Le Phédon commence par deux observations sur le plaisir mélangé avec la peine. Phédon décrit « un mélange inouï, fait à la fois de plaisir et de peine » qu’inspire la dernière conversation avec Socrate (59a). Puis, Socrate lui-même, quand on a enlevé ses chaînes, note le mélange curieux d’agréable avec pénible (60 b-c). Enfin, dans le dialogue, Socrate avertit ses interlocuteurs des illusions que le corps cause dans l’âme. (1) « …il (le corps) l’avait (l’âme) si bien ensorcelée par ses désirs et ses joies qu’elle ne tenait rien d’autre pour vrai que ce qui a figure de corps, que ce qui peut se toucher et se voir, se boire, se manger et servir à l’amour » (81b). (2) « C’est qu’en toute âme humaine, forcément, l’intensité du plaisir ou de la peine à tel ou tel propos s’accompagne de la croyance que l’objet précisément de cette émotion, c’est tout ce qu’il y a de plus clair et de plus vrai, alors qu’il n’en est point ainsi. » (83c). Pourtant, Socrate ne donne pas d’explication pour ces fausses opinions. Néanmoins, ces passages rappellent au lecteur les deux explications des illusions provoquées par le plaisir mélangé avec la douleur dans la République (583e-586d) et dans le Philèbe (46b-47b ; 51b-52c). La première explication figure dans le long discours de Socrate sur les sortes de faux plaisirs. Les plaisirs les plus grands et les plus intenses sont mélangés aux douleurs (46b-47b) ; mais seulement les plaisirs purs—non pas mélangés aux douleurs—sont vrais (51b-52c). Pourtant, il y a des gens que l’intensité (causée par le mélange) trompe ; donc ils croient que les plaisirs intenses sont de vrais plaisirs. La deuxième explication se trouve dans la République 9 où Socrate argumente qu’entre plaisir et douleur il y a un troisième état, le repos (hêsuchia)—ni plaisir ni douleur. Pourtant, il y a des gens que le mélange de plaisir et de douleur trompe ; ils croient que l’absence de douleur est un plaisir. Dans ma communication, je soutiendrai, en premier lieu, que le compte-rendu qui se trouve dans le Philèbe explique les deux fausses opinions que nous avons vues dans le Phédon. Les deux se fondent sur la fausse idée que le vrai plaisir s’identifie au plaisir intense. Puis, je soutiendrai, en second lieu, que l’argument de la République 9 explique le détachement du corps que le philosophe entretient dans sa vie. Puis qu’il sait que le plaisir se termine dans le repos, il peut mettre en valeur l’état du repos ;
donc, il peut se dissocier du plaisir corporel. De plus, l’argument de la République 9 explique la similarité entre l’âme du philosophe et l’état des dieux. Après sa mort, parce qu’il a échappé au corps et à ses plaisirs, le philosophe reste dans l’état du repos, sans plaisir ni douleur. Dans le Philèbe, Socrate remarque que les dieux sont toujours dans cet état parce qu’ils n’ont ni plaisir ni douleur (33a-c).

In the Phaedo, Socrates argues that death is the separation of the soul from the body. The separation means deliverance from the limitations of the body; the resulting state of the soul approaches the divine. In this paper, I wish to explore one of the dimensions of this near-divine status, i.e., deliverance from the pleasures of the body and their accompanying illusions.

Socrates’ account of the illusions associated with pleasure is made by way of two contrasts between the philosopher, who is immune to them, and the non-philosopher, who is not. The first kind of illusion is found in the contrast between the soul of the philosopher and the soul of the non-philosopher after both are separate from the body in death. The former soul, although joined to a body in life, maintained its distance from it. When this soul goes away, in death, to what is like itself—the invisible, the divine, the deathless, and the wise—it is happy, delivered from wandering, ignorance, fears, and wild passions. By contrast, the soul of the non-philosopher leaves this life defiled and impure because it “was always with the body and cared for it and loved it and was fascinated (gegoêteumenê) by it and its desires and pleasures, so that it thought nothing was true except the corporeal, which one can touch and see and drink and eat and employ in the pleasures of love…”. (81a-c)⁴ The second kind of illusion is found in another contrast between the soul of the philosopher and the soul of the non-philosopher before death. The philosopher’s soul undertakes the discipline of separation from pleasures, desires, pains, and fears; thereby it escapes the greatest evil. The soul of the non-philosopher does not escape this evil. “… the soul of every man, when it is greatly pleased or pained by anything, is compelled to believe that the object which caused the emotion is very distinct and very true; but it is not. These objects are mostly the visible ones, are they not?” (82e-83d)⁵
There are two extended accounts of the illusions associated with pleasure. One is in Republic 9 and the other is in Philebus. In this paper I wish to use both to explore the illusions of pleasure in the Phaedo. I do not mean to maintain a thesis about the development of Plato’s thought on this topic. I will rely on the softer assumption that the three accounts are related in such a way that they can be fruitfully compared. In fact, I will explore whether the account of the illusions caused by pleasure mixed with pain in Republic 9 and in Philebus can explain the illusions associated with pleasure in the Phaedo. Although both accounts are complex, I will select only portions of each. First, in the Republic, is the illusion that the absence of pain is pure pleasure. Second, in the Philebus, is the illusion that intense pleasure is pure pleasure.

The account in the Republic begins with Socrates recounting the way those who are sick say that nothing is sweeter than to be healthy; in general, people in severe pain say that there is no greater pleasure than the cessation of suffering (583c-d). There is also the opposite phenomenon: the cessation of pleasure is said to be painful. However, the cessation of pain, as well as the cessation of pleasure, is in reality a neutral state, between pleasure and pain, called calm (hēsuchia). Socrates explains that pleasure and pain are motions; the neutral state is cessation of motion (583e). So, it is wrong to think the cessation of pain is pleasure or the absence of enjoyment pain. However, the juxtaposition of calm with pain appears to be pleasant, and the juxtaposition of pleasure with calm appears painful. But there is nothing sound in these appearances with respect to the truth of pleasure; they are a kind of sorcery (goêteia) (584a-b).

So stated, the illusion is puzzling. Pain gives way to the neutral state of calm; but what is really calm appears to be pleasure. It is not just that pleasure is actually absent from the episode; rather, there is no explanation of the means by which the appearance of pleasure arises. There seems to be a missing step in the description. There is no answer to the question: why should the cessation of pain seem pleasurable and not just appear to be what it is, calm? In the face of this question, the appearance of pleasure seems gratuitous.
The missing step is, in fact, added. In order to defeat the idea that pleasure by nature is preceded by pain, Socrates cites the pleasure of smell as an example of pleasure not preceded by pain. Thus, one should not think that pure pleasure is the cessation of pain (*mê ara pheitheômeta katharan hêdonên einai tên lupês apallagên*) (584c1-2). Up to this point, Socrates has been talking only about the appearance of pleasure; now he is talking about pleasure as such. So pleasure is not just the appearance of pleasure. Moreover, there is a belief that pleasure is by nature preceded by pain—which is then shown to be false. If pure pleasure is not preceded by pain then, since it is pleasure, pleasure is not by nature preceded by pain. At this point, however, Socrates concedes that what are called pleasures that stretch through the body to the soul, the most and the greatest, are a kind of release from pain (*lupôn tines apallagai*) (584c6-7). So, even if pleasure is not just release from pain, there is a sense in which release from pain can be part of the most and the greatest of bodily pleasures. We can explain this relation between these bodily pleasures and release from pain by starting with what we already know, viz., that pleasures are motions; later we learn that the motion is a kind of filling while pain is a kind of emptiness (585a-b; 585d-e). Since pleasure is a process of filling an emptiness and since emptiness is painful, these pleasures occur simultaneously with pain. We find this simultaneous mixture of pleasure and pain in the *Gorgias* (496c-e). Thus, the bodily pleasure of filling exists side by side with the pain of emptiness. Then, at least in these cases, we can understand the reason that the cessation of pain appears to be pleasure. One comes to think that the cessation of pain would leave pure pleasure, i.e., pleasure unmixed with pain. This result is confirmed by what Socrates has already said, viz., that it is wrong to think that the cessation of pain is pure pleasure. However, why would he say pure pleasure instead of just pleasure? We can understand the reason if the mistaken belief is based on the assumption that, once the pain of emptiness has ceased, pleasure alone remains. In effect, Socrates is denying the pleasure of satiety—the pleasure of being in a state of fulfillment. After all, if pleasure is just filling, once the filling is over so is the pleasure.

What Socrates says next reinforces this interpretation. He goes on to expand this account with a spatial analogy that depends on an absolute up and an absolute down. The person with no experience of
the absolute up would mistake the middle for absolute up. Just so, the person with no experience of truth and reality would intensely believe, when moving from pain to the middle state of calm, that they are approaching fulfillment and pleasure. Just as, they might compare gray to black, in ignorance of white, so they are deceived in comparing pain with painlessness, through ignorance of pleasure (584d-585a). We can think of gray as a mixture of black and white or as between black and white. The spatial analogy implies the latter. The analogue of black is absolute down and the analogue of gray is the middle region, between absolute down and absolute up. The error, then, in the color analogy comes from comparing black with gray and consists in thinking that gray—what is between black and white—is white, through ignorance of white. In turn, the error with respect to pleasure comes from comparing pain—the analogue of black and of absolute down—to what is between pleasure and pain, the neutral state of calm—the analogue of gray and of the middle region. From the comparison comes the false belief that the neutral state is pure pleasure—the analogue of white (which is unmixed with black) and absolute up. However, the difference between the color analogy and the case of pleasure and pain is that the color analogy is not a process whereas the mixture of pleasure and pain is a process—as is the movement from absolute down to the middle region. So the error that results from the comparison of pain with the process of filling what is empty, in which pleasure and pain are mixed, is the belief that, when the process is over, only pleasure would be left—a belief made possible only by ignorance of pleasure, i.e., never experiencing pleasure just by itself.

In the *Philebus*, Socrates explores anew the theme of pleasure mixed with pain and its relation to illusions about pleasure. While Socrates recounts several different types of illusion, we will focus on only one. It depends on the previously given, general account of pain as disruption and pleasure as restoration (42d); however, Socrates adds a neutral state between disruption and restoration—a state of equilibrium that is neither pleasurable nor painful (43d). To think that it is either is a mistake (43e). At this point, one might expect, as in *Republic* 9, an argument to show how the mixture of pleasure and pain causes the neutral state to appear pleasurable. However, Socrates takes a different tack. The mixture can make
pleasure seem intense and great; but this exaggerated appearance of the underlying pleasure is not pure or true pleasure, although some seem to think it is. Socrates focuses on the strongest and most intense pleasures in order to understand the nature of pleasure (44e-45a). These kinds of pleasure are “proceded by the greatest desires (45b).”7 For instance, feverish patients suffer thirst and chill. “Do they not feel greater deprivations, and also greater pleasures at their replenishment? (45b-c).”8 These pleasures are obviously mixed with pain; but their intensity and greatness is due to the strength of the contrast between the two. In these types of cases, the pleasure and pain can be equal or one can outweigh the other (46d-e). The ones of greatest interest involve a surplus of pleasure over pain; here the “predominant part of pleasure” causes “leaping and kicking, color changes of all sorts, distortion of features, and wild palpitations (47a).” 9 By contrast, true pleasure is unmixed with pain; it is, thus, pure pleasure. Socrates gives several examples of bodily pleasures that are not associated with lack and pain, such as beautiful colors and forms, odors and sounds (51b-c). Finally, he adds the pure pleasure of knowledge (52a-c). So, although the investigation of the nature of pleasure started with the greatest and most intense pleasures, these are not true pleasures; true pleasures are pure, unmixed with pain. Thus, the error this account exposes is thinking that intense pleasure is true pleasure.

Without further analysis of this account of the mixture of pleasure and pain in Republic 9 and in the Philebus, we can see how it illuminates the notion of the illusion associated with pleasure in the Phaedo. First of all, the dialogue begins with the theme of the mixture of pleasure and pain. Phaedo himself reflects on the unusual mixing together of pleasure and of pain that he felt in the company of Socrates on the day of his death (59a). Then Socrates’ appearance starts with his remarks about the way pleasure and pain are mixed, as he rubs his leg where the shackles have just been removed (60b-c). The reader of the dialogues cannot help but think of the account of mixed pleasures in Republic 9 and in the Philebus. In fact, if we return to the illusions associated with pleasure, we find explicit textual links. First of all is the theme of enchantment. When Socrates, in the Phaedo, says the soul is enchanted (gegoëteumenê) by bodily desires and pleasures, he links this experience to the way the mixture of pleasure...
and pain leads to the illusion that the neutral state of calm is pleasure—a phenomenon that Socrates, in *Republic* 9, calls a kind of enchantment (goêteia). Second is the way the mixture of pleasure and pain is intense. In citing the role of intense pleasures and pains (hêsthênai è lupêthênai sphodra) as the source of the second kind of false belief, Socrates reminds his readers of the way the mixture of pleasure and pain, in *Republic* 9, are phantoms of true pleasure whose juxtaposition makes them appear intense (sphodrous) and of the account of the so-called strongest and most intense pleasures (tas akrotatas kai sphodratatas legoumenas) in *Philebus*.

However, when Socrates comes to the illusions associated with pleasures in the *Phaedo*, he does not invoke their mixture with pain to explain the illusions. In fact, he does not explain them at all. Still, the mixture of pleasure and pain has a role to play in their explanation. To see this role, let us now focus on the illusions themselves. The errors associated with pleasure are: (1) being enchanted by its desires and pleasures, the soul thinks nothing true but the bodily, what one touches, sees, drinks, eats, and uses for sexual pleasure and (2) it believes, in the face of great or intense pain or pleasure, that that about which one is pleased or pained is very distinct and very true.

We can begin with the account, in *Philebus*, of the way the mixture of pleasure and pain can lead to the intensification of pleasure, which is then mistaken for pure or true pleasure. The way pleasure mixed with pain becomes intense—and thus confused with true pleasure—explains the illusions of pleasure in the *Phaedo*. First, let us look at (1) above. The soul is enchanted by bodily desires and pleasures. If we understand desire to be painful—as it is in *Gorgias* 496c-e—then the enchantment is due to a mixture of pleasure and pain. The result of this enchantment is the belief that nothing is true but that which serves the satisfaction of bodily desire. We can understand (1) thanks to the account of illusions associated with pleasure. Because it does not know the distinction between pure pleasure and pleasure mixed with pain, this soul believes (1’): nothing is true pleasure but the satisfaction of bodily desire.

According to *Republic* 9 and *Philebus*, (1’) is false because it is contradicted by the existence of the unmixed pleasure of knowledge. Thus, we can understand why bodily pleasures enchant the soul into
believing that nothing is true but that which serves the satisfaction of bodily desire. Pleasures mixed with pain enchant the soul so that it cannot recognize the pleasures associated with knowledge. Lacking knowledge, then, the soul fails to recognize what is real and true. However, assuming that he has the pure pleasure associated with knowledge, the philosopher will not be enchanted by bodily desire and pleasure into thinking nothing is true but the bodily.

The way that the mixture of pleasure and pain leads to illusion also explains (2): the belief, in the face of intense pain and pleasure, that that about which one is pleased or pained is very distinct and very true. That about which one is pleased or pained is pleasing or painful situations. As in the *Philebus*, one is pleased by the prospect of gaining a lot of gold and the accompanying pleasures (40a-b). The mistake is in thinking that that about which one is pleased, i.e., gaining a lot of gold, is the clearest and the truest. However, the predicates ‘clear’ and ‘true’ can be completed by such terms as ‘good’ and ‘evil’ or ‘pleasure’ and ‘pain.’ One might mistakenly believe, for instance, that gaining a lot of gold is the clearest and the truest good. Equally, one might mistakenly believe that gaining a lot of gold is the clearest and truest pleasure. So (2) implies, with respect to pleasure, (2'): the belief, in the face of intense pleasure, that that about which one is pleased a very distinctly pleasurable situation and is a very truly pleasurable situation. The error is in thinking that intense pleasure is pure and true pleasure. The account of the illusions of pleasure explains the falsity of this belief by showing that intense pleasure is not distinct from pain but, in fact, is intense because it is mixed with pain. Then, because it is not pure pleasure it cannot be true pleasure. In turn, the philosopher would not be misled into thinking great and intense pleasure and pain are very distinct and very true; he would be able to distinguish between intense pleasure, which is mixed with pain, and true pleasure.

While the account, in *Philebus*, of illusion associated with intense pleasure explains the philosopher’s immunity to these false beliefs, the account of a different sort of illusion, in *Republic* 9, explains his detachment from the body. If the philosopher understands the way the illusions arise, he would be able to appreciate the true nature of desire and pleasure. Since the philosopher knows the pure
pleasure that accompanies knowledge, he would recognize that bodily pleasure’s mixture with pain leads to the enchanting illusion that the neutral state of calm is pleasure. Free of this illusion, the philosopher would understand that bodily pleasure ends in calm. This recognition undermines the idea that pleasure is an end in itself; rather, it is a process whose end is the state of calm. As Philebus 53c ff shows, pleasure is becoming; it is for the sake of some being. If he knows that pleasure is for the sake of calm, the philosopher would know not only that intense pleasure is exaggerated by mixture with pain but that its proper end is the state of calm. This sort of knowledge implies that being in the state of calm is more valuable than pleasure.

This subordination of the value of pleasure to the state of calm is a very good way to understand the state of the philosopher’s soul when he arrives in the afterlife. Of course, before that, in association with the body, the philosopher still lives with the mixture of pleasure and pain. He also lives according to the truth that the cessation of pleasure and pain is the calm state—the necessarily fleeting state of equilibrium between emptiness and filling. In death, however, the philosopher will not have the body and its emptying and filling. His soul will be in a permanent state of calm. So that it will not be necessary to have recourse to his philosophical beliefs in order to distance himself from the body’s desires and pleasures. Up until that point, however, his focus on the neutral state of calm is a kind of foretaste of the afterlife.

Moreover, because it is permanently in this state of calm after death, the soul of the philosopher is like that to which it goes, viz., the divine (81a-b). In his extensive discussion of pleasure in the Philebus, Socrates says that it is possible to have a kind of life in which there is neither pleasure nor pain; in fact, he poses the possibility that an entire life of this sort is divine. After all, it is not likely that the gods experience pleasure or its opposite because it is unseemly for them to have either of these (33a-c). Previously this sort of life was said not to be choice-worthy (21d-e); now it is said to be divine. Nevertheless, Socrates breaks off the discussion, postponing it to another time. However, we can now see that, in the afterlife, the philosopher has achieved the same divine status. Of course, while the philosopher
will be similar to the gods in this respect, he has a different history. In his bodily existence, he had to adopt beliefs that insulated him from possible illusions arising from the mixed pleasures of the body. So, arriving in the afterlife is a kind of deliverance.

Richard D. Parry

2 Platon: Phédon, p. 41.
3 Platon: Phédon, p. 45.
5 Fowler, p. 291.
6 Citations of the Greek text are from Burnet’s edition of the Republic in Oxford Classical Texts (1978)
8 Frede, p.434-5.
9 Frede, p. 436.
10 In a section of Republic 9 that we did not consider, Socrates also talks about the way that intense pleasure is mistaken for true pleasure (586a-c).