

The *Philebus*: What is the principal good of human life? Pleasure or Wisdom?

The *Philebus* begins (and ends) abruptly: we are to suppose that Socrates and Philebus have been arguing over the question of the what the principal good of human life is, and that Philebus has become tired (or perhaps that he has running out of good arguments). He has just handed over the responsibility of arguing his case to Protarchus, and Socrates is clarifying for the latter's sake the two opposing views before continuing with this new opponent:

Socrates: Observe, then, Protarchus, what the doctrine is which you are now to accept from Philebus, and what our doctrine is, against which you are to argue, if you do not agree with it. Shall we make a brief statement of each of them? 11b

Protarchus: By all means.

Socrates: Very well: Philebus says that to all living beings enjoyment and pleasure and gaiety and whatever accords with that sort of thing are a good; whereas our contention is that not these, but wisdom and thought and memory and their kindred, right opinion and true reasonings, are better and more excellent than pleasure for all who are capable of taking part in them, and that for all those now existing or to come who can partake of them they are the most advantageous of all things. Those are pretty nearly the two doctrines we maintain, are they not, Philebus? c

Philebus: Yes, Socrates, exactly.

Socrates: And do you, Protarchus, accept this doctrine which is now committed to you?

Protarchus: I must accept it; for our handsome Philebus has withdrawn.

Socrates: And must the truth about these doctrines be attained by every possible means?

Protarchus: Yes, it must.

Socrates: Then let us further agree to this:

Protarchus: To what? d

Socrates: That each of us will next try to prove clearly that it is *a condition and disposition of the soul* which can make life happy for all human beings. Is not that what we are going to do?

Protarchus: It is.

Socrates: Then you will show that it is the condition of pleasure, and I that it is that of wisdom?

Protarchus: True.

Socrates: What if some other life be found superior to these two? Then if that life is found to be more akin to pleasure, both of us are defeated, are we not, by the life which has firm possession of this superiority, but the life of pleasure is victor over the life of wisdom. e

Protarchus: Yes. 12a

Socrates: But if it is more akin to wisdom, then wisdom is victorious and pleasure is vanquished? Do you agree to that? Or what do you say?

Protarchus: Yes, I at least am satisfied with that.

Socrates: But how about you, Philebus? What do you say?

Philebus: I think and always shall think that pleasure is the victor. But you, Protarchus, will make your own decision.

Protarchus: Since you entrusted the argument to me, Philebus, you can no longer dictate whether to make the agreement with Socrates or not.

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The battle lines are thus drawn up: pleasure or wisdom – or perhaps some third thing, as yet unnamed – are to be championed by the two contenders. But immediately they run into problems when trying to establish the nature of the two ideals. Is pleasure just one thing? And is wisdom just one thing? Or are there in reality an almost uncountable number of things which we conveniently label pleasure or wisdom, but which, are nothing to do with each other? Socrates suggests there is a way of tackling this initial obstacle, and suggests a road to be taken:

Socrates: One which is easy to point out, but very difficult to follow for through it all the inventions of art have been brought to light. See this is the road I mean. 16c

Protarchus: Go on what is it?

Socrates: A gift of gods to men, as I believe, was tossed down from some divine source through the agency of a Prometheus together with a gleaming fire; and the ancients, who were better than we and lived nearer the gods, handed down the tradition that all the things which are ever said to exist are sprung from one and many and have inherent in them the finite and the infinite. This being the way in which these things are arranged, we must always assume that there is in every case one idea of everything and must look for it—for we shall find that it is there—and if we get a grasp of this, we must look next for two, if there be two, and if not, for three or some other number; and again we must treat each of those units in the same way, until we can see not only that the original unit is one and many and infinite, but just how many it is. And we must not apply the idea of infinite to plurality until we have a view of its whole number between infinity and one; then, and not before, we may let each unit of everything pass on unhindered into infinity. The gods, then, as I said, handed down to us this mode of investigating, learning, and teaching one another; but the wise men of the present day make the one and the many too quickly or too slowly, in haphazard fashion, and they put infinity immediately after unity; they disregard all that lies between them, and this it is which distinguishes between the dialectic and the disputatious methods of discussion. 17a

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This method – the “gift of gods to men” – is dialectic, and Socrates uses it to explore all the important ideas which the discussion must embrace – goodness, pleasure, wisdom and the nature of the states in which human beings can find themselves.

Can we see the “one” of each of these things? And their infinite multiplicity? And can we explore the numbers which each of the “ones” can be properly divided into before passing on to the “infinity”?

And do we agree that it is the “*condition and disposition of the soul* which can make life happy for all human beings”?

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After a while Socrates moves on to what might be called a demonstration of the adequacy or otherwise of pleasure and wisdom – and we begin to see that there is, indeed, a distinct possibility that there is “some other life be found superior to these two.” We’ll look at that third life soon, but first the demonstration or thought experiment that Socrates lays before us:

Socrates: I remember now having heard long ago in a dream, or perhaps when I was awake, some talk about pleasure and wisdom to the effect that neither of the two is the good, but some third thing, different from them and better than both. However, if this be now clearly proved to us, pleasure is deprived of victory for the good would no longer be identical with it. Is not that true? 20b

Protarchus: It is. c

Socrates: And we shall have, in my opinion, no longer any need of distinguishing the kinds of pleasure. But the progress of the discussion will make that still clearer.

Protarchus: Excellent! Just go on as you have begun.

Socrates: First, then, let us agree on some further small points.

Protarchus: What are they?

Socrates: Is the nature of the good necessarily perfect or imperfect? d

Protarchus: The *most perfect* of all things, surely, Socrates.

Socrates: Well, and is the good sufficient?

Protarchus: Of course; so that it surpasses all other things in *sufficiency*.

Socrates: And nothing, I should say, is more certain about it than that every intelligent being pursues it, *desires it*, wishes to catch and get possession of it, and has no interest in anything in which the good is not included.

Protarchus: There is no denying that.

Socrates: Let us, then, look at the life of pleasure and the life of wisdom separately and consider and judge them. e

Protarchus: How do you mean?

Socrates: Let there be no wisdom in the life of pleasure and no pleasure in the life of wisdom. For if either of them is the good, it cannot have need of anything else, and if, either be found to need anything, we can no longer regard it as our true good. 21a

Protarchus: No, of course not.

Socrates: Shall we then undertake to test them through you?

Protarchus: By all means.

Socrates: Then answer.

Protarchus: Ask.

Socrates: Would you, Protarchus, be willing to live your whole life in the enjoyment of the greatest pleasures?

Protarchus: Of course I should.

Socrates: Would you think you needed anything further, if you were in complete possession of that enjoyment?

Protarchus: Certainly not.

Socrates: But consider whether you would not have some need of wisdom and intelligence and power of calculating your wants and the like. b

Protarchus: Why should I? If I have enjoyment, I have everything.

Socrates: Then living thus you would enjoy the greatest pleasures all your life?

Protarchus: Yes; why not?

Socrates: But if you did not possess mind or memory or knowledge or true opinion, in the first place, you would not know whether you were enjoying your pleasures or not. That must be true, since you are utterly devoid of intellect, must it not?

Protarchus: Yes, it must. c

Socrates: And likewise, if you had no memory you could not even remember that you ever did enjoy pleasure, and no recollection whatever of present pleasure could remain with you; if you had no true opinion you could not think you were enjoying pleasure at the time when you were enjoying it, and if you were without power of calculation you would not be able to calculate that you would

enjoy it in the future; your life would not be that of a man, but of a mollusc or some other shellfish like the oyster. Is that true, or can we imagine any other result?

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Protarchus: We certainly cannot.

Socrates: And can we choose such a life?

Protarchus: This argument, Socrates, has made me utterly speechless for the present.

Socrates: Well, let us not give in yet. Let us take up the life of mind and scrutinize that in turn.

Protarchus: What sort of life do you mean?

Socrates: I ask whether anyone would be willing to live possessing wisdom and mind and knowledge and perfect memory of all things, but having no share, great or small, in pleasure, or in pain, for that matter, but being utterly unaffected by everything of that sort.

e

Protarchus: Neither of the two lives can ever appear desirable to me, Socrates, or, I think, to anyone else.

Socrates: How about the combined life, Protarchus, made up by a union of the two?

Protarchus: You mean a union of pleasure with mind or wisdom?

22a

Socrates: Yes, I mean a union of such elements.

Protarchus: Every one will prefer this life to either of the two others—yes, every single person without exception.

Socrates: Then do we understand the consequences of what we are now saying?

Protarchus: Certainly. Three lives have been proposed, and of two of them neither is sufficient or desirable for man or any other living being.

b

Socrates: Then is it not already clear that neither of these two contained the good for if it did contain the good, it would be sufficient and perfect, and such as to be chosen by all living creatures which would be able to live thus all their lives; and if any of us chose anything else, he would be choosing contrary to the nature of the truly desirable, not of his own free will, but from ignorance or some unfortunate necessity.

Protarchus: That seems at any rate to be true.

Socrates: And so I think we have sufficiently proved that Philebus's divinity¹ is not to be considered identical with the good.

c

Philebus: But neither is your "mind" the good, Socrates; it will be open to the same objections.

Socrates: My mind, perhaps, Philebus; but not so, I believe, the true mind, which is also divine; that is different. I do not as yet claim for mind the victory over the combined life, but we must look and see what is to be done about the second place . . .

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The dialogue continues in order to see if the two side can agree whether pleasure or wisdom takes precedence over the other after the mixed life. What is this "mixed life"? The *Philebus* is long and we won't have time to follow all the ensuing arguments, but we might notice that even "the good" has been given three essential marks – it is *desirable*, *perfect* and *sufficient*. The very act of acknowledging these allows the thought experiment to work and arrive at some important and settled conclusions: although the dialogue doesn't explicitly say so, perhaps the very fact that a wise "numbering" of the good into these three has allowed significant advances in discussions is itself some evidence that wisdom deserves the second prize in the contest.

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If we have time, we might want to expand the discussion beyond the theoretical to consider these principles when applied to the global crisis (or is it crises?) which faces humankind.

¹ Near the beginning Philebus has called his pleasure a "Goddess". Socrates, who says that we must tread carefully when naming divinities, has suggested that this Goddess is not Aphrodite but *Hedone* – a divinity or personification of pleasure.