

# PLATO, PHILEBUS 52c1–d1: TEXT AND MEANING

At *Philebus* 23c ff. Plato introduces the notion that πάντα τὰ νῦν ὄντα ἐν τῷ παντί are assignable to four classes. The precise scope of the phrase is disputed, but it is indisputable that Plato wants his readers to think of human life in these terms. We have just been told, in 20c–22e, that any human life, and especially the good life, is a mixture of both pleasure and reason (συμμειχθεὶς 22a2, μεικτός 22d6) and that one of these two ingredients is responsible (αἴτιος 22d2.4) for the goodness of the good life. Next we find that of the four classes that Plato postulates in 23c ff. two are given names derived from 16c ff. – ‘limit’ and ‘indeterminacy’; and the other two are ‘the mixed’ (συμμισγόμενον 23d1, μεικτός 27b8) and ‘the cause’ (αἰτία 23d7 etc., though strictly it is the cause of mixing rather than the cause of goodness). Not surprisingly, it turns out that the good life belongs to the mixed class (27d) and that reason is a cause (28–31). We are also told that pleasure is the indeterminate element of human life (27e–28a)<sup>1</sup>.

It has often been pointed out<sup>2</sup> that the metaphysical doctrine of 23–31 is strictly a digression, since the analysis of pleasure and knowledge which occupies most of the rest of the dialogue stands or falls on its own. Nevertheless, Plato does mean us to bear it in mind. The idea that pleasure is indeterminate is mentioned at 41d, but this adds nothing to the passage: it serves merely as a reminder. Again, pleasure’s indeterminacy underlies its devaluation at 65b–66a, since pleasure is taken to lack, *inter alia*, μετρίότης and beauty, which are properties of determinate things (24c; 26b). At one point, however, the doctrine that pleasure is indeterminate appears, on the usual text, to be qualified: this is 52c1–d1. All the editors follow Stallbaum in reading substantially as follows:

ΣΩ. Οὐκοῦν ὅτε μετρίως ἤδη διακεκοίμεθα χωρὶς τὰς  
τε καθαρὰς ἡδονὰς καὶ τὰς σχεδὸν ἀκαθάρτους ὀρθῶς ἂν  
λεχθῆίσας, προσθῶμεν τῷ λόγῳ ταῖς μὲν σφοδραῖς ἡδοναῖς

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1) We need a formal statement of this, since it is merely assumed in e. g. 31a and 41d. Burnet’s emendation of 28a3–4 to τοῦτο (i. e. pain and pleasure) δὴ σοι τῶν ἀπεράντων γε γένους ἔστων is therefore preferable to that of other editors who read τοῦτο δὴ σοι τῶν ἀπεράντων γεγονός ἔστω. In this latter reading τοῦτο should mean ‘this issue’ (i. e. the issue of the indeterminacy of pleasure and pain), rather than ‘pleasure’, which has recently been mentioned in the plural, and cannot therefore be picked up by the singular τοῦτο. But if it means ‘this issue’ (as, among others, R. Hackforth, *Plato’s Examination of Pleasure*, Cambridge 1945, p. 52, takes it), then we explicitly have no formal statement of the indeterminacy of pleasure and pain, which we are supposed to be aware of by 31a. However, in preference to Burnet’s γε γένους, which lacks an article, I suggest γεγονότε.

2) e. g. by G. Striker, *Peras und Apeiron*, Göttingen 1970, p. 9.

ἀμετρίαν, ταῖς δὲ μὴ τοῦναντίον ἐμμετρίαν· καὶ <τάς> τὸ  
 μέγα καὶ τὸ σφοδρὸν αὐτῶν (δεχομένας), καὶ πολλάκις καὶ 5  
 ὀλίγακις γιγνομένας τοιαύτας, [τῆς] τοῦ ἀπειροῦ γε ἐκείνου  
 καὶ ἥττον καὶ μᾶλλον διὰ τε σώματος καὶ ψυχῆς φερομένου  
 [προσ]θῶμεν αὐτὰς εἶναι γένους, τὰς δὲ μὴ τῶν ἐμμέτρων. d

c4-5 τὰς . . . δεχομένας add. Stallbaum c6 τῆς secl. Stallbaum d1 προσ-  
 secl. Stallbaum αὐτὰς restituit Stallbaum e Ven. 189 τὰς] ταῖς B μή om.  
 BW

This translates as follows:

Well, we have reached the point of drawing a satisfactory line between pure pleasures and those which may with fair justification be called impure: and now let us add to our statement that those pleasures that are intense are marked by immoderateness, those that are not by moderation. Pleasures that can go to great lengths or to an intense degree, whether they actually do so often or seldom, let us class as belonging to that ‘unlimited’ kind of which we spoke, which penetrates body and soul alike in greater or in less degree: but the other sort let us class amongst things moderate.

(tr. Hackforth)

I have no quarrel with Stallbaum’s square brackets, but two questions arise: (1) Can we find a meaningful text without resorting to the excessive insertion of τὰς . . . δεχομένας<sup>3</sup>? (2) Is the text right which involves the denial of the indeterminacy of some pleasures?

(1) This is easily dealt with by changing σφοδρὸν to σμικρὸν and altering the punctuation, as follows: προσθῶμεν τῷ λόγῳ ταῖς μὲν σφοδραῖς ἡδοναῖς ἀμετρίαν, ταῖς δὲ μὴ τοῦναντίον ἐμμετρίαν, καὶ τὸ μέγα καὶ τὸ σμικρὸν αὐτῶν. ‘We can explicitly attribute immoderation to intense pleasures, and its opposite, moderation, to those which are not intense: that is, we can attribute greatness and smallness respectively.’ See 45c–d for the association of σφοδρός and μέγας; the use of σμικρός reappears soon after at 53b10, and see also 37c9. This is a lesser emendation than Stallbaum’s and retains a nice balance of opposites.

(2) A text which denies the indeterminacy of some pleasures could be retained if there was evidence that Plato thought that *only* impure, false pleasures belonged to the indeterminate class. Not only is there no evidence for this restriction, but there is evidence to the contrary.

(i) To say that pleasure is the indeterminate element in human life is not to say that all the pleasures a person experiences are intense: the good life is explicitly a member of the mixed class, i. e. it has the indeterminate element of pleasure in it, but we know that the pleasures of the good life are *not* intense. Nevertheless, these pleasures are its indeterminate element, which only means (as with any other indeterminate thing) that *if left to themselves* they would proliferate and tend towards intensity. Thus it is expressly stated at 31a that *in itself* (αὐτῇ) pleasure is indeterminate.

(ii) A second, related consideration is that the mark of any indeterminate is the fact that such a thing can be *either* great *or* small, as opposed to being of a determinate size (24a–25a). Thus, so far from the attribution of smallness being the

3) The fact that Ficino translates as if δέχεσθαι or something similar were in the text only proves that the textual corruption was already present in his time and he was trying to make sense of the text as it stood.

denial of indeterminacy, it is precisely the fact that pleasure can be either great or small which shows that *all* pleasures belong to the indeterminate class.

Both these considerations reveal that were Stallbaum's text to be correct, we would have to deny the coherence of Plato's thought on the meaning of indeterminacy. I conclude that Stallbaum's text must be wrong, since it denies that some pleasures belong to the indeterminate class, and I suggest the following text, which salvages the coherence of the dialogue on this point.

οὐκοῦν ὅτε μετρίως ἤδη διακεκρίμεθα χωρὶς τὰς τε καθαρὰς ἡδονὰς καὶ τὰς σχεδὸν ἀκαθάρτους ὀρθῶς ἂν λεχθείσας, προσθῶμεν τῷ λόγῳ ταῖς μὲν σφοδραῖς ἡδοναῖς ἀμετρίαν, ταῖς δὲ μὴ τοῦναντίον ἐμμετρίαν, καὶ τὸ μέγα καὶ τὸ μικρὸν αὖ καὶ πολλάκις καὶ ὀλιγάκις γιγνομένας τοιαύτας, τοῦ ἀπείρου γε ἐκείνου, καὶ ἦττον καὶ μᾶλλον διὰ τε σώματος καὶ ψυχῆς φερομένας, θῶμεν αὐτὰς εἶναι γένους, τὰς δὲ τῶν ἐμμέτρων.

I have already discussed the first part, down to σμικρὸν αὖ. The rest would translate: 'And whether they occur commonly or rarely, whether they penetrate body and soul to a greater or lesser extent, we must say that they are members of our familiar indeterminate class, though some are moderate members.'

(a) *πολλάκις* and *ὀλιγάκις* refer, as I take the previous sentence, not to intense pleasures alone, but *πολλάκις* to intense pleasures, *ὀλιγάκις* to small pleasures: this fits the pattern of disjunction of opposites in the paragraph, and we have just been told (52b6–8) that some pure pleasures are not common but rare.

(b) The emendation of *φερομένου* to *φερομένας* becomes necessary. On Stallbaum's text it is the class which does the penetration, which seems rather odd.

(c) The separation of *τοῦ ἀπείρου γε ἐκείνου . . . γένους* and of the two participial clauses *γιγνομένας . . . φερομένας*, which is avoided in Stallbaum's text, is not a factor which counts against my text. Such *ὑπτιότης* is not uncommon in periodic sentences.

(d) It is easy to see how *μή* could have been inserted after *δέ* in d1, by reminiscence of c4. I have merely adopted the reading of BW.