PLATO'S PHILEBUS

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Epicurus the Platonist

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1. The *Philebus* depicts some interesting similarities between what Plato argues about the impossibility of regarding “crude hedonism” as the good and what Epicurus states within his hedonist framework. Plato offers a number of good reasons to reject what I just called “crude hedonism”, such as the one held by Protarchus in the *Philebus*. However, in a way it is tempting to associate Epicurus’ hedonism with Protarchus’ view, especially if one bears in mind those Epicurean passages where bodily pleasures are declared to be the origin of the good. Now given that Plato is not willing to assume that the good can be identified with pleasure, it can be even absurd to suggest that there is some trace of Platonism in Epicurus, the philosopher who systematically defended a hedonist view where the bodily pleasures play a significant role as a necessary cohabitation for conceiving of the good itself (Us. 67; 413).

The aim of this paper is to argue that Epicurus was probably reacting to some of Plato’s tenets and was sensitive to Socrates’ criticism to Protarchus’ crude hedonism when formulating some aspects of his hedonist agenda.1 When Epicurus spits upon what is noble whenever it does not yield any pleasure (Us. 512), he appears to be despising Plato’s Forms as having an effective role in the good life; but Epicurus also spits upon the pleasures of extravagance due to the difficulties which follow from them (Us. 181). This remark somehow advances his thesis that if some pleasures, like the ones of the profligate, finally turn out to be painful, they must not be pursued (Letter to Menoeceus 131; LM). Regarding the probable connection between the Plato of the *Philebus* and Epicurus it might only mean to take for granted some issues of Plato’s analysis of pleasure that Epicurus not only considered uncontroversial, but also highly advantageous in order to incorporate them to his own view. Thus although Plato never takes pleasure to be the good, he was unwilling to dismiss it from the good life. By contrast, Epicurus indeed is willing to take pleasure to be the good, but not “crude pleasure”; thus both Plato and Epicurus rejected crude pleasure as the good, but they also kept pleasure as part of the good life. To be sure, both positions are different, but I think that, despite their differences, both of them share a common ground in the sense just indicated.

2. There seems to be some evidence that Epicurus’ assumed distinction of the *katastematic* pleasure is inspired by and developed in the light of Plato’s discussion that pleasure is a certain kind of restoration (κατάστασις) towards the living being’s own nature (*Philebus* 32a6-b4; 42d5-6).2 Plato’s argument runs thus: a living being is in a balanced con-

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1 It should be noted, though, that there are no clear quotations of Plato in Epicurus’ writings, with the exception of three mentions of Plato in Epicurus’ *Epistolario* *Fragmenta* 93, 94, and 118 (Arrigetti), which, however, are incidental and give no clue with regard to the probable presence of Platonism in Epicurus’ hedonist theory.

2 Nikolsky (2001), followed by Roskam (2007), 30, bringing to life a suggestion of Gosling and Taylor, has recently argued that the Epicurean distinction between katastematic and kinetic pleasure should not be traced to Epicurus himself. I cannot discuss this issue here; for the sake of brevity, I shall
dition when it is harmoniously disposed. When that harmony is dissolved (31d4), the suitable condition of the living being is destroyed, which makes pain take place. Thus pain can be characterized as being the destruction of the living being’s own nature (42c9-10). Now if pain is the dissolution of the living being’s suitable condition, pleasure should be the restoration of the living being towards its own being (32b3-4). Therefore, pleasure constitutes a stable condition in the living being’s own nature and pain is its opposite. 1 It would not be strange if Epicurus has found appealing the account of pleasure as the living being’s stable condition; if the tenet that the real pleasure must be the katastematic type could be properly attributed to him, it might be suggested that Epicurus found it reasonable to take a step consciously avoided by Plato, i.e. to identify a state of imperturbability with a state of pleasure (1 shall return to this point later). What is interesting to note is that both the content and the wording of these passages display some Platonic features. One could compare the Epicurean texts (see note 4) to Philebus 42d5-7, where Socrates claims that “when [things] are restored (i.e. stabilized, ἀναστατήσαται) to their own nature, this restoration (katastasis) is pleasure”. 2 Perhaps in this passage katastasis does not mean “stability” but, as usually translated, “restoration”; however such a restoration is towards the natural condition, which is assumed to be “stable”.

Besides, pleasure as replenishment (πλήρωσις) can be understood in at least two ways: (i) as the process of being filled, and (ii) as the result of that process, i.e. as a sort of plenitude. If this is plausible, one might assume that Plato was implicitly advancing the distinction between pleasure in movement and pleasure in rest. This is at least the manner in which Damascius appears to have seen pleasure as replenishment in the Philebus when claiming that Epicurus refers to natural pleasure (i.e. pleasure as plenitude) by calling it “katastematic” (In Philebium 190, 6-7). To some extent, this coincides with Plato’s contention that the natural condition is harmony, and that the achievement of this harmony is pleasure. On the other hand, it should be recalled that Plato takes pleasure in involving a process of becoming – insofar as it always aims at another thing: 15b5; 53d-54c– and, hence, he assumes that there is no being (οὐδὲν) at all of pleasure (53c4-5). This issue somehow had been advanced before when Socrates, as part of his argument against crude hedonism, establishes that for every x, if x is good, x must attain three basic conditions: (i) it must be something perfect, (ii) sufficient (20d1-4), and (iii) choiceworthy. Nothing subject to generation, though, is capable of being both perfect and sufficient; but being perfect and sufficient were assumed to be necessary conditions of what is good (20d; 60c; 67a). Therefore, if pleasure belongs to the sphere of becoming, and if its own nature is identified with becoming, then, pleasure cannot be the good. 3 But Plato, like Epicurus, accounts for the restoration of the living being’s condition as if it were certain stability, such a stability being pleasure. In addition, in the final sections of the dialogue, where it is suggested that the good life is the mixed one (60b-61b), Plato is particularly emphatic upon the fact that the mixed life should be “the best and most stable (▵ὐστκακαστοτατή) mixture and blend” (transl. D. Frede; 63e9-10). The word △ὐστκακαστοτατή literally means “not liable to internal conflict”, and qualifies μὲν ἐξαιτίας κρατῶν, but the

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2 For a fuller discussion of Plato’s argument, see D. Frede (1992), 429-430; 439-440.
4 Us. 68 (Arrighetti 21.3); Us. 422; LM 128, 8-10; Cicero, De finibus 1.37-39.
5 On pain as a disruption of the structure (εἶδος) of what is animated and pleasure as a return to the proper being, see the difficult passage of Philebus 32a9-b4, with Sayre’s comments in his (2005), 182-183.
6 Actually this argument intends to prove that neither pleasure nor wisdom is the good, but a third issue attaining the conditions mentioned above (20b-c).
good life Plato is talking about certainly is a life of calm, and any calm involves certain stability. The two examples of katastematic pleasures apparently advocated by Epicurus — ἀσπιδή and ἀποκαλέονται — DL 2.87; 10.136 — allows him to cover the double condition of human beings: the corporeal and the psychical. It is true that Plato argues against the thesis that pleasure is absence of pain or peace of mind (43d-c; 44a) but as suggested above, this could be an Epicurean development based on a Platonic motive.

Unlike Plato, Epicurus contends that all pleasures are good by themselves insofar as they contain a nature, which is congenial to the living being (LM 129). But “sober calculation” (ῥηματον λογικόν; LM 132)¹ allows the agent to assess rightly if a specific pleasure is actually a good, i.e. if such a pleasure continues to be pleasant in the middle and long term due to the fact that turmoil and displeasure do not follow from it. It is sober calculation that drives out the beliefs which are the source of the greatest turmoil for people’s soul (LM 132). Pleasures of the profligate are not bad by themselves (LM 129-130), but given that the effect that follows from such pleasures does not release the profligate from their fears and, what is worse, since these pleasures produce more pain than pleasure, they must be dismissed as being real goods. At this point Epicurus might be drawing again on a Platonic suggestion; in the Philebus 63a-5 Plato argues that if it is beneficial and harmless to live our lives enjoying all the pleasures, we should mix them all in, clearly intending to show that not all the pleasures are beneficial and harmless and, accordingly, that there are some pleasures that should remain out of the good life. Like Protarchus, some scholars have found outrageous Socrates’ contention that there can be true and false pleasures.¹⁰ The issue has been much debated and I do not intend to contribute to the debate; what is pretty clear is that for Plato false pleasures arise from false beliefs. In Socrates’ view, the bulk of the issue is that there is a significant difference between a pleasure associated to a right belief and knowledge and the type of pleasure associated with false belief and ignorance,¹¹ a stance that, I submit, is followed by Epicurus.

3. In this last section I would like to focus on the role of memory, calculation, and true belief as crucial ingredients in the good life. I will consider just two passages related to these faculties: the first one appears within the rebuttal of Protarchus’ crude hedonism, who states that the good is to enjoy, being pleased and delighted (11b-c); so he believes that if he lives his own life in enjoyment of the greatest pleasures, he would not be in need of anything else (21a). Socrates objects that, if he wishes to have a completely pleasant life, he will be in need of knowledge, intelligence, memory, true belief, and calculation. In claiming that he just needs pleasure, Protarchus is led to eliminate the role of the just mentioned items in the good life, what commits him to accepting an outrageous consequence: if he lacks intelligence, memory, knowledge or true belief; then (i) he will not know whether he was enjoying himself or not, (ii) he will not be able to remember that he ever enjoyed him, and (iii) he will not be able to notice that he is enjoying himself. In addition, if he lacks calculation, he will be unable to calculate that he will enjoy in the future, and his life will be reduced to the life of a mollusc. What one should wonder is if this is a life worth choosing (21d). The other passage I

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¹ For Epicurus the soul is corporeal, but he clearly distinguishes body from soul and accordingly bodily pain and pleasure from psychical pain and pleasure. On this see Konstan (2008), 148-150.


⁹ By the way, it is interesting to note that at Philebus 61a6 phronesis is said to be like a “sober” (nephanhniké) source of pleasure.

¹⁰ Frede has conveniently distinguished and discussed four senses in which pleasures and pain can be false (1992, 443-452, and 1996, 233-236).

¹¹ Cf. Philebus, 37e30-38a8 with the still useful comments by Goldschmidt (1971), 249-252.
would like to briefly discuss is *Philebus* 35d-36c, where Socrates concentrates on certain processes consisting in “filling” and “emptying”, conditions that are related to both the preservation and the destruction of animals (35c1-2). As previously established (32a-b), when one is in either of the two conditions, one is in pain (if one is emptied) or is experiencing pleasure (if one is filled). But it could be the case that one is in between these two states, i.e. when one is in pain due to his own affective state and remembers the pleasant things that occurred to him and that would put an end to his pain (35e9-10). Socrates rightly notes that this person “is not yet being filled” (35e10), so this intermediate state between pleasure and pain cannot be declared to be pleasure (43d-c). Socrates suggests that it sometimes happens that one is emptied, but anyway is in a “clear hope of being filled” (36a8-b1), and at this moment, because of remembering (τῷ μεμηνηθείη τῇ: 36b4-5), one is enjoying his hope for replenishment. What matters here is the apparent causal power of memory for producing enjoyment. Actually, such a causal power had already been advanced in a previous section, where Plato intended to show that desire is not a matter of the body, insofar as every living being always strives towards the opposite of its own affective state. Such an impulse presupposes that the living being has memory of the opposite affective state, and it finally shows that every impulse and desire is the domain of the soul (*Philebus* 35c-d).12

It is not novelty that for Epicurus both memory and expectations are widely recognized as being capable of increasing and even producing one’s pleasure.13 Indeed the distinction between pleasure, pain, and the intermediate state as well as the emphasis upon the fact that the intermediate state cannot be identified with pleasure appears to go against the Epicurean Platonism I am arguing for. After all, Epicurus places the real bodily pleasure in αὐτόρια, which seemingly corresponds to Plato’s intermediate state, i.e. a state where the living being’s condition is neither destroyed nor restored, insofar as it experiences neither pain nor pleasure (33e). But we could take this as a good example of how Epicurus, even disagreeing with Plato, regards as true a stance which Plato had argued to be false. It is a pity that in the *Philebus* Plato has not given any specific name to that intermediate condition between pleasure and pain; he just speaks of “not being in pain” (43d4, 44a10) and of “relied from pains” (44b2). But fortunately Plato gives a name to that intermediate state in the *Republic*, where he argues that it is a certain peace of mind (δεινοτής; 583c7-8).14 It is tempting to replace Plato’s δεινοτής with Epicurus’ ἀτομοκίνητον, but insofar as this is speculation on my part in the absence of that connection in the texts, it is better to leave it merely suggested.

It is also true that Epicurus frequently places the good in the flesh, in “stimuli” (gargalismoi; μυγματα; Us. 67, 142, and 413).15 But sometimes he also adds the mental pleasures of anticipation as a decisive component to turn some apparent pleasure into a real pleasure. In fact, Epicurus argues (*Principal Doctrine* 20), very Platonically in my view, that the flesh regards the limits of pleasure as unlimited (maybe following Plato’s remark that pleasure belongs to the unlimited class; *Philebus* 41d). Since the limits of pleasure

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12 For further discussion on this important issue see Migliori (1998), 203-205, and, more recently, Delcommenne (2006), 343-347, who stresses the important point that the structure of desire involves the three temporal dimensions (343).

13 Warren (2002), 118.

14 *This hæmochila* is reminiscent of the one mentioned by Plato in the *Protagoras* (356c3-e2), where it is the effect of the art of measurement making the appearances lose their power and giving the agent peace of mind.

15 Plato also uses the word gargalismoi, although, unlike Epicurus, he mentions stimuli as examples where the pains outweigh the pleasure (*Philebus* 46d9; see also *Phaedrus* 253e5 and *Symposium* 189a3, where the word appears to be associated with pleasant sensations).
are unlimited, the time that provides such limits should be unlimited, too. Our mind (dianoia), though, making a calculation of the (final) goal and limit of the flesh, provides us a perfect way of life and removes the need of an unlimited time. So corporeal pleasure, in order to be good, should be rationalized by the sober calculation of our mind. Therefore, although the bodily pleasure is necessary, the good is not reduced to merely bodily pleasure. To be sure, the satisfaction of the bodily necessities crucially contributes to the balance of the living being; but the flesh by itself cannot properly measure the convenience or inconvenience of satisfying a desire in whatever way or unlimitedly. That is why Epicurus takes our mind to rule over the flesh and thereby to limit the unlimited limits of pleasure (Principal Doctrine 19).

Now Plato maintains that pleasures and pains that occur through the soul can precede those that occur through the body, so it could happen to us to have both anticipatory pleasure and pain (προκαιρεία τε καὶ προλήψις; Philebus 39d4) with regard to the future ("hopes for the future"; 34e4-5). At 31a-b he had already stressed that pleasure belongs to the kind that neither possesses nor will ever possess a beginning, middle or end, reminding us of the fact that pleasure itself is unlimited. In the Principal Doctrine just analyzed Epicurus can be assuming the Platonic remark that pleasure belongs to what is unlimited, but stressing that our mind is capable of pointing to the correct limit and final end of pleasure in such a way as to incorporate pleasure to the good life. Actually, Epicurus does not need "to incorporate" pleasure to the good life, inasmuch as pleasure is the good life; but the good life is not any kind of pleasure without qualification. The real pleasure is the one that we attain as the result of the activity of our mind, the crucial factor for rightly anticipating the consideration of an object of desire as being a real object of desire. At this point there is another analogy that could be made between Plato’s developments in the Philebus and Epicurus; as remarked above, Plato suggests that the soul perceives both the present and future pleasure, and, due to memory, our soul can also retain the past pleasure (21b-c; 33c-d). In a very Platonic vein, Epicurus also highlights that psychological pain is much more painful than physical pain, since with the body we are just able to perceive what straightforwardly affects our body in the present, while with the soul we can perceive the past as well as the future (cf. Cicero Tusculan Disputations 5.95-96). But the value of memory in the Epicurean theory can be mainly seen in a brief and touching passage describing the last hours of Epicurus’ life. There he states that, even suffering the most terrible physical pain, he is willing to maintain that the joy of his soul, produced by the recollection (μνήμη) of previous discussions, can relieve him from such pain (DL 10.22; Us. 138). Without overestimating my case, it does seem to me that this passage is reminiscent of Plato’s Philebus 36b4-5, where memory (μνήμη) is said to be the cause of enjoying one’s hope for replenishment. Like Plato, Epicurus also attributes to memory a causal power in producing joy in oneself; but he even seems to have deepened Plato’s view by suggesting that memory can be a good remedy to relieve physical pain or to neutralize it to some extent (Us. 436). Within his physicalistic theory of mind Epicurus had no problem attributing causal powers to a mental activity such as memory. In his view, memory, as any other mental state, is something corporeal; and given that only what is corporeal is capable of acting or of being acted upon, memory can perfectly be a causal power for removing or getting relief from physical pain.

Now Plato in the Philebus also dealt with the issue that a calculation of our mind could put the limit to pleasure. As already suggested, Protarchus declines to accept that there are pains and pleasures which are true and false; he is only ready to admit that beliefs are true or false (36c-d). By contrast, Socrates is unwilling to accept that there are no false pleasures (and pains), so in a second surprising move of his argument he points out that if some kind of
wickedness (πονηρία) attaches itself to pleasure or belief, both belief and pleasure become wicked (37d1-3). One should remember that Socrates had already warned that excess and the overabundance of our wickedness is what allows for no limit in our pleasures and their fulfillment (26b7-10). And this is so because "pleasure often seems to arise in us not accompanied by right, but by false belief" (37e10-11). After Protagoras' reluctance to accept that there can be false pleasures, Socrates reformulates his point by arguing that pleasure and pain often follow true and false belief (38b9-10). Plato does not say that belief causes pleasure or pain or, generally, our affective states; that is Aristotle's approach to the issue. But Plato clearly recognizes that our affective states, such as pleasure and pain, but also fear, longing, and so on are attached to beliefs and, therefore, like beliefs, such affective states can be either true or false (cf. 36c10, where it is said that fear can be either true or false; see also 40e).

Epicurus was keen to prove that the basic causes of human unhappiness lie in the mistaken beliefs on gods, death, and so on. He lays emphasis upon the fact that fear is a central cause of human unhappiness as well as of irrational desires. Fears are the effect of false beliefs, and part of the therapy philosophy consists of is focused on how to produce a secure conviction (πιστοὶ βήβαιοι; Letter to Pythocles 85), that allows the agent to live without false fears and disturbances. To some extent, this matches well with Plato's suggestion at Philebus that fears, insofar as they are a certain kind of pain within the soul, can be false (36c10; 40e; 47e). Although Epicurus says that he is not able to conceive of what the good is if he eliminates the pleasures of taste, of sex, and of listening (Us. 67; Vatican Saying 33; VS), with the same emphasis he claims that the stomach is not insatiable, but rather the false belief stating that the stomach requires an unlimited amount of food for filling itself (VS 59). The therapeutic argument in this case would run thus: (i) if natural desires (hunger, thirst) are not satisfied, there is pain. (ii) In virtue of the hedonist principle identifying the good with pleasure, pain should be avoided and pleasure should be pursued (if and only if such an avoidance and pursuit do not involve pain). But (iii) in order that satisfaction of natural desires is rightly done, satisfaction of such desires must be guided by reasoning and based on a true belief. (iv) Therefore, we ought to get true beliefs for the sake of being able to properly satisfy our desires. The therapeutic maxim might be formulated this way: "learn to satisfy your desires following a true belief".

I hope to have been persuasive enough about the fact that the alleged coincidences between Plato and Epicurus are not merely incidental. When Epicurus argues that wisdom is the greatest good and the source of all the other virtues insofar as it is impossible to live pleasantly without living wisely, honorably, and justly, and impossible to live wisely, honorably and justly without living pleasantly (LM 132), one might suspect that this was the Epicurean version of Plato's mixed life in the Philebus.

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16 Topica 151a15-19; 152a32-33; Rhetoric 1378a30-32.

17 Although every pleasure is good - insofar as it has a nature that is congenial to us --, this does not mean that every pleasure is to be chosen. Similarly, every pain is bad, but not every one is such as to be always avoided (LM 129).