Living the Good Life: Bridging the Gap Between Pleasure & Wisdom

At first glance, Plato's view on the good life seems fairly simple: to live a good life, one must be a philosopher. We are even given an archetype in the literary version of Socrates, the predecessor to the endearingly absent-minded but brilliant professor of modernity. However, the job description Plato lays out in *Phaedo* seems to demand the sole pursuit of wisdom at the expense of pleasure, with a prohibition on the latter. This is at odds with our philosopher-hero, who was deeply committed to his city and possessed a number of unnecessary bodily attachments, including a wife and children. Worse yet, the given ideal bears more similarities to asceticism than what one could reasonably term the good life. A different interpretation of *Phaedo* spares us this fate in two parts.

First, rather than advocating a complete ban on pleasure, the argument can be seen metaphorically, much like the rest of the dialogue. Plato's hedging on the need for pleasure, which initially appears slight, is great enough to allow for pleasure in conjunction with wisdom and potentially even for its own sake. In fact, the best life actually requires both attributes. If wisdom is taken to encompass the mental faculties, without a base level of wisdom, we cannot remember past pleasure or differentiate them from anything else; without a degree of pleasure there is no impetus to continue the

search for knowledge and the very word philosophy (lover of wisdom) is rendered meaningless – what is love without pleasure?

Second, the relative amounts of wisdom/mind and pleasure/body needed for the good life can be quantified, albeit imprecisely. Keeping the constraints the body places on the soul in mind (pun not intended), a life which includes pleasure will allow one to know of a greater number of forms, and potentially bring one closer to true knowledge. We have thus established that pleasure on its own is not *inherently* bad – one need not shy away from the world entirely.

The goal of human life, according to Platonic philosophy, is εὐδαιμονία; frequently translated as "happiness", but more accurately "human flourishing". It is not a simple feeling, but rather seems to be an ongoing process, the product of a tri-partite soul whose rational, spiritual and appetitive pieces are in appropriate balance. The appetitive is responsible for desires, from basic needs for survival – food and sleep – to unnecessary cravings whose sole purpose is pleasure – Sicilian-style dishes, Corinthian girlfriends and Attic pastries. The rational separates the true from the false, the needs from the cravings, and can discern the real (the Forms) from the merely apparent. The spirit serves as rational soul's enforcer, keeping the appetitive part in check. An unbalanced soul, such as that of an insatiable glutton, may suffer from a weak rational segment. In contrast, a regretful glutton might have an adequate rational piece but be

deficient in just spirit, hence the awareness (and accompanying regret) but continued performance of the un-virtuous actions. εὐδαιμονία accompanies – or is the result of – excellence or virtue (arête), though the exact relationship between the two is murky and never systematically stated. However, Plato does hint in the beginning of the *Meno* that virtue is a pre-requisite of happiness, and what is a true philosopher if not virtuous?

Philosophers, defined in the *Republic*, are "those who love the sight of truth", truth (in this case) being the Forms. "We customarily define a single form in connection with each of the many things to which we apply the same name" (596a), when we speak of a Form we mean the main thing: the eternal and unchanging thing which endows a particular object – say, a tree – with its thing-ness – tree-ness. The Form common to all trees is Tree, a certain invisible and intelligible quality that *makes* all trees trees. The Forms are partially visible within objects: each physical object partakes in the Form, and is comparable to it, but never equals it. A woman may be beautiful, but her beauty is always less than the Form of Beauty, or Beauty itself. These pure Forms are ontologically prior to their worldly manifestations – and therefore are more "real" – but are potentially inaccessible due to the constraints imposed by the body (to be discussed later).

Plato's Allegory of the Cave is a useful metaphor for understanding the Forms and the role of the philosopher. A group of prisoners is bound by chains in a cave since

childhood, forced to face the wall of the cave with no ability to look about. Behind the individuals is a great fire, along with a walkway that other men walk on, carrying "all kinds of artifacts that project" from it to the wall. Some of the walkers are silent, others talk, but all the prisoners are only able to see are the projections upon the wall: outlines, but never actually the figures themselves. Nonetheless, these projections comprise the whole of their reality. Suppose one of these men, Pearcy, is freed: upon turning around, he is asked to identify each one of the passing things but is dumbfounded. Instructed to look at the light, his eyes hurt and he turns back toward the wall, to the seemingly more-real things which he has known his entire life. He is then dragged out of the cave into daylight and is blinded by the sun's brilliance. With time, Pearcy begins to realize the truth that *this* is reality, and what he saw before was simply a series of shadows. In the same way, the Forms are the true reality, and the shadows – though real – are simply a poor reflection of it. What sets philosophers apart from others is their desire to see this truth above all else: rather than call the shadows and projections reality as most others do, philosophers view them as representative of a greater and more beautiful reality and seek to know more about it. Unlike the others, they don't need to be dragged out. Instead, they actively yearn to escape and see the real world.

The search for truth, though an end in itself, is also a means to an end: awareness of the Forms allows one to distinguish real from illusory and differentiate the

right from the wrong. Through contemplation of the Forms and self-examination, philosophers sharpen the rational part of their soul and strengthen the spirit, increasing discipline over their appetitive parts. This is what allows them to be virtuous and is why Plato places them at the top of the hierarchy in the ideal city in the *Republic*. The guardians – both as a metaphor for the rational part of the soul, and as an idea for a class of individuals – are the most well-suited to determining what is best off for their respective wholes (the full soul and the ideal city) because they can see the manifestations of the Forms and bring them as close to reality as possible, chief among these the Good, which "gives truth to the things known and the power to know to the knower" (*Republic* 508d), and "though it is the cause of knowledge and truth, it is also an object of knowledge . . .it is right to think of knowledge and truth as godlike but wrong to think that either of them is the [G]ood – for the [G]ood is yet more prized" (*Republic* 508d-509a).

The Good is unique, even among forms, much in the way that the sun is unique among objects: "the sun not only provides visible things with the power to be seen but also with coming to be, growth, and nourishment, though it is not itself coming to be" (*Republic* 509b). By acquiring knowledge of Good, philosophers are able to keep their souls in balance, thereby being virtuous and promoting excellence within themselves and others: through Good, they achieve εὐδαιμονία.

With this definition of a philosopher we have a clear example in Plato's literary Socrates, and likely the actual man as well. Socrates is declared by the Delphic oracle to be the wisest man living (*Apology* 21a), reportedly spending his entire life searching for truth and encouraging others to do the same. He lived in near poverty, preferring truth to luxuries, and admonished others to do the same, criticizing fellow Athenians for their "eagerness to possess as much wealth, reputation, and honors as possible, while [they] do not care for nor give thought to wisdom or truth, or the best possible state of [their] soul[s]" (*Apology* 29e). Countless other examples could be provided, but as Socrates is Plato's ideal philosopher, it is fair to say he embodies Plato's ideal man. Admittedly, there is one divergence from the requirements above: the philosopher is supposed to have knowledge of the Forms, though Socrates professes to have no such thing, as implied by his statement that "in each case the bystanders thought that I myself had possessed the wisdom that I proved my interlocutor did not have" (*Apology* 23a). A proper treatment of this divergence would double the length of this paper, so we'll pass over it, accepting that Socrates undoubtedly possesses some knowledge of the truth, and certainly more than others: "I am wiser than this man . . . he thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas when I do not know, neither do I think I know; so I am likely to be wiser than he to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know" (*Apology* 21d). While Socrates had some very important

knowledge, *viz.,* that he had knowledge of his own ignorance, he denies having the kind of knowledge that Plato seems to value the most.

In the *Phaedo*, Plato lays out the requirements one must meet for being a true philosopher, requirements which Socrates, without a hint of irony, sometimes fails to meet. The focus is no longer on living an excellent or virtuous life, rather, it is on trying to minimize the distorting influence the body has on recollecting knowledge of the Forms. We will first consider knowledge as recollection, then the way in which the body inhibits knowledge of the forms, finally returning to the issue of Socrates and the disparities between the ostensive ideal, Socrates the man, and the verbal one, the "true philosopher".

Learning as a process can occur in one of two ways: original learning or recollection of information previously learned, but forgotten. Plato believes all learning falls in the latter camp, as any person, questioned rightly, will eventually be able to give the correct answer to any question (*Apology* 73b-c). Learning as recollection implies that we have some innate knowledge, but lost access to it at birth (*Apology* (76c-d). Despite their attempt to recollect the Forms, philosophers are still bound by the same chains as other humans, the limits of their bodies. As an example of these chains, consider the example of a railroad track. The two rails run parallel, and logic dictates that they never cross – if by definition the lines never come closer together, it's

impossible for them to do so.[1] And yet our vision suggests they do! For this reason, Plato seems to paint a stunningly negative portrait of the body and most things corporeal. In particular, Plato argues that the true philosopher will separate the soul from the body as much as possible, as the body does nothing but inhibit the soul's perception of the truth (Forms).

This occurs in two main ways: first, the body "keeps us busy in a thousand ways because of its need for nurture. Moreover, if certain diseases befall it, they impede our search for truth . . . [even] if we do get some respite from it and turn to some investigation, everywhere in our investigations the body is present and makes for confusion and fear, so that it prevents us from seeing the truth" (*Phaedo* 66b-d). Second, because the examples our senses provide are inferior to the true and pure forms in themselves, and continuous exposure to limited versions wrongly conditions us to expect Forms to take the form (pun not intended) of an image or some other tangible element. The negative influence of both of these can never be overcome entirely, but can be minimized by approaching the object with thought alone, "taking leave from the body and as far as possible having no contact or association with it in the search for reality" (*Phaedo* 65c). Armed with the realization that we will come to possess full knowledge of the Forms when we die, and thus should happily prepare themselves for

[1] I'm aware that this is not actually provable, and that it doesn't apply in certain fields of geometry. That the rule doesn't apply in all cases when it should given what seems empirically correct only furthers the argument that the senses can/do deceive.

death: “if he is a true philosopher . . . he is firmly convinced that he will not find pure knowledge anywhere except [Hades]” (*Phaedo* 68b). Furthermore, he claims that true philosophers should strive to be as close to death as possible, denying the bodily pleasures because “every pleasure or pain provides, as it were, another nail to rivet the soul to the body and to weld them together” (*Phaedo* 83d).

Socrates, who is arguing on behalf of these points, follows many but violates more than a handful. He says that one should avoid physical attachments, yet he has a wife and children, and clearly loved his city-state. While poor and never one to strive for wealth, he enjoyed certain luxuries, provided by friends that he could not have afforded otherwise: the *Symposium* mentions him drinking a great deal with a group of friends. He wasn’t immune to passions, either: at the beginning of the *Charmides* Socrates declares that he is “inflamed” with sexual desire for Charmides, he claims to be “beside himself” for some time before he is able to regain composure. While still far less attached than most individuals, he was still not free from unnecessary attachments in contrast to the *Phaedo’s* claims about the true philosopher. How can these disparate positions be reconciled?

To make the issue more clear and present a potential solution, let us take the idea put forth by Plato – to reject the body as much as possible – to its logical end. The true philosopher, as described in the *Phaedo,* would prefer to be born, live, and die

while kept immobile in a bacta-filled isolation tank, so that he may recollect true knowledge of the Forms without the meddling of the body (sight, sound, smell and taste are easily eliminated, touch can be mostly dealt with by cutting select nerves).

This raises a perplexing set of problems: recollection requires stimulus. To remember whether something is right or wrong, we must first have something initially presented to us. Without bodily exposure to the world, a true philosopher would find himself confronted with nothing to consider. With respect to the Forms, take the example of a chair: how can I recognize that Chair-itself exists without seeing multiple chairs and realizing they have a common property? More generally, how can one recollect *any* Form without some basic level of exposure to the corporeal representations of that Form, however incomplete they may be? Even if the senses may make true or complete knowledge of Chair impossible, it seems better to have *some* knowledge, however incomplete, than no knowledge at all. Admittedly, the situation is a bit ridiculous, but it illustrates the utter absurdity of the ascetic reading of Plato.

The interpretation of *Phaedo* whereby pleasure and corporeal attachments are viewed as anathema to the life of a philosopher should thus be viewed as hyperbole. Instead, a better reading declares pleasure acceptable so long as it does not become the impetus for action at the expense of wisdom. Plato values wisdom/knowledge *over*

pleasure, rather than making a demand for the former and prohibiting the latter entirely. For a practical example, let us turn outside the texts.

Consider two lives: one of unending pleasure, the other of unparalleled wisdom (though still constrained by the body); both lack the feature other entirely. Even an unabashed hedonist would be loath to take the pleasurable life, as without memory, judgment, and all the other faculties of the mind (beyond pleasure) one would not know that the feeling was pleasurable (no ability to evaluate truth), whether one had felt pleasurable previously (no memory), and so on. The pure sensation of pleasure, in and of itself, is vapid or hollow. On the other side, consider Spock: even though he desires knowledge, wisdom, and memory above all else, he realizes that life without feeling, pleasure, and pain hardly qualifies as life at all. Now add, to both cases, a small amount of the opposite (while keeping the original portions): both of these are preferable to either of the extremes, though the true philosopher should prefer the case closest to pure wisdom. The ideal ratio is somewhere between the two extremes; though the exact location is unknown one must exist.

This ratio approach can be taken a step further to outright quantification, and the move provides a framework in which one can be a true philosopher and still live the good life. For this we shall use Socrates as our example. We have three ranges: breadth of knowledge (awareness of many Forms), depth of knowledge (absolute

closeness to grasping a particular Form), and degree of pleasure. The soul has the maximum value for breadth, depth, and pleasure – 100 for each. Humans, due to the constraints of the body, are capped at 80 for depth of knowledge – though they can reach the limit faster if they separate themselves from their bodies as much as possible.

Socrates has a number of options: [1] he can exist in a vacuum from birth, giving him neither pleasure, nor breadth, nor depth (0 for each). Alternatively, he can live a hedonistic lifestyle, maxing out at 100 pleasure but failing to examine himself or even considering the Forms (0 for both breadth and depth) [2]. Neither of these is particularly appealing compared to the third option: living in society but spending time discussing philosophy, focusing primarily on personal development but still enjoying life – just ensuring physical pleasure remained secondary to wisdom; we might assign values of 100, 80 and 30, respectively [3]. Socrates could choose to retreat to the tank after a brief period in society in order to approach true knowledge *faster*, but the limited number of stimuli encountered, combined with the hard cap (raised slightly due to the removal of the second constraint detailed above), leaves him with values of 10, 90, and 0 [4], which makes it questionably superior to the option [3] (assuming well behaved preferences).

Two conclusions are worth mentioning: first, an additional few pleasure points gained without a commensurate drop in either breadth or depth – say 100/80/35 [5], compared to 100/80/30 [4] – does not affect the level of closeness to true knowledge,

illustrating the idea that additional pleasure is acceptable (again, provided there is no drop in either of the knowledge attributes). Second, the benefits of living in society where one will encounter a greater number of Forms could outweigh the costs in additional time needed (it may be that [3] is better than [4] on balance). In fact, being a part of society could actually speed the process if one had good teachers: while true knowledge may be un-teachable, the process by which true knowledge is acquired does not necessarily suffer this fault. The quantification is not a necessity, it merely serves to illustrate the point that one is likely to live a better life – and be a truer philosopher – by remaining in society and philosophizing instead of crawling into a shell (or bacta tank ☺). The next step is to show that Plato would not disagree with the framework.

Far from taking issue with the quantification of knowledge and pleasure, there is ample evidence to support that this is actually what Plato had in mind. In *The Republic*, he explicitly quantifies the difference in pleasure between the philosopher-king and a tyrant, pegging the former at 729 more pleased than the latter (*Republic,* 587e). While the number is noted by the translator to be contrived – significantly so – it shows he was amenable to the idea of quantification, albeit while acknowledging the extreme degree of uncertainty. Another bit of evidence comes from the *Apology*, where Socrates says, “He should not care for any of his belongings before caring that he himself should be as good and as wise as possible” (*Apology*, 36c). There is an explicit prohibition on caring

for belongings but it disappears if one has made all the possible progress – this illustrates the difference between cases [3] and [5] perfectly. However, there are some problems with this line of thinking.

The strongest attack on this framework would cut at the assumption that there are degrees of closeness to true knowledge. It could be that knowledge is entirely binary – one either has it or does not. There is some support for this in the *Republic*, as Plato explicitly declares what is known infallibly is knowledge, with the balance of information being declared opinion. However, the entire theory of recollection within *Phaedo depends* on degrees of knowledge. This, coupled with his direct distinction between four types of mental activity: Imagination (*eikasia*), Belief (*pistis*), Thought (*dianoia*), and Understanding (*noesis*) and their differing levels of visibility and intelligibility (*Republic*, 509d-511e), closes the door on this critique.

This project as a whole seeks to bridge the gap between the life of a true philosopher and what could reasonably be called “the good life.” Plato’s main mouth-piece, Socrates, initially seemed at odds with the definition of a true philosopher as laid out in a strict interpretation of *Phaedo*. However, by considering the commentary on pleasure as demanding an orientation toward wisdom, rather than a strict lifestyle eschewing pleasure, the literary Socrates is restored to his place (if not pushed slightly higher). From a modern perspective, it opens the door to calling certain individuals

within society true philosophers, whereas the original “strict” interpretation practically slammed the door on this given the general level of comfort modernity all but requires.