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**THE PLEASURES OF THE COMIC AND
OF SOCRATIC INQUIRY:
APORETIC REFLECTIONS ON *PHILEBUS* 48A–50B**

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. . . and what sort of man am I? One of those who would be
pleased to be refuted, should he say something untrue.

Socrates, at *Gorgias* 458a

At *Apology* 33c, Socrates asks his jurors what seems a rhetorical question: “Why then do some people enjoy spending considerable time in my company? You have heard why, gentlemen of the jury; I have told you the whole truth. They enjoy hearing those questioned who think they are wise but are not. And indeed this is not unpleasant.”¹

Don’t Socrates’ words reach well beyond their immediate context, setting off bells of recognition for readers of Plato’s Socratic dialogues? Plato often has Socrates acknowledge the attentive bystanders present at his elenctic conversations; he refers as well, indirectly, to us, only the latest of the many generations who have listened in by reading. We, too, have “spent considerable time in [Socrates’] company,” “enjoying” the imagined dramatic spectacles in which he has shown Euthyphro and Hippias and Ion and Agathon and so many other pretenders to wisdom that, in truth, they “are not [wise].” As the sheer fact of our numbers and this “considerable time” attest, this has, indeed, been “not unpleasant”—quite the contrary.

How should we explain this “pleasure”? What is it, on the one hand,

1 This is the translation, very slightly altered, of Grube 1981. All other translations are my own.

in the spectacle of Socrates' refutations, on the other, in us, that makes reading the Socratic dialogues so distinctively "pleasant" an experience? The answer is not obvious, so it is initially very welcome when, in the *Philebus* at 48a–50b, Socrates himself appears to offer an explanation. At first sight, his characterization of the joy we take in the sight of "the laughable" (τὸ γελοῖον, 48c4) on the comic stage seems to fit the basic scene presented in many of the Socratic dialogues. There are two keys, he explains to Protagoras, to what makes a character "laughable." The first is the character's "ignorance" (ἄγνοια, 48c2), specifically, the self-ignorance of thinking that he possesses "goods" that he lacks. Socrates distinguishes kinds of self-ignorance by differentiating these goods into wealth, impressive physique, and virtue, and among the virtues, he singles out wisdom (48c–49a).

The second key is the character's "weakness" (ἀσθένεια, 49b7), that is, his lack of the social power that would enable him to avenge himself against laughter. Such power, Socrates observes, makes a man's ignorance and conceit "harmful even to his neighbors"; he becomes "fearful and dangerous" (49b–c). Socrates seems to allude to *personae* like the self-certain Oedipus of the early scenes of *Oedipus Tyrannus* or, again, like Creon in *Antigone*. These are powerful figures whose mistaken presumption of their own wisdom leads them to injure the city and to mistake any opposing counsel for treachery and personal attack. But the weak man—one who is our social equal—poses no such danger. Let him "puff himself up" (49a) with the false conceit that he is rich or handsome or wise and then be exposed in his lack of self-knowledge, and that—"the laughable"—is merely funny, the stuff of good comic theatre.

Needless to say, none of the Socratic dialogues are *merely* comedies. Even a text with as rich a comic current as the *Euthyphro* is given the darkness of tragedy by the ironies of its place and time. But granting this, doesn't Socrates' analysis of "the laughable" fit very nicely many of his encounters in the dialogues? The interlocutors are almost all Socrates' equals, either as his fellow citizens or as visitors from out of town who, however eminent, speak with him on the level ground of guest and host; hence they meet the criterion of the "weakness" that lets a character be laughable rather than fearful. More importantly, all think themselves wise in one way or another, and all, brought up short by Socrates' questions, are shown that they are not. Few, of course, accept this disclosure, but their various efforts at resistance—ranging from an obtuse refusal to recognize the implications of their own positions (e.g., *Euthyphro*, *Ion*, *Hippias*) to outbursts of defensive disbelief (e.g., *Thrasymachus*, *Polus*, and *Callicles*),

clever problem-posing (e.g., *Meno*), and, most shrewdly of all, pre-emptive agreement (e.g., *Critias*, *Nicias*)—only extend the process of their comeuppance and heighten our delight in it.

I. PROBLEMS WITH THE FIT AND THE PROGRAM OF INQUIRY

Is it, then, this comic subplot of the unmasking of the pretender that makes it “not unpleasant” for his bystanders to watch Socrates at work? Or, to shift to the level of the relation of the reader to the text, does the account that Plato has Socrates give in the *Philebus* capture a key part, at least, of the pleasure we take in reading Plato’s Socratic dialogues? To think this through, we must face two different kinds of problem.

First, Socrates embeds his account of our pleasure in laughter at the comic in a nest of larger projects.² To understand this pleasure fully, we must identify these projects and read Socrates’ account in the expanded context that each implies. At the first level, Socrates intends his account to show by example that the pleasures associated with the passions are in each case mixed with pain. We must therefore mark the pain that is mixed with the pleasure of laughter. At the next level, Socrates speaks of the whole class of such pleasures as if—like the two preceding classes,³ those of physical pleasures and pleasures of anticipation—they fall under his account of the causes of pains and pleasures as “emptyings” (or “deprivations,” κενώσεις) and “replenishings” (πληρώσεις), respectively (47c). We must therefore try to interpret the pleasure and pain mixed together in laughter at the comic in terms of such replenishings and emptyings. And, finally, Socrates takes these emptyings and replenishings as disruptions and restorations, respectively, of a “natural harmony” of opposites. He first presents these notions of opposites and natural harmony in the context of his fundamental ontological notion of the mixture of limit and the unlimited. We must therefore

2 Once we move past what I will speak of as the first of the three levels, we move into areas on which there is no consensus. That there is a second level at all (and, as a consequence, that there is a third) would be contested by Gosling and Taylor 1982, who hold that Plato does not intend his account of physical pleasures at 31b–32a to belong to any general and comprehensive theory of pleasure. But see, to the contrary, the penetrating arguments offered by Tuozzo 1996.

3 For the notion of “classes,” see εἶδος, 32b6, c4. For the distinction of the pleasures associated with the passions as the third class, see the trifurcation at 46b–c, reiterated at 50d.

try to interpret the pleasure of laughter at the comic in this context, asking what the opposites are and what the natural harmony is that gives this pleasure its normative structure.

This first set of tasks is formidable enough, just in itself. But as we shall see, it is made still more difficult by the very project it serves: considering whether and how Socrates' account of the pleasure of laughter at the comic illumines the pleasure that his audiences and we readers take in the elenctic drama of the Socratic dialogues. Our efforts to think through Socrates' account in light of his larger, general theory of pleasure will create a mounting set of worries. As we proceed level by level, we shall face a deepening tension between the moral-philosophical project of the Socratic dialogues and the dialogical rhetoric we are considering imputing to Plato and his Socrates. To put this baldly, we shall come to worry that the pleasure by which, on our reading, Socrates seems to draw his audience—and Plato, his readership—conflicts with and even betrays the notion of virtue that they urge. This *aporia* will require a radical stocktaking. It may be that the conflict is insuperable. If so, we must either accuse Socrates and Plato of hypocrisy or give up our orienting presumption that Socrates' account applies to our pleasure in the dialogues. But it may also be that we need to interpret Socrates' account more deeply. May we reach an understanding of the pleasure to be taken in his elenctic practice that, rather than contradicting the Platonic-Socratic notion of virtue, takes its bearings from it?

Our inquiry will follow the course these problems suggest. In section II, we will explicate Socrates' account of the pleasure of laughter at the comic on each of the three levels of his larger theory of pleasure. At the end of each of these reflections, we will make provisional assessments of the light our explication casts on the apparent fit of Socrates' account with his practice in the dialogues. In section III, we will mark the *aporia* we will have generated, and we will begin the work of radical rethinking that it requires.

II. LAUGHTER AT THE COMIC—THE THREE LEVELS OF SOCRATES' THEORY OF PLEASURE

Let's begin, then, to try to understand Socrates' account of comic laughter at each of the three levels of his general theory of pleasure.

A. The Mixture of the Pleasure of Laughter with the Pain of φθόνος

At *Philebus* 47d, Socrates turns from the kinds of pleasure, first, “that are confined to the body” (46b) and, second, that involve “both soul and body” (46c), to those that “are confined to the soul” (46c). The first are physical pleasures, the second, pleasures of anticipation, and the third, the pleasures that arise in conjunction with the passions. As with the first two kinds, so with the third, Socrates wants to argue, pleasure comes mixed with pain. As he indicates both before and after his analysis (see 48b and 50c–d), he focuses on the pleasure of laughter at the comic⁴ in hopes that Protarchus will let his analysis stand as a substitute for a “full account of the rest” of the pleasures associated with the passions. On the one hand, this class is vast and heterogeneous, very hard to encompass in its unity as a kind;⁵ on the other hand, our “state of mind in [enjoying] comedy” (48a) seems one of sheer, unadulterated pleasure. Socrates hopes that if he can show that even our exuberant delight in laughing at the comic is mixed with pain, Protarchus will let the point stand for the whole class of such pleasures, accepting “that there is such a mixture of pain and pleasure in other cases as well” (48b, cf. 50d).

How, then, is there pain mixed with the pleasure we feel in laughing “at comedies” (ἐν ταῖς κωμωδίαις, 48a8)? Socrates guides Protarchus through three major steps that, taken in the context of a tacit understanding of comic theatre, secure his claim. First, he gains Protarchus’s agreement that φθόνος—the feeling of malice or, more narrowly, of begrudging or envying—is a pain of the soul. (48b) Second, he gets Protarchus’s assent that one who is in a state of φθόνος manifests this in taking pleasure from “bad things” (κακοῖς, 48b11) befalling his neighbors. These first two steps are quick; the third is Socrates’ lengthy analysis of “the laughable,” τὸ γελοῖον, which we retraced earlier. To recall: “the laughable” consists in the conjunction of self-ignorant pretence and weakness. The one we laugh at must mistakenly think himself to possess some or all of the goods of wealth and physique and virtue—and, of the virtues, especially wisdom; and he must

4 I will use the phrase “the comic” to indicate the humor that is worked on stage in comedies.

5 It is striking that Socrates nowhere invokes the idea of θυμός, “spiritedness,” by which he gathered the passions to constitute the middle part of the soul in *Republic* 4. Instead, he offers overlapping lists of examples. On the implicit challenge in the *Philebus* to the tripartition of the soul, see Miller 2008.

lack the power to avenge himself against our laughter (48c–49c). At this point, we non-Greek moderns need to make explicit the understanding of comic theatre that goes without saying between Socrates and Protarchus: it is the very work of comedy to put on stage, by its indirect but quite transparent mimesis, various of one's fellow citizens and to expose them, to one's delight, as in the condition of self-delusion that makes for "the laughable." But this is to say that comedy elicits in its audience precisely that pleasure—pleasure in witnessing bad things, namely, self-ignorance, befalling one's fellows—that Protarchus has agreed is a manifestation of *φθόνος*; and *φθόνος*, he has also agreed, is a pain of the soul. Accordingly, there is pain mixed in with the joy one feels in laughing at comedies.

Should we be disturbed that Socrates identifies *φθόνος* at the heart of this pleasure? If we focus on his purpose in surveying various pleasures, not at all. He is at work collecting all the kinds of pleasure in preparation for the later task of selecting some of them as ingredients in the good life. He is doing a non-judgmental phenomenology, and it is appropriate that he acknowledge pleasure wherever he finds it; the moral-critical work of separating the ethically good pleasures from the ethically bad ones will come later. But *our* project is different. We have been struck by the apparent fit of the core event of the Socratic dialogues—the "questioning [of] those who think they are wise" that reveals that they "are not" (*Apology* 33c)—with Socrates' account of what we find laughable in comedy. Insofar as there is this fit, doesn't Socrates' account imply that his elenctic conversations draw their audiences by appealing to *φθόνος*? And is Plato, in turn, in having Socrates go out of his way to offer this account in the *Philebus*, acknowledging as much also about the draw of his dramatizations of Socrates' conversations?

The dark edge of these questions is only intensified by a striking passage in the last part of Socrates' argument. To bring the specificity of the "power" (*δύναμιν*, 49c) of *φθόνος* into focus, Socrates introduces the distinction between friends and enemies. He gets Protarchus to agree that while it is "neither unjust nor malicious (*φθονερόν*) to take pleasure at bad things befalling your enemies," it is "unjust . . . to be pleased when you see bad things befalling your friends" (49d). Not only does he thus assert the injustice of *φθόνος*; he also tacitly endorses the customary understanding of justice as doing good to one's friends and bad to one's enemies. The injustice of being pleased at "bad things befalling your friends" is based on their being your friends, not on the badness of the things that befall them;

indeed, Socrates has just argued that one can quite properly enjoy “bad things happening to your enemies.”

To be sure, taking pleasure in a bad thing happening is not the same as “doing” the bad thing; it does, however, imply an approval of such doing. Socrates thus contradicts his categorical denial in both the *Crito* and the *Republic* that it can ever be just to “do bad things,” κακουργεῖν,⁶ to anyone, even an enemy who has wronged you first. Socrates’ posture is, to say the least, arresting. Wouldn’t Crito and Thrasyarchus take pleasure—a guilty satisfaction, for Crito, a triumphant one, for Thrasyarchus—in catching Socrates in this contradiction? Do we, in turn, find ourselves getting a certain uneasy rise from Plato’s confession that he draws us to the dialogues by appealing to a kind of φιλονικία, a “love of victory” even over our friends, that, in the moral content of their arguments, the dialogues claim to renounce?

B. φθόνος and Laughter, Emptying and Replenishing, Self-Knowledge and Self-Evasion

To move now to the second level: can we understand our mixed pleasure-and-pain in laughter by way of Socrates’ account of pain and pleasure as the effects, respectively, of an emptying (or “deprivation”) that disrupts and a replenishing that restores a natural balance?⁷ By two features of Socrates’ rhetoric, Plato encourages us to regard this account of the

6 *Crito* 49c2. Taken literally, κακουργεῖν is to “work” or “do” (-ουργ-) “bad” (κακ-). Note the equivalent κακῶς ποιεῖν, 49c7, c10. In the comparable argument in *Republic* 1, Socrates speaks of “harming,” βλάπτειν, one’s enemies; see 335b–d.

7 In speaking of pain and pleasure as “effects” of emptying and replenishing, respectively, I opt against the alternative interpretation that, cuing from some of Socrates’ language at 31d–32b, takes these as identical. Socrates’ language in that passage is ambiguous: at first, he distinguishes disruption from pain and restoration from pleasure by genitive absolute constructions, then he identifies each pair by straightforward predicate nominative constructions. (I have reproduced the latter in the eight clauses I quote in section C [ii].) I follow Tuozzo 1996 in taking Socrates to disambiguate his account by his language at 43b and c. At 43b8–9, Socrates says that “the changes upwards and downwards [that is, of filling and emptying, respectively] produce (ἀπεργάζονται) pleasures and pains,” and at 43c4–5, he sums up his analysis by saying that “great changes make (ποιοῦσιν) pleasures and pains in us.”

causes of pain and pleasure as general, meant to cover all five of the kinds of pleasure (physical pleasures, anticipatory pleasures, pleasures associated with the passions, pleasures in sense perception of the pure, and pleasures of learning). First, when Socrates introduces the theory at 31d–32a, he speaks in a general way; when he presents cases of physical pleasure as examples, he selects them, he says, because they are “commonplace and obvious” and, so, the “easiest to understand” (31e). He never suggests that he means his selection of them to specify the theory’s object domain. Second, Socrates directly applies the language of emptying (or lack) and replenishing to the other four of the five kinds of pleasure (physical, anticipatory, sense-perceptual, and learning pleasures), and he uses these terms in the closest possible proximity to his discussion of the pleasures associated with the passions, both right beforehand (47c) and right afterwards (51b). Thus even though Socrates doesn’t directly apply that language to the pleasures associated with the passions, Plato makes it natural for us to presume that Socrates’ account is meant to hold for them as well. How, then, should we understand the mixed pleasure-and-pain of laughter at the comic as the effect of an emptying and replenishing?

By invoking his contemporary reader’s familiar experience of comic theatre, Socrates allows a set of factors to emerge that give his example the function of a paradigm for the rest of the pleasures associated with the passions. For consider:

[i] *Pleasure and pain in the seeing of images.* Socrates distinguishes three kinds of mixed pleasures. Anticipatory pleasures differ from physical pleasures in that they are the work of the soul, not the body; but for both kinds, the pains mixed with them are caused by bodily processes. The experience of the passions is different in that now the whole complex of pleasure *and* pain—not only the pleasure but the pain as well—is the work of the soul. What is this “work of the soul”? Anticipatory pleasures, Socrates explains to Protarchus, are pleasures one takes in fantasies of replenishing. Moved by bodily “emptying” to “desire a filling” (47c), one conjures on the basis of memory a picture of the conditions and deeds that this filling may involve. It is a virtue of Socrates’ appeal to the experience of comic theatre that it makes obvious the deepest kinship of anticipatory and passion-related pleasures: with its marvelously exaggerated costuming and burlesque, Attic comedy puts our fantasies, *as fantasies*, on stage before us. Thus it makes explicit and available for reflection what it means

to be pleased—and, now, pained as well—by the sight of images of our own inner making.⁸

[ii] *Images of others as well as of oneself.* In anticipatory pleasures, the images I enjoy gazing at are those, for the most part, of myself alone. Socrates' one qualitatively rich example is the picture I conjure up of myself "beside [my]self with delight" at the windfall "possession of an enormous amount of gold" (40a). In comedy, by contrast, I gaze at the sight of another, the "laughable" figure on stage. But in fact, the contrast is both greater and subtler than this. Comedy puts on stage *personae* in whom we recognize the types to which we ourselves belong. This is so not only in the obvious cases of the debt-ridden, ineffectual fathers, the aggrieved, conniving mothers, and the spoiled young but also, reaching into the Aristophanic extremes of visionary silliness, in the cases of his birds and wasps and frogs, etc. All re-present to us aspects of ourselves.⁹ To gaze at the comic stage, accordingly, is to be given a *double* sight: the external spectacle of others, there on stage before us, and the inner sight of ourselves, evoked by comparison.

[iii] *φθόνος and emptying.* It is in this comparative dynamic in comic imaging that φθόνος is triggered, and it is in this triggering that we can first glimpse the potentially Socratic aspect of comedy. The narrow meaning of φθόνος is "envy." The basic character that makes a *persona* fit for ridicule on the comic stage is conceit. As Socrates indicates with his account of the laughable, it is because the comic *persona* seems, above all to himself, to possess the goods of wealth or physique or virtue or, first of the virtues, wisdom, that he is a prime target for the exposé that will make us laugh. Before this exposé, however, as he struts the stage with confidence, the sight of his seeming possession of such goods makes us aware, by contrast, that we do not possess them. This is why, even as I laugh at these scenes of the comedy, there is as well, belying and even giving an edge of unease to my laughter, the sting of envy. This sting is the pain brought on by *the awareness of my lack*; this awareness, conversely, is the

8 For the ways the pleasures associated with the passions involve images and comparisons of oneself with others, I am indebted, again, to Tuozzo 1996, esp. section 4.

9 See the lovely typologies in the still fresh Cornford 1914. On Plato's provocative passages on the subtle variety and mixture of modes of relating to dramatic re-presentations, see Halliwell 2002, esp. ch. 2, and 1998.

emptying that, in disturbing the equanimity with which I first entered the theatre, causes me pain.

[iv] *Laughter and replenishing.* What, then, is the corresponding replenishing that gives me pleasure by restoring my equanimity? Here we need to proceed circumspectly. On the one hand, the figures on stage in comedy cannot provide me with the actual goods—riches or good looks or, especially, wisdom—that, stung, I know I lack. Accordingly, the experience of comedy cannot actually replenish me. On the other hand, in his examination of the mixed pleasures, Socrates has stressed that it can be difficult to distinguish positive pleasure from relief at the cessation of pain (see 44b–e). This ambiguity seems particularly relevant to the experience of comedy. There is no doubt that we love to laugh; however, the unmasking of the comic character's delusions of grandeur does not provide me what I see myself to lack so much as it eclipses the first image of the other and, so, the painful sight of myself as well. With the exposé of the character's conceit, I no longer have occasion to feel the contrast between the two of us, nor, therefore, the inferiority of my condition. My laughter has relief rather than replenishing at its core; it is not by a filling of my lack but rather by a release from the pain of the sight of it that my equanimity is restored.

So much, for the moment, for our work at the second level, reconstructing Socrates' account of the pleasure of laughter at the comic in accord with his account of emptying and replenishing as the causes of pain and pleasure. Now to bring this to bear on our project: does this expanded understanding of laughter at the comic help us understand how pleasure in such laughter could be the draw for his audiences that Socrates acknowledges at *Apology* 33c?

In fact, our second level analysis only makes this fit still more problematic than Socrates' introduction of $\phi\theta\acute{o}\nu\omicron\varsigma$ has already made it. Two new difficulties present themselves. First, what we should surely think of as Socrates' core hope for his spectators—that we come to experience our own lack of wisdom and so achieve a measure of self-knowledge—is but an initial phase of the comedic spectator's experience, a phase, moreover, that the resolution of the dynamic of comic pleasure frees us from. It is the sight of the comic character's seeming wisdom that provokes the stinging awareness in us of our own lack of it; but the exposé of the character's deludedness, rather than either replenishing us in what we lack, wisdom, or preserving our knowledge of this lack, releases us from the comparison

itself. The danger in comic laughter, then, is that in restoring our equanimity, it restores the very complacency and self-ignorance with which we first entered the theatre. Or, indeed, is the danger even graver? Shown the comic character's delusion, aren't we tempted to feel ourselves superior? It is pointedly not ourselves but those on stage who, by the denouement of the comedy, are shown to suffer the bad things that make them laughable. Thus comedy seems only to flirt with self-knowledge, yielding instead, in the form of a positive sense of superiority, the negation of any awareness of our lack. It is hard to imagine Socrates tolerating this outcome among his spectators. Would he have willingly "proceeded systematically" (*Apolo-gy* 21e) with a discursive practice that produced in his audience the very opposite of the effect he aimed for in his interlocutor?

The second difficulty points us on to the next phase of our interpretation of the pleasure of laughter at the comic. On Socrates' account of the cause of pleasure, the function of replenishing is to restore a "natural harmony." How should we understand this notion of natural harmony in the case of laughter at the comic? Surely it is not sufficient simply to identify it with the equanimity that the sting of envy disturbs. When Socrates introduces the notion of the natural at 31dff., he makes the harmony normative; it is the *right*, not just the given, balance of the relevant opposites. But our notion of equanimity is indifferent to the distinction between composure that is oblivious when—as, perhaps, the sting of envy may reveal—critical consciousness would be better and composure that is somehow welcoming of or even based on such critical consciousness. Wouldn't Socrates object to this indifference?

What is more, we have not yet asked what the opposites are that are restored to their rightful harmony in the pleasure of laughter. To overcome both of these limitations in our understanding, we must take our analysis to the third level of Socrates' theory of pleasure. When he first raises the question of the causes of pleasure and pain at 31dff., Socrates situates the emptyings and replenishings within a normative causal matrix of factors. As we noted, in his examples in that passage, he speaks only of physical pleasures. If, however, it is right that he intends his account to cover all the kinds of pleasure, then it should be possible for us to identify the causal matrix within which the emptyings and replenishings in laughter at the comic are situated. And it will be in the context of this reconstruction that we shall first be in position to try to discern, in its genuinely normative sense, the natural harmony that laughter at the comic restores.

C. A Normative Sense of Natural Harmony?

Accordingly, let us first clarify what we are looking for by identifying the normative causal matrix for physical pleasures and reminding ourselves of the sorts of emptyings and replenishings in play within it. This will prepare us to consider the more complex sorts of emptyings and replenishings that are in play in laughter at the comic.

[i] *Recovering the normative matrix: “limit” and “the unlimited.”*

At 31c, Socrates declares that pain and pleasure “arise naturally within the joint class” (ἐν τῷ κοινῷ . . . γένει, 31c2)—that is, within the structure that is constituted by the “mixture” (μείξις, cf. 27b) of “the unlimited and limit” (τὸ ἄπειρον καὶ πέρας, 31c10). “The unlimited,” as Socrates first presents it at 24a–25a, is in each case an unrestricted divergence of mutually relative opposites, constituted by the essential tendency of each to exceed the other. As he makes vivid by invoking the example of hotter and colder, this unrestricted divergence of each from the other implies as the structure of the field of its motion a continuum of opposed preponderances ranging from the ever hotter (than the colder) to the ever colder (than the hotter), with no “definite quantity” (τὸ ποσόν, 24c6) or “due measure” (τὸ μέτρον, 24c7) that would yield fixity and normative order, respectively. It is the admixture of “limit” that first provides these. Again proceeding by example, Socrates specifies limit as, “first of all, equal . . . and [then] double and . . . every relation of number to number or measure to measure” (25a–b). The application of such ratios to the continuum of the unlimited, he explains, “puts an end to the opposites exceeding each other, measuring them together and making them concordant by the imposition of number” (25d–e). Thus, for example, when limit “comes to be in frosts and heat waves, it removes what is far too much and unlimited, establishing moderation and balance” (26a). To begin to see how “number” is at work here, notice the symmetry of the structure of the seasons. An equal balance of hot and cold marks the midpoint of the mirroring passages from winter cold to summer heat in springtime and from summer heat back to winter cold in the fall. The full range of variations from one extreme to the other, in turn, is double that of each stretch from mid-point to extreme. Thus the ratios equal and double are structural features of the normative range of hot and cold,¹⁰ with a host

10 Note that equal is both the proportion of the opposites at the mid-point and the relation between the two lengths from the mid point to each of the two extremes.

of other ratios marking the right temperatures—that is, less anachronistically, the right balances of hot and cold—for each time of year. We might represent the minimal structure of this matrix as in figure 1.

[ii] *The causal processes in physical pleasures and pains, within the normative matrix.* Turning now to Socrates’ four examples of physical pleasures (31e–32a), it is not hard to see in a general way how each of the causal processes in play fits within a matrix of this form. The key insight is that the places that are picked out by the imposition of limit upon the unlimited are normative; in our example, each such place marks a “due” or “appropriate”¹¹ balance of hot and cold for a time of year—that is, a seasonable temperature. Correspondingly, the “harmony” (31d) in play in physical pleasures is also normative. Now, however, Socrates is speaking of an “ensouled being” (ἔμψυχον, 32b1), that is, an “animal,” and the harmonious balance of the relevant opposites is determined by its very “nature” (cf. κατὰ φύσιν, 32a4, a8, b1, also 31d7, 32a6) or “essence” (οὐσίαν, 32b3). Thus the dissolution of this balance by the emptying of one of the opposites and its restoration by the replenishing of that opposite mark the loss and recovery, respectively, of the animal’s physical well-being or health. The pain and pleasure, in turn, that these produce are indices of this well-being.

This said, there are illuminating fits and contrasts to note between Socrates’ four examples. Here are Socrates’ key sentences at 31e–32a:

- (1) (a) [Is] hunger, on the one hand, disruption and pain?¹²
- (b) [Is] eating, on the other hand, [as] a filling-up again, pleasure?
- (2) (a) And again, thirst [is] destruction and pain . . .
- (b) . . . whereas the power of the moist in replenishing the parched is pleasure?

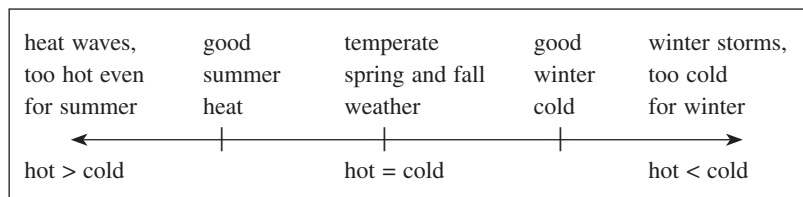


Figure 1

11 These are expressions for “due measure,” τὸ μέτρον, given at *Statesman* 284e.

12 Socrates elides the distinction of these as cause and effect. See n. 7 above.

- (3) (a) And again, further, a disintegration and dissolution against [a thing's] nature, a condition produced by intense heat, [is] pain . . .
 (b) . . . whereas a natural restitution and cooling [is] pleasure.
- (4) (a) And in shivering from the cold the unnatural congealing of a living being's moisture [is] pain . . .
 (b) . . . but the natural process by which [the stuffs that have become congealed, now] moving apart and separating, return [to their initial condition], [is] pleasure.

Notice, first, that (3) and (4), recovering by cooling from having gotten too hot and recovering by warming from having gotten too cold, fit together within a single matrix similar in form to that of the seasons. (The one disanalogy lies in there being but one "natural harmony" of the hot and the cold, whereas there are many such balances in the matrix for seasonable temperatures. This difference will be important to us later.) We might represent (3) and (4) as shown in figure 2.

(1) and (2), by contrast, each stand alone, and each occupies just one side of the full matrix to which it belongs. For (2), first of all, there is, in fact, a possible disruption and restoration that corresponds to the disruption that causes thirst and the replenishing by which one slakes one's thirst; one can drink too much, becoming over-hydrated, and need to sweat or urinate, etc., in order to restore the natural harmony of wet and dry. The same

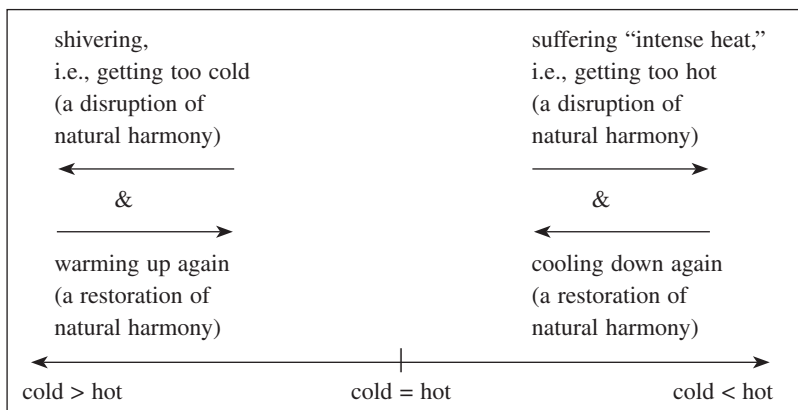


Figure 2

may be said for (1): not only may one who is “empty” satisfy one’s hunger by eating; one may also eat too much and become over-full and need to undergo a restorative purging or emptying. Interestingly, just spelling out these missing halves of each full matrix suggests why Socrates leaves them out: while there are indeed these kinds of excess in drinking and in eating, the restorative processes they require are not, at least in the remedial forms prescribed by doctors and trainers, causes of pleasure.

Finally, there is an interesting contrast between (1) and (2). In (2), Socrates indicates with distinct sets of terms the opposites that frame the continuum, on the one hand, and the processes of disruption and restoration, on the other; there are “the parched” and “the moist”—that is, the dry and the wet—on the one hand, and “thirst[ing]” and “replenishing [the parched],” on the other. Hence we can represent (2) as shown in figure 3.

In (1), by contrast, the opposites are not distinctly named but only intimated by the expression for the restorative process: “filling up again” implies the full and so the pair, empty and full. What is more, the notion of “full” is ambiguous. Considered as the opposite of empty, it marks the excess that gives us the unused half of the continuum, but considered as the state we aim at when we eat to satisfy our hunger, it marks the “natural harmony” of the opposites empty and (in its first sense) full. If we take our bearings from its use as the opposite to empty, we will mean by it “over full,” “too full.” But if we take our bearings from its use to designate the

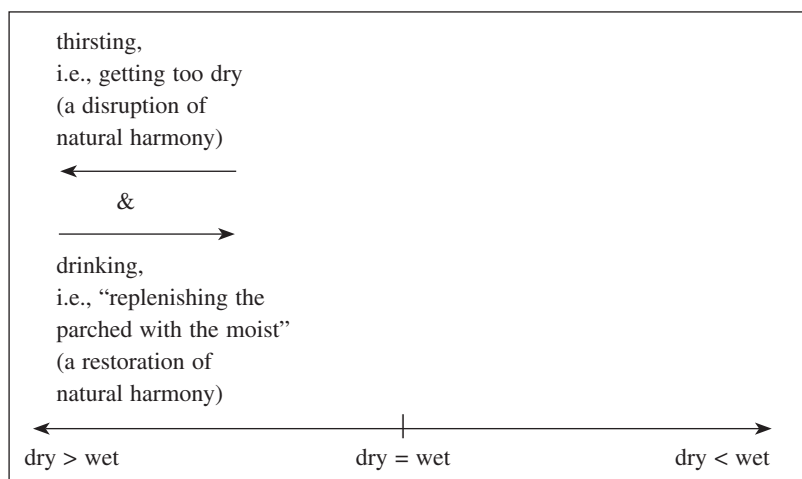


Figure 3

natural harmony, we'll take it to mean "just full enough," "not too full but just right"—that is, just the right balance of the opposites empty and full. Does Plato intend Socrates' choice of example (1) to alert us to these linguistic ambiguities? (They will, in fact, become substantively relevant in due course.) We might represent (1) as depicted in figure 4.

[iii] *The pleasure-and-pain of laughter at the comic within the normative matrix.* If we now try to understand how the pleasures and pains associated with the passions fit within this normative matrix, we confront two difficulties. The first is a matter of structural complexity; the second, already touched on, is the problem of identifying a genuinely normative measure, a "harmony" that is "natural" in the full sense exhibited in Socrates' examples of physical pleasure.

First, the structural complexity. Socrates' use of comedy brought out that the pleasures associated with the passions are occasioned by seeing images of others and ourselves. This implies that, in contrast with physical pleasures, there are two orders or levels of consciousness involved. Socrates, in effect, prepared Protarchus to recognize this in his earlier discussion of false anticipatory pleasures.¹³ In his example of one's "envisag-

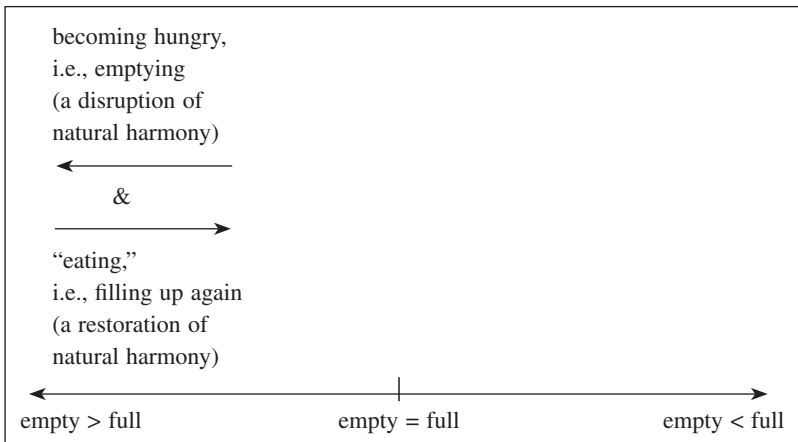


Figure 4

13 Note the continuity Socrates suggests between anticipatory pleasures and pleasures associated with the passions at 40e: "And the same account [as that just offered of anticipatory pleasures] holds in the case of fear, anger, and everything of that sort."

ing oneself in possession of an enormous amount of gold,” Socrates distinguished between, on the one hand, the “delight . . . one sees oneself taking in the gold” and, too, the “lot of pleasures [one sees oneself getting] as a consequence” and, on the other hand, the pleasures one takes in gazing at this picture (40a). The former pleasures all belong to the “oneself” whom one pictures and may never actually come to pass, while “one really does have” (40d) the latter pleasure, just insofar as one actually has this fantasy about the future. Accordingly, we must distinguish the loss and recovery of equilibrium of the “I” whom I envisage in these images and the loss and recovery of equilibrium that I experience in seeing these images. And since it is in the content of such images that I take the pleasures that I “really do have,” that content—the experience that I envisage myself as having—is basic to the pleasure I take in it.

If, in the context of this distinction, we now ask where to look for the opposites and the natural harmony that are in play in the pleasures and pains associated with the passions, the answer appears to be: at the still prior level of the objects or characters, the emptying and replenishing of which are the causes of the pains and the pleasures that I envisage myself and others as having. This is, so to speak, the baseline of the complex experiential structure of the pleasures and pains associated with the passions. To spell this out with reference to a relatively simple case, we may borrow one more time from Socrates’ enumeration of “goods” at 48d–e. Suppose I see my rich neighbor luxuriating in his wealth. This sight distresses me, for it brings with it the sight of my own painful lack of wealth. Thus I take my neighbor’s riches as normative for myself, as that harmony or balance of the opposites, poverty and wealth, that my own condition falls short of. That is, I see myself as suffering a painful imbalance, relative to the balance that my neighbor enjoys; my condition seems one of too much poverty, too little wealth. How may I gain relief from the pain these images cause me? There seem to be several ways. If my fantasy is driven by φθόνος, I may find myself imagining my neighbor’s losing his fortune. And I may combine this with an image of myself as, now, better off than he is. Or if my fantasy is driven by ζήλος, the zeal that inclines one more towards emulation and competition than resentment, I may find myself imagining my gaining the same wealth or, indeed, even more wealth than my rich neighbor has; that is, achieving the same balance of poverty and wealth or, again, an even higher proportion of wealth to poverty than my neighbor. These pleasant images free me, if I can lose myself in them, from the initial images of my neighbor and myself that first gave me pain.

If this example shows where we may look to find the natural harmony, it also points to the second difficulty, both manifold and deep, of securing a genuinely normative perspective. The crux, first of all, is this: in refocusing from the sense of natural harmony regulative for physical pleasures to the sense regulative for the pleasures associated with the passions, we refocus from the well-being of the body to that of the soul; that is, we turn from health to virtue. To understand, for instance, the balance of poverty and wealth that is truly normative for myself, I must understand what virtue is and what limits this implies for my possession of external goods. This understanding is *not* to be sought in the beliefs in play in my passions—except insofar as these may provide starting points in a critical inquiry. I may ask, for instance, what beliefs about how much wealth I need are operative in my envy of my neighbor's wealth—but I ask this only as the first step in the hard work of rising above my envy and coming to a reassessment based on a critical insight into what balance of wealth and poverty fits and serves the good of my soul. This good is virtue, and the core of it, as Socrates has gotten Protarchus to agree, is wisdom and self-knowledge (48e–49a).

With this, we come back to—if only to depart from—the pleasure associated with laughter at the comic. What we find eminently laughable, Socrates has argued, is the sight of another who thinks himself wise when, in truth, he is not. The opposites in play here are knowledge and ignorance. Not only must we not trust as truly natural any harmony that is a function of our φθόνος, our “envy”; we must also ask, if we are able to achieve a perspective sufficiently detached from such merely comparative and competitive concerns, what harmony of ignorance and knowledge is due or appropriate, given our nature. And even as we attempt to pursue this fundamental ethical question, we must also address the conceptual issue of whether—and if so, in what senses—ignorance and knowledge are the sort of opposites that form a continuum. On this latter point, Socrates' first example of physical pleasure offers some very initial help: “empty” and “full” would seem to be a paradigm, that is, an analogue from which inquiry can take its bearings, for “ignorant” and “knowing.” What is particularly striking is the objective ambiguity we noted earlier in the notion of full: it designates both the measured or moderate satiety that is the appropriate aim for a living being and the extreme, directly opposed to empty, that together with it frames the continuum of opposed preponderances. Full in the first sense is a balance or harmony of empty and full in the second sense. Hence, to return to the

fundamental ethical question, we can ask: is there, by analogy, a balance or harmony of the opposites knowing and ignorant that, as natural in a genuinely normative sense, constitutes the core of the soul's virtue?

III. THE APORIA AND THREE REPLIES

We began these reflections because we were intrigued by the apparent fit of Socrates' account in the *Philebus* of our pleasure in laughter at the comic with the enjoyment that, according to his remark to the jurors in the *Apology*, draws people to watch his elenctic conversations. On Socrates' account, what makes us laugh is the exposé of the deludedness of one who wrongly thinks himself in possession of goods, especially the virtues and, of these, especially wisdom. This seems to fit nicely with his elenctic work of showing "those who think they are wise [that they] are not" (*Apology* 33c).

The more deeply we have explored Socrates' account, however, the more problematic in its implications the fit has become. To recall: shouldn't it trouble us that, in asserting the fit, we impute to Socrates a tolerance, if not a sly use, of envy and of the small-minded love of the downfall of one's friends and enemies alike? Isn't this an injustice to one's friends on the demotic account of justice and an injustice without qualification on Socrates' own account? And if we do impute this to Socrates in his conversations, don't we also impute a complicity in it to Plato in his dramatizations of these conversations, a complicity for all intents and purposes confessed in the *Philebus*? More deeply still, shouldn't it disturb us to realize what Socrates' own acknowledgment of ambiguity allows, namely, that our mixture of relief and delight at the unmasking of the pretender may itself mask and enable our own self-evasive flight from the self-knowledge that comedy first sparks? And finally, shouldn't we be troubled that whereas Socrates' general theory of pleasure implies that the cause of this delight should be the restoration of a harmony that, as natural, defines our being, his account of our pleasure in the comic seems to make the cause a merely contingent victory over an altogether imbalanced and in any case fantasized "other"—with, moreover, the relevant natural harmony left undiscussed and indeterminate?

There are, I think, at least three distinct lines of reply to these objections. The first is glad surrender. "Glad" because, just insofar as the problems we have raised are good grounds for taking Socrates' account to

apply only to comedy and not to the dialogues, we are freed from finding hypocrisy in Socrates' and Plato's uses of the pleasures of comedy. But "surrender," nonetheless. My attempt to show the multi-leveled depth of the fit seems to have turned into the *quasi*-Socratic disclosure that the fit itself is more apparent than real, a "wind egg" (*Theaetetus* 210b), and into the *quasi*-comic exposé of myself as one who, having seemed to himself in possession of an intriguing insight, was deceived.

The second line of reply would dismiss the first for failing to appreciate the rhetorical and pedagogical subtlety of Plato and his Socrates. Even if we grant that Socrates plays on *φθόνο*ς and the promise of relief from it to draw his audience, it doesn't follow that he rests content with these attitudes. Nor does it follow from his invoking of the demotic notion of justice at *Philebus* 49d that he himself accepts that notion. On the contrary, the very forcefulness and explicitness with which Socrates on other occasions dismisses the value of victory in debate when it comes at the expense of truth¹⁴ and argues against ever doing ill to anyone, even one's enemies, should incline us to see not hypocrisy but dialectical irony in our *Philebus* passage. Pursuing this second line of reply, we would argue that by giving us Socrates' account of our pleasure in laughter at the comic, Plato may well be acknowledging and explaining the initial draw of Socrates' conversations for a great many of his onlookers. But we would also insist that Plato has Socrates use the comic event of unmasking the pretender to create occasions to refute the very values that this initial draw reflects. To borrow the language with which the *Laws* characterizes the Athenian love of comedy, Plato and Socrates do indeed appeal to the "slave" (816e) and the "adolescent" (658d) in us, but only in order, once having gotten our attention, to provide occasions for our emancipation and growing-up.¹⁵

The third line of reply would object that the second is not yet sufficiently comprehensive, appealing as it does to the content of Socrates' arguments and neglecting the performative dimension of the dialogues. Socrates, always alert to the contradiction of word by deed, resists *φθόνο*ς and merely demotic justice not only by his arguments but also by his char-

14 See, e.g., *Protagoras* 360eff., *Gorgias* 515bff., *Symposium* 201c. Weiss 2006.27 n. 58 calls attention to the first two passages.

15 In the *Laws*, Plato has the Athenian Stranger denigrate comedy by declaring it a form of entertainment that is fit for slaves and likely to be favored by adolescents (he says "big boys"). It is hard to square this with the apocryphal but, I have always thought, telling report that he kept a copy of the works of Aristophanes by his bedside.

acteristic existential stance. Whereas, as we have seen, the man driven by φθόνος takes pleasure in the exposure of his neighbor's limitations and in the concealment of his own, Socrates declares his own ignorance and challenges his interlocutor to join him in inquiry. He approaches others not with the love of victory but with the demanding generosity of one who knows that no man can be the measure of wisdom.

Plato, in turn, gives expression to this stance in the very structure of the dialogues and its at once humbling and empowering effect on the reader.¹⁶ To begin to explain, I need to pause to offer the following excruciatingly brief sketch of dialogue structure, deferring to other occasions a fuller and more adequate account.¹⁷ In kernel: in the dialogues, Socrates takes on interlocutors who are “ordinary” and “very much like us” (Nussbaum 1986.129), figures in whom, as with the *personae* of comedy, we in the audience can find ourselves. In the first phase of inquiry, Socrates' questions and refutations are elicitive, designed to yield the strongest formulation of the interlocutor's views; Socrates then mounts a refutation that challenges the very basis and core of the interlocutor's standpoint, reducing him to aporia. Though at this point the conversation often seems on the verge of breaking down, in truth, this is its true beginning: aporia is the necessary condition for new learning, and the interlocutor's predicament provides Socrates the right moment to introduce his deepest positive suggestion, an insight or set of insights that reorients the inquiry in a potentially fundamental way. Our first response may therefore be disappointment when, in the closing phase of the dialogue, conversation falls away from this insight, sometimes back into aporia, sometimes into a shallower set of ostensible conclusions. In this final phase, Socrates is anything but triumphant or complacent; on the contrary, having earlier unmasked his interlocutor's pretensions to wisdom, Socrates continues to acknowledge his own ignorance and to call for inquiry.

If we reflect on these Platonic reshapings of the comedic, we can find resources for responding to all the objections we raised in the course

16 For elaboration of this analogy of Socrates' generosity and dialogue structure, see Miller 1985, esp. 192ff.

17 Three such occasions, I hope, are Miller 1991, 1999, 2004. In the brief comment offered above, I speak for simplicity's sake as though Socrates were always Plato's philosophical antagonist, hence as though the structure I sketch belonged to the Socratic dialogues and not to those others in which Socrates is not in the lead role; but as Miller 1991 and 2004 make explicit, this structure is present in some non-Socratic dialogues as well. For the first articulation of this structure, see Ketchum 1980.

of thinking through the three levels of the *Philebus*'s theory of pleasure. First of all, any relief from the sting of envy that we might feel at Socrates' unmasking of his interlocutor should be put in check by his steadfast declaration of his own ignorance. By this stance he gives us—indeed, Plato confronts us with—a higher standard of comparison than the failed interlocutor, making it difficult for us to rest content with any sense of superiority over the latter and to fall back into the complacent equanimity with which we first entered, so to speak, the Platonic theatre. What is more, Socrates' characteristic composure, even serenity, in declaring his own ignorance also blocks our all-too-human presumption that the exposure of ignorance—and, perhaps, even ignorance itself—are simply “bad things” (κακοίς, 48b11). On the contrary, his open acknowledgment of the limits of his understanding challenges us to acknowledge the same for ourselves, and with this acknowledgment, we ready ourselves to heed Socrates' call for further inquiry. Now we can begin to understand why Plato has conversation in the closing phase of the dialogue fall away from the depth of insight it reached with Socrates' reorienting insight in the third phase: Plato, in effect, tests us, challenging us to recognize this shortfall and return to Socrates' insight in order to develop it for ourselves. Accordingly, we are left with more than Socrates' call for inquiry—we are also given a seminal positive suggestion to start us along the way.

Finally, these reflections bear striking implications for our question about a natural harmony of ignorant and knowing and the soul's virtue. Let me close by pointing out the paths of inquiry I think I glimpse. There are two sets of reflections to pursue, the first centered on knowledge and virtue, the second on pleasure.

First, then, with regard to knowledge, there are four sets of observations to weave together and develop:

[i] When Socrates, both validating and interpreting the god's declaration that he is the wisest of men, declares himself to possess only the “human wisdom” (*Apology* 20d) of not “thinking [he] knows what [he] does not know” (21d), he places himself between the god, who is wise (23a), and other humans, who are ignorant of their very ignorance.¹⁸ Doesn't this take us a step towards identifying a balance of ignorance and knowledge that,

18 See *Symposium* 203d–e, 204a–b.

in corresponding to human “nature” or, to say the same, the full exercise of the soul’s capacity for insight, is genuinely normative?¹⁹

[ii] An initial worry we might raise against this conception is that it appears not to acknowledge either the diversity of the sorts of knowledge we can strive for or the gains in knowledge that education yields. The *Philebus* itself provides a rich occasion for such concerns. At 55c–59d, Socrates distinguishes the kinds of knowledge, tracing a continuum from the most inexact sorts, like musical tuning, that are dependent on sense perception and practiced conjecture (56a), to the most exact sort, dialectic, in which the exercise of “reason” (νοῦς) and “understanding” (φρόνησις) achieves a grasp of timeless and unchanging being (59c–d). Along the way, he distinguishes the more mathematical crafts from the more empirical, pure mathematics from applied mathematics in the crafts, and dialectic from pure mathematics. His stepwise movement from the less to the more exact marks not only gains in the precision of knowing but also, in his turns from the empirical to pure mathematics and from the latter to dialectic, a turn to “objects” of greater universality and explanatory power.

How does this diversity in kinds of knowledge bear on the notion of a harmony of ignorant and knowing? Does it imply a diversity of harmonies of ignorant and knowing, with different kinds of knowledge striking distinct balances with ignorance? And does the educational process that Socrates’ distinctions suggest, a gradual advance from the most empirical to the most theoretical disciplines, imply gains in knowledge and, so, an increase in the proportion of knowing to ignorant? The complex possibilities that these questions point to suggest, at the very least, that our model for the mixture of limit and the unlimited should be not the single limit structure we saw in Socrates’ examples of physical pleasure (recall figures 2, 3, and 4 above) but rather the multiple limit structure we saw in his example of seasonable temperatures (figure 1 above). Socrates’ later welcoming of *all* the sorts of knowledge into the mixture that is the good life (62a–c) seems to support this. The continuum of kinds of knowledge might be represented as in figure 5.²⁰

19 This is the focus of Hülsz 2005. For a particularly deft formulation of the sense in which the Socratic philosopher “has” the wisdom that, in knowing her lack of it, she strives for, and for the notion that this condition is normative for the human soul, see Gonzalez 2007, esp. 377–79.

20 This figure is drawn from Miller 2008.

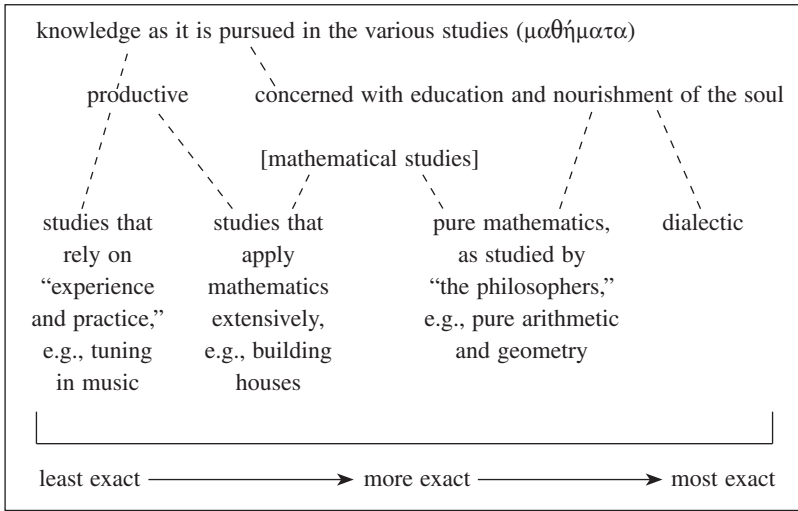


Figure 5

[iii] To the notion of gains in knowledge, however, there is this possible Socratic rejoinder: the more exactly or purely or deeply we come to know, the more keenly we also come to understand the limits of this very knowledge.²¹ This counterbalancing, so to speak, of the knowledge that overcomes ignorance with the recognition of the still deeper ignorance that besets it, occurs, arguably, in a number of dimensions. For example, the more fully we understand eidetic structure, the more fully we see the particularity and contingency and instability that go unexplained by this structure; hence, to cite a teaching as controversial in its own specificity as it is telling in what it signifies about Platonic thinking, Plato pairs the indeterminacy of the Dyad with the determinateness of the One.²² Again, the more clearly we grasp the expression of Reason in the cosmos, the more acutely we can appreciate the works of Necessity that defy this Reason; hence *Timaeus* must begin again at *Timaeus* 47e.²³ Or, still again, the more lucidly we grasp the

21 For an interpretation of Socrates' treatment of knowledge in the final phase of the *Theaetetus* that makes knowing at once a substantive achievement *and* provisional and open-ended, see Miller 1992.

22 For accounts, see Miller 2004, 141–61 and 1995.

23 Cf. Derrida 1997, Sallis 1999, and Hyland 2004, esp. 109–22.

different types of soul, the more profoundly aware we may become of the labyrinthine complexity and elusiveness of individual souls.²⁴

[iv] We began by suggesting that Socrates' notion of human wisdom might be a key to understanding the idea of a natural harmony of knowing and ignorant. Now we can also glimpse ways in which we might draw on this idea of natural harmony to inform and enrich the notion of human wisdom. May we find a key case of "not 'thinking one knows what one does not know'" in the recognition that even the most exact insights of dialectic leave essential dimensions or regions of their object fields unknown or indeterminate? And is it right to see in this recognition an instance of the more general appreciation of the way in which education, even while bringing an increase of knowledge, also brings a counterbalancing awareness of what remains—and even, in some cases, what *must* remain—unknown? As we develop these suggestions, we must keep in view the fundamental insight that gives Plato's Socrates his bearings: it belongs to our nature and status as human beings that we need to inquire. The normative condition of the human soul to which Socrates calls us, a harmony in which the acknowledgment of ignorance both enables and is deepened by the striving for knowledge, is the activity of inquiry.

What do these reflections enable us to say about the pleasure by which Socrates draws his audience and Plato his readers? At 52a–b, Socrates and Protarchus reach two striking agreements. First, whatever pain there is in the context of learning comes not from the activity of learning, which yields only pleasure, but from the "reflections" by which one becomes aware of one's "lack" or "need" (χρεία) of knowledge. Second, the pleasure of learning "does not belong to the great number of human beings but only to a very few" (52b). This last remark invites us to distinguish two sorts of pleasures for two sorts of auditor and reader. On the one hand, we may take Socrates' account of the pleasure of laughter at the comic to be the core of an explanation of how "the great number" of us who find his conversations "not unpleasant" (*Apology* 33c) fail to understand both these conversations and ourselves. The "restoration" that most of us gain pleasure from is only relief from the sting of envy; we are "restored," so to speak, only to the uncritical and complacent equanimity that characterizes us in our

24 Or, indeed, recalling Socrates' remarkable aside at *Phaedrus* 230a, of the tension between virtue and the monstrous powers of θυμός in even the most well-ordered soul.

quite ordinary and unphilosophical self-ignorance. If, laughing, I put down the text with a sense of my superiority to Euthyphro or Hippias or Meno, I show myself to have failed to learn from the reflections that Plato tries to generate by portraying Socrates' refutations of them. If, on the other hand, we rise to the challenge of such reflections, if, that is, in turning away from Euthyphro et al., we remain turned toward Socrates and the discovery of our ignorance that Plato aims to occasion for us, then we may join the "few" for whom the very loss of complacent equanimity is the welcome effect of a "restoration" of the "natural harmony" of knowledge and ignorance that, essential to our human being, is genuinely normative for us. If the discovery of *my ignorance* gives me pain, nonetheless the *discovery* of it, as itself a "replenishment" of knowledge that counterbalances my ignorance, gives me pleasure. This deeper appreciation of the Socratic sting is, I suggest, a clue to the uncommon serenity with which, in his keen awareness of the limits of his understanding, Socrates is always pleased to inquire.²⁵

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