

PLEASURE AND THE LEVELS ANALOGY: AN EXEGETICAL NOTE ON
REPUBLIC 584d–585a*

In *Republic* 9, Socrates gives three proofs to support (what I take to be) his fundamental claim of the *Republic*: the life of the just person (the philosopher) is happier than that of the unjust person (361d).¹ Our concern will be with the third proof (583b–587c), where Socrates tries to show that the just life is happiest because it is most pleasant.² Socrates promises this third proof to be ‘the greatest and most decisive of overthrows’ (μέγιστόν τε καὶ κυριώτατον τῶν πτωμάτων) in favour of the philosophical life, by proving that ‘pleasures other than those of the intellectual person are not altogether true or pure’ (οὐδὲ παναληθὲς ἐστὶν ἢ τῶν ἄλλων ἡδονὴ πλὴν τῆς τοῦ φρονίμου οὐδὲ καθαρὰ 583b). What makes this third proof intractable, yet so compelling, is that while we desire to understand the proof because it is arguably the culmination of the *Republic*’s fundamental project, we struggle to comprehend what Socrates intends when he says that certain pleasures are ‘not altogether true’.

Some interpreters assume that whatever Socrates might intend, one thing is clear: he is not claiming that we sometimes think we are pleased when we are not.³ Such an assumption—let us call it (A)—causes these same interpreters to take liberties with the translation of an analogy (which I shall hereafter call ‘the Levels Analogy’ 584d–585a) in which Socrates clarifies why some so-called pleasures are ‘not altogether true’. To avoid denying (A), these interpreters of the analogy provide a translation of the word ἄνω sometimes as ‘above’ and other times as ‘upwards’, and κάτω sometimes as ‘below’ and other times as ‘downward’, thereby using the Greek terms ambiguously. (Other interpreters may nevertheless posit the same ambiguous translation of ἄνω and

* I would like to thank John Carlevale, Terry Penner, and an anonymous referee for their comments. See n. 2 below for additional comments on the genesis of this paper.

¹ Advocates for this view of the *Republic* include M. B. Foster, ‘A mistake in Plato’s *Republic*’, *Mind* 46 (1937), 386–93; Terence Irwin, *Plato’s Ethics* (Oxford, 1992); David Sachs, ‘A fallacy in Plato’s *Republic*’, in Richard Kraut (ed.), *Plato’s Republic: Critical Essays* (Lanham, MD, 1997), 1–16; Richard Kraut, ‘The defense of justice in Plato’s *Republic*’, in R. Kraut (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Plato* (Cambridge, 1992), 309–37; Nicholas White, *A Companion to Plato’s Republic*, (Indianapolis, 1979).

² Much of the material in this article appears also in *Ancient Philosophy* 19 (1999), 285–98, though it is there directed at rejecting some Cartesian themes in N. R. Murphy (1951) and G. Grote (1875), rather than (as here) advocating a new translation of *Republic* 584d–585a. See also Butler, ‘The arguments for the most pleasant life in *Republic* IX: a note against the common interpretation’, *Apeiron* XXXII (1999), 37–48.

³ For instance, N. R. Murphy, *The Interpretation of Plato’s Republic* (Oxford, 1951) writes: ‘It is vital to notice that [Socrates] is not repudiating immediate experiences of pleasure and pain; he is attacking statements about their prevalence made at a distance and the generalizations of those who compare one condition of life with another. . . . If a man beset by worries and anxieties has them all dispersed, his mind may well be filled, in its relief, with positive delight: few pleasures are greater. But if he then proceeds to generalize from that experience and argues that freedom from anxiety is pleasant, he is falling back into the sick man’s error which Socrates exposed’ (212–13). According to Murphy, the error Socrates exposes is something like the following: I am worried that my car will be towed before I can put more money in the parking meter. But when I arrive at the parking lot, I find that it is still there. ‘What a relief! What pleasure!’, I say to myself. I then mistakenly make the universal prediction that *whenever* I am free from worry, I *will be* pleased. But this is likely not the case. For there may be occasions in the future when, (i) being suddenly released from anxiety, I feel no pleasure or (ii) having no anxiety at all, I feel no pleasure. Yet in spite of *this* error of prediction and generalization, Murphy contends that Socrates does not repudiate the following: when suddenly released from anxiety, if I think I am feeling pleasure, I am feeling pleasure.

κάτω, but for reasons other than a commitment to [A].) The aim of this paper is to suggest that such a reading of the Levels Analogy is mistaken: ἄνω and κάτω should be consistently translated as 'above' and 'below', and given this translation, we find that Socrates is indeed claiming that we sometimes think we are pleased when we are not.

The method I shall use is, I assume, well within the mainstream of Platonic scholarship: if we are to translate an idea correctly from a Platonic text into English, we must first understand how that idea functions within the context of the passage and in co-operation with other (perhaps more established) ideas in the text.

BACKGROUND

We should start our investigation with a survey of the passage that precedes the Levels Analogy, for it will be easier to understand the analogy given some context. Socrates begins his third proof by attacking the judgements of the sick, who expect that, when the sickness ends, the experience will be most pleasant (584a7–10). Socrates' attack relies on the fact there is a neutral state of the soul—a quietude (ἡσυχία)—between pleasure and pain which is neither pleasant nor painful (583c5).⁴ Thus, when a painful sickness ends, one does not move to pleasure, but only into a quietude from the pain. Socrates concludes that the quietude is not, but appears to be, painful when juxtaposed with pleasure and pleasant when juxtaposed with pain (584a7–10).

To support his conclusion, Socrates presents the Levels Analogy to show how people in pain (for example, the sick at 584a7–10) might be deceived into thinking that the quietude from pain is most pleasant. Just as a person who has moved from a low level to a mid-point might be deceived into believing she is at a high level, one who experiences the end of a sickness might be deceived into thinking that such an experience is a pleasure, when in fact it is only a quietude from the pain.⁵

But it is not clear exactly how the analogy is being drawn, partly because our own terms 'pleasure' and 'pain' are ambiguous between the *feelings* of pleasure and pain and the *objects and activities that cause* such feelings. Thus, we do not know (i) what the levels are supposed to represent and (ii) if there is something to be made of any movements between levels.

THE LEVELS ANALOGY

Let us, then, take a closer look at the Levels Analogy. Socrates presents the first part of the analogy as follows:

Do you acknowledge, I said, that in nature there is the above, the below, and the middle?⁶ (τὸ

⁴ Socrates defends the existence of such a neutral state at 584b–c by suggesting that since there are pleasures (such as a pleasant smell) which arrive with no prior pain, nor any pain following, there must be a neutral state of the soul from which the pleasure develops and to which it recedes.

⁵ This passage, which distinguishes three different states—above, middle, and below (analogous to pleasure, quietude, and pain respectively)—is strikingly similar to the *Philebus* (43e) where Plato distinguishes three states, gold, silver, and neither gold nor silver. But since using one dialogue in order to understand another involves serious and complicated issues of interpretation beyond the scope of this paper, I attempt to rely exclusively on the *Republic* passages.

⁶ I translate the Greek terms ἄνω, κάτω, and μέσον as 'above', 'below', and 'middle' in order to remain consistent with the translation of ἄνω in ἐν τῷ ἄνω (584d9) ('in the above'). I shall present arguments below to defend such a translation.

μὲν ἄνω, τὸ δὲ κάτω, τὸ δὲ μέσον) . . . So, do you think that someone moved from the below (τοῦ κάτω) to the middle (πρὸς μέσον) would think he is moved anywhere else but above (ἄνω)? And standing in the middle (ἐν μέσῳ σπάντα), looking back at the place from which he has been moved, would he think himself to be anywhere else but in the above (ἐν τῷ ἄνω), not having seen the truly above (τὸ ἀληθῶς ἄνω)? . . . But if one was moved back again, would he think he was moved below (φέροιτο κάτω) and would he think truly? (584d3–e2)

Socrates completes the analogy by showing that one makes a similar mistake having arrived at the quietude from pain.

So, would it surprise you if those inexperienced in truth hold unsound opinions about many other things and are disposed in this way toward pleasure, pain, and the intermediate of the two (πρὸς τε ἡδονὴν καὶ λύπην καὶ τὸ μεταξύ) so that, when they are moved to the painful, they truly think and really are pained (ἀληθῶς τε οἴονται καὶ τ' ὄντι λυποῦνται) but, whenever they are moved from pain to the intermediate (ἀπὸ λύπης ἐπὶ τὸ μεταξύ), they very much believe that they are at fulfilment and pleasure (πρὸς πληρώσει τε καὶ ἡδονῇ)—just as one inexperienced with white is deceived looking at grey compared with black, so one who is without experience of pleasure, is deceived (ἀπατῶνται) in this way viewing painlessness compared with pain. (584e7–585a5)

Clearly, Socrates is drawing the parallel between ἄνω and pleasure, κάτω and pain, and μέσον and the quietude between pleasure and pain. But the reference of ἄνω and κάτω in the analogy is unclear because, as mentioned before, our own terms 'pleasure' and 'pain' are ambiguous between the *feeling* of pleasure and the *sources* of pleasure.

A leading Plato scholar, N. R. Murphy, gives a common reading of the passage: (i) the movements 'upward' and 'downward' between the levels are equivalent to the *feelings* of pleasure and pain respectively,⁸ and (ii) the levels 'above' and 'below' are equivalent to the *objects* or *activities* which cause the feelings of pleasure and pain.⁹

But on such a reading, however, the problem arises: the terms ἄνω and κάτω must not only represent the movement 'upwards' or 'downwards' but also must represent the levels 'above' and 'below' themselves. Hence, on such an account the words ἄνω and κάτω are ambiguous.¹⁰

But should we allow ἄνω (κάτω) to be translated ambiguously as both 'upward' and 'above' ('downward' and 'below')? I do not believe so. First, it is clear, in one place at least, that Plato intends ἄνω to refer to 'above'.¹¹ At 584d6–e2, Socrates states that those who are carried from μέσον to κάτω are correct in thinking that they are carried

⁷ This and all translations of the *Republic* are based on Shorey with my modifications.

⁸ Others who allow the feeling of pleasure to be the movement 'upwards' include: J. C. B. Gosling and C. C. W. Taylor, *The Greeks on Pleasure* (Oxford, 1982), 107, 123; Dorothea Frede, 'Disintegration and restoration: pleasure and pain in Plato's *Philebus*', in R. Kraut (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Plato* (Cambridge, 1992), 436; R. C. Cross, and A. D. Woozley, *Plato's Republic* (New York, 1964), 267.

⁹ Murphy states: 'If as seems to be the case, movement upwards means feeling pleased and downwards feeling pained, while being at rest means the absence of feeling, what do the high, the low, and the middle regions mean? . . . It seems possible that by the naturally high region he means types of object or occupation that are truly pleasant in the sense that they are natural sources of pleasure, just as a low region is, for example, a state of depletion that would normally tend to produce pain, the middle being occupied by objects, states, etc. (for example, health of the body) that do not tend to produce either pleasure or pain . . .' (216–17).

¹⁰ For other translations of ἄνω as 'upward', Frede (n. 8), 436; G. M. A. Grube and C. D. C. Reeve, '*Republic*', in John Cooper (ed.), *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis, 1997), 1192; Paul Shorey, '*Republic*', in E. Hamilton and H. Cairns (edd.), *Plato: Collected Dialogues* (Princeton, 1961), 812; Gosling and Taylor (n. 7), 107; and B. Jowett, '*The Republic*', in *The Dialogues of Plato*, 5 vols (Oxford, 1953).

¹¹ Reading ἄνω as 'above' is consistent with Liddell and Scott's usage II.d as well as the usage found in Demosthenes 18.169 and Thucydides 4.48.

κάτω but he implies that those who are carried from κάτω to μέσον are incorrect to think they are ἐν τῷ ἄνω. Translating ἄνω as ‘upwards’ makes little sense here: for (i) how could one be ‘in the upwards’? And (ii) those moving from κάτω to μέσον would not be incorrect in thinking they have moved ‘upwards’. Therefore, the phrase ἐν τῷ ἄνω (584d9) should reasonably be translated as ‘in the above’.¹²

But could other occurrences of ἄνω in the analogy refer to a movement ‘upwards’? I contend that it makes little sense to posit movements upwards and downwards in the analogy at all. If the feeling of pleasure were represented by a movement ‘upwards’ and the feeling of pain by a movement ‘downwards’ as the common reading suggests, the Levels Analogy makes little sense. Take, for example (following 584b5–9), a case of a pleasant smell that occurs without any prior pain and no pain follows its cessation. By the common interpretation, when one is experiencing the pleasant smell, one should be ‘moving upwards’ from the quietude towards the region or level above. Once the pleasant smell subsides, however, one is in the quietude, feeling neither pleasure nor pain. But having moved ‘upwards’ one should now be *above* the quietude. It cannot be the case that one has moved back ‘downwards’ to the quietude for, according to Murphy’s reading, that would entail that one experiences pain after the smell subsides. So, if we suppose the feeling of pleasure to be the movement ‘upwards’ (and the feeling of pain to be movement ‘downwards’), the analogy becomes absurd: one experiencing the end of a pleasant smell would be simultaneously above the quietude yet in the quietude.

So, if there is good reason to abandon translating ἄνω as ‘upwards’, preferring instead always to translate it as ‘above’ (as with ‘in the above’), can ἄνω, μέσον, and κάτω be consistently translated as the levels ‘above’, ‘middle’, and ‘below’ throughout the passage and still preserve the coherence of the analogy? I believe so. We can univocally bring out the deception (ἀπατῶνται 585a5) people experience by interpreting their mistake as follows: having moved from the below to the middle, one thinks she is in the above, but she is deceived as to where she is. Yet, one carried from the middle to the below correctly believes that she is in the below. Thus, the mistake is one of being deceived about one’s place, not one’s movement.

The final step, then, is to confirm that the levels ‘above’ and ‘below’ represent the *feelings* of pleasure and pain, not the *objects* that cause pleasure and pain. The analogy provides a parallel between being carried *below* (κάτω τ’ ἂν οἴοιτο φέρεσθαι καὶ ἀληθῆ οἴοιτο) and really *being pained* (ἀληθῆ τε οἴονται καὶ τῷ ὄντι λυποῦνται), implying that the level ‘below’ represents the *feeling* of pain in the soul (and analogously the level ‘above’ represents the feeling of pleasure).¹³ Accordingly, the analogy explains why those having escaped pain mistake the quietude from pain for pleasure: just as one moved from the below to the middle is deceived into believing she is in the above, one who feels the quietude from pain thinks she is *feeling* pleasure, but she is deceived.

We are now in a position to understand Socrates’ earlier conclusion—‘the quietude is not, but appears to be, pleasant in comparison to the painful’—of which the analogy

¹² Although the phrase ‘in the above’ is rather crude in English, it is unfortunately the best way I know of distinguishing this use of ἄνω from ‘upwards’ without seeming to beg the question against Murphy *et alii*.

¹³ The parallel between being carried below and being pained is made clear by the fact that *only* in those two cases does Socrates say that one is correct about the experience. He says that ‘he would both think himself to be carried below and would think truly’ (584e1–2) and ‘they truly think and really are being pained’ (585a1).

is a clarification: contrary to common interpretations, Socrates *is* claiming that after a pain stops, one is merely perceiving the quietude from pain and *believes* it to be pleasant when, in fact, it is not pleasant at all.

CONCLUSION

The Levels Analogy, as I interpret it, is less complicated than commentators typically suppose: on my view both movements ‘upwards’ and objects and activities which cause pleasure are completely absent from the analogy.¹⁴ Thus, there is no need to be equivocal in the translation of *ἄνω* and *κάτω*; we should consistently translate *ἄνω* as ‘above’ as opposed to ‘upwards’, *κάτω* as ‘below’, as opposed to ‘downwards’. Then, by representing the feeling of pleasure as the level ‘above’, pain as the level ‘below’ and the quietude as a middle state between them, the analogy suggests the following: just as one might mistake being at the middle (having come to the middle from below) for the above, one often mistakes the quietude from pain as a pleasant feeling.

If correct, my clarification of the Levels Analogy should put us in a better position to understand how the just life is happier than the unjust life. For Socrates’ argument that the non-intellectual’s pleasures are ‘not altogether true’ depends on the fact that we can sometimes be wrong in thinking that we are pleased.

Department of Philosophy and Religion, Berea College

JAMES BUTLER

jim_butler@berea.edu

doi:10.1093/clquaj/bmh063

¹⁴ Although pleasures and pains are said to be movements of the soul (583e9–10), on my view their particular movements are not represented in the analogy.

AN EPIGRAM OF NOSSIS (8 GP = AP 6.353)

Ἀυτομέλιννα τέτυκται ἴδ', ὥς ἀγανὸν τὸ πρόσωπον
ἀμέ ποτοπτάζειν μελιχίως δοκέει·
ὥς ἐτύμως θυγάτηρ τῇ μητρὶ πάντα ποτώκει.
ἦ καλόν, ὅκκα πέλη τέκνα γονεῦσιν ἴσα.

Melinna-Herself (the real Melinna) has been made. See, how the gentle face seems to look sweetly at us.

How truly the daughter resembles her mother in all respects.

A good thing, when children are like their parents.

The ‘daughter’ is, of course, the painting.

This seems so obvious that I am somewhat embarrassed to point it out, but all commentators and translators read the epigram as simply expressing how much Melinna looks like her mother. The problem is that it is difficult to see the *point* of such an epigram. That a daughter resembles her mother is hardly of note and with this reading the poem is unbelievably flat. It is also strange that Melinna’s mother has no name.¹ On the other hand, it is quite easy to see what Nossis might have done, if the similarity of mother and daughter were the actual subject: ‘In this portrait you can see

¹ Contrast Nossis 3 (AP 6.265), whatever the naming practices of the Locrians might have been; for which see A. S. F. Gow and D. L. Page, *Hellenistic Epigrams* (Cambridge, 1965), II.437 on 3 GP (AP 6.265.4); M. Skinner, ‘Greek women and the metronymic: a note on an epigram by Nossis’, *Ancient History Bulletin* 19 (1987), 39–42.