

# The Nature of Pleasure in Plato's Philebus

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## Abstract

The central question in *Philebus* concerns whether the life of pleasure or the life of reason is most akin to the good human life. Naturally, engagement in such discussion requires an adequate analysis of the natures of pleasure, rationality, and the good. It is the purpose of this paper to outline and defend a (non-exhaustive) two-fold account of pleasure as presented in the dialogue. Specifically, the paper will argue for the claim that Plato advocates an account of pleasure as a process of change that occurs in sentient beings either when the harmonious natural condition is genuinely or apparently restored (impure pleasure), or when certain potentials are actualised by the rational human (pure pleasure).

*Philebus* is widely conceded to be an important work, though relative to the vast and comprehensive commentaries of the other dialogues, it has in large part been victim to systematic neglect.<sup>1</sup> Motivated by the desire to draw contemporary attention to the sagacious and illuminating themes in *Philebus*,<sup>2</sup> I attempt to contribute towards filling a gap in the field by elucidating the intricate and notoriously complex account of pleasure in the dialogue. I do this by providing a novel and comprehensive two-fold (non-exhaustive) analysis of pleasure. It will be argued that, on Plato's account in *Philebus*, pleasure is a process of change that occurs in sentient beings when either:

- (1) The harmonious natural condition is genuinely or apparently restored (impure pleasure), or when
- (2) Specific potentials are actualised by the rational human (pure pleasure).

Section 1 is a preliminary discussion to this paper and will elucidate Plato's 'fourfold division of being' – an ontological account presented in *Philebus* which places "everything that actually exists now" into four kinds.<sup>3</sup> This is because Plato's

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<sup>1</sup> Davidson 1990, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> A desire I share with Fletcher 2017, pp. 195–206, 2018, p. 30; Gill 2019, p. 75; and Tuozzo 2018, pp. 325–29, among others.

<sup>3</sup> 23b–27d.

ontological thesis plays a fundamental role in elucidating and defending several key claims made throughout this paper; hence, clarifying this account from the outset will contribute towards making the overarching argument of this paper lucid. Section 2 will defend the claim that *impure* pleasures are unlimited in kind and subsume under the restoration model: an account which argues that pleasure arises when “harmony is regained, and its former nature restored”.<sup>4</sup> Contrastingly, Section 3 will argue that *pure* pleasures conform to the following identity criteria: (a) they are preceded by *unperceived* lacks, (b) they have objects that are true, beautiful, and measured (such that they belong to the mixed ontological kind), and (c) they are sufficient; their telos is *internal*. Hence, the paper will conclude that there are at least two varieties of pleasure in Plato's *Philebus*.

### 1. Fourfold Division of Being

The fourfold division of being divides “everything that actually exists now” into four kinds:<sup>5</sup>

Socrates: As the first I count the unlimited, limit as the second, afterwards in third place comes the being which is mixed and generated out of those two. And no mistake if the cause of this mixture and generation is counted as number four.<sup>6</sup>

The unlimited kind can be classified as that which is relative and thus contains the “More and Less” (i.e., it supervenes on an indefinite matter of degree).<sup>7</sup> This class is characterised by being ontologically scalar and includes implicit comparative ‘opposites’ identifiable semantically through gradable adjectives: hotter/colder, strongly/gently, or rather, as Neil Cooper terms, “being R-er than”.<sup>8</sup> These terms are not quantitative (exact) for they are infinite, though they do differ in degree. Accordingly, the unlimited class is “always in a state of flux and never remains”.<sup>9</sup> Contrastingly, those which are both definite and non-scalar, e.g., ‘equal to X’, ‘double Y’, or the number 40 itself, belong to the limited kind, identifiable in virtue of their inherent exactness. The third kind is a *mixture* of the limited *and* unlimited and ‘comes-to-be’ when a definite point is imposed onto an infinite scale. For example, 40°C belongs to the mixed class since 40°C is a definite point on the unlimited scale of temperature.<sup>10</sup> If the *right* definite limit is imposed on the mixed class, it has the capacity to take away “excesses and unlimitedness, and establish harmony and moderation” by inflicting boundaries in that domain. For instance, when the right limits (e.g., the right pitch, tempo, timbre, etc.) are imposed into the unlimited domain of music, melody (as a member of the mixed class) is generated.<sup>11</sup> It is noteworthy that

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<sup>4</sup> 31da3–8.

<sup>5</sup> 23c3.

<sup>6</sup> 27b–c.

<sup>7</sup> 24a–e.

<sup>8</sup> Cooper 1968, p. 12.

<sup>9</sup> 24d3, 24d1–25a4.

<sup>10</sup> Cooper 1968, p.13.

<sup>11</sup> 26a, 25e; Gosling & Taylor 1982, p.132.

everything Socrates places into this division is likewise something classified as good.<sup>12</sup> Finally, the fourth kind can be described as the cause of the third kind, the *maker* of that which comes-into-being.<sup>13</sup> To extend the previous example, the composer who generates melody by imposing limit into the unlimited domain of music is the cause of that generation.

## 2. Impure Pleasures

This section will defend the claim that impure pleasures are (a) unlimited in kind, and (b) resemble each other qua subsuming under the restoration model: an account which argues that pleasure arises in a human being when “harmony is regained, and its former nature restored”.<sup>14</sup> It will argue for this by first defending the claim that the impure pleasures belong to the unlimited kind in Plato’s fourfold ontology. It will then proceed by deciphering an account of the restoration model before outlining how the main varieties of impure pleasures subsume under this model – namely, the restorative / non-restorative and true / false pleasures.

Both Socrates and Protarchus<sup>15</sup> agree that (impure) pleasure “*itself* is unlimited and belongs to the kind that in and by itself neither possesses nor will ever possess a beginning, middle or end”.<sup>16</sup> In virtue of lacking exactness and being intrinsically ontologically scalar,<sup>17</sup> impure pleasures are in a constant state of flux.<sup>18</sup> For example, pleasure is always ‘*pleasanter*’ relative to its opposite counterpart, pain, and the extent to which a pleasure is *pleasanter* is not finite, but rather a matter of degree: “pleasures seem greater compared to pain, and more intensive, and pain seems, on the contrary moderate in comparison with pleasures”.<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, pleasure cannot be characterised as a finite end-product,<sup>20</sup> instead, this paper will argue for the claim that pleasure is a *process* (of restoration).

Pleasures reside in sentient beings (whereby beings themselves are formed of a natural combination of limit and unlimited); hence, impure pleasures arise *in connection with* the mixed kind.<sup>21</sup> According to the restoration model in *Philebus*, this natural combination of the right mixture of the unlimited and limited is harmonious but contingent in living organisms. The process of deviating from this harmonious state

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<sup>12</sup> John Cooper goes as far as to suggest that their being good is a *consequence* of their being constituted by a combination of the unlimited and limited kind: “To be a good thing just *is* to be a combination” (1977, p. 715).

<sup>13</sup> 27a.

<sup>14</sup> 31da3–8.

<sup>15</sup> The primary interlocutors of *Philebus*.

<sup>16</sup> 31a.

<sup>17</sup> Refer to §1.

<sup>18</sup> 43a.

<sup>19</sup> 42b.

<sup>20</sup> I owe thanks to an anonymous reviewer for their challenge that we could quantify pleasure as a welfare unit and establish welfare as the agreed end. However, this misses the point. The unlimited kind is necessarily unquantifiable; to attribute quantity to pleasure (even by virtue of specifying *parameters*) would be to remove it from the unlimited class and place it into the mixed ontological kind – contrary to what Plato explicitly endorses.

<sup>21</sup> 30a–c.

within an organism can be identified as pain, whereas the process of the restoration of that harmonious state is pleasure – if the process of deviation/restoration is of a sufficient magnitude to be perceived, i.e., affect the soul.<sup>22</sup> One of the “most obvious” examples involves the restoration of harmony to a hungry person (i.e., one who *lacks* food) via the perceived process of filling the ‘empty’ body with food.<sup>23</sup> As such, it seems that “every pleasure seems to presuppose pain (a lack), just as every process of restoration presupposes a process of destruction”.<sup>24</sup>

### 2.1 Reflective and Nonreflective Impure Pleasures<sup>25</sup>

Socrates provides several examples of the restoration model which convey *physical* imbalance and, seemingly, are only explicitly intended to extend solely to nonreflective pleasures. Namely, those processes of *physical* replenishment that *jointly affect the body and soul* by the same affection; this is what Plato refers to as ‘motion perception’.<sup>26</sup> The human body undergoes constant replenishments and sentient beings do not perceive all of them (e.g., formation of an eschar which contributes towards restoring skin). However, when the process of replenishment is intense enough in degree such that one does perceive it, the soul is jointly affected by the bodily replenishment and, subsequently, that process is experienced as pleasurable. Hence, nonreflective pleasures can be regarded as a “psychic epiphenomenalism” of a physical replenishment.<sup>27</sup> Examples of nonreflective pleasures could include feeling a cool breeze on a summer’s day (which restores one’s bodily temperature), receiving a bodily massage after exercise (which restores muscle tissue by relaxing it), and feeling the sun on your face (such that it restores vitamin D levels in the human body, re-establishing a healthy condition).

In contrast to nonreflective pleasures, reflective pleasures refer to those pleasures that belong to the soul alone.<sup>28</sup> Such pleasures include the pleasures of anticipation:<sup>29</sup> those found in anticipating a future state of affairs. This process involves having previously had sufficiently intense sensory perception (i.e., an affection of both body and soul) and a preservation of that perception in memory which the soul can then authentically and independently recollect to cause present pleasure: “conscious psychic processes caused by entertaining mental representations or images of oneself in conditions that (one thinks) cause [or equate to] pleasure”.<sup>30</sup> For example, for a fatigued person to

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<sup>22</sup> 32b.

<sup>23</sup> 31d–32b.

<sup>24</sup> Fletcher 2018, p. 35. Contrary to Fletcher, I recommend ‘deviation’ as a more judicious articulation.

<sup>25</sup> Although Plato does not coin terminology to distinguish between different types of pleasures, doing so helps to elucidate the varieties and types of pleasures in *Philebus*. I have borrowed the terms ‘reflective’ and ‘nonreflective’ from Tuozzo (1996, pp. 498, 513).

<sup>26</sup> 34d.

<sup>27</sup> Tuozzo 1996, p. 497.

<sup>28</sup> 32c.

<sup>29</sup> It is not made explicit that the pleasures of anticipation are exhaustive of the reflective impure pleasures. However, they adequately demonstrate at least one way in which the restoration model can extend to the reflective pleasures.

<sup>30</sup> Frede 1985, p. 165; Tuozzo 1996, p. 497.

experience pleasure in anticipating going to bed, requires that they have a psychic representation of themselves in the conditions of restoration (i.e., getting sleep) that one thinks would be pleasant in the present/future – based on their memory of past experience.<sup>31</sup> In anticipating yet-to-be-actualised pleasure inducing conditions, one experiences pleasure in the present.

Despite the fact that Plato only explicitly applies his restoration model of pleasure to nonreflective pleasures, it is perhaps insightful that after Socrates introduces the reflective pleasures, he recapitulates the account of pleasure as involving restoration, whilst leaving the relation between pleasure and restoration vague – i.e., such that it need not involve *physical* restorations.<sup>32</sup> According to Thomas Tuozzo, this vague relation between pleasure and process can be interpreted as a causal one whereby pleasure need not be caused by a physical restoration, but by representations of replenishments in the mind of the beholder: pleasures “caused by images representing both the conditions of such a restoration and the pleasure ensuing on such a restoration”.<sup>33</sup> In other words, he argues that mental images of conditions (associated with their pleasant consequences) *cause* pleasure in virtue of (a) actually restoring the natural harmony or (b) by appearing to restore the natural harmony. Hence, it can be argued that the restoration model extends to anticipatory pleasures – mental images are sufficient for *causing* pleasure.

However, the claim that pleasure is *caused* is controversial. Near the beginning of *Philebus*, it is argued that the pleasure is the restoration of the natural state inferring that pleasure is the restoration, i.e., the relation is one of identity. Contrastingly, Tuozzo highlights that later in the text, the emphasis shifts to pleasure being caused by the process of restoration: “great changes produce pains and pleasure in us”.<sup>34</sup> This ambiguity perhaps reveals Plato’s failure to distinguish between pleasure as a process (i.e., the restoration itself) and pleasure as a product (i.e., caused by the process of restoration).<sup>35</sup> Since pleasure is seemingly ambiguous, Tuozzo’s choice to adopt the latter account without sufficient justification renders his decision arbitrary.

Alternatively, I argue that it is more plausible to suggest that pleasure is not ambiguous but is rather a process *and* a product in this context: what is ‘generated’ is a process of replenishment.<sup>36</sup> Imagining a particular mental image may cause pleasure in the sense it initiates a *psychic* process of restoration. For example, anticipating seeing your family (manifesting as a mental, pictorial representation of this) when you miss them *may*<sup>37</sup> trigger some psychic process of restoring a healthy mind (e.g., from a state of anxiety). Furthermore, restoring mental states in virtue of having the relevant mental images could also initiate the restoration of the body by preventing or reducing the impact of physical symptoms of poor mental health, such as panic attacks, fatigue,

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<sup>31</sup> In the form of an imprinted scribe or painting in their mind (39a–c).

<sup>32</sup> 32d–e.

<sup>33</sup> Tuozzo 1996, pp. 504–05.

<sup>34</sup> 43c.

<sup>35</sup> Frede 1985, p. 169.

<sup>36</sup> This explains why Plato does not distinguish between pleasure as process and pleasure as product: the product *is* a process.

<sup>37</sup> ‘May’ meaning it is at least *possible* that.

or low mood. In other words, mental representations are capable of instigating mental and/or physical processes of restoration.

## 2.2 True and False Impure Pleasures

Plato further divides impure (nonreflective/reflective) pleasures into those that are true and those that are false. As such, this section will now attempt to determine how truth and falsehood can coherently be applied to restorative processes.

Dorothea Frede argues that anticipatory (reflective) pleasures are true in virtue of having propositional content by defending the claim that some anticipatory pleasures consist in “definite logoi or pictures representing reality”.<sup>38</sup> Hence, she denotes that when one “clearly” hopes (meaning they are certain that the object of hope will actualise) for that which is pleasurable – in virtue of it having the capacity to restore the natural harmony – that such anticipatory pleasure does, in fact, have genuine propositional content. For example, anticipating having a child when you are nine months pregnant is a ‘clear’ hope and qualifies that anticipatory pleasure as true; there is a commitment to the description of the pleasure. Hence, Frede argues that the process of the restoration is itself a form of pleasure and its relation to reality in virtue of hope (i.e., in the technical sense of a definite prediction) means that pleasure can thereby be true or false: “The only way in which pleasures can be true or false is when he enjoys what his thought is the thought of and when the thought consists in an assertion about facts” past, present, or future.<sup>39</sup>

However, Frede’s account is intuitively implausible in light of epistemological concerns regarding when one can ever be *certain* that a pleasure/restoration will actualise. It seems as though her account of ‘certain’ hope requires one to have supernatural precognition capabilities, which for the majority of persons is unattainable, or even impossible. One might attempt to defend Frede’s account against this charge by claiming that if we take feeling and knowing to be sufficiently distinct psychological states, then it could be argued that *feeling* certain that pleasure will actualise does not require knowledge that it will.<sup>40</sup> In other words, Frede’s account need not be subject to the epistemological charge because rendering a pleasure true consists in *feeling* certain, rather than possessing knowledge that it will actualise. However, I think that this response is implausible since the choice to categorise only the anticipatory pleasures we *feel* are certain as true – where this feeling is distinct from knowing – would be arbitrary. On what grounds would feeling *certain* in the relevant sense qualify a pleasure as true, as opposed to feeling happy, or anxious?

Furthermore, Frede’s account is exclusive to reflective pleasures, and cannot extend to nonreflective pleasures since they can – and often do – occur independently of hope. Accordingly, if we were to endorse Frede’s account, we would be advocating for an ambiguous account of the truth. Not only is this problematic in the sense that Plato

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<sup>38</sup> Frede 1985, pp. 172–73.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 173.

<sup>40</sup> I owe thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this comment.

never explicitly commends an ambiguous account of truth in *Philebus*, but a defender of Frede's account would still be left with the challenge of identifying in virtue of what nonreflective pleasures qualify as true.

Alternatively, since pleasure can be experienced by pre-linguistic persons (e.g., infants can enjoy eating food<sup>41</sup>) and individuals more often than not experience pleasure without being aware of it 'as a restoration' (e.g., we feel pleasure in warming up on a winter's day, despite being ignorant of the process of the biological restoration itself), pleasure need not – and is unlikely to – have *propositional* content.<sup>42</sup> Considering this, when Plato speaks of “true” and “false” (impure) pleasures, I offer the less-restrictive interpretation that he is referring to whether or not a pleasure is *actually* restorative. For instance, if a man experienced pleasure in feeling the warmth of the sun, that pleasure would be (a) true, if it restored a vitamin D deficiency, or (b) false, if he was wearing strong sunscreen such that no restoration actually occurred.<sup>43</sup> This account of truth is able to consistently explain in virtue of what *both* reflective and nonreflective pleasures can render true, explaining why Plato did not explicitly endorse an ambiguous account of truth in the dialogue. On a charitable reading of *Philebus*, this paper thus renders Frede's account as implausible and argues instead for this latter position: that pleasures are true if genuinely restorative, and false if apparently restorative.

In sum, Section 2 has outlined that pleasures have an unlimited ontological nature in the fourfold division of all things, before claiming that pleasure arises in relation to the mixed class as a perceived restoration of the natural condition. The paper extended the restoration account to nonreflective pleasures, before arguing that impure pleasures are true if they are genuinely restorative and false if they are merely apparently restorative.

### 3. The Pure Pleasures

This section will outline and defend a plausible account of the pure pleasures by first depicting the general account of the good presented in the dialogue as that which is sufficient, true, beautiful, and moderate. Since the pure pleasures are exclusively ranked amongst the goods at *Philebus* 66a–67b, an account of the pure pleasures must be compatible with an account of the good. The paper will go on to establish that pure pleasures – which include pleasures of appreciating specific colours, sounds, smells, or geometrical shapes, as well as pleasures of learning – subsume under the following identity criteria:<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Nicklaus 2016, §3.2.

<sup>42</sup> I do not wish to claim that it is impossible for pleasure to have propositional content; rather, I am asserting that we should adopt a less restrictive means of attributing truth/falsehoods to pleasures that can help elucidate how both reflective and unreflective pleasures can be true or false.

<sup>43</sup> I owe thanks to an anonymous referee for the latter example.

<sup>44</sup> 51e7–52a3; Lang 2010: p. 155.

- (1) Pure pleasures are preceded by *unperceived* lacks (rational potentials).
- (2) Pure pleasures have objects with true, beautiful, and measured properties.
- (3) Pure pleasures are sufficient; they have an internal telos.

### 3.1 *The Good*

The final ranking of goods for the human life<sup>45</sup> is depicted as follows:<sup>46</sup>

- (1) Measure
- (2) The well-proportioned, beautiful, perfect, and self-sufficient
- (3) Reason and intelligence
- (4) Sciences and arts
- (5) The pure pleasures

What is important for the purposes of this section is the methodology used to construct this hierarchy.<sup>47</sup> In order to depict the final ranking of the goods, the different categories are judged in relation to the good *itself*, presented as a triadic unity “derived from those features of the good always exhibited by good things” that capture the good in a conjunction of three forms: truth, beauty, and moderation.<sup>48</sup> This demonstrates how all pure pleasures must be compatible with this tripartite conception of the good such that they are included in the hierarchy.

Furthermore, earlier in the dialogue, the good is characterised as “sufficient”, meaning that only that kind which is sufficient to itself (‘being’), as opposed to the kind that is for the sake of something else (‘becoming’), is *intrinsically* good. For example, if one were to drink water for the sake of something else (e.g., relieving thirst), drinking would not qualify as being intrinsically good. Contrastingly, one may appreciate beauty solely for the sake of appreciating beauty – subsequently that act is intrinsically good. After all, Socrates proclaims that “if pleasure really is becoming, then we shall be placing it correctly if we place it in a category other than the good”.<sup>49</sup> This paper will argue that that which has an internal telos (a process in which the goal of that process is internal) occurs ‘for the sake of itself’ and it thus compatible with the good; on the other hand, a process which has an external telos is for the sake of something else. As such, this paper defends the claim that pure pleasures have an internal telos (rational potentials are actualised for the sake of that actualisation).

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<sup>45</sup> At 28d–30c Plato presents a microcosm-macrocosm argument regarding the human body and the universe; hence, *perhaps* one would be justified in extrapolating the good in the good human life to the good of the universe (Frede 1993, p. 78): “the body of the universe which has the same properties as ours” (30a).

<sup>46</sup> 66a–d.

<sup>47</sup> The notion that the final ranking of the goods is *hierarchical* is merely implicit, though plausible since measure is explicitly regarded as the “most valuable” of the goods (64d–e).

<sup>48</sup> 65a; Lang 2010, p. 165.

<sup>49</sup> 54d1–2.



Although this depiction of the good as measured, beautiful, true, and sufficient is somewhat general and obscure, it is informative enough to determine the nature of the pure pleasures.

### 3.2 Preceding Unperceived Lack Condition

Socrates describes the pure pleasures as those pleasures that are “based on imperceptible and painless lacks, while their fulfilments are perceptible and pleasant”.<sup>50</sup> Hence, as a starting point for depicting the nature of pure pleasures, this section will begin by evaluating the claim that the pure pleasures are necessarily and sufficiently those that are preceded by *imperceptible* painless lacks “apparently construed as signalling the satisfaction of needs we are unaware of, and so not pained by, acquiring or having”.<sup>51</sup> For example, having a ‘lack of knowledge’ is not perceptually a painful experience in its own right,<sup>52</sup> but the process of learning (i.e., fulfilling that ‘lack’) is a perceived pleasurable experience. Perception in *Philebus* refers to that which is of a sufficient magnitude to affect the soul either independently, or jointly with the body; hence, unperceived lacks do not affect the soul. This is perhaps why the pure pleasures’ dependence on lacks does not impede their higher evaluative status – their “cure is slight”.<sup>53</sup> This paper will now refer to this condition as the preceding unperceived lack condition (PUL): for a pleasure to be pure, it is (at least necessary) that the pleasure is preceded by an unperceived lack.

However, this paper will argue that the PUL condition cannot solely account for the nature of pure pleasures since, paradoxically, if it did, some pleasures would be welcome in the good life that are not *good*, i.e., compatible with truth, moderation, and beauty. For instance, taking pleasure in eating a dessert out of sheer decadence, laughing (taking pleasure) maliciously as someone else’s expense, or taking pleasure in squeezing a pimple are all pleasures that intuitively bear no explicit relation to truth, beauty, or measure. Thus, it seems both in line with Plato’s intentions and common sense that not *all* pleasures preceded by painless lacks (e.g., those pleasures that are ugly, false, or immoderate, and subsequently *possibly* incompatible with the good) should be classified as pure and included in the final ranking of the good.

Hence, in order to provide an account of pure pleasure that restricts the scope of the PUL condition such that only good pleasures are welcome in the good life, it could be argued that the pure pleasures must conform to the PUL condition and be *true*. This further condition is not arbitrary. Rather, it is a suitable attempt to restrict the scope of pure pleasures in virtue of the fact the pure pleasures are explicitly coined the “true pure pleasures”.<sup>54</sup> As outlined in Section 2, true pleasures can be depicted as those that are genuinely *restorative*. Certain apparent pure pleasures (such as the ones outlined

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<sup>50</sup> 51b.

<sup>51</sup> 51b5–6; Katz 2016, p. 221.

<sup>52</sup> Having a lack of knowledge could partially constitute a painful experience in certain contexts (e.g., humiliation in a classroom), but the lack of knowledge itself is unperceived.

<sup>53</sup> Lang 2010, p. 155.

<sup>54</sup> 50e–55c.

above) are false and thus not pure; they “have the appearance of enormous size and great variety” but are not genuinely restorative.<sup>55</sup> For example, the decadent man who eats the indulgent chocolate bar is *harming* his body overall (it could contribute to weight gain and thus reduce self-esteem or increase health risks, etc.). However, a weakness of this account is that it defends the claim that the true pure pleasures are *restorative*. This is implausible since such an account conflicts with the sufficiency condition of the good; replenishment “always takes place for the sake of some particular being”.<sup>56</sup> As such, it seemingly follows that under this account the telos of the pure pleasures are external – they occur for the sake of restoring a being.

However, Plato's definition of *true pure* pleasures is based on “imperceptible painless lacks, while their fulfilments are perceptible and pleasant”, which suggests that the account of truth in *Philebus* is ambiguous:<sup>57</sup> “the ‘adjective’ true seems to have a different sense in this passage than the analysis of true and false [impure] pleasures earlier in the dialogue, functioning instead as a synonym of ‘pure’”.<sup>58</sup> Hence, in elucidating that truth and purity are merely synonymous, this section has established a more plausible interpretation of Plato that pure pleasures can be true without having to be genuinely *restorative*. After all, although Socrates endorses the restorative view of pleasure, “he nowhere recommends that they endorse it completely or for every type of pleasure”.<sup>59</sup>

Having established that the pure pleasures can be true (i.e., compatible with the good) without having to be restorative, this paper will now consider in what sense is pleasure related to the fulfilling of an unperceived lack if the fulfilling of a lack does not involve a restoration. As an alternative to the restoration model,<sup>60</sup> it could be argued that the *pure* pleasures just are a state of *completion* “thus enjoying that stability of its internal structure and/or its object and qualifying as a candidate for some kind of end”.<sup>61</sup> This is more lucid if one considers that the ‘lack’ of the PUL need not be thought of as gaps (e.g., ‘gaps in knowledge’) but rather as *potentials* in which the relevant pleasure consists in its end (as an actualisation) occurring for the sake of itself. For example, the potential to see the beauty of a perfect geometrical shape when actualised is pleasurable from the moment that shape is perceived, and when left as a mere potential constitutes a lack in the sense that it remains as a mere *capacity*. What is advantageous about this account is that such pleasures occur for the sake of themselves; they are fulfilled from the instant they are actualised. Hence, this account is compatible with the good, though it makes a stark contrast between the nature of the pure and impure pleasures: “one cannot ignore fundamental distinctions between

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<sup>55</sup> 51a7–8.

<sup>56</sup> 54b.

<sup>57</sup> 51b5–6.

<sup>58</sup> Fletcher 2014, p. 127.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.

<sup>60</sup> Although this is an alternative account of pleasure, it still subsumes under the overarching account of pleasure, i.e., that pleasure is a perceived process of change (kinesis) that occurs in sentient beings.

<sup>61</sup> Carone 2000, p. 268.

various classes of pleasures (such as pure and impure ones), against Frede's indiscriminate treatment of all pleasure as a process of replenishment".<sup>62</sup>

However, even if pleasure is regarded as the actualisation of a mere potentiality that occurs for the sake of itself, as opposed to the restoration of some 'lack', such a condition is still not strict enough. Although it now has the potential to be good since it can occur for the sake of itself (i.e., is not a generation despite being true), as mentioned at the start of this section, it still does not exclude certain pleasures that are intuitively pure from being actualised into the good life. For instance, if I have the potential to pop a pimple and I take pleasure in actualising that state of affairs, surely this cannot be a pure pleasure since it is ugly, and thus not compatible with beauty.<sup>63</sup>

### 3.3 *The Objects of Pure Pleasure*

It has been argued that the PUL condition cannot independently constitute an identity criterion for the pure pleasures since it fails to restrict the scope of pure pleasure to only those that are good. Since only a sub-group of the pleasures that result from unperceived lacks are pure, it could be argued that some emphasis must be placed on the 'object' of pleasure that bears the required relation to both the unperceived lack (potential) necessary for pleasure and its relation to the good. "Pure pleasures do not accompany the perception of every object, but only the perception of perfect shapes or pure colours or sounds."<sup>64</sup> If the pure pleasures arise from imperceptible painless lacks, the PUL condition is merely necessary; their lacks must also only be 'completed' by objects with specific properties, i.e., those that constitute the good: truth, beauty, and measure.<sup>65</sup> As such, mere 'grasping' or perceiving of an object or activity of pleasure with the relevant properties fills a lack in virtue of actualising a potential (that is compatible with the good, i.e., true, beautiful, and measured).<sup>66</sup>

One property that heightens the status of the pleasures it produces is non-relative beauty, those objects that are "forever beautiful by themselves" and "provide their own specific pleasures".<sup>67</sup> Plato explicitly dismisses the beauty of people or paintings as *wholes* (though he argues that it could be possible for beauty to be abstracted from such sensible objects). Instead, he alludes to the geometrical exactness of plane figures or solids (constructed out of a compass, ruler, and square, and to smooth and bright sounds.<sup>68</sup> Hence, pleasure derived from the perception of a particular object of pleasure need not imply that such properties are sensible: "the object of pleasures must [...] be abstracted from the particular sensible object given that it is impossible

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 261.

<sup>63</sup> Perhaps opposite properties can occur simultaneously in an object (when abstracted). However, it is certainly not obvious, even if this was possible, how squeezing a pimple can ever be beautiful, especially in the non-relative sense.

<sup>64</sup> Fletcher 2014, p. 124.

<sup>65</sup> Lang 2010, p. 154.

<sup>66</sup> The term 'grasp' is used when the properties of the object are not sensible, such that they cannot be perceived in the conventional sense.

<sup>67</sup> 51c6–7.

<sup>68</sup> 51c4–7, 51d6–8.

to have a sensible object which is white but no other predicate such as 'round' or 'chair'.<sup>69</sup> This non-relative conception of beauty is abstract since it is unintuitive to merely grasp a 'perfect' circle and to admire and appreciate its intrinsic beauty, yet to ignore other 'more obvious' beauty (e.g., that of your partner). However, this theory does cohere with concepts in modern science and philosophy about the nature of beauty as a mathematical golden ratio (*phi*) inherent within nature. Accordingly, depicting the properties of beauty requires rational powers since such properties are not *intuitively* beautiful. As such, the experience of pure pleasure is only accessible to the agent with rational expertise capable of actualising the unperceived rational potential to appreciate beauty.

Measure is also a property of the good which "turns[s] out to be everywhere in beauty and goodness"; this property appears to be of heightened significance for not only does it come first in the hierarchy of the good, but it *imposes limit* on the pure pleasures such that the pure pleasures are categorised as belonging to the mixed ontological kind – an ontological *combination* of the limited kind and the unlimited kind.<sup>70</sup> In virtue of being a *combination*, the pure pleasures do not have the tendency to be excessive or deficient: "any mixture that does not in some way or other possess measure or the nature of proportion will necessarily corrupt its ingredients and most of all itself".<sup>71</sup> Rather, when taking pleasure in an inherently measured object, such pleasures are entirely satiable and stable. However, again, identifying the measured properties in objects and taking pleasure in them requires the exercise of rational powers. For example, identifying which note is measured on the infinite scale of pitch requires expertise – and is immensely pleasurable to the agent who has the rational powers to appreciate it – whereas to the untrained ear, such a sound is merely generic.

Hence, it seems that pure pleasures are those necessarily preceded by rational, painless (unperceived) potentials ('lacks') whose objects cohere with the good: they are true (synonymous with pure) and their objects are inherently measured and beautiful. It is important to recognise that under these further constraints, purity bears a qualitative relation to pleasure (not quantitative), the pure pleasure is superior to impure pleasure not in its magnitude but in its very nature, implying that Plato was not seeking to promote a hedonistic maximisation model of pleasure. "Every small and insignificant pleasure that is unadulterated by pain will turn out to be pleasanter, truer and more beautiful than a greater quantity and amount of the impure kind."<sup>72</sup>

This paper has thus far outlined the nature of the pure pleasures. However, it will now present one potential objection concerned that this account has restricted the scope of pure pleasures too much, since it is not obvious how the pure pleasures of learning meet such conditions (perhaps in part because it is not obvious what Socrates means by the pleasures of learning in general).<sup>73</sup> Although the pleasures of learning seemingly conform to the PUL condition (there is, at least intuitively, no precedent

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<sup>69</sup> Lang 2010, p. 157.

<sup>70</sup> 64e6–7, cf. 65a; Cooper 1977, p. 715.

<sup>71</sup> 64d8–e2.

<sup>72</sup> 53c.

<sup>73</sup> Lang 2010, p. 155.

perceived lack prior to learning), it is not obvious in what sense the object of the pleasure (learning) can have properties such as truth, beauty, and moderation.

On the one hand, it could be argued that the 'object' of pleasure refers to its content, such as "learning that the symbol of gold is Au"; as such, if the content of learning is true, moderate, and beautiful, that pleasure is pure.<sup>74</sup> However, since the content of a pleasure of learning can be of any variety (Plato does not discriminate) such objects could involve learning that, for example, one's dog has died a painful premature death, which is immoderate ('violent'), and certainly not beautiful in the non-relative sense. Hence, this reading is implausible.<sup>75</sup>

Contrastingly, one could appeal to Plato's characterisation of the soul "in which opinions or questions with propositional content are written down [...] followed by the illustration of that judgement as a painting in the soul" to suggest that the pleasures of learning involve the process of remembering 'objects' in the form of 'scribes' or 'paintings'.<sup>76</sup> Here, the distinctive feature of the pleasures of learning lies in the *memory and judgement* of that pleasure's 'object' as an imprint on the soul: "I cannot properly classify the world through my senses if I do not have memory or judgement to rely upon, and so I cannot take pleasures in even those aspects of it that are true, measured, and sufficiently themselves."<sup>77</sup> Here, then, it appears the pleasures of learning (i.e., judging and remembering) act as a means to classify the world as it is and thereby take pleasure in perceiving and recalling that which is true, pleasant, and beautiful. However, our judgements and memories can be fallacious since it is not obvious that they do in fact depict or recall the world as it really is.

Alternatively, perhaps the most plausible account of the pleasure of learning (insofar as it makes such pleasures compatible with the good) is to depict it as the pleasure of acquiring (or 'recollecting'<sup>78</sup>) knowledge (*epistêmê*), which "in its most accurate sense and appropriate use" is "applied to insights into true reality".<sup>79</sup> Although this paper does not have space to defend a full account of knowledge as presented in *Philebus*, it is perhaps plausible to claim that by 'true reality' Plato was referencing the Forms:

The world that appears to our senses is in some way defective and filled with error, but there is a more *real* and perfect realm, populated by entities (called "forms" or "ideas") that are eternal, *changeless*, and in some sense paradigmatic.<sup>80</sup>

Under this account, the objects of knowledge are the Forms and the process of understanding (learning/recollecting) the Forms is pleasurable. Since the Forms are 'exemplars', they are true (i.e., have a place in reality), moderate (stable, 'unchanging'),

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> 52c5.

<sup>76</sup> Lang 2010, p. 156.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 158.

<sup>78</sup> Plato's epistemological views presented in *Meno* suggest that "what we think of as discovery [of knowledge] is in fact the recovery of knowledge which the soul has previously possessed but which it has forgotten" (Taylor 2008, p. 4).

<sup>79</sup> 59d.

<sup>80</sup> Kraut 2017, §1.

and perhaps beautiful<sup>81</sup> – the objects of the pleasure of learning do in fact make such pleasures appropriate for the good life. This account requires a substantial amount of further justification, though it does help to elucidate at least one way in which the pleasures of learning can be seen to be compatible with the tripartite structure of the good presented in *Philebus*.

In sum, this section has outlined the general account of the good as presented in *Philebus* and defended the claim that the pure pleasures must be preceded by an unperceived lack (rational potentials), have objects that are true, moderate, and beautiful, and are *sufficient*.

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper has argued for the claim that pleasure is a process of change (kinesis) that occurs in sentient beings either when the harmonious natural condition is genuinely or apparently restored (impure pleasures), or when certain potentials are actualised by the rational human (pure pleasures). It is noteworthy that despite their differences, pleasure is not necessarily ambiguous in *Philebus*: “any worthwhile discipline finds a unity in opposites, so there is nothing to be surprised about in pleasure’s situation”.<sup>82</sup> However, this is worthy of a paper in its own right.

A limitation of this paper is that it is unable, and has thus failed, to *prove* that the pure and impure pleasures are *exhaustive* of the varieties of pleasure presented in *Philebus*. One reason for this is the fact that Plato himself does not label all varieties of the pleasures depicted in this account. However, on a charitable reading of his text, the majority (if not all) of the pleasures presented in *Philebus* can either meet the identity criterion of pure pleasures or are characterised (somewhat) by being a restoration of some precedent perceived lack (impure). The task of demonstrating that *all* pleasures subsume under either model would be an incredible feat, though perhaps this is a challenge worthy of further research. Despite such a limitation, this charitable reading of *Philebus* is plausible. This account has pulled together a complex multiplicity of intricate concepts and interpretations to provide a coherent, in-depth analysis of the nature of pleasure as presented in Plato’s *Philebus*.

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<sup>81</sup> Since the Forms are abundant (e.g., in *Republic* X.596b, there is even reference to a Form of Bed), it is difficult at this stage to establish, without further tangential discussion, as to whether or not all of the Forms are beautiful – though it is certainly possible.

<sup>82</sup> Gosling & Taylor 1982, p. 131.

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