

## THE HOMOGENEITY AND THE HETEROGENEITY OF THE CONCEPT OF THE GOOD IN PLATO

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The thesis I should like to advance is that Plato cannot and, in fact, does not adhere consistently to the doctrine that to know the good is to do the good.<sup>1</sup> First, in order to display the paradoxes in the Platonic ethical system, I shall discuss the concept of the homogeneity of the good which Plato explicitly endorses. Second, by referring to Plato's practice, I shall endeavor to demonstrate that he treats the good as heterogeneous although this treatment is inconsistent with his equation of knowledge with virtue. Our understanding of the good as heterogeneous allows us to clarify many of the paradoxes present in Platonic ethics and affords us a deeper understanding of Plato.

I shall use the descriptive phrase 'homogeneity of the good' to stand for that conception of the good which identifies the good exclusively with the moral good. I shall use the descriptive phrase 'heterogeneity of the good' to stand for that conception of the good which includes in the definition of good mixed pleasures or the natural good.

### Part I. *Plato and the Homogeneity of the Good*

I should like to enter upon two considerations. One, it is the collapsing of the natural into the moral good, or the conception of the good as homogeneous, that leads to the paradoxes in the Platonic ethical system. Two, the conception of the good as homogeneous does not and cannot explain the human experience of a felt conflict between desires or inclinations and moral good.

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1. Plato, *Philebus*, translated by R. Hackforth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1945), 20 D. That this is not simply an early Socratic viewpoint that Plato later abandons is clear from a work as late as *Philebus*, where Socrates states: "And surely there is one more feature of it (the good) that needs stressing, namely that every creature that recognizes it goes it pursuit of it".

Plato collapses the natural into the moral good by equating happiness with moral good. All men seek their own happiness; no one willingly pursues his own unhappiness. The only way that true happiness is achieved is by doing the good. Thus, no one would voluntarily do evil since to do evil would be to seek deliberately one's own unhappiness. All wrong-doing, then, is involuntary.<sup>2</sup> If one knows the good, one will do it. All wrong-doing stems from ignorance, from not knowing where one's true happiness lies.<sup>3</sup>

If we accept the concept of the good as homogeneous, the above argument follows nicely. If the only form of happiness is moral happiness, then no one would voluntarily seek a state in which the harmony of the soul would be disturbed. The collapsing of the natural good into the moral good leads to the paradoxes in the Platonic ethical system. Since evil doing results in the destruction of the harmony of the soul, and this harmony is the only form of happiness, then no one would willingly pursue evil.<sup>4</sup>

In light of the homogeneity of the good, Plato is led to argue that the doer of evil is less happy than the sufferer of evil who is a morally good man.<sup>5</sup> For Plato, evil-doing occurs in virtue of the false impression that it is to one's self-interest to do evil. But in actuality, for Plato, it is to one's disadvantage to do evil for indulgence in evil involves the destruction of the health of the soul, a health which is only maintained through the control of the appetitive and spiritual parts by the rational part. The rational part controls the other parts of the soul so that they do not usurp each other's proper domain, but rather live in harmony with each other under the rule of the rational part. One commits evil only because he allows the appetitive part of the soul to usurp the ruling function of the rational part and when this usurpation occurs, the health of the soul is disturbed. It is only when reason is at the helm that the

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2. Plato, *Protagoras*, translated by George Kimball Plochmann (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1973), 345 E.

Plato, *Gorgias*, translated by W. C. Helmbold (Indianapolis: Library of Liberal Arts, 1952), 509 E.

3. *Protagoras*, 357 D—E.

4. Plato, *Republic*, translated by Francis M. Cornford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1945), 392 B.

*Gorgias*, 470 E.

Plato is aware that some hold the point of view that one can be overcome by pleasure while recognizing the good, or that one can purposefully choose the pleasurable over the good while knowing the good. However, he holds that this view is in error (*Protagoras*, 352 E.).

5. *Gorgias*, 469 C; 470 E.

proper harmony can be maintained.<sup>6</sup> Further, the feeding of the appetites leads to the desire for more and more gratification until the soul becomes completely dominated by the passions and becomes a mere ministrant to their every beck and call. Far from happiness, this condition is the most wretched state of all for Plato. This condition is totally destructive of the freedom that allows man to give a purposeful direction to his life. It reduces man to the lackey of the multiheaded beast within him who unceasingly clamors for novel and more base means of gratification.<sup>7</sup>

We have seen how for Plato the health of the soul, and therefore the happiness of the evil-doer, is destroyed by his evil acts. There is a certain plausibility to this theory thus far. However, it is not simply that evil men are unhappy. Even more unhappy is the evil man who is not brought to justice and made to suffer punishment for his evil-doing.<sup>8</sup> The evil-doer who is punished is happier than the evil doer who escapes scot-free because punishment reinstates the proper balance within the soul by diminishing the power of the appetites over the soul. The diminishment of the appetites, by incarceration, *exempli gratia*, allows reason to assume once again control over the soul. Thus, the jailer is the happy man. Such paradoxes begin to stretch our credulity.

The ultimate paradox is that since punishment is a good, if we want to injure someone, an enemy, *exempli gratia*:

...you must see to it that your enemy is not sentenced and punished, but that, if he has robbed others of a large sum of money, he shall not pay it back but shall keep it and squander it, in defiance of god and man, upon himself and his friends; and, if his crimes are worthy of death, that, if possible, he shall never die but live forever in his wickedness...<sup>9</sup>

If it is thought that the above is merely irony, one need only remember that the granting of natural good to the evil-doer is in perfect accord with Plato's conception of the homogeneity of the good. Since the only good is moral good, what we might consider happiness becomes, for Plato, a mode of punishment. The sufferer of evil, on the other hand, can come to no harm if he has a healthy soul. He remains in control of himself and happy, no matter what calamity may befall him.<sup>10</sup>

6. *Republic*, 444 B—D.

7. *Republic*, 586 A; 592 A.

8. *Gorgias*, 472 E; 478 E—479 A.

9. *Gorgias*, 481 A.

10. *Gorgias*, 478 D. It is interesting to note that while natural evil does not affect the morally good man, natural evil can act as a curative for the morally evil man, and natural good acts as the greatest curative for the morally evil man.

Why the above argument is unconvincing to Polus, Gorgias and Callicles is that it overlooks the fact that natural enjoyment is, in fact, a good and that moral happiness is not the sole form of happiness that many may enjoy. To subordinate, *in toto*, the natural desires and even to consider them injurious to the health of the soul is to neglect the fact that the natural passions may afford considerable happiness and that their satisfaction does not necessarily involve the loss of purposeful action. Even the most successful evil-doer is not necessarily a weak-willed individual, for reason may be employed in the service of the passions that would allow a well-balanced, if somewhat differently ordered, life of premeditated crime.<sup>11</sup>

The paradoxes present in the Platonic ethical system may, one and all, be attributed to the insistence upon the homogeneity of the good. If we allow mixed pleasures, those which can disturb the health of the soul, into the conception of the good, then we will no longer perceive the jailer as happy since he will be deprived of something good. Since natural good will be seen as a reward and not a punishment, we will no longer consider that the evil man is punished by allowing him to persist and to reap the rewards of his immorality.

There is another consequence which follows from conceiving the good as heterogeneous. If the good is heterogeneous, it will no longer be true that if one knows the good, he will do the good. If the good is conceived as heterogeneous, it will be possible to know what is good and yet not do what is good. The emergence of the natural good as competitive with the moral good allows us to explain situations in which there is a conflict between two values.

However, in order for the good to be heterogeneous, Plato must assign value to pleasure which are mixed with pain. It is only if Plato assigns value to pleasure which are mixed with pain, the very pleasures that he denounces as destructive of the soul, can he treat our experiences of them as genuinely attractive and not illusory. It is only mixed pleasures, pleasures which involve the great needs of the appetites, that one has to struggle against in order to be moral. It is only mixed pleasures that one would feel guilty about not suppressing, were one to succumb to them.

Plato seems to recognize the phenomenon of a genuine struggle within the individual and the phenomenon of moral guilt although his theoretical framework is not constructed to account for them. Plato describes the situation of a man who is tormented by the conflict

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11. *Republic*, 491 E.

between his inclinations and his reason, a man who knows the good, but is overcome by his inclination and, thereafter, suffers remorse:

But, I said, I once heard a story which I believe, that Leontius, the son of Aglaion, on his way up from Piraeus under the outer side of the northern wall, becoming aware of dead bodies that lay at the place of public execution, at the same time felt a desire to see them and a repugnance and aversion, and that for a time he resisted and veiled his head, but overpowered in despite of all by his desire, with wide staring eyes, he rushed up to the corpses and cried, There, ye wretches, take your fill of the fine spectacle!<sup>12</sup>

Plato, however, does not want to admit that the mixed pleasures, those which, at the same time, involve pain, can be good. He argues that two opposite things cannot exist at the same time in man if they are both to be good. It is certainly true with certain of Plato's illustrations, *exempli gratia*, health and disease, swiftness and slowness, strength and weakness, that a man cannot possess two of these qualities simultaneously.<sup>13</sup> However, mixed pleasures depend upon the release of considerable tension for the very magnitude of their delight. Plato's own vivid description of the joys of release coming from mixed pleasures demonstrates his awareness of the capacity of experiencing pleasure and pain simultaneously.<sup>14</sup> Yet, it is these very considerations that lead him to condemn these pleasures as illusory, as not really being good.

These mixed pleasures are the very sort of pleasures which Plato must admit to be good in order to make possible moral obligation and guilt feelings. It is exactly this sort of pleasure with which we are struggling when we are struggling to be moral. Since we have the experiences of obligation and moral guilt, and we know that they are possible only upon granting that the natural pleasures are a genuine contender for our attention and not simply an illusion, it follows that the good cannot be homogeneous.

It must be possible for men to know the good and yet feel the tension between desire and obligation. The only pleasures strong enough to overpower us are the mixed ones. If pleasure were an illusion, something which no one *really* desired, then all such conflicts, once one became cognizant of the fictional quality of the opponent, would dissolve into thin air.

Nevertheless, Plato insists on the illusory quality of the mixed pleasures. Mixed pleasures seem to be greater than they really are

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12. *Republic*, 439 E—440 A.

13. *Gorgias*, 493 E—496 E.

14. *Philebus*, 46 C—47 B; 63 D—E; 65 C.

because they are contrasted with the preceding state of pain that they relieve.<sup>15</sup> Pure pleasures, such as the pleasure of smell, do not require a contrasting state of pain to reduce, and thus, are far more real because their true pleasure can be appraised without mistaking any of their value for the relief from the state of pain. Furthermore, because the satisfaction of the appetites is only ephemeral, such pleasure as is afforded by them is by no means as genuine as is the pleasure that comes of partaking of the joys of the intellect.<sup>16</sup>

Pure pleasures and intellectual joys, however, are not the kinds of competitors with which reason would have to contend in the moral experience of attempting to control the appetites. Obviously, pure pleasures, which are not characterized by any demand, would be the ones that coincide with doing the good, so that these pleasures could not be ones which would struggle against knowledge of the good for their satisfaction.

Plato is aware of the demands of the mixed pleasures and sometimes speaks as if they should be countenanced.<sup>18</sup> But, in his final catalogue of goods, mixed pleasure is not explicitly included, and only the pure pleasures are allowed.<sup>19</sup>

#### Part. II. *Plato and the Heterogeneity of the Good*

Since natural happiness as a genuine motivation to action must be retained to give force to the concept of obligation, one can see that some appeal other than the appeal to natural happiness must be made in order to explain why men are moral. Plato is fully cognizant of the fact that virtue is not to be sought solely for the consequences it brings. He sees that moral goodness has to be made an imperative, a command of duty, so that one can be moral in spite of the fact that it does not necessarily lead to one's happiness.

In order for justice to be prescribed as a duty, it must assume an intrinsic value, apart from the consequences it may produce. Plato has the ethical insight (although he does not incorporate it into his general

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15. *Republic*, 583 B—584 C; *Philebus*, 45 B—C; 51 A; 54 E.

16. *Republic*, 585 B—586 C; *Phaedo*, 65-67.

17. *Philebus*, 51 B—52 A.

18. *Philebus*, 62 E; *Republic*, 558 E—559 A. Although Plato tells us that those necessary pleasures which we cannot suppress and those whose satisfaction is beneficial to us ought to be admitted, in the next breath he states that those pleasures that hinder the health of the soul ought, through proper training, be removed. Yet, obviously, all mixed pleasures are a detriment to the proper health of the soul.

19. *Philebus*, 66 C; *Cf.* also 63 E.

formula of morality) that justice is pursued primarily for its own sake and not for the results it may produce.<sup>20</sup>

Not only does Plato seem to place an intrinsic value on justice, but also he goes so far as to demonstrate that one does not attain to happiness by pursuing the good. The rulers of the state do not win happiness because of the extremely Spartan lives they are forced to live. They do not possess any private property, except for what is indispensable; they have only the amount of food that would suffice for the requirements of a soldier; they have no money; they have no private wives; they have no private families.<sup>21</sup>

It seems apparent that the reason behind these measures is the attempt to prevent the growth of private interests so that all of the ruler's efforts will be centered on the good of the state. But these restrictions do not seem very conducive to the rulers' happiness. *Plato could say that these men are the most morally happy, and since this is the only true happiness, that these men are the most happy. However, he does not.* He acknowledges the fact that though the rulers could be the most happy class, the object of the state is not the exceptional happiness of any one class.<sup>23</sup> Thus, *Plato intimates that the rulers might not be the most happy, and, if they were not, it would not matter for the good was still being accomplished.* This idea is very much at odds, it seems, with the theory explicated at the outset, namely, that morality is to be pursued because one so derives his truest happiness.

A striking illustration of the contradiction in the idea that to know the good is to pursue the good is demonstrated by the rulers who attempt to avoid rule and who must be compelled to do so.<sup>24</sup> If this situation is the case, then obviously one does not pursue the good because of happiness since in this case the rulers, who have been in the presence of the good and certainly know the good, still do not want to carry out its demands. Therefore, if one always acts for one's own happiness, *one must see that the good does not necessarily contribute to one's own happiness*, and, when it does not, the concepts of the intrinsic value of the good and the duty to do the good must be employed. If one stubbornly clung to the concept of the homogeneity of the good, one would be faced with the paradox of Plato's recommending the evil life

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20. *Republic*, 358 A; 367 C—D; 445 E.

21. *Republic*, 416 E—417 A.

22. *Vide*, *Philebus*, 21 E; 22 B, *et passim* for statements to the effect that the purely intellectual life is not the good life, and *a fortiori*, not the happy life. *Cf.*, *Philebus*, 11 D.

23. *Republic*, 420 B.

24. *Republic*, 346 E—347 D; 519 D; 520 A—C.

for the rulers since they do not willingly pursue the life of ruling. Clearly, the good must be heterogeneous if one is to avoid attributing such egregious paradoxes to Plato.<sup>25</sup> The rulers are not permitted to stay and dwell in the presence of the good although that is expressly stated as the better life.<sup>26</sup> If it is the case that one has to be constrained to do something even while one knows that it is good to do it, then it follows that knowledge of the good is not equivalent to doing the good.

Furthermore, the rulers cannot be ruling for the sake of their happiness, for it is found that after their long and arduous service, they are rewarded.<sup>27</sup> If the lives of the rulers had been completely happy without the reward, the reward would have to be considered superfluous.<sup>28</sup> In fact, if one did not take into account the intrinsic value of the natural good, but rather adhered to the doctrine of the debilitating effects of pleasure, the reward in this context would become absolutely devilish because it is either something that the ruler would reject in horror because it would be considered an evil rather than a good, or it would be an offer of something to someone which had the precise purpose of turning a good man to evil. Since such possibilities seem grotesque, it can only be concluded that the moral good is not performed for the sake of happiness and that the reward is appropriate. Therefore, natural happiness must be recognized as being good for surely it would be considered perverse for Plato to be venturing out of his way to do evil to the man who had performed such service to the state.<sup>29</sup>

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26. *Republic*, 519 D. The heterogeneity of the good clearly reveals itself here in that the ruler would be more happy to remain in the presence of the good, in contemplating the knowledge of it, than in actually carrying out its dictates. Possibly here the contemplation of the good is a non-moral good which is competitive with the moral good of ruling the state. The relevant point is that the rulers must be constrained to perform the moral good.

27. *Republic*, 414 A; 468 A—469 B; 471; 612 C; 613 C; 614 A.

28. Since the rulers are not to be rewarded, and, for something to be a reward it must be something in addition to what one already has; the good that is available to them as rulers cannot be perfect and adequate. For what is perfect and adequate does not lack anything and, therefore, could not require anything to improve upon it, nor could it be improved by the addition of anything. Thus, the life of the rulers cannot be the good life since it does not fit the criteria for the good life, which include perfection and adequacy as prerequisites. Cf. *Philebus*, 20 D. The heterogeneity of the good is thus fully displayed. *Vide*, *Philebus*, 60 C.

29. It could be argued that the reward of the ruler consisted not of the natural good, or mixed pleasures, but only of the true and pure pleasures that Plato admits into his final catalogue of goods. *Vide*, *Philebus*, 66 C and 63 E. But this would make the reward otiose since the philosopher-king would already have these goods as a ruler. He would by all means have the joys attending virtue. The only possible lack would be some of the joys

Natural happiness enters into the ideal state in another way: the commercial class is founded on the idea that the merchants and producers will benefit the state as a whole by pursuing that which they enjoy most, namely, the satisfaction of their appetites. They have private property, private wives, private families, money, and all the accoutrements of material happiness. Perhaps, the idea underlying all of this is that morality is an idea which is not expected to be realized in any one man, but that this does not derogate from its status as an ideal to be followed.<sup>30</sup> There is something in this. Yet, what is even more important to recognise is that ultimately pleasure must be admitted as a good in order that the moral good be sustained. It is apparent that in the case of the commercial classes, the pleasures which motivate their fulfilling their function of supporting the material needs of the state are not the allowed pleasures of the *Philebus*. The commercial classes are led, *exempli gratia*, by their greed for gain, by their desire to produce foodstuffs beyond their needs so that they may make a profit from their sales. This greed, however, has the consequence of ensuring that everyone may stay alive.<sup>31</sup>

It seems, then, for a coherent picture of Plato's view of morality, it must be taken as impossible that injustice and the pursuit of mixed pleasures should be construed as simply evil. They may be morally evil, but they must be acknowledged as naturally good. If they were wholly evil, then all experience of moral conflict and the concept of obligation would be illusory. There would be no need for obligation to stifle the desires for the desires would not be pursued: they would not be a temptation for a rational man. If however, natural happiness is taken as having intrinsic value and capable of making a demand on the person which can compete with the moral demand for the health of the soul, then the moral experiences of guilt and obligation once again become possible.

Now, it may be the case that Plato thought ultimately one should

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attending intellectual speculation, such as the ones he relinquished to rule. However, these do not seem to be among the rewards proffered.

*Cf.*, footnote, 27.

30. *Republic*, 472 C.

31. All in all, Plato demonstrates in the *Republic* (*Cf.* 441 D) a greater awareness of the relevance of the natural good than he does in the *Philebus* where, despite all of his initial presages of the mixed life (*Cf.* 60 C—61 A), the pleasures that he finally does allow into the mixture do justice neither to the function of the natural good as the competing good to the moral good (so as to make sense of obligation), nor to the function of the natural good as a reward for those who have been good while unhappy.

attempt, through education, to remove the possibility of the conflict between the natural and the moral good. But if he did, morality as we know it would no longer be necessary. All men would automatically do the good. However, as a matter of fact, Plato realizes that not all men (if any) could be brought to such a condition. Even the ideal state depends on their being different natures of man, none of which, taken in themselves, could be contrived of as just, but all of which, taken together, are necessary for the perpetuation of the state.

The spirit of Platonic writing, if not the letter, is the belief that man may know the good and yet not do it. This idea is explained by the fact that Plato realizes that the good is heterogeneous, that there is both a natural and a moral good, and that the two do not necessarily coincide. In order to take account of the heterogeneity of the good, Plato would have to revise his celebrated formula that to know the good is to do the good. It is reassuring to remember, however, that if he did so, this would only mean the expansion of his theoretical structure in order to encompass his own ethical insights which, although not printed on the label of his writings, are woven into its very cloth.