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APPETITIVE DESIRE IN LATER PLATO

Todd Stuart Ganson

From the time of its introduction in *Republic* iv, Plato never gave up on the idea that the appetites are importantly different from other desires. However, in a neglected passage in the *Philebus* Plato explicitly rejects his earlier *characterization* of appetitive desire in *Republic* iv.¹ In what follows I hope to uncover the philosophical motivation for his new approach to the appetites.

What Plato rejects in the *Philebus* is his earlier claim in the *Republic* that thirst is appetite for drink (438a). With this claim Plato was attempting to be precise about the nature of the objects of appetitive desire. He believed that precision on this matter would help us see what is wrong with the Socratic view that all of our desires aim at the good (i.e., happiness) as such.² Cases where one's desire for drink goes against one's better judgment show that thirst is not by its very nature ordered toward the good; thirst, by its nature, is for drink, no more. That is, in the *Republic* Plato rejected

(1) Thirst is desire for drink *as a good*.

in favor of

(2) Thirst is desire for drink *simpliciter*.

On the assumption that (2) is a correct description of the object of thirst, Socrates' view of desire is incomplete: there are some objects of desire that are not desired *qua* goods.³

In the *Philebus* Plato is evidently unhappy with (2), for he tells us that thirst is appetite, not for drink, but for the filling caused by drink (*Phlb.* 35a). In this later work Plato comes to reject (2) in favor of

(3) Thirst is desire for the filling caused by drink.

in the context of answering the following question: What common feature do all appetitive desires share? Plato apparently believes

that (3) is an improvement on (2) because it allows us to see what appetites like thirst, hunger, and the desire for sex have in common.

In the *Republic* Plato does not seem terribly worried about the question of what it is that the appetites have in common. He tends to rely on examples to illustrate what he has in mind (e.g., hunger, thirst, Leontius' urge to see corpses, the chilled person's desire for warmth, the love of money, and sexual desire) and has little to say in a general way about what unifies the examples. And when he does speak more generally about the nature of appetitive desire his characterization is largely negative. For example, we know that appetitive desires are *not* a product of reasoning about what is best all things considered; they are *not* what account for our strivings toward the good. Plato is oddly silent about what appetites *are*.

One possibility is that Plato's silence here is due to skepticism about the unity of the appetites.⁴ After all, Plato sometimes refers to the appetitive part of the soul as multiform and variegated (*R.* 580de and 588c). This way of talking makes sense if we consider how various the aims of the appetites seem in comparison with those of, say, rational desires. On Plato's view, the desires of the rational part of the soul always reflect its valuations of available options: the action judged better (more conducive to happiness) is desired more. Hence, desires of reason are unified by the fact that they are all teleologically ordered to (the rational part's conception of) the agent's good.⁵ All desires of the rational part aim at what is best for the individual as a whole (composed of parts). By contrast the aims of the various appetites are evidently quite diverse: thirst seeks drink and nothing further, hunger is just for food, and so on.

Notice, though, that any thoroughgoing skepticism about the unity of appetitive desires threatens to undermine the tripartite psychology upon which so much of the *Republic* is founded. Due to the lack of a unifying aim among appetites, it is not obvious how Plato will rule out the possibility of genuine conflict between appetites, the kind of conflict that demands diversity of parts.⁶ So while Plato's tripartite psychology is in part founded upon the assumption that appetites in general conform to the example in (2), that assumption raises serious worries about Plato's claim that the human soul has just three parts.

I want to suggest that in his later works Plato endorses a teleological view of appetitive desire, which is at odds with the distinction in the *Republic* between necessary and unnecessary appetites. This teleological approach allows for just the kind of unity among appetites that Plato wants. But while the process of appetite formation

is, on this later account, goal-directed, Plato continues to maintain that appetites are good-independent; that is, as in the *Republic*, their genesis is thought to be completely unconnected with the subject's value judgments. I will argue that Plato's new approach to good-independent desires deserves more attention than it has received.

The discussion of the appetites in the *Philebus* takes place in the context of an inquiry into the nature of pleasure and pain, so a few words on the latter topic will help to set the stage. At *Philebus* 32ab Socrates offers a provisional definition of pain as any corruption of the natural state of an organism. For example, he speaks of the effects (*pathē*) of intense heat on the body—unnatural separation and dissolution of the flesh—as pain (32a). In other passages Plato makes it clear that this definition is inadequate as it stands (*Ti.* 64cd and *Phlb.* 43c). No pain results when the departure from the natural state is mild and gradual, for in such cases one does not sense the affection of the body (i.e., the effect (*pathos*) that something has on the body). Similarly, Plato's initial account of pleasure (see *Phlb.* 32abc) as an affection that restores the natural condition of the body is unacceptable: pleasure occurs only when the restoration is sensed (*Ti.* 64cd, *Phlb.* 43c and 51b).

How, then, does Plato revise his initial account of pain and pleasure? One possibility is that Plato identifies bodily pains and pleasures with *sensed* affections of the body. In his *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle spends some time attacking the view that pleasure is a sensed change toward the natural state (e.g., 1152b13 and 1153a13). Although Aristotle does not tell us whose view he is examining, it is not unreasonable to suppose that he takes himself to be discussing Plato's view.⁷ Another interpretation of Plato's theory of pleasure and pain is due to Galen. In a fragment from his lost commentary on the *Timaeus*, Galen tells us that, for Plato, one's bodily affection can be pleasant or painful, but it is the sensation (*aisthēsis*) of such an affection that is the pain or pleasure.⁸ Galen's interpretation has several advantages over Aristotle's reading according to which pain and pleasure are objects of sensation, affections of the body. First, in the *Timaeus* Plato does not say that the sensed disturbance in the body is a pain; he says it is painful (64cd). Second, Plato sometimes identifies pains with sensations (e.g. *Thet.* 156b and *Lg.* 653a6). Finally, according to the account in the *Timaeus*, pains are housed in the mortal part of the soul (65a5 and 69cd), but sensed affections are in the body, not the soul.⁹ For these reasons I will assume that Plato takes pains and pleasures to be sensations whose objects are affections of the body: departures

from the natural state in the case of pain, restorations in the case of pleasure.

Because hunger and thirst are his prime examples of appetitive desire, Plato thinks of appetites as arising in response to painful affections. Of course, we do not desire these painful disintegrations of the body that we are presently sensing when hungry or thirsty; what we desire are the affections that restore the body, affections we have experienced in the past when eating and drinking (*Phlb.* 35abc). Accordingly, Plato sees the need to distinguish two stages of cognition in the process of appetite formation:

(A) An affection of the body that upsets the natural condition of the body gives rise to a sensation of that affection. The sensation is pain; the affection is painful.

(B) The sensation of this painful affection triggers a memory of an opposite affection previously cognized by way of sensation. This opposite affection restores the natural condition of the body and it is pleasant when sensed.

An illustration may be helpful here. Thirst is initiated by sensation of a depletion. Clearly one does not desire this painful object of cognition; what one desires is the filling grasped by way of memory. That is, thirst is for the opposite of what one is presently experiencing: thirst is directed toward the restoration of the natural condition (*Phlb.* 35abc).

These remarks on the cognition involved in appetite formation show that appetitive desires are ordered to the natural or healthy state of the body. What we come to desire in our appetites are affections that help to maintain the body's proper functioning. This view that the natural state of the body is the common end of appetites is present in the *Timaeus* as well as the *Philebus*. At *Timaeus* 70d Plato refers to the appetitive part of the soul as "the part which has appetites for food and drink and *as many other things as it needs because of the nature of the body.*"¹⁰ What unifies the desires of the appetitive part is that they drive us toward things that are needed because of the nature of the body. Plato goes on to contrast this part of the soul with reason. Whereas desires of the appetitive part are narrowly directed toward the natural state of the body, desires of the rational part aim at what is best for the individual taken as a whole (71a). The appetitive part, like the rational part, is a teleologically ordered network of desires, but the end of appetitive desire is the well-being of only a part of the individual, namely, the body.

On my reading of *Philebus* 31-6, (A) and (B) capture the only forms of cognition involved in the production of appetitive desires; no further kinds of cognition are employed in the process, only sensation and memory due to past sensation. If this assumption is correct, then appetitive desires are both good-independent and belief-independent. They are good-independent in the sense that their genesis is wholly unconnected with any sorts of value judgments. But not only does the process of appetite formation operate independently of the subject's beliefs about good and bad; it seems to operate independently of beliefs in general and is in this sense belief-independent.

This view of appetite formation sketched in the *Philebus* coheres nicely with Plato's remarks concerning the appetitive part of the soul in the *Timaeus*. The appetitive part, of course, is the part that manufactures appetites. Apparently Plato believes that the appetitive part can serve this role without having any beliefs, for at one point he explicitly denies that this part has beliefs (77b, cf. 71a), ascribing to it only sensation as a source of information about the world. Obviously, if the appetitive part does not have beliefs at all, then it does not have beliefs about what is good and bad; hence, its desires are good-independent as well as belief-independent.

So while appetitive desires systematically aim at the good of the body, they are not desires for this end *as such*. Their ordering toward this end is due, not to any grasp of the end on the subject's part, but to the gods who crafted our soul-body complexes. The gods have provided us with a kind of watchdog—the appetitive part of the soul—that (in the usual case) manages to signal trouble in spite of being wholly ignorant of the purpose of its activity.

But if the objects of appetite are not desired *qua* goods, how *do* they present themselves to the soul? The answer is clear: our appetites are cravings for pleasure. The one who is thirsty does not desire what she is presently experiencing (*Phlb.* 35b), for this process of emptying is painful (31e). What one desires is the opposite affection, the *pleasant* process of filling caused by drink (35abc and 31e-32a).¹¹ Hence, we should distinguish the subjective end or aim of appetitive desire from its objective end. Considering an appetite from the point of view of the soul that has it, we would say that the appetite is aimed toward the affection as pleasant. But when we consider their real purpose as conceived by the gods who designed our soul-body complexes, we would say that appetites have as their target the well-being of the body.

When Plato introduces his new view of the objects of the appetites in the *Philebus*, the topic at hand is the unity of appetitive desire. Plato explicitly rejects his earlier account of the object of thirst in the interest of capturing what all appetites have in common. So how does the new theory do a better job of insuring unity than the account in the *Republic*? In the *Republic* Plato distinguishes necessary appetites that promote health and well-being from unnecessary ones which do not (558d ff.). Desires of the latter sort are present in everyone (as reflection on our dreams makes clear) in spite of the fact that they are lawless and even dangerous (571-2). Thus in the *Republic* Plato seems to reject the idea that all appetites aim at health and well-being. But it is precisely this idea that Plato endorses in his later writings: the process of appetite formation, as it is described in the *Philebus*, systematically promotes the good of the body. Accordingly, the appetites that arise from this process would seem to be no less unified than desires of reason, which aim at the good of the individual taken as a whole.

In his later writings Plato is not committed to the implausible thesis that our appetites never lead us astray. His claim is rather that appetites which fail to promote the good of the body are aberrations due to disease and other corruptions (*Ti.* 86de). In this way Plato ensures that the unity of appetitive desire is not threatened by the existence of hazardous appetites. Such deviations are on a par with desires of the rational part that fail to hit their mark because of miscalculation or ignorance. We do not say that the latter undermine the unity of reason's desires; all desires of the rational part still have a common end. So also all appetites are directed toward health, even though not all reach their destination.

We seem to have come across a genuine difference between the *Republic* account and the later theory. In the *Philebus* and *Timaeus* Plato's goal of securing the unity of appetitive desire is accomplished by the adoption of a more robustly teleological approach to the appetites than what we find in the *Republic*. In the latter work Plato seems deeply impressed by the image of appetites as inherently dark forces against which the good part of ourselves is constantly in battle, and there is no suggestion that the unnecessary appetites are byproducts of a beneficial process. Indeed, Plato leaves it rather unclear why we must suppose that necessary and unnecessary appetites have a common origin, why they should *not* be thought to derive from two different parts of the soul. Hence, the later writings fill a gap in Plato's defense of his tripartite psychology.

This advantage of the later theory of appetitive desire is hardly decisive in the choice between that theory and the view of the *Republic*, for there are objections to the later theory that the account in the *Republic* does not face. One important difference between the two views is that only on the later account are our appetites desires for pleasure.¹² This difference is important because there is a plausible objection to the idea that our appetites are directed toward pleasure. The objection is that the pleasure associated with appetites seems to be consequent upon the satisfaction of the appetites. If this is right, then it is a mistake to suppose that pleasure is the *object* of appetitive desire; pleasure comes about with the attainment of the object of desire.

But should we agree that the pleasure involved in, say, drinking when thirsty is just a matter of desire satisfaction? It is implausible to suppose that the pleasure, say, of smelling a rose is always to be understood in terms of desire satisfaction.¹³ As Plato recognizes, this pleasure can come about quite suddenly and without the subject's antecedently recognizing any lack or need (*Phlb.* 51b, *Ti.* 65a, and *R.* 584b). I will call this pleasure taken in smelling a rose a 'sense-pleasure' because the object of one's pleasure experience, the pleasant effect of the odor upon the olfactory organ, is experienced as located in the sense-organ, just as the objects of pain experience are experienced as located in the sentient body. I see no objection to supposing that such sense-pleasures can sometimes be objects of desire. If this is right, then the issue here is whether we ought to assimilate other appetites to this case of desiring sense-pleasure.

A philosopher who denies that we ought to assimilate appetites like hunger and thirst to cases of desiring sense-pleasure is N. J. H. Dent. In his book *The Moral Psychology of the Virtues*¹⁴ Dent maintains that, while appetites (i.e., hunger, thirst, and the rest) are similar to desires for sense-pleasure in so far as both can be good-independent, appetites and desires for sense-pleasure are nonetheless two very different kinds of desire because hunger and thirst are not directed toward sense-pleasures; rather, the pleasure involved in eating when hungry is to be understood in terms of desire satisfaction. If Dent is right about hunger and thirst, then Plato's later theory of the appetites is clearly in trouble.¹⁵

There are, however, grounds for questioning Dent's assumption that appetites like hunger are not directed toward sense-pleasure. First, Dent is looking in the wrong place for the relevant sense-pleasures. He writes:

[I]t is not remotely plausible to suggest that our interest in the seasoning of dishes or in completing a meal with a sweet or savoury is dictated by hunger. These interests display a desire to enjoy gustatory pleasure quite over and above anything which might be needed to allay our hunger. (48–9)

We obviously need to distinguish hunger from desire for gustatory pleasures: hunger may arise without the latter, and *vice versa*. But Dent is wrong to draw the conclusion that hunger is not desire for sense-pleasure, for the pleasures relevant here are those connected with the abdominal region. What Dent needs to show is that hunger is not desire for sense-pleasures of the digestive tract.

Dent does not recognize this gap in his argument because he is working with a notion of sense-pleasure that seems to rule out the possibility of sense-pleasures of the abdominal region, as in the following passage:

The notion of a sense-desire I shall employ is this. To experience a sense-desire is to experience an inclination to secure, for oneself, the enjoyment of some sense-pleasure, some pleasure which comes from, or reposes in, *the gratification of one (or more) of the five senses*. (37, emphasis mine)

By limiting sense-pleasures to the traditional five senses, Dent has effectively ruled out the possibility of sense-pleasures of the digestive tract.¹⁶ Those of us who, like Plato,¹⁷ recognize more than five senses will find this limitation very puzzling: isn't it simply arbitrary to limit sense-pleasures to Aristotle's five senses? We have sensations that yield information about what is going on in the abdominal region, and some of those sensations seem to be pleasure sensations.¹⁸ Why shouldn't we call this sort of pleasure 'sense-pleasure' and desire for this pleasure 'sense-desire'? Why not suppose that hunger is precisely this sort of sense-desire?

Dent's failure to address these questions is significant. He has failed to undermine Plato's suggestion that what we desire in hunger are the pleasant effects that food has on the abdominal region. Accordingly, the interest of the later theory of the appetites may extend beyond its contribution to Plato's tripartite psychology; Plato may be getting at something important about the nature of hunger, thirst, and the other good-independent desires.¹⁹

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NOTES

1. Plato's explicit rejection of his earlier account of thirst has not, to my knowledge, been noted in the literature on the *Philebus*. The following discussions of *Philebus* 31–6 are, however, helpful on other features of the passage: Hackforth, R., *Plato's Examination of Pleasure, A Translation of the Philebus, with Introduction and Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954), *ad loc.*; Gosling, J. C. B., *Plato: Philebus, Translated with Notes and Commentary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), *ad loc.*; Gosling, J. C. B., and Taylor, C. C. W., *The Greeks on Pleasure* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), chs. 7 and 10; Frede, D., "Disintegration and Restoration: Pleasure and Pain in Plato's *Philebus*," Kraut, R. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Plato* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 425–463.

2. For an important challenge to this standard way of thinking about Socrates' position, see Daniel Devereux's "Socrates' Kantian Conception of Virtue," *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, vol. 33 (1995).

3. This standard reading of 438a is defended vigorously by Terry Penner in "Thought and Desire in Plato," G. Vlastos (ed.), *Plato. Vol. 2, Ethics, Politics, and Philosophy of Art and Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), pp. 96–118. Some problems for this interpretation are discussed in Glenn Lesses' "Weakness, Reason, and the Divided Soul in Plato's *Republic*," *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, vol. 4 (1987), pp. 147–161.

4. For alternative readings see Terence Irwin's *Plato's Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), ch. 13, and John Cooper's "Plato's Theory of Human Motivation," *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, vol. 1 (1984), pp. 3–21.

5. Cf. Penner's "Thought and Desire in Plato," p. 110.

6. For a useful discussion of Plato's appeal to mental conflict in partitioning the soul, see A. W. Price's *Mental Conflict* (London: Routledge, 1995), ch. 2.

7. Stewart's suggestion that Aristotle is concerned with Aristippus here is highly questionable (see his *Notes on the Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1892], *ad loc.*). While it is not unreasonable to suppose that Aristippus identifies pain with a sensed motion of the flesh, we have no reason to suppose that Aristippus' talk of "smooth motion" was understood in terms of a restoration of the natural state.

8. See Carlos Larrain's collection of fragments in *Galens Kommentar zu Platons Timaios* (Wiesbaden: Teubner, 1992), p. 170. A passage in Galen's *The Opinions of Hippocrates and Plato* is also relevant here. The passage was brought to my attention by William Hamilton (*The Works of Thomas Reid, D.D.*, eighth edition [Edinburgh, 1895], vol. 2, p. 950) who paraphrases as follows: "Sense (in mind) is not an alteration-affection-passion, but the recognition of it in the living organ of sense" (L vii c. 6). Galen recognizes the fact that Plato is careful to distinguish bodily sensation (a feature of the soul) from its object (an affection of the body).

9. Passages in the *Timaeus* where Plato speaks of pains as located in the body (64a and 64e) do not count against Galen's interpretation, for the sensation, the motion brought about by the initial affection, is partially a motion of the body (see the definitions of sensation at *Phlb.* 34a and *Ti.* 43c).

10. Notice that here in the *Timaeus* Plato is not insisting that we desire the *effects* of food, drink, etc. Only in the *Philebus* is Plato precise on this point.

11. These remarks in the *Philebus* fit together well with the assumption in the *Timaeus* that the appetitive part of the soul is dominated by pleasures and pains. See especially *Ti.* 71 where Plato tells us that the rational part is able to influence the appetitive part only by producing pains and pleasures in it.

12. My view is that the *Philebus* and the *Republic* present different views about the relation between the appetites and pleasure. In both dialogues Plato suggests that filling (when empty) is pleasure (*R.* 585d and *Phlb.* 31e) and that hunger and thirst are states of emptiness (*R.* 585b and *Phlb.* 31e), but only in the *Philebus* does Plato suppose that hunger and thirst are desires for pleasure, for the filling. In the *Republic* thirst is a desire for drink, hunger a desire for food; pleasure is consequent upon the attainment of these objects of desire. I wish to thank an anonymous referee for requesting that I clarify my view on these matters.

13. I am drawing here on Henry Sidgwick's important discussion of pleasure and desire in *The Methods of Ethics* (London: Macmillan, 1874), ch. 4.

14. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.

15. Notice that Dent's remarks are also problematic for the theory in the *Republic*. On the usual reading of the *Republic* Plato supposes that all good-independent desires belong to the appetitive part of the soul. Hunger and thirst serve to illustrate what good-independence consists in, and Plato never suggests that other good-independent desires are significantly different from these central cases. If there are significantly different kinds of good-independent desire, kinds of good-independent desire with entirely different aims, then we have good reason to be concerned about just how unified the appetitive part (as the seat of good-independent desires) is. For we have to worry that this difference in aims might result in strife and division.

16. I am assuming, of course, that such pleasure sensations (if there are any) do not belong to the sense of touch, as it is traditionally conceived.

17. As far as I can tell, Plato never commits himself to the view that there are only five senses, and the complex discussion at *Timaeus* 61–9 seems to rule out any straightforward assimilation of his theory to that of Aristotle. For example, for Plato pains are no less *sensory* than are gustatory and olfactory experiences.

18. Some will no doubt resist this suggestion that there are abdominal pleasure sensations to be distinguished from the pleasure taken in having one's hunger satisfied. I submit that such people have not sufficiently attended to the phenomenology of satiety. Of course, the relevant pleasure sensations are not as forceful as the pain sensations involved in hunger. They do, however, admit of subtle variation due to differences in what has been ingested.

19. Versions of this paper were presented at Oberlin College, at University of Memphis, and in a seminar I taught at Yale University. I am very grateful for all the helpful feedback I received on these occasions. I would especially like to thank Michael Barnwell, Sara Beardsworth, Tad Brennan, Todd Buras, Norman Care, Gail Fine, Dorit Ganson, Terry Irwin, Martin Jones, Al MacKay, Peter McInerney, Timothy Roche, Richard Schmechel, Catherine Wilson, and an anonymous referee.