

Similarity and Dependence in the Final Ranking of the *Philebus*

Ross Gilmore
University of Kansas

0. Introduction

The *Philebus* is concerned with the relative merits of reason and pleasure. Socrates and his primary interlocutor, Protarchus, quickly agree that the best life will have a share of each. Yet Socrates presses the issue, asking whether we have reason to believe that one or the other is more responsible for the goodness of the life combined of pleasure and reason. Is one of them better than the other in this sense, despite the fact that we likely wish a share of both in our lives? Socrates' final judgment comes in the form of a five-tiered ranking (the so-called 'final ranking'), which surprisingly includes not only reason and pleasure, but also such novel members as 'measure,' 'proportion,' and 'intellect.' Yet no sooner does Socrates introduce these terms than the dialogue ends. One major interpretive task of the *Philebus* has thus been to offer a reading of the final ranking, specifically to address the question: "By what principle or criterion is the final ranking organized?" In this paper, I will suggest a new way of looking at familiar pieces of textual evidence, hoping to illuminate the final ranking through its connections with the separate, thematic discussions of pleasure and reason. Ultimately, I claim that the final ranking may be understood in terms of 'dependence,' by which I mean to refer to the relation at work in the being/becoming (*ousia/genesis*) distinction. This frame, I believe, can preserve what is valuable in two traditional lines of interpretation, while avoiding their pitfalls.

1. Traditional Readings of the Criterion of the Final Ranking

Two related interpretations have been offered to account for the structure of the final ranking. The first, represented recently by Delcomminette (2006) and Lang (2010), describes each rank as a precondition for subsequent ranks. That is, the objects of the first rank are necessary conditions for the existence of the members of all subsequent ranks, while the latter ranks are not required for the existence of the first. In this sense, the “precondition” reading organizes the final ranking in terms of ontological priority. For example, measure (rank one) is a precondition of proportion (rank two), since a proportion is a relation of a number of measures. One issue with this reading, however, is that the “precondition” reading seems to imply that the preconditions are for the sake of the things they enable.¹ So if this reading is correct, the goodness of the items of higher ranks would seem to depend on the goodness of the lower-ranked products in which they issue. But Socrates clearly identifies the highest-ranked items (measure, paradigmatically) as being better than the lowest (pleasure). So this reading seems to get the priority wrong.

A second interpretation, as found in Barney (2016) and Harte (2019), considers the final ranking as organized in terms of causality. Often focused primarily on the construction of an actual well-lived life, this framework considers the causal role played by intellect in the construction of the life harmoniously combined of reason and pleasure. On this reading, knowledge is understood to be better than pleasure because it is more similar to reason, which is often taken as the paradigmatic good. Yet these interpretations have an awkward time trying to reconcile the pride of place they give to reason with the fact that intellect (*nous*) and thought (*phronesis*) are located not at the first rank, but at the third. There thus remains the problem of

reconciling the status of cause this reading would ascribe to intellect with the fact that it is placed below, and so presumably is caused by, members of the first two ranks (measure and proportion, respectively).

I will return to these problems at the end, arguing that my proposal avoids these pitfalls while more elegantly offering a unified reading of the final ranking.

2. *Similarity and Responsibility in the 'Deuteria'² and the Final Ranking*

Protarchus having quickly agreed that the combined life (which includes both pleasure and reason) is superior to the single lives (of pleasure without reason and reason without pleasure), the pair then seek to discover whether one is more akin to the good life as being responsible for its goodness. If one of the ingredients is responsible for the goodness of the well-mixed life, it will be judged the better element as being the cause of such goodness. Throughout the dialogue, Socrates describes this search for the second best thing in terms of finding what is most similar to (*homoiotaton*) the good thing that is the well-mixed life. He also describes the second best thing as being closely related (*suggenes*), connatural (*prospheusteron*), and akin (*oikeoteron*) to the good in question. I take it that all of these terms refer to the same relation, whereby the better component of the well-mixed life (either knowledge or pleasure) will be more responsible (*aition*) for the goodness of the life in virtue of being more similar to the good in question. That ingredient or aspect of the life will thus be better in the sense of being more good, and it will be more good in that it will be more similar to the good than the other, thereby having a greater share in the good.

This vocabulary of relation and similarity, first found in the *Deuteria*, reappears at the end of the dialogue in the context of the final ranking. Now, however, the items to be evaluated

are not the well-mixed life, together with reason and pleasure considered singly. Instead Socrates considers measure (as the “nature of proportion,” or that without which a mixture cannot exist), together with proportion as the characteristic which describes the harmony of the well-mixed life, before considering the faculties of *nous* (intellect) and *phronesis* (thought), and finally knowledge and (pure) pleasure. The well-mixed life has thus been replaced by the two ingredients in question over the course of the dialogue (reason and pleasure) as well as two properties pertaining to its harmonious mixture (reason and proportion) as well as the cognitive faculties which seem to bear some relation to all of the above. This rank ordering thus conveys Socrates’ judgment of which of reason and pleasure are more closely related to the good in question (with measure now taking first place, displacing the ‘well-mixed life’ of the *Deuteria*). Yet much of this final ranking strikes the reader as novel, and no account is given of the criterion according to which the items are ranked. Thus it is that commentators have sought to supply their own interpretations of the nature of the final ranking, namely, its principle of organization. It is this question which I seek to illuminate by connecting the final ranking with two passages not usually discussed in connection with this problem.

3. *Similarity and Dependence*³

The lengthy discussion of the nature and forms of pleasure which occupies most of the dialogue is concluded with a second thematic discussion of pleasure (53c-55c), immediately followed by a brief discussion of knowledge, and of dialectical knowledge in particular (55c-59b). In both cases, the capacities (of pleasure and knowledge) are described in their relation to being (*ousia*). Ultimately, being is said to be that for the sake of which *geneseis* (becomings, generations) come into being, while becomings come to be for the sake of another,

namely, being. A *genesis* is thus necessarily related to something else, and so is not sufficient unto itself, but depends on another for its own existence. In the case of the pure pleasures, such motions are described as resulting from the intellection of geometrical shapes or the perceptions of pure colors or sounds. Without these objects, no pleasure results, and so pleasure is understood as a becoming in relation to these beings.

Similarly, knowledge is described as resulting from a capacity aiming at an object. After discussing more and less precise forms of arithmetic (which take as their objects units of more or less precise identity), Socrates turns to dialectical knowledge. This knowledge is best, he claims, in that it is directed towards the best objects: eternal truths which never change and have an independent existence, in no way depending on something else for their being. Our faculty of intellect (*nous*) is thus aimed at the objects of its knowledge in a fashion analogous to how pleasure is said to aim at the being of its causes. In both cases, then, our capacities to know and to experience pleasure are described in relation to their objects. The primary difference between the two capacities, then, lies in their differing proximity to being.

In an oft-cited (and oft-misrepresented) passage, Protarchus claims that intellect is either identical to or most like (*homoiotaton*) truth (65d). While Socrates does not positively endorse this claim, neither does he quibble with it. And in light of the discussion of knowledge, we may understand why Socrates should agree with Protarchus' more qualified formulation. Since dialectical knowledge, related to the capacity *nous*, takes as its object what is most true, it may be said to be most similar to the truth.

And throughout the dialogue we have observed Socrates leading Protarchus in an inquiry into which, of pleasure and reason, is most similar to, related to (*suggenes*), connatural (*prophuesteron*), and akin to (*oikeoterion*) the good. In light of the general discussions of pleasure

and knowledge, we may now cash out such similarity and close-relation in terms of the dependence which obtains in the paradigmatic case of *genesis* and *ousia*. Reason is most similar to truth in that it is aimed at it as its object; pure pleasure, on the other hand, is described as being caused by worldly objects which themselves are dependent on the forms in which they participate. Pleasure is thus at a greater remove from the realm of truth than is knowledge, which takes this realm as its direct object. Ontological similarity, thus cashed out as proximity on this ordered spectrum of being-to-becoming, allows us to perceive the through-line of the final ranking, running from the good and its characteristics, through the faculty which intellects it, and on down to the systematic knowledge and pure pleasures which it can realize.

4. Dependence as Criterion of the Final Ranking

We are now in a position to evaluate this reading of *genesis* (as dependence) as the key to understanding the final ranking. First, understanding *genesis* as metaphysical dependence allows a desirable degree of flexibility in relating the heterogeneous classes of the ranking. Since the different levels of the final ranking are occupied by different kinds of things, we need a criterion which is general enough to be able to accommodate this variety. Metaphysical dependence does this job nicely, by not focusing on a univocal kind of cause, but on the nature of the relation. To run through the steps: the second rank (proportion) is dependent on the first rank (measure) as a composition is dependent on its constituent parts, where measures are the constituent parts of the proportions they compose.⁴ This is a case of one kind of form being dependent on another, simpler kind of form. Next, the third rank is dependent on the second in a different sense, as a faculty is dependent on the object of its activity. *Nous* and *phronesis* are dependent on their respective intelligible objects (on, perhaps, Forms as universals, and intelligible particulars as the

objects of practical judgment). The fourth rank is dependent on the third as a systematic body of knowledge is dependent on the faculty which elaborates it. As with *dianoia* in the divided line of *Republic VI*, *epistemai* (knowledges) and *technai* (crafts) are practical or theoretical frameworks derived (whether *a priori* or *a posteriori*, perhaps) from first principles. This relation is thus one of conclusions as dependent on their prior assumptions. Finally, the relation between the fifth rank and the fourth is that of pure pleasures and their causes, namely, the intellection of the sciences and the perception of paradigmatic sensibles as participating in the intelligible realm. The relation is between pleasure as a movement of the soul and the objects that are its cause. The virtue of dependence as the criterion of the final ranking is that it is both flexible enough to accommodate the ontological variety of the things ranked, while also allowing them to be put in a single, linear ranking, related as more proximally or distally related to the primary goods of the first rank.

Let us now consider the advantages of this interpretation relative to the two dominant traditional readings (preconditionality and causality). First, reading higher rankings as preconditions for the lower rankings risks getting the ‘for-the-sake-of’ relation backwards. As Socrates and Protarchus discuss in the case of shipbuilding (54c), the construction materials are desired for the sake of the ship to be produced. The materials are thus good to the degree to which they enable the construction of the ship in question. The relation between the sciences and pleasure, however, is not parallel. To say that the sciences are good to the degree they enable pleasure would be to take pleasure as the good, precisely the contrary point intended by the final ranking. Rather, the final ranking provides a framework within which to understand why knowledge should be considered better than pleasure. While pleasure is undoubtedly more pleasant than knowledge *per se* (as imagined in the thought experiment of the separate lives, of

pure reason and pure knowledge at 21b-c), the precondition reading of the final ranking would impute ‘finality’ (*to teleon*) to the lower ranked goods as that at which the higher ranked goods aim. By contrast, Socrates’ whole search has been for that good in light of which knowledge and pleasure may be understood as disparately related. The inquiry has been to seek the proximity of these two to the most complete (*teleon*) good, located at the first rank. The “preconditionality” reading thus risks locating the good at the wrong end of the ranking.

Second, the causality reading suffers from two related problems. First there is a strong tendency among commentators who take this approach to identify cause with intellect.⁵ While it is true that our intellect may play the role of efficient cause in organizing a well-mixed life, we note that our intellect does so in light of its understanding of just what the nature of that good life is. The potential pitfall of identifying intellect with cause, namely the threat of intellect causing good mixtures by fiat rather than by an independent standard, is often identified but rarely dealt with satisfactorily on this reading. Efforts are usually made to distinguish the kind of “formal” causal role played by the measure and proportionality of the first and second ranks from the more “efficient” causal status of intellect at the third rank. But this strategy only confuses the issue in trying to dole out causal efficacy in an equitable manner. By contrast, the dependence reading articulates how intelligible form, intellect, and the knowledge and pleasure which derive therefrom may all be located along a single spectrum in terms of their proximity to the goods of the first rank. In line with Socrates’ discussion of dialectical knowledge (57e-59e), the kind of understanding (third rank) which is in a position to attempt to realize a harmonious admixture of reason and pleasure takes as its object the eternal truths of dialectic (the first two ranks). In being directed towards them, and needing them in order to be active (thus not being self-sufficient), our intellect is related as dependent on the being of these objects. So while our intellect may in turn

play the role of cause in the temporal order of our actual lives, we may understand intellect as the lynch-pin of this two-worlds framework, as both intellector of the intelligibles and realizer of a temporal order which participates in those forms. In this way, the dependence reading preserves the two sorts of causality at issue while preserving the linear sequence described by the final ranking.

Finally, both interpretive strategies suffer from their *ad hoc* nature. Whether in the case of the precondition reading or the causality reading, the criterion is hypothesized and then tested against each step down the ranking⁶; the criterion itself is not satisfactorily justified in being derived from the text itself. The dependence reading, on the other hand, takes its bearings from the thematic discussions of pleasure(53c-55c) and (dialectical) knowledge (57e-59e). On the one hand, pleasure is understood as a becoming and so dependent on something else. On the other, the discussion of knowledge isolates the intelligible objects of dialectic as the most stable, eternal beings in existence. Taken together, these passages help link together all stages of the final ranking, from forms as unified and stable objects of knowledge (first rank) through to the pure pleasures (fifth rank). The dependence relation thus captures the heart of the *genesis-ousia* distinction, explicitly discussed in the case of pleasure before being more fully articulated in the final ranking.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I hope to have offered a plausible interpretation of the criterion according to which the final ranking is organized. I believe the ‘dependence’ reading preserves much of what is insightful about the ‘precondition’ and ‘causality’ readings, while avoiding their respective pitfalls. Centrally, it is through the structural similarities of the discussions of pleasure and

knowledge that we see the same relation at work repeatedly throughout the dialogue. Just as pleasure (as a becoming) is directed towards being, so too is knowledge directed towards being in the form of its intelligible objects. This relation, I claim, holds not only between the termini of the ranking, but for each intermediary step as well--not as *ad hoc* justification, but as the through-line derived from a reading of the expositions themselves.

Endnotes

1. Delcomminette seems to endorse such a connotation: "The different 'possessions' aren't added to each other: each lower level integrates the preceding ones as its conditions of possibility, joining to it its own dimension which makes it approach the good life itself in all its complexity, including in its affective dimension" (621, translation mine).
2. This name for the contest for second place borrowed from Barney (2016).
3. This reading of *genesis* as "dependence" draws on Carpenter (2011).
4. Additionally, we might say that a proportion depends on the measure of the first rank for its unity. Absent a governing unity (the measure of the nature of proportion itself), a proportion would be a mere collection of measures, not a unified proportionality. A similar claim is made at 64d-e, where Socrates claims that without "measure, or the nature of proportion" the elements of a good life would be a mere collection of ingredients and not a single good life.
5. This tendency is usually motivated by the discussion of the four kinds, where cosmic intellect is cited as the cause of the third kind, combination (30e). While falling outside the scope of this paper, I would suggest that identifying cosmic intellect with our own intellect is problematic. Cosmic intellect is better identified with intelligible content, at which our intellect aims, as embodied in the first two ranks of the final ranking.

6. This is the case more explicitly for Lang (2010), though implicit for both Barney (2016) and Harte (2019).

References

- Barney, Rachel. (2016) Plato on Measure and the Good: The Rank-Ordering of the *Philebus*. In Jakub Jirsa, Filip Karfik and Štěpán Špinka's (eds.) *Proceedings of the Ninth Symposium Platonicum Pragense* (pp. 208-229) Praha: OIKOYMENH.
- Carpenter, Amber D. (2011) Pleasure as Genesis in Plato's *Philebus*. *Ancient Philosophy* 31(1): 73-94.
- Delcomminette, Sylvain. (2006). *Le Philèbe de Platon*. Leiden: Brill.
- Harte, Verity. (2019) The Dialogue's Finale: *Philebus* 64c-67b. In Panos Dimas, Russell E. Jones, and Gabriel R. Lear's (eds.) *Plato's Philebus* (pp. 253-267) Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lang, P. M. (2010) The Ranking of the Goods at *Philebus* 66a-67b. *Phronesis* 55(2): 153–169.