

interpretation

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Socrates' Critique of Hedonism: A Reading of the *Philebus*

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Callicles' argument, in the *Gorgias*, that it is right by nature for the stronger to take advantage of the weaker relies largely on his claim that the finest and best life is to be capable of continually satisfying one's greatest possible desires. According to Callicles, nature herself proclaims the truth of his position. If most people praise instead what they call moderation and justice, and condemn their opposites, this is merely because they are ashamed at their own inability to satisfy their desires, and afraid of the power of those who can. In his discussion with Callicles, Socrates leads him to accept the following restatements of his position: that men are happy if they enjoy themselves, with whatever kind of enjoyment, and that the pleasant is identical with the good.

Socrates refutes Callicles' hedonism with a two-fold argument. First, he remarks that the pleasant and its opposite, the painful, are experienced together and cease together, as in the case of drinking, which is pleasant only while one still feels the pain of thirst. But this is not the character of the good and its opposite, at least not according to Callicles, for whom they are neither present together nor gotten rid of at the same time. So Callicles' hedonism is shown to be inconsistent with his view that the good, or happiness, is a condition entirely free from evils. Socrates' second argument against hedonism relies on Callicles' belief that those men to whom the good is present are good (as those to whom beauty is present are beautiful). Now Callicles understands by good men those who are wise and brave. But he is forced to admit that fools and cowards, as well as the wise and brave, enjoy pleasure. So if pleasure were the good, or that whose presence makes men good, then bad or worthless men would also be good, at least while they are enjoying pleasure, just as the good are.

Though Callicles is not really convinced by the first half of this argument, which suggests that no pleasure is good, he is compelled by the second half to admit that only some pleasures, the worthy ones, are good, while others are bad. But this argument does not refute hedonism, since Callicles turns out not to have been a whole-hearted hedonist in the first place. As the discussion with Socrates makes clear, Callicles also has the conviction that human excellence is noble and good in itself, quite apart from its usefulness as a means to pleasure. Moreover, he had earlier expressed vehement disgust at Socrates for even mentioning certain sexual pleasures. And when he nonetheless accepts, as a restatement of his thesis, the claim that all pleasures are good, he is admittedly trying to be consis-

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tent, rather than to state his truest thoughts. Accordingly, the outcome of the argument is merely a bringing to light of what had always been Callicles' deeper views.

The *Gorgias* leaves us wondering, then, whether Socrates can give an adequate response to the claims of a genuine hedonist. This question is obviously an important one, especially since Socrates seems to think that most people believe, even if they won't often say so, that the good is pleasure, and the greatest good the greatest pleasure (cf. *Republic* 505b5–6; *Gorgias* 492d1–3; *Philebus* 66e2–3 and 67b3). It would hardly be reasonable, for a man who seeks the best way of life, simply to disregard what he considers to be most people's opinion about it. Now this consideration offers the best perspective from which to approach Socrates' confrontation with Philebus. For Philebus is frank or shameless enough to act as a spokesman for the cause of pleasure. Moreover, he differs from nearly all other hedonists in having thought through the implications of his position. He is undeterred, for example, from his praise of pleasure by the knowledge that some pleasures are usually said to be low or even disgusting. And whereas Callicles' hedonism coexists uneasily with an attachment to virtue, Philebus never speaks of virtue and vice, or of good and bad men. In other words, he is sophisticated enough to deny that there is anything intrinsically good other than pleasure. This sophisticated detachment from what men call virtue would also help explain his refusal to speak about happiness, or about a perfect good that is separate from all evils (contrast 11d6–7). It is plausible that he'd be as distrustful of the promised reward for being good as he is of goodness or virtue itself. Instead, he seems to believe that we can have no greater good than the incomplete pleasure, mixed with pain, or satisfying painful wants—sexual wants in particular (27e7–9; 54e4–55a11 and 47a3–b9; 12b7–9). Philebus' hedonism, then, seems to differ from that of Callicles by its uncommon consistency and by its disenchanted sobriety. And so Socrates' arguments against Callicles don't appear to be adequate to refute him.

Yet Socrates evidently believes that Philebus is vulnerable to a similar refutation, despite the fact that Philebus, unlike Callicles, never admits to the defeat of his unqualified hedonism. For Socrates attributes to him also the absurd belief that those enjoying pleasure—they alone, and at those times alone—are good or virtuous men (55b5–c1), and that the more pleasure they are then enjoying, the better men they are. In other words, despite Philebus' apparent rejection of all concern with virtue, Socrates interprets his claim that pleasure is (the) good to mean that pleasure itself is, or is the necessary and sufficient sign of, the practice of virtue. Now Philebus, of course, would never have agreed that this is what he means. What he thinks he means is that the good is nothing more than pleasure, not that pleasure is nothing less than what men call virtue. But he may nevertheless have admitted to this latter view implicitly, at the very beginning of the dialogue. For there he agreed to the statement that pleasure is (the) good for *all* living beings. Now to speak of something as good for a being means, among other

things, that it is sufficient to meet its needs, or at least part of a whole good that is sufficient to meet its needs (20d4–6; 22b4). For if our fundamental need for such a good were not met, anything that gave us less would strike us more in its deficiency than in its strength, and we wouldn't call it good. Since Philebus admits no other good besides pleasure, he must mean that pleasure alone is a sufficient good for all living beings. But is pleasure, or the available pleasure, sufficient to meet the needs of *all* living beings, including even the incurably and painfully diseased? To be sure, there might well be some pleasure, if only the pleasure of hope, that is available to everyone who seeks it, no matter what the circumstances. But on what grounds can Philebus claim that even the emptiest of pleasures, and when accompanied by the greatest pains, are (sufficiently) *good* for us? By far the most plausible explanation is that he believes, as Socrates later interprets him to believe, that pleasure is the goal that everyone *ought* to pursue (60a7–9; cf. *Republic* 519c2–4). He believes, in other words, that to seek pleasure, and not to despair in its pursuit, is a kind of duty. Now since it is presumably good for a being to live as it ought to live, and since pleasant hopes are always intertwined with those pursuits that we regard as duties, a belief that everyone *ought* to pursue pleasure, in all circumstances, would account for Philebus' claim that the available pleasure is (a sufficient) good for everyone. Moreover, if Philebus does believe that everyone ought to pursue pleasure, he might well have to make the further claim that Socrates also attributed to him, namely that the more pleasure one is enjoying, the better or more virtuous one is. For to pursue what one ought to pursue is to be good. And the good man in the fullest sense will be the one who pursues what he ought to, either the most earnestly or skillfully, or else the most successfully. Now neither earnestness nor even skill in a pursuit can guarantee great success. Philebus must either allow, then, that the success or failure of the best man depends, more or less, on chance or the gods, or else think of the best man as the one who pursues pleasure the most successfully. Philebus' belief in an "ought" leads him to insist that the best men, who as such deserve the most happiness, will be happiest in fact, that is, most successful in their pursuit of pleasure; and yet he is too disenchanted to believe, at least consciously, in divine help for the good. The only way, then, for him to avoid this dilemma would be not only to regard good men as those who *succeed* in their dutiful pursuit of pleasure—a success, as we have seen, which is guaranteed to *some* extent—but even to define the best men as those who are succeeding the most. Socrates seems to be right, in other words, in attributing to him this bizarre notion of human goodness. The implications of Philebus' contention that pleasure is (the) good for *all* living beings are this extreme.

There are other signs, apart from the universality of his claim, that Philebus is more concerned with virtue than he knows. For one thing, he tells Socrates that he will *continue* to believe in the superiority of the life of pleasure, no matter what happens in the discussion (12a7). Now Philebus could have no reasonable grounds for claiming to *know* what his future beliefs will be unless he *knew* the

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truth of the beliefs themselves. And yet he is too sophisticated to delude himself that his hedonism is based on knowledge. His assurance, therefore, that he will remain a hedonist must be based instead on a will to remain one. In other words, Philebus is unreservedly loyal to the cause of pleasure. Yet isn't unreserved loyalty, even to Pleasure, inconsistent with the doctrine that the good is merely pleasure and that all pleasures are good?

Philebus' stubborn loyalty to the cause of pleasure cannot be accounted for, at least not fully, by the assumption that he regards hedonism as being conducive to the most pleasant life. Indeed, he never claims that to be a hedonist is more pleasant in all circumstances—for instance, in old age—than not to be. And if hedonism itself were to appear as an obstacle to the greatest pleasure, wouldn't a consistent hedonist at least hope that his beliefs could change? Philebus' failure, then, or his refusal, to anticipate any change in his beliefs is a sign of an attachment to the virtue of loyalty, which deepens and is a part of his very attachment to pleasure.

Philebus' candor, moreover, in stating his disreputable views seems to go beyond what a consistent and politic hedonist would allow himself (cf. *Gorgias* 492d1–3 with *Protagoras* 351c2–d7; *Republic* 538c1). In the course of this discussion, at any rate, he suffers considerable pain for having been so outspoken in his advocacy of pleasure. For one thing, Socrates attacks his doctrine with a long and powerful argument, which he is unable to answer and which he listens to in near silence. What may be even more painful, he sees his own closest follower, Protarchus, turn against him and join eagerly in ridiculing both him and his beliefs (54d4–55c3; cf. 49d11–e5, 23a2–b4, and 46a5–b1). Indeed, the whole circle of Philebus' followers—if we can trust Protarchus' claim to be their spokesman—join Socrates in severely rebuking those who praise the life of pleasure (12b4–6; 15c4–9; 67b8–9). Now if Philebus had been less outspoken about his beliefs, he could have protected himself from this contempt. Or if that was too much to foresee, it is clear that he could at least have mitigated the contempt by pretending to be convinced by Socrates' arguments. But Philebus makes no compromise with candor, not even for the pleasure of being respectable among his companions. Perhaps he despises hypocrites. But at all events, his outspoken candor betrays a concern with a kind of virtue, and a willingness to suffer for his beliefs, that are inconsistent with his own doctrine.

In addition to being more concerned with virtue than he supposes, Philebus is also more serious about the divine. He betrays the hidden depth of his piety, or what Socrates calls his exaltation of his goddess, not so much in speaking about Pleasure as a goddess—for this he does playfully—but in his serious claim that pleasure is completely good (27e7–28b2). For this claim, which he imagines to be about human pleasures, is more deeply, in fact, about the divine. What Philebus says is that pleasure would not be completely good if it were not unlimited, both in number and in degree. Now this somewhat peculiar remark points to a belief on Philebus' part that pleasure-seeking would lead, not to complete fulfill-

ment, but rather to satiety and boredom if there were not always a more intense pleasure, or a different pleasure, to look forward to. But this two-fold unlimitedness, while it may be a blessing of sorts for Philebus, is still not evidence that pleasure is completely good. To the contrary, it means that we can never possibly have enough of pleasure so as not to want more, or in other words that attainable pleasure is at best an incomplete good. In claiming, therefore, that it is completely good, Philebus cannot be speaking merely about the pleasures we experience. He must also be including those “pleasures” that are merely imaginable, but never enjoyed by anyone. The Pleasure that is completely good is thus an unreal goddess, a goddess in whom Philebus does in fact believe.

Philebus' unwitting belief that pleasure is virtue, and his belief in a goddess whom he “knows” to be unreal, are clear enough evidence that his position is unreasonable. Yet it doesn't follow from this that a *really* sober hedonism would be false. And even if it were impossible for any human being to believe wholeheartedly that the good is simply the pleasant, someone might still *suspect* that the belief is true. Such a one could be tempted to judge Philebus' inconsistencies, and his own, from the perspective of pleasure, rather than from that of reasonableness. And Philebus' conceit that to enjoy oneself is to be good, and akin to the divine, may considerably enhance the natural pleasures, just as his surface beliefs give him license to pursue them all.

Even from the perspective of pleasure, however, Philebus doesn't really fare so well. For his deepest, hidden, belief is not merely that to enjoy oneself is to be good, but likewise that to be in pain is to be bad (55b5–c1). He must therefore feel ashamed before his goddess for the suffering that he endures during this conversation with Socrates. Not only does he put up with a painful discussion out of loyalty to his convictions, but these very convictions lead him to be ashamed of being in pain, and so his pain must be compounded. And unlike ordinary moralists, who can sometimes feel relief from their pain by interpreting it as a punishment, and by resolving to be better in the future, Philebus cannot enjoy this consolation. For in his case, to resolve to *be* better would mean to resolve to *feel* better; and that resolve, as experiment will show, doesn't work very well. Philebus' state of soul, then, during this dialogue and on many other occasions, must be unusually painful (cf. 27e1–2). And the pain that he feels, together with his longing for a complete good, helps explain his attempt to escape himself by exalting his goddess, whom he dreams of as a perfect good even though he “knows” that she doesn't exist.

Socrates' argument against hedonism, however, is not merely to reveal the inconsistencies in Philebus' position and the pains that it adds to his life. He also argues, against a still more sober hedonism, that pleasure *isn't* the only good, and that not all pleasures are good. To show that pleasure isn't the only good, he asks Philebus' follower Protarchus whether he would choose, if it were offered, a life full of the greatest pleasures, but without intelligence, understanding, memory, and the like. Protarchus replies that everyone would prefer to this a life that

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combined both pleasure and understanding, and so Socrates concludes that pleasure is not the same as the good (cf. also 55b1–5).

One could object, however, to this argument that it rests on the supposition that a life *could* have the greatest pleasures and still be without intelligence and the like. But this is surely impossible, since the pleasures of the moment are much increased by intelligence, especially by the intelligence to anticipate future pleasure. Accordingly, a hedonist might come to admit that intelligence is also good, but he would see it merely as a means toward, or else as an ingredient of, the greatest possible pleasure. And even though pleasure would not, on this view, be the only good, it would still be the only ultimate good, the only good that was good in itself (cf. *Protagoras* 351d7–e3).

Socrates' case for the goodness of intelligence is strengthened if we consider this further point, which he also mentions in his discussion with Protarchus: whatever else the good might be, it is necessarily something sought after and chosen by a thinking being, by a thinking being (like ourselves) that is aware of a need for what is good (20d7–11). And no presumed good could be sufficiently good for us without our *awareness* of being in possession of the good we need. For in the absence of such awareness—of true opinion, if not knowledge—the “good” would slip away without having been appreciated as good. We would still be looking for something else, and thus the so-called good would not have sufficiently met our needs. Even the most sober hedonist, for example, depends for his contentment upon the thought that pleasure is good. This thought is important to him, not because it *increases* his pleasures, but because it allows him to be satisfied with them. And thus even if pleasure were otherwise the only ultimate good, the awareness of this truth would be a further good, distinct from pleasure itself.

Still, the argument I have just sketched is no more than a formal refutation of hedonism. A hedonist might reply that his conviction about pleasure being the good, when this conviction *is* good, is good because it reduces the pain of empty fears and of dashed hopes for something more; it thus increases—if not the amount of his pleasure—at least the predominance of pleasure over pain in his life. He could still argue, then, that understanding or true opinion is good only because it contributes to this predominance of pleasure. And most importantly, the above argument doesn't challenge, in any serious way, Philebus' conviction that the best way of life is to pursue pleasure, to pursue only pleasure, and to pursue pleasure from any available source.

Socrates does, however, spend much of the dialogue in outlining an alternative way of life to that of mere pleasure-seeking, a way of life that requires the rejection of many kinds of pleasure. He discusses this better way of life, not with Philebus, whose mind is already made up and who for the most part refuses even to speak, but again with his follower, Protarchus. Indeed, Socrates' only obvious victory in the dialogue is that he wins Protarchus over to this alternative doctrine about the best way of life. Socrates persuades Protarchus, in the first place, that a

life combining pleasure and wisdom, rather than that of pleasure alone, is the best one. Subsequently, by elaborating on the proper combination of the elements in this mixed life, Socrates leads Protarchus to agree that only certain pleasures—those unmixed with pain and those that accompany health and virtue—are compatible with it. And he leads him further to admit that intelligence or wisdom is better than pleasure, in the sense of being more nearly akin to what is good about this best life. What the dialogue seems to accomplish, then, is to save Protarchus from Philebus' hedonism by providing him with a clear alternative and with a goal to aim for in his own life.

There is something unsettling, however, about this apparent conclusion to the dialogue. For although Socrates and Protarchus speak of the best life primarily as a life for human beings (62a2; cf. 62b3; b8; c3; 63a4; 66e4–5), the mixed life that they outline together is quite impossible, at least for us humans. Not only does it include adequate knowledge of “justice itself”, and of all the other imperishable beings, but it also includes knowledge of *all* the arts and crafts. Now it simply isn't *true* that a human being could know so much—and this difficulty is only underlined, and not resolved, by Socrates' last-minute addition of “truth” as an ingredient of the best life (64a7–b5). How can such a life, which is clearly “too ‘good’ to be true,” be regarded seriously as something good or best for us? How can the impossible be good (see 23a6–b1; cf. *Protagoras* 358b6–c1)?

At the very beginning of the dialogue, Socrates indicated that the good is truly good, or choiceworthy, only for those for whom it is possible to share in it (11b7–c2; cf. 22b4–6). And yet this important consideration of what is possible, or in accordance with a being's nature, is treated slightly, if at all, in the course of the discussion (cf. 33a8–9; 55a7). It is never even suggested, for example, that the dialogue is sketching a *pattern* for the best life, and that the truly best life for human beings, or the best possible life, is the one that most nearly approximates this pattern (contrast *Republic* 472a8–473b3). Now the manifest impossibility of its conclusion lends to the whole dialogue the playful or ridiculous character of wishful thinking. And in the light of this fact, we must wonder about Socrates' interlocutor, Protarchus. If he really believed what Socrates says about the best human life, wouldn't he want to know how, and whether, it was possible for him to lead that life himself (cf. *Republic* 450c6–9; 458a1–b8)? And yet Protarchus gives no indication that he cares about the question of possibility (contrast 42d9–11). Why doesn't he? Whatever else it means for Protarchus to neglect this key question, it surely means that Socrates' success, in winning him over to his own doctrine, is not so significant as it appeared to be at first.

Is it possible that Protarchus is unconcerned with, or at least not seriously concerned with, Socrates' inquiry about the best life? On the face of it, this seems hard to believe. So urgent, in fact, is Protarchus' desire to settle this question, and to determine what kind of life he should pursue, that he half-playfully threatens not to let Socrates go home until he has provided a sufficient answer (19c4–20a5; 23b2–4; 50d6–e2; 67b10–13). And even at the end of the discus-

sion, which he follows patiently, despite its abrupt and confusing transitions, he still wants to hear more. Yet there are signs that Protarchus' eagerness to listen goes together with a lack of genuine openness to the inquiry. Early in the dialogue, for example, while he's still defending hedonism, Protarchus tries to conceal his better knowledge that pleasures can be dissimilar or opposed to one another, because Socrates has teasingly frightened him into believing that this admission would compel him to say that some pleasures are bad, that is, opposed to the good ones. As a result of this attempt at concealment, Socrates has to chide him for the foolishness of trying to defend his thesis so dishonestly. And later in the dialogue, after Protarchus has abandoned hedonism, he remains unwilling to expose his own beliefs to the power of Socrates' argument. Thus, Protarchus shows great reluctance to take an independent stand on hard questions, and even on some ridiculously easy ones (28b6–10; 44c1–4; 48d1–7; and 63a1–7). He likes to say what others say, especially if they are reputed to be wise (28c6–29a2; 36e9–10; 41a2–4; 43a1–6; 67b8–9). And if this proves impossible to do, he becomes uncomfortable. For example, he responds to Socrates' question whether the truest knowledge is of unchangeable being by saying that *Gorgias* used to praise instead the art of persuasion, and that *he*, Protarchus, doesn't want to oppose either of the two men (58a1–b3). On one occasion, he does appear to be arguing for a genuine conviction of his own, namely that there are no false pleasures. But when Socrates calls attention to his unusual eagerness in defense of pleasure, he retreats at once behind the claim that he's merely repeating what he's heard (37e12–38a5). It's true that Protarchus sometimes *claims* to be arguing for what he really believes. Yet he unwittingly betrays, again and again, how little of himself he is actually giving to the discussion. He agrees, for example, that he must stand behind his claim that there is a cosmic intelligence, and face the risk of being refuted by some clever man who denies it. But when Socrates, instead of attempting the expected refutation, surprises us with additional, and quite dubious, arguments in support of a cosmic intellect, Protarchus shows no concern that the question has been sidestepped (28d5–30e8). Or, to take another example, Protarchus agrees, late in the dialogue, to the suggestion that pleasure is not a good at all—although he repeatedly speaks of it elsewhere as a good belonging necessarily to the best life—without ever remarking on the contradiction (cf. 54c9–55a12). Despite Protarchus' intense desire to hear what Socrates has to say, especially in answer to the question about the best life, our suspicion is confirmed that he holds the question itself at arm's length. Indeed, his very insistence upon a satisfactory answer *tonight* might have alerted us that his concern to learn the *truth* about the question is not nearly so genuine as he pretends (11c9–d1; 14b5–8; cf. 34d1–8).

Yet how is it possible for Protarchus to care so little about this search for the best life, and for knowledge of the good? His unconcern is surprising, at least if Socrates is right that everyone wants to possess as much of the good—of what is really good, and not merely reputed to be good—as he can (20d7–10; cf. *Repub-*

lic 505d5–10). Socrates has argued, moreover, and argued persuasively, that knowledge of the good is the most important knowledge there is (*Republic* 504d2–505b3). Now Protarchus' lukewarmness toward the search for this knowledge could perhaps be explained on the assumption that he secretly believes he already possesses it. But this suggestion, though not entirely wrong, is too simple, for apart from the question of why Protarchus would conceal his belief, the suggestion fails to account for his intense desire to hear Socrates' opinions. Even the assumption that Protarchus' hidden conviction is only moderately strong can't explain his strange combination of curiosity with inner complacency. Moreover, he is amazingly flexible, and he doesn't betray any real attachment to any particular notion of the good.

Rather than simply claiming to know the good, Protarchus relies, I believe, on the following unspoken convictions: first, there are probably no true answers, and almost surely no knowable ones, to fundamental questions, including that about the good; and secondly, the virtue of moderation consists largely in an awareness of this situation, and a consequent refusal to commit oneself inwardly to any one position (cf. 19b1–20a5; 45d7–e2). As for Protarchus' refusal openly to acknowledge these convictions, there are several reasons for it, including snobbishness. But the most important reason is his fear of exposing his beliefs to the harsh light of Socratic cross-questioning (cf. 22e6–23a2). Being distrustful, as he is, of all claims to truth, he can hardly have a genuine confidence in the truth of his own convictions. But they provide him, even so, with what he somehow accepts as a sufficient response to the question of the best life, and thus he is only superficially involved in the discussion with Socrates.

Protarchus, then, is adrift—to some extent deliberately adrift—regarding life's important questions, and he even prides himself on this fact. He is, moreover, a hypocrite. Once one has seen through his facade of earnestness, it is hard to take him seriously. And so the question arises of why he should play so prominent a part in *the* Platonic dialogue about the best life. For Socrates surely doesn't succeed, despite appearances, in educating Protarchus, any more than Protarchus' earlier teachers had done. Protarchus' father Callias, by the way, may well be the same Callias whom Socrates speaks of elsewhere as having spent more than anyone else in Athens for the education of his sons (19b5; cf. *Apology of Socrates* 20a4–b9). What Socrates accomplishes, rather, is to expose Protarchus' true character, which Protarchus thinks he has successfully concealed, and then to show the inadequacy of his posture toward life. And though we may be tempted to dismiss Protarchus out of hand, as not even deserving serious criticism, Plato must have thought it of some importance to show the grounds for rejecting his attitude. For Protarchus might conceivably be correct in his suspicion that there is no true answer to the question of the good life; human life could be a meaningless accident. And if this is even possibly true, it isn't so easy to say what's wrong with Protarchus' attitude. It allows him, among other things, to avoid the painful doubts that tend to plague those who take some

definite stand about the good, as well as the heartaches that threaten anyone with serious commitments. At the same time, it protects him from the pains of what could be the futile attempt to replace one's opinions about the good with knowledge (cf. 34d4–9). Since there are difficulties, and difficulties that bring pain, in all opinions that are held about the good, and since even Socrates has often been left “alone and resourceless” in his pursuit of knowledge (16b4–7), the temptation to try to evade the question is not surprising, and it may become necessary to know whether Protarchus' attitude of easy-going indifference is untenable.

The most obvious perspective from which to see the inadequacy of Protarchus' approach to life is that of moderation, the virtue on which he prides himself most. To the extent that he really cares about this virtue, he must be judged a failure by his own standards. That this is so is not because he accepts the dialogue's ridiculous and extreme conclusion about the best human life; after all, he isn't serious about that conclusion himself. But moderation, to Protarchus, means primarily self-knowledge—the sober refusal to claim to possess wisdom, along with the self-awareness, as he sees it, not to commit himself, and not even to hope for answers, regarding such fundamental questions as that about the good (19b1–20a5; 48c6–49a6). In the dialogue's rather lengthy analysis of comedy, Protarchus repeatedly agrees that folly, and especially the foolish conceit to be wise, is an evil, an evil that stems from a ridiculous, if not hateful, lack of self-knowledge. He apparently thinks that Socrates is criticizing the folly of Philebus, and of those many others who make dogmatic claims about the best life and the good (48a8–50a10; cf. 54d4–55a11). But what he doesn't see is that his own refusal to make such a claim presupposes the belief that it is good, and sensible, not to do so. To state this criticism differently, Protarchus' claim to possess the virtue of moderation implies the belief that he knows what that virtue is; and yet to claim to know what virtue, or even a single virtue, is is to claim to know, at least in part, what is truly good. No more than any other human being can Protarchus evade the necessity of making some serious claim about the good. And his posture is all the more ridiculous for his failed attempt, which he regards as a success, to conceal his inner indifference to the questioning of the dialogue. Protarchus, who prides himself on his self-knowledge and who insists that folly is an evil, orients his otherwise aimless life in terms of a foolish self-delusion. His way of living, then, is unacceptable when judged by a standard that he himself puts forward.

This criticism, however, even if it doesn't take for granted that moderation is truly a virtue, does assume that it is decisively important to Protarchus. But what if Protarchus isn't serious even about this? What if he doesn't really care whether his belief in his own moderation is a coherent or true one? If he were shown the inconsistency in claiming that it is virtuous or good to make no serious claims about the good—and if he were willing to speak his mind—he might reply as follows: he surely doesn't *know* that his noncommittal attitude is good, and it may well not be; but it doesn't really matter anyway whether it is or not. If this

were his reply, his indifference to the truth of his belief in moderation would make its inconsistency irrelevant to him. Now we might be tempted all the more to despise Protarchus for such shallowness. But if his underlying suspicion, that nothing is truly good, were correct, how could anything—and in particular, his indifference to moderation, and to the truth of his “belief” in it—be criticized as bad? Someone might still object that it is base of Protarchus to be so easy-going about the awful possibility that there is no good. But such “baseness” can be called bad only if there *is* a good and bad. If there isn’t, Protarchus’ difference from others would mean merely that he’s less troubled by painful thoughts. It is at least conceivable, then, that Protarchus’ aimless life is no worse, and—especially if fortune is kind to him—less difficult than those of others.

There is ample evidence, however, within the dialogue that Protarchus is quite troubled by painful thoughts, and that he is haunted by the difficulties he wants to sweep under the rug. His half-playful threats of violence, when he senses that Socrates is teasing, and not taking him seriously, betray a painful feeling of contempt for himself and for his phoniness (15d8–16a6; 19b2–e5). Moreover, his admitted reluctance to state an opinion of his own, unless he knows that others share it, suggests a conscious dread of being left alone with his half-buried uncertainties (compare 58a7–b3 with 59b10–c1; see also 14a3–6; 28b6–c5; 48d4–7; 67b8–9). It is largely as a result of this dread that he is so eager to hear what Socrates thinks about the good. But since this desire is merely a substitute for the desire to learn what *is* good, it can never lead him any closer to real satisfaction. Thus, the dialogue is as frustrating for Protarchus as the scratching of an itch, and he is unable to let it end, even though Socrates had offered to resume it the next morning (50d6–e1; 67b10–13).

The evidence so far might suggest merely that Protarchus is uncomfortable now and then, as everyone is. But in fact he is unusually depressed. His underlying depression becomes evident when Socrates asks him about the pleasure or pain involved in the following situation: someone suffers from hunger, thirst, or the like; he remembers the pleasant things that could put an end to his pain; but his emptiness is not yet being filled. Protarchus’ unusually firm response, which he stresses with an oath by Zeus, is that there is then a double pain, from bodily emptiness and from longing in the soul. Socrates has to remind him that one can also hope for replenishment—or, better, that one can hope for it consciously—and thus rejoice in the memory of those pleasures that one hopes to enjoy again. What Protarchus imagines as his despair about the good makes him tend to be oblivious to the pleasures of hope, and that sad condition must be especially acute during this conversation, from which he only pretends to hope that he will learn (35e2–36c2; cf. 48a1–2 and 34b11).

The dialogue offers a still clearer sign of Protarchus’ depression, and of its deepest source, in his wavering judgment about a hypothetical life without pleasure and without pain. Early in the dialogue, Protarchus says that a life containing wisdom and intelligence, but entirely free of both pleasure and pain,

would not be worth choosing, and that everyone would prefer to this a life that combined intellect with pleasure. But later, after pleasure has been analyzed and the falsity in so many pleasures has been exposed, he claims that it's highly unreasonable to choose a life with pleasure and pain in preference to the thoughtful life that contains neither. Now it's true that he soon contradicts himself again and reaffirms, as if it were an obvious truth, that the best life combines thoughtfulness with pleasure. And it is always hard to know how much he means the things he says (cf. also 44a4–8). But the ease with which he is led to denigrate the kind of life we know, as being inferior to a so-called life without pleasure and pain, betrays a soul that is oppressed by suffering (21d9–22a6; 54e1–55a11; 60d3–e7; cf. 33a5–c4). Indeed, a less unhappy youth, even if he weren't in earnest about the conversation, would have probably seen through the absurdly wishful thinking in Socrates' outline of the best human life (cf. also 62c1–4).

Something spoils Protarchus' satisfaction with the life we live, and this something must be a buried dream that there *could* be a life wholly free of evils. Though he does not acknowledge this dream consciously, and thus does not enjoy it, it colors all his experience nonetheless. And the immediate ground of this dream must be his belief in virtue, which alone could promise a life without evils as its reward (cf. 39e4–40b5). In other words, Protarchus *does* care—more than he knows—about virtue or moderation; his belief in its goodness, and therefore also in his own, is deeper than what he imagines as his despair about the good. Now no one could have much confidence in such a belief, a serious belief in the goodness of not making serious claims about the good. It surely does not give peace of mind to Protarchus. But the concern for virtue—the concern that underlies his bondage to this belief, and to the buried hopes that it awakens—is a source of continual dissatisfaction for him. The dialogue shows, then, that Protarchus' view of life is an unenviable one, both because of its inconsistency and because of the suffering that it entails.

The exposure and the criticism of Protarchus that the dialogue accomplishes compel us to hesitate about its apparent conclusion that wisdom, intelligence, and the like are more choiceworthy than any pleasure. That conclusion, which is directed chiefly to Protarchus, might not be seriously meant. And we are thus left wondering whether Socrates knows a better way of life than the unqualified pursuit of pleasure. Unfortunately, I cannot even try to resolve this question here, but I will state what I take to be the decisive consideration: this is, I believe, the question of the value of hope. Socrates rejects unqualified hedonism because he thinks that there are worthless pleasures, by which he means, perhaps surprisingly, nothing other than false ones (40e9–41a6; cf. 32b9–d6). Now the false pleasures that Socrates has chiefly in mind are the pleasures of false hope, such as an evil man's pleasant hopes for his most distant future. But since we tend to exaggerate the magnitude of future pleasures and also, perhaps, because all hope must imagine the future as if it were already present, Socrates sees some falsity, and hence worthlessness, even in those pleasant hopes that turn out to have been

well-founded (41a7–42c4; compare 39c4–7 and 40a9–c2 with 51b1ff.). Now Socrates isn't recommending, of course, the impossible and miserable task of trying to live a life without *any* hope (cf. 39e4–6 and *Phaedo* 91a1–b7). But what distinguishes him from simple hedonists, and from most others, is his demand that the highest good, or that sufficient pleasure in relation to which the other “goods” in his life could become truly good, must be free of falsity, and independent, for that reason alone, of all mere hopes, or at least the deepest ones. If there is such a pleasure—and Socrates' experience led him to believe that there was—it is the philosopher's pleasure, for so long as he remains capable of enjoying it, in thinking.