

Interpretation

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Volume 24 Number 3

- 251 Robert D. Sacks The Book of Job: Translation and Commentary
- 287 Paul A. Cantor "A Soldier and Afeard": *Macbeth* and The
Gospelling of Scotland
- 319 Todd R. Flanders Rousseau's Adventure with Robinson Crusoe
- 339 Colin D. Pearce Prescott's Conquests: Anthropophagy, Auto-da-Fe
and Eternal Return

Discussion

- 363 Harry V. Jaffa The Speech That Changed the World

Book Reviews

- 371 Alex Harvey *The End of Science*, by John Horgan
- 377 Will Morrisey *The Tragedy and Comedy of Life: Plato's
Philebus*, by Seth Benardete

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Seth Benardete, *The Tragedy and Comedy of Life: Plato's Philebus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), xiv + 250 pp., \$37.50.

WILL MORRISEY

In the *Philebus* "Socrates finally replaces the good with the beautiful in his summary of the goods," Benardete states (p. ix). Philosophy's superiority to poetry "cannot lie in the neutral impersonality of its discourse" but in its ability "to tell a better story than poetry" (p. ix). If "better" means, finally, more beautiful, then how does philosophy differ from poetry in kind? Benardete answers that philosophy's beauty is a beauty of the mind and its thoughts, not of the body and its actions, a beauty that reflects a "divide between man as man and man as political animal that poetry denies" (p. ix). It is true that such radical abstraction from the body is impossible, but that only makes it more beautiful, farther above the city, which "did not educate [the philosopher] either in its opinions or in philosophy" (p. xi). How then does the philosopher differ from the aesthete? He differs in that the most beautiful is also the truest: "there is a range of human experience that is incorrigibly false, and the recognition of this is known to the soul, which is always trying to divine where the true good for itself is," and "hides from the enchantments of poetry" (p. xi). Is, then, the beautiful the true good? In that case, Socrates has not exactly replaced the good with the beautiful.

This book consists of two main parts: a translation of the *Philebus* and Benardete's commentary. Socrates says he initiated the dialogue in order to articulate and interpret what is the best of human possessions. His "way," he says, is to throw his interlocutors into "perplexity" (p. 15). His principal interlocutor here, Protarchus, is a man who wants to have it all. Protarchus wants a life that combines pleasure and thought. Socrates argues that without knowledge one would not know one is being pleased and that thought therefore outranks pleasure. Protarchus may be too optimistic about the ability to enjoy many intense pleasures, particularly sexual pleasures, while thinking (either at the same time or at many other times); as Yogi Berra said, "You can't hit and think at the same time." Socrates may not show by this argument that thought is not merely instrumental to pleasure.

Socrates does say that genesis and being are distinct, that genesis is for the sake of being; he is well aware of the difference between a good means and the good end it seeks. He suggests a solution to the problem by saying that there are true and false pleasures, that one should choose the kind of life that is closest to *being*, the life "in which there was neither joy nor pain, but thought-

ful thinking as pure as possible" (p. 67). As for knowledge, it is similarly ranked. Some knowledge is clearer, purer, than other knowledge.

Protarchus easily grasps this point in the abstract but applies it in an unfortunate way. Asked if there is a truest understanding, an understanding that "is by nature always in the same way" (p. 72), Protarchus mentions Gorgias' opinion that rhetoric is the best art. Socrates finds rhetoric insufficiently pure.

Socrates does not say that thought is or brings about the most intense pleasure. He distinguishes thought and pleasure and, while subordinating the latter, does not eliminate it. But again, any blending requires measure, and measure requires that mind be prior to pleasure. Measure is beautiful; there, Socrates says, "the power of the good has fled for us into the nature of the beautiful" (p. 81). In that sense the beautiful "replaces" the good.

Benardete comments that measure requires the concepts of the limited and the unlimited. The dialogue itself embodies these concepts. It begins in *medias res* and so has a 'missing' beginning.

We are forced to wonder . . . whether the unbounded *Philebus* does not represent something essential about philosophy, that it is an activity that cannot have a beginning or an end of a strictly determined kind, even though the philosopher always begins somewhere in the neighborhood of the true beginning of philosophy and ends almost every question short of the answer he has set out to find. The philosopher's own death or senility also cuts short his quest without affecting the unending life of philosophy itself. (P. 88)

Philosophy has two beginnings, the first cosmological—the quarrel of philosophers with poets concerning the status of myths—the other human, when Socrates turned away from the teleological physics that previous philosophers had offered as a replacement for myths. The uniqueness of the *Philebus* consists in its presentation of Socrates *after* his 'turn' *not* mentioning the city and almost not mentioning the law. "All of morality is out of bounds in the *Philebus*, and, whatever the human good turns out to be, it is not informed by any social virtues" (p. 90).

Laws treat human perplexity by answering questions with finality.

The dissatisfaction that Protarchus feels at the end of the *Philebus* must reflect the unfinishable character of any true philosophical question, but it cannot represent the true state of the issue of the human good, for that issue must be settled once and for all if the philosopher is not to be in doubt about the good of philosophy as the human good. The argument of the *Philebus* must come to a nonarbitrary end . . . while it opens up everything else. (P. 91)

Human *pleasure* is double: tragic or comic. But tragedy or comedy, alone or in combination, cannot grasp the truth. "Philosophy must be by itself the truth of comedy and tragedy and the good of human life" (p. 91), else philosophy col-

lapses back into poetry. Philosophy, then, is a way of life, as “Socrates stands not just for thinking in all its purity but for the effort to think as well” (p. 94). The moral-political life represents a ‘third way,’ independent of either philosophy or the life of pleasure.

‘Protarchus’ means first beginning (p. 103). Protarchus fails to achieve such perfectly free self-determination, as certain limits are inevitable in any life. The desire to maximize pleasure and thought simultaneously is utopian, as hedonism’s limit is the thoughtlessness that precludes knowing you’re having a good time. The demarcation set upon the moral-political man is Mardi Gras, the feast of fools, the purgative elevation of lords of misrule. As for the philosopher, “To be silly is a privilege of the wise on holiday” (p. 106). Not only is hedonism “a funny form of idealism” (p. 107), which conceives pleasure as a kind of universal with many particulars that ‘participate’ in it, but each of the other ways of life has its own funny form of idealism: the too-political man, whose desire for self-sufficiency forever contradicts his real dependence on others; the (in a sense) too-philosophic man, Socrates, whose life delineates the limits of philosophic inquiry and who needs Plato’s ‘poetic’ rescue.

In Protarchus, the attempt to mix pleasure and thought yields a political sort of soul, but one of potentially the most dangerous type. “Protarchus is more eager to win, or at least not to lose, than he is interested in pleasure” (p. 109). A rhetorician unbound by the laws, an apolitical-political man, tends toward tyranny. Socrates cannot deal with him as he deals with the respectable but wavering Crito, or as the Athenian Stranger deals with his sober interlocutors. Socrates must convince Protarchus that there are many pleasures, and that thought is needed to sort them out and rank them. Protarchus needs to want a science of pleasure. The “second sailing” sees that the first sailing, on the winds of divine inspiration, gets one nowhere nearer the truth, and that a new effort—rowing, using one’s own powers—is necessary. Protarchus is well beyond the first sailing, beyond public opinion, at least in his own mind (although if he practiced the rhetoric he preaches he would find himself dependent, the opposite of free). He is not yet at the second sailing, in that he does not know his own true powers or his own true weaknesses. He wants moral certainty without the morality; he does not want to know that he does not know. *Socratic* “freedom from the gods and other men” wants very much to know its own ignorance and thereby arrives at a certainty concerning the human good denied to quest-for-certitude, moral-political men and mindless hedonists.

That the life of reason is not without its problems—the problem of the one and the many being perhaps the foremost among them—does not of course escape Socrates’ notice. In terms of the life of philosophy, this is the problem of how to choose rationally the life of reason, of how to know in advance that the reasoning life is best. It is settled practically by providence or necessity, which actually may be unprovidential or random, even if very fortunate. This would make the origin of philosophy unfree, and thus set a lower limit on the philoso-

pher's freedom. Some souls simply do not incline to satisfied belief. "Socrates rejects with a laugh the entire basis of Antigone's nobility" (p. 199). Obviously, the philosopher does more than laugh, else there would be no distinction between a philosopher and the village atheist. "Self-knowledge, Socrates implies, is an exact account of one's own goods" (p. 202); lack of self-knowledge is more comic than tragic. The human soul by nature does not rest content—if it could, the purposeless pleasures of hedonism would suffice—nor can it never rest or "simply postulate a goal outside itself" that gives the soul no taste of its own goodness. To recognize this is to abandon "the psychology of pleasure and pain" *and* (what finally mirrors that psychology?) the hopes of reward for the just and the pious (p. 219). The truth the philosopher uncovers is "the truth of our perplexities and their necessary structure" (p. 236), which is not a pleasurable truth, although it is good for the soul to recognize it. Few souls bring themselves to live happily according to this disenchanting truth.