Critical Study

Sylvain Delcomminette, *Le Philèbe de Platon: Introduction à l'agathologie platonicienne*. Philosophia Antiqua. Leiden: Brill, 2006, €163.00 / US\$243.00.

By venerable consensus, Plato's *Philebus* is a challengingly problematic dialogue, and Sylvain Delcomminette admits as much at the very beginning of his near-650-page study: "La progression argumentative du *Philèbe* a été perçue comme problématique dès l'antiquité, à tel point que ce dialogue a pu passer pour 'un assemblage de morceaux primitivement distincts et dépourvus d'unité organique'" (Delcomminette p. 16, quoting Rodier (1957), p. 74).¹

As Delcomminette reminds us (p. 289), Rodier's complaints about "lack of organic unity", and about the dialogue's being a "collection of crudely-distinguished fragments", echoed those of Benjamin Jowett, who thought it one of Plato's least satisfactory dialogues. They will be familiar enough to anyone who considers, for instance, the casual-looking beginning and end of the *Philebus*, or the abrupt way that Socrates, at *Philebus* 20b6, curtails the careful discussion of the one and the many by simply announcing a proposal that he may or may not have heard in a dream. There is perhaps room for the idea that Plato left the *Philebus* unfinished at his death; or for the more *recherché* suggestion that the dialogue's apparent lack of polish is itself an artifice, an intended pointer to the perpetually unfinished and unsatisfactory character of all arguments about pleasure, knowledge, and the good. (Delcomminette makes a parallel but opposite suggestion: he thinks that in the *Philebus* "la forme exprime au niveau de la pratique philosophique elle-même ce que le contenu se contente de dévoiler thématiquement", namely that "ce dont il traite constitue précisément l'unité du continu et de la forme" (p. 634).)

¹) G. Rodier 1957. *Études de philosophie*. Paris: Vrin.

However that may be, apparent shapelessness and lack of polish are not the only difficulties that the reader of the *Philebus* must contend with. Further difficulties are noted, for example, by Dorothea Frede:

The development of the conversation seems quite un-Socratic, in that we have to spend considerable time in a kind of purgatory (or hell, as some might say) of methodological ruminations that are typical of some of the late Platonic works, before we even reach the promised field of investigation of the dialogue's avowed topic, pleasure and knowledge themselves... Once that purgatory is over, neither is the long critical discussion of different kinds of pleasure and knowledge any green meadow in a philosopher's paradise. The dialogue's third part seems rather to be a barren field of unusually long-winded and detailed discussions of different kinds of pleasure and knowledge, which leads only at long last to the ultimate goal: selecting the ingredients of the good life. So what should persuade readers to expose themselves to such a troublesome journey? (Frede 1993: xiii-xiv)²

Delcomminette is happy to recognise such questions as Frede's, and equally happy (happier indeed than Frede herself) to give them a resoundingly confident answer. Delcomminette is nothing if not an optimistic reader. (And a purist one, too. As he engagingly puts it on p. 19: "si l'on nous demande de quel courant nous nous sentons le plus proche, nous répondrons: nous avons essayé d'être platonicien.") His final conclusion is utterly opposite to Jowett's and Rodier's: it is that the *Philebus* is "un dialogue... *parfaitement* organisé" (p. 627, italics mine). Provided, of course, we read it right; it is characteristic of him to remark that the common view that the method of division is not applied rigorously to pleasure "nous paraît résulter d'une compréhension insuffisante" (of the role of number in the dialectic) (p. 290), or to say, of interpretations that see Plato softening his opposition to rhetoric in *Philebus* 57-58, that "de telles interprétations nous paraissent résulter d'un malentendu" (p. 526). His p. 493's sentence beginning "Mais c'est précisément pour ces raisons que ce passage est parfaitement à sa place", and p. 541's pronouncement that "la dernière partie du dialogue manifeste un enchaînement parfaitement logique et rigoureux", are equally characteristic. Overall, as he tells us on p. 455, the governing principle of his

² Dorothea Frede 1993. *Plato: Philebus*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.

interpretation is to read each passage “en l’intégrant à la totalité du dialogue”; a principle which of course presupposes that the dialogue is a totality into which passages *can* appropriately be integrated. He likewise sees the *Philebus* itself as part of a coherent unitarian Platonism. In its insistence on the supremacy of dialectic, for instance, “le *Philèbe* est loin d’innover: il témoigne au contraire de la parfaite cohérence de la démarche platonicienne... dès l’*Apologie de Socrate*” (p. 536).

It is in line with this optimism that Delcomminette takes the *Philebus* to be “un des plus grands chefs-d’oeuvre de Platon” (p. 17)—and its status as *chef d’oeuvre* to be as good as necessitated by its subject matter (“comme il doit d’ailleurs l’être en vertu de son objet même”). For its subject matter, according to him, is “agathologie”, the science of the good (p. 12). He argues that the *Republic* shows that “la dialectique [peut] s’appliquer au bien lui-même” (p. 12):

Or selon Platon, la dialectique est bel et bien une *science*—elle est même la seule science véritable. La *République* nous apprend que non seulement la science du bien recherchée dans les premiers dialogues est possible, mais qu’elle doit être de forme *dialectique*. Cette science sera donc tout aussi discursive que n’importe quelle autre science, puisqu’elle consistera à donner le *logos* de l’Idée du bien, c’est-à-dire à expliquer son essence, condition de la compréhension de sa fonction.

The *Republic* argues that there can be a science of the Platonic Good, no less discursive than any other science whatever, which will proceed by way of dialectic to the *logos* and essence of the Good. This raises an obvious question: where, if at all, is that science put to work by Plato? Certainly not in the *Republic*, Delcomminette admits, since “Socrate y refuse explicitement de s’engager dans cette voie” (pp. 12-13). So where?

D’après certains commentateurs, nulle part: l’analogie entre l’Idée du bien et le soleil sera le dernier mot de Platon sur la question. D’autres... pensent que Platon aurait réservé cet approfondissement à ses disciples immédiats... Cependant, avant d’arriver à de telles extrémités, il convient de s’assurer que l’on ne peut trouver cette discussion dans aucune des œuvres écrites de Platon. Or tel ne nous paraît pas être le cas. Il nous semble au contraire qu’un dialogue est explicitement consacré à cette question: le *Philèbe*.

Delcomminette is surely on to something important here. The *Republic* is nothing if not programmatic; that fact alone is enough to make pressing the question where the *Republic's* programme is spelled out. It could hardly be satisfying, even if it were historically accurate, to answer that it was spelled out in secret, unwritten discussions. It is not much more satisfying to say, instead, that it was not spelled out at all.

Of course there are many whose retort to "The *Republic's* metaphysics is nothing if not programmatic" is "The *Republic's* metaphysics is nothing but a programme and a rather grandiose and unlikely one at that". This retort was most famously and acerbically developed by Gilbert Ryle in his 1939 essay "Plato's *Parmenides*",³ and it is no doubt under Ryle's influence that tough-minded Plato scholars such as John McDowell turn with noticeable relief from what they clearly see as the ontological slums of the *Republic* and *Phaedo*, to the more ascetic (and aesthetic?) landscapes of the *Theaetetus* or *Sophist*: *solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant*. For all that, Ryle's idea that the later Plato was so "illuminated", and disillusioned, by "self-criticism" as to have put behind him all the *Phaedo's* foolish fervour for the Forms, is not one that bears close examination. A key part of the support for it is Ryle's reading of the *Parmenides* as a *refutation* of the middle-period metaphysics. But this reading seems to be decisively undermined in the dialogue by Parmenides himself, when he reassures Socrates that the reason why he cannot refute Parmenides' arguments against the Forms is that he is too young, and not yet properly trained in defining the fair, the just, the good, and the one (*prôti gar... prin gymnasthênai*, *Parmenides* 135c8). The implication is clear that these definitions *will* be available to an older "Socrates": that is, most probably, to Plato himself. The idea that the *Parmenides* aims to move us decisively away from the metaphysics of the Forms is, therefore, untenable. And we return to the proposal that this older "Socrates" is in action, using his training to offer the requisite definitions, in at least some of the later dialogues. In particular, so Delcomminette argues, in the *Philebus*. To him, as already noted, the *Philebus* is the key dialogue that fulfils the programme sketched in the *Republic* of providing us with an *agathologie*, a science of the good.

³) G. Ryle 1939. 'Plato's *Parmenides*'. *Mind* n.s. 48, 129-151, 302-325.

We might, in that case, expect the dialogue to focus on the question how to define the good. But, a critic might rejoin, it does not do this. Instead, it focuses—when it is focused at all—on questions about pleasure (cp. the dialogue’s ancient, albeit non-Platonic, subtitle *peri hêdonês*), and in particular on the relative value of lives of pleasure, of knowledge, and of pleasure and knowledge combined. In all this—the critic might continue—the Socratic questions “What *is* pleasure?”, “What *is* knowledge?”, or indeed “What is the good?” are left in a deafening silence. So far from telling us about the nature of the good in itself, the *Philebus* tells us, at most, about the good life for humans, more plausibly about no more than the relations of two or three possible kinds of good life.

Delcomminette is aware of this sort of objection: “la question initiale du dialogue [concerne] moins le bien lui-même que ses rapports avec le plaisir et la science” (p. 290; cp. p. 42). “Agathology”’s central question “What is the good?” is not, however, ignored in the *Philebus*: Delcomminette argues, with some plausibility (p. 490), that it is being addressed directly at *Philebus* 65a1-5, where “good” is “hunted down under one *idea*” by acquiring a threefold grasp of it (*syntrisi labontes*): beauty, proportion, and truth. In the earlier stages of the *Philebus*, Plato is content to deal with the relational questions, and let the essentialist ones go. According to Delcomminette (p. 32), this is not merely a clumsy retreat from the Socratic method; it is a way of cueing in distinctions between importantly different questions about pleasure and the good (pp. 43-47).

In particular, Delcomminette suggests, we need to distinguish between asking questions such as “Is (all) pleasure good?” and “Is pleasure identical to the good?”. The distinction between identity and (universal) predication is hardly a difficult one to make (not at least once we have outgrown the difficulties of the *opsimatheis*, and the “childish and facile” problems of *Philebus* 14c). Plato’s purpose in highlighting it in the *Philebus* is not to draw our attention back to the difficulties of the *Republic* and *Sophist*, which Plato takes to be now resolved (p. 54). Rather, on Delcomminette’s view, it is to set up a choice between extreme or “radical” hedonism (the view that pleasure and the good are identical), moderate hedonism (the view that all pleasure is good, or that pleasure is the best thing), and other views, such as Plato’s own, which allow only that *some* pleasure are good things, though no pleasure is the best. Plato’s way of eliminating the two forms of hedonism

will be, as Delcomminette eventually describes it (p. 489), to dismiss radical hedonism by arguing that it is self-defeating. To seek *pleasure*, as such, can lead the seeker only to the negation of pleasure; while “moderate but logical” hedonism subverts itself because, for this view to be coherently formulated, we are obliged to give truth, and then intelligence, places of precedence to pleasure.

It is thinking about these alternatives, Delcomminette more immediately suggests, that leads us into the technical issues that Plato considers in *Philebus* 14b-20a: about the “divine” method of division, and about questions such as those marked out at pp. 43-47: (a) “Can pleasure be divided into species?”, (b) “Can pleasures be distinguished as good and bad?” (b’) “Is the good identical to pleasure?”, (b’’) “What is the good?”, and (c) “Can pleasure be divided according to its intrinsic determinations?”. The divisions of the notions of pleasure and knowledge that these questions should lead us to are a crucial part of the answer to the original Socratic question what pleasure and knowledge *are*; for they make it clear that the fact that there is a single Form for each of pleasure and knowledge does not imply that each is a single thing that might easily be captured in a simple formula. It is precisely their complexities, as explored by Delcomminette in his Chapters 2 and 3, that make the *Philebus*’ question a difficult one, which cannot be answered by the simpler methods of earlier dialogues.

So—although we can, as Plato implies, carry over the notions of limitation and lack of limitation from the *Philebus* 14-20 discussion of division—we need some other device (*allês mêchanês*, 23b7; Delcomminette p. 201). This “other device” is to step back from applying the method of division to pleasure or knowledge, and apply it to *everything*. This gives us the fourfold division of 23c: the unlimited, the limit, the mixture, and the cause of the mixture. As Delcomminette argues in his Chapter 5, these categories then give us crucial information about the nature of knowledge and pleasure. They lead us to the *Philebus*’ key claim about pleasure and the good, that pleasure is in itself *apeiron*, and only gets to be part of the good life by being measured; and it takes intelligence to measure it. Hence hedonism’s own resources do not extend to showing how pleasure fits in the good life: this, Delcomminette concludes, is an “internal refutation” even of the moderate hedonism that affirms only the predication “Pleasure is good”, let alone the

extreme hedonism that insists on the identity statement “pleasure is *the* good”. What is key is to identify and describe the contexts in which pleasure and intelligence can encounter each other and be mixed (Delcomminette p. 350): the point of the *Philebus* is then not to keep pleasure and intelligence separate, but to describe the science of mixing them.

Now (as Plato has been careful to explain) there are different kinds of pleasures, and it seems clear that some are better fitted to being mixed into a good life than others; some, indeed, have no place at all in a good life. This, according to Delcomminette, is one of the reasons why *Philebus* 36c moves on to the question of false pleasures; the other is the appearance/reality distinction that he sees as central to the dialogue from this point on (p. 351; cp. p. 425, p. 630): “par rapport au bien, nul ne peut se contenter de l'apparence: nous désirons tous la réalité, car c'est notre bonheur qui est en jeu”.

Unlike some other commentators—Dorothea Frede, for example—Delcomminette sees the *Philebus* as offering us a tripartition of false pleasures, which, as his long analysis of 36c-50e in his chapter 7 aims to show, are distinguished by their objects. The object of a false pleasure can be a “phantasme” (a false imagining, like a sack of gold: see *Philebus* 40a). Or the object can be a “phénomène”, a misperception of the experience of pleasure itself, which is false insofar as the sensation seems more or less intense to us than it is (“nous apparaît plus ou moins intense qu'il n'est réellement”: *Philebus* 41a-42c). Or, third, a pleasure can be false in virtue of a false “concept”: “par exemple, celui qui confond dans le concept lui-même le plaisir avec l'absence de peine s' imagine d'éprouver un plaisir lorsqu'il n'éprouve rien, et a ainsi un plaisir faux” (42c-44b; Delcomminette p. 423). This, according to Delcomminette, is an exhaustive division of the kinds of false pleasure, rigorously derived.

I confess that I find it difficult to understand the idea that a sensation could “appear more or less intense to us than it really is”. What our sensations seem to us, they *are*: isn't that the whole point about sensations? I also find it harder than Delcomminette does to see just his argumentative structure in Plato's discussion of false pleasures. Why exactly is Delcomminette's way of reading the passage preferable to familiar alternatives, including Frede's? After all, Delcomminette himself sees other ways of distinguishing and dividing the concept of pleasure in

Plato's text. He notes, for instance, the way in which *Philebus* 46c suggests the classification of "mixed" (hence false: pp. 426, 485) pleasures according to whether they happen in the body, the soul, or both (p. 440). On the face of it, this is a neat way of categorising false pleasures, and it seems to be an exhaustive one, too. It isn't entirely clear why Delcomminette thinks that this way of dividing false pleasures *must* be given an auxiliary place, rather than a central role in the analysis of the discussion.

However, these are relatively minor points. The central issue is not the details of Delcomminette's analysis of Plato's discussion of false pleasures. It is Delcomminette's important, interesting, and plausible claim that what the discussion of false pleasures means to give us is a taxonomy of those pleasures, which uses such key dialectical tools as the method of division: other writers about pleasure have gone wrong because they have not treated it dialectically (p. 451).

In his Chapter 9, Delcomminette turns to what he plausibly sees as the parallel discussion of pure pleasures in 50e-55c. This distinguishes three kinds of pure pleasure (pp. 455-456): (1) those which, like smells, are mere "processus"; (2) those which involve aesthetic pleasure and the idea of beauty; (3) "les plaisirs qui concernent les connaissances" (p. 470; *Philebus* 51e). The criterion of division here, obviously enough, is the relative involvement of mind and body: (1) includes purely physical pleasures, (2) pleasures which mix physical and intellectual components, (3) purely intellectual pleasures. The parallel with 46c is obvious, and reinforces the question I raised above—why Delcomminette's preferred way of reading the division of the false pleasures should be thought in any way mandatory.

Be that as it may, Delcomminette swiftly moves to align his reading of 50e-55c's taxonomy of pure pleasures with his reading of 55c-59d's taxonomy of the forms of knowledge or science. The key move that he makes to align them is already announced on p. 470:

[C]ette classification [des sciences] procédera à une hiérarchisation des diverses sciences selon leur degré de scientificité, la science la plus scientifique étant identifiée à la dialectique. Dans ces conditions, il semble logique de penser que la science la plus apte à procurer de tels plaisirs [sc. purs] n'est autre que la dialectique, c'est-à-dire la philosophie.

The most “scientific science” (or most scientific knowledge; or most knowledgeable knowledge? The meaning is: the *purest* science) is dialectic. Hence, it gives the purest pleasures.

The obvious problem with this claim, at least for anyone as unitarily inclined as Delcomminette, is Plato’s clear admission elsewhere that the pleasure of knowing is preceded by a desire to know, a felt lack. This becomes a matter of explicit doctrine in *Symposium* (204a) and *Phaedrus* (266b-c); but the point is already obvious when we consider the descriptions that fill the earlier dialogues, of Socrates’ interlocutors feeling pain because of their ignorance (*Meno* 80a-c and the rest of them). The trouble is, of course, that by the standards of the *Philebus*, this picture of the pleasure of knowing makes that pleasure a *mixed*, and hence a false, pleasure.

Delcomminette’s solution is this (p. 473, italics in original):

Si la philosophie est un désir, elle n’est pas un désir de plaisir, mais un désir de vérité et de connaissance. Dès lors, la loi selon laquelle ce qui désire tend toujours vers le contraire de ce qu’il éprouve (*Phb.* 35a4-5) n’implique aucunement, dans le cas du désir de connaissance, une douleur préalable. Ce désir implique néanmoins un manque – en l’occurrence, un manque de connaissance. Cependant, ce manque ne peut être présenté en tant que tel à la conscience que par l’intermédiaire de la réminiscence. Pour désirer une connaissance, il faut donc avoir une réminiscence de cette connaissance. Mais précisément, *la réminiscence d’une connaissance ne se distingue en rien de cette connaissance elle-même*: se ressouvenir d’une connaissance ou avoir cette connaissance, c’est du pareil au même.

The basic and fundamental desire that is philosophy involves no previous pain. True, it involves a *lack*, but becoming conscious of this lack is a matter, not of pain, but of *remembering* the knowledge that one lacks. And to remember the knowledge that one lacks is to *have* that knowledge. So becoming conscious of one’s ignorance is curing it: “pour désirer véritablement la connaissance, encore faut-il savoir exactement en quoi elle consiste” (p. 473).

If this argument worked, it would establish that ignorance involves no pain, which would plainly contradict the *Symposium*, *Phaedrus*, and *Meno* passages mentioned above—passages which Delcomminette clearly thinks he is *not* contradicting. But the argument does not work.

To desire a piece of knowledge, it claims, it is necessary to remember the knowledge that I lack; but (cue italics) *remembering knowledge is having knowledge*; so desiring knowledge is having knowledge. This italicised move is plainly fallacious (and the fallacy seems interestingly akin to the one buried in the paradox of inquiry at *Meno* 80-86). “Remembering the knowledge that I lack” means remembering the question, not the answer. It does not mean remembering what time the bus leaves; it means remembering *that I don’t have the knowledge* what time the bus leaves. Of course, as Delcomminette might rejoin, there is much to be gained in philosophy, as opposed perhaps to the study of bus timetables, from clarifying the question. But not enough to make his argument plausible: even if philosophy is (as I doubt) a purely *a priori* and conceptual matter, it still isn’t true that getting the question completely clear is the very same thing as answering it.

It is not hard to see other possible solutions to the paradox. One obvious one would be simply to glory in it, as the *Symposium* does (at least on my reading): for all Diotima’s stress on the differences, philosophical desire, the desire for truth and understanding, just *is* uncomfortably parallel to *eros* in its mixture with pain, in its phenomenological intensity, and in its untidiness; there is an ambivalence here that we simply have to learn to live with. A second alternative would be to revisit and revise our definitions. Maybe we should deny the thesis that a pleasure which begins in a felt lack, hence in a pain, must itself be a “mixed” pleasure. Or maybe we should go even further, and deny that it is even true that all mixed pleasures are false pleasures—citing the pleasures of philosophy as a counter-example.

Whichever of these alternatives we take, it is striking how little difference it makes to Delcomminette’s overall case. Delcomminette’s ultimate aim, as we have seen, is to argue that the best life, the most truly pleasant life, is the life that involves the study of dialectic—the philosophical life. He is not really diverted from this aim by the problems I have just noted about his resolution, or failure to resolve, this dilemma about pleasure and philosophy. His key point, that the taxonomy of the sciences and the taxonomy of the pure pleasures can be aligned, remains plausible—one way or another.

It is this point that leads Delcomminette to the triumphant affirmations of his “Conclusion” (pp. 629-637—anyone who has only

time to read eight pages of the book should read these): the search for the best life and the search for the life that rightly combines pleasure and knowledge coincide on the philosophical life, the life which is maximally filled with beauty, symmetry and truth (p. 490; *Philebus* 65a2). This life is not a *compromise*, as many readers of the *Philebus* have thought, simply because it mixes the goods of pleasure and intelligence: “la vie mélangée n’est pas un compromis: elle est l’idéal suprême de ce qui nous est accessible durant cette vie” (p. 560). And this information about *the good life* is, at the same time, information about *the good in itself*; for (p. 563) the content of the idea of the good is derived from the examination of the good life. It is in this sense that, at last, a study of the place of pleasure and intelligence in human happiness becomes a study, not only of the good *for humans*, but of the good itself: an agathology.

It is not easy to summarise a book of 637 pages. To summarise is, by definition, to miss much of the detail, which in truth is a major part of what is most impressive about Delcomminette’s book—its close, careful, and ingenious readings of particular passages. Such, however, is the book reviewer’s lot. It is not, of course, surprising to find myself disagreeing with Delcomminette on this or that particular issue. What is surprising, and admirable, is the ambition, consistency, and scope of the reading of Plato’s *Philebus* that this truly impressive book develops.

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