Polemical Arguments about Pleasure: The Controversy within and around the Academy

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It comes as no surprise that polemics were numerous and vivid among ancient philosophers, whose distinct schools were competing in order to strengthen their intellectual and social influence against one another as well as against other rival practices such as rhetoric and sophist. Although Hellenistic philosophy was doubtlessly the “golden age” for polemics, given the context of high rivalry between the three dominant schools (Academics, Stoics, Epicureans), this polemical mood started much earlier. Heraclitus is well known for bashing his predecessors and peers; later, the competition among Socrates’s disciples for embodying the Socratic legacy was tough, as numerous testimonies—coming mainly from the later work of Diogenes Laertius—indicate. Moreover, the spectrum of what can be called polemics is broad and diversified. Indeed, it mixes personal aspects and argumentative means in various proportions. According to Jacques Brunschwig, polemics is to be located between the mere invective—passionate and personal—and the rational and more impersonal refutation, focused on arguments. With the birth of the first institutional philosophical school, Plato’s Academy, the competition became internal and therefore perhaps less personally aggressive, though no less active. The dialectical content of the philosophical exchanges that took place within Plato’s school still allows for looking for polemical aspects, provided polemics is not understood too narrowly. The personal attack is indeed softened in order to promote the argumentative contest. Polemics may appear less embodied and more formalized, but it is still present and arguably played a significant part in the philosophical development of its main actors. This seems to me exemplarily instantiated in the case of what several testimonies single out as a major subject of controversy within the Academy: the issue of pleasure.

Constituting one standard ethical problem in ancient thought—alongside friendship, virtue, and happiness—the topic is indeed expected to be a

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1 See Brunschwig, “Aspects de la polémique philosophique en Grèce ancienne,” 40, 46.
2 For an instance of this intra-Socratics polemic, see, for example, Rashed’s insightful reconstruction of Plato’s subtle reply to Antisthenes’s gross satire in his “Platon, Sathon, Phédon,” 121–26.
polemical subject. Nonetheless, the intensity of the discussion may exceed what holds for other ethical matters. Every important scholar apparently brought his own contribution to the debate by writing a book on the topic, according to the evidence given by Burnyeat:

Nor is Aristotle alone in having written a monograph *On Pleasure*. So too, apparently, did Speusippus (D.L. 4. 4: one book), Xenocrates (D.L. 4. 12: two books), Heracleides Ponticus (Athen. 512A), Strato (D.L. 5. 59), and Theophrastus, who is credited (D.L. 5. 44) with one book Περὶ ἡδονῆς ὡς Ἀριστοτελῆς (On Pleasure according to Aristotle or On Pleasure in the Style of Aristotle) plus another entitled simply *On Pleasure*, and—last, but would that we had it!—*On False Pleasure* (D.L. 5. 46: one book). It would seem that the *Philebus*, like Plato’s Lecture on the Good, aroused a furore of discussion.4

The controversy grew so big as to quickly involve many actors and various arguments. Indeed, what started as an ethical problem—namely, assessing the place pleasure deserves in a good human life—eventually turned into a wide-ranging discussion concerning the identification of pleasure with the good, going far beyond the ethical realm to touch upon metaphysical arguments. In this case the polemical dimension of the debate is interesting, not only for a historical account of the debating processes in the Academy5 but also because there are reasons for thinking that it largely contributed to shaping the philosophical doctrines on this topic. The purpose of this paper is to point out how the elaboration of two major theories of pleasure, those of Plato and Aristotle, can be read as resulting from the necessity to reply to their respective adversaries in the polemics.

From the lively debate recalled by Burnyeat, the main evidence at our disposal lies in Plato’s *Philebus* and Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, along with scarce testimonies concerning other figures that are always difficult to interpret in the absence of their original work or context. The *Philebus* and Aristotle’s treatises on pleasure (*Eth. Nic. 7* and 10) provide us with two complete but different settings for polemics: one that is partly hidden because of its elusive and encoded character, and another one that is more transparent. I will first focus on the *Philebus*, where two polemical arguments are introduced in a way that makes them worthy of attention. I will then proceed to assess which specific part these arguments played in the elaboration of Platonic theory and how the

4 Burnyeat, “Kinēsis vs. Energeia,” 274.