COMMENTARY ON VALLEJO
RACHEL SINGPURWALLA

ABSTRACT
In his rich and suggestive paper, Alvaro Vallejo argues for the novel thesis that Plato posits a form of pleasure in the Republic and the Philebus. Vallejo argues that the notion of a Platonic form of pleasure best explains other things that Plato says about pleasure. First, Plato draws a distinction between true pleasure and the appearance of pleasure. Second, Plato uses the same language to describe the relationship between forms and their inferior instantiations as he uses to describe the relationship between true and false pleasures. In these comments, I argue that we do not need to posit a form of pleasure to explain these features of the text. Moreover, I argue that on Vallejo’s account of the form of pleasure, the form could not do the job required of it, namely, it could not explain the problem with false pleasures.

In his rich and suggestive paper, Álvaro Vallejo argues for two main claims. In the first part of his paper, he defends the novel thesis that Plato posits a form of pleasure in both the Republic and the Philebus. In the second part, he lays out the requirements for instantiating the form of pleasure, and he argues that the problem with false pleasures is that they fail to meet those requirements and so are imperfect imitations of the form of pleasure.

The claim that Plato posits a form of pleasure in both the Republic and the Philebus prompts many fundamental questions about the theory of forms. If Plato thinks there is a form of pleasure, then does he also think there are forms for other sorts of psychological states, such as beliefs and emotions? If so, for which range of psychological states? Are there forms for emotions like anger, pride, or love? If not, then what is so special about pleasure? In sum, for what range of entities does Plato posit forms and why? Vallejo’s thesis also invites questions about the development of Plato’s metaphysics between the time he wrote the Republic and the purportedly later dialogue, the Philebus. Does the Philebus even posit the existence of forms? If so, what is the evidence for this? Might we think instead that Plato modified or even abandoned the theory of forms by the time he wrote the Philebus?1 Addressing these questions is important for the success of Vallejo’s project. In these comments, however, I set these difficult issues aside in order to assess more directly Vallejo’s claim that Plato posits

---

1 For examples of scholars who reject the idea that the Philebus posits forms, see Teloh 1981, and Sayre 1983.
a form of pleasure and that false pleasures are inferior imitations of the form of pleasure.

Plato never states that there is a form of pleasure. Why, then, should we attribute the view to him? Vallejo seems to think that doing so best explains other things that Plato says about pleasure. First, Plato draws a distinction between true pleasure and the appearance of pleasure. Second, Plato uses the same language to describe the relationship between forms and their inferior instantiations as he uses to describe the relationship between true and false pleasures. My strategy in these comments is to argue that we do not need to posit a form of pleasure to explain these features of the text. Moreover, I argue that on Vallejo’s account of the form of pleasure, the form cannot do the job required of it, namely, it cannot explain what is wrong with false pleasures.

According to Vallejo, the most important evidence that Plato posits a form of pleasure is that he distinguishes between true pleasure and what only appears to be a pleasure in both the Republic and Philebus. Thus, Plato holds the somewhat counter-intuitive view that someone might think that she is experiencing pleasure, but not really be experiencing pleasure. This means, of course, that there is more to truly experiencing pleasure than simply thinking you are feeling it. Hence, there must be an objective standard of what it is to experience a true pleasure. Vallejo argues that this objective standard must be the form of pleasure.

While Vallejo is surely correct that Plato thinks that there is such an objective standard it is not at all clear that we need to think of this standard as a Platonic form of pleasure; instead, we might think that this standard is something found in the physical world, namely, to be in a certain physiological state. And indeed, Plato explicitly presents us with such a view. In the Philebus, Socrates describes the nature of pleasure as follows:

What I claim is that when we find the harmony in living creatures disrupted, there will at the same time be a disintegration of their nature and a rise of pain. . . . But if the reverse happens, harmony is regained and the former nature restored, we have to say that pleasure arises, if we must pronounce only a few words on the weightiest matters in the shortest possible time (31d).²

This passage certainly suggests that to experience a true pleasure just is to be in a certain physiological state.

Moreover, Plato explicitly uses this account of pleasure during his critique of false pleasures later in the dialogue. As is well known, Plato thinks that there are a variety of ways in which pleasures can be false. For exam-

---

² All translations are from Frede, 1993.