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The Basic Analysis of Plato's *Philebus*

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This paper was originally read at the VIII Symposium Platonicum (the International Plato Society) held in Trinity College, Dublin, on the 23rd July, 2007. Plato's later dialogue, the *Philebus*, deals with the natures of intelligence and pleasure, and in the course of examining them, analyses reason and sensation. Hence this dialogue is regarded as one of the earliest studies of human mind in the Western Philosophy. In the conference paper, I discussed the main purpose of the arguments, so as to clarify Plato's focus on human reason and sensation.

1. The Beginning of Plato's *Philebus*

The *Philebus* is notorious for the complexity of its arguments. In order to provide a clear analysis of its structure and to observe many arguments as a unified whole, I will carefully examine the beginning part (11a-12b), which sets up the overall inquiry by introducing new questions. The new questions require the method of dialectic, which structures the whole dialogue. I hope my basic analysis shows the correct way of reading the dialogue.

The opening conversation between Socrates, Protarchus, and *Philebus*, contains three peculiarities:

(1) without proper introduction, the dialogue plunges into the main discussion;

- (2) before it opens, another discussion on the same subject is assumed to have been held;
- (3) a new dialogue begins with the change of Socrates' interlocutors from Philebus to Protarchus.

These peculiar features reveal Plato's strategy: i.e. that the dialogue renews the inquiry with a change of questions.

2. The Previous Controversy

The dramatic setting is obscure, and the characters are unknown outside the dialogue. The discussion starts in the middle and ends with other matters hinted to remain discussed (67b11-13).

A similar abrupt beginning is seen in the *Meno*. Meno first utters the main question, and examination immediately follows. This beginning reveals the impatient character of young Meno, and hints at the subsequent failure of his inquiry. In the *Cratylus*, before the dialogue begins, Hermogenes and Cratylus are said to have had an argument on the correctness of names. However, since they could not reach any conclusion, Socrates is summoned to be an arbitrator of their argument and asked to examine both views. By contrast, the *Philebus* keeps Socrates in one party of the controversy before and throughout the dialogue.

To start the inquiry afresh, Socrates recapitulates the two positions:

[Philebus' position] (11b4-6, 13a8, b4-5, 7, 19c6-8, 60a7-b1, 66d7-8)

- (1) Philebus is a hard-line hedonist, who maintains that pleasure is good, or is identified with the good. His chief example is sexual pleasure.
- (2) Although Socrates describes this position in terms of "to enjoy, pleasure, and delight", Philebus seems to care little about the variety of expressions, for his hedonist position, which Protarchus takes over, makes no distinction among pleasures, but understands "pleasure" univocally.
- (3) Nothing suggests that his position concerns any other tense than the present.
- (4) It appeals to the natural fact that for all living creatures pleasure is good.

[Socrates' position] (11b6-c1, 13e4-6, 19c8-d6, 60b1-4, 66e1-5)

- (1) Socrates had been *arguing against* Philebus' position: it is *not* the case

that pleasure is the good. In this contention he uses comparatives: intelligence is *better* and *more desirable* than pleasure. So, although Socrates proposes intelligence as his candidate for the good, he seems to anticipate the conclusion that intelligence is not identical with the good, either.

(2) He proposes a group of words concerning intelligence, including memory, right opinion, and true calculation. The variety of related concepts indicates a necessity to make distinctions among them. In fact, Socrates soon makes a concession to Protarchus, saying that some kinds of intelligence might be unlike each other (13e4-14a5).

(3) Socrates' candidate for the good concerns not only the present tense, but also the future and the past. Memory deals with the past, calculation concerns future events, and right opinion works for present practical decisions.

(4) His good is concerned with human beings, insofar as they take part in intelligence.

At the beginning, the question asked in the previous discussion is not explicit, but it gradually turns out that they argued over the good. Judging from the way Socrates argued (i.e. in negation and with comparatives), we can suppose that he proposed intelligence only in response to Philebus. When Philebus insisted that pleasure is the good (11b4-6), Socrates opposed this idea and suggested, instead, that intelligence is better. Then, being asked "what is the good?", he presented intelligence as his answer. The controversy between them was, thus, over what the good is.

3. The Failure of the Previous Dialogue

The previous discussion between Socrates and Philebus seems to have got stuck, so that Socrates has to set out a new inquiry with Protarchus by reformulating the question. Instead of asking "what is the good?", a new question is asked (11d2-7, to be discussed in the next section). This introduction of a new inquiry is crucial to the understanding of the dialogue, although commentators have not clearly analyzed it. To observe this shift, let us imagine, from the intertextuality with other dialogues, what the preceding argument between Philebus and Socrates might have been.

In *Republic* VI both intelligence and pleasure are discussed as the candidate for the good, and quickly rejected (505b5-d4, 506b2-7). When Socrates claims

that the greatest object of learning is the form of the good (504e7-505b3), and that the guardian of the ideal State must have knowledge of it (506a9-b1, etc.), he introduces a controversy among people over what the good is: some insist that it is pleasure, and others intelligence. But Socrates refutes each view, and shows that both of them fail to be the good itself: first, people cannot give a proper account of intelligence; second, pleasures cannot be the same as the good, either, since people have to admit that some of them are bad. Instead of these two, Socrates appeals to the three similes of the Sun, the Line, and the Cave, in order to illustrate the supreme form of the good (506c2 ff.). This short discussion in *Republic* VI reminds us (readers of Plato's dialogues) of the opposing positions between Socrates and Philebus. It suggests that the simplistic either-or question inevitably fails concerning the good.

This conflict between pleasure and intelligence is traced back to another severe dispute, between Socrates and Callicles in the *Gorgias*. Callicles insists on the life of pleasure, and equates pleasure with the good (494e9-499b8). In this instance, the antagonism between the two extreme positions gets them nowhere, and their dialogue unavoidably collapses, so that Callicles abandons his role of interlocutor. We can imagine that the controversy between Philebus and Socrates ended in a similar way.

This deadlock and break down in holding a dialogue must be avoided firstly by change of interlocutors from the hard-line hedonist, Philebus, to the rational proxy, Protarchus. This strategy resembles the Eleatic visitor's (imaginary) conversation with the "tamed materialists" in the *Sophist* (246c9-e4). When he examines the tough materialists, who never admit anything other than tangible objects as "being", he proposes to imagine them becoming milder, and asks his interlocutor Theaetetus to answer on behalf of them. Obviously this is the only way to get out of the deadlock and to continue inquiry through dialogue.

The previous speaker, Philebus, was such a hard-line hedonist that he neither accepts any rational argument nor makes any concession. In order to have a constructive discussion, Socrates needs a more rational opponent who succeeds Philebus' hedonist position, namely Protarchus. For he can argue and judge the issue rationally in defence of hedonism. Socrates first asks Protarchus whether he will take over Philebus' argument, and he accepts his role (11b1-3, c5-d1).

4. New Stage of Investigation

The second tactic to avoid the deadlock is to raise a new question in order to advance shared inquiry. After the change of interlocutors, a further point is agreed:

[*Philebus* 11d2-7]

Socrates: *In addition to these*, shall we agree on the following point?

Protarchus: What's that?

Soc: That each of us will try to prove that a certain state or disposition of the soul is the one capable of rendering life happy for all human beings.

Prot: Quite so.

The question now asked is, "which of the two *makes* human life good, the state of pleasure or that of intelligence?" This is a new agreement, which becomes possible only with the new interlocutor Protarchus. For while the old opponent, Philebus, responding in the same tone, maintains that pleasure *will* win (12a7-8), the inquiry already moves in a new direction.

The question paves the way for the new inquiry in two aspects.

(1) The focus is now on the "life (*bios*) of human beings", and asked in respect of the soul. We should remember that Philebus does not restrict his claim to human beings, but rather considers living beings in general. The new question suggests that goodness is properly considered in the specific field of human life. Remember that man is the being which partakes of intelligence, which resides in the soul.

(2) The new question enables the inquirers to avoid futile conflict. The straight question of "what is the good?" may well lead them to *aporia*, since neither candidate fulfills the conditions of being *the* good, as the Republic shows. The good must be "a third thing", but there is no obvious candidate other than pleasure and intelligence. This reminds us of a similar argument in the *Sophist*. The direct investigation into being gets stuck; both motion and rest are, but being is neither motion nor rest; we must look for "a third thing beside the two".

If we can hardly give a direct answer to the previous question, which of the two the good is, intelligence or pleasure, we can examine, instead, what a good *life* is, and further what *makes* life good, in relation to the two. By

changing the questions, the inquiry tackles the same issue in a different way.

In spite of the failure of dialogue between Philebus and Socrates, their two candidates should not be dismissed; no positive statement will be concluded about the good, if both candidates are simply thrown away. On the other hand, the new question enables Protarchus and Socrates to examine where each is located in relation to the good.

5. Contest for Prize

Later Socrates gives his first verdict (as if given in a dream) that both pleasure and intelligence fail to win the first prize for the good (20b6-23b10). He argues that instead of the two the mixed life wins. This argument pretends to continue the contest between pleasure and intelligence, but it is already pursued within the new scheme of inquiry arranged through the new question, for the competition is not directly made between the two candidates, but between the *life* of pleasure and that of intelligence.

The logic of this argument is simple: if something is identical with the good, a life of *it* must fulfill all the conditions for the good life. However, neither the life of pleasure alone nor that of intelligence alone does, so that a third kind of life must be better: i.e. the life mixed of pleasure and intelligence. The argument does not prove that the mixed life is the good itself, although the contest appears to be between the three. Thus, while there is no room for the third (mixed?) in the previous question, the new question makes the first verdict possible.

Later the relation between the good and the good life is compared to the one between a man and his house (61a7-b7, 64c1-4); looking for a man, one must first learn where he resides. This explains the strategy and aim of the inquiry.

Now both pleasure and intelligence are to be considered in relation to the good life. This contest raises two new questions:

- (1) *Of what* is the good life mixed? Not all kinds of pleasure and intelligence may be included. Then, the division and classification of each become necessary, even if the divisions themselves are no longer *the* aim of inquiry.
- (2) Since the good life is *mixed* by some cause, it is asked *what* makes a life good, in terms of pleasure and intelligence. Either of them may be responsible

(*aition*) for the mixed life. In respect of the cause, it is asked “which is better (or closer to the good), pleasure or intelligence?”

For this consideration, the inquiry needs classification of all beings into four kinds: the limit, the unlimited, the mixed, and the cause of mixture.

6. Dialogue for Making a Good Life

Two arguments concerning dialectic are required for this new dialogue. The inquiry first introduces the divine method of dialectic (16c1-18d2). Second, after the first contest (20b6-23b10), Socrates explicates the division of the four kinds (23c1-27c2). Both passages use some common, dialectical weapons (cf. 23b6-9). The dialectical method can sort out the ingredients of the good human life by analyzing both pleasure and intelligence, and then integrate them into a unified whole. Dialogue eventually brings about the good *mixed* life.

Without proper method, dialogue fails, as Callicles gave up answering to Socrates. Simple questions sometimes mislead inquiry into superficial conflict, or futile result. The either-or question concerning the good is one of such improper questions (like the one-many problems manipulated by eristics). Methods of dialectic are introduced for properly engaging in dialogue, which deals with the issue in multilateral consideration.

Intelligence is one important ingredient of the mixed life, but at the same time it belongs to the cause of mixture. Also, pure and unmixed pleasure is determined as “things that possess measurement”, as distinct from other mixed pleasures that belong to “the unlimited”. Thus, the original competition between pleasure and intelligence was not so simple as to make one win and the other lose. Dialectic is required to discern this complex reality.

Finally, just as the art of dialectic discerns the interweaving of kinds in the *Sophist*, the role of dialectic in the *Philebus* is to determine various human states of the soul and to mix proper elements into a good life. Dialecticians are like craftsmen (*dēmiûrgoi*) of mixture. It is intelligence that causes this good life, and human intelligence is employed through dialogue. Dialectic, therefore, generates the good for human beings.

Dialectic should also mix truth with the ingredients; otherwise nothing *truly* comes into being. This remark reminds us of the initial declaration that

Protarchus and Socrates should together “conclude the truth” (11c9-10). While the basic question of “what is the good?” remains the basis of the whole dialogue, it is transformed into another question, “what makes a life good?”. In this question, the *Philebus*, as a whole pursues and constructs the good in human life through *logos*. The leading figure is our Socrates who, through his whole life, made *logos* and life one and the same.