

**Pleasure and Illusion in Plato**  
**Jessica Moss**  
**Penultimate Draft – final version in *PPR 72*, 2006**

Plato links pleasure with illusion, and this link explains his rejection of the view that all desires are rational desires for the good. The *Protagoras* and *Gorgias* show connections between pleasure and illusion; the *Republic* develops these into a psychological theory. One part of the soul is not only prone to illusions, but also incapable of the kind of reasoning that can dispel them. Pleasure appears good; therefore this part of the soul (the appetitive part) desires pleasures *qua* good but ignores reasoning about what is really good. Hence the new moral psychology of the *Republic*: not all desires are rational, and thus virtue depends on bringing one's non-rational desires under the control of reason.

## **Introduction**

In the many, deception seems to come about on account of pleasure. For while it is not the good, it appears to be. They choose the pleasant as being good, then, and avoid pain as being bad. (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1113a33-b2)

Plato is suspicious of pleasure. He devotes the whole of the *Philebus* and a significant portion of the *Gorgias* to attacks on hedonism. He declares that “the soul of a true philosopher...keeps away from pleasures and appetites and pains and fears as much as it can (*Phaedo* 83b5-7)” and denounces pleasure as “evil’s greatest lure” (*Timaeus* 69d1).<sup>1</sup> And even when acknowledging that some pleasures are good, and that the good life (the philosopher’s life) is supremely pleasant, he holds that the very best life – the life of the gods – is a life with no pleasure at all (*Philebus* 33b).<sup>2</sup>

Why is Plato so mistrustful of pleasure, and why does he devote so much attention to the topic? Some have taken his concern with pleasure to stem from plain

---

<sup>1</sup> Translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> The apparent exception to Plato’s general anti-hedonism is the *Protagoras*, in which Socrates gives an argument based on the premise that pleasure is not only good, but *the* good. It is a testament to the strongly anti-hedonistic tendency of the other dialogues, however, that this passage of the *Protagoras* has generated so much interpretative debate.

prudishness, or from an excessive reaction against contemporary advocates of hedonism. By contrast, I will argue that Plato's suspicion of pleasure is systematic and philosophical, and tied to his most central views. Pleasure is dangerous because it is a *deceiver*. It leads us astray with false appearances, bewitching and beguiling us, cheating and tricking us.<sup>3</sup> In particular, it deceives us by appearing to be good when it is not.

This paper traces the development of the association between pleasure and illusion through three dialogues, the *Protagoras*, *Gorgias*, and *Republic*. I argue that this association explains why Plato's account of the *desire* for pleasure – the desire for things *qua* pleasant – changes radically between these dialogues, and thereby explains a more general shift in his theory of virtue and desire from the early dialogues to the middle. (While there are important refinements of the association between pleasure and illusion in the *Philebus* and *Laws*, a discussion of those dialogues lies outside the scope of this paper.)

In the early dialogues, Plato argues that all desires (including the desire for pleasure) are rational desires for the good. On this view of desire, vice is merely a matter of ignorance about good and bad: once we learn which things are really good and bad, we can rely on our desires to lead us to virtue. In the *Republic*, by contrast, Plato argues that some desires, including desires for pleasure (understood now as belonging to the appetitive part of the soul),<sup>4</sup> are distinct from and can conflict with rational desires for the good. Correspondingly, the *Republic* rejects the intellectualist moral psychology of the

---

<sup>3</sup> This is an accusation that Plato makes throughout the dialogues. The soul is bewitched (γῆτευμένη) by the body and its pleasures (*Phaedo* 81b3); people are bewitched and charmed (κηληθέντες) by pleasure (*Republic* 413c1-2, cf. *Rep.* 584a10); pleasure “does whatever her will wishes by means of persuasion with deceit (πειθῶ μετὰ ἀπάτης)” (*Laws* 863b7-11). In the *Philebus*, Protarchus calls pleasure “the greatest impostor” (ἀλαζῆνιστατῆν, *Phil.* 65c5).

<sup>4</sup> See section III for explanation and defense of this claim.

earlier dialogues: it holds that vice is a matter of psychic disorder, not mere ignorance, and that virtue can be achieved only when the parts of the soul with the wrong kind of desires are ruled by the best part of the soul, reason. Why does Plato change his view of desire in this way? I will argue that he is motivated to do so by his developing thoughts about pleasure and illusion.

If the account I offer is correct, then, the association between pleasure and illusion is central to Plato's thought. For the most part, however, the association has been little noted, and, where it has been noted, not well understood.<sup>5</sup> The only context in which the connection has been widely recognized is *Republic X*, where Plato seems to argue that the part of the soul that desires pleasure is the part that is deceived by optical illusions. No satisfactory account has been given of why Plato would group these traits together here, however, and indeed many interpreters have found the claim bizarre. As Annas puts it, "desire has nothing to do with optical illusions."<sup>6</sup> By tracing the connections between pleasure and illusion in the *Protagoras* and *Gorgias*, I provide an account that makes sense of *Republic X*'s argument: I show that on Plato's view the desire for pleasure does, in fact, have much to do with optical illusions.

In Section I, I show that Plato associates pleasure and illusion in the *Protagoras* in order to explain why desires for pleasure lead people astray: when we pursue harmful or vicious pleasures instead of doing what is good, we do so because we have been deceived by illusions generated by pleasant and painful things. Sections II and III argue that the *Gorgias* and *Republic* expand this idea, with an important revision. Whereas

---

<sup>5</sup> Shorey and Gosling and Taylor notice some aspects of pleasure's deceptions, but mainly in connection with bodily pleasures in the *Phaedo* (Shorey 1903: 23, Gosling and Taylor 1982: 86); Price notes a connection between pleasure and illusion, but only in the *Timaeus* (Price 1995: 86).

<sup>6</sup> Annas 1981: 330.

according to the *Protagoras* rational calculation has the power to overcome the illusions inherent in pleasure, so that they no longer affect our desires, these later dialogues develop an account of why the desire for pleasure is subject to illusion that entails a very different view of that desire. Pleasure appears to be good even when it is not (section II); one part of our souls is inherently susceptible to illusion, and immune to the corrective effects of reasoning; this part of the soul therefore desires pleasure as good, and when this part rules our souls we pursue pleasure (section III). Furthermore, although this part of the soul desires pleasure as good, its cognitive limitations – its inability to see beyond appearances – render its desires unfit to lead the agent toward what is truly good (section IV). Once Plato adopts this view of the desire for pleasure, he rejects the intellectualist psychology of the earlier dialogues and the theory of virtue it entails, and in the *Republic* defines virtue as the state in which reason rules the lower, nonrational parts of the soul. Section V traces the history of the idea that pleasure appears good in later Greek thought; in the last section I indicate Plato's views on the metaphysical aspect of pleasure's deceptions.

### **I. Pleasure and illusion in the *Protagoras***

In order to understand the *Protagoras*' account of the desire for pleasure, we must distinguish two views of this desire implicit in the discussion of pleasure at *Protagoras* 352b ff. This is the passage in which Socrates, arguing from the premise that pleasure is the good, maintains that no one ever fails to do what he knows is best because he is “overcome by pleasure,” and that virtue is therefore a matter of knowledge.<sup>7</sup> He directs

---

<sup>7</sup> Why does Socrates premise his argument on the claim that pleasure is the good, which he explicitly contradicts in other dialogues, including one considered roughly contemporaneous, the

his argument against popular opinion, or “the many,” who initially claim that they often do what is pleasant instead of what they know is good.

Although there is no explicit discussion of desire in this passage, behind the claims Plato attributes to the many there clearly lies a view of the desire for pleasure as an impulsive desire for immediate gratification. This view has a good deal of intuitive appeal. It says that the pleasure-seeker eats a second piece of cake just because the cake will give her pleasure *now*, even if she knows she will feel sick or sorry later. Someone who resists the immediate temptation in order to obtain long-term pleasures is not, on this view, ruled solely by her desire for pleasure: she is subjugating her hedonistic impulses to her more rational, calculating side. Left to itself, the desire for pleasure will lead us to pursue immediate gratification. When Socrates argues that there is no reason to care about when a pleasure will come, an imaginary representative of the many protests, “But Socrates, the immediate pleasure (τὸ παραχρῆμα ἡδύ) differs greatly from the pleasure and pain of a later time” (*Prot.* 356a5-7). This imaginary interlocutor means, of course, that immediate pleasure is more attractive than distant pleasure; when he claimed that he sometimes does something bad just because it is pleasant, it was immediate pleasure he had in mind.

Socrates advances an opposing view: the desire for pleasure is a desire not for what will provide immediate gratification, but rather for what will be more pleasant than painful overall. When the imaginary interlocutor protests that immediate pleasures differ from remote ones, Socrates replies:

---

*Gorgias* (495e-499b)? I will not address this question here, as it does not directly bear on my discussion of the *desire* for pleasure.

They don't differ in any other way than by pleasure and pain, do they? For there is no other possible way. But like a man good at weighing, having put the pleasures together and the pains together and having weighed both the near and the far on the scale, say which one is greater. For if you weigh pleasures against pleasures, the greater and more must always be taken (ληπτέα)...and if you weigh pleasures against pains...that action must be done (πρακτέειν) in which pains are exceeded by pleasures. (Prot. 356a7-b8)

The context makes clear that the 'must' here denotes a psychological necessity. Socrates is telling the many that when *knowingly* faced with an opportunity to get more pleasure than pain overall they will inevitably take it, even if it means passing up immediate gratification in favor of deferred.

Socrates needs to make this counterintuitive claim in order to argue that the "art of measurement" he proposes can lead people to virtue. For on his account, both the apparently impulsive person who overindulges and the temperate person who abstains are motivated by the same desire: the desire for what will bring more pleasure than pain overall. The difference is only that the apparently impulsive person has false beliefs about what will gratify this desire, because she has false beliefs about the relative sizes of specific pleasures and pains. If we can instruct her in the art of measuring pleasures and pains, teaching her to calculate correctly whether the pleasures inherent in and consequent on an act will outweigh the pains, she will become virtuous. The very desire that now leads her astray will then lead her toward the good.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> For this account to work, of course, it must be the case that virtuous acts yield more pleasure than pain in the long run, while vicious acts do not; this is clearly an underlying assumption of the *Protagoras*. Irwin argues that Plato abandons this idea in the *Gorgias* (Irwin 1995: 112-113). Irwin is certainly right that Plato's view in that dialogue is more complex: the vicious person

Why do people make mistakes about which things will best gratify their desires – why do we need an art of measurement to guide us in our choices? And why, if the desire for pleasure is in fact a desire for more pleasure than pain overall, do the many falsely think of it as a desire for immediate gratification? Plato answers both questions with the claim that we are subject to systematic illusions about pleasures.

Things of the same size appear to your sight to be bigger from nearby, and smaller from afar, don't they?...If then our well-being lay in this, doing and choosing the large things, avoiding and not doing the small, what would appear to be our salvation in life? The art of measurement, or the power of what appears [or "of appearance" (τῆς φαίνεμεν)]? (Prot. 356c5-d4)

Pleasant and painful things are analogous to the objects of vision: those that are near (in time) appear larger than those that are far away. Thus, while what people really care about in desiring pleasure is getting more pleasure than pain overall, "people who make mistakes concerning the choice of pleasures and pains make these mistakes through a lack of knowledge...of measurement" (Prot. 357d3-7).<sup>9</sup> People pursue near pleasures in the mistaken view that they are overall greater, and thus seem to care only for immediate gratification instead of for what is truly good.

Socrates insists, however, that this fault is perfectly correctable. "The art of measurement" – the knowledge of how to judge the true overall pleasantness of different options, regardless of their immediacy or distance – "...would make the appearance lose

---

experiences pleasures that are more intense than the virtuous person's (cf. *Philebus* 45a ff.), while the virtuous person experiences a greater balance of pleasure over pain overall; this makes a purely quantitative ranking of lives by pleasure difficult or impossible. Nonetheless, Plato always holds onto a modified version of the idea that the life of virtue is the most pleasant life: see *Republic* 580d-588a and *Laws* 732e-733a.

<sup>9</sup> The analogy recurs and is made more explicit at *Philebus* 41e-42a.

its power (ἄκυρῶν μὲν ἄν ἐπιίησε τῶν τὸ φάντασμα)” (*Prot.* 356d7-8).<sup>10</sup> Once a person learns to judge that some particular immediately gratifying pleasure will be outweighed by the pains to follow, she will lose her desire for that pleasure, and desire the better course of action instead.<sup>11</sup>

It is important to note that Socrates’ confidence that the illusions generated by pleasure can be overcome by the right kind of reasoning – the art of measurement – is directly related to his characterization of the desire for pleasure as a desire for more pleasure than pain overall. For on this characterization desires for pleasure are sensitive to, and often even arise out of, *calculations* about the relative sizes of pleasures and pains. The apparently intemperate hedonist pursues what she pursues in the belief that it will bring her more pleasure than pain, and to acquire such beliefs she will often have to perform rudimentary calculations. (“The cake may make me sick later on,” she might think, “but that discomfort will be outweighed by the pleasure of eating it!” It is this calculation that makes her desire the cake.) Furthermore, her desire will also be sensitive to further calculations: if she comes to believe that the discomforts to follow will in fact outweigh the pleasure of eating the cake, she will no longer desire the cake at all. Her desires for pleasure are thus like our judgments about optical illusions, and unlike our

---

<sup>10</sup> How should we understand the idea that an appearance “loses its power”: does an illusion – for instance, the illusion that the second piece of cake is pleasant enough to outweigh the pains that will follow on eating it – actually disappear, or does this illusion merely lose its power to affect our desires? The second alternative is more plausible, although nothing Plato says here rules out the first. See my discussion of *Republic X* in section III below.

<sup>11</sup> It cannot be that the agent continues to desire (e.g.) the cake *qua* pleasant but is motivated by some *other* desire to eschew it, for this other desire would have to be a desire for what is good in contrast to what is pleasant, and the many have conceded that pleasure is the only thing they think good (*Prot.* 355a). Neither can it be that the agent continues to desire the cake *qua* immediately pleasant but is motivated by a distinct desire for an overall balance of pleasure over pain to eschew it, for the many have conceded that all they care about is the overall balance; they never desire things *qua* immediately pleasant at all (*Prot.* 356a-c).



mere perceptions of them, in depending entirely on beliefs that can be influenced by illusions but thoroughly corrected by rational calculations.

Contrast the desire for pleasure understood as an impulsive desire for immediate gratification. No calculation is required to generate such desires. A piece of cake strikes someone as pleasant, and right away – without needing to consider beforehand what would ensue from eating the cake, nor how much pleasure the cake would give her relative to any other pleasant or painful activity – she desires that piece of cake. Likewise, her desire is not sensitive to subsequent calculation: if she learns that the painful after-effects of the cake will outweigh the pleasure of eating it she might restrain herself and decide not to gratify her desire, but the desire will remain. If she is ruled by such desires – as the many claim to be when they act against their beliefs about what is best (*Prot.* 352d) – she will go for what strikes her as pleasant even when she recognizes better reasons to abstain.

To say that on Socrates' account the desire for pleasure depends on calculation while on the many's account it does not is to say that on Socrates' account it is a *rational* desire while on the many's account it is irrational. Measurement, and more broadly calculation, is for Plato a paradigmatically rational activity.<sup>12</sup> In the *Republic* Plato defines reason as the part of the soul that engages in calculation, where this includes measurement (*Rep.* 602e1-2), and even standardly refers to the rational part as τὸ λογιστικόν, “the calculating part.”<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the *Republic* holds that it is through calculation that reason generates its desires (*Rep.* 439d1, see section IV below). The

---

<sup>12</sup> Note for example the close connection between measurement and science or knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) at *Protagoras* 357b4 and *Philebus* 55d5-e3.

<sup>13</sup> *Rep.* 439d5 and throughout.

desire for pleasure as Socrates presents it in the *Protagoras* would thus count in the *Republic* as a desire of reason. This is a very different view from the one the *Republic* itself will present: there, the desire for pleasure is a non-rational desire belonging to a non-rational part of the soul.

Of course we expect significant differences between the *Protagoras*' account of the desire for pleasure and that of other dialogues, because the *Protagoras*' discussion is based on a premise that Plato nowhere else accepts: that pleasure is the good.

Furthermore, the *Protagoras* implies that the many *only* pursue what they think pleasant: their concession that they think good only what will bring them pleasure, together with Socrates' view that all our actions are in pursuit of the good, implies that, for them at least, pleasure is the generic object of desire.<sup>14</sup> This means that the moral psychology of the dialogue cannot distinguish between desires for pleasure and desires for anything else: the *Protagoras* implies that a soldier chooses to go to war not because he desires honor as distinct from pleasure, as in the *Republic*, but because the honorable action is more pleasant (*Prot.* 359e-360a). These are views that sit well neither with common sense nor with Plato's own views in other dialogues; one may thus be tempted to dismiss the entire discussion of pleasure in this dialogue as anomalous. Nonetheless, if we step back from the odd context of the *Protagoras*' discussion, we see that the dialogue makes

---

<sup>14</sup> Socrates does not state the view that we always and only pursue what we think good as explicitly in the *Protagoras* as he does at *Gorgias* 468b-c or *Meno* 77c-78b, but it is very clearly implied by his defense of the power of knowledge to control our actions. For when Socrates claims that "if someone knows what is good and what is bad, he wouldn't be prevailed upon by anything to do anything else other than what his knowledge commands" (*Prot.* 352c4-6) – that is, he will do what he knows to be good – he clearly assumes that everyone has the *desire* to do only what he thinks good. He comes close to saying this explicitly at *Prot.* 358c6-d2: "No one goes willingly toward bad things nor towards things that he believes bad, nor is this, as it seems, in human nature, to want to go towards things that one believes bad instead of [things that one believes] good."

a compelling observation about pleasure (and one that will have serious consequences for Plato's later thought): that there is a special connection between desiring pleasure and being susceptible to illusions.

Close-at-hand pleasures do have a special attraction that delayed ones lack, and Plato has expressed this well by saying that they seem pleasanter, just as close-at-hand objects seem larger. The analogy with optical illusions may seem so apt that we hardly notice that it calls for explanation. For not all objects of desire work on us this way: someone who pursues wealth for its own sake, for instance, will easily recognize a smaller, immediate gain as less lucrative than a larger one that will come only in five years. Nothing about the nearness in time of the first makes it seem larger than it is, or larger than the second. (It may of course seem more attractive in another sense, but I think it would be fair to explain this by saying with Plato that it seems more gratifying, more *pleasant*).<sup>15</sup> The same is true of health, and knowledge, and many other things one might desire. Why then should desires for pleasure be different – why should these desires, more than other desires, be subject to illusions of distance; why should pleasures, more than other objects of desire, behave in this sense like objects of vision?

A quick (although mysterious) solution to this puzzle would be to claim that desiring pleasure just is a matter of perceiving some sort of appearance; below I shall argue that this is precisely Plato's account. But if desiring pleasure is akin to perception, then Socrates' suggestion in the *Protagoras* that the desire for pleasure is sensitive to rational calculation is very likely wrong. Reasoning can make optical illusions "lose their power" over a person's judgment, but not over her vision: her eyes will see the nearer

---

<sup>15</sup> Compare Parfit: "[B]ias toward the near...applies most clearly to events that are in themselves pleasant or painful" (Parfit 1984: 160).

object as larger even when she knows that it is not. If desires for pleasure are really analogous to perception, then we should expect that reasoning can make pleasure-illusions lose their power over a person's judgment, but not over her desires for pleasure: she will still desire the nearer object even when she knows that she should not.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, we have empirical reason to think that something like this may be right. Socrates' argument about the power of the art of measurement seems too optimistic: sometimes even after rational deliberation shows us that an immediate pleasure is to be avoided we still feel the pull of that pleasure, just as sometimes even after calculation shows us that the two lines in the Müller-Lyer illusion are equal we still see one as longer.

No one makes this case about the desire for pleasure in the *Protagoras*. But Plato himself will make it, as I argue in the next sections, in his characterization of the appetites in the *Gorgias* and later dialogues. He will recognize the desire for pleasure as a distinctively illusion-prone desire, and will offer explanations for this susceptibility to illusion that will entail that it cannot be overcome, and therefore that the desire for pleasure is not in fact a rational desire at all.

## II. Pleasure and illusion in the *Gorgias*

Pleasure and illusion are first associated in the *Gorgias* via the description of what Socrates calls "flattery," a category that includes the dialogue's main subject, rhetoric. Early in the conversation with Polus, Socrates denies that rhetoric is a craft (τέχνη), saying instead that it is a knack (ἐμπειρία – etymologically, something derived from

---

<sup>16</sup> For an interesting discussion of this parallel, put to very different uses from mine, see Penner 1971.

experience), and part of the practice of flattery (κῶλακεία). He then divides practices dealing with the body and the soul into crafts on the one hand and flattering knacks on the other, and categorizes rhetoric as one of the flattering knacks dealing with the soul. Crafts, he explains, are based on knowledge and aim to benefit the body or soul; knacks are based on guessing and experience, and aim only to provide gratification.<sup>17</sup>

As he characterizes flattery and describes the relation of the flattering knacks to the crafts of body- and soul-care, Plato condemns flattery on both metaphysical and ethical charges: first, it deals in appearances and not reality; second, it deals in pleasure and not the good.<sup>18</sup> The implication is that these two traits are joined: pleasure and appearance are naturally grouped together. More specifically, Plato implies that flattery

---

<sup>17</sup> The crafts set over the body are medicine and physical training; the corresponding knacks are pastry-baking and cosmetics. The crafts set over the soul are the administration of justice and legislation; the corresponding knacks are rhetoric and sophistry (*Gorg.* 464b-c).

<sup>18</sup> First, the metaphysical charge: flattery deals in appearances, pretence, illusion and deception. Flattery “makes the body and the soul seem to be in good condition (δῶκεῖν εὖ ἔχειν), but not to be so one bit more” (*Gorg.* 464a8-b1). It hides its own true nature and pretends to be something else: “having put on the mask (ὑπὸ δῶσα) of each of the parts [of the crafts of soul-care and body-care] it pretends to be that part whose mask it wears” (464c7-d1); pastrybaking “seems (δῶκεῖν) to be a craft, but I say it isn’t a craft but a knack and a routine” (463b3-4); “Pastrybaking has put on the mask of medicine, and pretends to know what foods are best for the body” (464d3-5); flattery “deceives (ἐξαπατᾷ), so as to seem to be of the greatest worth” (464d2-3); cosmetics is “deceptive (ἀπατηλή)” (465b3; cf. ἀπατῶσα, 465b5). Rhetoric is defined as a false image (εἰδωλόν) of the craft of administering justice (463d2), and Socrates says that rhetoric “has discovered a certain mechanism of persuasion so that it appears (φαίνεσθαι) to those who do not know to know more than those who do” (459b8-c2).

Second, the ethical charge: flattery has no concern for the good, but only for pleasure. Rhetoric and pastrybaking are knacks of “producing gratification and pleasure” (462c7, 462d11-e1). Flattery “is not at all concerned with what’s best; with the lure of what is pleasantest at the moment it lures foolishness and deceives it” (464d1-2). “It guesses at what is pleasant without [thought of] what is best” (465a2). “The pleasant is different from the good, and for each of them there is a practice and a plan for obtaining it, the hunt for pleasure on the one hand, and for the good on the other” (500d8-10); in the case of the soul, some practices “are craft-like (τεχνικαί), having forethought about what’s best regarding the soul, while the others don’t care about that, having considered...only the pleasure of the soul, in what way this might come about...nor caring for anything other than gratification...and I say this sort of thing is flattery” (501b3-c3).

uses pleasure as a tool of deception, and that this is effective because people who go for pleasure are easily deceived – easily taken in by illusions.

Like the *Protagoras*, then, the *Gorgias* suggests a general correlation between desiring pleasure and being susceptible to illusion; unlike the *Protagoras*, it also suggests explanations for this correlation. One explanation is that illusions are pleasing, often more pleasing than the truth.<sup>19</sup> But implicit in the description of flattery is another suggestion with important consequences for Plato's thought. We desire what we think good (*Gorg.* 468b); but what is pleasant appears to be good, whether or not it is (see below). People who tend to pursue pleasure thus do so because they are deceived by the illusion that pleasure *qua* pleasure is good – because they fail to distinguish appearances from reality.

Socrates introduces the idea that what is pleasant is good in making his distinction between knacks and crafts. He argues that in the case of both body and soul there is such a thing as good condition (εὐεξία), and also such a thing as merely apparent good condition (δῶκῶσα εὐεξία, 464a3). Crafts aim to produce the good condition of body and soul, while knacks aim only to produce the apparent good condition – not what is

---

<sup>19</sup> We can find an argument for this suggestion in the *Encomium of Helen* of Gorgias, the dialogue's namesake. Here Gorgias not only describes rhetoric as deceptive but also implies that it persuades because we take *pleasure* in being deceived. He describes one form of speech, divine incantations, as “bringers of pleasure and banishers of pain” which work by “enchanted, persuading and altering the soul through sorcery (γῶητεία)” (*Helen* 10). The incantations bring pleasure *because* (γάρ) they work magic on us, and magic is deceptive. He also claims that “Whoever persuaded or persuades anyone concerning anything does so by molding a false account (ψευδῆ λόγον)” (*Helen* 11). Wardy interprets the passage as follows: “now Gorgias’ promise to retail pleasure rather than (known) truth [see *Helen* 5] appears to reach disconcerting fruition in the statement that persuasion results from a misleading pleasure induced by rhetorical skill inimical to truth” (Wardy 1996: 45). Of Gorgias’ argument that Helen can’t be blamed for what she did if she was a victim of persuasion, Wardy says “The implication is that Helen might have enjoyed Paris’ verbal seduction; in fact, it was precisely the pleasure she took in his *logos* which caused her to yield....Perhaps, in the last analysis, we who are persuaded are all more or less willing victims of persuasion” (Wardy 1996: 37).

genuinely good for body or soul, but what appears good whether or not it is so.<sup>20</sup> In each case the apparent good state the flattering knacks produce is a *pleasant* state. The case of pastry-baking, and the craft of medicine which it imitates, is most straightforward: medicine aims to produce the genuinely good condition of the body, health; pastries do not of course make people physically healthy, but they do provide physical *pleasure*. Likewise, cosmetics gives us pleasing physical appearances, sophistry gives the sophist a pleasing appearance of wisdom, and rhetoric pleases us by making us appear to ourselves to be wise. People who are taken in by appearances will believe that the pastry chef's pleasing confections are good for them (*Gorg.* 464d5-e1), and that the orator's gratifying counsels will benefit them (*Gorg.* 459b3-4, 459b8-c1). These things appear to be good, simply because they are pleasant; when someone pleases us, we think he is doing us good. This is an idea that Plato holds onto until the end: at *Laws* 657c he argues that “whenever we are pleased, we think that we are faring well.”<sup>21</sup>

In saying that flattery is concerned with what seems good but is not, then, Socrates means that it is concerned with pleasure. The metaphysical and ethical charges against flattery ultimately amount to the same charge. Knacks are mere imitations of

<sup>20</sup> In principle it seems that good condition and apparent good condition might coincide, but Plato clearly does not have this kind of case in mind. “...what about a condition that seems good, but isn't really (δοκῶσαν μὲν εὐεξίαν, ἴσσαν δ' οὐ)?” (*Gorg.* 464a2-4). Here as elsewhere in the corpus Plato uses words for appearance to connote *mere*, misleading appearance, not the manifestation of reality.

<sup>21</sup> As well as vice versa: χαίρομεν ὅταν βιώμεθα εὖ πράττειν, καὶ ὁπότεν χαίρωμεν, βιώμεθα εὖ πράττειν αὖ, *Laws* 657c5-7.) (For clear evidence that χαίρειν is here, as usually, connected with pleasure (ἡδονή), see *Laws* 658a10.) Compare also Xenophon's Socrates, who says that we feel pleasure and rejoice (εὐφραίνεσθαι) when we believe we are doing well (βιούμενοι εὖ πράττειν) (*Memorabilia* I.vi.8-9), and that “those who perceive that they are becoming better live most pleasantly” (*Memorabilia* IV.viii.6-7). Here pleasure is the blessed reward of those who are in genuinely good condition, not the delusion of those who ignorantly appear to themselves to be so.

crafts (*Gorg.* 464c7-d1), and the pleasure they produce is a mere imitation of the good that crafts produce.

According to the *Protagoras*, the illusions generated by pleasure can be neutralized by a certain kind of rational activity, the art of measurement.<sup>22</sup> I suggested that a more pessimistic view may be more plausible. The *Gorgias* takes no explicit stance on this question, but several passages suggest that the illusion that pleasure is good is very hard to dispel. One cannot easily correct someone who is under the illusion that a harmful but pleasant thing is good; one cannot easily redirect her desire for good toward its proper objects.

There are several instances in the dialogue in which people reject or ignore arguments that something is good, on the ground that that thing is unpleasant. On my interpretation, these are cases in which, because the thing is unpleasant, it simply appears bad to them (just as a pleasant thing will simply appear good), and arguments to the contrary cannot compete with the appearances. An exchange between Socrates and Polus provides a particularly clear example. Socrates has argued that it is better to pay the penalty for one's injustices than to go free; Polus responds with a graphic list of painful punishments (*Gorg.* 473b12-c5). Socrates accuses him of failing to refute the argument (*Gorg.* 473d3), but the meaning of Polus' response is clear: he is saying, "How can you claim that this is good, when I can *show* you that it is bad?" where the description of the pains is meant to do the showing. Punishment is painful; therefore it just evidently is bad. Polus believes he has refuted Socrates' claim. A second example occurs in Socrates' allegory of the pastry chef who accuses the doctor of having harmed the

---

<sup>22</sup> The illusions in question in the *Protagoras* and *Gorgias* differ slightly, but their effect is the same: both dialogues hold that people pursue harmful pleasures or avoid beneficial pains because they are taken in by illusions generated by the pleasures and pains.



children on the grounds that he caused them pain. The pastry chef details the pains the doctor causes (*Gorg.* 521e7-522a2). Socrates adds: “[if the doctor should say] ‘I did all these things, children, in the interest of health (ὕγιεινῶς),’ how great an uproar do you think judges like that [the children] would make? Wouldn’t it be a great uproar?” (*Gorg.* 522a5-7). The doctor claims his work was beneficial; the children shout him down. Because he pained them they believe that he harmed them, and they are deaf to the claim that the pain was beneficial – that in this case pleasure and benefit come apart.

The same explanation underlies the enormous persuasive powers of rhetoric which both Socrates and Gorgias emphasize early in the dialogue. The orator can convince the citizens to appoint him doctor rather than a real medical man; in fact he can win such a contest against any craftsman or expert, even though he has no knowledge of their crafts (456a-c). Why are doctors and generals and architects powerless to convince the citizens of what should be obvious, that the orator is completely ignorant about these crafts and should be ignored? Because, as Socrates emphasizes throughout the dialogue, the orator’s words please the audience. The pleasure he provides makes the audience think he does them good, and arguments that his advice is bad cannot compete with that appearance.

The dialogue thus suggests that the belief that pleasure is good (and pain bad) is often immune to argument. Pleasure appears to be good, and for most people, appearances win out over reasoning.<sup>23</sup> Compare the beginning of the *Philebus*, where

---

<sup>23</sup> Note that in the cases of both Polus and Callicles, however, Socrates does make some headway in getting them to recognize the distinction between pleasure and benefit. He does so not precisely by argument, but rather by appeal to *shame*. In the conversation with Polus, he gets Polus to admit that he sometimes thinks a thing καλόν, admirable, on the grounds that it is beneficial even if not pleasant, and that he finds committing injustice shameful, though desirable in other ways (i.e. pleasant). In the conversation with Callicles, he cites shameful pleasures and

instead of arguing that pleasure and not knowledge is the good, the hedonist Philebus declares argument irrelevant: “I think, and I always will think, that pleasure wins altogether” (*Philebus* 12a7). Here Plato nicely anticipates the attitude of Epicurus, who according to Cicero “denies that any reason or argument is necessary to show why pleasure is to be pursued, pain to be avoided. He holds that we perceive these things, as we perceive that fire is hot, snow white, honey sweet; it is unnecessary to prove any of these things with sophisticated reasoning; it is enough just to point them out” (*De Finibus* I.30). One can simply *see* that pleasure is good, the line goes; what need or use is there for argument here?

On this view, a person who pursues pleasure will seldom say to herself, “This pleasant thing appears good (or this unpleasant thing appears bad), but perhaps that is a mere appearance; I should be open to arguments that it is not in fact as it appears.” Rather, she will stop at the appearance: she will accept it, she will not consider that it may be a mere appearance nor think to look beyond it, and will thus be deaf to arguments that challenge it. Compared to the *Protagoras*, then, the *Gorgias* offers a more pessimistic view about reason’s power to overcome the illusions induced by pleasure. Does the dialogue offer an explanation for this pessimism? One possible explanation is that people take *pleasure* in the illusion that pleasure is good. It is pleasant to believe that in pursuing what gratifies you, you are doing what you should be doing and getting what is good for you. The contrast between the pastry chef’s popularity and the doctor’s ill

---

thereby gets Callicles to retract his claim that all pleasures are good. Why do these appeals work, when arguments that rationally appeal to benefit (e.g. *Gorg.* 466d ff.) do not? A promising answer is that pleasure is not the only apparent good (and pain not the only apparent bad). To the right kind of person, whatever is αἰσχρόν – ugly or shameful – will appear bad, and whatever is καλόν will appear good. If this is right, Plato is demonstrating that one appearance can be countered, if not by argument, then by another appearance. See Moss 2005 for a fuller discussion of this claim and of its repercussions for Plato’s moral psychology.

fame – or between the orators’ success in persuading people and Socrates’ failures – suggest this view. Flattery makes us feel good about ourselves; the harsh truth – for instance, Socrates’ arguments that we care about the wrong things and should redirect our lives toward virtue – does not. Because the illusion that pleasure is good is itself pleasing, someone who tends to pursue pleasure will of course resist letting go of this illusion.

The final section of the dialogue, where Socrates implies that the appetites occupy a distinct location in the soul, and that a temperate person’s appetites are different in nature from those of an intemperate person (*Gorg.* 493a-494a), gives the beginnings of an argument for a second and far stronger reason why the illusion that pleasure is good may be intractable. This argument relies on a theory of moral psychology at which the *Gorgias* only hints: that the soul is divided into different, conflicting sources of both motivation and belief. In the next section I will show that the *Republic* develops this theory in such a way as to entail that people dominated by their desires for pleasure are unable to look beyond appearances, and thus cannot be persuaded by reason. It is left to the *Republic*, then, to develop a view only suggested by the *Gorgias*; in so doing, the *Republic* will present an account of the desire for pleasure radically different from what we saw in the *Protagoras*.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> The *Gorgias* seems in fact to suggest two conflicting accounts of the desire for pleasure. Socrates’ argument that whatever we pursue we think good (*Gorg.* 468b-c) entails that this desire must be a species of the desire for the good. The discussion of the appetites in the conversation with Callicles, however (491d ff.) seems to imply an account much closer to that of the *Republic*: desires for pleasure are rooted in their own part of the soul, do not aim at the good, and can conflict with desires for good. Irwin 1979 argues that the *Gorgias* is internally inconsistent in this and related ways. The account I offer in section IV is intended to reconcile the apparent inconsistencies.

### III. Pleasure and illusion in the *Republic*

The desired and wished for is either the good or the apparent good. Therefore the pleasant is also desired: for it is an apparent good. Some believe that it is [good], while to some it appears so even though they do not believe that it is. For appearance-perception (φαντασία) and belief (δόξα) are not in the same part of the soul. (Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics* 1235b25-9)

In the *Republic*, Plato introduces a new theory of desire. Now rational desire for the good is only one species of desire, and has its source in a particular part of the soul, the reasoning part; there are also non-rational desires, rooted in non-rational parts of the soul. Where do desires for pleasure fit in this scheme? I hold that the *Republic* distinguishes desires for pleasures *qua* pleasures from other sorts of desires – desires for truth and honor, for example, which when gratified yield their own particular pleasures, but are not properly construed as desires *for* pleasures – and assigns these desires to appetite (τὸ ἐπιθυμητικόν). (The *Republic* introduces appetite as the part with which we “desire the pleasures of food drink, sex, and whatever others are akin to them,” the “companion of certain indulgences and pleasures” (436a11-b1, 439d8); while this falls short of the explicit definition of appetites as desires for pleasure that we see in the *Charmides* and in Aristotle, I take the underlying view to be the same.)<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Plato defines ἐπιθυμία as desires for pleasure at *Charmides* 167e1-2, Aristotle at *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1111b17 and *De Anima* 414b5-6. There are two possible objections to the claim that the appetitive part is well characterized as the pleasure-desiring part of the soul. First, in Book IX (*Rep.* 580d ff.) Plato assigns each part its own pleasures; this may be thought to undermine the claim that desiring pleasure is distinctive of appetite. But nonetheless there is a special connection between pleasure and appetite, which we can account for by saying that appetite that *pursues* pleasure for its own sake, pursues things just for the pleasure they bring. While Plato introduces the appetitive part of the soul as the part desiring and related to pleasures (436a11-b1, 439d8), pleasure plays no role in the definition of the other parts, nor do we even discover that they have their own pleasures until Book IX. Moreover, in describing the democratic man in Book VIII (561c ff.), he ascribes to the appetitive soul desires for a wide

What motivates this change in Plato's view of desire, and of the desire for pleasure in particular? In this section and the next, I shall argue that Plato is providing an explanation for what we saw hinted at in the *Gorgias*: that although all desires are in some sense for the good, when we desire pleasure we pursue what only appears good, and are immune to reasoning about what is really good. The *Republic* explains this by assigning desires for pleasure to a part of the soul that lacks the cognitive ability to see beyond appearances. In this section, I show that the *Republic* characterizes appetite, the pleasure-desiring part of the soul, as illusion-bound. In the next section, I show the significance of this fact for Plato's theory of desire.

Let us begin with Plato's distinction of the appetitive part of the soul from the rational part, in Book IV. Here he argues for a division of the soul using what is sometimes called the principle of opposites:

It's clear that the same thing will not be willing to do or undergo opposite things in the same part of it (κατὰ ταύτων) and in relation to the same thing at the

---

variety of objects, including objects associated with reason (the democrat dabbles in philosophy) and with spirit (the democrat may have a whim for politics and military affairs) (561d). This passage implies that we must distinguish this part of the soul not by the *kind* of thing it desires (e.g. sensory indulgence), but rather by *how* it desires these things – just for the pleasure they will bring. See Cooper 1984: appetites are those desires that “have their ultimate origin simply in...the fact that the person in question happens to get a certain pleasure from doing these things, and this justifies classifying [desires such as the democratic man's appetite for philosophy]...together with the bodily appetites” (Cooper 1984: 130).

Second, some object that pleasure is not precisely what appetite pursues. The ἐπιθυμητικόν is sometimes referred to not as the pleasure-desiring part, but rather as the part that pursues mere “desire-satisfaction” (see e.g. Santas 2001: 144). However, this suggestion is not really a rejection of the view of appetites as pleasure-seeking. Desiring an object only because it will satisfy your desire for it amounts to desiring the experience of having your desire satisfied, namely (on Plato's account) pleasure. This is very clear in the *Gorgias*, where the claim that pleasure is the good (495d4), is treated as equivalent to the claim that appetite-satisfaction is the good (491e-492a).

same time, so that if we discover these things happening in the soul, we will know that there was not one thing but many. (Rep. 436b8-c1)

He applies the principle to show that when someone is thirsty but does not wish to drink, there must be two distinct forces at work within his soul (Rep. 439b3-5). What pushes the person to drink, Socrates says, is something “unreasoning (ἀλόγιστον) and appetitive, companion of certain indulgences and pleasures” (Rep. 439d7-8). What forbids him to drink is something different: the resistance arises “out of calculation (ἐκ λογισμῶν)” (Rep. 439d1), and has its source in “the calculating part of the soul (τὸ...λογιστικὸν...τῆς ψυχῆς),” namely reason (Rep. 439d5-6).

This argument thus serves to distinguish two distinct, potentially conflicting sources of motivation in the soul: the part that desires pleasure, and the part that calculates what is best. Recall the significance of calculation in the *Protagoras*: only through the weighing and measuring of pleasures can the illusions attending pleasures be dispelled. In the *Protagoras*, where there is no distinction between pleasure and goodness and no partition of the soul, desiring pleasure and engaging in calculation are in no sense opposed. Now, in the *Republic*, the part that calculates is not concerned with pleasure but rather with what is best, while the part that desires pleasure does not calculate. Plato puts this emphatically by calling appetite ἀλόγιστον (unreasoning or incapable of calculation) while emphasizing the role of calculation in forming the desires of reason.

In Book X, Plato again appeals to the principle of opposites to distinguish distinct sources in the soul for different mental states. This time the states in question are not motivational but cognitive: believing illusions on the one hand, and calculating the truth

on the other. In a passage that includes examples familiar from the *Protagoras*, Socrates contrasts these two states:

The same magnitude viewed from nearby and from afar does not seem equal to us....And the same thing looks bent when seen in water and straight out of water....And are not measuring, counting and weighing most welcome aids in these cases, so that what appears bigger, smaller, more numerous or heavier does not rule in us, but rather what has calculated (τὸ λᾱγισάμεν[ν]), measured or weighed? (Rep. 602c7-d9)<sup>26</sup>

Now he applies the principle of opposites, arguing that the experience of optical illusions reveals two distinct parts of the soul:

And these things [calculating, measuring and weighing] are the work of the rational (λᾱγιστικᾱ) part of the soul....But often when this part has measured and has shown that some things are greater or smaller or the same size as others, the opposite appears at the same time<sup>27</sup>....Didn't we say that it is impossible for the same thing at the same time to believe opposite things about the same things?....Therefore the part of the soul that believes contrary to the measurements can't be the same as the part that believes in accord with the measurements....But surely the part that trusts in measurement and calculation (λᾱγισμᾱ) is the best part of the soul....Therefore what opposes it is one of the inferior parts in us. (Rep. 602e1-603a8)

---

<sup>26</sup> The claim that one thing “rules in us (ἄρχειν ἐν ἡμῖν)” recalls Book IV’s definition of the virtues as relations of rule between parts of the soul (*Rep.* 441e ff.). There a person is wise, courageous, moderate and just when reason “rules” in him and the inferior parts are ruled; here a person is cognitively virtuous when the calculating part rules in him and the illusion-believing part is ruled.

<sup>27</sup> On the translation of this problematic sentence see the following footnote.

Socrates is arguing that reasoning belongs to one part of the soul, while belief in appearances belongs to another. When a rational person perceives an optical illusion, one part of her soul *believes* that (e.g.) the submerged stick is bent; only because another part of her, which sees through the illusion, is dominant in her soul does she resist acting on this belief. The distinction looks very like the distinction of Book IV: cognitive dissonance is being explained by the same mechanism as motivational conflict. Plato makes the analogy explicit a few lines later:

Just as in the case of sight [a person] took sides against himself and had opposite beliefs in himself at the same time about the same things, thus also in actions will he take sides and do battle against himself. (*Rep.* 603d1-3)

The question arises, then: is Plato explaining both motivational and cognitive conflict with reference to the same parts of the soul? Both Book IV and Book X identify reason (τὸ λογιστικόν) as one player in the conflicts (*Rep.* 439d5 and 602e1). The part of the soul that in matters of action looks to our overall good is the same part that in cognitive matters uses calculation to resist the power of appearances. But what is the “inferior part” that opposes reason in the cognitive case, being taken in by the illusions? Is it either appetite or spirit – the parts distinguished from reason in Book IV – or a combination of both, or some other part altogether?<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> There is much dispute in the literature. Some come down in favor of appetite: see Murdoch 1977: 5, Reeve 1988: 127, 139, Penner 1971: 100-101, Annas 1981: 131. Others think that both appetite and spirit are intended, although neither very precisely (Adam 1902 II: 40) or that some new, unspecified part is here introduced (Janaway 1995: 144). Others have argued that Book X posits a division within reason itself: one part calculates, while another, inferior part of reason falls prey to illusion (Murphy 1951: 239-40, Nehamas 1982: 265). The evidence for this interpretation is a natural reading of lines 602e4-6: τούτω δὲ πλάκεις μετρήσαντι καὶ σημαίνοντι μείζω ἅττα εἶναι ἢ ἐλάττω ἕτερα ἑτέρων ἢ ἴσα τάναντία φαίνεται ἅμα περὶ ταύτά: “But [often] when this part [reason] has measured and has indicated that some



We learn the answer by attending to the context of the passage. Plato introduces the discussion of optical illusions in order to make a point about appearances of another kind, those created by imitative poets. His claim is that optical illusions and the creations of poets appeal to the same part of the soul:

...the imitative poet instills a bad constitution in the private soul of each person, gratifying the part of the soul that is foolish (ἀνπίητῳ) and doesn't distinguish greater things from lesser, but thinks that the same things are at one time large and another time small. (Rep. 605b7-c3)

Furthermore, his description of imitative poetry clearly implies that it is dangerous because its illusions appeal to and strengthen our appetites, our desires for *pleasure*.

---

things are larger or smaller or the same size as others, the opposite appears *to it* at the same time" (trans. Grube/Reeve, emphasis mine). If we read the sentence this way, it implies that reason both does and does not believe in the illusion; the principle of opposites would thus force a division within the rational part of the soul. I think we should resist this interpretation, which is not only *ad hoc* (there is no other evidence in the *Republic* nor, so far as I can see, in any other dialogue for this kind of division within reason) but also strongly countered by Plato's other remarks in the passage. Plato refers to the illusion-believing part as "a part of us that is far from wisdom (φρῶνῆσεως)" (Rep. 603a12), ἀνπίητῳ (not understanding, foolish, unreasonable, Rep. 605b8), and even ἀλόγιστῳ (thoughtless or unreasoning, Rep. 604d9). Furthermore, he has introduced this part of the soul as the part over which imitative art has power (see Rep. 603c), and, as I go on to argue, the rest of his remarks in Book X, as well as those in the initial discussion of poetry, myths and other mimetic arts in Books II and III, make clear that imitation primarily affects the appetitive and spirited parts of the soul. Lastly, the association between the desire for pleasure and susceptibility to illusion which I demonstrate in this chapter should provide a substantive answer to Nehamas' question "Why should our *desire* tell us that the immersed stick is bent?" (Nehamas 1982: 265). What, then, should we do with the problematic lines 602e4-6? Adam suggests that we understand τᾶναντίᾳ not as "opposite appearances' in general, but *the* contrary (in any given instance) of the impression formed without the aid of *measurement*;" in which case Plato "merely says that the rational element takes the opposite view of an object from that which is at the same moment entertained by the irrational element" (Adam 1902 II: 408, 466-7). Alternatively, we could deny that τᾶντίᾳ is to be taken as the indirect object of φαίνεται, as I have done in my own translation above. On this reading, τᾶντίᾳ may be an ethical dative, or we may read the dative clause as loosely absolute. In forthcoming work Hendrik Lorenz argues compellingly for Adam's reading, and gives a detailed exposition of Book X to support the view that Plato is attributing some form of appearance-based belief to spirit and appetite (Lorenz 2005). I am thoroughly in agreement with his discussion.

The discussion of poetry ends by warning that “If you let in the pleasurable (ῥηδυσμένην) muse in lyric or epic poetry, pleasure and pain will be kings in your city” (*Rep.* 607a5-6), and condemns imitative poetry as “the poetry that aims at pleasure” (*Rep.* 607c4-5).

Many other passages in Book X also suggest that the illusions of poetry – and thus optical illusions as well – appeal to the pleasure-desiring, appetitive soul.<sup>29</sup> These passages specify the kinds of pleasure we take in the illusions poetry presents. Plato claims that poetic imitation gratifies our desires for strong emotions, and he describes these desires as appetitive.<sup>30</sup> Passages in Book III also support the conclusion that poetry appeals to the appetitive soul, arguing that imitative poetry is dangerous because it makes people and cities *intemperate* – that is, because it strengthens their appetites.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> That according to Book X imitative poetry appeals to the appetitive soul is widely accepted, even among those who deny or doubt that optical illusion does as well. See Annas 1981: 338, Ferrari 1989: 138, Nehamas 1988: 282, Reeve 1988: 230.

<sup>30</sup> The part of the soul that desires to remember misfortunes and to grieve over them is “insatiable” for these things (ἀπλήστως ἔχῃν, *Rep.* 604d9): variations of ἀπληστῆς are used in connection with the appetites at *Republic* 442a7, 555b9, 562b6, 562b10, 562c5, 578a1, 596b3, and 590b8. (Oddly, the word is also used once to characterize reason, at 475c7.) The part of the soul that “hungers for the satisfaction of weeping and sufficiently lamenting, being by nature such as to have appetites for these things (ἐπιθυμεῖν), is the part that is satisfied and delighted by the poets” (*Rep.* 606a4-7, emphasis mine); when we allow ourselves to enjoy watching someone else indulge in such emotion, we obtain pleasure (*Rep.* 606b4). Furthermore, Plato describes the type of character that gives into excessive emotions and that is naturally akin to poetic imitation as “irritable and multicolored” (ἀγανακτητικόν τε καὶ πικίλῃν, *Rep.* 605a5). Earlier he has used the word ‘multicolored’ several times in connection with the appetites: to describe the democrat, the character who is ruled by his appetites (*Rep.* 561e; cf. 557c8, 558c5, 559d9), and to describe the appetites themselves (“a multicolored, multiheaded beast” (*Rep.* 588c7-8)). (See also *Rep.* 404e3.) A passage I quoted above mentions appetitive qualities (as well as anger) as the targets of poetic imitation: “And concerning *sexual desires* and anger and *all the appetitive desires and pains and pleasures* in the soul...poetic imitation...nurtures these things, watering them although they should wither, and sets them up to rule in us although they should be ruled” (*Rep.* 606d1-5, emphasis mine).

<sup>31</sup> In outlining his program of censorship, Socrates says that insults made to rulers (like those at *Iliad* 1.225) should not be heard by young people whom one wants to make temperate, “although if they offer some other pleasure, that’s nothing to be wondered at” (*Rep.* 390a4-5). He also condemns passages about the pleasures of food, drink and sex as detrimental to self-control (ἐνκράτεια, *Rep.* 390b3). The style of poetry he rejects as bad for the city – the ‘mixed style,’ in which the poet not only narrates but also imitates the characters (i.e. speaks in their voices) is not

(In fact, there is some indication that imitative poetry affects spirit as well as appetite.<sup>32</sup> The question of the relation of spirit to poetry, and to appearances and illusions more generally, is too broad to enter on here; my aim at present is to make sense of the widely recognized but mysterious implication that *appetite* believes the illusions discussed in *Republic X*.)

Just like optical illusions, then, imitative poetry appeals to the unreasoning (ἄλόγιστον) part(s) of the soul instead of to the part that follows rational calculation (λογισμός). It appeals to this part by arousing and gratifying our emotions and desires. *Republic X* thus implies that indulging emotion is analogous to – or even an instance of – accepting appearances.<sup>33</sup> In the discussion of imitative poetry Plato describes a reason-

---

only dangerous but also offers the greatest *pleasures* to ignorant people: “it is by far the most pleasant to children and teachers...and the great crowd” (*Rep.* 397d7-8). Finally, Socrates and Glaucon agree that their censorship is an exercise in making the city temperate: “Without noticing it we have been purifying again the city which just now we said was luxurious. – That’s because we’re being temperate (σωφρονῶντες)” (*Rep.* 399e5-7). Temperance (σωφροσύνη) is later described as “A kind of order and the mastery of certain pleasures and appetites” (*Rep.* 430e6-7, cf. 442a-d).

<sup>32</sup> At *Rep.* 604e2 and 605a5 Plato speaks of imitations of and for “irritable” (ἀγανακτικόν) characters; this seems to be an allusion to spirit, the part that experiences anger. There is also a direct reference to anger at 606d1-5, quoted above. This passage implies that both spirit and appetite – both the part of the soul that experiences anger, and the part associated with sex “and all the appetitive desires, pleasures and pains” – are affected by poetry. Books II and III also imply that spirit is affected by poetic imitation: they outline a program of education that aims to mold the spirit by means of poetry and other arts.

<sup>33</sup> Ferrari notes the analogy in his excellent discussion of this passage: he writes that to the rational person “the stick does still look bent, the person still looks tiny....So too....the bereaved father....knows, as it were, the true size of his bereavement when measured against the fullness of a life. This knowledge will not stop him grieving (the stick still looks bent, the bereavement is still painful)...But this knowledge will prevent the immediate reaction from ruling or obsessing him” (Ferrari 1989: 133). See also White: “Our visual perspective, which painting renders, shows things as they appear from a particular standpoint.... Similarly....tragedy shows us situations in that manner in which they produce an immediate emotional reaction, not as they would be looked on by reason, that is, as requiring a calculated and rational response designed to make the best of them....Moreover, just as a preoccupation with appearances may prevent us from calculating the facts, so by succumbing to emotions we may be prevented from the calculation that is needed to improve the situation” (White 1979: 256). Murphy suggests a similar view: tragedy is analogous to painting and optical illusion because it appeals to “our

led person as “measured” in his grief,<sup>34</sup> and says that such a person holds back from lamentation because he follows “calculation” (*Rep.* 604d5); these two remarks remind us of reason’s role in combating optical illusions (reason measures and calculates at *Rep.* 602d-603a). The thoughts that Plato here describes as calculation include the thought that “it is unclear what is good and bad in such things [e.g. the death of one’s son]” (*Rep.* 604b10-11). The implication is that although the death of a son certainly *appears* to be bad, just as the stick in water appears to be bent, reason does not simply accept this appearance. In desiring to grieve and lament, meanwhile, the unreasoning (ἀλόγιστον, *Rep.* 604d9) appetitive soul is passively giving in to the way things appear, and it must be resisted by rational calculations about how things really are.<sup>35</sup> Imitative poetry appeals to appetite by presenting appearances (e.g. that the death of a son is bad) that appetite embraces as real; appetite fails to question appearances with respect to good and bad just as it fails to question appearances with respect to far and near. Thus Plato concludes the passage with the explicit reference back to optical illusions that I quoted above: “the imitative poet ...gratif[ies] the part of the soul that...doesn’t distinguish greater things from lesser, but thinks that the same things are at one time large and another time small” (*Rep.* 6057b-c3).

Thus Book IV’s case of the thirsty man and Book X’s case of optical illusions do after all divide the soul into the same parts: a calculating, rational part on the one hand,

---

carelessness and inattention and our readiness to jump to conclusions uncritically” (Murphy 1951: 241). Belfiore, in her analysis of *Republic X*, argues that pain *appears* bad (and pleasure good), and that when we succumb emotionally to poetry we are uncritically accepting this appearance (Belfiore 1983).

<sup>34</sup> Μετριάσει, from μετριάζειν, *Rep.* 603e8: the word means “to be moderate,” but the remarks that follow encourage us to note the etymological connection with μετρεῖν, “to measure.”

<sup>35</sup> Another thought described as calculation is that “human affairs are not worth great seriousness” (*Rep.* 604b12-c1): reason puts the man’s pains into perspective, as it does when it corrects for effects of distance in matters of sight.

and a pleasure-desiring, irrational part on the other.<sup>36</sup> When we see a straight stick in water as bent, or a distant object as small, it is appetite that believes the appearance. The *Republic* assigns to the appetitive part of the soul not only the lowest kind of desire, but also the lowest kind of cognitive power: imagination (εἰκασία), a power of apprehending only images and not reality.<sup>37</sup> Like the prisoners in the cave, appetite fails to distinguish how things are from how they appear.

It may be objected that this is too stark a view of appetite. After all, Plato does recognize that some appetites are necessary, and even beneficial (*Rep.* 558d ff), and have a positive role in the just, well-ordered soul. They “do their own work” (*Rep.* 586e5-6) – satisfying their moderate desires and in the process supplying the body with the nourishment it needs to sustain the activity of the soul, and supplying a modicum of appetitive “wellbeing” arguably beneficial to the soul itself.<sup>38</sup> If the pleasures that these appetites seek is in fact beneficial, can it be that these appetites exercise lowly εἰκασία? Can it be that even the soul of a philosopher, the wise, just, well-ordered soul, is in one of its parts so cognitively base?<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> Again, I omit a discussion of spirit.

<sup>37</sup> The cognitive powers are listed in Book VI, 511d-e. For arguments that appetite exercises εἰκασία, see Reeve 1988: 139 and Murdoch 1977: 4-5.

<sup>38</sup> Plato says that the appetite for delicacies (ῥψιλον), while not essential to survival or even health, may be necessary “if it offers some benefit regarding wellbeing (εὐεξία)” (*Rep.* 559b6). Plato does not elaborate his idea, but we are clearly to understand that in some cases it is simply a good thing to experience (moderate, quiet) appetitive pleasures. Certainly it is easier to do philosophy and practice justice when one’s appetites are not starved for basic needs (compare the passage on preparing for sleep, at *Republic* 571d ff.); perhaps it is even easier to do so when one’s appetites are positively content!

<sup>39</sup> I owe this objection to John McDowell and Ben Morison. Reeve argues that necessary appetite corresponds to πίστις, not εἰκασία, and that those ruled by necessary appetite exercise this higher faculty (Reeve 1988: 97-98). He wishes to map the parts of the soul onto the four cognitive faculties described in the divided line simile in *Republic* VI; this is an interesting project, but I think Reeve goes wrong in executing it. While διάνοια should surely be attributed to reason along with νόησις, he attributes it to spirit, claiming that it is the kind of thought one

In fact I think this is precisely Plato's view. Necessary appetites unreflectively pursue what strikes them as good, just as unnecessary appetites do. The only difference is that in the case of necessary appetites, the appearances of goodness are true; in fact, we can simply define the necessary appetites as those that happen to be constituted such that beneficial things appear good to them. Compare the cognitive state of the producing class in the ideal city, the political counterpart of necessary appetites in the just soul. These craftsmen – necessary for the city's survival and wellbeing, and thus tolerated – are no more *cognitively* advanced than their counterparts in ordinary cities. The ideal city does not encourage its lowest class to do the kind of thinking that would take them away from images and up toward truth;<sup>40</sup> instead it protects them from harmful images (the censored passages of poetry that glorify lust, or make death seem terrible) and replaces these with myths and stories and music that present truth-like images of the gods and virtues. These images are like “useful drugs” administered by wise doctors (*Rep.* 389b): beneficial because truth-like, but drugs nonetheless, meant to be swallowed whole rather than critically examined. Necessary appetites and the ideal city's craftsmen have a limited set of true beliefs about what is good, but no awareness of higher goods and no

---

needs to exercise in order to satisfy a love of honor. To make this argument he must construe διάνοια as “the intellectual resources necessary to yield true beliefs about the visible world” (ibid. 96), which seems to me a bizarre departure from Plato's conception of διάνοια as the kind of thought mathematicians engage in, thought that makes use of the visible world merely as an *image* of the intelligible (*Rep.* 510d-e). If we assign spirit πίστις instead, as we may surely do – for Plato makes it quite clear that spirit is tied to perception and the world of the cave – then we cannot follow Reeve in distinguishing between the cognitive faculties of necessary and unnecessary appetites: there is nothing left over but lowly εἰκασία. The arguments I give below should make this lack of cognitive distinction compelling.

<sup>40</sup> The producing class is denied the intellectual education needed to turn the soul away from becoming and toward being (*Rep.* 521d3-4), and even, it would seem, the non-rational, “musical” education that the auxiliaries receive (see 456d).

understanding of why their beliefs are true;<sup>41</sup> and while true beliefs without understanding may be innocuous and even useful, they are nonetheless, Plato tells us, blind and shameful things.<sup>42</sup>

In the *Republic*, then, the association between pleasure and illusion that functioned almost as a background assumption of the *Protagoras* is developed into a full-fledged theory. The pleasure-seeking and illusion-susceptible faculties are separated off from the good-seeking and reasoning faculties; each of these pairs is now rooted in its own part of the soul. Various passages from outside the *Republic* support this interpretation. First, there are passages where Plato groups pleasure with perception: see e.g. *Phaedo* 65c, *Theaetetus* 156b, and *Timaeus* 69c-d. Perception responds only to appearances, having no access to how things really are; the otherwise puzzling connection between pleasure and perception in these dialogues becomes clear if we take it that Plato regards desires for pleasure as slaves to appearances as well.<sup>43</sup> Second, the *Timaeus* states appetite's dependence on images quite explicitly:

---

<sup>41</sup> Compare Bobonich: "Although proper training can ensure that the Spirited part finds honor in fine objects and that the Appetitive part prefers the satisfaction of necessary bodily appetites to the satisfaction of unnecessary appetites, neither part can be brought to value these objects because they possess what reason would recognize as genuine value" (Bobonich 2001: 332-3).

<sup>42</sup> 506c6-9; the context is a discussion of beliefs about the good in particular. In *Republic X*'s discussion of the immortal soul we find the view, familiar from the *Phaedo*, that the soul can only reach perfection when separated from the body. Here Plato implies that in its perfect, disembodied state the soul may have no appetites at all (*Rep.* 611a ff.).

<sup>43</sup> *Timaeus* 69c-d also associates perception with spirit (*thumos*), which together with appetite comprises the nonrational soul in the *Republic* and later dialogues. As I mention in section III, *Republic X* implies a connection between spirit and illusion. It is certainly plausible to see spirited desires – for honor, glory, reputation, victory and the like – as susceptible to the power of appearance in various ways (in particular, as subject to bias toward the near, just like desires for pleasure); however, it is also clear that Plato holds spirit in much higher esteem than appetite. For some discussion of the relation of spirit to appetite see Moss 2005.

The part of the soul that has appetites for food and drink and whatever else it feels a need for, given the body's nature<sup>44</sup>...[does not] understand the deliverances of reason...[or] have an innate regard for any of them, but...[is] much more enticed by images and phantoms (εἰδῶλων καὶ φαντασμάτων) night and day. Hence the god conspired with this very tendency by constructing a liver [as the bodily seat of the appetites]....so that the force of its thoughts sent down from the mind might be stamped upon it as upon a mirror that receives the stamps and returns visible images. (*Tim.* 70d7-b5, trans. Donald J. Zeyl)<sup>45</sup>

In the next section, I will show how the separation of the pleasure-desiring faculty from the reasoning faculty motivates Plato to abandon the *Protagoras*' view that all desires can in principle lead us toward the good, and to adopt instead the view that virtue can only be attained via the suppression and mastery of our desires for pleasure.

#### IV. The desire for pleasure and the desire for good

In the dialogues thought to pre-date the *Republic*, Socrates argues that we desire only what we believe good, even when we pursue pleasure.<sup>46</sup> Whenever we desire a particular thing, we desire it *qua* good; when someone desires a harmful pleasure, therefore, she does so in the mistaken belief that that thing is good. According to a widely accepted view, in the *Republic* Plato abandons this position. Only reason desires the good; the desires of the lower parts of the soul – including appetitive desires for pleasure – are not

---

<sup>44</sup> Clearly a reference to necessary appetites, supporting my argument that these too are image-bound.

<sup>45</sup> In Cooper ed. 1997.

<sup>46</sup> *Protagoras* 354c claims explicitly that people pursue pleasure because they believe it good. For the more general claim that whatever we pursue we think good, see *Gorgias* 468b-c, *Meno* 77c-78b, 87e-89a, and *Symposium* 205a ff. (where the desire for money, according to the *Republic* a paradigm appetitive desire, is specifically described as a desire for the good (205d)). A similar view of desire can be inferred from *Apology* 25e-26a, *Euthydemus* 278e, and other passages in the early dialogues.



concerned with the good.<sup>47</sup> The fact that the lower parts of the soul do not desire the good explains why motivational conflict is possible, *contra* Socrates' position in the *Protagoras* and other early dialogues, and why virtue can only be achieved through psychic order, the state in which reason rules and the lower parts of the soul obey. As Terence Irwin puts it, only reason's desires are "good-dependent" – only a rational desire for x depends on the belief that x is good – while the desires of appetite are "good-independent."<sup>48</sup>

It is certainly true that, according to the *Republic*, only reason's desires can be relied upon to lead us toward the good (hence the necessity that reason rule in a virtuous soul), and an agent's appetitive desires are often independent of her rational part's beliefs about good and bad (hence the possibility of motivational conflict). Is it right to say, however, that only reason *desires* the good? Does appetite desire its objects without in any way conceiving of those objects as good? Recent work opposes these conclusions: Lesses 1987, Carone 2001 and Bobonich 2002 argue compellingly that in the *Republic* (and later dialogues) Plato retains the "Socratic" view that all desire is for the good.

I have three reasons for wishing to join this resistance to the orthodox view. First, that view entails a radical discontinuity between the view of desire attributed to Socrates in the earlier dialogues and the later, which goes beyond what is necessary for making sense of the dialogues; it even attributes radical inconsistency on the question of desire to

---

<sup>47</sup> Here again I will concentrate only on appetites, leaving the question of spirit mostly to one side. See Reeve 1988: 136 and Irwin 1995: 212 for arguments that unlike appetitive desires, spirit's desires involve the notion of goodness in some way. (Reeve also argues that necessary appetites have a limited concept of the good, while unnecessary appetites have none (Reeve 1988: 135).)

<sup>48</sup> Irwin 1977: 78, 117 192, Irwin 1979: 218, 221, Irwin 1995: 208-9.

a single dialogue, the *Gorgias*. Second, it leaves no room for what I have argued is a well-supported view that does preserve continuity between the dialogues and within the *Gorgias*: that appetite desires pleasure because it appears to be good. Third, if Plato has rejected the view that desire is good-dependent in the *Republic* he is far from clear about saying so: he certainly *seems* to claim that everyone always desires the good (505e), and to speak even of the appetitive part of the soul as desiring its objects *qua* good (555b, 562b);<sup>49</sup> meanwhile, the evidence that the *Republic* construes appetites as “bare urges,” devoid of all cognitive content and in particularly devoid of thoughts about goodness, is at very best inconclusive.<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup> One can read these passages as noncommittal on the question of good-dependence: perhaps at 505e Plato means only that we pursue the good in virtue of our rational part; perhaps when he speaks of the oligararchic and democratic – appetite-ruled – constitutions setting out money or freedom as good (555b, 562b) he means only that the civic analogue of the rational part in such cities, enslaved as it is to appetite, regards money or freedom as good. But I would urge that such readings are unnecessarily indirect.

<sup>50</sup> The evidence for this view comes from Book IV’s example of the thirsty person who does not wish to drink, which Plato uses to establish the distinction between reason and appetites. “Thirst itself will never be an appetite for anything other than what it is for by nature, drink itself, and hunger for food... – Each appetite is only for that thing which it is for by nature, while appetites for something that is of such and such a kind have something added. – ...Let no one then find us unprepared and disturb us, saying that no one has an appetite for drink but for beneficial [χρηστῆ] drink...because everyone has appetites for good things [τῶν ἀγαθῶν]” (*Rep.* 437e4-438a4). This passage has been interpreted as a direct denial of the Socratic claim that all desires are for the good, and furthermore as implying that appetite lacks the cognitive resources to desire anything *qua* good (Cornford 1941: 130, Irwin 1995: 209-11, Reeve 1988: 135, and many others). But when we look at the wider context, the interpretation simply does not work. Cooper points out that later in the dialogue desires for particular *kinds* of food and drink are construed as appetites, and argues that the bare, unqualified appetites presented in Book IV are intended only as the clearest, simplest cases (Cooper 1984: 126-8, citing among other examples the desires of the democrat at *Rep.* 561c, and *Rep.* 437d11-e2); Annas, among others, argues that later passages attribute to appetite far more complex cognitive resources than the minimal ones required for bare urges, so that the Book IV passage should not be taken as the last word on appetite (Annas 1981: 129-30, citing *Rep.* 442c-d, 571c-572b, and 580d-581a); and Price points to several passages that clearly attribute *evaluative* thoughts to appetite, including thoughts about what is “better” (Price 1995: 50, citing *Rep.* 442d, 554d, and 574d). (I am broadly sympathetic to Price’s discussion of this topic, at Price 1995: 49-52.) Bobonich uses these same passages to argue that appetite *does* have a concept of the good, namely of what is good for it (Bobonich 2002: 243 ff.). Adam offers a plausible interpretation of the Book IV passage which allows that appetites do think of their objects as good: in denying that thirst is always the desire for good drink Socrates means to deny only that thirst is always the desire for “drink which is in reality good;” Socrates does not deny

In fact, if we look carefully at the arguments that have been made for the claim that the *Republic* does not construe appetites as desires for good, we find a good deal of inconsistency between authors (and sometimes within a single author's work) as to what precisely is meant by this claim. Only those supporting the untenable "bare urge" view of appetite argue that appetite in no way thinks of its desired objects as good; elsewhere, we find only denials that appetite construes its objects as good in one or another of various complex ways: as best overall, for instance, or good all things considered, or morally good.<sup>51</sup>

Certainly there is an important difference between the way reason conceives of its objects of desire and the way appetite does – and between the desire for pleasure as presented in the *Protagoras* and this same desire as presented in the *Republic* – but this difference is not best expressed as a difference between desires that involve thoughts about goodness and those that do not. In this paper I have provided a way of

---

that thirst is always the desire for "drink which desire *thinks* good" (Adam 1902 I: 250). On Carone's reading, the point of the passage is that desires are individuated by their characteristic objects, where this is consistent with every desire being a desire for its object *qua* good; she cites important parallels between the Book IV passage and the uncontroversially Socratic *Charmides* (167c ff.) in support of her reading (Carone 2001: 118-120).

<sup>51</sup> Hence Irwin sometimes defines good-dependent desires as ones dependent on beliefs about "the final good" or "what is best over all" (Irwin 1977: 78, 191), although his examples sometimes assume a weaker notion of the good (ibid. 117, 184); Cornford treats the thought that an object is good as "a moral judgment" – to desire something as good is to desire it as *morally* good, and to have the normative thought that "the desire *ought* to be satisfied" (Cornford 1912: 260-261, n.2); Penner denies only that appetite has thoughts about "the good, all things considered" (Penner 1971: 97); while when Murphy speaks of reason as the only part that desires the good he means that it is the only part that desires εὐδαιμονία (Murphy 1951: 29), or that eschews "anything which on general grounds, everything relevant having been taken into account, we consider bad" (Murphy 1951: 46-47). Murphy even allows that in Book IV the appetitive soul desires drink *qua* good, so long as "good" is understood as "good 'of its kind,'" by which he means *pleasant* (Murphy 1951: 45); thus his view turns out to be very close to that of Price, who says that "It will fit the same phenomena to say that appetite aims only at pleasure and takes no interest in the good, or that it identifies the good with pleasure" (Price 1995: 50).

distinguishing between reason's and appetite's *cognitive* capacities that can also, I now suggest, help us to understand the difference between their desires. Appetitive desires are different in kind from reason's not because they lack all concern for the good, but rather because appetite fails to distinguish between what merely appears good and what is truly good – that is, because it is stuck at the cognitive level of εἰκασία, imagination.

Recall the distinction between two views of desire implicit in the *Protagoras*: desire as rational, arising out of calculation and sensitive to subsequent calculation (Socrates' view) vs. desire as nonrational, indifferent to calculation and responding merely to how things appear (the many's view). The *Republic* finds a place in the soul for each kind of desire. The rational part employs calculation to counteract the effect of appearances on its beliefs (Book X), and its desires arise “out of calculation” (Book IV). Appetite, meanwhile, is ἀλόγιστον, unreasoning: it neither calculates nor changes its beliefs in response to calculations; therefore its *desires* too will be non-rational, insensitive to calculation.<sup>52</sup>

We can point to two ways in which this cognitive quality renders appetite's desires not literally good-independent, but very deficient indeed as desires for the good.

---

<sup>52</sup> It may seem a problem for Plato's claim that the appetitive soul is ἀλόγιστον and that its desires do not arise out of calculation (*Rep.* 439d) that he characterizes this part of the soul as money-loving in Book VIII. For as he describes it, the desire for money seems to arise out of one form of calculation: the means-end reasoning that tells us that money will procure more pleasures. Perhaps this is not the case: see Lorenz 2004: 111 for an argument that appetite desires money non-instrumentally, as a “direct source of pleasure.” Or perhaps Plato does not include means-end reasoning as a form of calculation, although he does not tell us why: he may think of calculation proper as concerning only the choice of *ends*. At any rate, appetite's desire for money is compatible with its inability to question appearances: money strikes us as good because it can procure pleasant things, just as particular pleasant things (pastries, for instance) strike us as good because they give us pleasure. Appetite needs *some* empirical beliefs in order to form even its simplest desires; plausibly, the experience-based belief that money procures pastries is not cognitively more complex than the experience-based belief that pastries taste good.

First, as *Republic X* emphasizes, appetite's insensitivity to calculation makes its beliefs intractable, and this will apply to its belief-dependent desires as well. Appetite accepts appearances: because a submerged stick appears bent, appetite will continue to believe that it is bent even when the agent's rational part has calculated otherwise. Likewise, because a pleasing drink appears good, appetite will continue to believe that it is good even when the agent's rational part has calculated otherwise – and thus will continue to desire it. This is of course precisely the phenomenon we saw at work in several examples from the *Gorgias*: because pleasure appears good, a certain kind of person believes that pleasure is good, and is immune to reasoning that questions this appearance. Now we can understand that kind of person as one whose soul is ruled by appetite.

On this understanding, appetite does desire things *qua* good: it desires pleasures just *because* it takes them to be good. Because appetite is separate from the rational part of the soul both in its desires and its beliefs, however, a person may continue appetitively desiring a particular pleasure *qua* good even while *rationally* believing that pleasure bad. Note that, while denying Irwin's characterization of appetites as strictly good-independent, this interpretation does agree with what I believe to be the main point of Irwin's distinction and the view most interpreters have intended in claiming that appetites are not desires for good. For on my interpretation appetitive desires will be independent of the agent's rational beliefs about the good, and therefore independent of the *agent's* beliefs about the good insofar as the agent is identified with her reason.<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> Vlastos succinctly formulates what I have called the "main point" of the good-dependent/good-independent distinction without any appeal to the concept of goodness: he says that in the Book IV passage quoted above (*Rep.* 437e-438a), which some have taken to show that appetites are good-independent desires, Plato "wants to call attention to the fact that we may crave at times forms of gratification unacceptable to our reason" (Vlastos 1991: 87).

There is also a second way in which appetite's cognitive limitations make its desires deficient as desires for the good. The *Republic* characterizes reason not merely as thinking about what is good, but as thinking about the good in complex ways. Reason is "the part that has calculated about the better and worse" (*Rep.* 441c1-2); it "has within it knowledge of what is advantageous for each part and for the whole" (*Rep.* 442c6-7); it "has foresight on behalf of the whole soul" (*Rep.* 441e5). To have thoughts like this, one must engage in some fairly sophisticated forms of thinking. One must make comparative judgments, or consider a complex object as a whole while also considering each of its parts, or prioritize between different parts of the soul, or calculate the long-term against the short-term consequences of an action. I suggest that when Plato describes reason's desires as arising ἐκ λῶγισμῶν (out of calculation), he has precisely these types of thought in mind, and that he thinks this kind of calculation is valuable because only by engaging in it can one discover what is truly good – just as only by engaging in calculation of other kinds can one discover the relative sizes of objects at different distances, or the true shape of a submerged stick.

Furthermore, such thoughts are clearly unavailable to a part of the soul that forms its beliefs simply on the basis of appearance. An object cannot simply *appear* to have good long-term consequences that on balance outweigh its short-term drawbacks, or to be well-suited to the nature of the soul considered as a whole (as when reason thinks that something is "advantageous"); to have these thoughts, one must at some point have engaged in some form of calculation.<sup>54</sup> Therefore, while appetite may desire things *qua*

---

<sup>54</sup> Although perhaps after one has habitually engaged in such calculations objects *can* simply appear to one to have such complex characteristics. Aristotle's view of virtue as a quasi-perceptual capacity, and his

good, it can never have the kind of thoughts about goodness that reason does. Reason is well-suited to rule the soul not merely because it desires what it thinks good, but because it can reason in ways that allow it to figure out what is in fact good, and thereby develop desires for what is truly good. *Republic* VII makes this point vivid by making knowledge of the Form of the Good the culmination of a long, rigorous philosophic education.

“Whoever is unable to distinguish the Form of the Good by means of a rational account (τῷ λόγῳ), isolating it from all other things, surviving all refutation...knows neither the Good itself *nor any other good*” (*Rep.* 534b8-c5, emphasis mine). Only by grasping the Form can one know which things are truly good, and only by working through mathematics, astronomy and dialectic can one come to know the Form; therefore only a part of the soul able to engage in very sophisticated thought (reason) – or perhaps a part sufficiently receptive to the thoughts of such a part (spirit) – can reliably guide its desires with true beliefs about the good.<sup>55</sup>

On my reading, then, appetite does conceive of the objects of its desires as good, but its desires are highly deficient desires for good, desires that cannot be relied upon to lead us toward the good because they are insensitive to the kind of thought – rational calculation – that is alone suited to discern the good. This way of making the distinction between reason’s and appetite’s desires avoids the disadvantages of making the

---

insistence that even the virtuous person pursues what *appears* good to him (see *Nicomachean Ethics* 1114a32) imply such a view.

<sup>55</sup> Compare Carone: “[O]nly reason can know what is actually good for the overall well-being of the person, and can thus oppose the lower parts of the soul, which have at most narrow-minded beliefs about what simply ‘appears’ to be good to each of them” (Carone 2001: 120). Lesses argues that only reason can have “all things considered” views about what is good, and that therefore “The non-rational parts are especially liable to be mistaken about whether what they pursue really is good since they, unlike reason, are not equipped to answer questions about the nature of what is good” (Lesses 1987: 151).

distinction in terms of good-dependence and good-independence that I mentioned above: it offers a coherent account of the nature of appetite's desires, and also preserves continuity within Plato's account of desire. Furthermore, and very importantly, this way of making the distinction ties together the cognitive and ethical attributes of the appetitive part of the soul. Morally and intellectually, appetites are stuck in the realm of appearances. The part of the soul that desires pleasure is a slave to how things appear, and this prevents it not only from exercising the higher kinds of thought (hence the idea that the appetitive soul exercises only the lowest kind of thought, εἰκασίᾱ), but also from experiencing the higher kind of desire.<sup>56</sup>

#### **V. Pleasure as apparent good: a brief subsequent history**

Before concluding I wish to note, in support of my interpretation of Plato, the prevalence of the idea that pleasure is an apparent good in the works of philosophers very much influenced by Plato: Aristotle, Epicurus, and the Stoics.

I have already indicated Aristotle's position in the two epigraphs above. He explains why pleasure is an object of desire by calling it an "apparent good"

(φαινόμενον ἀγαθόν) (*Eudemian Ethics* 1235b25-9; compare *De Motu Animalium*

700b29 and *Nicomachean Ethics* 1155b25-6). For Aristotle, as for Plato, the appearance

---

<sup>56</sup> Price draws an analogy that points in this direction, although he does not follow up the consequences for appetite: "What differentiates Socrates' position [in the early dialogues] is that he aimed all desires not just at the good taken indefinitely, but at long-term happiness (*eudaimonia*) as conceived rationally (if often foolishly) by the agent. Again, belief and truth provide a helpful analogy: all beliefs aim at truth, indeterminately conceived...but some beliefs may irrationally identify reality with appearance, while others take reality to be captured not by looking but by measuring" (Price 1995: 51). See also Annas: "We can see in an impressionistic way that desire is associated with what is 'subjective', that is, what appeals immediately to the person regardless of whether it is confirmed by intersubjective standards, and that reason is associated with what is objective...based on what can be judged to be the case after reflection" (Annas 1981: 131).



that pleasure is good contains an element of illusion: “In the many, deception seems to come about on account of pleasure. For while it is not the good, it appears to be. They choose the pleasant as being good, then, and avoid pain as being bad” (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1113a33-b2).<sup>57</sup>

Epicurus’ view of the relation between pleasure, appearance, and goodness is very close to the one I have attributed to Plato, but with diametrically opposed significance. For Plato, the apparent goodness of pleasure is a dangerous illusion. For Epicurus, pleasure and pain,<sup>58</sup> along with perceptions and preconceptions, are *criteria* of truth (Diogenes Laertius X.31). What does this mean? That just as whatever appears white to us, in that we perceive it as white, must really be white, so too whatever appears *good* to us, in that we take pleasure in it, must really be good. “From pleasure we begin every choice and every flight, and to it we come back, discerning all good by this feeling as by a yardstick (κανόνι)” (DL X.129). “Pleasure is to be pursued, pain to be avoided....[W]e perceive these things, as we perceive that fire is hot, snow white, honey sweet” (*De Finibus* I.30).<sup>59</sup> It is on the basis of such arguments that Epicurus establishes his doctrine that pleasure is the highest good.

---

<sup>57</sup> For Aristotle, however, it turns out that there is something after all correct in the appearance that pleasure is good, just as more generally there is, on Aristotle’s view far more than on Plato’s, something after all correct in appearances. For good discussion of Aristotle on the apparent good see Segvic 2002.

<sup>58</sup> The two πάθη (Diogenes Laertius X.34).

<sup>59</sup> This simple hedonism is of course complicated by Epicurus’ distinction between goodness and choiceworthiness: all pleasures, *qua* pleasures, are good, but because some lead to pain, not all should be chosen (DL X.19). Gosling and Taylor provide a compelling interpretation of Epicurus’ view that pleasure is a criterion of truth, on which “pleasure is consciousness that one’s psycho-physical structure is operating as it should, or (equivalently) in a way appropriate to it” (Gosling and Taylor 1982: 404). Here we find the same claim that I attribute to Plato in the *Gorgias*, but with the characteristic Epicurean twist: for Plato, pleasure is a *misleading* appearance of bodily or psychic εὐεξία (good condition); for Epicurus, pleasure is solid evidence that one is doing well.

The Stoics, like Plato, treat pleasure as a merely apparent good. “Pleasure projects a persuasive appearance [φαντασία] that it is good,”<sup>60</sup> but in truth virtue alone is good, while pleasure is at best indifferent but “preferred.”<sup>61</sup> Moreover in their discussions of pleasure as a passion,<sup>62</sup> they take the connection between pleasure and apparent goodness farther than Plato ever does, using the idea of apparent goodness to provide an analysis of pleasure. Pleasure is (in part) as the appearance-based belief that something is good: someone who possesses some φαινόμενῶν ἀγαθόν, and assents to the appearance that it is good, experiences pleasure.<sup>63</sup> But such appearances are not to be trusted: the wise person never assents to them and therefore never experiences pleasure at all.

Thus the idea that pleasure appears good, which I have argued is implicit in Plato’s works, becomes standard doctrine in later Greek thought. Moreover these other philosophers use the idea just as Plato uses it, on my account: to explain why we pursue pleasure, and – even in Epicurus’ case – to argue that in doing so we act in some sense without the guidance of reason.

## VI. Pleasure and the cave

I began by claiming that the association between pleasure and illusion plays a central role in Plato’s moral psychology. Now we have a complete picture of that role:

---

<sup>60</sup> Galen, *De Placitis Hippocratis et Platonis*, 5.5.23-24, paraphrasing Posidonius.

<sup>61</sup> DL VII.102

<sup>62</sup> To be distinguished from pleasure as an experience or sensation. The sage may experience pleasurable feelings, but will not *take pleasure* in them – will not, that is, assent to the false appearance that they are good. For a brief but illuminating discussion of this distinction, see Long and Sedley 1987 Vol.1: 421.

<sup>63</sup> Stobaeus defines appetite (ἐπιθυμία) as being for the apparent good (φαινόμενῶν ἀγαθόν), and pleasure as what arises when we get the object of our appetite (Stobaeus *Eclogae* II.88.17-19); Adronicus defines pleasure as “...a fresh opinion (δόξα πρόσφατῆς) that a good is present...” (Adronicus, *On passions* I); compare Cicero: “*laetitia opinio recens boni praesentis...*” (*Tusculan Disputations* IV.14).

Plato begins with the Socratic view that all desires, including desires for pleasure, are rational desires for the good. He notes in the *Protagoras* that when we desire pleasure we are peculiarly susceptible to the power of illusion, but nonetheless claims that our desires for pleasure are in fact rational, sensitive to calculation. Once he begins to offer explanations for the connection between pleasure and illusion, he rejects the idea that desires for pleasure are rational. Hence the more pessimistic stance of the *Gorgias*: reason will often fail to persuade someone that the appearance that a harmful pleasure is good is false. Hence also the explanation offered for this pessimism in the *Republic*: that in us which desires pleasure is not only prone to illusions, but also (*contra* the *Protagoras*) immune to the kind of reasoning that can dispel them. Therefore, Plato concludes in the *Republic*, desires for pleasure are very deficient as desires for good. Illusion-bound desires, like those of the appetitive soul, are desires for what *appears* good, but these desires ignore the agent's more reliable thoughts about what really is good and thus cannot lead the agent toward virtue.

Once Plato has acknowledged the existence and motivational power of this kind of desire, he moves from Socratic intellectualist moral psychology to full-blown divided-soul psychology. Some parts of us do not engage in reasoning, and are prisoners of illusion; these parts will always have faulty beliefs about what is good, and their desires will lead us astray. A virtuous person is one who gets these parts under the control of reason. The illusions inherent in pleasure, the illusions that lead us into vice, will only "lose their power" over a person when the illusion-believing part of her soul has ceded its own power and has submitted to the rule of reason.

Once we recognize the importance of the association between pleasure and illusion to Plato's ethics and moral psychology, we should also be able to give a unified account of Plato's more metaphysical complaints about pleasure. I have in mind, for instance, passages in which Plato associates pleasure with perception (*Phaedo* 65c, *Theaetetus* 156b, and *Timaeus* 69c-d), argues that pleasure is *ontologically* inferior to the good (*Phaedo* 60b-c, *Gorgias* 495e ff. and *Philebus* 53c ff.),<sup>64</sup> or accuses pleasures of impeding the soul's progress toward truth (*Phaedo* 81b-c and 83c-d). If we study these passages, I suggest, we will discover a set of coherent charges against pleasure that turn on its association with appearance, where appearance is now understood as an ontological realm distinct from and inferior to the real world of the Forms. Pleasure deceives us by appearing to be *real* although it is not, and furthermore by making the physical, perceptible world appear to be real although it is not; when we devote ourselves pleasure, we accept a counterfeit reality and fail to seek out the true world that lies beyond appearances.<sup>65</sup>

Thus in the cave allegory of *Republic* VII, the bonds which keep people prisoner in the cave are "the bonds of kinship with becoming, which have been fastened to [a person's nature] by feasting, greed, and other such pleasures and which, like leaden weights, pull its vision downwards," away from the real world, the world of the Forms

---

<sup>64</sup> The *Philebus* argues that pleasure is a becoming and not a being, while good is a being: this would seem to put pleasure in the lower half of *Republic* VI's divided line, leaving good at the top. The *Phaedo* holds that pleasure is always accompanied by pain, while the *Gorgias* argues that pleasure and pain can coexist (while good and bad cannot): these two arguments imply that pleasure is ontologically impure and unstable (compare the arguments in *Republic* and *Phaedo* that worldly things, unlike Forms, suffer from what is sometimes called the "compresence of opposites")

<sup>65</sup> Arguments in *Republic* IX (583b-4c) and the doctrine of false pleasures in the *Philebus* (36c-50e) refine the view that pleasure itself belongs to the realm of appearance: while *true* pleasures are ontologically robust, and worth having, most things people desire as pleasures are not only ontologically inferior entities but are in fact only apparent pleasures, not really pleasant at all. A full study of Plato's treatment of pleasure will have to account for this modification.

and above all others the Form of the Good.<sup>66</sup> Philosophy seeks to free us from the cave; pleasures keep us fast. Philosophy makes us strive for the good and the truth; pleasure tricks us with its illusions, making us content with what merely seems good, and what merely seems real.<sup>67</sup>

---

### References

- Adam, J. (1902) *The Republic of Plato*, 2 volumes, Cambridge University Press.
- Annas, J. (1981) *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- (1999) *Platonic Ethics, Old and New*, Cornell University Press.
- Belfiore, E. (1983) "Plato's Greatest Accusation against Poetry", in F.J. Pelletier and J. King-Farlow eds. (1983) *New Essays on Plato, Canadian Journal of Philosophy Supplementary Volume IX*.
- Bobonich, C. (2002) *Plato's Utopia Recast*, Oxford University Press.
- Carone, G.R. (2001) "Akrasia in the *Republic*: Does Plato Change His Mind?" *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy XX*: 107-148.
- Cooper, J.M. (1984) "Plato's Theory of Human Motivation", *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 1: 3-21, reprinted in J.M. Cooper (1999) *Reason and Emotion*, Princeton University Press, 118-137.
- Cornford, F.M. (1912) "Psychology and Social Structure in the *Republic* of Plato", *Classical Quarterly* 6: 246-65.

---

<sup>66</sup> *Rep.* 519a9-b4, trans. Grube/Reeve.

<sup>67</sup> I owe thanks to many people for very helpful discussion of this material and comments on earlier drafts. I am particularly grateful to James Allen, David Berger, John Cooper, Matt Evans, Simon Keller, Alexander Nehamas, Kieran Setiya, and most especially Cian Dorr.

- (1941) *The Republic of Plato*, Oxford University Press.
- Ferrari, G.R.F. (1989) “Plato and poetry” in G. Kennedy ed. (1989) *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism* Volume 1, Cambridge University Press, 92-148.
- Grube, G.M.A. (1992) translation of Plato’s *Republic*, revised by C.D.C. Reeve, Hackett Publishing Company.
- Gosling, J.C.B. and Taylor, C.C.W. (1982) *The Greeks on Pleasure*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- Irwin, T. (1977) *Plato’s Moral Theory*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- (1979) *Plato: Gorgias*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- (1995) *Plato’s Ethics*, Oxford University Press.
- Janaway, C. (1995) *Images of Excellence*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- Kahn, C.H. (1996) *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue*, Cambridge University Press.
- Lesses, G. (1987) “Weakness, Reason, and the Divided Soul in Plato’s *Republic*,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 4:147-161.
- Long, A.A. and Sedley, D.N. (1987) *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, Cambridge University Press.
- Lorenz, H. (2004) “Desire and Reason in Plato’s *Republic*,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* XXVII: 83-116.
- (2006) *The Brute Within: Appetitive Desire in Plato and Aristotle*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- Moss, J. (2005) “Shame, Pleasure and the Divided Soul,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* XXIX: 137-170.
- Murdoch, I. (1977) *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- Murphy, N.R. (1951) *The Interpretation of Plato’s Republic*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- Nehamas, A. (1982) “Plato on Imitation and Poetry” in J.M.E. Moravcsik and P. Temko eds. (1982) *Plato on Beauty, Wisdom and the Arts*, Rowman and Littlefield, 47-78, reprinted in A. Nehamas (1999) *Virtues of Authenticity: Essays on Plato and Socrates*, Princeton University Press, 251-278.

- (1988) “Plato and the Mass Media”, *The Monist* 71: 214-34, reprinted in Nehamas 1999, 279-299.
- Parfit, D. (1984) *Reasons and Persons*, Oxford University Press.
- Penner, T. (1971) “Thought and Desire in Plato” in G. Vlastos ed. (1971) *Plato*, Volume II, Anchor Books, 96-118.
- Price, A.W. (1995) *Mental Conflict*, Routledge.
- Reeve, C.D.C. (1988) *Philosopher-Kings: the Argument of Plato’s Republic*, Princeton University Press.
- Santas, G. (2001) *Goodness and Justice: Plato, Aristotle, and the Moderns*, Blackwell Publishers.
- Segvic, H. (2002) “Aristotle’s Metaphysics of Action,” *Logical Analysis and History of Philosophy* 5: 23-53.
- Shorey, P. (1903) *The Unity of Plato’s Thought*, University of Chicago Press.
- Stocker, M. (1979) “Desiring the Bad: An Essay in Moral Psychology”, *Journal of Philosophy* 76: 738-53.
- Velleman, J.D. (1992) “The Guise of the Good”, *Nous* 26:1: 3-26.
- Vlastos, G. (1991) *Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, Cornell University Press.
- Wardy, R. (1996) *The Birth of Rhetoric*, Routledge.
- White, N. (1979) *A Companion to Plato’s Republic*, Hackett Publishing Company.
- Zeyl, D. (1997) translation of Plato’s *Timaeus*, in J.M. Cooper ed. (1997) *Plato: Complete Works*, Hackett Publishing Company.