PLATO ON THE PLEASURES OF COMEDY

Lauren Olin*

Abstract

In considering Plato's position on humor, we are faced with an apparent paradox. There is evidence that Plato thought deeply about humor and recognized its value—Plato's writings and Socrates's ironic disposition testify to his comedic sensitivity—but Plato's explicit remarks on the subjects of humor and comedy are largely negative (e.g. *Laws* 934d-936c; *Apology* 18d, 19c; *Philebus* 48a-50c; cf. Morreall 1983: 4-5). This paper aims first to reconstruct his view on the topics of humor and comedy, and secondly to examine this apparent paradox in light of that reconstruction. I argue first that Plato's discussion of comedy in the *Philebus* is intended to apply narrowly to the case of malicious comedy. I'll then argue that, understood in light of the broader context of the *Philebus*, Plato's account is possessed of resources to explain both why humor is a valuable part of the good life, and why, for some individuals, exposure to humor brings only deleterious effects and should not be indulged.

Key words: Plato, *Philebus*, Pleasure, Comedy, Humor

I.

It seems reasonable to believe that Plato's dialogues have endured, at least in part, because they are amusing. Without exception: Plato's writings are woven through with humor and witticism, and so testify to his comedic sensitivity (Wood 2007, Halper 2011). Plato's main character, Socrates, is endowed with cunning sense of humor and, often, this capacity is instrumental in his efforts to put "pretenders to wisdom" in their proper places (*Apology* 33c). Socrates is also, in moments, made to explicitly recognize the value of humor. Consider, for example, his remark in *Cratylus* (406c) that "…the gods too love a joke." However, evidence of Plato's skill as a humorist, and of Socrates's ironic disposition, is not easily brought to bear in interpretations of Plato's position on the nature and value of humor. In contrast to the view his talents naturally inspire, Plato's explicit remarks on the subjects of comedy and humor seem, on balance, negative.

* **Lauren Olin**, Department of Philosophy, Center for Neurodynamics, University of Missouri - St. Louis, USA; olinl@umsl.edu

In the contemporary literature, Plato is widely regarded as the founder of the superiority theory of humor, according to which comic amusement is brought on by feelings of power over others or by the sudden awareness of another's misfortune (cf. Morreall 1983: 4-5).[1] Plato is often cited for his claim that comedies, if allowed at all, should be subject to heavy censorship (*Laws* 934d-936c). In the *Republic* Socrates warns Adeimantus that the youth of the ideal city should not be prone to bouts of laughter, because violent and untoward changes of mood are bound to follow (388e, cf. 606c). Here, Plato has Socrates elaborate: he goes on to disapprove of depictions of the gods, and good men, laughing (389a). Elsewhere, Plato implies that the comic portrayal of Socrates by Aristophanes in *The Clouds* was of particular importance in bringing about his death (*Apology* 18d; 19c).

In considering Plato's position on humor, then, we are faced with an apparent paradox. There is evidence on one hand that Plato thought deeply about humor—that he recognized and exploited its social, literary, and philosophical value. At the same time, on another hand, there is evidence that he disapproved of comedy and its consequences for the good life. As Wood (2007: 77) puts the point: "Plato seems to practice comedy himself while condemning its use by others. He uses precisely those features of comedy that his character Socrates criticizes in actual comedies: most notably imitation and ridicule." The paradox is sharpened, and made less obviously tractable, by the fact that his dialogues do not include a complete, neatly packaged account of humor or comedy. This paper aims first to reconstruct his views on these topics, and secondly to examine this apparent paradox in light of that reconstruction.

My strategy is as follows. First, I provide a brief exposition of Plato's discussion of comedy in the *Philebus* (II). I then argue that the example is intended to apply narrowly to the case of malicious comedy, and that Plato's account of comic pleasure is more nuanced than commonly supposed (III). Turning my attention to the broader context of the *Philebus*, I reconstruct an account of humorous amusement that is consistent with the general account of pleasure developed in the *Philebus*—an account which implies that different types of people experience the laughable in different ways (IV-V). Finally, I apply this account to the apparent paradox outlined above, and

[1] Shelley (2003) argues that negative appraisals of Plato's view of humor are largely motivated by ambitions to interpret him in this context. Amir (2013) also provides reasons for doubting such standard interpretations.

show that Plato has the resources to explain both why humor is a valuable part of the good life, and also why, for some individuals and in some circumstances, exposure to humor brings only deleterious effects and should not be indulged (VI). In general, I hope to suggest that Plato's views of comedy and humor deserve more attention. For when examined on the whole, his thinking on the pleasures of humor provides a unique perspective on his general account of pleasure, on the pleasures of philosophy, and on the philosophy of humor more broadly construed.

II.

Plato gives his most focused and extensive discussion of comedy in the *Philebus* (48a-50c).[2] It touches on the relations between comedy and laughter and the notion of the ridiculous, and explores these relations in the context of a broader consideration of pleasure, pain, self-knowledge, and self-ignorance. It therefore provides reasonable point of departure for an examination of his general position on humor.

Socrates initially defines pain as a conscious, or perceptible process of disruption or depletion, and pleasure as an opposing process of restoration or replenishment (31d; 33d).[3] As the dialogue proceeds, Socrates also distinguishes false from true pleasures, and pure from impure ones. While all pleasures on Plato's account in the *Philebus* presuppose some painful lack or disruption, pleasures are classified as pure or impure depending upon whether that lack has been perceived. Only impure pleasures require that the lack be experienced consciously, or perceived as painful; pure pleasures, in contrast, involve the filling of a lack that has not been consciously recognized, or previously perceived.

Comedy becomes relevant to Plato's discussion in the *Philebus* in the middle of a long

[2] Unless otherwise noted, parenthetical citations refer to *Philebus*.

[3] I don't intend to give an analysis of Plato's account of pleasure here. Rather, the aim is to bring the core features of his account to bear on the case of comic pleasure. I therefore assume some version of the traditional interpretation, according to which Plato defends a general account of pleasure in the *Philebus* (cf. Tuozzo [1996] and Frede [1992]). I will, however, also assume that Plato allows for the possibility of "hybrid" pleasures, such as true, impure pleasures. I follow Ionescu (2008) in her defense of that possibility - but not in her interpretation of how this it bears specifically on the account of comedy presented in *Philebus*.

discussion of these different kinds of pleasures. He has already distinguished true from false pleasures, dealt with pleasures that are restricted to the body (46b) and those that involve both body and soul (46c), and is embarking on a discussion of those restricted to the soul (ibid).

Socrates provides his interlocutors with a list of emotions that, he claims, involve a combination of experienced pleasure and pain within the soul itself. These emotions, "wrath, fear, longing, lamentations, love, jealousy, malice, and other things like that" (47e1-2) require a conscious perception of a lack, and a subsequent filling, or replenishing of that lack. Understood in relation to Plato's broader account of pleasures and pains as restorations and destructions, respectively, Socrates's claim is that in all of the tragedy and comedy of life, the natural harmony of a person's soul is disturbed, somehow, and then somehow restored. These are pains within the soul that are, at the same time, "full of marvelous pleasures" (47e4).

Protarchus quickly agrees with Socrates's assessment, and Socrates takes advantage of this ready acquiescence to extend his observation to the cases of tragedy and of comedy. Protarchus agrees that in the case of tragedy the description fits, since in watching tragedies laughter is often mixed with sadness (cf. *Republic* 607c), but he is more hesitant to allow that our reactions to comedy also involve mixtures of pleasure and pain (48a).[4] Socrates insists that such a mixture obtains, and proposes that getting clear on states of mind in comedy will aid understanding of the other cases, since the mixture of pleasure and pain in our reactions to comedy is the most obscure and difficult to discern: the painful malice felt towards the self-ignorant, together with the pleasures of laughter that ensue (48b). Malice, Socrates argues with help from Protarchus, is best understood as a pain of the soul. It is also, however, a pleasure that follows from an awareness of the suffering of others, as when malicious people take pleasure in bearing witness to the misfortunes of their friends or neighbors (48b11-12).

The laughable, Socrates explains, are persons aptly described by a reversal of the Delphic inscription *know thyself*: the laughable are self-ignorant (50c-d). Socrates elaborates further by

[4] Gosling (1975: 208) suggests that Plato embarks here on a discussion of comedy because it is interesting, and secondarily because, of all affections of the soul, the pleasures of comedy seem most likely to be pure or, unmixed with pain, and so the discussion serves his rhetorical purposes well. I am inclined to reverse Gosling's order of emphasis; see Socrates's remarks at 50c10-e3.

outlining three separate ways in which people might fail to know themselves. The first involves an ignorance of the worth of one's material estate (48e1-2); the second, an ignorance of the state of one's body—in particular its beauty and strength (48e4-5). The third and most important form of self-ignorance, according to Socrates, derives from a failure to apprehend the actual virtue of one's soul. This is the worst way, and the most common way to qualify as laughable: to believe that you are virtuous then be exposed as vicious—as having "false pretensions to would-be knowledge" (49a1-2).

While all of these forms of self-ignorance are bad (49a5-6), Socrates insists that more work needs to be done before it can be made clear which of them is relevant to the mixture of pleasure and pain characteristic of malicious comedy. There is an important difference between people who are both powerful and self-ignorant, and those who are weak and self-ignorant. People who have delusions of their wealth, strength, or wisdom but are at the same time powerful for other reasons, Socrates contends, inspire our fear and hatred rather than our amusement. Ignorance afflicting the powerful, Socrates claims, is harmful, and those afflicted hateful, while the self-ignorance of the weak is just humorous (49a10-c5).

Protarchus agrees with Socrates that there exists such an interaction between self-ignorance and the strength and weakness of those afflicted, but remains unsure as to how the division bears on an appropriate understanding of the relative mixtures of pleasure and pain experienced in comedy (49c6-7). Socrates elaborates, again taking the case of comic malice as an example. Malice, he reasons, is an unjust pleasure and pain—unjust in that malicious pleasure arises in response to the evils suffered by a friend, or neighbor. Taking pleasure in the pain of one's enemies, in contrast, involves no measure of injustice, since justice involves doing good things for one's friends and bad things to one's enemies (49c8-d6). The discussion of comedy shortly concludes with Socrates's remark that pleasures and pains are mixed "in all of life's tragedies and comedies, and so it is on infinitely [many] other occasions" (50b2-4).

III.

Plato's concluding remark invites questions about the aim and scope of his discussion of comedy (cf. Wood 2007). Is the account of comedy offered in the *Philebus* intended to be comprehensive —applicable to all of life's comedy? Or is it best read more narrowly, as an account of malicious comedy? The contemporary classification of Plato as a superiority theorist suggests a broad

interpretation: for if all comic pleasure derives from a feeling of superiority over others, then all comic amusement is, for Plato, to some extent vicious (cf. McCabe 2010).[5] This reading of Plato's account in the *Philebus* implies a natural interpretation of the negative claims mentioned earlier, such as that comedy should be severely censored, and has deleterious effects on young men (*Laws* 934d-936c; *Republic* 388e, cf. 606c). Despite this degree of resonance, however, there are problems with a generalized interpretation.

First of all: Plato never claims that all comedy is malicious. Although Socrates endorses the claim that all pleasures of comedy are impure, like those of tragedy and love, malice is explicitly entered, and subsequently set aside, as one example of the painful part of the mixtures that obtain in our experiences of comedy (49c8; 50c-e).[6] Socrates also claims specifically that it is "the malicious person" who will derive pleasure from bearing witness to the misfortunes experienced by family or friends (48b9-10).

The overt tone and context of the discussion also imply that Plato was concerned with the nature of mixed emotions, rather than comedy in general—the psychology of comedic experience, rather than the comedy per se, seems most important in light of the broader aims of the dialogue.[7] Given this emphasis, it is hardly mysterious that Plato chose malicious comedy for his example. He notes explicitly that it is hard to see how the pleasures of comedy involve pain, and so attention to the example would facilitate an understanding in the case of the other mixed emotions. Reasons the case is difficult are not hard to fathom. Common sense, after all, tells us that humor is pleasurable. And as Halliwell notes: comedy of the sort in fashion during Plato's time was utterly crude, and yet unabashedly enjoyed (2008: 243-263).[8] As such, the case of comic amusement

[5] McCabe (2010) dubs this interpretation a "savage" account of comedy.

[6] Wood (2007:81) agrees: "Malice is Plato's main target, and comedy is implicated only to the extent that it becomes malicious."

[7] Wood (2003: 81) makes much of this point, and cites Taylor's (1956: 72) remark that this section of Plato's discussion "may fairly rank as one of the finest pieces of psychological analysis in Greek literature."

[8] Halliwell is most concerned with laughter in the context of this discussion. His remarks in this case are made in the context of defending the more general thesis that there must have been some implicit exceptions to Athenian laws against slander in the case of comedy, because so much of it

makes for a wonderful test case in Socrates's demonstration that many of the emotions people experience are mixed.

Perhaps the best reason to reject an interpretation of Plato as claiming that all humorous amusement is malicious comes from a consideration of Socrates's own, extensive use of humor ––or Plato's. As Miller (2008: 268)[9] observes, there is an "apparent fit" between Socrates's account of what the malicious person enjoys about ridicule and what many of us enjoy about Socrates's performances questioning men who think they are wise, and then shown not to be. The experience of watching this happen, Socrates also tells us, "is not unpleasant" (*Apology* 33c). Given the similarity, interpreting Plato's account of comedy as broadly malicious leaves us with the untoward result that there is no difference between the pleasures we experience watching Socrates ridicule and humiliate others for the sake of improving their understanding, and those a malicious person experiences in witnessing the ridicule of a friend, or actor on the Athenian stage.

Once a view of comic amusement as constitutively involving malice is set to one side, there are ways to understand this difference. It is clear that, according to Plato, malicious people delight in ridiculous comedy onstage primarily because they experience pain at others thriving, and pleasure at the revelation, or anticipated revelation of their ignorance. But must a virtuous person such as Socrates react in this way? Ionescu (2008: 448) explores the possibility of a negative answer where she writes that it's possible to find even the most ridiculous of staged comedy pleasant "…in part from knowing that [it] is not happening in real life. The pain mixed with this enjoyment is suffered in reaction to another fellow's misfortune, whether the person identifies with them or not" (2008: 448).

Plato does talk about comedy in other places in ways that suggest there is more than one way for it to be inspired. In *Laws* (816e) Plato has Socrates distinguish between buffoonery and seriousness, characterizing the buffoon as one who is "trapped" by ignorance, and thus disposed to say ridiculous things "when there is no call for it." By implication: the ridiculous may sometimes be well-motivated. Later, in the same dialogue, Socrates tells us more explicitly that we should censure funny remarks when they are made in the service of anger, as for example when someone

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was explicitly defamatory.

[9] See also Brown (2006) and McCabe (2010).

is engaged in a "slanging match." Comedy can, at other times, be "good natured." In these cases, jokes are not made in "savage earnest"—they are made in a way that is playful. If comedy can be inspired by anger, as well as malice, then by implication it can turn on other mixed emotions as well (935d-e).

In musing about his own experiences in the *Theaetetus*, Socrates also references a distinction between malice and goodwill. He complains that when he "takes away some nonsense or other" from his friends in mocking them, his good intentions are never recognized. He complains that his friends fail to see that it is "all in goodwill…I don't do this kind of thing out of malice, but because it is not permitted to me to accept a lie and put away the truth" (151c-d).

So, if Plato does not intend his view of comedy as experienced by the malicious person to serve as a full account, what are we to make of comic pleasure more broadly construed? In the next section, I reconstruct an account of comic pleasure based upon the more general account Plato provides in the *Philebus,* and explain how comedic pleasure can be experienced by different kinds of people. Because Plato's treatment of comedy is so brief, and so focused on malicious comedy, my work here admittedly goes beyond the text. The picture I outline, though, is not rendered without textual support and, I believe, true to the spirit of Plato's analysis of pleasure on the whole.

IV.

The account of pleasure Plato provides is a psychological account inasmuch as the harmony of a person's soul is relevant to the determination of what the person find disruptive and restorative and, hence, pleasurable.[10] In the *Republic* Plato tells us that the soul is divided into three parts: the intellectual, the spirited, and the appetitive. In different types of individuals, a different part of the soul dominates, and so a different kind of harmony is most relevant to our understanding of what these types of individuals will perceive as painful, and what they will interpret as restorative and thus pleasurable.[11] In this section, I bring this framework to bear in interpretations of how persons

[10] Many commentators have emphasized this "medical" character of Plato's account in *Philebus*, especially in comparison with the more literary and symbolic account of pleasures we find in the *Gorgias* and the *Republic* (cf. Frede 1992).

[11] It is interesting to note that the three ways in which a pleasure can be false correspond to the three sorts of ways Socrates claims a weak person might qualify as laughable: ignorance of one's

dominated by each part of the soul might experience comic pleasure.

The first difficulty that arises in attempting to apply this overall framework to the case of comic malice comes in interpreting the sense in which malice is painful, or disruptive to the soul of a malicious person. While Protarchus agrees quickly (and repeatedly) with Socrates that malice is a pain of the soul (47e3, 48b8, 49d1), Socrates never makes it clear how exactly malice is painful. I propose that we take seriously the reference to Homer's portrayal of Achilles's wrath, which is described as both embittering to the most virtuous of men and, at the same time, "sweeter than soft-flowing honey" (47e4-8). The idea here seems to be that there are two distinct but inseparable aspects to Achilles's experience of wrath: the pain of having been wronged, and the pleasures of anticipated revenge. One might understand the pain of malice as a kind of distress that is provoked in a malicious person by the awareness that someone else is doing well or better, and the simultaneous pleasure that arises in anticipation of their misfortune. This interpretation recalls other remarks Plato makes about the nature of malice; in particular, its relationship to competition. Malice is painful because it involves a comparison of one's own good standing relative to that of others'. In the *Republic* (500c1) we are told that malice is nurtured, in part, by interpersonal competition, and elsewhere the term is used in order to describe the state of a person's soul who is disposed to deprive others of the things they desire (*Phaedrus* 247a7; *Timaeus* 29c2).[12]

If this is the manner in which Plato intends that we understand the painful and pleasurable aspects of malice, then it is possible to sketch an account of malicious comedy along the lines of pleasure as restoration. The malicious person is, like the spirited person, ruled by the spirited part of the soul: she aspires to victory, and recognition by others (cf. *Republic* 440e-f, 442a-b). Malicious people thus regard affronts to their status as honorable painful, and affirmations of their superiority as pleasurable. Initially when they see someone onstage, or a fortunate friend, their sense of superiority is challenged and experienced as a painful lack. When the actor or the friend is exposed as laughable the experiences lack is restored: the malicious person's superiority, relative to the object of their amusement, has been confirmed.

Here we run into another difficulty. There is something odd about the claim that the restorative powers of laughter actually bring the malicious relief from their preoccupation with

material worth, or bodily strength, or wisdom (48e1-2; 48e4-5; 49a1-2; cf. section II, above).

[12] See Tuozzo (1996: 510-11) for a similar emphasis on the role of insecurity in the pain of malice.

status and superiority. In merely witnessing misfortune befall friends, are malicious people *themselves* changed at all? Their souls should remain out of balance because the spirited part has undue influence over reason. Thus, the comic pleasure experienced by malicious persons is bad not only because such persons take pleasure in the ignorance of the weak, but because they take pleasure in illusions of their own superiority.

This seems to be what Wood (2007:83) has in mind where he notes that a malicious person who rejoices in the humiliation of another is also

> …deluded, for he takes as evidence for his own virtue and wisdom the mere fact that he can expose someone else as a fool. In fact, it is unimportant to the ridiculer whether his target is actually a fool or not; lacking any criteria for wisdom other than victory.

Our example, then, suggests not only that the malicious mocker is foolishly self-ignorant, but also that the malicious person's "hope for replenishment" is falsely aimed: it cannot bring the mocker's soul into harmony.

Might this framework be extended to account for comic pleasure derived from an emotion other than malice? We have already seen indications that Plato believed it was possible for comic ridicule to be undertaken out of anger (47e4-8; *Laws* 816e, 6.935d-e). It is, according to Plato, the spirited person who is most prone to bouts of anger, because these follow from the frustrations of that person's desires for superiority and success. Like the malicious person, angry persons enjoy ridicule because they perceive the honorable status of others as painful—as evidence of their own inferiority. When someone is then exposed as ignorant, angry people experience pleasure because this provides them with some evidence of their superiority. However, again as in the case of the malicious person, such experiences of pleasure are not rightly regarded as evidence of superior virtue, because the souls of the angry remain out of balance—reason is not given power over the spirit, and experiencing pleasure in response to the ridiculousness of others only serves to strengthen spirit's hold.

How, though, might a virtuous person experience comedy? What sorts of things would a virtuous person experience as painful, and pleasurable? The virtuous person's soul is regulated by reason, which is by its nature attuned to truth and knowledge (422c). The virtuous person, then, is

prone to experience threats to truth and knowledge as painful, and to experience pleasure in its highest form—in learning (57e7-52a10). Further, virtuous persons are not attuned to their own knowledge and wisdom, but to truth and knowledge in general: the truest forms of understanding are impartially construed (58a 2-5, 65a1-5).[13] The most virtuous and philosophical persons are motivated by their love of these things. Given that the virtuous experience ignorance as painful, and knowledge as pleasurable, we might understand virtuous experiences of comic amusement as stemming out of a love of the truth.

When truly virtuous people are confronted with the laughably self-ignorant, they may be pained by that ignorance in a special way. Rather than take pleasure in evidence of someone's self-ignorance, the virtuous are pained by the laughable because it is always bad to be ignorant. When self-ignorance is revealed through humor, the virtuous people can take pleasure in the knowledge that, while ignorant, at least some laughable people are no longer laughable: they have been made aware of what, before, they had not known about themselves.

In the *Symposium* Plato distinguishes between a "special kind of love" that aims at truth and beauty, and "the supreme and treacherous love" that is characteristic of our general desires for happiness, and which might be pursued "through making money, or through the love of sports, or through philosophy" (*Symposium* 205d). The love implicated in the virtuous person's experience of comedy must be the former sort: the special kind of love, which does not aim at personal belongings or subjective interests, but at "nothing other than the good" (*Symposium* 205e).

V.

On the interpretation I have proposed, Plato offers us a general account of pleasure in the laughable. Insofar as different types of people are characterized by different balances of the soul, they should experience different things as painful and as pleasurable. Malicious persons, I have suggested, are like those ruled by the spirited part of the soul: they experience challenges to their honor and virtue as painful, and evidence of their superiority as pleasurable. The virtuous, in contrast, are motivated by a love of the good: they experience ignorance as painful, and knowledge of that ignorance as pleasurable. Does Plato give us the resources needed to explain why the comic pleasures of the virtuous person are superior to those of the malicious person?

[13] See Hampton (1990: 11-12) for helpful discussion on this point.

I believe he does. While all the pleasures of comedy are mixed with pain and in this sense impure, Plato also suggests that some impure pleasures can be false. The pleasures of malicious comedy, he gives us reason to believe, are always false -- but the pleasures of comedy in general need not be. In the *Philebus* Socrates outlines three possible ways that we can make mistakes about what it pleasurable; each is best described with reference to his initial characterization of pleasure as a process of restoration to a natural harmony. The first of these cases arises when we experience pain, yet simultaneously enjoy the anticipation of the pleasure that will come when the pain is satiated, or filled. Socrates and Protarchus discuss the case of thirst that, according to Socrates, involves a pain in the condition of the body, and a simultaneous "hope for replenishment" (36b3). In cases where that replenishment fails to obtain, the anticipatory pleasure will be false in that the reality our anticipation presupposes is illusory. When malicious people are pained by the good fortune of friends, they are pained by an awareness of the inferiority of their own in relation. When they anticipate taking pleasure in ridicule, they anticipate a confirmation of their own virtue and superiority. Yet, in so doing, they are mistaking evidence of another's ridiculousness for evidence of their own well-balanced souls, and in this sense, remain ignorant. Such anticipatory pleasures are, then, false.

Even if reality does turn out roughly as expected, however, pleasures can still be false in cases where one misestimates the intensity of the pleasure, or pain, in question. In cases where we make comparisons of pleasure as relative to pain, vice versa, or when we compare the intensity of pleasures to other pleasures, we are liable to make mistakes that distort the truth of our judgments. The truth of our pleasures, then, is determined by an objective standard that goes beyond "a mere appearance without real being" (42c1; 41a-42c).

Malicious agents' comic pleasure in the laughable can be false in this way as well, in cases where they fail to accurately estimate their pleasures. Think for example of the Thracian slave who laughs at Thales when he, while stargazing, trips and falls into a ditch (*Theatetus* 174a-175b). The slave took pleasure in witnessing Thales's humiliation, and thought herself better for having the wisdom to keep her eyes on the path. But, according to Plato, the Thracian woman has mistaken the intensity of her pleasure relative to that of Thales's pain: looking at the stars is better than looking at the ground, so while she thinks she is reveling in a demonstration of his ignorance, she is in fact revealing her own.

The third sort of false pleasure that Socrates considers comes about in cases where we

mistake some neutral, or harmonious condition characterized by the absence of pleasure or pain for some genuine pleasure or pain (42c-44d). It is also possible for the malicious person to mistake their pleasure in this sense. Recall once more, for example, Socrates's distinction between humor in "earnest" and humor in "jest" (*Laws* 11.934d-936b). The former, as he describes it, reduces essentially to violent name-calling and thoughtless disputation. Malicious and spirited people who engage others in this way do so because they take pleasure in the prospect of their exclamations successfully passing as disputation, but in reality, their remarks amount to little more than nonsense. They can make no difference from the perspective of the harmony of their souls (cf. *Republic* 3.396e).

All three cases suggest that the determination of the truth and falsity of pleasures depend upon whether a perceptible lack is replenished or filled, first of all, and secondly on whether we are accurate in our estimations of the degree to which that replenishment occurs.[14] As Ionescu (2008: 442) emphasizes, implicit in this account of the truth and falsity of pleasures "is the view that there are objective standards in relation to which we can assess the kind and degree of replenishment/depletion we are experiencing." In cases where we think we experience some replenishment but do not, and in cases where we do experience some replenishment but don't perceive it accurately, then, our pleasures fall some measure short of the true. The more nuanced picture of malicious pleasure in the ridiculous that emerges with reference to Plato's broader discussion of pleasure, then, suggests that there is something unique going on in cases where a malicious person is pained by the good fortune of friends, or the ignorance of actors, and takes pleasure in their ridicule. Because malicious persons are intrinsically vicious and excessive, they do not realize that they are also self-ignorant (48e; see Wood 2007: 82; Ionescu 2010: 446). It is their own self-ignorance, rather than the self-ignorance of the laughable, that makes their comic pleasures false.

It seems clear then, for Plato, that the pleasures of malicious comedy are false in a way that has much (or everything!) to do with the psychology of malicious persons. Can we reconstruct the

[14] Ionescu (2008: 442) notes that this list of possible ways to qualify as a false pleasure is nowhere claimed to be exhaustive. Rather, Socrates claims to have established that pleasures can sometimes be false—contra Protarchus's assertion that pleasures are always true.

comic pleasures of a virtuous person along the same lines? Must these pleasures also be false?

Socrates denies that all pleasures are false (44c-d), and clearly allows that some impure pleasures of the body can be rightly included among those that feature in the good life (62e, 63e). At 40e Socrates claims that fear, wrath, and other emotions like them are false "at times." By implication, these mixed emotions can sometimes also be true. In the case of anger, Ionescu (2008: 445) suggests that we look to an example from *Timaeus* (70b), when anger seems to facilitate an awareness of the fact that reason is superior to the appetites, and a restoration of the soul's natural harmony. When excessive, mixed pleasures are false. In moderation, however, Plato gives us ample reason to think that they can be properly restorative, and so also true.

As an example of this, we can look to Socrates's own reaction to the laughable. In *Phaedo* (115c-e) Socrates laughs at Crito for asking a question about how Socrates's body should be disposed after his execution. In asking the question, Crito has revealed that he still does not understand the distinction between soul and body. Plato tells us that Socrates laughs, quietly, then says (115c7-d7:

> I do not convince Crito that I am this Socrates talking to you here and ordering all I say, but he thinks that I am the thing which he will soon be looking at as a corpse, and so he asks how he shall bury me. I have been saying for some time that after I have drunk the poison I shall no longer be with you but will leave you to go and enjoy some good fortunes of the blessed, but it seems that I have said all this to him in vain in an attempt to reassure you and myself too.

Is Socrates's laughter here malicious? Does it issue from pleasure taken in some awareness of Crito's ignorance? A more plausible interpretation has it that Socrates laughs because he is pained by Crito's distortion of the truth. In his laughter Socrates calls attention to that distortion, thereby making Crito aware of his mistake. To the extent that Socrates's pain is pain borne out of his love of truth, and so long as his pleasure is taken in the good, impartially construed, the pleasures he takes in laughter may be just, and true.

My discussion in the above is reminiscent of a distinction that Plato makes in the *Republic* between being laughed at and actually missing the truth. Socrates and Glaucon have just agreed that while most people would find the idea of nude female athletes ridiculous, that they must not

let their plans for the ideal city be disrupted by "the various jokes that wits will make about this kind of change" (5.451a, 452b). Socrates insists that the genuinely laughable, the truly bad or shameful, is different from what seems ridiculous "to the eyes" (452d4). It is rational judgments of what is good, or bad, rather than contingent cultural peculiarities that should be relevant in determinations of whether laughter is justified. The people who laugh at the thought of "women exercising naked in the palestras with the men" seem to be unaware of the fact that local and defeasible cultural norms underwrite their perceptions, and so remain unaware of what the laughable truly is (457ab).

The people who laugh at the notion of women exercising the way that men do, according to Socrates, are laughing at the ignorance of such women. At the same time, however, he claims they are revealing their affinity to the "Barbarians" who laugh at the nakedness of men. In this sense their pleasures are false: the lack perceived is local and contingent rather than truly shameful, but the pleasure they experience on realizing that the situation is only imagined is falsely identified as genuine and truly good.[15]

VI.

On the interpretation of Plato's account of comic pleasure that I have proposed we should understand all comic pleasures as impure, but allow that some of these pleasures can also be true. The self-ignorance of the laughable characteristic of experiences of comic amusement can be understood in relation to one's own self-ignorance and, in cases where that comparison respects an absolute standard for the good, they can be true. If the comparison is bad or derives from malice, on the other hand, then the associated pleasures will be false. I conclude my discussion in this section with some thoughts on how this interpretation of Plato's account could help us to explain the apparent paradox outlined in the introductory section of the paper, and related thoughts about how the case of comedy helps to illuminate Plato's apparently paradoxical claims about pleasure in general.

In many of the places where Plato appears to condemn comedy and laughter, we can

[15] A similar distinction seems to be at work in Socrates's remark to Polus at *Gorgias* 473e2-4: "What's this, Polus? You're laughing? Is this now some further style of refutation, to laugh when somebody makes a point, instead of refuting them?"

interpret him as condemning the excessive nature of the pleasures associated with them—condemning the extent to which people's laughter signals a poor estimate of how the self-ignorance of the laughable compares to their own self-ignorance. Malicious people who take pleasure in the mockery of others, because they fail to see that they too are ignorant, experience only false comic pleasures. For example, recall Plato's derisive claims about hysterical laughter (*Republic* 3.388e, 10.606e), which is violent and unconstrained. In the *Philebus* (52c-d) these violent pleasures are described as "unlimited." As there is a risk of eating too much, there is a risk of laughing too much: both are easily over-indulged, giving way to gluttony and buffoonery, which in turn perpetuate an imbalance in the soul.[16]

The virtuous, in contrast, take pleasure in the laughable because they recognize that being aware of ignorance is better than simply being ignorant. They should be able, then, to poke fun at friends insofar as their guiding aim is to cultivate awareness of ignorance. We can, on Plato's model, construe the pleasures of comedy as falling on a continuum from false to true: false pleasures are mixed with intrinsically vicious emotions such as malice, and the truest pleasures mixed with the most virtuous, such as love. This interpretation allows us to make sense of the way in which Socrates routinely exposes and humiliates his interlocutors. His efforts are taken, not out of malice, but out of love of the good. Sometimes, comic ridicule can help his companions become aware that they are not being guided by the aim of truth, and inspire a recalibration of the balance in their souls. Think, for example, of Socrates's recommendation to the spirited Protarchus that laughter can guard against excessive seriousness (*Philebus* 30e).[17]

In contrast to philosophers who may at times appear ridiculous in their search for the truth, spirited persons are truly ridiculous in their lust for victory over philosophers (*Republic* 7.517a). Such persons take the laughter of a philosopher as a challenge rather than an invitation to pursue knowledge. This seems to be what Socrates has in mind in his description of a rhetorician who, when asked to engage in an examination of the nature of justice, only addresses questions about

[16] See also, for example, the description of Thersites at *Iliad* 2.212-43.

[17] Halper (2011) suggests that Plato's use of humor in general is designed to function in this way––to disarm readers in such a way that they are more likely to consider ideas they would have otherwise dismissed.

who is being unjust towards whom (*Theaetetus* 175c-d):

> When it is an account of matters like these that is demanded of our friend with the small, sharp legal mind…his head swims as, suspended at such a height, he gazes down from his place among the clouds; disconcerted by the unusual experience, he knows not what to do next, and can only stammer when he speaks. And that causes great entertainment, not to Thracian servant-girls or any other uneducated persons - they do not see what is going on - but to all men who have not been brought up like slaves.

In cases where Socrates's use of humor looks really indefensible, for example in his remarks intended to humiliate Philebus, we can interpret his efforts as a kind of last resort in the promotion of truth and wisdom. In most of the instances where Socrates engages in heartless ridicule, the objects of his ridicule are appetitive people who, in the pursuit of excessive material pleasures, further corrupt their souls. Consider the case of Thrasymus in *Republic* book I, who first refuses to engage philosophically with Socrates about the nature of justice then asks sardonically: "Tell me, Socrates, do you still have a wet nurse?" When Socrates replies with the suggestion that he respond to the issues at hand Thrasymus calls him a "snotty little nose" (*Republic* 1.343a). Such characters are not aptly characterized as being open even to the possibility of the good. In cases where they are powerful, they are enemies and may deserve malicious ridicule. But ridiculing them is not funny, for the philosopher, because there are no true pleasures to be taken in their humiliation. The philosophic person recognizes that, in these cases, efforts aimed purely at cultivating the good are futile.

On Moes's (2000) interpretation of the *Philebus*, Socrates, Philebus, and Protarchus are meant to represent the Rational, Appetitive, and Spirited parts of the soul, respectively. Philebus, as an appetitive person, cares only to defend his hedonism and, when mocked by Socrates, leaves their discussion. Later Socrates confesses that he thinks the crude hedonism Philebus defends is hateful, and akin to the lusty desires of lower animals (67b1-7). Socrates's apparent ridicule of Philebus, then, is not an instance of comedy—(indeed, it doesn't seem that Socrates takes any pleasure in it at all—but simply an attempt to diminish Philebus's authority in the eyes of Protarchus. He, after all, is more open to being made aware of his own ignorance, and to benefit

from that awareness in the pursuit of further knowledge.

Protarchus does not, ultimately, succeed in attaining the truth about pleasure and its role in the good life. As Wood (2007: 90; c.f. 65c4-66a3) notes, when Socrates asks him towards the end of the dialogue to judge the truth of the analysis they have undertaken, Protarchus condemns pleasure in a way that is crude, and philosophically lacking. Wood wonders whether this counts against an understanding of Socrates as truly devoted to Protarchus's intellectual advancement. Yet, Protarchus has the last word. For when Socrates asks whether he is allowed to go, Protarchus insists that, for his part "there is still a little missing" and promises to remind him of what must be left for future discussion (67b9-10). This, perhaps, indicates something special about the nature of comedy, and its relationship to tragedy. By showing Protarchus that he doesn't know, Socrates awakens in him a philosophical disposition—a hunger for wisdom that is tragic because it will never be satiated. Philosophical persons should find themselves laughable in at least this respect, according to Plato, for they are trying to live the best of all possible lives without knowing what that means.[18]

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