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360 BC

PHILEBUS

by Plato

translated by Benjamin Jowett

PHILEBUS

PERSONS OF THE DIALOGUE: SOCRATES; PROTARCHUS; PHILEBUS.

Socrates. Observe, Protarchus, the nature of the position which you are now going to take from Philebus, and what the other position is which I maintain, and which, if you do not approve of it, is to be controverted by you. Shall you and I sum up the two sides?

Protarchus. By all means.

Soc. Philebus was saying that enjoyment and pleasure and delight, and the class of feelings akin to them, are a good to every living being, whereas I contend, that not these, but wisdom and intelligence and memory, and their kindred, right opinion and true reasoning, are better and more desirable than pleasure for all who are able to partake of them, and that to all such who are or ever will be they are the most advantageous of all things. Have I not given, Philebus, a fair statement of the two sides of the argument?

Philebus Nothing could be fairer, Socrates.

Soc. And do you, the position which is assigned to you?

Pro. I cannot do otherwise, since our excellent Philebus has left

the field.

Soc. Surely the truth about these matters ought, by all means, to be ascertained.

Pro. Certainly.

Soc. Shall we further agree-

Pro. To what?

Soc. That you and I must now try to indicate some state and disposition of the soul, which has the property of making all men happy.

Pro. Yes, by all means.

Soc. And you say that pleasure and I say that wisdom, is such a state?

Pro. True.

Soc. And what if there be a third state, which is better than either? Then both of us are vanquished-are we not? But if this life, which really has the power of making men happy, turn out to be more akin to pleasure than to wisdom, the life of pleasure may still have the advantage over the life of wisdom.

Pro. True.

Soc. Or suppose that the better life is more nearly allied to wisdom, then wisdom conquers, and pleasure is defeated;-do you agree?

Pro. Certainly.

Soc. And what do you say, Philebus?

Phi. I say; and shall always say, that pleasure is easily the conqueror; but you must decide for yourself, Protarchus.

Pro. You, Philebus, have handed over the argument to me, and have no longer a voice in the matter?

Phi. True enough. Nevertheless I would dear myself and deliver my soul of you; and I call the goddess herself to witness that I now do so.

Pro. You may appeal to us; we too be the witnesses of your words. And now, Socrates, whether Philebus is pleased or displeased, we will proceed with the argument.

Soc. Then let us begin with the goddess herself, of whom Philebus says that she is called Aphrodite, but that her real name is Pleasure.

Pro. Very good.

Soc. The awe which I always feel, Protarchus, about the names of the gods is more than human-it exceeds all other fears. And now I would not sin against Aphrodite by naming her amiss; let her be called what she pleases. But Pleasure I know to be manifold, and with her, as I was just now saying, we must begin, and consider what her nature is. She has one name, and therefore you would imagine that she is one; and yet surely she takes the most varied and even unlike forms. For do we not say that the intemperate has pleasure, and that the temperate has pleasure in his very temperance-that the fool is pleased when he is full of foolish fancies and hopes, and that the wise man has

pleasure in his wisdom? and how foolish would any one be who affirmed that all these opposite pleasures are severally alike!

Pro. Why, Socrates, they are opposed in so far as they spring from opposite sources, but they are not in themselves opposite. For must not pleasure be of all things most absolutely like pleasure-that is, like himself?

Soc. Yes, my good friend, just as colour is like colour;-in so far as colours are colours, there is no difference between them; and yet we all know that black is not only unlike, but even absolutely opposed to white: or again, as figure is like figure, for all figures are comprehended under one class; and yet particular figures may be absolutely opposed to one another, and there is an infinite diversity of them. And we might find similar examples in many other things; therefore do not rely upon this argument, which would go to prove the unity of the most extreme opposites. And I suspect that we shall find a similar opposition among pleasures.

Pro. Very likely; but how will this invalidate the argument?

Soc. Why, I shall reply, that dissimilar as they are, you apply to them a now predicate, for you say that all pleasant things are good; now although no one can argue that pleasure is not pleasure, he may argue, as we are doing, that pleasures are oftener bad than good; but you call them all good, and at the same time are compelled, if you are pressed, to acknowledge that they are unlike. And so you must tell

us what is the identical quality existing alike in good and bad pleasures, which makes you designate all of them as good.

Pro. What do you mean, Socrates? Do you think that any one who asserts pleasure to be the good, will tolerate the notion that some Pleasures are good and others bad?

Soc. And yet you will acknowledge that they are different from one another, and sometimes opposed?

Pro. Not in so far as they are pleasures.

Soc. That is a return to the old position, Protarchus, and so we are to say (are we?) that there is no difference in pleasures, but that they are all alike; and the examples which have just been cited do not pierce our dull minds, but we go on arguing all the same, like the weakest and most inexperienced reasoners?

Pro. What do you mean?

Soc. Why, I mean to say, that in self-defence I may, if I like, follow your example, and assert boldly that the two things most unlike are most absolutely alike; and the result will be that you and I will prove ourselves to be very tyros in the art of disputing; and the argument will be blown away and lost. Suppose that we put back, and return to the old position; then perhaps we may come to an understanding with one another.

Pro. How do you mean?

Soc. Shall I, Protarchus, have my own question asked of me by you?

Pro. What question?

Soc. Ask me whether wisdom and science and mind, and those other qualities which I, when asked by you at first what is the nature of the good, affirmed to be good, are not in the same case with the pleasures of which you spoke.

Pro. What do you mean?

Soc. The sciences are a numerous class, and will be found to present great differences. But even admitting that, like the pleasures, they are opposite as well as different, should I be worthy of the name of dialectician if, in order to avoid this difficulty, I were to say (as you are saying of pleasure) that there is no difference between one science and another;-would not the argument founder and disappear like an idle tale, although we might ourselves escape drowning by clinging to a fallacy?

Pro. May none of this befall us, except the deliverance! Yet I like the even-handed justice which is applied to both our arguments. Let us assume, then, that there are many and diverse pleasures, and many and different sciences.

Soc. And let us have no concealment, Protarchus, of the differences between my good and yours; but let us bring them to the light in the hope that, in the process of testing them, they may show whether pleasure is to be called the good, or wisdom, or some third quality; for surely we are not now simply contending in order

that my view or that yours may prevail, but I presume that we ought both of us to be fighting for the truth.

Pro. Certainly we ought.

Soc. Then let us have a more definite understanding and establish the principle on which the argument rests.

Pro. What principle?

Soc. A principle about which all men are always in a difficulty, and some men sometimes against their will.

Pro. Speak plainer.

Soc. The principle which has just turned up, which is a marvel of nature; for that one should be many or many one, are wonderful propositions; and he who affirms either is very open to attack.

Pro. Do you mean, when a person says that I, Protarchus, am by nature one and also many, dividing the single "me" into many "mens," and even opposing them as great and small, light and heavy, and in ten thousand other ways?

Soc. Those, Protarchus, are the common and acknowledged paradoxes about the one and many, which I may say that everybody has by this time agreed to dismiss as childish and obvious and detrimental to the true course of thought; and no more favour is shown to that other puzzle, in which a person proves the members and parts of anything to be divided, and then confessing that they are all one, says laughingly in disproof of his own words: Why, here is a

miracle, the one is many and infinite, and the many are only one.

Pro. But what, Socrates, are those other marvels connected with this subject which, as you imply, have not yet become common and acknowledged?

Soc. When, my boy, the one does not belong to the class of things that are born and perish, as in the instances which we were giving, for in those cases, and when unity is of this concrete nature, there is, as I was saying, a universal consent that no refutation is needed; but when the assertion is made that man is one, or ox is one, or beauty one, or the good one, then the interest which attaches to these and similar unities and the attempt which is made to divide them gives birth to a controversy.

Pro. Of what nature?

Soc. In the first place, as to whether these unities have a real existence; and then how each individual unity, being always the same, and incapable either of generation or destruction, but retaining a permanent individuality, can be conceived either as dispersed and multiplied in the infinity of the world of generation, or as still entire and yet divided from itself, which latter would seem to be the greatest impossibility of all, for how can one and the same thing be at the same time in one and in many things? These, Protarchus, are the real difficulties, and this is the one and many to which they relate; they are the source of great perplexity if ill

decided, and the right determination of them is very helpful.

Pro. Then, Socrates, let us begin by clearing up these questions.

Soc. That is what I should wish.

Pro. And I am sure that all my other friends will be glad to hear them discussed; Philebus, fortunately for us, is not disposed to move, and we had better not stir him up with questions.

Soc. Good; and where shall we begin this great and multifarious battle, in which such various points are at issue? Shall begin thus?

Pro. How?

Soc. We say that the one and many become identified by thought, and that now, as in time past, they run about together, in and out of every word which is uttered, and that this union of them will never cease, and is not now beginning, but is, as I believe, an everlasting quality of thought itself, which never grows old. Any young man, when he first tastes these subtleties, is delighted, and fancies that he has found a treasure of wisdom; in the first enthusiasm of his joy he leaves no stone, or rather no thought unturned, now rolling up the many into the one, and kneading them together, now unfolding and dividing them; he puzzles himself first and above all, and then he proceeds to puzzle his neighbours, whether they are older or younger, or of his own age-that makes no difference; neither father nor mother does he spare; no human being who has ears is safe from him, hardly even his dog, and a barbarian

would have no chance of escaping him, if an interpreter could only be found.

Pro. Considering, Socrates, how many we are, and that all of us are young men, is there not a danger that we and Philebus may all set upon you, if you abuse us? We understand what you mean; but is there no charm by which we may dispel all this confusion, no more excellent way of arriving at the truth? If there is, we hope that you will guide us into that way, and we will do our best to follow, for the enquiry in which we are engaged, Socrates, is not unimportant.

Soc. The reverse of unimportant, my boys, as Philebus calls you, and there neither is nor ever will be a better than my own favourite way, which has nevertheless already often deserted me and left me helpless in the hour of need.

Pro. Tell us what that is.

Soc. One which may be easily pointed out, but is by no means easy of application; it is the parent of all the discoveries in the arts.

Pro. Tell us what it is.

Soc. A gift of heaven, which, as I conceive, the gods tossed among men by the hands of a new Prometheus, and therewith a blaze of light; and the ancients, who were our betters and nearer the gods than we are, handed down the tradition, that whatever things are said to be are composed of one and many, and have the finite, and infinite implanted in them: seeing, then, that such is the order of the

world, we too ought in every enquiry to begin by laying down one idea of that which is the subject of enquiry; this unity we shall find in everything. Having found it, we may next proceed to look for two, if there be two, or, if not, then for three or some other number, subdividing each of these units, until at last the unity with which we began is seen not only to be one and many and infinite, but also a definite number; the infinite must not be suffered to approach the many until the entire number of the species intermediate between unity and infinity has been discovered-then, and not till then, we may, rest from division, and without further troubling ourselves about the endless individuals may allow them to drop into infinity. This, as I was saying, is the way of considering and learning and teaching one another, which the gods have handed down to us. But the wise men of our time are either too quick or too slow, in conceiving plurality in unity. Having no method, they make their one and many anyhow, and from unity pass at once to infinity; the intermediate steps never occur to them. And this, I repeat, is what makes the difference between the mere art of disputation and true dialectic.

Pro. I think that I partly understand you Socrates, but I should like to have a clearer notion of what you are saying.

Soc. I may illustrate my meaning by the letters of the alphabet, Protarchus, which you were made to learn as a child.

Pro. How do they afford an illustration?

Soc. The sound which passes through the lips whether of an individual or of all men is one and yet infinite.

Pro. Very true.

Soc. And yet not by knowing either that sound is one or that sound is infinite are we perfect in the art of speech, but the knowledge of the number and nature of sounds is what makes a man a grammarian.

Pro. Very true.

Soc. And the knowledge which makes a man a musician is of the same kind.

Pro. How so?

Soc. Sound is one in music as well as in grammar?

Pro. Certainly.

Soc. And there is a higher note and a lower note, and a note of equal pitch:-may we affirm so much?

Pro. Yes.

Soc. But you would not be a real musician if this was all that you knew; though if you did not know this you would know almost nothing of music.

Pro. Nothing.

Soc. But when you have learned what sounds are high and what low, and the number and nature of the intervals and their limits or proportions, and the systems compounded out of them, which our fathers discovered, and have handed down to us who are their descendants under

the name of harmonies; and the affections corresponding to them in the movements of the human body, which when measured by numbers ought, as they say, to be called rhythms and measures; and they tell us that the same principle should be applied to every one and many;-when, I say, you have learned all this, then, my dear friend, you are perfect; and you may be said to understand any other subject, when you have a similar grasp of it. But the, infinity of kinds and the infinity of individuals which there is in each of them, when not classified, creates in every one of us a state of infinite ignorance; and he who never looks for number in anything, will not himself be looked for in the number of famous men.

Pro. I think that what Socrates is now saying is excellent, Philebus.

Phi. I think so too, but how do his words bear upon us and upon the argument?

Soc. Philebus is right in asking that question of us, Protarchus.

Pro. Indeed he is, and you must answer him.

Soc. I will; but you must let me make one little remark first about these matters; I was saying, that he who begins with any individual unity, should proceed from that, not to infinity, but to a definite number, and now I say conversely, that he who has to begin with infinity should not jump to unity, but he should look about for some number, representing a certain quantity, and thus out of

all end in one. And now let us return for an illustration of our principle to the case of letters.

Pro. What do you mean?

Soc. Some god or divine man, who in the Egyptian legend is said to have been Theuth, observing that the human voice was infinite, first distinguished in this infinity a certain number of vowels, and then other letters which had sound, but were not pure vowels (i.e., the semivowels); these too exist in a definite number; and lastly, he distinguished a third class of letters which we now call mutes, without voice and without sound, and divided these, and likewise the two other classes of vowels and semivowels, into the individual sounds, told the number of them, and gave to each and all of them the name of letters; and observing that none of us could learn any one of them and not learn them all, and in consideration of this common bond which in a manner united them, he assigned to them all a single art, and this he called the art of grammar or letters.

Phi. The illustration, Protarchus, has assisted me in understanding the original statement, but I still feel the defect of which I just now complained.

Soc. Are you going to ask, Philebus, what this has to do with the argument?

Phi. Yes, that is a question which Protarchus and I have been long asking.

Soc. Assuredly you have already arrived at the answer to the question which, as you say, you have been so long asking?

Phi. How so?

Soc. Did we not begin by enquiring into the comparative eligibility of pleasure and wisdom?

Phi. Certainly.

Soc. And we maintain that they are each of them one?

Phi. True.

Soc. And the precise question to which the previous discussion desires an answer is, how they are one and also many [i.e., how they have one genus and many species], and are not at once infinite, and what number of species is to be assigned to either of them before they pass into infinity.

Pro. That is a very serious question, Philebus, to which Socrates has ingeniously brought us round, and please to consider which of us shall answer him; there may be something ridiculous in my being unable to answer, and therefore imposing the task upon you, when I have undertaken the whole charge of the argument, but if neither of us were able to answer, the result methinks would be still more ridiculous. Let us consider, then, what we are to do:-Socrates, if I understood him rightly, is asking whether there are not kinds of pleasure, and what is the number and nature of them, and the same of wisdom.

Soc. Most true, O son of Callias; and the previous argument showed