



Eros, Desire, Pleasure, and the Good

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A central claim across Plato's dialogues is the universally held desire for the Good. Seemingly simple at first glance, this claim suggests a high level of complexity as Plato denies our epistemic possibility toward the Good. In Book VII of the *Republic*, Plato writes explicitly that the Good is beyond Beings,¹ which entails that the faculty of its comprehension is beyond knowledge. If the Good is unknowable, what exactly is the object of our desire? Can we even possess such a desire for the Good, let alone pursue it? And most importantly, how is this desire related to us; why should we accept this articulation of such a desire if the Good is so separate from us? Each question is worth extended discussion, and I cannot address each in thorough detail in the essay. Instead, through examining pleasure, desire, and Eros, I want to open a discussion and provide a proposal concerning their, and ultimately, *our* ontological relationship with the Good.

In the *Philebus*, Plato outlines a detailed distinction between different types of pleasures and their ontologies concerning Beings (Limited) and becoming (unlimited). He especially dwells on intellectual pleasure as a pure but semi-divine one, for it is experienced with the absence of pain but is nevertheless experienced through the filling of a lack in opposed to the most divine pleasures that do not originate from a lack. In the *Symposium*, Plato closely examined Eros and its co-existence with desire, which both are directed toward the Good. In this essay, I use this shared ontological status between the semi-divine pleasure and desire and Eros, both as (and only as) wisdom-oriented, to argue that the Good-in-itself is desirable and pursuable, and this pursuit is necessarily pleasurable. I will first show the distinction between three kinds of pleasures with a focus on the two pure pleasures to argue that the semi-divine pleasure of learning is ontologically placed between the form of Pleasure and the bodily pleasures. I then discuss desire and Eros's ontological correspondence to the semi-divine pleasure in relation to the Good to show that the Good is desirable, pursuable, and relatable (pleasurable). I will also spend a

¹ Plato, *Republic* 509b.

section arguing that our desire for the Good is, in fact, pointed toward the Good-in-itself, and this relationship is developed independent of an epistemic commitment. At the end of the essay, I will discuss what this pursuit looks like epistemically by examining knowing (seeing) and philosophizing (smelling).

Pleasure

In this section, I will examine the different kinds of pleasure presented by Plato. In the *Philebus*, Plato uses “godlikeness” to indicate the ontological status of an object: the more “god-like” an object is, the closer it resides to the Good.² The two criteria that constitute this assessment are pureness and self-causing (self-sufficiency).³ Pure/unmixed pleasure is achieved when pleasure is independent of pain (pain-free).⁴ When pleasure is experienced as the alleviation of pain, such as an ill person experiencing the pleasure of comfort while recovering from a sickness, this pleasure experienced depends on the pain of sickness. Once the pain ceases to be, say, this person fully recovers, they no longer experience comfort as a pleasure.⁵ This pleasure is pain-dependent and, thus, mixed. A self-causing pleasure is achieved when the pleasure is actualized in and for itself, independent of filling a lack (lack-free).⁶ When both criteria are achieved, the pleasure is divine. If only one of them is achieved, the pleasure is semi-divine.⁷ With these two criteria, we infer four possible kinds of pleasures that reside in four distinct ontological categories: pure and self-causing, pure and not-self-causing, impure and self-causing, and impure and not-self-causing.

Plato hasn't mentioned the self-causing impure pleasure at all. I think this is so because a self-causing but impure pleasure is

² Plato, *Philebus*, 51-52.

³ Plato, 51-52.

⁴ Plato, 51-52.

⁵ Plato, 47c-d.

⁶ Plato, 51-52.

⁷ Plato, 51-52.

impossible, as self-causing indicates an ontological category incompatible with impureness. Self-causing, indicating self-sufficiency and an “in-itself-ness,” is the property only possessed by the highest ontological category: Beings.⁸ In the *Philebus*, Plato also implies that all Beings are pure through an example of the perfect shade of white. Socrates uses the perfect shade of white as an analogy to Truth (Beings), and he concludes with Protarchus that “the pure, unadulterated, and sufficient”⁹ is closer to the Truth than their opposites (impure, adulterated, and insufficient) are.¹⁰ This example shows that the closer something gets to Beings, the purer this thing is, indicating that Beings themselves are perfectly pure. Therefore, an impure Being cannot exist, leaving only three kinds of pleasure possible: the Form of Pleasure (the most divine), the pure but not-self-causing pleasure (the semi-divine), and the impure/mixed and not-self-causing pleasure.

Socrates discussed the most divine sort of pleasure and the “less divine” (the semi-divine) together, for both are unmixed¹¹ (pure, pain-free) pleasures. The distinction between the two kinds of pure pleasures is clearly made at 51d-e, as Socrates describes one kind as “not beautiful in relation to anything else but in and by themselves and that are accompanied by their own pleasures, which belong to them by nature,”¹² and the other kind belongs to a “less divine tribe”¹³ which has “no inevitable pain mixed with them,”¹⁴ but is not pleasurable in and by themselves. He also states, at 51e, that these

⁸ Plato, *Republic*, 508b.

⁹ Plato, *Philebus*, 52d-e.

¹⁰ Plato, 52d-e.

¹¹ As noted by Emily Fletcher, the word “unmixed,” along with some other words such as “true,” changes its sense throughout the dialogue. Here, “mixed” and “unmixed” means pure and impure; their senses differ totally from the third, “mixed” class of Limited and unlimited that Socrates explains in the *Philebus*, 26a, when he and Protarchus divide the universe into four kinds. See Emily Fletcher, “Plato on Pure Pleasure and the Best Life,” *Phronesis* 59, no. 2 (April 2014): pp. 113-142.

¹² Plato, *Philebus*, 51d.

¹³ Plato, 51e.

¹⁴ Plato, 51e.

are the “two species of the kinds of pleasures we are looking for,”¹⁵ indicating explicitly that there are two distinct kinds of pure pleasures. The macroscopic categories of mixed and unmixed pleasures are more commonly written on, but this smaller distinction between the two kinds of pure pleasures is not. I will spend most of this section arguing that there is such a distinction, as only by arguing that there exists a form of Pleasure can I relate pleasure to the Good.

A problem of this reading arises at 51b, where Socrates introduces the discussion on pure/unmixed pleasures, where he uses the quality of the less-divine kind to describe the entire category of pure/unmixed pleasures: “[true pleasures]¹⁶ *in general* [. . .] are based on imperceptible and painless lacks, while their fulfillments are perceptible and pleasant.”¹⁷ This passage makes it seem like there is no form of Pleasure and that all pleasures are necessarily becomings since only becomings are based on lacks, regardless of whether the lack is painful or painless. In addition, at 54c, Socrates says that all pleasures are becomings, hence, not self-causing, because they are all “processes of generation [that] necessarily comes to be for the sake of some Being,”¹⁸ which seems to indicate further that he denies a pure in-itself pleasure (the form of Pleasure).

However, Plato hasn't been precise in his word usage throughout the *Philebus*. One instance of imprecision is found at 55c, where Socrates uses “pleasure” to refer to the mixed kind of pleasure *specifically* without making a distinction on naming.¹⁹ The distinction between mixed pleasure (discussed here) and pure pleasure (not

¹⁵ Plato, 51e.

¹⁶ Also noted by Fletcher, “true pleasure” here seems not to be regarding pleasures with correct judgment, as says Socrates in 36c-d. Here, true pleasure is analogous to “pure/unmixed pleasure.” An examination on whether correct judgment and pureness are analogous doesn't contribute to the subject of discussion in this essay, so I will not go into it here. See Fletcher, “Plato on Pure Pleasure and the Best Life,” 127.

¹⁷ Plato, *Philebus*, 51b.

¹⁸ Plato, 54c.

¹⁹ Plato, 55c.

included here) is frequently made across dialogues²⁰ and is more commonly recognized among papers that examine the *Philebus*, regardless of their authors' positions on whether Plato accepts hedonism.²¹ If we recognize the distinction between mixed and pure pleasures while accepting an imprecise usage of the term "pleasure," we cannot claim a definite exclusion of the form of Pleasure at 54c.

At 55b-c in the *Philebus*, where Socrates says that it is illegitimate to "call the person who experiences not pleasure but pain *bad* while [they] are in pain, even if [they] were the best of all [people],"²² Socrates refutes Philebus's claim about the equation between pleasure and Good by showing that pain and human virtue can co-exist. "Pain" in this passage is only understood as bodily pain, similar to the pain of a wound or the pain of thirst. For Socrates, the elevation of this kind of pain, though pleasurable, is evaluated separately from virtue, as the former concerns the body while the latter concerns the soul: one can be the most virtuous and yet suffer from extreme bodily pain. The word "pleasure" here, as referring only to the soothing of pain, is clearly only referring to mixed pleasure (as it is pain-dependent), though Socrates hasn't made a distinction. If Socrates is referring to only one type of pleasure using the general term "pleasure" in the same dialogue, then it is not too bold to allow the possibility for him doing the same at 54c, which is only one Stephanus number ahead.

As to the problem at 51b, where Socrates seems to use the

²⁰ In Book IX of the *Republic*, Socrates distinguishes between false pleasures that come necessarily from pain and true pleasures that don't come from pain (584b). In the *Gorgias*, 494c-e, Socrates makes the same distinction by showing Calicles that the pleasure of scratching an itch is false because the person who scratches ceases to experience the joy of scratching after the itch is gone.

²¹ Different authors use different names for this distinction of good and bad pleasures, but they nevertheless show acknowledgment of such distinction. Fletcher and Shaw use "psychic" and "bodily," while Frede and Sanday use "true" and "false," "mixed" and "unmixed," etc. Shaw is writing on *Protagoras*, not on *Philebus*. I included him because he is referring to the same two kinds of pleasures. The list of works is included in the bibliography.

²² Plato, *Philebus*, 55c.

description of the semi-divine pleasure to describe the entire category of pure pleasures, the nature of the problem is slightly different from that of 54c.²³ It is unlikely that Plato is using a term imprecisely here because Plato uses the term “in general,” signifying an inclusion of *all* kinds of pure pleasures.²⁴ Emily Fletcher has addressed this concern in her paper, and she provides an alternative translation. Contrary to Frede’s own, which interprets the original ancient Greek as “*in general* [. . .] are based on [. . .] painless lacks,” Fletcher suggests that it should be translated to “*however many are based on* [. . .] painless lacks”.²⁵ If this alternative translation is taken, we can infer that Plato is not referring to all pure pleasures but only to *some* pure pleasures, allowing space for two types of pleasures to exist as pure pleasures. Although I cannot comment on this alternative translation’s legitimacy because I am ill-trained in reading ancient Greek, the understanding of Frede’s reading of *Philebus* as denying both the form of Pleasure and Plato’s acceptance of any kind of hedonism presented in her paper, “Rumpelstiltskin’s Pleasures: True and False Pleasures in Plato’s *Philebus*”²⁶ gives insight as to why she may have translated the text this way. If the form of Pleasure is already not considered, then there is only one type of pure pleasure left; hence, there is no need to account for the separation at 51b. According to Fletcher, both translations are possible, and since only hers allows for two kinds of pure pleasure that Plato has clearly expressed but aren’t examined by Frede in her reading of *Philebus*, I think reading this passage with Fletcher’s translation provides a more wholesome understanding.

²³ For context, I provide the quote again: “[true pleasures] *in general* [. . .] are based on imperceptible and painless lacks, while their fulfillments are perceptible and pleasant.”

²⁴ Plato, 54c.

²⁵ Emily Fletcher, “Plato on Pure Pleasure and the Best Life,” 122.

²⁶ Dorothea Frede, “Rumpelstiltskin’s Pleasures: True and False Pleasures in Plato’s *Philebus*,” *Phronesis* 30, no. 2 (1985): 151-80. On page 151, Frede writes that “[Plato] refuses to regard [pleasure] as *a good*” and “pleasure is therefore often treated by Plato as a necessary evil.” She writes in her footnotes on page 155 that “I am not persuaded by any of the arguments I have seen that Socrates or Plato who were so critical of the pleasures cherished by their contemporaries ever subscribed to an unconditional hedonistic position.”

I want to spend the last part of this section discussing the pleasure of learning, which Plato describes as the less divine pure pleasure at 51e of *Philebus*. This type of pleasure is less divine because it exists independent of pain but is nevertheless felt through filling a lack. At 52a-c, where Socrates notes that “there is no such thing as hunger for learning connected with [the pleasure of learning], nor any pains that have their source in a hunger for learning”²⁷ and that “the lapse of knowledge never causes any pain,”²⁸ he implies that the filling of knowledge brings pleasure and joy to the learner while it doesn’t originate from pain.

At 48e, Socrates and Protarchus agree that ignorance is a vice for the soul, and since all vices are painful, ignorance is painful for the soul. This may seem contradictory to the claim at 52b-c, where Socrates and Protarchus agree that the lack of knowledge doesn’t cause any pain. I think these two claims are not contradictory because, at 48e, Socrates talks about double ignorance (ignorance of one’s own ignorance), whereas Socrates is only referring to the state of a lack of knowledge at 52b-c. At 48e, Socrates and Protarchus describe three types of ignorance contrary to the Delphi oracle, “know thyself.”²⁹ The three ways in which one can be ignorant of oneself are to think of oneself as having a) more money, b) a more beautiful appearance, and c) more virtuosity than the actuality.³⁰ All three accounts address a sort of double ignorance that is extensively addressed in the *Apology*, where Socrates realizes he is wiser than everyone he has examined *not* because he has more knowledge than everyone else but because he is the only person who knows his ignorance, thus doesn’t regard himself as possessing any more knowledge than he does.³¹ This type of ignorance is very different from a lack of knowledge. The former is a vice, and the latter is simply a condition: it is a vice for a person to think they have more money than they have, but it is only a condition for a person to be

²⁷ Plato, “Philebus,” 52a.

²⁸ Plato, 52b.

²⁹ Plato, 48e.

³⁰ Plato, 48d-e.

³¹ A similar instance can be found in the *Alcibiades*, 117d-118c.

poor. Therefore, the account of ignorance at 48e doesn't contradict the pleasure of learning as a pure (pain-free) pleasure addressed at 52a-c.

In summary, there are three types of pleasures—divine, less divine, and bodily—identified in the *Philebus*. The divine and less divine kinds are pure pleasures, and the bodily is a mixed pleasure. The two pure pleasures are both independent of pain; they are distinct because the divine kind is in-and-for-itself, allowing them to reside in the ontology of the Forms. The less divine pleasure and the bodily pleasure, though the former is ontologically superior to the latter because the former is independent of pain, both reside in the ontological category of becomings. Both pureness and self-causing contribute ontologically, but since self-causing makes the distinction between Beings and becomings, it does most of the ontological work. Plato has specially made a connection between the less divine pleasure with the sense of smell, which, considering the significant extent to which Plato draws the parallel between knowing and seeing (vision), provides interesting insights into Plato's account of the epistemological potential of the philosopher. I will return to this point at the end of the essay.

Desire and Eros

In this section, I draw an ontological connection between this type of pleasure and the Eros that takes form in learning and claim that only the philosopher's pleasure and pursuit can transcend one's soul ontologically.

For we are becomings that exist intermediate to Beings and non-being, we cannot experience Beings due to an ontological incompatibility. Since the form of Pleasure is a Being, we do not experience them, meaning that we can only experience two out of the three pleasures: the pure but less divine and the mixed bodily pleasure. In the analogy of the divided line in Book VI of the *Republic*, Plato explains the ontological category of becomings in relation to Beings through a discussion of the intellectual and visible

realm.³² The intellectual realm consists of Beings/Forms and thus is the ultimate Reality where everything is unchanging and immortal.³³ The visible realm, on the other hand, consists of flux, which comes into being and dies away.³⁴ In the *Philebus*, Plato uses “Limited” (or “Measured”) and “unlimited” (or “unmeasured”) to address Beings and becomings, respectively—the descriptions of these dyads of terms are largely identical.³⁵ For Plato, that which comes into being and dies away doesn’t have a defined stable state; therefore, it exists and doesn’t exist at the same time, and resides intermediate between what *is* (Beings) and what *is not* (non-beings).³⁶

Eros and desire share the ontology as becomings with the less divine and the mixed pleasures because Eros originates from desire, and desire is necessarily dependent on a lack/need, which indicates that both are also necessarily not self-causing/self-sufficient. In the *Symposium*, Plato gives a detailed account of the birth of Eros. As the child of Poros (resource) and Penia (poverty), Eros is “by nature neither immortal nor mortal”³⁷ and is “always living with Need.”³⁸ Further, Eros is “far from being delicate and beautiful,”³⁹ and because of his lack of Beauty, Eros “is in love with what is beautiful” and pursues it with “eagerness and zeal.”⁴⁰ Since Eros exists intermediate between what-is and what-is-not, he exists in the same ontological category, as becomings, as us. Therefore, the conditions of Eros apply to humans. For Plato, Eros and desire is common for everyone and are both directed toward the same

³² Plato, *Republic*, 508-509.

³³ Plato, 508-509.

³⁴ Plato, 508-509.

³⁵ Plato, *Philebus*, 16d-17b.

³⁶ A more detailed account of this topic would be more helpful. However, due to limited space and because this topic and the point that I am trying to use this argument to support, i.e., human beings are becomings and becomings are incompatible with Beings, are both quite commonly agreed upon, I do not plan to go further in-depth.

³⁷ Plato, *Symposium*, 203e.

³⁸ Plato, 203d.

³⁹ Plato, 203d.

⁴⁰ Plato, 206b.

thing—the Good.⁴¹ At 205b, Diotima notes that “everyone is in love”;⁴² at 206a-b, Diotima and Socrates define being in love as “wanting to possess the Good forever,”⁴³ suggesting that being in love is a condition that must include a desire, which is pointed toward the Good.

Unlike the account of pleasure, there aren’t different types of Eros and desires. In the *Symposium*, Diotima describes Eros as a driving force that points to many different things and is actualized through action in many different modalities. In Book IX of the *Republic*, Socrates shows that the different actualized actions will result in large differences using a comparative examination of the philosopher’s life and the tyrant’s life, as both are the product of love. The pursuits of both the philosopher and the tyrant are identical, as both desire the same thing. In the *Symposium*, Diotima says that the pursuit “is possible one way only: reproduction.”⁴⁴ However, the subject of reproduction marks the difference in the result of the pursuit, which accounts for the large ontological difference between the philosopher and the tyrant.⁴⁵

The philosopher’s pursuit is directed toward Wisdom, and is actualized by intellectual reproduction that moves them ontologically up on the ladder of Love. The love of Wisdom, if we tie it back to the different ontological categories of pleasures, corresponds to the semi-divine pleasure of learning. However, the tyrant pursues their desire through a kind of lawless freedom that, in reality, enslaves the tyrant’s soul through the never-ending fulfillment of bodily lack. According to Socrates, the Eros in the tyrant’s soul becomes a kind of “madness that [. . .] destroys [the tyrants] [. . .] until it’s purged [the tyrants] of moderation and filled him with imported madness.”⁴⁶ As much as Eros can elevate one’s

⁴¹ I will examine whether this target of Eros and desire is the Good-in-itself or the apparent good in the next section.

⁴² Plato, 205b.

⁴³ Plato, 206a.

⁴⁴ Plato, 207d.

⁴⁵ Plato, 207d.

⁴⁶ Plato, *Republic*, 573b.

soul ontologically in the case of the philosopher, it also has the power to destroy one's soul and move it closer to non-being. It is important to note that what marks the ontological difference between the tyrant and the philosopher is directly related to the corresponding kinds of pleasures that follow from their pursuit. The philosopher will not be enslaved by their desire because the lack that they are trying to fill is not painful, so even though the lack is always present, it doesn't cause pain. On the contrary, the lack of a tyrant is a painful one, and the pleasure resulting from the filling of such a lack is mixed. In the latter case, the lack drains all moderation of the tyrant's soul. It can never be filled, and since it is painful, one cannot stand it not being filled. The tyrant is then stuck in their endless pursuit of bodily comfort that shall never come, thus living a miserable life—a living nightmare.⁴⁷ As Plato later claims, the differences in the pleasure of the philosopher and that of the tyrant constitute a vast difference in how happy they are: the philosopher is 729 times happier than the tyrant.⁴⁸ This note further shows the differences between the philosopher and the tyrant, which yield the same conclusion that it must be the intellectual pleasure resulting from a love of Wisdom for the soul to pursue the Good. And because the pursuit results in happiness, the pursuit of the Good is a pleasurable one.

Do we desire the Good-in-itself?

This section discusses the object of the desire. In the *Symposium* and many other dialogues, Plato claims that all desires are pointed toward the Good. However, a problem arises. How can desire, as something necessarily lacks and thus is a becoming, be pointed toward the Good that is beyond Being? This question is pressing because only if we *can* desire the Good-in-itself can we count the pursuit of Eros as a pursuit of the Good-in-itself.

In Book VII of the *Republic*, Socrates asserts that the Good is

⁴⁷ Plato, 576b.

⁴⁸ Plato, 587e.

beyond Beings.⁴⁹ At the end of Book VI, Socrates assigns different faculties of comprehension to each ontological category through the divided line analogy: opinion opines becoming, and Knowledge knows Beings. Since each faculty of comprehension can only be applied to its ontological category, Knowledge cannot be applied to the Good, as the Good is “beyond Beings.”⁵⁰ This further mean that the Good is unknowable. If the Good is not knowable, how can we be sure that our desire is directed toward the Good-in-itself, not the apparent good (our opinion of the Good)? I think the reluctance on whether we can indeed desire the Good-in-itself stems from two concerns: a) the desire to possess something must share the same ontology as its object, and b) we must know something to desire it. I attempt to address both concerns in this section.

The first concern is very reasonably inferred, as Plato has always been very strict with his assignment of ontological categories and with the insistence that different ontological categories don't interact. One example is again the strict correspondence between the faculty of comprehension and their objects of understanding (epistemology and ontology) presented in the previous paragraph. We can infer the same thing from Socrates's definition of Justice in the *Republic*: “having and doing one's own [work].”⁵¹ This rule of specialization is the foundation of the city and, according to Socrates, prevents the city from failing. If Plato organizes his ontology, epistemology, and politics from the strict correspondence, no-interference rule, then it is very reasonable to infer that he does the same thing with desire. As is explicitly written, all desires originate from a lack; desires are necessarily becoming. There seems to be an ontological incompatibility for the desire to point toward the Good-in-itself, and it seems that the solution to this problem must press us to accept that the desire points only to the apparent good instead of the Good-in-itself.

However, it seems to be the case that desire is a special force that

⁴⁹ Plato, 509c.

⁵⁰ Plato, 507-509.

⁵¹ Plato, 433b.

points not to its own ontological category but to some higher Being because desire intrinsically points *away* from itself to the things that are unattained. In the *Symposium*, Socrates states that we only desire what we don't have and that we want the good things that we currently hold to persist forever.⁵² He says to Agathon that "it's *necessary* that [...] a thing that desires desires something of which it is in need; otherwise, if it were not in need, it would not desire it."⁵³ This short excerpt of the dialogue between Socrates and Agathon provides important insights into what the desire we experience looks like. Socrates uses two examples to show that we don't desire what we already have. The first example is time-independent: a short person wants to be tall.⁵⁴ I interpret this example as being tall fitting more in the beauty standard: the short person wants to be beautiful, so they want to be tall. Tallness itself is not necessarily synonymous with the Good because it doesn't make sense for a very tall person, say, a seven-foot person, to want to be taller; it is desirable because the person who desires to be tall is shorter than the beauty standard. Therefore, it is not tallness that the person desires; it is Beauty. For Beauty is a Being, this person desires something ontologically superior to their own through their desire for height. The second example is time-dependent: strong and healthy people want to remain in their good states forever.⁵⁵ This example conveys its message pointing to the distinction of time-boundedness between the state of presently healthy and the possession of the form of Health. The state of presently healthy is a time-bounded state since one whose present state of health doesn't guarantee that they will remain healthy in the future. Since this state comes into being and dies away, it is between what-is and what-is-not, so it is a becoming. On the contrary, the state of Health that lasts forever signifies that it never dies away, so it exists not as a becoming but as a Being, which the desiring agent doesn't possess. Therefore, a desire for maintenance is also based on a lack and is pointed toward Beings.

⁵² Plato, *Symposium*, 200a-e.

⁵³ Plato, 200b.

⁵⁴ Plato, 200b.

⁵⁵ Plato, 200b-d.

The second concern is also pressing: if we cannot know the object of our desire, how are we sure that the object of our desire is indeed the Good-in-itself, not what appears to us as good? Since desire is necessarily a becoming possessed by becomings (us), even if it can point toward the Good-in-itself, we can never claim this ability by comparing our knowledge of our desires and our knowledge of the Good. I suggest that Knowledge of the Good is unnecessary for our desire to be directed toward the Good.

Since our acknowledgment of the existence of our desire doesn't depend on our epistemic account of it, we cannot deny the possibility of our desires pointing toward the Good-in-itself simply because we do not know the Good-in-itself. In many dialogues, Socrates explores our limited knowledge of our desires by contrasting our desire, i.e., what we *actually* want, with what we *thought* we wanted.⁵⁶ Socrates attributes the discrepancy between what one really wants and what one thinks one wants to be caused by a lack of intelligence—it is because one doesn't know what one really wants that causes one to do the alternative, which only causes harm.⁵⁷ Therefore, though Plato writes extensively in the *Symposium* explaining that desire is the fundamental reason for all our actions, he doesn't think we know our desires, though we undoubtedly have them.

This claim is not as hard to accept as it seems to be. The desire for Beauty doesn't require us to know Beauty. We desire Beauty because we have a vague feeling that Beauty is a good thing to have, and this reason alone is sufficient for us to desire and pursue Beauty. In addition, as desire pursues only what it lacks and knowing is a permanent fulfillment of the lack, it is impossible for a desire to pursue something that it already has, meaning that not knowing the Good is crucial for it to be desired in the first place. Considering these points, I think we do not desire the apparent good; the object of our desire is necessarily the Good-in-itself. Since our desire is indeed directed to the Good-in-itself and desire shares its ontology

⁵⁶ Two examples are found in the *Meno*, 88-89, and the *Gorgias*, 477d-e.

⁵⁷ Plato, *Gorgias*, 467a.

with Eros, we can say that Eros's pursuit is also directed toward the Good-in-itself. However, not all kinds of pursuits are on the right track of ontological transcendence. Since the pleasure of learning is discovered to be taking form in the highest possible ontological status that becomings can achieve, only the Eros that takes the route of learning can allow one's soul to move closer to the Good.

Conclusion and the philosopher's pursuit

In this essay, I first examined the three kinds of pleasure listed in the *Philebus*, with a focus on the pure but less divine pleasure of learning. Then, I drew an ontological connection between this kind of pleasure and the Eros that actualizes with the love of wisdom to suggest that the philosopher's pursuit of the Good is the only known one that allows for an elevation of one's soul. However, since this hypothesis can only work if our desire's object is the Good-in-itself, not an apparent Good, I tried to show that this is indeed the case in the previous section. If my arguments hold, then I can conclude in saying that it is the Good-in-itself that is desired, pursued by Eros, and that this Good-in-itself is relatable to us because the most seemingly promising pursuit of it generates the best kind of pleasure among the variety of our experiences.

At the end of the essay, I want to open a suggestion on the philosopher's pursuit of the Good. As written by Plato, the pursuit of learning is a semi-divine pure pleasure, and it is connected to the sense of smell.⁵⁸ This account gives insight into Plato's account of the epistemological potential of the philosopher because, as opposed to the association between learning and smelling, knowing is associated with seeing. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato writes that the doctrine of recollection is the "recollection of the things our soul saw when it was traveling with god";⁵⁹ in the cave allegory, the prisoner who goes out of the cave and *sees* the world *knows* reality;⁶⁰ in the divided line, vision is also used as an analogy for the gain of

⁵⁸ See Plato, *Philebus*, 51e, as well as Plato, *Republic*, 589b-c.

⁵⁹ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 249c.

⁶⁰ Plato, *Republic*, 516e-517a.

Knowledge in the intelligible realm.⁶¹ It is quite explicit that Plato equates knowledge with the sense of sight. What does he mean, then, to say that the pleasure of learning is a pleasure of the sense of smell? I think the most straightforward interpretation of this claim is that Plato denies the epistemic potential of Knowledge for the philosopher, which aligns with similar claims made in many other dialogues: in the *Meno*, Socrates claims that he doesn't know the virtues;⁶² in the *Gorgias*, Socrates claims, "My account is always the same: I don't know how these things are;"⁶³ in the *Apology*, Socrates again claims that he knows nothing.⁶⁴

It seems that the philosopher's pursuit is *not* a seeing one but a blind and smelling one. It is important for me to note that, though the philosopher's pursuit does elevate the philosopher's soul ontologically, it is never an elevation so significant that it transcends the soul from becoming to Being. Lastly, I want to suggest that this elevation, though small macroscopically, is huge when applied because the life that one chooses to live according to pure pleasure includes much more joy than the life that results from the otherwise decision. Therefore, though Knowledge may not be guaranteed, the pleasure that results from loving Wisdom is more than adequate for this life to be a desirable one.

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⁶¹ Plato, 509-510.

⁶² Plato, *Meno*, 58c-d.

⁶³ Plato, *Gorgias*, 509a.

⁶⁴ Plato, *Apology*, 21d-e.

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