PLEASURE IN ANCIENT GREEK PHILOSOPHY

In this volume Professor Wolfsdorf undertakes the first exploration of ancient Greek philosophical conceptions of pleasure in relation to contemporary conceptions. He provides broad coverage of the ancient material, from pre-Platonic to Old Stoic treatments; and, in the contemporary period, from World War II to the present. Examination of the nature of pleasure in ancient philosophy largely occurred within ethical contexts but in the contemporary period has, to a greater extent, been pursued within philosophy of mind and psychology. This divergence reflects the dominant philosophical preoccupations of the times. But Professor Wolfsdorf argues that the various treatments are complementary. Indeed, the Greeks' examinations of pleasure were incisive and their debates vigorous, and their results have enduring value for contemporary discussion.

The *Key Themes in Ancient Philosophy* series provides concise books, written by major scholars and accessible to non-specialists, on important themes in ancient philosophy that remain of philosophical interest today.

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But meanwhile – is it not clear that there are several concepts that need investigating simply as a part of the philosophy of psychology and – as I should recommend – *banishing ethics totally* from our minds? Namely – to begin with: "action," "intention," "pleasure," "wanting." More will probably turn up if we start with these. Eventually it might be possible to advance to considering the concept of a virtue; with which, I suppose, we should be beginning some sort of a study of ethics.

G. E. M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy"

Muse, tell me the deeds of golden Aphrodite,
the Cyprian, who stirs up sweet passion in the gods
and subdues the tribes of mortal men, the birds
that fly in the air, and all the many creatures
that the dry land and sea rear.

Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite 5.1–5

Contents

Acknowledgments

Soon after I came to Temple University in 2004, my colleague Charles Dyke invited me to read *Philebus*. He had a hypothesis about the influence of Eudoxus' theory of proportions on the role of the discussion of mixtures of dissimilar kinds. So far as I can tell, the hypothesis never bore the intended fruit; and overall we moved through the text too swiftly. But it was a start.

At about the same time, my colleague and friend Andrew Payne, also new to the area, invited me to read Greek together. I suggested that we include Charles Kahn and proposed that since Charles was working on late Plato, we try *Philebus*. That group, occasionally augmented by graduate students, proceeded with great care and completed the text in about two years. By that time, my appetite for ancient hedonic theory had been thoroughly whetted. Charles, Andrew, and I also attempted to compose a paper on the *dihairesis* of pleasure, but we were more successful as collaborative readers and interlocutors than writers.

Felicitously, the 2007 meeting of the International Plato Society in Dublin was devoted to *Philebus*, further cementing my fascination with this text. Meanwhile, I had also begun teaching seminars on ancient Greek conceptions of pleasure and included some relevant material in courses on ethics. Temple's tradition as a stronghold of aesthetics certainly encouraged my focus on pleasure. But it was principally my growing interests in meta-ethics and philosophy of mind that motivated me. Pleasure stands at a wonderful intersection of these vigorous domains.

About 2008 I began working on a book on Plato's curious coupling of pleasure and truth-value. I was well underway when in the spring of 2010 Michael Sharp contacted me from Cambridge University Press to ask if I would be interested in contributing a book on the topic of pleasure to a series that John Ferrari and Catherine Rowett were editing. My initial reaction was mixed pleasure. I was delighted to be invited but worried that such a book would jeopardize my work on Plato on pleasure and truth-value.

In fact, the project has been extremely salutary. I find it easy to get lost in scholarly details and debates, but the conditions, including the intended audience, for this book compelled me to think through problems and write from a different perspective. In the process I came to appreciate its value. From a bird's eye view, one can see connections that are easy to miss when one's nose is too close to the ground. The project also encouraged me to think harder about the relevance of the ancients' contributions to contemporary discussions – and this has proven to be one of the most important consequences of the undertaking.

I would like to believe that ultimately I was ripe for this project and fortunate that the opportunity to execute it came my way. For this and for their editorial investment and advice, I express my gratitude and appreciation to Drs Sharp, Ferrari, and Rowett.

In writing this book, I have also sporadically consulted several experts in the relevant areas of ancient thought. For their willingness to listen, their comments and criticisms, and in some cases for sharing unpublished work, I thank Elizabeth Asmis, Tad Brennan, Victor Caston, David Sansone, Brooke Holmes, Brad Inwood, Jeffrey Purinton, and James Warren. I would also like to thank Diana Lobel for her interest in my manuscript and for a challenging and productive exchange regarding Epicurus' conception of pleasure. Epicurus' view has been particularly difficult to work out.

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