

## COMMENTARY ON VALLEJO

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### ABSTRACT

In his rich and suggestive paper, Alvaro Vallejo argues for the novel thesis that Plato posits a form of pleasure in the *Republic* and the *Philebus*. Vallejo argues that the notion of a Platonic form of pleasure best explains other things that Plato says about pleasure. First, Plato draws a distinction between true pleasure and the appearance of pleasure. Second, Plato uses the same language to describe the relationship between forms and their inferior instantiations as he uses to describe the relationship between true and false pleasures. In these comments, I argue that we do not need to posit a form of pleasure to explain these features of the text. Moreover, I argue that on Vallejo's account of the form of pleasure, the form could not do the job required of it, namely, it could not explain the problem with false pleasures.

In his rich and suggestive paper, Álvaro Vallejo argues for two main claims. In the first part of his paper, he defends the novel thesis that Plato posits a form of pleasure in both the *Republic* and the *Philebus*. In the second part, he lays out the requirements for instantiating the form of pleasure, and he argues that the problem with false pleasures is that they fail to meet those requirements and so are imperfect imitations of the form of pleasure.

The claim that Plato posits a form of pleasure in both the *Republic* and the *Philebus* prompts many fundamental questions about the theory of forms. If Plato thinks there is a form of pleasure, then does he also think there are forms for other sorts of psychological states, such as beliefs and emotions? If so, for which range of psychological states? Are there forms for emotions like anger, pride, or love? If not, then what is so special about pleasure? In sum, for what range of entities does Plato posit forms and why? Vallejo's thesis also invites questions about the development of Plato's metaphysics between the time he wrote the *Republic* and the purportedly later dialogue, the *Philebus*. Does the *Philebus* even posit the existence of forms? If so, what is the evidence for this? Might we think instead that Plato modified or even abandoned the theory of forms by the time he wrote the *Philebus*?<sup>1</sup> Addressing these questions is important for the success of Vallejo's project. In these comments, however, I set these difficult issues aside in order to assess more directly Vallejo's claim that Plato posits

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<sup>1</sup> For examples of scholars who reject the idea that the *Philebus* posits forms, see Teloh 1981, and Sayre 1983.

a form of pleasure and that false pleasures are inferior imitations of the form of pleasure.

Plato never states that there is a form of pleasure. Why, then, should we attribute the view to him? Vallejo seems to think that doing so best explains other things that Plato says about pleasure. First, Plato draws a distinction between true pleasure and the appearance of pleasure. Second, Plato uses the same language to describe the relationship between forms and their inferior instantiations as he uses to describe the relationship between true and false pleasures. My strategy in these comments is to argue that we do not need to posit a form of pleasure to explain these features of the text. Moreover, I argue that on Vallejo's account of the form of pleasure, the form cannot do the job required of it, namely, it cannot explain what is wrong with false pleasures.

According to Vallejo, the most important evidence that Plato posits a form of pleasure is that he distinguishes between true pleasure and what only appears to be a pleasure in both the *Republic* and *Philebus*. Thus, Plato holds the somewhat counter-intuitive view that someone might think that she is experiencing pleasure, but not really be experiencing pleasure. This means, of course, that there is more to truly experiencing pleasure than simply thinking you are feeling it. Hence, there must be an objective standard of what it is to experience a true pleasure. Vallejo argues that this objective standard must be the form of pleasure.

While Vallejo is surely correct that Plato thinks that there is such an objective standard it is not at all clear that we need to think of this standard as a Platonic form of pleasure; instead, we might think that this standard is something found in the physical world, namely, to be in a certain physiological state. And indeed, Plato explicitly presents us with such a view. In the *Philebus*, Socrates describes the nature of pleasure as follows:

What I claim is that when we find the harmony in living creatures disrupted, there will at the same time be a disintegration of their nature and a rise of pain . . . . But if the reverse happens, harmony is regained and the former nature restored, we have to say that pleasure arises, if we must pronounce only a few words on the weightiest matters in the shortest possible time (31d).<sup>2</sup>

This passage certainly suggests that to experience a true pleasure just is to be in a certain physiological state.

Moreover, Plato explicitly uses this account of pleasure during his critique of false pleasures later in the dialogue. As is well known, Plato thinks that there are a variety of ways in which pleasures can be false. For exam-

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<sup>2</sup> All translations are from Frede, 1993.

ple, someone could think she is experiencing pleasure when she is really just experiencing the absence of pain. He says, "It has now been said repeatedly that it is a destruction of the nature of those entities . . . that gives rise to pain and suffering . . . . But when things are restored to their nature again, this restoration, as we established in our agreement among ourselves, is pleasure" (42c-d). Accordingly, if someone thinks she is experiencing pleasure when she is only experiencing the absence of pain, then she is experiencing a false pleasure (42c-44a). In this case, then, the objective standard by which Plato criticizes false pleasures is a physical standard. Thus, to explain that Plato thinks that people can be mistaken about whether they are experiencing pleasures we need not posit a form of pleasure; instead, it is more consistent with the text to infer that the objective standard for determining whether or not someone is truly experiencing pleasure is whether or not she is in a certain physiological state.

However, Vallejo highlights a second piece of evidence that suggests that there is a Platonic form of pleasure: Plato uses the same language to describe the relationship between forms and their inferior instantiations as he does to describe the relationship between true and false pleasures, namely, the language of imitation and appearance. So, for example, in the *Philebus*, Plato says that false pleasures are a ridiculous imitation of true pleasures (40c5). Vallejo argues that this language is ontologically significant, since shortly thereafter he says that false pleasures appear greater than they truly are (42b). In the *Republic*, Plato does not explicitly use the language of imitation. He does, however, compare the false pleasures of the majority to images and shadow paintings of true pleasures (586b). Vallejo argues that the comparison between false pleasures and images and shadow painting links false pleasures to the theory of artistic imitation presented in *Republic X*, where the imitator creates only appearances of real objects (601b). Vallejo thinks that Plato's use of the language of imitation and appearances to describe the relation between true and false pleasures provides further support for the idea that he posits a form of pleasure and conceives of false pleasures as inferior instantiations of this form.

But again, it is not necessary to posit a form of pleasure to explain Plato's use of the language of imitation and appearance. Vallejo is correct to note that Plato links imitation and appearance, but he is too hasty in inferring that the language of appearance always involves reference to a form. So, for example, in *Republic X*, Socrates draws attention to the fact that many things appear to be other than they really are when they are viewed in certain contexts. He notes that the same thing can appear to be different sizes depending on whether we are looking at it from close up or far away; and the same thing can appear crooked or straight depending on whether we are

viewing it when it is in or out of water (602c-d). He goes on to argue that calculating, measuring and weighing assist us in these cases, so that we are not ruled by how things appear, but by our reason (602d). These claims suggest that Plato can draw a contrast between the way something is and the way it appears without implicating the notion of a form, since he thinks that the means to accessing the truth is weighing, counting and measuring, which are tools that help us to navigate the physical world, and not necessarily the world of forms.

In the *Protagoras*, Plato notes that just as objects or sounds in the distance appear less than they truly are, so pleasures that are far in the future seem smaller than they truly are; and just as objects or sounds that are near at hand appear greater than they truly are, so immediate pleasures seem to be greater than they truly are (356c-d). Here too Plato uses the language of appearance without invoking the notion of a form, since the standard by which we are to compare the appearance of the size or sound of objects is a physical fact, namely, the real size or sound of an object. If we take the analogy strictly, this suggests that the standard by which we are to judge the real size of a pleasure is also a physical fact; and indeed Socrates goes on to say that it is the art of measurement that will save us from being deceived by false appearances of pleasure (356d). Therefore there is no reason to think that the language of appearance indicates a form. Sometimes it can indicate a merely physical objective standard, and this certainly appears to be the case with pleasure.

Vallejo also seems to suggest, however, that false pleasures are best explained as poor imitations of true pleasure, and that this provides further evidence for the claim that Plato posits a form of pleasure. But on Vallejo's account, false pleasures could not be inferior imitations of true pleasures, since he holds that true and false pleasures have absolutely nothing in common. Let me explain. In the *Philebus*, Socrates places pleasure in the genus of the unlimited and he argues that because of this pleasures cannot be good in themselves (27e-28a; 31a). Later, he argues that since pleasure is the restoration of an entity to its natural state, it is a kind of process or becoming, which has no being of its own but exists for the sake of some other being (53c-54d); again, he argues that because of this, pleasure is not good in itself (54c-d). According to Vallejo, if pleasure cannot be good in itself, then there cannot be a form of pleasure.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, he argues that not

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<sup>3</sup> It would be useful to have more of an explanation for why there could not be a form for something that is not good in itself. Indeed, if Plato posits forms in the *Philebus*, then it is likely that there would be a form for each of the four kinds of being: the unlimited, the limit,

all pleasures belong to the genus of the unlimited, and not all pleasures are restorations. In support of this he notes that in the beginning of the *Philebus*, Plato states that there are many different kinds of pleasure; Vallejo argues that we should understand this as a warning against supposing that there is any unity underlying these kinds (12c-13d).<sup>4</sup> Thus, Vallejo seems to think that there are at least two radically different kinds of pleasure: false pleasures, which presumably are restorations, and true pleasures, which are not restorations, but instead involve some kind of stable being and are therefore good in themselves.

The idea that there are radically different kinds of pleasure, however, is in serious tension with the idea that false pleasures are problematic because they are inferior imitations of the form of pleasure. Vallejo conceives of the relation of imitation as identical to the relation between form and image as depicted in the *Republic's* allegory of the divided line. Vallejo says:

The vocabulary of shadows, phantoms and appearances, to which the scene painting of illusory pleasures are related, means that they are mere images in the sense given to this word in the allegory of the divided line, where such kinds of objects, ontologically inferior, are so considered in comparison with the perfect and eternal reality of the forms that Plato calls "the only true object" (516a3). (57)<sup>5</sup>

But if false pleasures are imitations or images of true pleasures in the sense given to the terms in the divided line then they would be *likenesses* of their forms, albeit imperfect likenesses, and they would have to be *caused* by their forms. After all, Plato says that the images on the lowest level of the line are reflections of their originals.<sup>6</sup> On Vallejo's account, however, it is

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the mixture, and the cause of the mixture. This suggests that there could be forms for things that are not good in themselves.

<sup>4</sup> Vallejo is too hasty in inferring from Plato's claim that there are many kinds of pleasure that there is no unity underlying these pleasures. Plato is trying to show that unity is compatible with variety. Thus, he argues that even though all colors share some feature in virtue of which we call them colors, there may be great variety and difference in types of colors, such as black and white (12e-13a). Accordingly, we ought to conclude that he thinks that all pleasures share some feature in virtue of which we call them pleasures, even though particular pleasures, such as the pleasure of being wise and the pleasure someone receives in virtue of having foolish hopes, may be very different (12c-d).

<sup>5</sup> Also, "The mixed and untrue pleasures, with their unlimited character, would be *eidola* or phenomenal appearances of the true essence of pleasure, or, in other words, would be situated in the lowest segments of the scalar ontology which Plato describes in the divided line of the *Republic*" (n. 13). Also, "These false pleasures are false in the same ontological sense in which the *eikones* and *eidola* situated in the lowest segment of the divided line, do not represent the most real or truthful objects" (65).

<sup>6</sup> See also the discussion of imitation in *Republic X*, where Plato says that the artist imitates a bed by making something that is like it (597a).

difficult to see how a false pleasure could be at all like a true pleasure, or caused by a true pleasure, since he insists that they have radically different natures with no underlying unity. In short, if true and false pleasures have nothing in common in virtue of which they are both called pleasure, then true and false pleasures could not be related through the latter being an imitation (even a poor imitation) of the former.

Now Vallejo might respond to this objection by abandoning the idea that the form of pleasure explains false pleasures, and holding instead that the form of pleasure explains the particular instances of true pleasures. At the conclusion of the *Philebus*, however, Plato gives a final ranking of goods: measure attains first place, harmonious mixtures the second, reason and intelligence the third; the practical arts and opinion fourth; and finally, true pleasures receive fifth place (64c-67b). This suggests, of course, that there is something wrong with pleasure. If, however, true pleasures are not restorations, but have being and are good in themselves, then why does Plato rank them last? In other words, if pleasures are such that there can be a form of pleasure, then what is the problem with pleasure?

In these comments, I have challenged Vallejo's claim that there is a form of pleasure. I do not mean, however, to cast doubt on the point that pleasures are false because they fall short in some way or another from an objective standard of what it is to experience pleasure. In his introduction, Vallejo states that he believes that the normative concept of pleasure that he proposes could function independently of the ontological implications. In this commentary, I hope to have shown that we have reason to favor the idea that the objective standard, or normative concept of pleasure, is something other than a form of pleasure.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Many thanks to an anonymous referee and to Clerk Shaw for comments on an earlier version of this commentary.

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