

Plato on False Pains and False Pleasures

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A commonsense view about pains and pleasures is that they are mere sensations. Perceiving pains as painful and pleasures as pleasant does not involve beliefs about the world. In Plato's *Philebus*, Protarchus, a very intelligent young man who is apparently a disciple of the hedonist Eudoxus, defends this commonsense assumption. Plato puts into the mouth of Socrates the startling view that pleasures and pains can be false. In defending this view, Plato argues for the bizarre claim that what makes pleasures pleasant and pains painful are beliefs. We are primarily interested in this claim. However, to understand Plato's argument we will need also to follow his reasons for thinking that pains and pleasures can be false.

In claiming that pleasures and pains can be false, Plato uses the notion of falsity in a number of different ways. We will focus on the claim at 36c–41b that pleasures can be false because they involve beliefs, propositions or expectations that can be true or false.¹ At times, 40c–e for example, Plato suggests that these false pleasures are "less real" and so it looks like Plato means that pleasures which have a false propositional content do not even exist. It is this idea that has been the focus of criticism in modern times. But in other parts of the dialogue Plato does not push the unreality point but says that they are false in the sense that they misrepresent the world. The idea of false pain or pleasure has found little acceptance in the

1 We have followed the normal convention of referring to passages in Plato, which is to refer to page numbers and column letters of the standard edition of the works of Plato, edited by Stephanus. These page numbers and column letters are repeated in Plato, 1925.

last couple of hundred years. The prevailing ideas about pleasure and pain have been more closely aligned to the position of Protarchus. In particular, the idea, defended by Protarchus, that we are always correct about the pleasantness of pleasures and painfulness of pains has seemed obviously right. This position has gone hand in hand with a theory about the workings of the brain, in which the stimulation of neurones leads to the activation of specific parts of the brain that cause particular feelings. On this theory, the parts of the brain that process beliefs about the world are not essentially involved in experiencing pain or pleasure.

Recent work in psychology and neurophysiology has, however, led to a radically different perspective that is far closer to Plato's view. In *The Myth of Pain*, Valerie Grey Hardcastle argues that it is possible for someone to feel pain as intensely as ever but not to have an aversion to it (Hardcastle, 1999). She argues that a large part of what makes something painful is our thoughts about it, and that pain processing is far from a simple response by a single part of the brain in reaction to a stimulus. The crux of her thesis is that pains have a cognitive aspect. This is interesting because Plato's argument that pleasures can be false has implicit in it a cognitive theory of the pleasantness of pleasures and the unpleasantness of pains. So while we may dismiss Plato's attempt to make some pleasures unreal, the fact that Plato was aware of and interested in the cognitive component of pleasures and pains makes for renewed interest in his arguments in the *Philebus*.

To support his claim that pleasure and pain always involve a cognitive component, Plato exploits the fact that pain and pleasure words can sometimes be used to designate states that involve beliefs: he uses various root words to cover pleasure and pain. All of the root words describe a variety of states. They can be used to designate what might be called mental pleasure and pain as well as what seem to be mere bodily sensations. One root word he uses for pain is *άλγος*, which is a rather broad word covering all kinds of unpleasant states. Another is *λόπη*, which covers both mental and what is commonly thought to be bodily distress. He also uses three root words for pleasure: one word *ἠδονή* means delight or enjoyment; *χαίρειν* means to rejoice; and *τέρμις* means gladness or enjoyment.

Plato's argument depends on his theory that pleasure and pain are perceptions (*aistheses*). The passage in the *Theaetetus* at 156b is the clearest articulation of what Plato means by perceptions:

Now we have names for the perceptions of the following sort : seeings, hearings, smellings, feelings of cold, feelings of heat; also what are called pleasures, pains, desires, fears and others.

It seems that Plato does not think that pleasure or pain is merely the perception of a (subjective) feeling or sensation, but rather, the perception of states or objects in the world.² So, at 31d–32b in the *Philebus*, we are to see pain as the perception of a deficit, and pleasure as a perception that we are being restored from a deficit. Coupled with the feeling is the perception that a particular object is diminishing or replenishing us. At 35a–c we see Plato drawing an analogy between pleasure and desire. Pleasure, like desire, has an object to which we are directing ourselves in thought. Socrates claims that in the child who lacks experience, pain is the perception of a lack and a desire for replenishment. However, he hints that in the experienced individual it is a perception of a lack plus a perception that a particular external object will replenish her.

Furthermore at 38e–40c Plato has Socrates talk about a writer and a painter within the soul. Memory and the senses unite, and they and the feelings connected with them write *logoi* (words) in the soul. These words can be true or false and will therefore affect the truth or falsity of the pleasures and pains. But there is also a painter who illustrates the words the writer has written, and hence is also dependent on the truth or falsity of the words. Plato treats these pictures as images that evoke pleasure and pain, hope and

2 This is denied by Gosling and Taylor in their analysis in *The Greeks on Pleasure* (1982:16–19). They argue that Plato and other thinkers used the word *aistheses* (usually translated as perceptions) when they should have talked about sensations, because “it seems impossible to regard enjoyment as literally a form of perception.” We find their argument unsatisfactory. We believe Plato does indeed believe what he states many times; that pleasure is a perception of an external quality.

despair. They are not just empty hopes but expectations of what is to be. At 36a–c Socrates states that these images are so powerful that a man who suffers a bodily lack can pleasure himself by picturing the appropriate replenishment in his soul.

At 36c Socrates asks Protarchus whether there are true and false pleasures and pains, and Protarchus responds negatively with a question: “How could there be false pleasures and pains?” Socrates answers by drawing an analogy with some cognitive states which are sometimes called false such as fears, expectations and opinions. The discussion is most clear at 37a – 38a. Socrates claims that just as a false opinion is both in the soul and false, so a pleasure can be in the soul and false. Socrates argues at 40d that pleasures or pains are not simply feelings causally produced, but feelings with a cognitive element. They are like opinions and thoughts which may or may not be based on reality and which, therefore, make some pleasures and pains distinguishable from others, in particular the ones that involve propositional statements that can be false or true. And so at 42a the point is made that in making a mistake in our thoughts and opinions about things, we infect our pleasures and pains with error. Hence we can be wrong about what pleases us and what pains us.

As the dialogue unfolds we see a clash between these two different ways of understanding pleasure and pain. Protarchus’s Eudoxian conception of pleasures and pains sees them as exclusively feelings which contain within them the qualities of attraction and aversion. At 12e Protarchus makes it clear that he considers pleasure as a phenomenon that comes from different sources but is always the same. When we get pleasure from drinking beer for example, our pleasure seems to consist only of sensations caused by the alcohol; if there is any cognitive (thought) element involved in our pleasure it is completely separable from the sensation (the belief being the cause of the sensation). Regardless of what we think (true or false) about the beer, the price or the quality, we are pleased by its effect on us, our pleasure seems to involve no possible misconception.

Socrates argues for the second way of understanding pleasures and pains. On this conception, pleasures and pains are wholes made up of two parts;

a felt component and a belief component. To get an idea of the belief component consider two situations. The first involves beliefs about future states of affairs, while the second involves beliefs about the past. First, think about the story of Ajax, who is the best Greek soldier after Achilles, and a man for whom the attainment of honours is of high priority. Ajax is convinced that he is (or will be) the winner of a prize for martial prowess, as he can see that he exceeds all the competition in strength. He rejoices in the supposed fact that the prize will be his. In reality, the prize is awarded to Odysseus, and so Ajax's sure belief and expectation of winning turns out to be mistaken. Ajax rejoiced prematurely, so it might be said that his rejoicing was false. At 40a–e Socrates argues for the related claim that a man who has visions of securing vast quantities of gold and rejoices in his visions feels pleasure, but he is falsely pleased since his visions are not based on any reality past, present or future.

The second situation shows that false beliefs need not be about future states of affairs. They may be about the past. Suppose that Cleopatra takes pleasure in her relationship with Anthony. She believes it to be an intimate and mutually monogamous relationship. Her pleasure involves pleasant thoughts about how candid she and Anthony are with each other. The thought that Anthony loves her exclusively is part of that pleasure. Imagine that she discovers that Anthony has been adulterous and has been lying to her for years. She might exclaim that her pleasure has been false, hollow or worthless. On Protarchus's conception of pleasure, the pleasantness of Cleopatra's pleasure is merely causally connected to her beliefs about Anthony. The pleasantness of her pleasure is a feeling which dissipates when she makes her horrifying discovery. On Plato's conception, there is a sense in which the pleasure was false because of the fact that her thoughts about Anthony and their relationship were mistaken.

The propositional content of Cleopatra's pleasure, her belief that she and Anthony share an exclusive and monogamous relationship, was false and so the pleasure she took in it suddenly seems irrevocably debased. Likewise with Ajax the pleasure he took from his belief that he has won was falsely taken, nothing of it remains and indeed he may well feel especially

bitter about the whole experience. That many of our pleasures and pains are connected with this propositional content is uncontroversial, but what is often objected to, and what Protarchus objects to, is any claim that the propositional content's truth or falsity affects the pleasantness of pleasure or the painfulness of pain. We might expect a supporter of the Eudoxian position to claim that although the pleasure has evaporated now, at the time both Ajax and Cleopatra were pleased. This argument seems particularly strong if you see pleasure solely as a caused feeling as Protarchus does. But if we think about it, it does not seem so straightforward, for imagine if we were to ask both Cleopatra and Ajax at which point were they pleased? Was it instantly, or only after thinking about their respective situations? How close was the pleasure to the belief that supposedly caused the pleasure? It becomes obvious that the two components are not so easily dissected (Thalberg, 1962:67).

In the dialogue Protarchus adheres to the first conception and repeatedly resists Socrates's arguments for the second. Protarchus's continued objections show that he considers pleasure to be composed of two elements that are separable, the belief and the pleasure caused by it. If this is the case then we would have to accept that the falsity is confined to Cleopatra's belief and that the pleasure she feels is untouched by the truth or falsity of that belief. Plato is arguing against the temptation to unwind the statement "Ajax rejoices that he won" into "Ajax believes (falsely) that he won", and "Ajax feels pleasure from his belief that he won" (Thalberg, 1962:67). Plato has picked up on the intimate relationship between the pleasure and the belief. Plato argues that it is not the case that pleasure simply accompanies belief, for the simple reason that one does not rejoice that one has won a prize, or has a loving relationship without believing that one has won a prize or is cherished by another (Thalberg, 1962:68). That this is the case is also supported by the fact that when people become undeceived their pleasure evaporates.

On Plato's argument, then, being pleased implies awareness of the object that is the source of enjoyment, and therefore awareness of the object involves awareness that the object is what it is, that it actually exists with

the qualities it is thought to have (Thalberg, 1962:71). The cognitive aspect of pleasures and pains makes it possible that we can be wrong about the painfulness of pain and the pleasantness of pleasure. If we are ignorant or deceived then we may feel a pleasurable attraction with regard to the wrong objects or not feel pleasure when we ought. Likewise with pain we may not feel aversion to it when we ought, or we may feel the painfulness of a pain when we ought not.

In her book *The Myth of Pain* Hardcastle chronicles the recorded history of pain and pain research. As one would expect there are many fascinating stories about pain. In particular however there are many stories which would seem relevant to the kind of discussion about pleasure and pain that we have been having. Although, as we have seen, Plato focuses mainly on pleasure, the story about pain is the same in the sense that it has a cognitive element which is crucial to the way we feel it. As it turns out there are some phenomena which support the thesis that cognitive states influence our perceptions of pain and that it is possible not to feel the painfulness of pain.

Consider these examples of phenomena that suggest a cognitive component in the perception of pain. Results of surveys done on people awaiting emergency surgery after accidents show that people reported that at the time of, and for a period after the accident, they did not feel pain (Hardcastle, 1999:122–23). The pain did not occur simultaneously or even directly after damage was done to their bodies. Their state of shock, a cognitive state, seems to provide a short term buffer before the pain is experienced.

The phenomenon of phantom limb pain is also interesting. A common phenomenon reported by people who have had their arm amputated is that they can still feel pain in their “phantom” arm and hand. For example, some people can feel the fingernails of their missing hand pressing painfully hard into their missing palm. Others feel their “phantom” arm aching because the arm is constantly in an uncomfortable position (Ramachandran and Blakeslee, 1998:21–38). These people know that their arm and hand are gone, yet they perceive pain in a way consistent with the

limb still being present and functional. It is as if a remembered pain becomes real again (Hardcastle, 1999:119). It has been suggested that in these cases the brain re-creates the experience of pain from remembered cognitive and emotional associations. This situation reminds us of Plato's theory about the perception of pleasures and pains in which the soul contains a writer (who perceives and remembers) and a painter (who represents and creates).

A phenomenon of particular interest is when people, under certain circumstances, are able to distance themselves from their pain. This is called *dissociation*. The most interesting cases of dissociation occur as a result of a procedure performed on people whose long term, chronic and intractable pain fails to respond to all other treatment methods. This procedure involves the removal of some parts of the frontal lobes of the brain. The result is that the patient will typically report that the pain is still there and that it is the same, except that the pain no longer bothers them (Hardcastle, 1999:117). These people no longer feel the painfulness of their pain.

Some recently developed techniques for studying the brain have given us new insights into how the brain works. The most interesting new technique is functional brain scanning or FBS. FBS is a broad name for a variety of clinical techniques, (C.T. scans, P.E.T. scans, M.R.I. scans, fM.R.I. scans, etc) which allow us to view detailed images of brain structures and observe neuro-chemical changes in the living human mind as it performs tasks, processes information, or responds to stimuli.³ Using several techniques at once and with the aid of powerful computers, information about brain structures and function can be recorded and examined as it happens in the conscious subject with a delay as small as a second.

3 C.T Scans: Computed Tomography uses x-ray beams to reveal the structure of the brain. P.E.T. Scans: Positron Emission Tomography detects gamma rays after radioactive dyes have been injected or inhaled by the subject and is very useful in revealing functional information. M.R.I Scans: Magnetic Resonance Imaging detects radio frequency signals produced by displaced radio waves in a magnetic field and gives good anatomical data. fM.R.I: functional M.R.I detects changes in blood flow to particular areas of the brain and gives good functional and anatomical data.

One area which has received particular study is what goes on when we perceive pain. What we are discovering is that there is no pain centre that produces a uniform sensation of pain when it receives direct inputs from neuronal pathways. FBS suggest that pains involve a number of diverse and discrete, complicated and multi-dimensional systems and sub-systems in the brain. We are still in the dark as to the details. What counts as pain processing as opposed to the emotional reaction to pain or the belief that one is in pain, is hard to determine because they all blend into each other (Hardcastle, 1999:108). The brain scans can indicate which areas of the brain respond, but they do not tell us what the function is of each specific part in what Hardcastle calls “the cognitive economy of the subject” (Hardcastle, 1999:111).

However, interfering with one or more of the different areas involved in pain recognition, whether through organic disease or manipulation, significantly changes one’s emotions about pain (the painfulness of pain). And since we can observe activity in the brain as it functions during manipulations, the differences in how pains are felt give us important clues as to what parts of the brain are contributing what components to the overall experience of pain. One such path that has been researched is the pathway to areas of the brain that are associated with emotion (Carter, 1998: 13). It turns out that it is essential that the Anterior Cingulate Cortex, an area primarily involved with emotion and attention, be very active for someone to feel aversion to a painful stimulus (Carter, 1998:114). Interestingly, this same region is damped down by the opioids in our pain-killers (Carter, 1998:114). Studies done on people who are on morphine report dissociation (Hardcastle, 1999:104). Experiments with hypnotic suggestions aimed at the emotions that accompany pain rather than at the pain sensation itself, reduced the reported emotion associated with the pain, but not the pain sensation. A brain scan carried out during this hypnosis revealed functional changes in the Cingulate Cortex only (Damasio, 2000:75).

Consider the emotional and affective component of pain (the painfulness of pain). It should already be clear that it is a plausible claim that it

is cognitive. Emotions are states with intentionality. We fear something, we love someone, and so on. Emotions are also like desires. And they can be rational or irrational, a point argued in considerable detail by Aristotle and recently by Schacter and Singer (Schacter and Singer, 1962:379–99). The point is that having a certain cluster of feelings is not sufficient to give you any particular emotion like aversion. Suppose you had a sweating chill and you could feel the hair on the back of your neck standing up. These feelings are not sufficient for you to be fearful. You may be subject to a high static electricity charge while you are in a draught. What is missing is fearful thoughts. It is necessary that we have fearful thoughts in order to feel fear.

The suggestion is that pain processing involves inputs from various different parts of our brains. Pain involves motor response patterns, perceptions, expectations, memories as well as motivations and goals which usually bind together to form a coherent whole (Hardcastle, 1999:118). The feeling of pain does not appear as a uniform result of a painful stimulus but is itself part of the experience. Some of the qualities of a feeling of pain, particularly its painfulness, are dependent upon cognitive states and our thoughts and beliefs. It is possible to alter the way we perceive pain by manipulating areas of the brain through psychological therapy or hypnotism, or with drugs or surgery. The cognitive component does not just cause the sensational qualities of painfulness or pleasantness but are components of a single experience.

Plato's discussion of pleasures and pains in the *Philebus* is startling with its denial of the claim that we are always right about the pleasantness of pleasure, and the painfulness of pain. His ideas have had few advocates among scientists and philosophers alike. And indeed there is much in the dialogue which is peculiar to Plato's philosophy and which struggles to contribute to our discussions today. But when Plato's Socrates argues that pleasantness and painfulness can be attached to the wrong objects, he bases that argument on the thesis that our thoughts and perceptions about things play an important role in determining whether we feel something as a pleasure or a pain, and this is being supported by

the latest research. Recent studies on the brain and on consciousness are providing evidence that gives more credence to Plato's arguments on the role of belief states in what makes something a pleasure or a pain. Sometimes people do not feel pain when we would expect them to, sometimes people feel pain when we would not expect that they should. Some people report feeling pain, but that it lacks painfulness. If Plato is correct in thinking that the painfulness of pains is partly due to their propositional content, he might be right about pleasure too. We hope to discuss pleasure in a future paper.

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