

University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

ScholarWorks @ UTRGV

Philosophy Faculty Publications and
Presentations

College of Liberal Arts

2015

Pleasure

Cory Wimberly

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/phi_fac



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

(Pre-print of text with page numbers follows the first text from Word for citation purposes. First text is given for legibility).

Wimberly, Cory. "Pleasure." In *The Encyclopedia of Political Thought*, edited by Michael Gibbons, Diana Coole, Elisabeth Ellis, and Kennan Ferguson. Volume 6, 2716-2720. Blackwell: Chichester, 2015.

The history of the political thought on pleasure is not a cloistered affair in which scholars only engage one another. In political thought, one commonly finds a critical engagement with the wider public and the ruling classes, which are both perceived to be dangerously hedonistic. The effort of many political thinkers is directed towards showing that other political ends are more worthy than pleasure: Plato battles vigorously against Calicles' pleasure seeking in the *Gorgias*, Augustine argues in *The City of God* against the human tendency to hedonism in favor of a profound distrust of pleasure, and even Machiavelli claims in *The Prince* that it is in the prince's best interest to separate his pursuit of pleasure from his pursuit of political power.

The thrust of the majority of political thought is to interrupt the popular equation that links pleasure with the good. Instead, political thought has largely followed Plato's lead and has worked to contain hedonism on two fronts. First, pleasure is rigorously separated from ethical and political good: what is good is not identical with what is pleasurable even if the two sometimes overlap. Second, even where the pursuit of pleasure is judged to be coincident with the good, pleasure should only be pursued to the degree it is rational to do so and pursued in the most rational way. Of course, it is not true that all thinkers hold to these two positions on pleasure. Epicureanism and utilitarianism are two major schools of thought that challenge the first precept equating pleasure with the good. Both Epicureanism and utilitarianism argue that the only good is pleasure. However, it is much less frequently that one finds a thinker challenging the second Platonic position that reason must master and guide our pursuit of pleasure—even the Epicureans and utilitarians believe that pleasure is best pursued rationally. However, Foucault has attracted recent attention by challenging the idea that reason should dominate the pursuit of pleasure.

This entry on pleasure has three parts. The first part works through Plato and Aristotle as thinkers who set the dominant tradition in political thought of distinguishing the good from the pleasant and arguing that pleasure seeking needs to be submitted to rational control. The second part will tackle Epicurus and Bentham as representatives of Epicureanism and utilitarianism respectively, in order to show how they challenge the separation of the pleasant and the good with their enlightened hedonism. The final part will look at Foucault and how his work challenges the Platonic political orthodoxy on both fronts.

The impact of Plato on the political thought governing pleasure would be hard to overestimate. Aristotle, Epictetus, Augustine, and much of the Christian tradition take important cues from his work—even utilitarianism is in many respects a reaction against his work and a challenge to the ancients' hold on political philosophy. Subtly and in a complex fashion, pleasure is a theme throughout Plato's work but it is perhaps most politically telling in the *Gorgias*.

The *Gorgias* finds Socrates tackling the arguments of Gorgias, Polus, and Calicles. As the drama unfolds, Calicles takes over the argument from Gorgias and Polus and proclaims himself brave enough to say what the others have not: the rich and powerful live best because they experience the most pleasure (2007: 482d, 483d). When Calicles makes the argument that the good and the pleasant are identical we should note that Calicles is not merely saying that

pleasure is preferable to pain but that pleasure is the only good. To achieve this good/pleasurable life, Callicles claims that one must want and pursue as much pleasure as possible: “[I]t is necessary for the one who’s to live rightly to allow his desires to be as big as possible and not to curtail them” (2007: 491e-492a). This dramatic context provides Plato with the setting to make the argument that the good and pleasure are not identical even if pleasure sometimes accompanies what is good.

In a memorable and humorously vulgar *reductio*, Socrates gets Callicles to agree that scratching an itch is a pleasure. Socrates then claims that, according to Callicles, the greatest pleasure would be to have a tremendous and unsatisfiable itch so that one would receive the maximal pleasure of the longest duration from continually itching it (2007: 494d). Callicles reluctantly agrees but is shocked at Socrates next suggestion: Socrates claims that, according to Callicles’ argument, we would have to say that the catamite who had tremendously and unendingly itchy hemorrhoids could be said to be living the best life, if only this individual constantly worked at itching them in a way very analogous to a sex act (Tougas 1998: 136). Obviously, humor and shock are hoped for reactions but they serve on a gut level to reinforce the philosophical point that a life of maximal and continual pleasure is not necessarily a good life. While what is pleasurable might sometimes be good, not all pleasures are good and not all goods are pleasurable.

Precisely what is so disturbing to Callicles about the example Socrates gives of the catamite is that the individual becomes enslaved to their pleasures and they take up the role of a passive and dominated ephebe in relation to pleasure. Instead of being enslaved to pleasure, Socrates tells Callicles that one needs to learn self-mastery through moderation in order to live rationally (2007: 505b). Thus, the argument is brought to its two primary conclusions on pleasure: first, that pleasure and the good are not identical and, second, that individuals should master their impulses for pleasure and pain through moderation in order to be free to rationally pursue the good.

Although Aristotle criticizes his teacher’s understanding of pleasure, he remains faithful to the imperatives established by the *Gorgias* to separate pleasure from the good and to live a life of rational self-mastery in pursuit of the good. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle criticizes Plato indirectly via a scathing analysis of Plato’s nephew and inheritor of the Academy, Speusippus. Aristotle finds that both Plato and Speusippus develop an understanding of pleasure that is built from a misleading generalization about physical pleasure. In physical pleasure, pleasure seems to result from the satisfaction of a lack: hunger succeeds to the satisfaction of eating, thirst succumbs to drinking, and, as we saw, a terrible itch is relieved by scratching. Aristotle argues that it is mistaken to infer from these physical observations that pleasure is the satisfaction of a lack.

Instead, we should see that pleasure results from the proper operation of the individual’s capacities. For instance, eating is pleasurable not because it rids one of a lack (hunger) but because the faculty of digestion is working properly when the food is consumed. The pleasure of eating does not come from the satisfaction of a lack but from the part of the body that is working excellently to rid one of the lack. In short, for Aristotle pleasure is the result of an activity that properly puts a capacity to work and is not the replenishment of a lack, “pleasures are ways of being at work and are ends, and they do not result from states that are coming into being but from capacities being exercised” (2002: 1153a10-12). This gives Aristotle a different understanding of what pleasure is than Plato even if their positions will overlap on key normative points: like Plato, Aristotle finds that pleasure is different than the good but he argues that

pleasure is much more tightly related to the good in that pleasure is supervenient upon the excellent exercise of the individual's capacities.

Although pleasure is supervenient upon excellent exercise of a capacity, Aristotle is no hedonist: he would not agree that one can follow one's pleasures to the good. Although pleasure results from the proper exercise of one's capacities, pleasure is no indicator of which capacities to exercise, when, and in what measure. For instance, one could exercise the capacity to eat to such a degree that one could grow ill and die from the effects of overeating. It is clear that even those who are extremely obese still feel pleasure in eating because the digestive capacity is properly working. In this case, irrationally following the pleasure of eating would result in the destruction of one's being; it would be better to exercise temperance, forgo the pleasure of digestion, and learn to cultivate other capacities (and pleasures) instead. Aristotle thought the lure of the bodily pleasures that we share with the animals were such a draw away from the cultivation of rational capacities that he wrote "the whole concern of both of virtue and of politics is about pleasures and pains" (2002: 1105a11-12). Politics is about the pursuit of a community for the good and so rational use has to be made of pleasures so that the right pleasures are experienced at the right time. Although Aristotle developed a very different notion of pleasure than Plato, he remained committed to the Platonic position that pleasure and the good are not identical and that pleasure must be mastered by reason in order for pleasure to have a proper place in ethical and political life.

Historically, many thinkers have challenged the dominant view established by Plato and Aristotle that the good and the pleasant are not identical. Most notably, the Epicureans of antiquity and modern utilitarians have both argued for an enlightened hedonism. Here I will examine Epicurus and Bentham as representatives and founders of their schools. Epicurus argued that the good was identical with the pleasant but his approach hardly resulted in an out-of-control hedonism. Like the Stoics found in their pursuit of happiness, the Epicureans found that the surest road to pleasure was to be found in the proper regulation of the soul and not in the pursuit of external goods: where the pleasures of the external world were unreliable and needed the cooperation of other people and events, the soul and its pleasures were in the individual's control and hence reliable. More specifically, if an individual could turn away from the external world and turn to the life of the soul, which he had control over, he would be free to live in the happiness of the soul by calling up past pleasurable memories and reliving them in the present or by thinking forward to anticipated future pleasures. By turning to the soul and its pleasant memories and anticipations, an individual could live in happiness regardless of what was occurring externally. Epicurus even boasts that with just bread and water he could be as felicitous as Jupiter himself.

Bentham, the founder of utilitarianism, shares Epicurus' understanding of the good as coinciding with pleasure: "Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do" (1879: 1). However, Bentham does not agree with Epicurus on the best method for pursuing pleasure. This difference can be traced to the maxim that Bentham gives to govern his hedonism, "It is the greatest happiness of the greatest number which is the measure of right and wrong" (1776: ii). Bentham's pursuit of pleasure turned outward where Epicurus' turned inward: Bentham attempted to govern decisions based on which actions would result in the greatest amount of pleasure for the greatest number instead of the greatest pleasure for the lone individual.

Bentham and Epicurus both move away from the Platonic tradition that is dominant in

political thought by refusing Plato's argument that the good is not identical to the pleasant. Both Bentham and Epicurus want to argue that pleasure is identical with the good and that the best life results in the maximal attainment of pleasure. However, neither Epicurus nor Bentham challenge the supremacy of reason in guiding the pursuit of pleasure. Both hold that individuals need to master themselves and not be ruled by the immediate pushes and pulls of pleasure. They argue that individuals and communities need to be able to practice temperance and pursue pleasure rationally in order to maximize pleasure. Although Epicurus and Bentham challenged the Platonic separation of the good from pleasure, they did not challenge the ideal of rational self-mastery.

Foucault challenges both Platonic points in that he strategically aligns the good with the pleasant and positions the pursuit of pleasure as a process that transforms reason. Foucault is different in another important way than the other four thinkers that we have discussed: Foucault understands reason and subjectivity to be historically malleable. Through time, he holds, new subjects emerge, new human natures, and reason is radically transformed in the process. For instance, in *The Order of Things* Foucault tracks changes in reason across the three fields of economics, linguistics, and biology over the last four centuries. He finds that radically different forms of thought were 'rational' across that period of time. For our purposes, we just need to consider a smaller portion of Foucault's analysis of the transformation of reason—that which pertains to pleasure and self-mastery.

In some of his last work before he died, notably in *The Use of Pleasure*, Foucault investigates Greco-Roman morality and pleasure. Foucault tracks the history of the ideas of self-mastery, reason, and pleasure from antiquity, to Imperial Rome, early Christianity, and on to the present. He finds that the philosophy of self-mastery reaches an important turning point in the Stoics and in early Christian thinkers. In late Imperial Rome, the individual comes to be thought of as incapable of properly mastering its own use of pleasure through moderation and reason. Especially in Christian thought, for instance in Augustine, the individual becomes no longer able to master itself and so becomes a 'sinner' and unable to establish self-control in regards to pleasure. What is the individual to do when it is necessary to master oneself through reason but finds that one is neither rational nor moderate enough to do so? Plato provides Augustine the template to answer this dilemma in the *Republic*: the more rational should rule the less rational and provide them the control over the use of pleasure that they lack. For Augustine, the more rational agent that should rule over us is clearly God.

Today, we practice a kind of scientific Augustinianism in that we find the rational agency we lack in the experts and knowledge produced by the social sciences. We have experts who determine for individuals and communities the proper way to do almost everything including how to love, remain healthy, pursue school productively, rehabilitate deviants, land a job, pursue a career, eat well—there are even experts who can come to the store and show one how to shop properly. Modern individuals typically experience themselves as lacking the proper tools to rationally master themselves and so they turn to the rational expert—often in the guise of the social scientist—who can provide a framework for living to them with the result that today people are willingly dominated by those with specialized scientific knowledges (Foucault 1990: 53-54).

Foucault finds that the practice of rational self-domination trumpeted by Plato has changed through time to become the handmaid of domination in that individuals have become incapable of mastering their pleasures and require a more rational agent to determine the appropriate measures for them. Foucault argues that there needs to be a "counterattack" to

transform the contemporary understanding of self and reason so that individuals no longer lie under the burden of a project of self-mastery that they cannot achieve except through submission and domination by others (Foucault 1990: 157). In *The History of Sexuality: Volume I*, Foucault argues that we need to turn to “bodies and pleasures” to resist contemporary domination (1990: 157). Why? Through following our pleasures, we might turn inward to ourselves as guides and quit looking to others to provide us with the reason that we presume we lack. Through focusing on the lead of our pleasures, we can turn to ourselves as a source of leadership instead of placing ourselves at the mercy of experts. Through working to follow our pleasures by developing them, intensifying them, and even transforming them, we can create new bodies susceptible to these pleasures and possessed of a new form of reason adequate to these tasks.

While it is clear that Foucault’s hedonistic politics is only intended as a possible remedy for a contemporary problem, it is also equally clear that his politics strategically equates pleasure with the good and seeks to subordinate reason to practices of pleasure such that reason would be transformed through the pursuit of pleasures (McWhorter 1999: 157, 182). Even if this move is only a temporary and strategic response to problem, it is notable for being one of the few political philosophies to challenge the lead of the Platonic politics of pleasure on both counts: Foucault challenges both the differentiation of the good and pleasure and the imperative that pleasure must be pursued rationally. Instead, a new reason and a new subject should be pursued through the pleasures of the body.

SEE ALSO: Pain; Reason; Teleology; Moderation; Plato; Utilitarianism; Michel Foucault

References and Suggested Readings:

Aristotle. (1996) *The Politics and the Constitution of Athens*. Trans. Stephen Everson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Aristotle. (2002) *Nicomachean Ethics*. Trans. Joe Sachs. Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing.

Augustine. (2003) *The City of God*. Trans. Henry Bettenson. New York: Penguin.

Bentham, J. (1879) *An Introduction to the Morals and Principles of Legislation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Bentham, J. (1776) *A Fragment on Government*. London: T. Payne.

Epicurus. (1993) *The Essential Epicurus: Letters, Principal Doctrines, Vatican Sayings, and Fragments*. Trans. Eugene O'Connor. Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books.

Foucault, M. (1990) *The History of Sexuality, An Introduction*. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage Books.

Freud, S. (1990) *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Trans. James Strachey. New York: W. W. Norton.

Locke, J. (1980) *Second Treatise of Government*. Indianapolis, IN.: Hackett.

- Marcuse, H. (1974) *Eros and Civilization*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- McWhorter, Ladelle. (1999) *Bodies and Pleasures*. Indianapolis, IN.: Indiana University Press.
- Mill, J. S. (2002) *Utilitarianism*. Indianapolis, IN.: Hackett.
- Plato. (1991) *Republic*. Trans. Allan Bloom. New York: Basic Books.
- Plato. (1998) *Phaedo*. Trans. Peter Kalkavage. Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing.
- Plato. (2007) *Gorgias*. Trans. James Arieti. Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing.
- Smith, Adam. (1991) *Wealth of Nations*. New York: Prometheus Books.
- Tougas, Joe. (1998) "Bad Pleasures in Plato's Gorgias: The Lesson of the Catamite," *Conceptus*, 78: pp. 121-142.
- Wimberly, Cory. (2011). "Moralities of Self-Renunciation and Obedience: The Later Foucault and Disciplinary Power Relations," *Philosophy Today*, 55(2): pp. 37-49.
- Winnubst, Shannon. (2006) *Queering Freedom*. Indianapolis, IN.: Indiana University Press.

intelligible Forms are the only things that truly "are," but also that human beings should direct their lives according to what is good, beautiful, and just in itself. However, because Plato shows that the Forms are never perfectly realized in the sensible world in which we live, his works can also be understood as attempts to moderate the unreasonable hopes and desires of his readers.

SEE ALSO: Aristotle (384–322 BCE); Death; Heidegger, Martin (1889–1976); Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm (1844–1900); Socrates (469–399 BCE); Tragedy and Politics; Xenophon (ca. 430–mid-4th century BCE)

References

- Foucault, M. (2001) *Fearless Speech*. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e).
- Kraut, R. (1984) *Socrates and the State*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Popper, K. (1950) *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Saxonhouse, A. (2006) *Free Speech and Democracy in Ancient Athens*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Stone, I. F. (1988) *The Trial of Socrates*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Strauss, L. (1983) "On Plato's *Apology of Socrates and Crito*." In L. Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 38–66.
- West, T. and West, G. S. (1984) *Four Texts on Socrates*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Further Reading

- Burger, R. (1984) *The Phaedo: A Platonic Labyrinth*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Diogenes Laertius. (1925) "Plato." In Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* (bk. 3, chs. 276–373), trans. R. D. Hicks. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, vol. 1.
- Euben, P. (1978) "Philosophy and Politics in Plato's *Crito*," *Political Theory*, 6 (2), 149–72.
- Klosko, G. (2006) *The Development of Plato's Political Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nichols, M. (1987) *Socrates and the Political Community*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Plato. (1997) *Collected Works*, ed. J. Cooper. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.

Strauss, L. (1964) "On Plato's *Republic*." In L. Strauss, *The City and Man*. Chicago: Rand McNally, pp. 50–138.

Strauss, L. (1972) "Plato." In L. Strauss, *The History of Political Philosophy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 33–89.

Zuckert, C. (2009) *Plato's Philosophers: The Coherence of the Dialogues*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Zuckert, M. (1984) "Rationalism and Political Responsibility: Plato's *Apology* and *The Clouds*," *Polity*, 17 (1), 271–97.

Pleasure

Cory Wimberly

The history of the political thought on pleasure is not a cloistered affair in which scholars only engage one another. In political thought, one commonly finds a critical engagement with the wider public and the ruling classes, which are both perceived to be dangerously hedonistic. The effort of many political thinkers is directed toward showing that other political ends are more worthy than pleasure: Plato battles vigorously against Callicles' pleasure-seeking in the *Gorgias*, Augustine argues against the human tendency to hedonism and in favor of a profound distrust of pleasure in *City of God*, and even Machiavelli claims in *The Prince* that it is in the prince's best interest to separate his pursuit of pleasure from his pursuit of political power.

The thrust of most political thought is to interrupt the popular equation that links pleasure with the good. Instead political thought has largely followed Plato's lead and has worked to contain hedonism on two fronts. First, pleasure is rigorously separated from the ethical and the political good: what is good is not identical with what is pleasurable, even if the two sometimes overlap. Second, even where the pursuit of pleasure is judged to be coincident with the pursuit of the good, one should only pursue pleasure (1) to the extent that it is

rational to do so and (2) in the most rational way. Of course, it is not true that all thinkers hold on to these two positions on pleasure. Epicureanism and utilitarianism are two major schools of thought that challenge the first position by equating pleasure with the good. Both Epicureans and utilitarians argue that the only good is pleasure. However, it is much less frequently that one finds a thinker challenging the second Platonic position – the position that reason should master and guide our pursuit of pleasure; even the Epicureans and utilitarians believe that pleasure is best pursued rationally. However, Foucault has attracted attention recently by challenging the idea that reason should dominate the pursuit of pleasure.

This entry on pleasure has three parts. The first part works through Plato and Aristotle as thinkers who set the tradition, dominant in political thought, of distinguishing the good from the pleasant and of arguing that pleasure-seeking needs to be submitted to rational control. The second part will tackle Epicurus and Bentham as representatives of Epicureanism and utilitarianism respectively, in order to show how they challenge the separation of the pleasant and the good with their enlightened hedonism. The final part will look at Foucault and explain how his work challenges Platonic political orthodoxy on both fronts.

The impact of Plato on the political thought governing pleasure would be hard to overestimate. Aristotle, Epictetus, Augustine, and much of the Christian tradition take important cues from his work – even utilitarianism is in many respects a reaction against Plato and a challenge to the ancients' hold on political philosophy. Subtly and in a complex fashion, pleasure is a theme throughout Plato's work; but it is perhaps most politically telling in the *Gorgias* (Plato 2007).

The *Gorgias* finds Socrates tackling the arguments of Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles. As the drama unfolds, Callicles takes over the argument from Gorgias and Polus and proclaims himself brave enough to say what the others have not said: that the rich and powerful live best because they experience the most

rational to do so and (2) in the most rational way. Of course, it is not true that all thinkers hold on to these two positions on pleasure. Epicureanism and utilitarianism are two major schools of thought that challenge the first position by equating pleasure with the good: both Epicureans and utilitarians argue that the only good is pleasure. However, it is much less frequently that one finds a thinker challenging the second Platonic position – the position that reason should master and guide our pursuit of pleasure; even the Epicureans and utilitarians believe that pleasure is best pursued rationally. However, Foucault has attracted attention recently by challenging the idea that reason should dominate the pursuit of pleasure.

This entry on pleasure has three parts. The first part works through Plato and Aristotle as thinkers who set the tradition, dominant in political thought, of distinguishing the good from the pleasant and of arguing that pleasure-seeking needs to be submitted to rational control. The second part will tackle Epicurus and Bentham as representatives of Epicureanism and utilitarianism respectively, in order to show how they challenge the separation of the pleasant and the good with their enlightened hedonism. The final part will look at Foucault and explain how his work challenges Platonic political orthodoxy on both fronts.

The impact of Plato on the political thought governing pleasure would be hard to overestimate. Aristotle, Epictetus, Augustine, and much of the Christian tradition take important cues from his work – even utilitarianism is in many respects a reaction against Plato and a challenge to the ancients' hold on political philosophy. Subtly and in a complex fashion, pleasure is a theme throughout Plato's work; but it is perhaps most politically telling in the *Gorgias* (Plato 2007).

The *Gorgias* finds Socrates tackling the arguments of Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles. As the drama unfolds, Callicles takes over the argument from Gorgias and Polus and proclaims himself brave enough to say what the others have not said: that the rich and powerful live best because they experience the most

pleasure (Plato, *Gorgias* 482d, 483d). When Callicles makes the argument that the good and the pleasant are identical, we should note that Callicles is not merely saying that pleasure is preferable to pain, but that pleasure is the only good. To achieve the good or pleasurable life, Callicles claims that one must want and pursue as much pleasure as possible: "it is necessary for the one who's to live rightly to allow his desires to be as big as possible and not to curtail them" (*Gorgias* 491e–2a). This dramatic context provides Plato with a setting for making the argument that the good and the pleasant are not identical even if pleasure sometimes accompanies what is good.

In a memorable and humorously vulgar *reductio*, Socrates gets Callicles to agree that scratching an itch is a pleasure. Socrates then claims that, according to Callicles, the greatest pleasure would be to have a tremendous and unsatisfiable itch, so that one would receive the maximal pleasure of the longest duration from continually itching it (*Gorgias* 494d). Callicles reluctantly agrees but is shocked at Socrates' next suggestion: Socrates claims that, according to Callicles' argument, we would have to say that the catamite who had tremendously and unendingly itchy hemorrhoids could be said to be living the best life, if only this individual constantly worked at itching them in a way very much analogous to a sex act (Tougas 1998: 136). Obviously, humor and shock are hoped-for reactions; but they serve on a gut level, to reinforce the philosophical point that a life of maximal and continual pleasure is not necessarily a good life. While what is pleasurable might sometimes be good, not all pleasures are good and not all goods are pleasurable.

Precisely what is so disturbing to Callicles about the example of the catamite that Socrates gives is that the individual becomes enslaved to his/her pleasures and takes up the role of a passive and dominated epebe in relation to them. Instead of being enslaved to pleasure, Socrates tells Callicles that one needs to learn self-mastery through moderation in order to live rationally (*Gorgias* 505b). Thus the argument is brought to its two primary conclusions on

pleasure: first, that pleasure and the good are not identical; and, second, that individuals should master their impulses for pleasure and pain through moderation, in order to be free to rationally pursue the good.

Although Aristotle criticizes his teacher's understanding of pleasure, he remains faithful to the imperatives established by the *Gorgias* to separate pleasure from the good and to live a life of rational self-mastery in pursuit of the good. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle (2002) criticizes Plato's nephew and inheritor of the Academy, Speusippus. Aristotle finds that both Plato and Speusippus develop an understanding of pleasure that is built on a misleading generalization about physical pleasure. In physical pleasure, pleasure seems to result from the satisfaction of a lack: hunger gives in to the satisfaction of eating, thirst succumbs to drinking, and, as we saw, a terrible itch is relieved by scratching. Aristotle argues that it is mistaken to infer from these physical observations that pleasure is the satisfaction of a lack.

Instead we should see that pleasure results from the proper operation of the individual's capacities. For instance, eating is pleasurable not because it rids one of a lack (hunger) but because the faculty of digestion is working properly when the food is consumed. The pleasure of eating does not come from the satisfaction of a lack but from the part of the body that is working excellently to rid one of the lack. In short, for Aristotle pleasure is the result of an activity that properly puts a capacity to work; it is not the replenishment of a lack: "pleasures are ways of being at work and are ends, and they do not result from states that are coming into being but from capacities being exercised" (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1153^a10–12). This gives Aristotle an understanding of what pleasure is that is different from Plato's, even if their positions will overlap on key normative points: like Plato, Aristotle finds that pleasure is different from the good; but he argues that pleasure is much more tightly related to the good, in that pleasure is supervenient upon the excellent exercise of an individual's capacities.

Although pleasure is supervenient upon the excellent exercise of a capacity, Aristotle is no hedonist: he would not agree that one can follow one's pleasures to the good. Although pleasure results from the proper exercise of one's capacities, pleasure is no indicator of which capacities to exercise, when, and in what measure. For instance, one could exercise the capacity to eat to such a degree that one could grow ill and die from the effects of overeating. It is clear that even those who are extremely obese still feel pleasure in eating, because the digestive capacity is properly working. In this case, irrationally following the pleasure of eating would result in the destruction of one's being; it would be better to exercise temperance, forgo the pleasure of digestion, and learn to cultivate other capacities (and pleasures) instead. Aristotle thought that the lure of bodily pleasures, which we share with the animals, was such a draw away from the cultivation of rational capacities that he wrote: "the whole concern both of virtue and of politics is about pleasures and pains" (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1105a11–12). Politics is about the pursuit of a community for the good, and hence rational use has to be made of pleasure, so that the right pleasures are experienced at the right time. Although Aristotle developed a very different notion of pleasure from Plato's, he remained committed to the Platonic position that pleasure and the good are not identical and that pleasure must be mastered by reason in order to have a proper place in ethical and political life.

Historically, many thinkers have challenged the dominant view, established by Plato and Aristotle that the good and the pleasant are not identical. Most notably, the Epicureans of antiquity and the modern utilitarians have both argued for an enlightened hedonism. Here I will examine Epicurus and Bentham as representatives and founders of their respective schools. Epicurus argued that the good was identical with the pleasant, but his approach hardly resulted in an out-of-control hedonism. As the Stoics discovered in their pursuit of happiness, the Epicureans, too, discovered that

the surest road to pleasure was to be found in the proper regulation of the soul, and not in the pursuit of external goods, while the pleasures of the external world were unreliable and needed the cooperation of other people and events, the soul and its pleasures were under the individual's control, and hence reliable. More specifically, if an individual could turn away from the external world and toward the life of the soul, which s/he had control over, s/he would be free to live in happiness of the soul by calling up past pleasurable memories and reliving them in the present, or by thinking forward or anticipating future pleasures. By turning to the soul and its pleasant memories and anticipations, an individual could live in happiness regardless of what was occurring externally. Epicurus even boasts that, with no more than bread and water, he could be as felicitous as Zeus himself.

Bentham, the founder of utilitarianism, shares Epicurus' understanding of the good as coinciding with pleasure: "Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do" (Bentham 1879: 1). However, Bentham does not agree with Epicurus on the best method for pursuing pleasure. This difference can be traced to the principle that Bentham gives to govern his hedonism: "It is the greatest happiness of the greatest number which is the measure of right and wrong" (Bentham 1776: ii). Bentham's pursuit of pleasure turned outward, whereas Epicurus' turned inward: Bentham attempted to govern decisions on the basis of which actions would result in the greatest amount of pleasure for the greatest number, not in the greatest pleasure for a single individual.

Bentham and Epicurus both move away from the Platonic tradition that is dominant in political thought; they do so by refusing Plato's argument that the good is not identical with the pleasant. Both Bentham and Epicurus want to argue that pleasure is identical with the good and that the best life results in the maximal attainment of pleasure. However, neither

the surest road to pleasure was to be found in the proper regulation of the soul, and not in the pursuit of external goods: while the pleasures of the external world were unreliable and needed the cooperation of other people and events, the soul and its pleasures were under the individual's control, and hence reliable. More specifically, if an individual could turn away from the external world and toward the life of the soul, which s/he had control over, s/he would be free to live in happiness of the soul by calling up past pleasurable memories and reliving them in the present, or by thinking forward or anticipating future pleasures. By turning to the soul and its pleasant memories and anticipations, an individual could live in happiness regardless of what was occurring externally. Epicurus even boasts that, with no more than bread and water, he could be as felicitous as Zeus himself.

Bentham, the founder of utilitarianism, shares Epicurus' understanding of the good as coinciding with pleasure: "Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do" (Bentham 1879: 1). However, Bentham does not agree with Epicurus on the best method for pursuing pleasure. This difference can be traced to the principle that Bentham gives to govern his hedonism: "It is the greatest happiness of the greatest number which is the measure of right and wrong" (Bentham 1776: ii). Bentham's pursuit of pleasure turned outward, whereas Epicurus' turned inward: Bentham attempted to govern decisions on the basis of which actions would result in the greatest amount of pleasure for the greatest number, not in the greatest pleasure for a single individual.

Bentham and Epicurus both move away from the Platonic tradition that is dominant in political thought; they do so by refusing Plato's argument that the good is not identical with the pleasant. Both Bentham and Epicurus want to argue that pleasure is identical with the good and that the best life results in the maximal attainment of pleasure. However, neither

Epicurus nor Bentham challenge the supremacy of reason in guiding the pursuit of pleasure. Both hold that individuals need to master themselves and not be ruled by the immediate pushes and pulls of pleasure. They argue that individuals and communities need to be able to practice temperance and pursue pleasure rationally in order to maximize pleasure. Although Epicurus and Bentham challenged the Platonic separation of the good from pleasure, they did not challenge the ideal of rational self-mastery.

Foucault challenges both Platonic points in that he strategically aligns the good with the pleasant and positions the pursuit of pleasure as a process that transforms reason. Foucault is different in another important way, too, from the four thinkers whom we have discussed: he understands reason and subjectivity to be historically malleable. Through time, he holds, new subjects emerge, new human natures, and reason is radically transformed in the process. For instance, in *The Order of Things* Foucault tracks changes in reason that occurred over the last four centuries across the three fields of economics, linguistics, and biology. He finds that radically different forms of thought were "rational" across that period of time. For our purposes, we just need to consider a smaller portion of Foucault's analysis of the transformation of reason – that which pertains to pleasure and self-mastery.

In some of his last work before he died, notably in *The Use of Pleasure*, Foucault investigates Greco-Roman morality and pleasure. He tracks the history of the ideas of self-mastery, reason, and pleasure from antiquity, to Imperial Rome, early Christianity, and on to the present. He finds that the philosophy of self-mastery reaches an important turning point with the Stoics and the early Christian thinkers. In late Imperial Rome, the individual comes to be thought of as incapable of properly mastering his/her own use of pleasure through moderation and reason. Especially in Christian thought, for instance in Augustine, the individual is no longer able to master him-/herself and thus becomes a "sinner," unable to establish

self-control with regard to pleasure. What is one to do when it is necessary to master oneself through reason, yet one finds that one is neither rational nor moderate enough to do so? Plato's *Republic* (Plato 1991) provides Augustine with the template to resolve this dilemma: the more rational should rule over the less rational and give it the control it lacks over the use of pleasure. For Augustine, the more rational agent that should rule over us is clearly God.

Today we practice a kind of scientific Augustinianism, in that we find the rational agency we lack in the experts and in the knowledge produced by the social sciences. We have experts who determine, for individuals and communities, the proper way to do almost everything – including how to love, remain healthy, pursue school productively, rehabilitate deviants, land a job, pursue a career, eat well; there are even experts who can come to the store and show one how to shop properly. Modern individuals typically experience themselves as lacking the proper tools to rationally master themselves, and so they turn to the rational expert – often in the guise of the social scientist – who can give them a framework for living; and the result is that today people are willingly dominated by those with specialized scientific knowledges (Foucault 1990: 53–4).

Foucault finds that the practice of rational self-domination trumpeted by Plato has changed throughout time to become the handmaid of domination – in that individuals have become incapable of mastering their pleasures and require a more rational agent to determine the appropriate measures for them. Foucault argues that there needs to be a “counterattack” to transform the contemporary understanding of self and reason so that individuals no longer lie under the burden of a project of self-mastery that they cannot achieve except through submission and domination by others (1990: 157). In volume 1 of *The History of Sexuality* Foucault argues that we need to turn to “bodies and pleasures” to resist contemporary domination (1990: 157). Why? By following our pleasures we might turn inward, to ourselves as guides, and quit looking to others to

provide us with the reason that we presume we lack. By focusing on the lead of our pleasures, we can turn to ourselves as a source of leadership instead of placing ourselves at the mercy of experts. If we work to follow our pleasures by developing them, intensifying them, and even transforming them, we can create new bodies, susceptible to these pleasures and possessed of a new form of reason, adequate to these tasks.

While it is clear that Foucault's hedonistic politics is only intended as a possible remedy for a contemporary problem, it is also equally clear that his politics strategically equates pleasure with the good and seeks to subordinate reason to practices of pleasure, so that reason may be transformed through the pursuit of pleasures (McWhorter 1999: 157, 182). Even if this move is only a temporary and strategic response to the problem, it is notable for constituting one of the few political philosophies that challenge the lead of the Platonic politics of pleasure on both counts. Foucault challenges both the principle of differentiating the good from pleasure and the imperative that pleasure should be pursued rationally. Instead, a new reason and a new subject should be pursued through the pleasures of the body.

SEE ALSO: Foucault, Michel (1926–84); Moderation; Pain; Plato (429–347 BCE); Reason; Teleology; Utilitarianism

References

- Aristotle. (2002) *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. J. Sachs. Newburyport, MA: Focus.
- Bentham, J. (1776) *A Fragment on Government*. London: T. Payne.
- Bentham, J. (1879) *An Introduction to the Morals and Principles of Legislation*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Foucault, M. (1990) *The History of Sexuality, An Introduction*, trans. R. Hurley. New York: Vintage Books.
- McWhorter, L. (1999) *Bodies and Pleasures*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Plato. (1991) *Republic*, trans. A. Bloom. New York: Basic Books.
- Plato. (2007) *Gorgias*, trans. J. Arieti. Newburyport, MA: Focus.

Tougas, J. (1998) “Bad Pleasures in Plato's *Gorgias* The Lesson of the Catamite.” *Concepts* 74, 121–42.

Further Reading

- Aristotle. (1996) *The Politics and the Constitution of Athens*, trans. S. Everson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Augustine. (2003) *The City of God*, trans. H. Bettenson. New York: Penguin.
- Epicurus. (1993) *The Essential Epicurus: Letters, Principal Doctrines, Vatican Sayings, and Fragments*, trans. E. O'Connor. Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books.
- Freud, S. (1990) *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. J. Strachey. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Locke, J. (1980) *Second Treatise of Government*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.
- Marcuse, H. (1974) *Eros and Civilization*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Mill, J. S. (2002) *Utilitarianism*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.
- Plato. (1998) *Phaedo*, trans. P. Kalkavage. Newburyport, MA: Focus.
- Smith, A. (1991) *Wealth of Nations*. New York: Prometheus Books.
- Wimberly, C. (2011). “Moralities of Self Renunciation and Obedience: The Later Foucault and Disciplinary Power Relations.” *Philosophy Today*, 55 (2), 37–49.
- Winnubst, S. (2006) *Queering Freedom*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Plekhanov, Georgii (1856–1918)

Peter B. Josephson

Georgii Plekhanov is generally acknowledged as “the father of Russian Marxism.” He began his political activities in the 1870s, and early in his career opposed the use of terrorism and assassination. He was arrested in Russia twice, and emigrated to Switzerland in 1880. In the early twentieth century Plekhanov aligned with the Mensheviks against the more extreme elements of Lenin's Bolshevism. In his political thought he offered considered critiques of utopian socialism and of idealism. In doing