

## CHAPTER I

*Introduction*

This book principally examines philosophical conceptions of pleasure in Greek and to a more limited extent Greco-Roman antiquity. The discussion begins with pre-Platonic treatments (Chapters 2 and 3). The heart of the book is then devoted to the contributions of Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, the Cyrenaics, and the Old Stoics, in that order (Chapters 4–8). Consequently, the book principally focuses on a stretch of about 200 years of philosophical history, from the beginning of Plato’s literary career in the early fourth century BCE to the death of the Old Stoic philosopher Chrysippus at the end of the third century BCE. Chapter 9, which follows, discusses contemporary conceptions of pleasure, specifically Anglophone conceptions since World War II. Its aim is to provide perspective on and a means of assessing the ancients’ contributions. The conclusion (Chapter 10) then offers some remarks to this effect. A bibliography with suggestions for further reading follows the conclusion. Among these are suggestions for reading concerning conceptions of pleasure in antiquity after the Old Stoics.

THE RELEVANCE OF AN INQUIRY INTO ANCIENT GREEK  
 PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEPTIONS OF PLEASURE

Elizabeth Anscombe’s 1958 article “Modern Moral Philosophy” is often cited for encouraging a reorientation in contemporary ethical theory, away from the dominant modern traditions of deontology, utilitarianism, and contractualism, toward a style of thought exemplified by the theorizing of the Greeks, namely, virtue ethics or the ethics of character. In her article, as the epigraph indicates, Anscombe suggests that the reorientation must in fact begin outside of ethics, in philosophy of psychology, and with basic philosophical psychological concepts pertaining to the practical life of humans such as action, intention, wanting, and pleasure.

Anscombe's short treatise *Intention*, published a year before the article, itself constitutes a seminal contribution to the reorientation of ethical theory she advocates. In one section she remarks on the impoverished philosophical psychology of her British empiricist predecessors, and she singles out their treatments of wanting and pleasure as cases in point:

The cause of blindness to these problems seems to have been the epistemology characteristic of Locke, and also of Hume. Any sort of wanting would be an internal impression according to those philosophers. The bad effects of their epistemology come out most clearly if we consider the striking fact that the concept of pleasure has hardly seemed a problematic one at all to modern philosophers, until Ryle reintroduced it as a topic a year or two ago. The ancients seem to have been baffled by it; its difficulty, astonishingly, reduced Aristotle to babble, since for good reasons he both wanted pleasure to be identical with and to be different from the activity that it is pleasure in. It is customary nowadays to refute utilitarianism by accusing it of the "naturalistic fallacy," an accusation whose force I doubt. What ought to rule that philosophy out of consideration at once is the fact that it always proceeds as if 'pleasure' were a quite unproblematic concept. (§40)

Ryle's several contributions of the mid fifties, to which Anscombe here refers and which will be our point of departure in the discussion of contemporary treatments in Chapter 9, galvanized philosophical debate over the nature of pleasure for three decades. After the waning of this strain of discussion in the eighties, the topic has once again been reinvigorated in the last fifteen or so years through the burgeoning of philosophy of mind, philosophy of emotion, and consciousness studies, in conjunction with neighboring empirical arenas such as affective psychology, cognitive science, and neuroscience.

Ryle's work, like Anscombe's, was congenial with the thought of the Greeks. Indeed, Ryle's reading of Aristotle influenced his account of pleasure. True – Anscombe criticizes Aristotle for babbling; but her criticism here is misguided. Anscombe has in mind a well-known passage from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* where, according to the standard translation on which she depends, it is claimed that "pleasure supervenes on activity like the bloom of youth." This may be babble. But there is good reason to think that the translation is inaccurate. As we will see in Chapter 6, when the Greek is properly rendered, Aristotle's thought emerges as intelligible, intelligent, and arguably true.

More generally, it is facile and unjustified to claim that the topic of pleasure baffled the ancients. When Anscombe called for a return to virtue ethics and to the investigation of the psychological concepts upon which

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this form of ethical theorizing depends, she did not herself undertake historical investigations into the Greeks' theories of wanting, action, or pleasure. If she had and had pursued the task in a careful and searching manner worthy of a philosopher of her stature, she would have discovered a treasure of insights. The Greeks' examinations of pleasure were incisive, their debates vigorous, and their results have enduring value for contemporary discussion.

### THE TOPIC OF PLEASURE IN ANCIENT GREEK PHILOSOPHY

The topic of pleasure enters Greek philosophy in the fifth century BCE from two intellectual traditions: the ethical tradition and what the Greeks call the tradition of "*physiologia*." I will refer to the latter as the "physical" tradition and describe it in some detail in Chapter 3. Early ethical treatments of pleasure focus on whether, how, and to what extent pleasure contributes to a good life. In this context, I discuss the contributions of Prodicus of Ceos, Democritus of Abdera, and two men associated with Socrates, Antisthenes of Athens and Aristippus of Cyrene. Among the various things these figures say about pleasure, none engages the question "What is pleasure?" For convenience, I will refer to this as the *identity question*.

So far as I know, it was Plato who first raised and earnestly pursued the identity question. He does so in the context of ethical theorizing. Precisely, he thinks that in order to determine the relation between pleasure and goodness, it is necessary to determine what pleasure itself is. My discussions of Plato and his successors principally focus on their treatments of the identity question and closely related questions.

Depending on one's conception of pleasure, the answer to the identity question may require an account of human or animal physiology, including what we now call neurology. In Greek thought, such accounts initially arise within the physical tradition of inquiry. This tradition, as we will see, overlaps with the tradition of medical theory. Once again it is Plato who is pivotal in appropriating and developing such discussions.

There are fewer physiological accounts of pleasure than accounts that occur within the contexts of ethical theory. But this disparity is a function of authorial interests and not a reflection of any theoretical commitment that physiological accounts are somehow discontinuous with other accounts. So far as evidence permits, we will discuss the complementary relation between physical and non-physical accounts of pleasure. In the next section of this introduction, I offer some general orientational remarks about the state of the evidence for ancient philosophy.

Closely related to the identity question is the question “What kinds of pleasure are there?” I will refer to this as the *kinds question*. Plato and his successors variously distinguish different kinds of pleasure. The way in which they draw such distinctions depends of course on their conceptions of pleasure itself. For example, all ancient philosophers think that pleasure somehow involves the soul (*psychê*). But some philosophers think that some pleasures essentially depend on the body. Consequently, they distinguish bodily and psychic pleasures. (Note that here and throughout I use the adjective “psychic” in the sense of “relating to the *psychê*.”) Some philosophers think that there are different parts of the soul. Consequently, they distinguish different kinds of pleasure according to the different parts of the soul involved. Some philosophers think that pleasures can be true and false and, moreover, that there are different ways in which pleasures can be true and false. Thus, they draw distinctions between true and false pleasures. With respect to at least to one kind of truth-conception, some philosophers think that some psychic conditions appear to be, but are not in fact, pleasures. Thus, they distinguish between true or genuine pleasures and merely apparent pleasures.

In light of such distinctions, I should note that I am here using the term “kinds” loosely. It is not, for instance, necessarily intended to demarcate relations of genus and species. The various kinds of pleasure may be related in a number of ways, and those ways may be explained according to various theoretical commitments. A central question we will pursue in tandem with the kinds question is what motivates and, to some extent, grounds the philosophers’ distinctions among kinds of pleasure.

The focus of my discussion on the identity and kinds questions is to the exclusion of two other important questions or rather domains of inquiry, both of which were central to ancient philosophical discussions that engage the topic of pleasure. One of these concerns the value, specifically the ethical value, of pleasure. Generally speaking, ancient philosophers vigorously debate the positions of ethical hedonism and anti-hedonism. According to the former view, pleasure is the good, at least for humans. According to the latter view, it is not. The other question concerns the relation between pleasure and motivation. More precisely, philosophers debate the position of psychological hedonism. According to psychological hedonism, we naturally or innately desire or are motivated by pleasure.

While the question of psychological hedonism can be viewed purely as a part of the psychology of motivation, it tends to be discussed, like the identity and kinds questions, within the context of ethical theory. For example, some philosophers examine the argument that the good is that which things

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naturally desire. Some philosophers distinguish different kinds of pleasure in the context of arguing that certain kinds of pleasure have greater value than other kinds. In short, the identity and kinds questions as well as questions about the nature of human or animal motivation are in fact usually and in principle always subordinate to questions about value and ethics.

Insofar as this book focuses on the identity question, then, it focuses on an aspect of what may be called hedonic theorizing that tends to arise within the contexts of psychology and ethics. The focus on the identity question is, however, justified on logical grounds. How deeply or effectively can one ascertain pleasure's value without clarifying what pleasure is? Indeed, as I mentioned before, this is why the identity question arises for Plato. Compare Socrates' reply to Meno when asked whether excellence is teachable: "If I do not know what something is, how could I know what characteristics it possesses?" (71b) The same question may be put with respect to the relation between motivation and pleasure: If we do not know what pleasure is, how can we know whether we are naturally motivated by it? In short, the identity question has a claim to methodological priority. Compare the remarks of William P. Alston in his 1967 article on pleasure from *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, "from the time of Plato much of the discussion of the topics of motivation and value has consisted in arguments for and against the doctrines of psychological hedonism ... and ethical hedonism. One can make an intelligent judgment on these doctrines only to the extent that he has a well-worked-out view as to the nature of pleasure. Otherwise, he will be unable to settle such questions as whether a putative counterexample, for instance, a desire for the welfare of one's children, is or is not a genuine example of desiring something other than pleasure for its own sake" (341).

A further justification for restricting the focus to the identity question is simply that the ancient treatments of this question provide more than ample material for a book of this length. In fact, in numerous cases I have had to abbreviate my discussion to conform to editorial considerations. That is to say, the Greeks had a great deal to say about pleasure and its place within human psychology and life. To be sure, our discussion of what they say will inevitably bleed into questions in ethics and other areas of psychology. But we will have our hands full just coming to grips with the identity and kinds questions.

I stated above that the book principally focuses on a stretch of about 200 years of philosophical history. To prevent misunderstanding, I should emphasize that the aim of the book is not to provide a comprehensive treatment of philosophical conceptions of pleasure even across these two

centuries. My primary aim has been to focus on what I regard as the most historically and, at least from a contemporary perspective, philosophically important treatments of the identity and kinds questions from this period. As it happens, these philosophically as well as historically important treatments do make for quite a comprehensive treatment of pleasure in the latter half of the Classical and the earlier half of the Hellenistic periods.

Finally, it is helpful to recognize a distinction between what any Greek philosopher or school thinks pleasure is, including what kinds of pleasure there are, on the one hand, and why that philosopher or school holds these views, on the other hand. For convenience, I will refer to the latter as the *explanation question*. Inevitably in answering the identity and kinds questions, I engage the explanation question. But in contrast to the identity and kinds questions, the explanation question can be treated at various levels of depth. Inevitable engagement of the explanation question in the process of working out the identity and kinds questions does not require deep engagement. Indeed, very deep treatment of the explanation question is not feasible within a book of this length or character. However, in the course of my discussions I explore some of the deeper reaches of explanation. To anticipate, in part these lie in the various philosophers' conceptions of the soul. That is, a given philosopher's conception of what pleasure is, if adequately theorized, will be a function of or at least informed by that philosopher's conception of the soul. In part, still deeper reaches of explanation lie in the various philosophers' basic metaphysical commitments.

#### THE TEXTUAL EVIDENCE

Our study of ancient Greek philosophy depends upon texts as records of the thought of the ancient philosophers and schools. In the case of every philosopher or philosophical school we will be discussing in the following pages, our textual evidence presents a range of difficulties. More precisely, the textual evidence for different philosophers presents different kinds of difficulty. Where needed, I will clarify the particular difficulty or difficulties the textual evidence of a given philosopher or philosophical school presents. Here, I make some brief general remarks.

Our textual evidence for ancient Greek philosophy is basically of three kinds: more or less complete primary texts, fragments of primary texts, and testimonies regarding figures, schools, and their texts. Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *On the Soul* are examples of complete primary texts. Fragments are verbatim passages from the work of a philosopher. Testimonies are paraphrases or comments upon the work, thought, or life of a philosopher

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or school. For example, consider the following piece of textual evidence regarding the fifth century Pythagorean philosopher Ion of Chios:

- (a) [Ion of Chios] wrote many poems and tragedies and a philosophical treatise entitled *Triad* . . . In some copies it is entitled *Triads*, in the plural, according to Demetrius of Skepsis and Apollonides of Nicaea. They record this from it:  
 (b) This is the beginning of my account: all things are three, and there is nothing more or fewer than these three things. Of each one, the excellence is threefold: intelligence and power and fortune.

I have added letters to distinguish two parts of the passage. Part (b) is a fragment; it purports to be the opening words of Ion of Chios' philosophical treatise *Triad*. In contrast, part (a) is a testimony, in this case a report about the range of Ion of Chios' literary activity and the title of his philosophical treatise. The whole passage derives from a lexicon composed by Valerius Harpocration some time during the Roman Empire. Harpocration's text is the one that survives today and thereby preserves this fragment and testimony of Ion of Chios.

As in the case of the fragment from Ion of Chios' *Triad*, fragments almost always consist of passages from other non-fragmentary or relatively non-fragmentary works. Very rarely do we actually have fragmentary texts, for example, bits of papyrus scrolls, from antiquity, that are copies of an original author's work, let alone being an original author's work.

Fragments and testimonies have distinct values. Fragments of course give us the actual words of a philosopher. In the best cases, testimonies help us to contextualize fragments or, more generally, to contextualize the contribution of a philosopher. Harpocration's passage from Ion of Chios is quite helpful insofar as it specifies the work in which the fragment occurs as well as the location of the fragment within the work. But compare the following testimonies and fragment regarding another fifth-century Pythagorean, Hippo of Croton:

- (1) One would not propose to place Hippo among these men because of the poverty of his thought.
- (2) (a) In the third book of his *Homeric Studies* Crates says that the later philosophers of nature also agreed that the water that surrounds the earth for most of its extent is Ocean and that fresh water comes from it. Hippo: (b) "All drinking waters come from the sea. For the wells from which we drink are surely not deeper than the sea is. If they were, the water would come not from the sea, but from somewhere else. But in fact the sea is deeper than the waters. Now all waters that are higher than the sea come from the sea."

(1) is a testimony from Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (composed in the latter half of the fourth century BCE). It is barely useful as evidence for reconstructing Hippo's life or thought since it merely records that Aristotle had a poor estimation of Hippo's intellect. (2) consists of a fragment (b), which is prefaced by a testimony (a). The passage derives from an anonymous ancient commentator on Homer's *Iliad*. The testimony derives from a lost work, *Homeric Studies*, by the Stoic philosopher and grammarian Crates of Mallos. (Hence a *terminus post quem* for the anonymous commentator is Crates of Mallos' lifetime, that is, second century BCE.) The commentator is citing Crates' idea, although not verbatim. The commentator then quotes a fragment from Hippo, which supports Crates' idea. In this case, it is unclear whether Crates himself originally quoted Hippo in support of himself. We are also not given any context for Hippo's remark. For example, was Hippo also commenting on the Homer passage? Or did Hippo refer to bodies of water more generally in the context of a natural scientific discussion?

What might be called the limiting case of a fragment is one in which the fragment is simply presented with no testimony framing it. We might call this an "unframed" fragment. Unframed fragments occur, for example, in a Late Antique anthology, a compendium of knowledge and wisdom, compiled by Johannes Stobaeus for his son Septimius. The contents are organized under chapter and sub-chapter headings. But beyond these basic points of orientation, Stobaeus simply gives the name of his source and quotes or paraphrases. For example: "Heraclitus: A man when he is drunk is led by a beardless boy, stumbling not knowing where he goes, his soul is moist." Unframed fragments, while valuable insofar as they are fragments, can of course be difficult to interpret precisely because they are unframed. If a philosopher composed several works, we may not know from what work the fragment derives, nor may we know where in a given work the fragment occurs.

Given these distinctions in forms of evidence, we can now specify, loosely, the nature of our evidence for the figures and schools that we will be discussing in the following chapters. For the pre-Platonic material, we have almost no primary texts. Occasionally, we have fragments, many of which are unframed. But most of the evidence comes in the form of testimonies. For Plato and Aristotle, we have many primary texts. In the case of Aristotle, we also have fragments from otherwise lost works. In the case of Epicurus, we have a few short primary texts. In addition, we have some fragments, most of which are unframed. Finally, we have numerous testimonies. In the case of the Cyrenaics, we only have testimony, and not much testimony at that. For



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the Old Stoics, we have no primary texts. We have numerous fragments, framed and unframed, and numerous testimonies.

### CONCLUDING REMARK

In the ancient world, pleasure was widely associated with the goddess Aphrodite (Roman Venus). In Plato's dialogue *Philebus*, the ancient text that arguably plumbs the nature of this topic more deeply than any other, Plato's principal dramatic character Socrates begins the inquiry into pleasure's role in the good human life by invoking the goddess with reverent and cautious words:

We must do our best, making our start with the goddess herself – this fellow claims that although she is called Aphrodite, her truest name is *hêdonê* (pleasure) ... I always feel a more than human dread over what names to use for the gods ... So now I address Aphrodite by whatever title pleases her. (12b–c)

One of the delightful facts about an inquiry into pleasure is the way that philosophical scrutiny quickly gives the lie to common sense. Untutored intuition suggests that the nature of pleasure is too obvious to be contested, let alone to warrant sustained investigation. It is often assumed that pleasure, like pain, is simply a feeling. It will therefore shock readers to learn that almost no Greek or contemporary philosopher identifies pleasure with a feeling. In fact, arguably, there is no Greek word for “feeling.” Most Greek and contemporary philosophers regard pleasure as something altogether different or at least something more complex. More precisely, most Greek philosophers conceive of pleasure as an attitude toward an object. Contemporary philosophers who hold such a view debate what this attitude is: attention, absorption, liking, desire. In their investigations, the Greeks tend to focus on the proper objects of pleasure. They variously propose: a process of restoration, an activity, a state of equilibrium, a proposition. The following chapters of course explore these positions and examine their grounds. Ultimately, we will also try to explain why the Greeks tend to focus on pleasure's object, while contemporaries tend to focus on pleasure's attitude.

Socrates' studied care in the *Philebus* quotation suggests that the endeavor to provide a philosophically adequate account of pleasure should begin with humility. Fortunately, mischaracterizing pleasure will not incur the wrath of Aphrodite. However, naïve assumptions about its nature may jeopardize our broader ethical theoretical aspirations.

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## CHAPTER 2

*Pleasure in early Greek ethics*

The topic of pleasure enters Greek philosophy in the fifth century BCE. The principal site of entry is ethics. Early Greek ethical treatments of pleasure focus on whether, how, and to what extent pleasure contributes to a good human life. There is also some discussion of pleasure in the contexts of theology and cosmology, physiology and psychology, all areas explored by so-called Presocratic thinkers we refer to as “philosophers.” I will discuss pleasure in some of those contexts in Chapter 3. Here I discuss the early ethical contributions.

## PRODICUS

Prodicus of Ceos (c. 465–395) – a man often but misleadingly referred to as a “sophist” – composed a pedagogical work, one part of which is known as *The Choice of Heracles*.<sup>1</sup> In *The Choice of Heracles*, Prodicus presented the mythological hero Heracles as a young man at a crossroads poised to choose a path of life. Feminine figures representing Excellence and Depravity advertised their respective courses. Prodicus’ *Choice of Heracles* does not survive. However, a rendition of it by the historian and Socratic philosopher Xenophon of Athens (c. 430–354) does. Consider the following passage from Xenophon’s rendition of Depravity’s exhortation:

You [Heracles] will not be concerned with wars or public responsibilities, but with what food or drink you can find to suit your taste, what sight or sound might please you, what scent or touch might delight you, which beloved’s company might gratify you most, how you may sleep most softly, and how you can achieve all this with the least trouble. (*Memorabilia* 2.1.24)

The allure of the path of Depravity lies in the enjoyment of these pleasures. For convenience, I will refer to them as *depraved pleasures*.

<sup>1</sup> The whole work seems to have been called *The Seasons* (*Horai*), perhaps referring to stages of a man’s life.