

Article

Plato on Laughing at People

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Abstract

In this paper I explore the ethics of laughing at people, drawing on Platonic moral psychology to show why malicious laughter is spiritually destructive. Contra the view that Plato opposes laughter, I argue that for Plato, laughter plays an important role in discourse. Through a new analysis of both the dialectic and drama of the *Philebus*, I argue that Plato distinguishes between specific forms of bad and good laughing at people; the former harms the soul and stifles human inquiry, whereas the latter benefits the soul and furthers human inquiry.

Keywords: Plato; laughter; comedy; ethics; malice; *Philebus*

1. Introduction

*Another account is that his death was caused by a violent fit of laughter; for after an ass had eaten up Chrysippus's figs, he cried out to the old woman, "Now give the ass a drink of pure wine to wash down the figs." And thereupon he laughed so excessively that he died.¹ ~Diogenes Laertius, *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers* (VII.7) (Laertius 1925).*

Plato takes laughter seriously. Both the *Republic* and the *Laws* introduce regulations on comedy and laughter. Plato's *Philebus* provides a psychological justification for such regulation: maliciously laughing at people, in comedy or otherwise, corrupts the soul. According to the *Apology*, Socrates' most dangerous accuser is the comic poet Aristophanes, who maliciously convicted Socrates in the court of public opinion (18b–d). Laughter is not only dangerous for the soul (ψυχή). It is also socially and politically dangerous.

However, Plato does not oppose laughing at people, contrary to one prominent line of interpretation (Keith-Spiegel 1972, pp. 7, 25–26; Morreall 1983, pp. 98–102). Plato's views on laughter and comedy are more complex and more interesting (De Vries 1985; Shelly 2003; Miller 2008; Perks 2012; Austin 2012). After all, Plato is a comic poet of sorts. As others have noted, there are striking stylistic and thematic similarities between Plato's dialogues and ancient Greek comedies.² And like Attic comedy, the dialogues are a mimesis of contemporary people, touching on plebian topics in colloquial language, often for the sake of political critique.³ Aristotle even compares Socratic dialogues to the farcical mimes of Sophron and Xenarchus (*Poetics* 1447b).⁴

In this paper I explore the ethics of laughing at people. I argue that for Plato, laughter plays an important role in discourse. Through a new analysis of both the dialectic and drama of the *Philebus*, I argue that Plato distinguishes between specific forms of morally good and bad laughing at people; the former harms the soul and stifles human inquiry, whereas the latter benefits the soul and furthers human inquiry.

Focused, as it is, on the *Philebus*, the view I develop here need not be attributed to Plato, though I make this interpretive assumption throughout. Those who reject Vlastos's

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developmentalism may attribute the view developed here to the *Philebus* rather than to Plato himself; see Vlastos (1991). While developmentalism has its challenges, especially regarding its shaky chronological assumptions, Plato's contemporaries, most notably Aristotle, attributed philosophical views to Plato on the basis of his Socratic dialogues. So long as we do not read the dialogues as straightforward treatises, I think we can discern Plato's philosophy, even if we do not buy the full developmentalist story. Doing so requires paying close attention to both the dialectic and the drama of the dialogues.

2. Laughing at People: Intentional and Representational

Although the dialogues touch on many kinds of laughter, Plato focuses on amusement or enjoyment that arises out of representing people as self-ignorant and powerless. This emphasis makes sense, given Plato's interest in the social, ethical and political dimensions of laughter. Thus, the dialogues do not develop a general theory of laughter. Rather, they present the ethical implications of a certain kind of laughter. In this paper I focus on one sort of laughter Plato highlights; namely, the pleasurable affection [πάθος] that arises from judging or imagining people to be self-ignorant and powerless. Such laughter is 'intentional' in the sense that it is *about* an object and *represents* an object (unlike, say, nervous giggling or laughing automatically in response to tickling).

Intentional laughter is also norm-governed. One important norm is 'fittingness.' According to Plato, one laughs fittingly at people, if one accurately believes or imagines them to lack (a) self-understanding of their own financial, physical, epistemic or moral failings (especially ignorance) and (b) the power to defend themselves when laughed at (*Phileb.* 47e-50e).⁵ The self-ignorant and powerful person is fearful, not funny.

For example, there should not be anything funny about a powerful and self-ignorant tyrant, because he has the potential to do great harm. So, laughter does not "fit" the powerful tyrant. Although laughable people believe they are better and more self-aware than they are, they are powerless to defend themselves when laughed at. When we laugh at such people, our laughter is fitting in the sense that it arises from our appreciating the genuinely laughable features of another person or group of people (i.e., their self-ignorance combined with powerlessness). This is not to say that a powerful person *cannot* be a source of laughter. To be sure, Old Comedy abounds with this kind of laughter. Plato's point is that one should be afraid, not humored by, such figures. For a powerful person can do great harm, if they are self-ignorant.

Sometimes laughter is not a fitting response to people. For example, when we laugh at men and women exercising naked together, we are laughing at the wrong people. Laughter is not a fitting response because reason reveals naked, coed exercise to be good for us (*Rep.* 452c-d). Naked exercisers are not self-ignorant; rather, they are wiser than we. Only fools laugh at naked, coed exercisers. Socrates makes a similar point later on in the *Republic*: it is foolish to laugh at the enlightened soul, who is confused in virtue of coming from the light to the darkness, instead of the dimwitted soul, who is confused in virtue of coming from the darkness to the light (518a-b).⁶

Plato's *Theaetetus* expands on this point even more: the object of fitting laughter is someone who really is, rather than merely appears, self-ignorant and powerless. When the philosopher laughs at his companions for overvaluing noble ancestry, the philosopher is 'scornfully laughed at' [καταγελάται] by the many (174e-175b). In such cases, the philosopher appears to the many to be without resources, arrogant and ignorant—in effect, a powerless and laughable [γελοῖός] figure who is ignorant of his own ignorance.

However, the lawyers, whom the "free and the educated" laugh at, are the objects of fitting laughter. For the lawyer falsely believes he is "clever and wise" [δεινοί τε καὶ σοφοί] when really he is ignorant of the most important matters (175d). When questioned about kingship, happiness and misery, the lawyer is stumped, a laughable figure amid a

comic chorus of clouds (175d). In short, we wisely laugh at lawyers; laughter is a fitting response to lawyers. In contrast, we foolishly laugh at philosophers; laughter is an unfitting response to philosophers.

In sum, Plato focuses on the following kind of laughter: amusement arising from representing a person or group as self-ignorant and powerless. What is more, such laughter is norm-governed in various ways. I have briefly sketched one way this form of laughter is norm-governed: it is ‘fitting’ when it accurately represents its object as self-ignorant and powerless. Moreover, according to the Platonic picture unfitting laughter is also necessarily ethically problematic in that it flows from ignorance, a moral failing.⁷

Because laughter can be foolish or wise (depending on whether it is a fitting response), comedy plays an important role in Platonic moral education. For example, in the *Laws* the Athenian Stranger proposes a law that permits some comedy in Magnesia, on the grounds that virtue requires ‘practical wisdom [φρόνιμος] about vice’ (816e)—i.e., recognizing and hating vice. Magnesia’s citizens are to laugh at slaves’ comic imitations of vicious people so as to become habituated in discerning and disdaining the vicious among us.

However, so as not to become vicious themselves, citizens should not perform comic mimesis; or if they do, they should not do so “seriously” [σπουδῇ] but only satirically (*Rep.* 397a).⁸

In conclusion, wisely laughing at people is part of practical wisdom about vice. On the face of it, this is a strange result. How can a wise person laugh at people? It may seem that laughing at people is morally wrong even when it is a fitting response. Plato is aware of this problem. Indeed, good laughter must meet additional ethical norms: it must not be serious or malicious. The sort of laughing at people that Plato recommends not only fits its object but is also playful (unserious) and benevolent in nature. In sections 3 and 4 I articulate forms of laughter that fail to meet these norms. In section 5 I discuss a form of laughter (showcased in the *Philebus*) that does meet these norms. Throughout I will focus on one kind of laughter; namely, laughing at people who are represented as self-ignorant and powerless. This kind of laughter has important implications for political and philosophical discourse.

3. Serious Laughing at People

Serious laughter is a form of abusing [νεκείων]—i.e., a way of harming or threatening to harm someone in a social or political setting. A scene from Homer’s *Iliad* brings out the ways in which violence, politics and laughter intersect (Homer 1938, pp. 215–82). Thersites, elderly and disabled, scolds Agamemnon for weakening the Achaean army by angering a man better than he (i.e., Achilles), whose concubine (a war prize) Agamemnon stole. In verbally abusing Agamemnon, Thersites attempts to channel the Achaeans’ fury into laughter directed at the “ridiculous Agamemnon,” whom Thersites represents as a man more interested in bedding women than winning the Trojan War. “Let us go home in our ships and leave this man [Agamemnon] here in Troy to ponder his prizes,” Thersites jeers. However, Odysseus turns the weapon of laughter back on Thersites:

Passage A

Odysseus quickly came up to him, and glowering beneath his brows he put him in his place with a savage word [χαλεπῶ ... μύθῳ]: “Be still, Thersites, fancy with words, clear-voiced speaker—don’t try and argue with the chiefs, alone as you are! No one worse than you ever came to Troy with the sons of Atreus. So don’t go around with ‘chief’ lightly on your lips, despising them, saying we should all sail home. No one knows how this will all turn out, or whether the sons of the Achaeans will return in victory or defeat to our homes....” So he

spoke, and with the staff he struck Thersites' back and shoulders. Thersites bent over. A hot tear rolled down his cheek. A bloody welt rose up on his back beneath the golden scepter. He sat down, deeply alarmed, in pain, with a helpless look on his face. He wiped away a tear. The Achaeans, though they suffered, laughed with pleasure [ἡδὺ γέλασσαν] at his plight.⁹

Unlike Thersites, Odysseus succeeds in using laughter as a weapon. To the laughing Achaeans, Thersites, not Agamemnon, is ignorant of his own ignorance and powerless to defend himself. The officers may be ignorant—since “no one knows how this will all turn out”—but they are also powerful, a fact Odysseus violently impresses on Thersites. Laughter resolves a potential threat to Agamemnon's power, effectively stabilizing that power. Such laughter is not playful. It is serious.

Like Thersites, the Thrasymachus of Plato's *Republic* attempts to use laughter as a weapon against Socrates, after Socrates claims to be ignorant about what justice is:

Passage B

... he [Thrasymachus] burst into extremely sardonic laughter [ἀνεκάγχασέ τε μάλα σαρκάνιον].¹⁰ “By Heracles,” he said, “that's just Socrates' usual irony. I knew, and I said so to these people earlier, that you'd be unwilling to answer and that, if someone questioned *you*, you'd be ironical and do anything rather than give an answer” (337a2-6).¹¹

Thrasymachus sees Socrates as a laughable pretender to knowledge, a powerless fraud who cannot defend his own view of justice. Thrasymachus' terrifying laugh contains a threat, which Socrates acknowledges when he twice remarks that the roaring Thrasymachus inspires fear. However, the ensuing philosophical discussion exposes Thrasymachus to be ignorant of justice and incapable of defending himself. Although Socrates emerges as the wiser and more powerful dialectician, Socrates does not use laughter as a weapon against Thrasymachus. For, as Socrates remarks in the discussion, pity, not violence, is an “appropriate” [εἰκός] response to human ignorance (336e9-10). Although serious laughter may be politically expedient, it does nothing to ameliorate human ignorance. To be sure, Thrasymachus *is* genuinely laughable, and the dialogue represents him as such. But if we, the readers, are to laugh at him, we should not laugh at him in the violent way that he laughs at Socrates.

What I am calling “serious” or “violent” laughter permeated many aspects of Greek culture. Aristophanes and Hypereides even portray bullying crowds gathered in the agora, laughing and jeering at a shamed person.¹² In his book on the cultural psychology of laughter in antiquity, Stephen Halliwell dubs such laughter “consequential laughter;” that is, laughter that harms or threatens to harm.¹³ While consequential laughter is abundant in Greek tragedy, its consequences are consequences for tragic characters. The terrible actions of Euripides' *Medea* spring at least in part from her desire to avoid consequential laughter (Dillon 1991). In contrast, by directing serious laughter at contemporary people, Attic comedy had serious consequences for Socrates and others.

However, in the *Republic*, Socrates disparages serious laughter for a different reason, focusing instead on its harmful effects on the laugher himself. Indeed, the *Republic* proposes we do away with “violent laughter” [ἰσχυρῶ γέλωτι], which produces a violent “change in mood” [μεταβολήν] (388e-389a). Similarly, in *Laws* XI comedians are permitted to make fun of people “not in angry seriousness [σπουδῇ] ... ἄμα καὶ θυμουμένοισιν], but in a playful spirit [μετὰ παιδιᾶς] and without anger [ἀνευ θυμοῦ]” (936a5-6). The worry is that serious, angry laughter devolves into “real hatreds and quarrels of the most serious kind” (935a2-3), transforming the laugher into a reckless beast (934e-936b). In other words, serious laughter is ethically problematic in virtue of the spiritual or

psychological harm it does to the laughers themselves. (I will explore this idea more in section 4.)

In contrast, mirthful or playful laughter—common at Greek festivals, symposia, and even the assembly and law courts—was a form of communal play, fostering a sense of togetherness and joint relaxation (Halliwell 1991, pp. 281–96). Though the dialogues say little about playful laughter, Plato’s characters laugh playfully. For example, in the *Phaedo* Socrates laughs in response to Crito’s question about how to bury him:

Passage C

In any way you like, if you can catch me and I do not escape you. And laughing he simultaneously kept quiet and looked at us [γελάσας δὲ ἄμα ἡσυχῇ καὶ πρὸς ἡμᾶς ἀποβλέψας]; he said: I do not convince Crito that I am this Socrates talking to you here and ordering all I say, but he thinks that I am the thing which he will soon be looking at as a corpse, and so he asks how he should bury me. I have been saying for some time and at some length that after I have drunk the poison I shall no longer be with you but will leave you to go and enjoy some good fortunes of the blessed, but it seems that I have said all this to him in vain in an attempt to reassure you and myself too. (115c6-116a2).

This is playful laughter. Socrates does not laugh seriously at Crito. He laughs at himself for failing to teach Crito that his soul is immortal. In the next lines Socrates implores his companions to teach Crito, expressing concern for Crito’s soul. Unlike serious or consequential laughter, playful laughter is unifying, inclusive and benevolent in nature.¹⁴

I will return to playful laughter in section 5. In the next section I will consider a further dimension of serious laughter; namely, its harmful effects on the soul of the laugher. Serious laughter is not only ethically problematic because it harms (or threatens to harm) its object; it is also ethically problematic because it harms its subject.

For the remainder of this paper I will focus on Plato’s *Philebus*—a text that contains Plato’s most sustained discussion of laughter, nested within a complex argument about pleasure and its role in the good life. In section 5 I will shift my focus to the comedic drama inherent in the *Philebus* itself. The joking interactions between Socrates and Protarchus showcase how laughing at people in the right way fosters learning and furthers human inquiry.

4. Maliciously Laughing at People

I will be focusing on *Philebus* 49d-50a. In this section of text Socrates claims that malicious laughter is a mixed psychic pleasure, combining in the soul elements of pleasure and pain. Before I begin, I want to be clear about what interpretive claim I am defending. I will not defend a position in the ongoing debate about whether or not the *Philebus* contains a unified and coherent theory of pleasure. Nevertheless, I do believe the dialogue attempts to develop a comprehensive theory of pleasure—one that applies to every kind of pleasure.¹⁵ Very basically, Plato conceives of pleasure as a process of restoration (in particular, a generation [γένεσις] of harmony), which (a) involves both the body and the soul and (b) ceases once the end [τέλος] is achieved—a harmonious state [οὐσία] with a limit [πέρας].¹⁶ Though I will make some suggestions about how the psychic pleasure of malicious laughter could be understood as a restorative or quasi-restorative process, I will not defend the contentious claim that Plato intends the restoration model to apply to all pleasures, including psychic pleasures. Rather, my primary aims are to show why maliciously laughing at people is so problematic and to salvage a good form of laughing at people, not to defend an interpretation of the *Philebus*’s account of pleasure.

4.1. Malicious Laughter: Non-Hedonic and Hedonic Falsity

Socrates explains the pleasure of malicious laughter to Protarchus:

Passage D

So take first the nature of malice [φθόνου]. ... It contains a kind of unjust pain and pleasure. ... Now, if you enjoy [χαίρειν]¹⁷ bad things [κακοῖς]¹⁸ that happen to your enemy, is there any injustice or malice in your pleasure? [P: How should there be?] But is there any occasion when it is not unjust to be pleased rather than pained to see bad things happen to your neighbors [φίλων]¹⁹ [P: Clearly not.] But we just agreed that ignorance is bad for everyone? [P: Right.] Let us take now the ignorance of neighbors which we said came in three versions, would-be wisdom and would-be beauty, and the other sort we just mentioned [i.e., would-be wealth], each of which is laughable [γελοῖα]²⁰ if weak, but odious if strong. Now, we are ready to affirm of our neighbors' state what we just said, namely, that it is laughable if it is harmless to others? [P: Very much so.] But did we not agree that it is bad if it is ignorance? [P: We certainly did.] But if we laugh about it, are we pleased or pained by it? [P: We are pleased, obviously.] But this pleasure in the face of the bad things belonging to neighbors—did we not say that it was the product of malice? [P: Necessarily.] Our argument leads to the conclusion that if we laugh at what is laughable about our neighbors, by mixing pleasure with malice, we thereby mix pleasure with pain. For we had agreed earlier that malice is a pain in the soul, that laughing is a pleasure, and that both occur together on those occasions (49d-50a).

Malicious laughter is a mixed psychic pleasure, combining in the soul the pain of unjust malice (itself a mixed pleasure) toward neighbors and the pleasure of enjoying and laughing at “bad things” belonging to neighbors (i.e., various forms of self-ignorance). The pain stems from unjust malice [φθόνος] toward neighbors [φίλοι],²¹ and the pleasure is the pleasure of enjoying [χαίρειν] and laughing at the bad things [κακοῖς] belonging to neighbors. Many passions (if not all) produce mixed pleasures of the soul (47e).²² Malice is “a sort of unjust pain and also a pleasure” [λύπη τις ἄδικός ἐστί που καὶ ἡδονή] (49d1).

While the object of malicious laughter is a weak neighbor, the object of the pleasure of malicious laughter is more complex, deriving from the comparison malicious laughers make between their neighbors and themselves (Miller 2008; Tuozzo 1996). In maliciously laughing at neighbors, we enjoy their presumed badness not in and of itself, but rather insofar as it seems to augment our own excellence by comparison. In particular, in maliciously laughing at our neighbor, we enjoy our own supposed financial, physical and/or spiritual superiority, as well as our own supposed epistemic superiority—that is to say, we think we know our worth, whereas our oblivious neighbor laughably overestimates her own. Because malice [φθόνος] is the desire for ‘bad things belonging to neighbors’ (hereafter, “BBN”), malice is serious; it harms or threatens to harm its object, either directly or indirectly.²³ The desire for BBN stems from the desire to be financially, physically, and/or psychically better off than one's neighbors—a desire whose satisfaction produces the pleasure of malice.²⁴

While Socrates does not explicitly invoke the malicious laugher's enjoyment of her presumed superiority, without this piece, Socrates' account of the pleasure of malicious laughter does not make sense.²⁵ Why would we take pleasure in the badness of our neighbors for its own sake? Also, as we have seen in section 3, serious laughter is used to establish or reinforce one's superior status. Moreover, going this route explains Socrates' otherwise puzzling claim that the enjoyment of bad things belonging to enemies is neither malicious nor unjust: we enjoy our enemies' faults and misfortunes not insofar as they

seemingly elevate our own greatness by comparison, but rather because deriding their weaknesses protects us from harm.²⁶

At this stage, malicious laughter is problematic because it is serious; it arises out of a desire that one's neighbor be harmed. To appreciate its effect on the soul of the laugher, we must now turn to Socrates' discussion of anticipatory psychic pleasures, which precedes his discussion of the pleasure of malicious laughter. Like the psychic pleasure of malicious laughter, false anticipatory pleasures are also vicious pleasures of the soul (40a-c). In explicating false anticipatory pleasures, Socrates develops a rich moral psychology, which I draw on to sketch the kind of problematic falsity inherent in the pleasure of malicious laughter.

At 39d-40e Socrates discusses the psychic pleasures of anticipation, for the purpose of explaining a type of falsity applicable to all psychic pleasures, including the pleasure of malicious laughter.²⁷ Socrates maintains that such pleasure involves beliefs and imaginings that represent the pleasure-experience and pleasure-object in certain ways (39a-c). While there is enormous scholarly debate about what aspect of the content of these representations makes their corresponding pleasures true or false,²⁸ my primary aim is not to take a hard line in these debates. Rather, I argue that however we understand the falsity of anticipatory pleasures, such falsity is ethically problematic in the case of the pleasure of malicious laughter.

After claiming that "writings in the soul" (i.e., beliefs) and "paintings or pictures in the soul" (i.e., imaginings) attend pleasures (38e-39d), Socrates and Protarchus discuss false anticipatory pleasures:

Passage E

And are those writings and pictures that come to be in us, as we said earlier, concerned only with the past and the present, but not with the future? [P: Decidedly with the future.] If you say 'decidedly', is it because all of them are really hopes for future times, and we are forever brimful of hopes, throughout our lifetime? [P: Quite definitely.] ... There are, then, assertions in each of us that we call hopes? [P: Yes.] Socrates: But there are also those painted images. And someone often envisages himself in the possession of an enormous amount of gold and a lot of pleasures as a consequence. And in addition, he also sees, in this inner picture himself, that he is beside himself with delight. ... And wicked people nevertheless have pleasures painted in their minds [1], even though they are somehow false. ... So wicked people as a rule enjoy false pleasures, but the good among mankind true ones? [P: Quite necessarily so.] ... Now, it was agreed that whoever judges anything at all is always *really* judging, even if it is not about anything existing in the present, past, or future. ... And these were, I think, the conditions that produce a false judgment and judging falsely, weren't they? [P: Yes.] But should we not also grant to pleasures and pains a condition that is analogous in these ways? [P: In what ways?] In the sense that whoever has any pleasure at all, however ill-founded it may be, really does have pleasure, even if sometimes it is not about anything that either is the case or ever was the case, or often (or perhaps most of the time) refers to anything that ever will be the case. [2] ... Well, then, do we have any other way of distinguishing between bad and good judgments than their falsity? [P: We have no other.] Nor, I presume, will we find any other way of account for badness in the case of pleasures unless they are false (39d6-40e9).

Passage E is famously ambiguous, dividing interpretations of what kind of falsity Socrates means to invoke.²⁹ Is the false anticipatory pleasure for gold false because the belief and imagining 'I will get gold' is false? (Call this "non-hedonic falsity.") Or rather,

is the false anticipatory pleasure for gold false because the belief and imagining ‘Getting gold is pleasant’ is false? (Call this “hedonic falsity.”) It seems Socrates implicates both kinds of contents and both kinds of falsity; a man’s false anticipatory pleasure for gold involves his imagining and believing both that he will obtain gold in the future and that his getting gold will be pleasant. Socrates focuses on non-hedonic falsity to make the point that non-hedonic falsity does not threaten the reality of the pleasure in question; the anticipatory pleasure is still a real pleasure, despite its predictive failure—i.e., despite the fact that the subject will not obtain the gold he anticipates for himself. (See underlined [2] in passage E.) The second kind of falsity, hedonic falsity, provides clear support for Socrates’ primary point; namely, that the vicious or wicked are prone to false pleasures. The vicious, who value wealth over virtue, have hedonically false pleasures; they are wrong about *what is pleasant*. Thus, whereas the predictive failure of an anticipatory pleasure does not obviously imply its viciousness, its hedonic falsity does. So, while Socrates selects the gold example to draw our attention to two types of falsity, only one sort of falsity (i.e., hedonic falsity) supports his larger point that false anticipatory pleasures belong to the vicious.

This is puzzling. Why should Socrates pinpoint two types of falsity, when only hedonic falsity supports his larger point about anticipatory pleasure? The reason is this: both hedonic and non-hedonic falsity account for the viciousness of many non-anticipatory psychic pleasures, and Socrates intends these modes of falsity to apply more widely to all psychic pleasures (and possibly all pleasures), including the non-anticipatory pleasure of malicious laughter. I shall now examine how hedonic and non-hedonic falsity illuminates the harmful effects the pleasure of malicious laughter has on the soul.

What beliefs and imaginings attend the pleasure of malicious laughter? Following the gold example, one belief-imagining pairing must represent the object of pleasure (i.e., the pleasure-object), and the other must represent the pleasantness of the object of pleasure (i.e., the pleasure-experience). Keeping in mind that a malicious laughter takes pleasure in her neighbor’s presumed badness relative to her own presumed goodness, the beliefs and/or imaginings attending malicious laughter represent the following two contents:

- (1) I am better than my neighbor in virtue of my financial, physical and/or psychic worth, as well as in my superior knowledge of my worth.
- (2) My neighbor’s inferiority and inferior knowledge thereof are pleasant.

Notice, the pleasure of malicious laughter is non-hedonically false according to the Platonic picture, because the belief representing content (1) is false. The malicious laughter is foolish and unjust in desiring that bad things befall her neighbor, so, in maliciously laughing at her neighbor, she is not genuinely better than her neighbor, despite what she inaccurately believes or imagines. (To be sure, she may be financially *better off* than her neighbor; however, mere financial prowess does not make her better, full stop, than her neighbor, at least not on a Platonic picture that privileges qualities of soul above all other measures of human worth.) Recall, in Socrates’ words, a non-hedonically false pleasure is not “about anything that either is the case or ever was the case.” (See underlined [2] in Passage E.) The false pleasure of malicious laughter is also not about anything that is the case, because the malicious laughter is not really superior to the object of her foolish and unjust laughter.

While the pleasure of malicious laughter is no less real on this account, it is vicious, since its non-hedonic falsity stems from self-ignorance, not mere predictive error (as in the case of false anticipatory pleasure).³⁰ For example, when Thrasymachus maliciously laughs at Socrates, his pleasure arises from foolishness, because he falsely judges Socrates to be inferior in knowledge, a kind of non-hedonic falsity. He is wrong about his pleasure-object, as the dialogue reveals Socrates to be far superior with respect to knowledge. Thus,

the non-hedonic falsity of Thrasymachus's pleasure is not (here) morally neutral; it reveals the deluded and self-ignorant character of Thrasymachus.

Just as malicious laughter is serious, malicious laughter is foolish, because the pleasure of malicious laughter is normally non-hedonically false. A malicious laugher is rarely, if ever, superior to whomever he laughs at, at least not in the moment of her unjust laughter. As a result, malicious laughers do not take pleasure in any real state of affairs—i.e., their own real goodness relative to their neighbor's real badness. Why should this be? Recall, malicious laughter is serious and unjust in that it satisfies the desire for BBN, establishing power or strength based on harm or threat of harm. However, it is never just to "harm" [κακουργεῖν, κακῶς ποιεῖν, βλάπτειν] anybody, friend or enemy (*Crito* 49c; *Rep.* 335b-d). To imagine and believe in one's own human superiority, while simultaneously being unjust, is, for Socrates, the pinnacle of self-ignorance. Indeed, the irony of malicious laughter is this: the malicious laugher is herself laughable. Deluded by a false comparison, she is oblivious to her own self-degradation and self-ignorance.

To modern readers it might seem strange that a mere desire—in this case, for bad things to befall one's neighbors—can be unjust. However, even contemporary philosophers, like William G. Lycan, acknowledge at least *some* moral harm here. Malicious mirth is morally wrong both because it reveals one's bad character (e.g., their cruelty and schadenfreude) and because it reinforces these traits. Moreover, it inhibits a more sympathetic response, the kind of response I will explore in section 5.

One might also object that it is possible for one to maliciously laugh at someone who really is inferior to oneself—and so, in that case, the malicious laughter is non-hedonically true. But I take it that Socrates' point is this: when we maliciously laugh at someone, *in that very moment* we cannot simultaneously claim to be a superior human being—i.e., we cannot claim that we possess more "occurrent" goodness, even if we have the disposition of a moral saint. For, in the moment of our unjust laughter, we lower ourselves to their level. What is more, our malicious laughter backfires. One need only consider the lowness of certain political commentators who maliciously deride politicians. While they may be morally superior, when they maliciously laugh at politicians, in that moment they forfeit any claim to moral superiority. This is one of the reasons why their malicious jibes so often fail to convince.

What makes the pleasure of malicious laughter hedonically false? To be sure, the malicious laughter initially experiences some real pleasure, just as the wicked man who gets gold. What both the malicious laugher and the wicked wealth seeker are wrong about is their *estimation* of the pleasure; both judge the pleasure to be far greater than it actually is. I will develop this point in the next section, where I discuss the "inauthenticity" of the pleasure of malicious laughter. Malicious laughers are not only wrong about the object of their laughter, they are also wrong about the nature of the pleasure they experience, supposing it to be more satisfying and happiness-making than it really is.

This discussion of anticipatory pleasure sets us up to see the ways in which the pleasure of malicious laughter is false. Like false anticipatory pleasures, the pleasure of malicious laughter takes false mental judgments or imaginings as its content. And like false anticipatory pleasures, the pleasure of malicious laughter is non-hedonically and hedonically false; the malicious laugher wrongly supposes that she is superior and that her pleasure experience is more satisfying and more happiness-making than it really is.

In short, the pleasure of malicious laughter is not good for us. This presents a problem for anyone who endeavors to assimilate all pleasures to the dialogue's restoration model of pleasure: how could the pleasure of malicious laughter constitute a kind of restorative process? To answer this question, we would need to think about what painful lack or deprivation precedes the pleasure of malicious laughter. What needs to be restored? Perhaps the lack is the painful awareness of one's own deficiencies relative to

better human beings.³¹ Perhaps imagining one's own presumed superiority (relative to one's neighbor) soothes the pained, self-doubting soul without producing any real superiority. The pleasure of malicious laughter removes the superficial (albeit genuine) psychic disharmony and pain caused by sensing one's own inferiority, but it does not remove the spiritual disharmony and pain caused by actually being an unjust and foolish human being.³² In fact, the pleasure of malicious laughter further exacerbates the bad spiritual situation (i.e., injustice and ignorance) that falsifies the pleasure of malicious laughter; the laughing makes the malicious laughter worse, which falsifies her belief in her own superiority. If this is how we are to understand the pleasure of malicious laughter, then the pleasure constitutes a quasi-restorative process. I present this line of interpretation as a suggestion, not an interpretive claim I can defend here.

In conclusion, with regard to the pleasure of malicious laughter, both kinds of falsity, non-hedonic and hedonic, point to the viciousness of the pleasure of malicious laughter. To be wrong in our assessments of our own goodness relative to our neighbor's presumed badness implies our foolishness. To be wrong about *what we take pleasure in*—to suppose that the world, and not our own fantasies thereof, furnishes the objects of our pleasures—implies our ignorance about the world, ourselves and the disconnect between the two. Ultimately, though, what accounts for the twin falsity of the pleasure of malicious laughter is the injustice and seriousness at its core—i.e., that it arises from the desire that our neighbors be harmed. Far from supporting our actual superiority (as it is intended to do), the vicious pleasure of malicious laughter undermines our real worth as human beings, effectively falsifying the self-affirming fantasies that attend the pleasure of malicious laughter.

4.2. Malicious Laughter: (Great) Inauthenticity

At this stage in the argument, Protarchus is not convinced. At the conclusion of the discussion of non-hedonic and hedonic falsity, Protarchus digs in his heels, protesting, "It is not at all because they are false that we regard pleasures or pains as bad, but because there is some other grave and wide-ranging kind of badness involved" (41a1-4). Socrates does not dispute Protarchus's point. Rather, Socrates proposes to forestall discussion of the badness of pleasures, in order to detail additional ways in which pleasure may be false. Whereas non-hedonic falsity attaches to judgments and/or imaginings about the pleasure and laughter object, the second kind of falsity, hedonic falsity, relates to the "authenticity" of the pleasure experience (for which reason I am using the term "inauthenticity" to capture Socrates' concept of hedonic falsity)³³. Moreover, inauthenticity comes in degrees, whereas the falsity of false judgments—what commentators call "semantic falsity"—does not. In any case, pinpointing this further mode of falsity reveals additional ways in which the pleasure of malicious laughter is "false," which, in turn, expands Socrates' account of malicious laughter and its effects on the soul. In particular, the inauthenticity of the pleasure of malicious laughter explains its unruliness and immoderation.

The inauthenticity of the pleasure of malicious laughter arises from the fact that it is a pleasure mixed with a great pain; namely, the pain of malice. The juxtaposition of pleasure and great pain makes the pleasure and the pain appear much larger than they really are (42b), and the admixture of pleasure and pain destroys the purity of the pleasure experience (46a-53c). The pleasure is inauthentic, because it is (a) impure and (b) experienced as much greater than it really is.³⁴ Because impurity and magnitude come in degrees, inauthenticity also comes in degrees: a radically impure pleasure, which appears much larger than it really is, is an extremely inauthentic pleasure. A greater impurity results in a greater illusion of magnitude, which results in greater inauthenticity. I will explain.

Of course, in Socrates' view, most pleasures are mixed with pain (in the sense that painful deprivations precede them), and so most pleasures are *somewhat* inauthentic, albeit not to a problematic degree.³⁵ Indeed, healthy mixed pleasures are part of the good life (63e-64a), even though they are not necessarily ingredients *accounting for* the goodness of the good life (66c).³⁶ For example, the pleasure of healthful eating is part of the good life, even though it is mixed with the pain of hunger and therefore somewhat impure.³⁷ It remains to explain why the pleasure of malicious laughter is mixed in such a way so as to be inauthentic to a great degree.

First, it will help to show why healthy or virtuous mixed pleasures are only slightly inauthentic. When soul or body achieves a particular limit, the process of 'restoration of harmony' ceases, along with the felt pleasure that partially constitutes this restorative process. Importantly, when reason imposes this limit, the pleasure is moderate and good, ceasing once healthful harmony is restored. Personifying reason, Socrates remarks:

Passage F

It is the goddess herself, fair Philebus, who recognizes how excess and the overabundance of our wickedness allow for no limit [πέρας] in our pleasures and their fulfillment, and she therefore imposes law [νόμον] and order [τάξιν] as a limit on them. And while you may complain that this ruins them, I by contrast call it their salvation (26b5-c2).³⁸

Thus, even though healthy mixed pleasures are somewhat inauthentic (e.g., the healthy pleasure of eating is mixed and misleadingly large, because it contrasts with the pain of hunger), such pleasures are reason-governed and hence not extremely inauthentic. Vicious or diseased pleasures are inauthentic to a far greater degree than healthy or virtuous mixed pleasures. In the passage directly preceding the analysis of the pleasure of malicious laughter Socrates explains:

Passage G

... is it not the case that pleasures are more intensive or set in with greater intensity when people suffer an illness than when they are healthy? ... Are not those pleasures overwhelming, which are also preceded by the greatest desires? ... And when people suffer from fever or any such disease, aren't they more subject to thirst, chill, and whatever else continues to affect them through the body? Do they not feel greater deprivations, and also greater pleasures at their replenishment? (45b5-9).

Protarchus answers in the affirmative, claiming that the most intense and excessive pleasures and pains drive one to mania and arise from vicious states of body and soul. In Passage G Socrates explains extreme hedonic inauthenticity: pleasures that are juxtaposed with extreme pain appear greater than they really are, in virtue of the hedonic contrast. Such pleasures have their origins in vice or disease, which produces great spiritual or physical deprivations and pains. Such vicious or diseased pleasures appear illusorily large and intense in contrast to the great deprivations and pains that precede them. Importantly, reason does not govern such pleasures, in the sense of supplying their rational limit and definite end (relative to virtue or health norms).³⁹

Rather, vicious or diseased pleasures continue on and on relative to great spiritual or physical pains, their arbitrary limit being determined by the arbitrary size of one's present spiritual or physical deprivation. For this reason, such pleasures tend toward excess rather than moderation. The more painfully aware I am of my inferiority relative to other humans, the more pleasure I derive from maliciously laughing at my ostensibly inferior neighbor. The intensity of the pleasure is arbitrarily set by my own present degree of psychic disharmony.

What is more, in virtue of their intensity, diseased and vicious pleasures present themselves as pursuit-worthy, supreme and happiness-making, when in fact they are not (47a3-b6). They are counterfeit. At 53 a-c Socrates explains that pure, unmixed pleasures are more pleasant, more true and more beautiful than mixed pleasures. Just as a tiny patch of pure white is whiter than a huge patch of impure white, a moderate and pure pleasure is in reality pleasanter than an intense, impure pleasure. The less adulterated with pain a pleasure is, the more pleasurable it is. Thus, intense, mixed pleasures (i.e., diseased or vicious pleasures) are inauthentic; they present themselves as the pinnacle of supreme pleasantness, when in fact they are not. What is more, as Socrates emphasizes, these excessive pleasures usurp one's focus and attention, making their possessors foolish and mindless (47a-b).

The pleasure of malicious laughter is a vicious mixed pleasure and, hence, greatly inauthentic. A great, painful spiritual deprivation precedes the pleasure of malicious laughter, which accounts for its inauthenticity. Recall, while the malicious laughter is superficially restored through her fantasy of her own superior self-worth and self-knowledge, she is nevertheless unjust and soul sick. The great spiritual pain that precedes the malicious laughter's intense enjoyment of BBN is the injustice in the soul. Contrasted and adulterated with this great spiritual pain, the pleasure of malicious laughter is extremely inauthentic; it appears much greater than it really is and appears much pleasanter than it really is. It follows that spiritual disease and deprivation (i.e., inner ignorance and injustice) arbitrarily determine the limit of the pleasure of malicious laughter. Reason does not set a limit (relative to virtue norms) on the pleasure of malicious laughter. Therefore, the pleasure of malicious laughter tends toward excess, infecting the soul with madness [$\mu\alpha\nu\acute{\iota}\alpha$] and interfering with the development of reason and knowledge (63d-e), including the practical wisdom that enables wise laughter.

If this account seems implausible, one need only consider the addictive quality of Internet shaming and cyber bullying. Many people, in the grip of pleasurable malice, really do lose their minds. Thus, it may be well worth asking what state of mind or spirit produces such potent, amusing malice. Although Socrates does not provide an explicit answer, the dialogue prompts us to think about how the pain of unjust malice might be understood as a painful deprivation symptomatic of psychic disease. Why would someone wish other human beings ill or harm?

Why is such a wish necessarily unjust, and why is it also painful? Here it is important to recognize that not every "wish for harm" is malicious. Socrates may, for example, hope that the jurors who convicted him "get what they deserve" so that they will come to see the error of their harmful ways and improve themselves. This sort of desire is neither malicious nor unjust. In contrast, hatefully desiring that your neighbor experience bad things *simply because it makes you feel superior*—this is unjust malice. The desire to elevate oneself *at another's expense* is at the core of malicious laughter. Why is this desire so painful? It is painful insofar as hatred is painful. It is also painful insofar as insecurity is painful. For if you are truly confident in your own worth as a human being, what joy could you take in elevating yourself at the expense of another human being? You would consider all malice a great waste of your time. But if you are insecure, the pleasure of malicious laughter is a great balm to your soul.

At this point, if you are a hedonist, you may be resolutely unconvinced. Why should virtue, health, truth, moderation or even "happiness" be the criteria by which we evaluate the pleasure of malicious laughter?⁴⁰ If it feels good, then it is good! However, the Hedonist should care about the authenticity and inauthenticity of her pleasures. The great inauthenticity inherent in the pleasure of malicious laughter reveals it to be a sham experience; it presents itself as more pleasant than it actually is. This inauthenticity should especially bother the Hedonist, who identifies the pleasant with the good. The basic thought is this:

the Hedonist, especially, should want *authentic* pleasure, as opposed to counterfeit pleasures that represent themselves as greater than they really are.

So far, the ensuing discussion might seem to recommend the view that laughing at people is always bad. However, only maliciously or seriously laughing at people is bad, in virtue of its relation to outward injustice, violence and inner psychic sickness (i.e., ignorance, injustice and foolishness) and falsity. In the next section, I will show that the comedic drama of the *Philebus*—in particular, the joking interactions between Socrates, Philebus and Protarchus—reveals a form of good laughing at people.

5. The *Philebus*: Good Laughing at People

Comedy and laughter abound in the *Philebus*.⁴¹ While I cannot give a full analysis of the ‘comedy of the *Philebus*’ here, focusing on a few passages will reveal what a salutary form of wise, playful and virtuous laughter looks like. Good laughter crucially involves the laugher laughing at himself, in addition to his companions. In this way, good laughter is inclusive—an emotional acknowledgment of our shared human flaws and limitations. Instead of deluding us with fantasies of superiority, good laughter enables us to honestly confront our own human limitations, especially with regard to knowledge. In effect, good laughing at people helps us know what we do not know, inspiring us to jointly inquire through discourse and philosophy.

In what follows, I will advance the view that the *Philebus* is a dramatic comedy about discourse. The comedy itself is complex, in that two comedies run side by side. On the one hand, Socrates and Protarchus act out a satire of eristic discourse, combatively pitting themselves against each other in jest. On the other hand, Socrates and Protarchus laugh at themselves and their position as non-eristic truth seekers, laughing at their own Sisyphean efforts to marshal the machinery of philosophic dialectic to put a limit on unlimited human discourse. In other words, a comedy about eristic discourse runs alongside a comedy about philosophic discourse. Both forms of comedy elicit laughing at people, albeit in a wise, playful and virtuous way.

The dramatic context of the *Philebus* is funny. Protarchus, Philebus and their youthful gang are supposedly holding Socrates hostage, while they all settle the relative roles of reason and pleasure in the good human life. Given this superficially hostile situation, Socrates encourages Protarchus to not be a childish lover of quarrel [φιλόνηκος] but an ally in seeking the truth (13c-14e). Socrates worries that in staking out one’s position from the start and childishly inventing absurdities (e.g., one-many puzzles), eristic discussants will ultimately forfeit the discussion, with each side refusing to concede out of love of quarrel. Indeed, the eristic *Philebus* has already bowed out of the discussion, just as soon as he found himself unable to defend his hedonistic position. Even when spoken to, Philebus remains mostly mute throughout—a constant reminder of an eristic discussion gone wrong. In the course of setting out to discuss whether pleasure is the human good or whether knowing, understanding, remembering, right opinion and true calculation is the good (11b-c), Socrates presents one-many puzzles and attempts to guide Protarchus toward a resolution:

Passage H

Is it not best to start here? ... By making the point that it is through discourse [λόγων] that the same thing flits around, becoming one and many in all sorts of ways, in whatever it may be that is said at any time, both long ago and now. And this will never come to an end [μὴ παύσηται], nor has it just begun, but it seems to me that this is an “immortal and ageless” condition that comes to us with discourse [λόγων] [3]. Whoever among the young first gets a taste of it is pleased as if he had found a treasure of wisdom.⁴² He is quite beside himself

with pleasure and revels in moving every statement, now turning it to one side and rolling it all up into one, then again unrolling it and dividing it up. He thereby involves first and foremost himself in confusion, but then also whatever others happen to be nearby, be they younger or older or of the same age, sparing neither his father nor his mother nor anyone else who might listen to him. He would almost try it on other creatures, not only on human beings, since he would certainly not spare any foreigner if only he could find an interpreter somewhere (15d1-16a4).

Seeing himself implicated in this depiction, Protarchus jokingly replies:

Passage I

Careful, Socrates, don't you see what a crowd we are and that we are all young? And are you not afraid that we will gang up against you with Philebus if you insult us? Still, we know what you want to say, and if there are some ways and means to remove this kind of disturbance from our discussion in a peaceful way, and to show us a better solution to the problem, then just go ahead, and we will follow you as best we can. For the present question is no mean thing, Socrates (16a5-b3).

Protarchus intends his threat in playful jest, just as he playfully threatens that his gang will only release Socrates once the discussion reaches a satisfactory limit (19e, 23b). Meanwhile, Socrates makes fun of eristic discussants; if they could, these lads would dominate nonhuman animals in discourse! In his reply Protarchus merely plays the part of the quarrel-loving eristic; in reality, he is desperate for Socrates to reveal the truth about the human good (19c-20a), even if such revelation requires that he, Protarchus, laughably hand over Philebus's thesis to Socrates (19a-b).

One major indication that the discussion is not genuinely eristic is that nobody (except eristic Philebus) staunchly stakes out a position. Protarchus reluctantly defends Philebus's Hedonist position (38a), and Socrates revises his own initial position, allowing pure pleasure to be an ingredient in the good life.⁴³ Indeed, after acknowledging that Protarchus's combative threats are unserious, Socrates introduces a promising new thesis, belonging to the gods—i.e., that a third thing (neither pleasure nor knowledge) is the human good (20b-c).

Despite this non-combative spirit of cooperative inquiry, Philebus aggressively clings to his hedonistic position, accusing Socrates of extolling his own God (27e-28b)—i.e., intelligence, knowledge and reason. Protarchus interrupts Philebus's ad hominem attack, beseeching Socrates to be spokesperson, lest they invite a "false note" into the discussion (28b6-8). Socrates, in turn, defends a view attributed to earlier thinkers; namely, that reason is ruler of the cosmos (30d). Socrates emphasizes that this discourse is not idle but proves the important point that reason belongs to the "fourth kind," which is cause of that mixture that is the good human life (30d-e). Clearly, the cooperative pursuit of truth underlies the eristic theatrics.

If we laugh at these eristic caricatures, we laugh wisely. Eristic discussants like Philebus are the proper object of laughter—i.e., dialectically powerless, ignorant and ignorant of their own ignorance. However, despite the fact that Philebus is genuinely laughable, Socrates and Protarchus do not laugh at him. In fact, Protarchus defends Philebus's position, and Socrates repeatedly invites Philebus back into the discussion. Thus, the purpose of this playful eristic satire is not to maliciously degrade eristic discussants like Philebus (in order to establish one's own superiority), but rather to service the philosophic pursuit of truth through avoiding an eristic breakdown of discourse. Such playful satire (and the laughter it elicits) is virtuous, in that it helps people pursue wisdom and spiritual advancement.

The comedy of the *Philebus* is especially playful to the extent that Socrates and Protarchus represent themselves as laughable, in effect inviting us to laugh at them. Even while it satirizes eristic discourse, the *Philebus* reflexively pokes fun at philosophic discourse. Benevolently laughing at people (here, eristic discussants) involves laughing at oneself (here, philosophic dialecticians). Including oneself in the sphere of the laughable communicates the benevolent, non-malicious intention of one's laughter. Even more importantly, playfully laughing at oneself fosters knowledge of oneself and one's position in the world, in stark contrast to malicious laughter, which is delusional. Whereas the pleasure of malicious laughter derives from a painful state of spiritual sickness, the pleasure of playfully laughing at oneself may be understood as a pure pleasure of learning about oneself and one's real position in the world. Such pleasures are salutary, not harmful.

What is so laughable about the position Socrates and Protarchus find themselves in? Socrates has already stated (Passage H, underlined [3]) that through human discussion or discourse the same thing becomes eternally one and many. Shortly thereafter, Socrates supplements this point, drawing an analogy with music: one is competent in music when one knows the number, nature, names and notes that define the intervals in high and low pitches, in addition to the combinations they form and the modes of harmony, meter and rhythm they make. Socrates proclaims:

Passage J

... these [music theorists] have made us realize that every investigation should search for the one and many. For when you have mastered these things in this way, then you have acquired expertise there, and when you have grasped the unity of any of the other things there are, you have become wise about that. The boundless [ἄπειρον] multitude, however, in any and every kind of subject leaves you in boundless [ἄπειρον] ignorance, and makes you count for nothing and amount to nothing, since you have never worked out the amount and number [ἀριθμόν] of anything at all (17c10-e8).

Protarchus correctly interprets Socrates as requesting that they investigate the various kinds of pleasure and knowledge (19b, 20a), both their number and their nature. The pair set out to do just this, lest through discourse pleasure and knowledge become unlimited, plunging them into boundless ignorance. However, Protarchus repeatedly flounders, entreating Socrates to take over the discussion or else clarify matters (e.g., 20a, 51b-c, 53e, 54b, 57a), at one point alluding to the laughable nature of his own dialectical ineffectiveness (19a). At the conclusion of Socrates's discussion of cosmic wisdom (which initially confounds Protarchus), Socrates remarks, "sometimes joking is a relief from seriousness" (30e6). The "joke" is Socrates' feigned ignorance of the obvious; namely, that reason rules the cosmos. Indeed, taking Socrates' apparent ignorance of the obvious seriously, Protarchus is initially incredulous (28e, 29c-d).

Why would Socrates want the discussants (or us) to laugh at him? At 23c11-d2 Socrates again represents himself as laughable, albeit in virtue of a real aspect of his position as a philosophic dialectician:

Passage K

Let us now take these as two of the kinds [limit and unlimit], while treating the one that results from the mixture of these two as our third kind. But I must look like quite a laughable figure [γελοῖός τις ἀνθρώπος]⁴⁴ with my distinctions into kinds and enumerations!

Here, the ridiculousness of Socrates' situation extends beyond his feigned ignorance to his many fine philosophic distinctions. Passages H and J point to the ways in which human discourse can un-bound and un-limit a topic, miring discussants in ignorance. Just as limit puts an end to the opposition of pleasure and pain (25e), limit puts an end to

dialectical opposition and discourse. Socrates intends his “distinctions into kinds and enumerations” to limit the unlimited domain of inquiry (i.e., pleasure and knowledge). However, Socrates indicates that this endeavor is laughable. Why should philosophical discussion be laughable?

Notably, Socrates does not succeed in limiting the discourse. In fact, the very structure of the *Philebus* underscores this failure. Strangely, the discussion begins in the middle (after a substantial conversation with Philebus) and ends in the middle. The dialogue’s discourse is not limited, reflecting the unlimited nature of the domain of inquiry. (This is not to suggest that knowledge is unlimited; rather, the domain of inquiry and human discourse are.) The philosopher’s attempt to limit the discourse with distinctions and enumerations is comically futile. Read in this light, the final lines of the *Philebus* are hilarious. Socrates asks Protarchus whether he will release him, and Protarchus replies, “There is still a little missing, Socrates. Surely you will not give up before we do. But I will remind you of what is left” (67b9-11). While the mindless pleasure-seeker is stuck in the limitlessness of his pleasures, the philosopher Socrates is trapped in the limitlessness of his discourse, held hostage by his young interlocutor’s boundless ignorance!⁴⁵ In effect, the dialogue makes fun of the philosopher and in particular the futility of providing a limited discussion of an unlimited domain of inquiry, so as to save oneself (and others) from boundless human ignorance.

However, in acknowledging his own funny situation by laughing at himself and inviting others to do the same, Socrates does not become a genuinely ridiculous figure; for the ridiculous are ignorant about their own human ignorance. As Protarchus aptly exclaims, “while it is a great thing for the wise man to know everything, the second best is not to be mistaken about oneself, it seems to me” (19c1-3). The example of Socrates suggests an alternative to malicious laughter—and with it, an alternative to becoming genuinely laughable. When confronted with the pain of our own human deficiencies (especially regarding knowledge), instead of fantasizing about our supposed superiority, we should join our peers in laughing at ourselves and our shared human situation of dialectical weakness in the face of an unlimited domain of inquiry. Only then can we know what we do not know, acquiring a “second best” sort of wisdom (i.e., self-knowledge). And only then can the real, cooperative work of never-ending human inquiry get started.

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Notes

1. Translation by Hicks (Laertius 1925).
2. For example, the *Gorgias* and Aristophanes’s *Knights*, and the *Protagoras* and Eupolis’s *Flatterers*. See Brock (1990, 39–50) and Nightingale (1995, pp. 172–92).
3. See Brock (1990, pp. 43–46) for the content and style of ancient comedy. See Nightingale (1995, pp. 172–92) for ancient comedy as political critique.
4. Syracusans Sophron and Xenarchus wrote “mimes” in prose—i.e., farcical sketches of everyday occurrences.
5. While Plato does not explicitly use the language of “fittingness” to describe laughing at people, his discussions clearly capture this concept. Laughter is warranted or unwarranted depending on whether the laughter correctly conceptualizes her object.
6. Here Socrates suggests that the best response is to admire the enlightened soul and to pity the dimwitted one. Socrates suggests that, in some cases, it may even be unwise to laugh at the dimwitted soul. In sections 3 and 4 I present such a case—i.e., when laughter is serious or malicious.
7. D’Arms and Jacobson (2000) might accuse Plato of committing the “moralistic fallacy” in conflating laughter’s ‘unfitting-ness’ with its ‘moral wrongness.’ For example, D’Arms and Jacobson point out that envying your friend can be a fitting response, if

her deserved success really is bad for you. The envy is fitting, albeit morally questionable. However, Plato would deny that envy is ever a ‘fitting’ response toward a real friend. The wise person knows and judges that the success of her (true) friends can never harm her. So, in practice, epistemic and moral norms do not come apart in the case of emotions with evaluative content that the wise get right and the ignorant get wrong. For a compelling contemporary discussion of the moral wrongness of malicious laughter, see Lycan (2020).

8. While *Laws* 816e mandates that only slaves perform comic mimesis, the *Republic* allows citizens to perform unserious or satirical comic mimesis. See Ferrari (1989, pp. 118–19) for the argument that un-serious mimesis is satirical mimesis. In section 5 I will argue that in the *Philebus* Protarchus satirically imitates an eristic interlocutor.
9. Using the Rouse (Homer 1938) translation of the *Iliad*.
10. Using the Loeb classical library for the original Greek of Plato’s works (Plato 1925).
11. Cooper et al. (1997) for all English translations of Plato’s works.
12. Ar. *Peace* 1015ff. (cf. *Ach.* 854), Hyp. 2.2, 3.12. See Halliwell (2008, 237) for a discussion of laughter in the agora. Cf. Halliwell (1991, 286). Aristotle classes verbal abuse as a form of violence (*NE* 1131a9; *Pol.* 1262a27).
13. See Halliwell (1991, 281–96) for the distinction between “consequential laughter” and “non-consequential laughter.” Whereas the former is injurious or potentially injurious to its recipient, the latter is not (unless it devolves into consequential laughter).
14. In a similar vein, the *Symposium* portrays Diotima playfully laughing at the youthful Socrates, whom she teaches about love (202b–d). Performing Socratic elenchus on Socrates, Diotima gently (and with a laugh) steers Socrates to see the contradiction in his theory of love. This gentle learning moment is foil to the dialogue’s depiction of pedagogical pederasty as disempowering and spiritually destructive. See Trivigno (2019, p. 32) for the view that Socrates models playful laughter throughout the dialogues so as to discourage readers from maliciously laughing at foolish characters.
15. Miller (2008, p. 270) sums up the case for the universality of the restoration model of pleasure: “First, when Socrates introduces the theory at 31d–32a, he speaks in a general way; when he presents cases of physical pleasure as examples, he selects them, he says, because they are ‘commonplace and obvious’ and, so, the ‘easiest to understand’ (31e). He never suggests that he means his selection of them to specify the theory’s object domain. Second, Socrates directly applies the language of emptying (or lack) and replenishing to the other four of the five kinds of pleasure (physical, anticipatory, sense-perceptual, and learning pleasures), and he uses these terms in the closest possible proximity to his discussion of the pleasures associated with the passions, both right beforehand (47c) and right afterwards (51b).” This echoes Tuozzo (1996) and Aufderheide (2011). Also, the methodological assumption of the *Philebus* (i.e., that all pleasures can be collected under one genus, even as they are differentiated into kinds) is additional support for the view that the restoration model unites the many species of pleasure under one genus. See Fletcher (2017) for an argument to the contrary. According to Fletcher, there is not a unified theory of pleasure in the *Philebus*. In any case, recent commentators compellingly apply the restoration model to comic pleasures, both good and bad. See, for example, Olin (2019) and Duplessie (2020).
16. Indeed, Aristotle interprets Plato this way when he rejects the view that pleasure is or requires generation (*NE* VII.XII).
17. Translating “χαίρειν” as “enjoy” instead of “rejoice in.”
18. Translating “κακοῖς” (and cognates) as “bad things” instead of “evils” throughout. “Bad things” is a broad category, including external circumstances, as well as internal states of soul. Otherwise translated in accordance with Frede (1993).
19. Translating “φίλων” (and cognates) as “neighbors” (instead of “friends”) throughout, following Bury (1897, p. 113). Bury notes that, for the Greeks, humans were divided into two categories: “φίλοι” [neighbors] and “ἐχθροί” [enemies]. Translating “φίλοι” as “friends” (as Hackforth 1972 does) invites problems. It is doubtful that audiences considered the characters of comedy (e.g., sophists) to be friends, so much as neighbors, peers or non-enemies.
20. Translating “γελοῖα” (and cognates) as “laughable” (rather than “ridiculous”) throughout.
21. Following Hackforth (1945), Frede (1993), Taylor (1956), Austin (2012), and Wood (2007), I translate “φθόνος” as malice. Those who translate “φθόνος” as “envy”—Tuozzo (1996), Miller (2008), Bury (1897)—face the following problem, noted by Russell (2005, 189, fn. 47): the characters of Attic comedy are simply not of the sort we would envy. Russell goes on to explain (fn. 49) that “φθόνος” means “envy” in Aristotle, because Aristotle is focused on the phenomenon of being pained by good things belonging to neighbors. In contrast, Plato is focused on the phenomenon of being pleased by bad things belonging to neighbors. Both phenomena share the same psychic source—i.e., a desire that our neighbors fare poorly, not well.
22. This leads some to speculate that, for Plato, all emotions involve mixed pleasures. See Frede (1993, lii) and Hackforth (1945, pp. li–liii). Plato chooses to focus on the emotion of malicious laughter, because laughter and comedy are a dramatic theme in the dialogue (as I argue in section 5).

23. Arising from a desire that one's neighbor be harmed, malicious laughter is serious in the sense that it has potentially harmful consequences. It could motivate abuse and violence. To be sure, malicious laughers are often quite passive. They do not wish to themselves harm the person they laugh at; however, they do wish the individual harm. And given that the very act of laughter can inspire others to laugh (becoming a kind of "collective" and "viral" phenomenon), the threat of violence is always there: someone could act out the collective wish and deliver harm to the target of malicious laughter. And indeed, in Plato's *Apology* Socrates implies that the Athenian jury is in fact fulfilling a collective wish for harm that the comic poet Aristophanes inspired in Greek audiences, in virtue of depicting Socrates in a way that invited malicious laughter. Malicious laughter can be very serious indeed.
24. We should keep in mind a useful distinction that Harte (2004, p. 114) makes. Pleasure may indicate the pleasure-experience (as in, "the pleasure of eating") or the pleasure-object (as in, "the pleasure of food"). So, when I say, "the pleasure of malice," I am referring to the pleasure-experience (i.e., the experience of taking pleasure in BBN) rather than the pleasure-object (i.e., BBN).
25. Indeed, humor theorists attribute a "superiority theory" of laughter to Plato—e.g., Perks (2012, p. 126), Shelly (2003, p. 352), Keith-Spiegel (1972, pp. 6–7), and Morreall (1983, pp. 4–5). Plato does not have a superiority theory of laughter, so much as a sense that bad, malicious laughter involves feelings of superiority. See Linott (2016, p. 349). The superiority theory fails in that it does not distinguish between laughing at versus laughing with. Insofar as Plato maintains this distinction, he is not a superiority theorist. He does not think all laughter can be assimilated to the superiority model, as I argue in this paper.
26. Contra Austin (2012) and Miller (2008), who suppose that we laugh at the faults and misfortunes of our enemies in much the same way that we laugh at the faults and misfortunes of neighbors. This of course raises a problem (which drives both of their papers): how can laughing at enemies not be unjust (as Socrates supposes), given that it is always unjust to harm anybody? My interpretation has the advantage of avoiding this problem.
27. And possibly all pleasures, though this is a matter of debate. When, at 36e, Socrates starts to articulate what it means to say a pleasure is true or false, he goes on to cite only examples of psychic pleasures (no bodily pleasures). See Fletcher (2018). In the passage Socrates does not mention any examples of bodily pleasures.
28. There is considerable scholarly debate about whether the "relevant content" (i.e., that content whose truth-value determines the truth or falsity of its corresponding pleasure) is 'that such-and-such will come to pass in the future' or 'that such-and-such will be pleasant.' Harte (2004, pp. 124–27) argues that the relevant content is of the latter, not the former, sort. Harte points out that this account of falsity is meant to (a) apply to all pleasures (not just to anticipatory pleasures relating to the future) and (b) show why this type of false pleasure belongs to the wicked. Since the former sort of content is not shared by non-anticipatory pleasures, and since it is not clear how believing it would make one wicked, Harte suggests that the false content accompanying these false pleasures is of the latter sort—i.e., 'such-and-such is or will be pleasant.' In contrast, I will argue that both types of false content are implicated and that both types of false content can, at least in some cases, explain the wickedness of certain pleasures.
29. See Evans (2008) for a good summary of the literature. Socrates does say, at 40b2–5, that the pictures in the soul are "true" in the case of good people, because they are dear to the gods. But even this comment does not definitively imply that it is non-hedonic truth/falsity that is at issue here. The gods could just as easily give good people the right values as they could give them material resources. Again, the comment is ambiguous between hedonic and non-hedonic falsity. And, as I argue, this ambiguity is intended; both forms of falsity are implied, and we need not suppose that only one kind of truth/falsity is implicated here.
30. See Shaw (2016) for an analysis of hedonic error in the *Philebus* and *Republic*. It's not obvious that, with the gold example, Socrates has mere predictive failure in mind. He may be envisioning the ancient equivalent of a lottery player, who foolishly believes that he will win, even when the odds are heavily stacked against him. In this case, the belief 'I will get gold' is foolish and, hence, morally problematic. In contrast, if the man reasonably believes he will get gold (but, for some odd reason, he does not), then he suffers from predictive failure (but not foolishness).
31. This "awareness" does not have to rise to the level of full consciousness. (Indeed, if it did, then the malicious laugher might not maliciously laugh!) Rather, it has to be painfully felt in the soul. See Olin (2019) and Duplessie (2020) for the view that one's awareness of one's own deficiency is the painful part of the mixed pleasure of malicious laughter. Duplessie takes it further, arguing that the comic poet Aristophanes is pained by his inability to live as a philosopher, that it is this spiritual pain that drives his comic poetry. His delusion of his own superiority makes him tragic.
32. Since malicious laughter actually worsens the soul, the superficial psychic restoration it provides is not a restoration "in accordance with nature [κατὰ φύσιν]," unless we interpret "nature" non-normatively, to indicate the subject's "normal" state.

Since the malicious laughter's normal/natural state is ignorance of her human deficiencies, malicious laughter restores her spiritual normalcy/nature by removing her awareness of her deficiencies and restoring her self-ignorance.

33. Evans (2008, 90, fn. 5) suggests that *Philebus* 36c–50c contains four arguments intended to show that pleasures can be false in some way. While I am not completely convinced that the falsity discussed at 42c–44b (i.e., that a hedonically neutral state, because it is not a pain, can falsely appear to be a pleasure) is not some version of the falsity discussed at 41c–42c (i.e., that a pleasure, when juxtaposed with pains or other pleasures, can falsely appear greater than it is), I agree with Evans and the literature in claiming that Socrates distinguishes between the semantic falsity (wrong about pleasure-object) and metaphysical falsity (wrong about pleasure-experience) of pleasures. My big departure is in my claim that the discussion of false anticipatory pleasures implies both kinds of falsity.
34. In the discussion of inauthenticity (46a–53c) there is the interesting suggestion that purity, not quantity, is a better criterion in assessing a pleasure.
35. See Hackforth (1972, li) for the view that most pleasures are mixed, albeit not in a bad way. Hackforth is right in thinking that Socrates criticizes “morbid” mixed pleasures—i.e., pleasures arising from disease or vice. Austin (2012) also makes a compelling case that not all mixed pleasures are bad on Plato's view. Still, there is scholarly debate on whether these mixed pleasures can be “true” or not and to what extent. For example, Olin (2019) argues that such pleasures are “true” when a perceptible lack is genuinely filled, according to reason's limit. Duplessie (2020, pp. 18–19) makes the provocative claim that, insofar as opinions constitute most mixed pleasures, they cannot be true. Good comic pleasure, insofar as it involves one's knowledge of one's own ignorance, could be true in the strict, Platonic sense.
36. Rather, their measure and limit, being extrinsic to them, is an external, goodness-making ingredient accounting for their extrinsic goodness and justifying their inclusion in the good life. Following Vogt (2010), the *Philebus*'s final ranking is not a ranking of goods in the good life, but rather, principles or causes of the good life. The ingredients on the list (i.e., measure; the proportioned, the fine, complete, etc.; reason and intelligence; the sciences and arts; and pure pleasures) combine and mix to create good things in the good life—e.g., good health and virtue, wisdom and healthy mixed pleasures.
37. Contra Irwin (1995, p. 331), who holds that the pleasure of healthful eating is somehow not mixed with pain. Were this the case, Socrates would include such pleasures in his list of pure pleasures, but he does not.
38. Irwin (1995, p. 324) claims that having a limit requires not only having a determinate quantity but also having that quantity relative to some ‘norm.’ Here the norm is health. This works as an analysis of healthy pleasures, but it does not work as an analysis of unhealthy pleasures. Rather, I interpret Socrates as follows: Each token unhealthy or vicious pleasure ceases at some limit (for all pleasure ceases at some limit), but because this limit is arbitrary in the sense that it is not determined relative to a health or virtue norm, the type to which the pleasure token belongs is ‘unlimited,’ in the sense that it does not answer to some norm that determines the limit of its tokens. So, when Socrates claims all pleasure is unlimited (27e, 31a), he has pleasure tokens in mind; for each individual pleasure ceases as soon as some limit is reached. However, when he claims that only vicious or diseased pleasures are unlimited (26b–c, 52c), he has pleasure types in mind, since unhealthy pleasures are not governed by rational norms that set their natural limit. I see no other way to square these ostensibly conflicting remarks.
39. Whereas virtue norms are set by human reason, health norms are set by cosmic reason.
40. Socrates also includes beauty (in addition to truth and proportion) as a criterion of what ingredients go into the good human life (65a); however, the main critique of wicked pleasures relies primarily on their falsity (and somewhat on their immoderation or lack of proportion).
41. See Wood (2007) for a fuller analysis of the comedy of the *Philebus*. Do Plato's other dialogues employ “good” laughter? While the answer to this question lies outside the scope of this paper, Tanner (2018) argues for this form of laughter in dialogues as diverse as the *Apology*, *Laches*, *Charmides*, *Cratylus*, and *Symposium*, highlighting the ways in which playful, self-directed laughter promotes greater self-knowledge, epistemic humility, courage, wonder, and, ultimately, philosophy itself.
42. See Wood (2007) for a deeper analysis. Wood argues that the dialogue draws parallels between Hedonists and eristic discussants and that the drama indicates that malicious laughter springs from love of quarrelling. I am sympathetic to this reading and owe much of my own analysis to Wood.
43. I side with Vogt (2010) in being suspicious of any anti-Hedonism interpretation of the *Philebus*, given that pure pleasure is an ingredient in the good human life.
44. Replacing “fool” with “laughable figure.”
45. While I cannot develop this line here, Wood (2007) convincingly argues that eristic discussants who love quarrel are hedonistic pleasure-seekers prone to malicious laughter. Wood interestingly suggests that the drama of the *Philebus* reveals a link between pleasure-seeking, love of quarrel and malicious laughter. Olin (2019) further develops Wood's analysis. See Austin (2012) for

an excellent analysis of how the good pleasure of comic laughter is still, nevertheless, a mixed pleasure. While we are pained by our own and others' foolishness, we are nonetheless pleased by removing our and others' delusion.

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