

EVEN MORE APORETIC REFLECTIONS ON PHILEBUS 48a-50b
Comments on Miller,
"The Pleasures of the Comic and of Socratic Inquiry:
Aporetic Reflections on Philebus 48a-50b"

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Mitchell Miller asks a terrific question: what does Plato think about the pleasure that onlookers and readers take in Socrates' examinations? To refer to this pleasure, I beg your indulgence of a Germanic shortcut. I want to say that Miller asks us to consider what Plato thinks about the Socrates-watcher's pleasure. Having asked an interesting question, Miller also offers an inspired suggestion to answer it: we should take the Philebus' account of the pleasures of comedy to illuminate this pleasure. And things get even better, because Miller shows that his suggestion is problematic. In the Philebus, Socrates argues that the pleasures of comedy often involve the passion of phthonos, malice or envy, and, still worse, injustice. So, if the Socrates-watcher's pleasure is the pleasure of comedy, then Socrates' examinations (and Plato's representations of them) attract crowds only by encouraging injustice. But how can this be? How can Socrates, the wisest and most just human being of all, do such a thing? Call that Miller's aporia.

Miller offers three possible responses. First, one might simply reject the original suggestion: we should not, after all, explain the Socrates-

viewer's pleasure in light of Socrates' remarks in the Philebus about the pleasures of comedy. Second, one might stick by the suggestion and defend the unjust appeal to envy made by Socrates' examinations and Plato's representations of them on the grounds that the ends justify the means: that is, only by attracting an audience eager to see some hapless know-it-all harmed can Socrates and Plato show why it is wrong to harm another. Third, one might stick by the suggestion and defend the unjust appeal to envy by showing how (roughly) the structure of the dialogue cancels the unjust pleasure.

As I hope I've already made clear, I very much like Miller's question and his turn to the Philebus to answer it. But I do not think I understand exactly how the Philebus' account of the pleasures of comedy. I'm stuck on what Miller calls the first level. Never mind the connection between the account of this pleasure and the general account of pleasure as restoration, let alone the link between this account and the mixtures of limit and the unlimited. So I am going to belabor the two pages of the Philebus on which Miller has offered what he calls "Aporetic Reflections." My comments might be called, "Aporetic? You Call That Aporetic?" I want to raise several aporiai, some of which suggest some quibbles with Miller's account, some of which are simply at cross-purposes, and some of which do not dissent in the slightest. But at least a couple of the aporiai will, I hope, justify the

belabored approach, even if, regrettably, I will be passing over so much of Miller's rich and suggestive project in silence.

When we come to Philebus 48a, Socrates is in the middle of providing a taxonomical analysis of pleasures. He has divided pleasures into the false and true, and he is working his way through the false ones. There are several kinds of false pleasures, it turns out, and it is far from obvious what makes them all false. This is my first question about the pleasures of comedy (**Q1**): what is so false about them? I think that Miller has an answer to this. Sometimes, Socrates seems to say that a pleasure can be false by failing to be a pleasure at all: apparent pleasures are one kind of false pleasure. When Miller links the pleasure of comedy to the general account of pleasure as restoration, he construes this pleasure as mere relief. That sounds like the falsity of mere appearance. If I am reading Miller right on this point, I worry about the distinction between restoration and mere relief from pain, which must hold good if some pleasures are not merely apparent and pleasure is generally restoration. There are many big questions hiding under this first query. Let's bracket them.

Among the false pleasures are the mixed ones. Some mixed pleasures mix bodily pleasure with bodily pain; others mix bodily pleasure with psychological pain or vice versa; and still others mix psychological pleasures with psychological pain (47d5-6). To identify the members of this last set of mixed pleasures, the ones that do not involve the body, Socrates lists some

passions (47e1-2) that are painful (47e2-3) and yet "mixed up with pleasures" (47e5).¹ Protarchus understands this list immediately (48a3-4), and he understands how purely psychological mixed pleasures arise for those enjoying tragedy (48a5-7). But he does not grasp how there is anything mixed about the pleasure of comedy (48a8-10). So Socrates offers to explain the pleasure of comedy as the hard case that will serve as the paradigm for the whole set of purely psychological mixed pleasures (see 50c10-d3).

To explain the pleasure of comedy, Socrates turns to one passion on the list of those responsible for purely psychological mixed pleasures, phthonos. He immediately establishes that phthonos is a psychological pain (48b8-10) and that the person who feels phthonos will take pleasure at bad things that beset his neighbors (48b11-13). That is well and good, Protarchus might wonder, but what has it to do with the pleasure of comedy? How does the audience of a comedy experience phthonos toward the characters on stage and enjoy the bad things that beset them? That is my second question (**Q2**).

Sadly, Socrates does not answer it directly. Instead, he detours abruptly. He highlights one bad thing that can beset a person, namely ignorance or stupidity (48c2), and he then asks what conclusions Protarchus

¹ I am here quibbling with the first sentence of Miller, p. 3, which strikes me as misleading. Socrates does not argue that every pleasure that arises with a passion is mixed with pain. He merely identifies some passions that bring with them both pain and pleasure.

draws from these considerations about the nature of the geloion, the ridiculous or laughable (48c4). Protarchus, unsurprisingly, is clueless (48c5). Socrates then asserts that the geloion is a bad condition that, in general, is the opposite of the condition recommended by the Delphic Oracle (48c6-10). The Delphic Oracle recommends self-knowledge (48c10-d1); the geloion is the unfortunate condition of self-ignorance (48d1-2). Socrates then analyzes self-ignorance into three kinds (48d4-49a6; cf. 49d11-e1): people fail to know themselves by thinking that they possess external, bodily, or psychological goods that they in fact do not possess.² As if to underscore the connection Miller wants to draw, Socrates singles out those who are self-ignorant by thinking that they have wisdom that they do not in fact possess (49a1-2).

This account of the geloion prompts my third question (**Q3**): does Socrates really mean that this is what it is to be geloion? Does he simply misspeak when he says, for example, in the Republic (452c), that people once found exercising naked to be geloion? But perhaps Socrates would distinguish between the naturally geloion and what seems geloion. What seems geloion can change over time, as indeed Athenians came to believe that there was nothing geloion about men exercising naked. But what really

² I am quibbling again. On p. 1, Miller distinguishes three conditions of the $\gamma\epsilon\lambda\omicron\iota\omicron\nu$, and he separates the self-ignorance condition from the merely apparent possession of one or several of the human goods. The seemingly different list of three conditions on p. 3 is closer to the mark with the second condition. I quibble with other aspects of these lists below.

is geloion, what has the nature of the geloion, is fixed. That might suggest an affirmative answer to my third question, but lest it seem as though I am going soft on my commitment to out-aporein Mitch, let me assure you that we are not done with the definition of the geloion.

Socrates immediately insists on making a division to see the point of paidikos phthonos or "playful malice" (49b), by which delightful phrase he refers to the connection between phthonos and pleasure of comedy.

Socrates points out that some of the self-ignorant are weak and others strong (49b1-4). This distinction makes a difference (49b6-c5). For the strong self-ignorant are not laughably ridiculous: they are dangerous. Note that it does not matter whether the strong self-ignorant person is your friend or your enemy. Such a person is bad news, and his or her ignorance is not ridiculous but "hateful and ugly" (echthra te kai aischra, 49c2). Powerful, self-ignorant Oedipus was trouble even for his philoï, or perhaps especially for his philoï.³ So the truly geloios, it would seem is the weak, self-ignorant person. That, I am afraid, does settle the definition of the geloion. All I can say is that some small puzzles need to be solved for the big ones to make any sense.⁴

³ More quibbling. On p. 1, Miller seems to suggest that friendship render self-ignorance unthreatening just as weakness does. Miller's discussion of Oedipus (n. 2) is enough to show what is wrong with that suggestion.

⁴ So I think that only two conditions are needed. Miller gets three conditions on pp. 1 and 3 by bifurcating the self-ignorance condition (in two different ways). Additionally, on p. 3, his first condition (that a geloios be a social equal) converts what might be a necessary condition of the object of phthonos into a necessary condition of the geloion.

At this point, Protarchus finally shows some impatience (49c6-7). How does this account of the geloion illuminate the role of phthonos in the pleasure of comedy? Our second question is still not answered. To help Protarchus, Socrates returns to the notion of phthonos, malice or envy (49c8). When he left this notion, he had established that it is a pain that gives rise to some pleasure when the neighbors for whom one feels phthonos are beset by bad things. Now he adds to his account by securing immediate agreement that phthonos is necessarily an unjust kind of pleasure and pain (49d1-2). This is my fourth question (**Q4**): Why are the pleasure and pain of phthonos necessarily unjust? Don't some people deserve malice and envy?

Protarchus and Socrates are making an assumption about phthonos that they do not make perfectly explicit. It emerges implicitly in the contrast Socrates introduces next. He says that if you take pleasure in the bad things that beset your enemies, your pleasure is neither unjust nor expressive of phthonos (49d3-5), whereas if you see your friends beset by bad things, it would be unjust to feel pleasure rather than pain (49d6-7). There are two related points here. The first point is that phthonos cannot be felt toward an enemy; it is necessarily, that is, by definition, a feeling toward a friend. This is clear enough from what Socrates says, and even clearer from Protarchus' easy responses. But clearest, perhaps, is the entry in the

It does not exactly represent what Socrates says. Socrates names weakness, not equality, as the other condition.

Definitions of pseudo-Plato: "Phthonos is a pain at the goods of one's friends, either present or past" (416a13).⁵ The second point is that it is unjust to feel pleasure at the misfortune of friends, though not at all unjust to take pleasure in the misfortune of enemies. Now, put these points together: they entail that the pleasures of phthonos are necessarily unjust. That is the framework for answering question four.

Of course, we might wonder why phthonos is limited to friends and why it is unjust to take pleasure in the misfortunes of friends but not in those of enemies. Call these questions five and six (**Q5** and **Q6**). The second of this pair strikes me as the easier one. Friends are supposed to share things both good and bad in common; it violates the friendship to feel pleasure at a friend's pain. Enemies, on the other hand, are governed by no such expectations. Justice simply does not require that one sympathize with the sufferings of one's enemies. So I dissent from Miller's suggestion that Socrates has contradicted his prohibition on doing harm.⁶ He can with perfect consistency insist that we never do harm or injustice and yet recognize that some actions that would unjustly harm a friend do not do

⁵ The restriction to friends is less clear in Aristotle, Rhetoric II 10.

⁶ It is not plausible to say that the one who takes pleasure in his enemy's suffering ("the laugher") harms his enemy in some way other than by doing an injustice. First, it is just not plausible to say that the laugher harms his enemy. It is one thing to laugh while another suffers, and quite another to cause the other to suffer. Second, one cannot really harm another person without doing injustice: what other virtue would cover the case? That is why Socrates moves back-and-forth on occasion between adikein and kakourgein, I take it. On p. 12, Miller suggests that because it is never right to do "bad things happening to people," it is never right to "endorse, much less enjoy" "bad things happening to people." But I do not see why the implication holds in an agent-centered ethic. Cannot there be things I would not see fit to bring about but would welcome?

injustice or harm to an enemy. Indeed, he must think this if he is not a pacifist.

But there is an interesting question lurking here. Since the pleasure of watching an enemy squirm is not a matter of phthonos, is it mixed with some other pain, or is it an unmixed pleasure? Call that question seven (**Q7**), and leave it hanging. I want to return to question five.

Why is phthonos limited to friends? Here, Aristotle's discussion in the Rhetoric (II 10) might provide some help. He says that the primary grounds for phthonos is the sight of equals enjoying good fortune. Why equals? Well, perhaps, to feel phthonos, I must have the thought (even if only inchoately, of course) that I could just as easily enjoy that good fortune. It is not impossible to extend this thought toward a justification for limiting phthonos to friends. But I am not sure how plausible it is either. In the interests of time, I leave my fifth question open. I want to get back to question two. Socrates needs to say something to explain why the pleasure of phthonos is the pleasure of comedy.

Socrates takes his time recapitulating his central points. Ignorance is bad (49d9). Weak ignorance is ridiculous (49d11-e4). But it is bad, since it is ignorance (49e6-7). And if we laugh at it, we take pleasure (49e9). Then, the kicker (50a2-3): "Pleasure at friends' bad things, didn't we say that phthonos brings this about?" Socrates is assuming that if I take some pleasure in the hardships of a friend, then I also feel pain at the goods my

friend enjoys (or perhaps has enjoyed). Without that assumption, he is not warranted in saying that phthonos drives my pleasure. But he has said nothing to justify the assumption. Earlier, he said that people who feel phthonos take pleasure in the bad things that happen to those in relation to whom they feel phthonos. Now he is, as it were, affirming the consequent: he is saying that people who take pleasure in the bad things that happen to friends also feel phthonos toward them. Here is question eight (**Q8**): Why does Socrates make this assumption?

I don't have an answer to this. I can imagine two possible responses. Perhaps he thinks that every person feels some pain at the goods of all his or her friends. That is a given, and it sets up pleasure at the bad things that beset our friends. This would be an unfortunate assumption, however, for it would doom us all to injustice. So perhaps he has another story to tell. Perhaps he thinks that no alternative explanation is available. To take pleasure at the bad things that beset a friend is such a rupture in friendship that there must have been some prior pain to underwrite it, and what could that pain be if not phthonos? I suppose that rhetorical question will have to count as an answer. I am not crazy about it, either. (One problem: on this account, Socrates' assumption is an inference to the best explanation. But Protarchus seems to see it otherwise: when Socrates asks the pleasure isn't caused by phthonos, Protarchus replies, "Necessarily" (50a4). That is just a mistake if Socrates is making an inference to the best explanation.)

At this point, disturbingly, Socrates repeats and generalizes his conclusion (50a5-9 and 50b1-c9, respectively). He takes as obvious how this feeling that is both pain at the goods of a friend and pleasure at his misfortune is also the pleasure of comedy. Miller says several helpful things here about the types of characters, and how the audience would recognize the characters as familiar stand-ins. But he also suggests that the audience feels pain at the characters weaknesses because they see themselves in the characters, and that is a level of psychologizing about phthonos that Socrates does not offer. On Socrates' account, the audience must just feel bad about the characters' goods in order to feel good about the characters' bads. I suppose my ninth question is (**Q9**): is this a plausible account of comedy?

I have just three more short questions, concerning what all of this has to do with the Socrates-watcher's pleasure. First, if the Socrates-watcher feels pleasure unjustly, then he or she must be a friend of Socrates' hapless victim. In a note (n. 3), Miller embraces this consequence by suggesting that everyone Socrates examines is either a fellow-citizen (and so a civic friend) or an honored guest (and thus a friend of another sort). Another explanation of this sort is available: in the Euthyphro, Socrates says that he examines other people out of philanthropia. But the task is not, I presume to explain how the examinees are friends of Socrates. Socrates does not

feel unjust pleasure at the ignorance of the examinees.⁷ Rather, the real question is, do these accounts of Socrates' friendship for his examinees apply equally well to all of the Socrates-watchers? To the characters crowded around Socrates in the dialogue, perhaps. But what about the readers of the dialogue? This is my tenth and final question (**Q10**): do I have to be a friend of Polus and feel phthonos for Polus to enjoy the hurt that Socrates puts on him?

⁷ He does not say that he does at Apology 33c. He says, "The listeners take pleasure in the refutation of those who think that they are wise but are not, for it is not unpleasant." This stops short of saying that Socrates-watching is pleasant, let alone that it is pleasant for Socrates. (The explanatory (gar) clause is naturally read to say that the experience is not unpleasant for the listeners.)