Mixed Emotions about Comedy: Philebus 48a-50b (Verity Harte, Yale)

I. The Question

Why does the Philebus devote just over two Stephanus pages to the discussion of comedy (48a-50b)? At least prima facie, establishing the nature of comedy and its effect on its audience is not immediately relevant to the dialogue’s overall project: identifying the good human life. At least, it is not more immediately relevant than many other topics that are not treated to discussion at such length. Of course, the extent to which this question seems urgent depends on one’s attitude to the Philebus. The dialogue can easily be seen as a poorly structured ragbag, into which Plato inserted lengthy discussions of matters which happened to be of interest, but whose connections with the dialogue’s overall project are more or less forced. But this characterization of the dialogue is, in my view, seriously mistaken. So, the question arises: why discuss comedy in this work?

The discussion of comedy occurs in the context of the dialogue’s lengthy investigation of pleasure, as part of its discussion of the possible existence of mixed pleasures, pleasures whose occurrence is inextricably bound up with pain. According to Socrates, mixed pleasures are of three broad types (47c1-d9): mixtures of bodily pleasure and bodily pain; mixtures of bodily pain or pleasure with pain or pleasure of soul; and purely psychological mixtures of pleasure and pain of soul.

These psychological mixed pleasures quickly become the focus of Socrates’ attention. They are exemplified by a list of emotions (47e1-3, 50b7-c2): anger (ὀργή), fear (φόβος), longing (πόθος), lamenting (θρήνος), love (ἔρως), jealousy (ζῆλος), and what is usually translated “malice” (φθόνος). Protarchus immediately assents to the existence of such mixtures in several such cases: anger, lamenting, longing and in the weeping-enjoyment of the audience of tragedy (47e5-48a7). His immediate comprehension runs out only when Socrates claims to find such mixtures of pleasure and pain in the audience of comedy. Here is where we find the “official reason” for the lengthy discussion of comedy. [T1]
SOC: The disposition of our soul in [the audience to] comedies, do you recognize that in the case of these there is a mixture of pain and pleasure? PRO: I don’t understand. SOC: Because, Protarchus, it’s not easy to see that an affection of this sort each time occurs in this situation.

PRO: Indeed not, at least as it seems to me. SOC: Then let us grasp this, so that, to just the extent that it is more obscure, a person may more easily understand mixture of pain and pleasure in other cases also. (48a8-b6)

The official reason given for the lengthy discussion of comedy is that comedy will serve as a test hard case for the thesis regarding psychological mixtures. Showing that the audience’s response to comedy is a mixture of pleasure and pain will make it easier to understand both that and how other emotions also involve such a mixture of pleasure and pain.

Upon examination, however, this “official reason” seems inadequate. We are led to believe that we will examine the emotion involved in our reaction to comedy in order to show that that emotion – and emotion in general – is mixed. In fact, however, the emotion involved in our reaction to comedy is immediately established as mixed, without any mention of comedy. That emotion is φθόνος, [T2]

SOC: The name we just mentioned – ‘phthonos’ – do you give it to a specific sort of pain of the soul or what is your view? PRO: This. SOC: And yet the person who experiences phthonos is plainly pleased at the misfortunes/ills (κακά) of neighbours. PRO: Very much so. (48b8-12)

Since φθόνος – the emotion that, as will turn out, is involved in our reaction to comedy – is a pain of the soul that involves being pleased at the misfortunes of neighbours, it is already clear that it is a mixture of pleasure and pain.

It is true that it is not yet clear that this specific emotion – φθόνος – is what is involved in our reaction to comedy. This is important. The remainder of the argument seeks precisely to establish that the mixture of pleasure and pain that is the emotion of φθόνος is the very emotion involved in our reaction to comedy. But, I submit, this subsequent argument provides little if any of the advertised clarification of the sort of mixture of pleasure and pain that φθόνος is, and none that would obviously generalize to other emotions.

Socrates’ original claim about the existence of psychological mixtures, at 47d8-e5, was a general claim – perhaps about all emotions. Lack of recognition of the mixture involved in our reaction

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1 That Socrates is focused on the psychological condition of the audience – not the actors or dramatist – is clear both from his reference to “our soul” and from the ensuing discussion (see, e.g. conclusion as stated at 50a5-9, which is focused on us laughing at the misfortune of friends).

4 I am grateful to Stephen Halliwell for discussion of the force of Ἀλλὰ μὴν ... γε here. It is unclear to me whether it is (merely) progressive or adversative (on which see Denniston The Greek Particles, Second Edition, Oxford: Clarendon 1954, 341-7). I translate so as to keep both options to some extent available.

5 I take ἐπὶ κακοῖς κτλ. with ἥδομενος (so too Diès (Budé), Frede (English & German), Gosling & Hackforth). Cf. 49e3 for near parallel (with τὸ χαίρειν).

6 At issue is the scope of ὅσα τοιαῦτα at 47e2.
to comedy would put in jeopardy this general claim. However, despite his suggestion, Socrates’ lengthy discussion of comedy provides no obvious additional grounds for the view that emotions in general are mixtures of pleasure and pain. It does not simply follow from establishing that, contrary to expectation, our emotion in comedy is mixed, that other emotions are so also.

What, then, should we think about the occurrence of this passage? If Socrates can establish that our reaction to comedy constitutes ϕθόνος and that, as such, it involves a mixture of pleasure and pain, this is undoubtedly an interesting result that tells us something important about comedy. But it remains unclear why getting this result about comedy is part of the project of the Philebus. This, of course, is merely a developed version of my original question. Why does the Philebus devote two Stephanus pages to showing that an audience’s reaction to comedy involves a mixture of pleasure and pain just insofar as it is the emotion of ϕθόνος? I shall argue that the answer lies in an unofficial reason for the discussion of comedy. The discussion of comedy puts on the table for the Philebus the important ethical question of what our attitude should be to the distribution of goods between ourselves and members of our community; and it offers self-knowledge as (one, important) good that is at stake.

II. Preliminaries

Having established implicitly that ϕθόνος is mixed, Socrates begins with some not untypical misdirection. [T2*]

SOC: The name we just mentioned – ‘phthonos’ – do you give it to a specific sort of pain of the soul or what is your view? PRO: This. SOC: And yet the person who experiences phthonos is plainly pleased at the misfortunes/ills (κακά) of neighbours. PRO: Very much so. SOC: But ignorance (ἀνοια) and what we call a silly disposition (ἀβελτέραν ἔξιν) is a misfortune/ill. PRO: Indeed. SOC: Then, on the basis of these [claims], see what nature the ridiculous (τὸ γελοῖον) has. PRO: Just you tell me! (48b8-c5)

Clearly enough, with the benefit of hindsight, Socrates is preparing himself for the argument to come. Since ϕθόνος is agreed to be enjoyment of the misfortune/ills of one’s neighbours, the agreement that ignorance is a misfortune/ill means that – once it is established that, in comedy, we laugh at the ignorance of neighbours (or, as it turns out, weak friends), it’s clear that our reaction in comedy is “phthonetic”, as I shall say, and thereby a pleasure that’s mixed.

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7 So Cornarius, followed by OCT. Alternatively: ἄνοια with MSS. I discuss this briefly below.
8 ἀβελτέρας has a comic connection. Of 5 Platonic uses, 3, including this one, have some connection to comedy or laughter and a large percentage (perhaps more than half overall) of the word family’s extant occurrences for 5\textsuperscript{th}/4\textsuperscript{th} C are from comedy (Aristophanes (4x), Menander (13x), CAF ed. T. Kock (15x)).
However, when Socrates invites Protarchus, on the basis of the initial claims about φθόνος and ignorance to see the nature of what is ridiculous, it is preposterous to think he could do so already at this stage, as his reply makes clear. Without already knowing where the argument is going, one could not move forward from here. As we shall see, this isn’t the only place in the argument where one suspects Socrates of constructing an argument with it all figured out in advance. This is not uncharacteristic of Socrates. But characteristic Socratic behaviour is precisely what one would expect in a parody, as, I shall argue, this partly turns out to be.

Two preliminaries before we get to his argument. First, there is an important textual question, but one that I shall be setting aside. In 48c2 [T2*] and three places elsewhere (49c2, 49d9, 49e2), the MSS read ἄνοια, but the OCT picks up a running correction to ἄγνοια (“ignorance”) by the 16th C scholar Cornarius. It’s a nice question what difference the choice between readings makes.9 For present purposes, however, we will get sufficient specific information about the intellectual condition in question from the body of the argument without needing to consider this question.

Second, and more importantly, we need some understanding of φθόνος, the specific emotion in view. Normally translated into English as “malice”, a survey of uses of φθόνος in Plato suggests it is the emotion that corresponds to begrudging, characteristically described as absent from a person who, when in possession of a putative good, does not begrudge sharing this good with others.10 Perhaps the most famous example of this is Timaeus 29e2, where Timaeus sets out as foundational principle of the creation of the visible cosmos that: [T3]

He [the Demiurge] was good, and no φθόνος ever arises regarding anything in the good, hence being without this [sc. φθόνος], he wanted everything to become, so far as is possible, like himself [viz. good]. (Timaeus 29e1-3)11

Putting together this claim about φθόνος with those in the Philebus, we get an understanding of φθόνος through the conjunction of two claims: (i) the absence of φθόνος suffices for sharing putative goods of one’s own with others; (ii) the presence of φθόνος suffices for enjoying the bads of another. In general, then, φθόνος is the sign of an asymmetrical attitude towards the distribution of goods between oneself and others.

III. Socrates’ examination of “the ridiculous”

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9 Thein ‘Entre ἄνοια et ἄγνοια’ makes a forceful case for the MSS reading.
10 Examples: Phd 61d10, Soph. 217a9, b1, Phdr. 247a7, Rep 476e6. Delcommyninette Le Philèbe de Platon, 440-8, cites other Platonic usage, but his understanding of φθόνος as “l’envie” differs from mine.
The argument that follows divides roughly into three parts. First (48c6-d2), Socrates has a stab at identifying “the ridiculous” (τὸ γελοῖον), identifying it as a form of self-ignorance. Second (48d4-49c6), Socrates does some elaborate dividing of kinds of self-ignorance. Third and finally (49c6-50a4), Socrates marries the two parts of his argument together – the claims about φθόνος and the claims about the ridiculous and self-ignorance – to get the conclusion we have been anticipating all the way through. I shall focus on the ways in which the discussion proves unsatisfactory as an argument to its conclusion and on what I propose we should understand the material as doing instead.

First, Socrates’ first stab at identifying “the ridiculous” – what we laugh at, in comedy and/or in life – is willfully indirect. [T4]

SOC: [The ridiculous] is, in summary, a type of wickedness, taking its name from a specific disposition; among all kinds of wickedness, it is that one12 involving the opposing condition to what’s said by the inscription at Delphi. PRO: You mean “Know yourself!”

SOC: I do. Evidently, the opposite to this [said by the inscription]13 would be not to know oneself in any way at all.

(48c6-d2)

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that this willful indirection serves, in large part, to give the opportunity for Protarchus to say – to Socrates of all people – “You mean ‘Know yourself!’”.14

The Delphic inscription has a special connection to (Plato’s) Socrates. In Charmides 164d, Critias offers the Delphic injunction as an understanding of sophrosunê, where Socrates subsequently unpacks this as consisting in an ability to know oneself, to examine what one knows and does not know, and to examine others, to see when a person does not know what he thinks he knows (167). This characterization of sophrosunê is itself reminiscent of the “human wisdom” that Socrates had claimed for himself in the Apology (20e-21e) as the only way in which he was able to validate another Delphic pronouncement, that no one is wiser than Socrates. No-one is wiser than Socrates in that, though, like others, he does not have knowledge, unlike others, he also does not take himself to do so.15

Recalling the “human wisdom” of Socrates in the Apology allows us to bring into the background of the discussion the well-known comic portrayal of Socrates in Aristophanes’ Clouds.16 In the Apology, the Clouds is mentioned when Socrates explains the nature of the

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12 Reading τὸ τούναντιον with Diès and Frede.
13 Diès proposes deletion of λεγόμενον ὑπὸ τοῦ γράμματος at d2, followed by Frede.
14 Compare here, McCabe “Banana Skins...”, who also notes the Apology and Charmides connections.
15 Cf. Rasmussen The Enigma of Socratic Wisdom.
16 Possibly, the use of ἀβέλτεραν ἔξω at 48c2 invites this. The term ἀβέλτερος is used in Aristophanes’ Clouds 1201, leveled as an insult by Strepsiades at the spectators, at precisely the point at which he’s about to sing an encomium to his own presumed wisdom. But, though the word seems to have strong comic connections (see n. above), they are not distinctively Aristophanic.
accusations of his “first accusers”, “the many”. There, he says, we see a Socrates “swinging about there, saying he was walking on air and talking a lot of other nonsense about things of which I know nothing either great or small” (19c3-6, Hackett tr. modified). According to the Apology, then, we find in the Clouds a Socrates who seems precisely to fit the bill of the coming Philebus analysis of the ridiculous: a person (more specifically, a weak person) who takes himself to have knowledge he does not have.

In the Apology, their laughter at Socrates rebounds upon Socrates’ first accusers: it is they who do not have the knowledge, about Socrates, that they take themselves to have, since they fail to recognize Socratic wisdom as the kind of wisdom it is: human wisdom, that is, precisely the avoidance of the kind of lack of self-knowledge respecting one’s ignorance that makes one a (real) target for comedy by the Philebus’s lights. Given this web of connections, we may note that Socrates will subsequently diagnose these first accusers, “the many”, precisely as suffering from φθόνος (Apology 28a8-9).

What is the point of this complex cluster of reminiscence? I suggest three things. First, and fairly obviously, we are being prepared for a contrast between Socratic self-knowledge and the kind of self-ignorance at the heart of the ensuing analysis of the ridiculous. Second, we are being prepared for the idea that laughing at Socrates shows up, not the lack of self-knowledge of Socrates as target of ridicule, but the lack of self-knowledge in the audience who laughs. Third, then, we are being prepared for the way in which the way the staging of the Philebus’s discussion of comedy – as an encouragement both to laugh at Socrates and to reflect on the implications of doing so – will suggest the value of the kind of self-knowledge the object of ridicule will be said by the passage’s explicit analysis of comedy to lack.

The encouragement to laugh at Socrates, and to think about the implications of doing so, is found in the next stage of the argument, in which we find Socrates engaged in some apparently ridiculous dividing of lack of self-knowledge. Socrates proposes an initially three-fold analysis of kinds of self-ignorance, where self-ignorance is understood as the condition of falsely supposing one has some positive feature that one does not. The three kinds of self-ignorance are ignorance with respect to one’s wealth, with respect to one’s physical character (one’s size or beauty), and with respect to one’s virtue, of which the main species is ignorance with respect to one’s wisdom, a false “conceit of wisdom” (δοξοσοφία, 49a2) (48d4-49a3). Self-ignorance, as a whole, further divides into two, according as it is found in those who are strong or those who are weak (49a7-b5). The self-ignorance of those who are strong is not laughable, but
frightening. The self-ignorance of those who are weak, on the other hand, he says, “has as its lot the rank and nature of ridiculous things” (49c4-5).

Considered as an argument to this conclusion about what is ridiculous, the passage has evident shortfalls. While the division may anatomize something that can be intuitively agreed to be funny – as well, perhaps, as being a stock feature of contemporary comedy – the elaborate division does not provide grounds for this way of thinking of what is ridiculous; and certainly not for thinking that this analysis has exhausted an account of what is ridiculous or given us its nature. As it happens, from the point of view of the argument, all Socrates needs is agreement (i) that the self-ignorance of weak people is indeed funny and (ii) that such self-ignorance is an object of ridicule in dramatic comedy. These we might be prepared to grant him intuitively. But, then, what is the purpose of the elaborate dividing?

The elaborate dividing is itself problematic in various ways. First, what is the point of dividing? Does it discover things or is it merely an elaborate mechanism for setting out things that we already know? Consider Socrates’ three-fold division of self-ignorance, with respect to one’s wealth, one’s physical character or one’s virtue. Clearly enough, Socrates is relying on a threefold distinction between external goods such as money, goods of the body and goods of the soul. But the division has not itself given grounds for dividing the goods in this way or for using this division of goods in this division of self-ignorance. Second, how is dividing supposed to work? We are given divisions into three, into two and into one (the division of self-ignorance of virtue into self-ignorance of wisdom). And we are given both vertical and horizontal divisions: (vertical) the division of self-ignorance into three; (horizontal) the division of self-ignorance as a whole as it befalls the strong or weak. Third and last, when is a division complete? The division we have been given could seem so, until we discover that Socrates will diagnose comic φθόνος as laughter at the self-ignorance of weak friends. Hence, the horizontal division into weak and strong needs supplementation by another division – also horizontal - into friends and enemies.

These questions are, I take it, substantive questions about Socrates’ method of division as we see it enacted in numerous places. At the same time, the fact that all this elaborate dividing seems actually irrelevant – from the point of view of the

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17 Some, at least, are picked up in Aristotle’s – thoroughly serious – critical examination of division in, for example, Parts of Animals I.
18 In both Sophist and Politicus the method is enacted by the Eleatic Stranger, not Socrates, but it can still, I take it, be reasonably regarded as ‘Socrates’ method’ in the sense of being the method he characterizes and praises in both Philebus and Phaedrus.
argument – arouses suspicion that what we have here is an elaborate – and laboured – joke, at the expense of Socrates’ self-professed fondness for division of which he had called himself lover (ἐραστής) at 16b5-7 (in an echo of Phaedrus 266b3-4). That suspicion is supported by its anticipation at 23d10 – when, in the course of his earlier fourfold division of beings – Socrates identified himself as being “as it seems, a ridiculous (γελοῖος) sort of person, dividing by kinds and enumerating” (23d1-3). In this connection, we may recall that, at 16e4-17a5, Socrates criticized present-day σοφοί for their slaphappy application of the method he praises, as a way to distinguish eristic from dialectical arguments; and that the kind of self-ignorance of virtue that he individually highlights – self-ignorance of virtue of wisdom – is said to involve “puffing oneself up” with eristic disputes (49a1-2).

So, we have a joke and one that’s called to our attention as such – at Socrates’ expense – which is nevertheless instructive, if not about comedy, then at least about the sorts of questions that we ought to be asking about Socrates’ favoured method in connection with knowledge. Just this kind of learning from (recognized) humour is, I propose, what is on offer in the structure of the Philebus’s discussion of comedy, as a whole. To see what we learn, I turn to the remaining and final stage of Socrates’ argument, in which he marries this discussion of self-ignorance with the earlier material on φθόνος.

IV. Friends and Enemies

Socrates’ elaborate division has identified something at which we laugh: the self-ignorance of those who are weak. But laughter is intuitively a pleasure, so as yet Socrates has done nothing to show that our pleasure at comedy is mixed up with pain. Socrates will fix this by marrying the earlier material on φθόνος with this characterization of self-ignorance as comic.

His first move is to reintroduce and embellish his characterization of φθόνος, which was earlier implicitly characterized as a mixture of pleasure and pain and which Socrates now characterizes as an “unjust type of pain and pleasure” (49d1). Protarchus takes the injustice of φθόνος to be obvious, perhaps in light of his earlier agreement that it involves enjoyment at

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19 As M.M. McCabe points out, “Banana Skins...”. That the division of beings into the four kinds is an application of the method described at 16c10 ff. is pointed out by D. Frede Philebos.

20 In Dorothea Frede’s nice turn of phrase. Hackett tr.

21 In calling the division a ‘joke’, I do not mean to deny that the results that it provides play a serious role in the dialogue’s discussion of ‘the ridiculous’, nor to say that Plato is not philosophically serious about e.g. the division of goods or division in general. My concern is to highlight another aspect of the argument – other than its direct analysis of comedy – one that, I argue, is accomplished by the pointedly comedic aspects of the analysis’s manner of presentation.
the misfortunes or ills of one’s neighbours. That this is assumed to be unjust is something I shall return to.

φθόνος, on Socrates’ account of it, is a species of enjoyment of another’s misfortunes or ills. But it is not any such species. It is not, they agree, the enjoyment of the misfortunes or ills of one’s enemies. Enjoyment of these, Socrates and Protarchus agree, would not be unjust, so would not be phthonetic (49d3-5). What would be unjust would be to be pleased – and not pained – at the misfortunes or ills of one’s friends (49d6-7). It is unclear here whether this talk of “friends” corresponds to the earlier talk of “neighbours” – that is, one’s community generally22 - or picks out a narrower class. Either way, Socrates is now in the home straight of his argument. Since ignorance has been agreed to be a misfortune or ill, but the object of laughter, when found in the weak, Socrates invites Protarchus to apply to our friends the understanding of what is ridiculous developed previously. The self-ignorance of those of our friends who are weak is the object of laughter. Socrates concludes: [T5]

SOC: The argument states that, when we laugh at the ridiculous [behaviour/characteristics] of our friends, mingling pleasure with phthonos, pleasure is mingled together with pain. Because we agreed a while ago that phthonos is a pain of soul, but that to laugh is a pleasure, and that, at these times, these two [phthonos and laughter] occur at the same time. PRO: That’s true. SOC: Then the argument now indicates to us that in both tragedies and comedies, not only in plays, but also in the entire tragedy and comedy of life, pains are simultaneously bound up with pleasures, also in countless other cases. (50a5-b4)

In drawing this conclusion about comedy, Socrates implicitly makes the assumption that the characters we laugh at in dramatic comedy count as friends. This assumption is undoubtedly striking and may reflect something important about Plato’s attitude to drama. But what I shall focus on here is what this talk of friends contributes to the moral of this elaborate discussion of comedy, a discussion in which there has in fact been surprisingly little explicit talk of drama and in which there is, in T5, an explicit assumption that as goes drama, so goes life.

Recall that φθόνος – the emotion at work in our enjoyment of comedy – is a complex attitude involving an asymmetrical attitude towards the distribution of goods between self and other. Socrates’ discussion of friends is central to a question I take to be raised by the argument about the ethics of such distribution of goods.

Friends - unlike enemies – are those respecting whom we might expect to find in ourselves an attitude of symmetry towards the distribution of goods. This must be the reason why Protarchus agrees that phthonetic enjoyment of the misfortunes of friends is evidently unjust.

22 See, for example, Herodotus 7.152.6-10, where οἱ πέλας is equivalent to οἱ πλησίοι.
Such phthonetic enjoyment defies the expected attitude of symmetry towards the distribution of goods between self and friend.

But Socrates’ analysis of comedy also makes an assumption about the relation between subject and object of laughter that undercuts the asymmetry on which laughter depends. Comic laughter is laughter at friends. As a psychological adage has it: if you spot it, you’ve got it. We understand others, at least in part, by recognizing aspects of ourselves.

This, I suggest, is how the *Philebus’s* analysis of comedy turns the anticipated laughter at Socrates that is signaled in the presentation of the analysis on the audience itself. Phthonetic persons make a false assumption about themselves, supposing themselves safe from the misfortune or ill at which they laugh in another. This, in turn, is part of the point of the argument’s prominent placing of concerns about self-knowledge and of its interest in jokes about Socrates and the way that laughter at Socrates tends to rebound on the audience that laughs. In the passage’s explicit analysis of comedy, the audience to comedy laughs at the lack of self-knowledge in others, while (falsely) holding itself immune from such misfortune. In the passage’s presentation of comedy, we are shown how laughter at Socrates – the paradigmatic self-knower – reveals a lack of knowledge, and of self-knowledge, in ourselves. The passage’s analysis gives us as object of laughter the Socrates of the audience to the *Clouds*; the passage’s presentation gives us the Socrates with which Plato counters that audience in the *Apology*.

But the passage also has a connected, but general moral, as part of the dialogue’s overall ethical project. The absence of φθόνος – in *Timaeus*’s demiurge, for example – is linked to the possession of good and a willingness to share it. In the *Philebus*, phthonetic enjoyment of the misfortunes of others is, I suggest, correspondingly offered as paradigmatically occurring when the phthonetic person lacks – but is unaware of lacking – the good whose lack they enjoy in the object of laughter. This is the structure of the phthonetic laughter of Socrates’ first accusers in the *Apology*.

The *Philebus’s* general analysis of pain establishes that φθόνος, being a pain, involves some lack of a good. Pain, according to the *Philebus’s* general analysis is the lack arising from the dissolution of some good state of harmony. The phthonetic person also has pleasure – they

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23 I put it this way to acknowledge a point made by Halliwell *Greek Laughter* 254-5: that Plato’s target in the *Apology* is the audience to the *Clouds* and that he distinguishes Aristophanes himself from this audience.

24 At 31d4-10, Socrates associates pain with the disruption of an animal’s harmonious nature and pleasure with its restoration. Like Frede (*Philebos*), I take this to provide the general model for all types of pleasure
laugh, after all. But the immediate context of this discussion of mixed pleasures, suggests that such pleasure is false, in the sense that it is intrinsically bound up with pain and, perhaps, that the laughter is not – and cannot – be a genuine cure.25

Of course, it does not just follow – from our account of the nature of φθόνος – that phthonetic enjoyers falsely take themselves to have the good that is lacked in the object of laughter. But it seems reasonable to suppose that when we are enjoying the misfortunes of others, we are typically at the very least ignoring the possibility of our presently suffering the very same misfortune ourselves.

There is an important general moral question lurking underneath all of this. It certainly seems true that, at least sometimes, when people to whom we are friendly take themselves to be smarter, prettier or richer than they seem in fact to be, we find this funny. But why, we might ask, should this be funny and not sad or pathetic (in the proper sense of the word)? When friends experience other misfortunes – when they are bereaved, for example – we are saddened, not amused.

Our Philebus passage offers the rudiments of an analysis of the psychology of such comic amusement: that it turns on an implicit comparison between the mistaken person and ourselves. They are in this situation of being mistaken about themselves; I am not. This analysis turns on an underlying framework in which I am not indifferent to the distribution of goods between myself and others, so that a situation that – were I to see it in myself – would be much more difficult to laugh at, I nevertheless find laughable in someone else. As the characterization as φθόνος implies, the psychology of comic laughter suggested is that I do indeed begrudge my friends things I value for myself.

At the same time, the passage makes perfectly clear in its talk of injustice that the ethically appropriate stance would not be begrudging. The picture of the ethically virtuous agent that emerges from this is not entirely clear. At the least, it suggests that the ethically virtuous agent should – like the demiurge – welcome the possession of goods that are had by the agent by others as well. At the most, what is proposed is an (importantly limited) attitude of impartiality as regards the distribution of goods, so that ethically virtuous agents are as pleased by the possession of good by a relevant other as by its possession by themselves and are indifferent to

and pain considered in the Philebus, including the mixed pleasures whose discussion includes the argument about comedy.  
25 In this way the purely psychological cases of mixture would compare with the purely bodily mixtures discussed at 46a2-47c3, which are treated as irredeemably pathological.
which of these outcomes obtains. If such impartiality is on offer, it is restricted to our circle of friends. If the argument’s talk of friends is co-extensive with its talk of “neighbours”, the impartiality that may be on offer would extend to the broader community in which we live, but not further. On either view of the ethically virtuous agent, the passage raises the question of the extent to which, if any, I am entitled in looking for happiness to privilege myself.

Much more could – and should - be said about all this. For the present, I conclude by offering some possible indirect evidence that these are among the issues this Philebus passage is concerned with. It is well known that Aristotle engages with the Philebus frequently in his ethical writings. The interpretation I offer would allow us to identify another such connection, one that, to my knowledge, has not been recognized to date. Consider what it would be for me not to do what the Philebus analysis suggests we are doing when we laugh at our friends. It would be for me to treat my friends as regards the distribution of goods in exactly the way that I treat myself. I would treat them as “another self”, as Aristotle characterizes friends who stand in the relation of virtue friendship, identifying such friendship as a valuable source of self-knowledge (EN IX.9 and EE VII.12). Aristotle’s analysis is, I propose, a mirror image of the Philebus’s diagnosis of lack of self-knowledge as inherent in the vicious emotion of φθόνος, which finds its expression in comedy.

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26 For example, the Philebus is the source for the criteria for the good at work in EN I.7 & X.7-8, and much of the treatment of pleasure in EE VI/EN VII.11-14 & EN X.1-5.
27 Given the massive literature on Aristotle’s ethics, reaching back to antiquity, this claim cannot be very secure and is based on an, even yet cursory, survey of modern writings on Aristotle. In conversation, I discover that Jennifer Whiting has recently been thinking along the same lines.
28 I do not mean, of course, that there are no significant differences between Aristotle’s view and such view as may emerge from the Philebus passage, for example, on the understanding of ‘friends’. Aristotle’s engagement is a “mirror” in the sense that it focuses on the positive converse of the Philebus’s focus on φθόνος, but it is an engagement with all that this entails.
REFERENCES:


