

# THE CONCEPT OF PLEASURE: PLATO versus GREEK'S MANNER OF LIFE

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[Haz Kavramı: Yunan Yaşam Biçimine Karşı Platon]

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to compare and contrast Plato's concept of pleasure and the place of this concept in Greek's manner of life. In general, the daily life of Greek society is based on simplicity and temperance, which simply aims at avoiding extremism of any kind. However, some studies show that social togetherness for celebrations and excessiveness in bodily pleasure are constantly seen in this society. Yet, against this background Plato emphasizes the importance of putting restraints on bodily pleasure and being temperate in pleasure seeking in his entire philosophy. This study focuses on this apparent discrepancy between Plato's moral philosophy and values of his society, as it is important to figure out in what ways these two might have come apart.

**Keywords:** Plato, pleasure, hedonism, Greek social life.

## ÖZET

Bu makalenin amacı, Platon'un haz kavramı ile bu kavramın Yunan yaşam biçimindeki yerini ve anlamını karşılaştırmaktır. Yaygın düşünceye göre, Yunan toplumunun günlük yaşantısı sadelik, aşırılıktan kaçınma ve ölçülü olmaya dayanır. Ancak bazı araştırmalar göstermektedir ki, kutlamalar için biraraya gelme ve bedensel hazlarda aşırılık bu toplumda sıkça görülmektedir. Bunun aksine, Platon kendi felsefesinde bedensel hazları kısıtlamaya ve bedensel hazlarda ölçülü olmaya açık bir

vurgu yapar. Bu karřıtlığın nedenlerinin açıklanmasının Platon'un ahlak felsefesi ile yaşadığı toplumun değerleri arasındaki ilişkinin anlaşılması açısından önemli olduğunu düşünüyorum.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Platon, haz, hazcılık, Yunan toplum yaşamı.

In a broad sense, it can be said that while the daily life of Rome is constituted by extremism and furors in pleasure, the daily life of Ancient Greek is constituted by temperance. According to this common thought, simplicity and avoiding extremism are the main characteristics of the daily life of the Greek society. However, many studies show us, in contrary to this belief, social togetherness for conviviality, for celebrations and for banquets is constantly seen in Greek society and this type of togetherness is encouraged by the society. In addition, excess especially in eating and drinking is exhibited by Greek people in this conviviality. Furthermore, the economical situation of the society is not convenient for this type of amusements in their daily life.

On the other hand, in his many works, Plato draws attention to the restraint of bodily and sensorial appetites and being temperate in these appetites. His insistent admonitions on restraint of bodily pleasure have an important role in his moral philosophy. The same emphasis reaches the most mature of degree in Aristotle's view of morality. At this point, a question arises as follows; if, as said, the tendency of the daily life of the Greek society is simplicity, what is the reason of Plato's emphasis against the excess in bodily pleasure? This question is based on the supposition that the philosophers criticize the values of daily life in their society. In that case, what is extreme or wrong in the daily life of Greek society which is observed and criticized by Plato and what are the indications, in terms of the common tendencies of daily life, which can legitimize Plato's critics on this society?

The purpose of this study is to compare and contrast Plato's concept of pleasure and the understanding of this concept in Greek popular morality. It can be said that there is a contrast between Greek's view of pleasure in their daily life and Plato's examination of the concept of pleasure in his dialogues. I will try to show this opposition on the basis of Plato's sayings on the life in his time in Greek society. First, I will present Plato's examination of the concept of pleasure in his philosophy, especially on the basis of the *Republic* and the dialogue of *Philebus*. Second, I will examine the place of pleasure in Greek's daily life and third; I will try to present the relationship between the two understandings of the concept of pleasure.

The development of Plato's discussion on pleasure can be seen as a triangular process. The first part is included in the dialogues of *Gorgias* and *Phaedo*. In these dialogues, he attacks the hedonistic view and he contemns bodily pleasures. The second is included in the *Republic*. In this work, he improves a theory on pleasure and changes some arguments on hedonism. The third is included in *Philebus*. This dialogue is known as the main work in which Plato discusses the concept of pleasure deeply and he presents the problem of variety and dissimilarity of pleasures.

Plato's dualistic perspective on the tension between the soul and the body determines his general view on pleasure. While he attaches importance and he gives priority to reason and knowledge, he undervalues the body and its pleasure. On the other hand, in the process of his life, there are some changes in Plato's definitions of pleasure and hedonism. Especially his aristocratic background and political and social conditions of the Greek society influence Plato's view on pleasure and cause some changes in his view (Gosling & Taylor, 1982, pp. 3-4). Gosling and Taylor explain these influences on Plato's view as follows;

Like so many Greek philosophers he did not make a sharp division between purely academic and useful enquiries. His concern with hedonism, and indeed philosophy generally, arose from his analysis of the ills of society in his time and his view of the sources of those ills in human nature. (1982, p. 3)

In his dialogues, Plato reflects and criticizes the wrong or harmful beliefs of the society and he wants to change these beliefs by using Socrates' dialectic methods. In this sense, his general approach to his society in his dialogues gives reason to us to consider his unwillingness to give priority to bodily pleasures in his philosophy. Plato locates the philosophical life as the best life against the life of pleasure. The philosophical life refers to the rational life and to being independent of all bodily pleasures. The idea that the philosophical life is the best life dominates many dialogues on pleasure. Martha Nussbaum (1986) states this idea as follows;

[B]y the time we reach the end of the *Republic*, Plato has said a great deal about content. He has, in fact, rejected many of the most common human activities, including all appetitive activities, as lacking in true or

intrinsic value, and he has chosen the life of the philosopher as the best life. In fact, Socrates claims very precisely that this life is 729 times better than the worst life, the life of the tyrant.... Similarly, in the *Phaedo*, Socrates defends as the best life a life which he calls a practice for death: a life of philosophical contemplation in which the philosopher dissociates himself or herself as much as possible from the desires and pursuits of the human body, according them no positive value at all. (p. 139)

In *Republic*, Plato argues that the best life involves avoiding appetitive activities and living according to the rules of reason. These rules provide the soul to evaluate and to order alternative pursuits. Plato sees reason as opposite to pleasure and compares them in order to explain necessary and sufficient conditions for the good life. He separates the soul in three parts; appetitive, emotional and intellectual. Plato gives priority to the intellectual part in order to achieve the good life (p. 141).

Socrates now argues that the activities associated with the ‘reasoning part’ of the soul, learning and the contemplation of the truth, are the best activities in a human life. He argues first epistemologically: the correct criterion of judgment is ‘experience combine with wisdom and reason’. The philosopher alone judges with the right criterion from the appropriate standpoint; he selects his own activities as best. Second, Socrates argues that the philosopher’s activities are superior on intrinsic ground: being concerned, as they are, ‘with the unchanging and immortal and with truth’, they have a higher worth than the pursuits associated with the other two parts. (Ibid.)

In this sense, the way of good life is defined by the rules of reason and the intellectual part of the soul. Accordingly, only philosophers can succeed and have a good life. “[T]he philosophic life is most *eudaimon*.” (Gosling & Taylor, 1982, p. 100). In addition, there is no place to pleasure independently of reason in this good life. To see a philosophical life as a best life can be considered as Plato’s division between wise man and common man in Greek society. In his dialogues he pays attention to this division frequently. In his general view on living a good life, wise man represents true and valuable manner of life and the common man represents extreme and pleasurable manner of life.

The definition and the nature of pleasure change in different dialogues therefore it is difficult to find only one definition of pleasure in Plato's view. "Greek contains, and Plato uses, a variety of idioms describing pleasure as resulting from the activity enjoyed, or from some source... Plato uses a wide range of idioms." (Ibid, p. 176). In this respect, the definition of pleasure in one dialogue can be in contrast with another. He refers sometimes to an action, sometimes to a cause or source and sometimes to a state of replenishment, as in *Republic* and *Philebus*, by using the notion of pleasure. In addition, he refers sometimes only to physical pleasures and sometimes to the pleasure of the soul. Moreover, as said before, his dualism on body and soul and his emphasis on the notion of the stability have determinative role on his definition of pleasure.

In the dialogue of *Philebus*, Plato deals with the nature of pleasure and the varieties of it in more detail. In this dialogue, he starts with the definition of the good for man. While Philebus defines the good for man as pleasure, enjoyment and delight, Socrates defines it as thought, intellect and memory. In this respect, Philebus defends the extreme type of hedonism. He gives value only to pleasure and for him, all living things should seek only pleasure. On the other hand, Socrates tries to show the priority of intellect. He claims that intellect and thought are better than pleasure for goodness. However, Socrates does not ignore the intrinsic value of pleasure (Hackforth, 1945, p. 12-13).

In *Philebus*, Socrates' main objection to the hedonist view improves on the basis of the problem of "The One and the Many". Socrates claims that we name many different things as pleasure even though the concept of pleasure includes contradictory objects. Both good and bad pleasures are considered as "pleasure". The questions of how we can classify these various types of pleasure and "how one thing can be also many things" (Ibid, p. 17) refer to the problem of the definition of pleasure. On the other hand, he argues that the pleasure has no meaning without thought, intellect and memory. People cannot give meaning to their pleasure without memory and cannot live without the intellectual part of the soul. However the intellectual life is possible without pleasure. Socrates suggests that the two types of life are necessary but he gives priority to the intellectual life. He calls the relationship of pleasure and intellectual life as harmony. He calls pain as the confusion of the

harmony and the pleasure as the replenishment of the harmony. The third situation that Socrates calls as the divine life is the life without both pleasure and pain (Ibid, p. 29-34).

As mentioned before, the tension between soul and body can be seen in the explanation of goodness. Plato argues that the soul remembers the pleasure without a body and he calls this 'desire'. The source of desires cannot be a body; desires do not belong to the body. Since soul commands the all living things, it is the source of all desires of man. On the other hand, body is the source of the bad, extreme and mixed pleasures. In body, pain and pleasure are mixed and it is not good for man because it causes contradiction between the soul and the body. Bodily pleasures can be wide and found more easily than pure pleasures, but they are mixed. However, pure pleasures belongs the soul and they depend on the intellect and thought (Ibid, p. 85-92).

In the conclusion of the dialogue of *Philebus*, Plato concludes that neither pleasure nor intellect is sufficient alone for goodness. According to him, both real and true pleasure and temperate and virtuous intellect are required for goodness. Proportion, reality and temperance are the creators of the goodness and they are prior to the intellect and pleasure. However, intellect is more akin to them than pleasure (Ibid, p. 127-132).

Plato's view of pleasure is consistent with his philosophical theory, especially with his dualism. He does not reject pleasure completely in human life, but for him, in order to reach goodness in life we should avoid bodily pleasure which causes extreme and bad actions for man.

By this time, we can see Plato's theory of value in its general outlines: we see how it supports the life of the philosophers as against a life devoted primarily to need-relative pursuits. There are certain marks of value which philosophical activity possesses to a particularly high degree and which appetitive activities do not possess at all...All this appears to be enough to undermine the 'democratic' conception of enjoying, according to which all enjoyings have an equal claim to inclusion as intrinsic values in the best life. (Nussbaum, 1986, p. 151)

On the other hand, as mentioned before, the conditions and habits of the daily life of Greek society are not consistent with Plato's description of the valuable life. As many Greek philosophers, Plato considers on the life of his society and presents it in his dialogues. In his dialogues, we can see the frame work of the manner of life in Greek society.

At this point, I want to examine the manner of daily life in Greek society and their perception of pleasure. When Plato states his idea that the philosophical life is the best life, he argues that "a philosopher must eat and drink enough to live" (Ibid.). Plato considers excess in eating and drinking as a bad bodily pleasure and he gives weight especially to pleasure of eating and drinking in his dialogues. He proposes ascetic life to the philosophers. On the other hand, many searches present that the life of Greek people is not consistent with asceticism. C.E. Robinson (1933) says that "the Athenians were not a gross race, even in their cups. Their exuberant spirits sometimes ran into excess; but mere drinking for drinking's sake they left to the mighty toppers of the north" (p. 81).

Researches show that the social togetherness is very important in Ancient Greek. Both planning of the street of the cities and customs on conversation and neighborliness invite Greek peoples to social togetherness. "The Athenians loved company at their meals, as at everything else. To eat your dinner alone was, according to Plutarch, 'not dining, but feeding'" (Tucker, 1917, p. 140). The reasons of social togetherness are various and it is more frequent than it is today. Tucker presents the reasons of social togetherness as; "It might be a birthday, the arrival or departure of a friend, the naming of a child, any important domestic event, or no event at all. And be it said, to their credit, that the actual consuming of food had comparatively little to do with the matter." (Ibid.)

It can be said that extreme actions are exhibited by Greek people in the conviviality and most of these excess are in the pleasures of eating and drinking. Although Socrates says that the pleasure is the "greatest and most extreme of all evils" (Nussbaum, 1986, p. 152), in *Phaedo*, excess in bodily pleasure is frequently seen in Greek society. Tucker (1917) says that "there were doubtless some Athenians who liked good living for its own sake; there were doubtless even some gluttons"



(p.141). Excess in eating and drinking in society is recognized by Plato and he presents these situations in his dialogues. Robinson (1933) states this extremeness and Plato's view of them as follows; "Occasionally the wine got the better of the drinkers and the evening ended in a sad debauch. The concluding passage of Plato's 'Banquet' gives a strange picture:

A band of revelers entered and spoiled the order of the banquet, compelling everyone to drink large draughts of wine. Some of the guests went away; but Aristodemus (who is telling the story) fell asleep. Towards daybreak he was awakened by the crowing of the cocks, and found all the others had gone to sleep, save Socrates, Aristophanes, and Agathon, who were drinking out of a large goblet which day passed round. Socrates was discoursing to them; and the chief thing that Aristodemus could remember (for he was only half awake) was the philosopher compelling the other two to acknowledge that the genius of comedy and tragedy were really the same and that the true artist would excel in both. To this day consented perforce, being more than a little drowsy and not quite understanding the argument. Then first Aristophanes dropped off, and finally Agathon; and Socrates, having laid them both on the floor, got up and went his way. (p. 80)

Additionally, the economy of society is not sufficient for this type of extremeness in eating and drinking. The climate of Ancient Greek is drier than it is today. For this reason, the celebrations of ingathering are celebrated as for begging to God for more ingathering.

In all rural cultures each of the principal actions of the farmer's year, seed time, harvest, threshing, grape harvest, has been and sometimes still is accompanied by festivities which are designed to favour those natural forces that promote fertility, to celebrate their metamorphoses, their seasonal death and resurrection, to ward off hostile influences and raise the ban that weighs on every new creation. (Mireaux, 1959, p. 227)

Despite these economical difficulties, Greek people cannot abandon the pleasurable life and this type of life labels their social relations. In this sense, it can be said that their habit of life includes priority of the bodily pleasure. Value of appetitive activities has an important role in their life and in some sense they see seeking pleasure as the ultimate goal of life. We can encounter this approach in some dialogues of Plato, which reflect and criticize the bad tendencies of the society in

terms of values. In that case, this addiction of bodily pleasure legitimates Plato's emphasis on the restriction of pleasure and excess in bodily pleasure especially in the pleasure of eating and drinking.

In conclusion, I think that Plato's emphasis on the evil consequences of bodily pleasure and his saying on the necessity of restriction of them are originated from the manner of life of Greek society. For this reason, I tried to examine Plato's view of pleasure and his perception of his society. After that, I presented the daily life in Greek society, their social habits and their attitudes on bodily pleasures. I think the value that Greek people attribute to pleasure has a more important role than we assume and it is in contrast with Plato's view of pleasure. At this point, I claim that Plato wants to attract attention to the corruption in the society and he insists his arguments on the priority of reason and intellect. He purposes the philosophical and ascetic life in order to reach goodness. In this respect, we can say that there is a contrast between the notion of pleasure or the value of pleasure in daily life of Ancient Greek and Plato's notion of pleasure. Plato observes his society and considers their attitudes in social relations. The social relations of them have very important role in Plato's political and moral philosophy. For this reason, it can be said that the notion of pleasure in Plato's moral philosophy can be the conclusion or reflection of the ills of his society.

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