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Plato on Appetitive Desires in the Republic

Paul Hoffman

The standard interpretation of Plato's account of desires attributed to the appetitive part of the soul, most notably the biological desires for food, drink and sex, is that they are blind in the sense that they do not involve a conception of their object as good (alternatively, a belief that their object is good).¹ The evidence cited in favor of the claim that Plato believes all or at least some appetitive desires are blind seems to be provided chiefly, and perhaps exclusively, by the following passage:

Therefore, let no one catch us unprepared ... and cause a disturbance, alleging that no one desires drink but rather good drink, nor food but good food, on the grounds that everyone after all desires good things, and that if thirst is a desire, it will be a desire for good, be it drink or anything else of which it is a desire, and similarly with the others. (*Republic* 438a)²

This passage is cited by Terry Penner, C.D.C. Reeve, Terry Irwin, and Nicholas White in their defense of the claim that Plato thinks of appeti-

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- 1 I am presuming that the belief that x is F presupposes a conception of x as F , so that a desire that is independent of a conception of x as F is also independent of the belief that x is F .
 - 2 I am using the translation found in C.D.C. Reeve, *Philosopher-Kings: the argument of Plato's Republic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1988), 134.

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tive desire as blind.³ They all read the passage as implying a denial of the Socratic view that all desire is for the good, or at least the perceived good.

There is, however, another passage in the *Republic* in which Plato clearly commits himself to the view that all desires, including appetitive desires, are for what we perceive to be good. This decisive passage is 505d11-e1, the concluding sentence of the following quotation:

when it comes to good things nobody is satisfied with what seems to be so, but they seek the things that really are good, and everybody in this case disdains appearances — Quite so.
This every soul pursues, and all its actions are done for its sake.

I do not think it could be more plainly stated by Plato, at least on the usual translation, that he thinks every soul in every action aims at the good.⁴ This applies to those ruled by appetite as well as those ruled by spirit or reason.

There are two possibilities. Either Plato has contradicted himself in the *Republic*⁵ or he is making a different point from the one he is typically thought to be making in the 438a passage. It is my contention that there is a better interpretation of the 438a passage.

It is one thing to argue that thirst is the desire for drink and not the desire for good drink. It is entirely different to argue that to desire drink is not to view drink as good. Plato argues only for the first claim. He does not argue for the second claim. One can maintain that to desire some-

3 C.D.C. Reeve, *ibid.*; Terrence Penner, 'Plato and Davidson: Parts of the Soul and Weakness of Will', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Supplementary Volume 16 (1990), 53; Terence Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1977), 191-3; Nicholas P. White, *A Companion to Plato's Republic* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co. 1979), 124-5.

4 Irwin, as Charles Young has reminded me, defends an alternative translation of this passage according to which Plato, in saying that the good is that for the sake of which every soul does everything, means that the good is that for the sake of which the soul goes to all lengths and not that the good is that for the sake of which every soul does everything that it does (*Plato's Moral Theory*, 336 n. 45).

5 The charge of contradiction requires the further assumption, which I believe is true, that Plato thinks that drinking typically counts as a genuine action even when the only operative desire is the biological desire for drink. In other words, Plato does not believe genuine actions require the endorsement of reason.

thing includes viewing it as good and at the same time consistently deny that thirst is the desire for good drink and not merely the desire for drink. Indeed as I read the passage, Plato is actually endorsing the claim that he is alleged to be rejecting. The premise used to derive the rejected conclusion that we desire good drink rather than drink, namely, 'that everyone after all desires good things, and that if thirst is a desire, it will be a desire for good, be it drink or anything else of which it is a desire' is one Plato himself accepts. That is, Plato accepts that all desire is for good and thus for good things, and he accepts the inference that since thirst is a desire it is also a desire for something good, but he denies that it follows that thirst is the desire for good drink. In other words, Plato's point is that the good thing thirst is a desire for is drink, not good drink.⁶

C.D.C. Reeve claims that by rejecting the view that all desire is for the good in 438a Plato is laying the foundation for his rejection of the Socratic view that *akrasia* is impossible.⁷ But this is not the only possible explanation of *akrasia*. One could also reject the other premise that Reeve identifies as required for *akrasia* to be impossible, namely, that 'the strength of A's desire for *x* is always directly proportional to the amount of the good he believes *x* will yield.' If we suppose that reason is the faculty or part of the self by which we judge what is the best, what will yield the most good, *akrasia* is possible so long as we can be motivated to act by some faculty or part other than reason. Even if that other faculty is drawn to things only insofar as it views them as good, *akrasia* is possible so long as that faculty or part leads us to pursue something contrary to the judgment of reason. In such a case it seems fair to say that the strength of our desire for *x* is not proportional to the amount of good we believe

6 Plato's reason for rejecting the conclusion, he tells us right before the 438a passage, is that it makes the object of thirst more complicated than it is. Thirst is for drink, not for drink of a certain sort. We might express Plato's objection by saying that the rejected conclusion that thirst is the desire for good drink has the false implication that there is some subset of drink that is good that is the real object of thirst. This way of stating the objection is potentially misleading, however, because even if all drink were of the good sort and in desiring drink we viewed it as good, Plato's objection would still stand that the object of thirst is not good drink or drink as good, but merely drink. As I read him, Plato's point is that the fallacy leading to the false conclusion that good drink is the object of thirst arises from mistakenly projecting what is involved in the act of desiring — viewing the object as good — onto the object of desire in a way that transforms it into a different, more complicated object.

7 Reeve, *Philosopher-Kings*, 133-4

x will yield because that belief is identified with the judgment of our reason. To be sure, such a theory pays a steep price insofar as it divides the self into parts that are capable of acting independently. But this is a price we know that Plato is willing to pay, once he divides the soul into reason, spirit, and appetite.⁸

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⁸ I would like to thank Charles Young and the referee from *Apeiron* for their extremely helpful comments.