

## Plato on Pleasure and the Good Life

By Daniel Russell

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Daniel Russell examines Plato's subtle and insightful analysis of pleasure and explores its intimate connections with his discussions of value and human psychology. Russell offers a fresh perspective on how good things bear on happiness in Plato's ethics, and shows that, for Plato, pleasure cannot determine happiness because pleasure lacks a direction of its own. Plato presents wisdom as a skill of living that determines happiness by directing one's life as a whole, bringing about goodness in all areas of one's life, as a skill brings about order in its materials. The "materials" of the skill of living are, in the first instance, not things like money or health, but one's attitudes, emotions, and desires where things like money and health are concerned. Plato recognizes that these "materials" of the psyche are inchoate, ethically speaking, and in need of direction from wisdom. Among them is pleasure, which Plato treats not as a sensation but as an attitude with which one ascribes value to its object.

However, Plato also views pleasure, once shaped and directed by wisdom, as a crucial part of a virtuous character as a whole. Consequently, Plato rejects all forms of hedonism, which allows happiness to be determined by a part of the psyche that does not direct one's life but is among the materials to be directed. At the same time, Plato is also able to hold both that virtue is sufficient for happiness, and that pleasure is necessary for happiness, not as an addition to one's virtue, but as a constituent of one's whole virtuous character itself. Plato therefore offers an illuminating role for pleasure in ethics and psychology, one to which we may be unaccustomed: pleasure emerges not as a sensation or even a mode of activity, but as an attitude - one of the ways in which we construe our world--and as such, a central part of every character.

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## **Editorial Review**

### Review

"Many scholars have characterized Plato as having been a hedonist for at least part of his philosophical career. Russell (Monash Univ., Melbourne) disagrees. Those who find hedonism in some of Plato's works, moreover, typically see its opposition in other works as a sign of a later move away from the Socratic influence more evident in Plato's early work. But Russell officially remains neutral on developmentalism generally, on the correct observation that many developmentalists actually share his view that none of Plato's dialogues are rightly construed as committed to hedonism. At any rate, Russell seeks to defend a Unitarian view only with respect to Plato's understanding of the role of pleasure in the good life for human beings. He elaborates and defends this view in seven chapters, followed by a substantial nine-and-a-half-page appendix on the *Protagoras*."--*Choice*

### About the Author

Daniel Russell is a research fellow in the School of Philosophy and Bioethics at Monash University, Melbourne, Australia.

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