

Before and After Philosophy takes Possession of the Soul The Ascetic and the Platonic Interpretation

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In the *Phaedo*, to explain why the philosopher lives in the unusually ascetic way he does, Socrates explains what someone realizes when philosophy takes possession of his soul and how he changes his behavior on the basis of this information. This paper considers the conception of belief the character uses in this explanation and whether it is the same as the conception Michael Frede thinks the historical Socrates is likely to have held and that the Stoics much later incorporated into their doctrine of practice.

1. *Introduction*

I argue against the “ascetic” interpretation. The subject of this interpretation is the explanation in the *Phaedo* Socrates gives for what happens in the soul before and after philosophy takes possession of it and thus for why the philosopher lives in the unusual way he does with respect to experiences of pleasure and pain. Further, it is part of this interpretation that the conception of belief the character uses in his explanation is the one Michael Frede thinks the historical Socrates is likely to have held and the Stoics incorporated in their doctrine of practice. This gives the interpretation its name.¹

The ascetic interpretation, if it is correct, provides a reason to think the Stoics took inspiration for their doctrine of practice from the historical Socrates and his life through the

¹ Woolf 2004: 98 introduces the “‘ascetic’ reading” for one of two interpretations he develops of how in the *Phaedo* Socrates understands what “it [is] to live, as far as possible, without the body.” (The other interpretation he calls the “‘evaluative’ reading”). The interpretation I argue against shares the name and is similar in certain ways but is not a version of Woolf’s “‘ascetic’ reading”.

explanation in the *Phaedo*.² It provides a reason to think they saw that he was represented as living with an indifference to the kinds of experiences of pleasure and pain that ordinarily are central to the way human beings live, that they concluded he lived this way to become “open to the truth” and to “come to have the right view of things”,³ and that they followed Socrates in this in their doctrine of practice.

This is an intriguing way to understand the history from Socrates to the Stoics, but the evidence for the ascetic interpretation is weak. Socrates’ explanation can be read so that it confirms the ascetic interpretation, but his explanation can also be read so that it is inconsistent with this interpretation. This alternative way to read Socrates’ explanation is the “Platonic” interpretation. This interpretation rejects the intellectualism that marks the conception of belief Frede suggests for the historical Socrates and the Stoics,⁴ but it fits the textual evidence at least as well as the ascetic interpretation.

2. *Frede’s Historical Socrates*

To understand the ascetic interpretation, it is necessary to understand how Frede thinks the historical Socrates thought about belief. He says that what we know or at least

² A. A. Long, *Epictetus: A Stoic and Socratic Guide to Life*. Oxford University Press, 2002. Long 2002 says that the language Epictetus uses and the way he contrasts mind and body shows that “[his] recollection of the *Phaedo* is certain” (158). In general, though, the evidence for the influence of Socratic textual sources on the Stoics is more difficult to assess. For discussion of the influence of the *Phaedo*, see Alesse 2015. For the influence of the Platonic dialogues, see Alesse 2018.

³ “[W]hat is at issue [in the Stoic division of ethics into a theoretical and practical part] is not just making one’s life consistent with one’s views, <...> but also arranging one’s life and one’s disposition in such a way that one is open to truth and can come to have the right view of things” (Frede 2000: 15). Cf. Frede 2000: 11. “[A] good life [according to Plato] will crucially involve, as part of the way one lives, contemplation of the truth. Practicing the right way to live will also be a means to enable the soul to free itself from the body, to see the truth, and to engage in the contemplation of truth”.

⁴ Frede 2000: 12. Cf. Michael Frede, *A Free Will. Origins of the Notion in Ancient Thought*, edited by A.A. Long, University of California Press, 2011. “The Stoics took themselves to be reverting to Socrates’ view [that, in what we are doing, we are entirely guided by our beliefs], as they saw it represented in Plato’s earlier dialogues, in particular, Plato’s *Protagoras*. There is no indication in these dialogues, down to and including the *Phaedo*, of a division of the soul. Even in the *Phaedo* the soul in its entirety seems to be an embodied reason. So the Stoics took the soul to be a reason” (32).

seem to know⁵ about him “strongly suggests” that he thought some beliefs are “embedded in the way we feel and behave”. What we seem to know, according to Frede, is that “in spite of his extreme intellectualism—that is to say, his view that the way we act is completely determined by our beliefs, in particular our beliefs concerning the good and related matters⁶—Socrates’ life seems to have been characterized by a remarkable degree of asceticism”. Frede does not explain why, but he says this “strongly suggests” that Socrates “thought that it is not a matter of pure rational argument which beliefs we espouse and which we fail to espouse, but that, precisely because some of our beliefs are so deeply embedded in the way we feel and behave, our openness to their rational rejection or their rational acceptance, our openness to rational argument, also is a matter of our pattern of behavior and the control we have over our behavior”.⁷

Frede’s description of what the historical Socrates “thought” is compressed, but one way to supply some of the missing detail is to take him to mean that the historical Socrates thought that to have the knowledge one needs to live a good life, one must not only reason correctly but must also behave correctly. One must behave correctly because behaviors that make us “feel” certain ways can produce beliefs in the absence of reasoning, and some beliefs these behaviors produce and reinforce are inconsistent with living a good life. Since these beliefs are not “espoused” on the basis of “pure rational argument,” having a reason is not enough for someone to abandon these beliefs. One must also change the behaviors that constitute them because these beliefs and the control human beings have over them are “a matter of our pattern of behavior and the control we have over our behavior”.⁸

The argument for this interpretation of the historical Socrates is that if he did think about belief and the good life in this way, it would explain why he lived in the unusually ascetic way he did. Frede leaves his readers to supply most of the explanation,⁹ but it is not

⁵ Frede 2000: 9, Frede 1992: 204-205.

⁶ Frede understands Socrates’ intellectualism to have its basis in the ontological thesis that desires are “beliefs of a certain kind” (Frede 2000: 10).

⁷ Frede 2000: 9-10.

⁸ For skepticism on philosophical grounds about this conception of belief in the Stoic doctrine of practice, see Brennan 2003: 278-279.

⁹ Frede says only that the fact that Socrates lived in the ascetic way he did, even though he was convinced that his behavior was completely controlled by his beliefs, “strongly suggests” that he

too difficult to do. Socrates would think that as a result of behaviors in which human beings “feel” pleasure and pain, they typically try to arrange their lives so that they behave in more of the pleasurable ways and in fewer of the painful ways because the pleasure and pain they experience causes them to develop states that motivate them to behave in these ways. Socrates would think too that motivation requires desire and that the behavior these states motivate is habitual.¹⁰ This understanding of how human beings live is in itself relatively uncontroversial, but since he also accepted that “extreme intellectualism” is true, he drew the substantive conclusion that these states are or stem from “beliefs of a certain kind”¹¹ that themselves are not held as a matter of reason. Moreover, Socrates realized that he had developed such beliefs and that they were inconsistent with living a good life as he had come to understand this life. So he changed his “pattern of behavior” to rid himself of these beliefs, and this change in his behavior changed his life so that it came to be “characterized by a remarkable degree of asceticism”.

3. The Parts of the Explanation the Interpretations have in Common

Now that the assumption about belief that informs the ascetic interpretation has been clarified, it remains to determine whether the ascetic interpretation is more plausible than the Platonic interpretation. Since the two interpretations agree in outline on how to understand Socrates’ explanation, the first step is to set out this common ground the interpretations share.

On both the ascetic and Platonic interpretation, to explain why the philosopher lives in the very unusual way he does, Socrates explains what happens in the soul before and after philosophy takes possession of it. To show why the philosopher lives this life, a life the non-philosopher thinks is more like being dead than alive,¹² Socrates explains what someone

thought that some beliefs are “embedded in the way we feel and behave” and thus that we do not “espouse” or “fail to espouse” these beliefs as “a matter of pure rational argument”.

¹⁰ For discussion of habit in the Roman Stoics, see William O. Stephens, “The Roman Stoics on Habit”, *A History of Habit: From Aristotle to Bourdieu*, 37-65, edited by Tom Sparrow and Adam Hutchinson, Lexington Books, 2013.

¹¹ For this characterization, see note #6.

¹² *Phaedo* 65a4-6. Cf. Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.6.4.

realizes when philosophy takes possession of his soul. Further, he explains how on the basis of this information the philosopher changes his beliefs and his behavior with respect to experiences of pleasure and pain.

Both interpretations take what the philosopher realizes to include an important fact about his existence.¹³ Socrates says that before philosophy takes possession of the soul, each pleasure and pain “fastens it to the body” so that it has “the same beliefs as the body and enjoys the same things (ὁμοδοξεῖν τῷ σώματι καὶ τοῖς αὐτοῖς χαίρειν)”.¹⁴ This, in turn, he says, forces the soul to adopt “the same ways and sustenance” as the body (83d5, 7-8, 8-9)¹⁵ and thus to live a life that is not its own. Socrates makes these remarks in the context of his previous assertion that “lovers of knowledge¹⁶ recognize¹⁷ that when philosophy takes possession¹⁸ of the soul, it has been thoroughly bound and glued to the body” (82d9-e2). So it is clear that what the philosopher realizes about his existence is twofold. He realizes not only that (i) his past experiences of pleasure and pain have “fastened” his soul to his body but also that if he is to start living a good life as he now understands this life, (ii) he must take steps to stop living as he had been living before philosophy took possession of his soul.

Socrates’ discussion shows that he understands (i) in terms of something he has said is a “track” philosophers have discovered and think they should no longer follow. He says that “genuine philosophers” tell one another that “it looks as if some sort of track is leading us, together with our reason, astray” (66b2-4).¹⁹ He does not pause to explain what this

¹³ Cf. Robins 2003: 3.

¹⁴ David Sedley & Alex Long, *Plato, Meno and Phaedo*. Cambridge University Press, 2011. David Gallop, *Plato – Phaedo*, Oxford University Press, 1975. My translations are or follow the translations in Gallop 1975 and Sedley & Long 2011. For “same beliefs as the body and enjoys the same things”, the translation in Gallop 1975 is “sharing opinions and pleasures with the body”.

¹⁵ Gallop 1975: “force to become of like character and nurture to it”.

¹⁶ Plato draws no distinction between “lovers of knowledge” and “philosophers.” See *Phaedo* 82b10-c1. See also *Republic* II.376b8-9. Cf. John Burnet, *Plato’s Phaedo*, Oxford University Press, 1911, 38, 74, 77 and Ebrey 2017: note 13 on 5.

¹⁷ Gallop 1975. Sedley & Long 2011: “are aware (γινώσκουσι)”.

¹⁸ Gallop 1975: “when philosophy takes their soul in hand”. Cf. Burnet 1911: “παραλαβοῦσα, ‘taking in hand,’ as a doctor takes his patient in hand for treatment” (75).

¹⁹ Gallop 1975. Sedley & Long 2011: “a sort of short cut may well be taking us with our reason towards the quarry in our inquiry”. Wilburn 2011 criticizes this translation as “rather graceless”, but there is also the question of interpretation. For discussion, see Harry 1909. Gallop 1975 follows Harry

“track” is, but he clearly thinks that it exists because “we possess the body” (66b5).²⁰ Socrates explains that genuine philosophers think that their “soul is contaminated” by the body (66b5-6), that they think that the body “fills us up with lusts and desires and fears and with all sorts of fancies and foolishness” (66c2-4), and that because genuine philosophers think in this way about “the body and its desires” (66c7-8), they do not “consort with or have dealings with the body other than what is absolutely necessary” (67a3-4).

The point to notice in these remarks is that the philosopher realizes that he should abstain from certain “desires” he would not have resisted before philosophy took possession of his soul. These desires are expressions of “lusts,” “fears,” and “all sorts of fancies and foolishness” that arise in the soul in connection with the track the philosopher thinks he should not follow. The philosopher thinks this track is the path by which his body “contaminates” his soul because a soul that follows this track is “led, together with its reason, astray”. It is led to live a life proper to the body but not itself.

Socrates adds more detail to what the philosopher realizes when he explains why “true philosophers abstain from all bodily desires, and stand firm without surrendering to them” (82c3-4). He says that true philosophers “believe that their actions must not oppose philosophy” (82d5). He says they realize that when philosophy takes “possession of the soul” (82e1), it is imprisoned by the body and that the “ignorance” this imprisonment causes is reinforced through the satisfaction of “desire, so that the captive himself” aids in “his imprisonment” (82e4-7). It is for this reason, he says, that “the soul of the true philosopher abstains from pleasures and desires and pains and fears, so far as it can, reckoning that when one feels intense pleasure or fear, pain or desire, one incurs harm from them not merely to the extent that might be supposed—by being ill, for example, or spending money to satisfy one’s desires—but one incurs the greatest and most extreme of all evils” (83b5-c2).

(note 10 on 227). John Burnet, *Platonis Opera*, Vol. 1. *Tetralogias I-II*, Oxford University Press, 1900. Burnet 1900 brackets *μετὰ τοῦ λόγου*. Burnet 1911 says the phrase is “a marginal note <...> that has got into the wrong place”. E. A. Duke, *Platonis Opera*, Vol. 1. *Tetralogias I-II*, edited by E. A. Duke, W. F. Hicken, W. S. M. Nicoll, D. B. Robinson, and J. C. G. Strachan. Oxford University Press, 1995. Duke 1995 leaves the phrase in the text.

²⁰ Gallop 1975 takes the “track” to be the body and supposes that philosophers “recognize that it *side-tracks* them in their quest for truth” (note 10 on 227).

The “track,” then, the philosopher has discovered is a way of thinking according to which someone who experiences “intense pleasure or fear, pain” is prevented from living a good life because in this thinking he is led to incur “the greatest and most extreme” evil. To make clearer what happens, Socrates asks Cebes whether it is true that “the soul of every man, when intensely pleased or pained at something, is forced to suppose²¹ that whatever affects it in this way is most clear and real, when it is not so; and such objects are especially things seen” (83c5-8). Cebes agrees without hesitation, and Socrates asks whether it is also true that “in this experience the soul is most thoroughly bound fast by the body” (83d1-2). This binding of soul to body is initially opaque enough that Cebes asks for explanation. Socrates says in reply that “each pleasure and pain fastens it to the body with a sort of rivet, pins it there, and makes it corporeal, so that the soul takes for real whatever the body declares to be so” (83d4-7) and that as result, because the soul has “the same beliefs as the body and enjoys the same things”, it is forced to have “the same ways and the same sustenance” (83d7-9).

So, according to both the ascetic and Platonic interpretation, the philosopher thinks he should not follow the “track” he has discovered because it leads to the “greatest and most extreme of all evils”. This evil results from the “ignorance” the soul reinforces if it follows the track in connection with its experiences of pleasure and pain. If the soul follows the track, it comes to believe that certain objects are involved in these experiences and that they are “most clear and real”, when in fact they are not. Moreover, because the soul also attributes a value to these experiences they do not possess,²² it acquires “the same ways and the same sustenance” as the body and thus acts on the basis of desires to pursue pleasures and avoid pains of the kinds it has experienced. In this way, the soul lives a life proper to the body but not itself and hence does not live a good life as the philosopher understands it.²³

²¹ Gallop 1975. Sedley & Long 2011: “believe (ἠγεῖσθαι)”.

²² Cf. Butler 2017: 88-91 and Ebrey 2017: 8.

²³ Although he does not talk about a “track”, Socrates seems to make a similar point in the *Gorgias*: that one who gets himself “accustomed from childhood on to like and dislike the same things” (ἐθίζειν αὐτὸν τοῖς αὐτοῖς χαίρειν καὶ ἄχθεσθαι) as the tyrant “will have incurred the greatest evil, when his soul is corrupt and mutilated on account of his imitation” of the tyrant (510d6-7, 511a1-2). This is the translation in Donald Zeyl, *Plato – Gorgias*, Hackett Publishing Company, 1987. Cf. *Laws* II.656b.

4. *The Ascetic Interpretation*

The ascetic and Platonic interpretations agree that the thinking that occurs when the soul follows the track is familiar enough to explain why Cebes accepts without hesitation that it occurs,²⁴ but they disagree about what happens in the cognitive process in which experiences of pleasure and pain lead the soul to have “the same beliefs as the body and [to enjoy] the same things” as the body. They also disagree about what happens when to stop living as he had been living before philosophy took possession of his soul, “the soul of the true philosopher abstains from pleasures and desires and pains and fears, so far as it can”. Both interpretations understand this abstaining in the same general way. They agree that the philosopher resists the “desires” that arise with respect to experiences of “pleasure”, “pain”, of what one “fear[s]”, and so on, in order to remove the “rivets” that fasten his soul to his body, but since they disagree about what these “rivets” are and how they are driven into the soul, they disagree about what happens in the process in which the philosopher removes them.

To begin to understand the side of the ascetic interpretation in this disagreement, it is useful to consider a familiar case in which someone forms a belief but later abandons it in the light of new information. Suppose, for example, that someone is looking at lines in a Müller-Lyer illusion and wonders whether they are the same length. One way to know is to use a ruler and to reason about the measurements, but this is not the only way. If someone looks at the lines, and is unaware of the illusion and has no other reason to withhold judgment, he will naturally form the belief that one line is longer. Once he is aware of the illusion, however, he will abandon this belief, as is rational. One line continues to look longer to him, but he does not believe it is because he knows the look is misleading.

²⁴ William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, Volume II. Henry Holt and Company, 1918: “among all sensations, the *most* belief-compelling are those productive of pleasure or of pain. Locke expressly makes the *pleasure-* or *pain-*giving quality to be the ultimate human criterion of anything's reality” (306). James cites *Essay* IV.2.14 and IV.11.8, where Locke argues from within the empiricist tradition (which the character Socrates rejects (*Phaedo* 99b)) for knowledge of what exists.

Since this can appear true too for the philosopher and the beliefs he formed in terms of his experiences of pleasure and pain, it can be puzzling what abstaining from desires has to do with abandoning the beliefs he formed previously. When philosophy takes possession of his soul, he realizes that the way he had been forming beliefs is inconsistent with living a good life. He now understands that the soul has a good opposed to the body and that if he continues to form beliefs in terms of his experiences of pleasures and pains, he will have an incorrect view of reality and will live a life proper to his body but not to his soul. So once philosophy takes possession of his soul, he has the reason he needs to abandon the beliefs he formed previously. Abstaining seems to have no role to play.

The text too can suggest that when the philosopher abstains, it is not to rid himself of the beliefs he formed in terms of his experiences of pleasure and pain before he became a philosopher. Socrates has explained that when philosophy takes possession of the soul, the philosopher finds himself with “no leisure for philosophy” (66d2). He believes the forms are “most clear and real” and that his life is good to the extent he spends his time in contemplation of them, but he has trouble living this way because he is continually interrupted by desires to live as he did before philosophy took possession of his soul. This is why he abstains. His aim is not to abandon the beliefs he formed previously. He abandoned them when philosophy took possession of his soul. He abstains in an effort to prevent the desires to live as he did from arising and interrupting the leisure he needs for philosophy.

The ascetic interpretation, however, sees the matter differently. It takes this way of thinking about Socrates’ explanation of what happens in the soul to rest on a misunderstanding of the conception of belief he uses in his explanation. One might naturally think that someone abandons a belief simply by recognizing it is false, but if the character Socrates uses the conception of belief that Frede thinks the historical Socrates is likely to have held, then the philosopher cannot abandon some of the beliefs he has come to recognize as false without also changing “[his] pattern of behavior”.²⁵

²⁵ The philosopher does not control his behavior to rid himself of beliefs in Woolf’s “ascetic reading”, but other commentators seem to understand the philosopher in this way in their interpretations of Socrates’ explanation. See, for example, Butler 2012: 108, Butler 2017: 88, 99-100, Ebrey 2017: 7-8, and Butler 2019: 168-174. For a bibliography, see Jones & Marechal 2019: notes 7 and 8 on 97-98.

So, according to the ascetic interpretation, abstaining from the desires is how the philosopher abandons the beliefs he formed before philosophy took possession of his soul and thus how he stops living as he had been living. He formed these beliefs about what is good and bad when he attributed values to his experiences of pleasure and pain. These beliefs guided him before he became a philosopher. Moreover, on the ascetic interpretation, they continue to guide him now that philosophy has taken possession of his soul. He thinks the forms are most clear and real and that his life is good to the extent he lives in contemplation of them, but he remains “bound fast” to his old ways.

Because the philosopher remains “bound fast” to his old ways, he is interrupted by the “body and its desires” when he tries to spend time in contemplation of the forms. On the ascetic interpretation, these desires arise because he continues to look for ways to engage in the activities he still believes are good and to avoid the activities he still believes are bad. Socrates explains that even “if we [philosophers] do get any leisure from [the body], and turn to pursuing some inquiry, once again it intrudes everywhere in our investigations, setting up a clamor and disturbance, and overwhelms us, so that the truth cannot be discerned because of it” (66d3-7). According to the ascetic interpretation, to prevent these desires from arising and thus to give himself the leisure he needs to live in contemplation of the forms, the philosopher realizes that he must rid himself of these beliefs he formed previously and now recognizes are false. On the ascetic interpretation, these beliefs are the “rivets” that prevent him from living a good life as he now understands it. Further, according to the ascetic interpretation, he realizes that he formed these beliefs in a kind of conditioning in terms of his previous experiences of pleasure and pain and thus that he can abandon them only by reconditioning himself.

Since, as Socrates explains, “philosophy discerns the cunning of the prison [the body forms for the soul], how it is affected though desire” (82e5-6), one of the ways the philosopher reconditions himself is by resisting the desires that arise when he sees certain opportunities to live as he did before philosophy took possession of his soul. The soul of the philosopher, he says, “would not suppose that, its own release being a job for philosophy,

while philosophy is doing that it should of its own accord surrender itself for the pleasures and pains to bind it back inside [the body] again” (84a3-5).²⁶

This resistance to the “body and its desires” is common to both interpretations, but the ascetic interpretation understands it in a distinctive way. On the ascetic interpretation, the psychology is intellectualist. This has the consequence that the desires the philosopher resists have to be understood to be or to stem from “beliefs of a certain kind”. On the ascetic interpretation, he resists the desire that arises when he sees an opportunity to engage in an activity he came to believe and still believes is good on the basis of his past experiences of pleasure.²⁷ If he resists the desire, and so does not experience the pleasure because he does not engage in the activity, he weakens the belief. As he weakens the belief by resisting the desires, he becomes less occupied with opportunities to engage in the activity and thus provides himself with some of the leisure he needs to live in contemplation of the forms.

Socrates does not describe this resistance to desire in detail, but the explanation on both interpretations is that he sees no need to supply details because he has in mind the ordinary practices human beings use to change their habitual behaviors. Moreover, later in the *Phaedo*, in an objection to the theory that the soul exists as a kind of harmony, he lists exactly the sort of ordinary practices one should expect. He suggests, and Simmias immediately agrees, that the soul opposes “bodily passions,” such as thirst and hunger, “in all kinds of ways, sometimes disciplining more harshly and painfully with gymnastics and medicine, sometimes more mildly, now threatening and now admonishing, conversing with our appetites and passions and fears, as if with a separate thing” (94b7, d2-6).²⁸

Given intellectualism, it is possible too to see more evidence that the philosopher reconditions himself so that he no longer has the beliefs about what is good and bad that he formed on the basis of his experience of pleasure and pain. After Socrates says the philosopher thinks his soul is “contaminated” by the body, he identifies “purification” with the “habituating (ἐθίσαι) of [the soul] to assembling and gathering itself from every part of

²⁶ Sedley & Long 2011. Gallop 1975: “would not think that while philosophy should release it, yet on being released, it should of itself surrender to the pleasures and pains, to bind it to the body once again”.

²⁷ Cf. *Gorgias* 492d-494a.

²⁸ For argument Plato thinks such personification is a way to control behavior, see Kamtekar 2006.

the body, alone by itself, and to living alone by itself as far as it can” (67c5-9).²⁹ The implication is that to purify himself so he can live a good life, the philosopher must get used to living a new way. On the ascetic interpretation, the philosopher must get used to resisting the desires that are or stem from the beliefs about what is good and bad he formed before philosophy took possession of his soul. Resisting these desires weakens the beliefs and thus loosens the “rivets” his previous experience of pleasure and pain drove into his soul. In this resistance, the philosopher aims to live in a way that he is as free as possible from “body and its desires” and thus to live in a way that he has the leisure he needs to live his life in contemplation of the forms.

When Socrates returns to the need for habituation, he “imagines” (81b1)³⁰ the consequences that follow in death for those who do not properly retrain their souls. He says that when such a soul departs in death, it is “impure, because it has always been with the body, has served and loved it, and been so bewitched by it, by its passions and pleasures” (81b1-4). He explains that such a soul does not enter the “presence of the good and wise god” (80d7). Instead, it “is weighed down, and dragged back into the region of the seen” (81c10),³¹ and it “roams among tombs” (81d1) until it enters a body with the “character” (ἦθη) the human being had in life (81e3). Socrates explains that “[t]hose who have cultivated³² gluttony, for example, and lechery, and drunkenness, and have taken no pains to avoid them, are likely to enter the forms of donkeys and animals of that sort” (81e6-82a1).

Socrates does not say why he helps Cebes imagine the consequences that follow in death for someone whose soul is not habituated properly,³³ but given the ascetic

²⁹ Cf. Harold Fowler, *Plato*, Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo, Phaedrus. Harvard University Press, 1914: “the purification consists in <...> teaching the soul the habit of <...>”.

³⁰ Gallop 1975: “I imagine (οἶμαί)”. Sedley & Long 2011: “I mean”.

³¹ Cf. *Republic* VII.519a-b.

³² Gallop 1975. Sedley & Long 2011: “practiced” (μεμελετηκότας).

³³ Daniel C. Russell, *Plato on Pleasure and the Good Life*. Oxford University Press, 2005. Russell 2005: 99 thinks this imagery is “occult” and that it is “not clear what we should make” of it. Jones & Marechal 2019: 96 explain that “Socrates tells us (surely playfully)” that “souls [that have not purified themselves from the body] are so bodily that they sink to earth and wonder around graveyards as shadowy figures that are occasionally seen by the living”.

interpretation, it is plausible to take his intention in part to illustrate another step the philosopher can take to loosen the “rivets” that were put in place before philosophy took possession of his soul. One way is to resist the desires that arise when he sees opportunities to engage in the activities he came to and still believes are good on the basis of his past experiences of pleasure, but Socrates seems to think there is another way too. He can weaken these beliefs by imagining the negative consequences of engaging in the activities.

On the ascetic interpretation, the question and answer sequence in 64d-65a indicates the beliefs the philosopher possesses at the end of the reconditioning process. Socrates asks Simmias whether it is fitting for the philosopher to be “eager” (64d2) about the pleasures of food, drink, and sex. He replies it is not, and Socrates extends the inquiry to other “services to the body” (64d8), such as “having fine clothes and shoes” (64d9-10).³⁴ He asks whether the philosopher prizes “them highly, or does he disdain them, except in so far as he is absolutely compelled to share in them” (64d11-e1).³⁵ Simmias replies that he “disdains” them. Socrates asks whether “such a man’s concern is not for the body, and that, as far as he can, he stands apart from it and is turned to his soul” (64e4-6). Simmias gives the expected answer, and Socrates concludes that “in matters like these the philosopher differs from other men in releasing his soul, as far as possible, from its association with the body” (64e8-65a2).

Moreover, on the ascetic interpretation, this exchange suggests that the philosopher reconditions himself to replace his beliefs with the sort of beliefs the historical Socrates seems to have had. So, for example, if the philosopher previously believed the pleasures of wearing “fine clothes and shoes” are good, then after philosophy takes possession of his soul, he reconditions himself so that he no longer has this belief. Similarly, if he had the belief that the pleasures of the table are good, he reconditions himself so that he no longer has this belief. The philosopher must eat and drink and protect himself from the elements, but he reconditions himself so his beliefs are for what maintains his life.

Both interpretations take this reconditioning to result in a life in which Socrates thinks one has the virtues of character, but the ascetic interpretation understands this in terms of

³⁴ Cf. Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.6.2.

³⁵ Gallop 1975. Sedley & Long 2011: “values them, or attaches no value to them except in so far as he must absolutely take an interest in them”.

intellectualism. It is a mistake, Socrates says, to exchange “pleasures for pleasures, pains for pains, fear or fear, greater for lesser ones, like coins” (69a7-9). He does not explain how these states are like “coins”, but the suggestion is that the exchange treats pleasure and pain as commensurable and aims to maximize the overall experience of pleasure minus pain. Hence it is a mistake, for example, to give up the pleasures of the table for the pleasures of health because over time the pleasures of the table bring more pain than pleasure.³⁶ On the ascetic interpretation, the correct exchange is for the correct beliefs about good and bad that constitute “wisdom” (69a10).³⁷ Socrates thinks that this exchange results in “courage, temperance, justice, and in sum true virtue” (69b2-3), that true “temperance, justice, and courage are a kind of purification” (69c1-2)³⁸, that engaging in this purification is what those “who have pursued philosophy correctly” (69d2) have done, and that he has striven to be among them (69d2-4).

5. *The Platonic Interpretation*

At this point it is clear that Socrates’ explanation can be read so it that confirms the ascetic interpretation, but it is also clear that this reading is surprising on philosophical grounds. According to this interpretation, experiences of pleasure and pain give the philosopher beliefs he later recognizes as false when philosophy takes possession of his soul. This recognition, though, is not enough for him to abandon these beliefs because the behavior that constitutes them is habitual. To abandon them, he must also control his behavior so that he stops acting on desires for the sorts of experiences of pleasure and pain that gave him these beliefs before philosophy took possession of his soul. This interpretation might be correct, but there must be enough evidence to rule out the Platonic interpretation.

At 83c5, Socrates does say that when “the soul of every man” experiences intense pleasure or pain, it is “forced” to suppose that what affects it in this way is “most clear and

³⁶ Cf. Burnet 1911: 42.

³⁷ Cf. Burnet 1911: 43. “[We are supposed] to buy wisdom with pleasures, &c”. For discussion of the exchange metaphor, see Weiss 1987 and Russell 2005: 94-97.

³⁸ “The other so-called virtues of the soul seem very close to the body, for they do not really exist before, but are added later by habit and practice” (*Republic* VII.518d9-e2).

real”.³⁹ It is also true that he says this as part of an explanation of why the “soul of the true philosopher abstains from pleasures and desires and pains and fears, so far as it can”, but these remarks are part of his account of what happens before and after philosophy takes possession of the soul. Socrates does not say “the soul of every man at every time”. When he says “the soul of every man”, he is explaining what happens before philosophy takes possession of the soul and thus what is true before the soul realizes that the forms are most clear and real and that the good life is a life of contemplating the forms. So it is natural to take him to mean that when the soul experiences pleasure and pain before philosophy has taken possession of it, the soul accepts certain propositions it later rejects once philosophy has taken possession of it. The soul is “forced” to accept these propositions before philosophy takes possession of it because at this point in its imprisonment it lacks an alternative. Before philosophy takes possession of the soul, it does not know what is most clear and real and what life is the good life.

So what Socrates says at 83c5 about the “soul of every man” allows that when philosophy takes possession of his soul, the philosopher abandons the belief about what is “most clear and real” that he formed before philosophy took possession of his soul. This is true even if, contrary to what I have argued, Socrates thinks that experiences of pleasure and pain can force the philosopher to form a false belief about what is most clear and real after philosophy has taken possession of his soul.⁴⁰ As long as the philosopher is not experiencing pleasure or pain when philosophy takes possession of his soul, he can abandon his false belief about reality because he now recognizes that it is false. He now realizes that the forms are most clear and real and that the good life is the life of contemplation.

Further, even the ascetic interpretation can take Socrates to think both that the philosopher abandons this false belief when philosophy takes possession of his soul and that he does not form it again if he experiences pleasure or pain. The heart of the disagreement

³⁹ Butler 2012 stresses the importance of these remarks for his interpretation. “Since the result is inevitable and necessary, the philosopher must stay away from such feelings and their causes” (107).

⁴⁰ At *Phaedo* 60b3-4, as he straightened his leg and gave it a hard rub, Socrates reports having the experience “people call pleasure”. He finds it surprising how this experience is related to its opposite, but he gives no indication that he thinks that it has forced him to have a belief about what “most clear and real”. The reason, presumably, is that he is a philosopher and so knows better than to follow the “track” that philosophers have discovered and think they should not follow.

between the ascetic and Platonic interpretation is over what Socrates thinks goes on when “the soul of the true philosopher abstains from pleasures and desires and pains and fears” to solve the problem the “body and its desires” poses for his leisure. The ascetic interpretation takes the psychology to be intellectualist. The philosopher has the problem of the “body and its desires” after philosophy has taken possession of his soul because he still has the beliefs about what is good and bad he formed on the basis of his experiences of pleasure and pain before philosophy took possession of his soul. If he resists the desires that arise to pursue and avoid the pleasures and pains of the kind he experienced previously, he does not experience the pleasure or pain. This weakens the beliefs about what is good and bad he formed previously because it deprives the soul of the experiences necessary to sustain them. Thus, by resisting the desires and imagining the negative consequences, the philosopher rids himself of the beliefs he formed and thus solves the problem the “body and its desires” poses for the leisure he needs for contemplation.

Intellectualism, however, is not something Socrates indicates that he accepts. In his explanation of what happens before and after philosophy takes possession of the soul, he uses the ordinary and familiar language of the mind in a way that gives no indication he thinks that intellectualism is true. Moreover, without intellectualism as a premise, it is possible to understand his explanation so that the philosopher “abstains” to change his likings and dislikings, not his beliefs about what is good and bad. Recall that in his explanation Socrates says that before philosophy takes possession of the soul, each pleasure and pain “fastens it to the body” in such a way that it has both “the same beliefs as the body” and “enjoys the same things” as the body. A soul that enjoys things has likings and dislikings, just as a soul that believes things has beliefs. So it is possible the point Socrates makes in these remarks is that before philosophy takes possession of it, experiences of pleasure and pain fasten it to the body by giving it beliefs and likings and dislikings that force it to live a life proper to the body.⁴¹

⁴¹ Woolf 2004: 120-121 seems to think that Socrates recognizes a distinction between “beliefs” and “enjoyments of the body” and that the latter might be a problem “abstention” is intended to solve, but he does not explain the distinction or develop an interpretation in terms of it.

One reason to think this is his point is that over time as human beings experience pleasure or pain, especially intense pleasure or pain, it is a matter of common thought that they develop likings and dislikings for the objects of the experiences. As, for example, someone gains experience in eating different kinds of foods, he naturally develops likings for some and dislikings for others. Such likings and dislikings are not beliefs about what is good and bad. They are intentional states whose contents are how much one likes or dislikes something, such as eating a kind of “food,” drinking a kind of “drink”, or engaging in a kind of “sex” (64d3, 64d4, 64d6).⁴² So, on the Platonic interpretation, because the soul had various pleasurable and painful experiences before philosophy took possession of it, the soul developed a set of likings and dislikings that guide it in the choices it makes.

If this is right, the rest of Socrates’ explanation goes through almost exactly as it does on the ascetic interpretation. When philosophy takes possession of his soul, the philosopher realizes that he previously formed false beliefs when he experienced pleasure and pain. At this point in Socrates’ explanation, however, contrary to the ascetic interpretation, the philosopher abandons all of these beliefs that he formed previously, as is rational, because he now knows that the forms are most clear and real and that his life is good to the extent he spends his time in contemplation of them.

This alone, though, does not solve the problem of the “body and its desires”. On the Platonic interpretation, these desires do not continue to arise from beliefs the philosopher formed on the basis of his past experiences of pleasure and pain. Instead, they arise from the likings and dislikings he developed on the basis of his past experiences of pleasure and pain. The philosopher abandoned the beliefs when philosophy took possession of his soul, but because the likings and dislikings he developed continue to guide his life, the philosopher needs to recondition himself to change the likings and dislikings and thus to remove the remaining “rivets” that fasten him to his old ways.

The methods the philosopher uses are the same as in the ascetic interpretation. If he resists the desire that arises when he sees an opportunity to engage in an activity he came to

⁴² For a theoretical discussion of likings and dislikings, and how these intentional states fit into human cognition and rationality more generally, see John Pollock, *Thinking about Acting – Logical Foundations for Rational Decision Making*, Oxford University Press, 2006, 38-66.

like through past experiences of pleasure, and so does not experience the pleasure because he does not engage in the activity, the liking diminishes because it is not reinforced. In his resisting the desires and in his imagining negative consequences⁴³ of the activities, the philosopher aims for a life of the sort the historical Socrates seems to have lived because the philosopher thinks that this life has the virtues of character necessary for the leisure required to live in contemplation of the forms.⁴⁴ In this life, he has replaced the likings and dislikings he developed before philosophy took possession of his soul with new ones and thus has solved the problem of the “body and its desires” to the extent possible while he is alive. Now desires no longer arise for the pleasures of “fine clothes and shoes” and other such things that dominated his life before philosophy took possession of his soul.⁴⁵ He thus lives in a way that appears to non-philosophers to reflect an indifference to experiences of pleasure and pain.

So the ascetic interpretation is not the only possible way to read Socrates’ explanation of what happens in the soul before and after philosophy takes possession of it. It is also possible to read the explanation so that he uses a distinction between beliefs, on the one hand, and likings and dislikings, on the other. On this Platonic interpretation, the character does not

⁴³ Cf. the “Tips From Former Smokers” campaign. To help smokers break the habit and to prevent non-smokers from acquiring it, the campaign features in graphic images the horrific “stories of former smokers living with smoking-related diseases and disabilities and the toll these conditions have taken on them” (<https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/campaign/tips/about/index.html>). The campaign intends these images to help smokers change their behavior in a way belief in the evidence that smoking contributes to various diseases does not. The belief or even the knowledge that smoking is bad for them is not itself enough for them to stop. They must recondition themselves, and the campaign uses the gruesome images in their ads to “communicate in a very human way” that smoking is bad for one’s health (<https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/campaign/tips/about/faq/campaign-faq.html>).

⁴⁴ Cf. Jones & Marechal 2019. “[T]he goal is to clear as much space as possible for the pursuit of knowledge” (90) and “to maintain our full attention on the pursuit of knowledge” (92).

⁴⁵ In the *Symposium*, Alcibiades reports that during the campaign at Potidaea, when the cold sent others to “wrap themselves in an amazing number of garments and put on shoes and tie up their feet in felt and sheepskins,” Socrates went out in the clothes he always wore (220a-b). This suggests that Socrates, as a philosopher, has taken control of his life in such a way that he does not have the desire that drove his fellow soldiers to take such elaborate precautions to avoid the cold. Alcibiades also reports that Socrates once stood at dawn thinking and continued thinking through the night (220c-d). This too suggests that for Socrates, as a philosopher, desires that would arise in many do not arise in him. He has solved the problem of the “body and its desires” to give himself leisure for philosophy.

have the conception of belief that some commentators seem to think and that Frede suggests for historical Socrates. He does think some experiences can produce beliefs in the absence of reasoning.⁴⁶ This can happen with experiences of pleasure and pain. Over time, when someone experiences pleasure and pain, he develops certain likings and dislikings. These likings and dislikings are not beliefs, but if someone has no reason to think otherwise, it is rational for him to form beliefs both about the reality of the objects he takes to be involved in the experiences he likes or dislikes and about the value of these experiences.

It is not true, however, to use Frede's words to express the point, that these beliefs are immune to "pure rational argument". When philosophy takes possession of his soul, the philosopher rejects the beliefs he formed previously when he experienced pleasure and pain. He realizes that these beliefs are false and thus he abandons them as rationality requires, but if he is to have the leisure necessary to live in contemplation of the forms, he knows he must also change the likings and dislikings he has developed. It is these likings and dislikings, not the beliefs he formed, that are not revisable in argument alone. He realizes he acquired them in a kind of conative conditioning from his experiences of pleasure and pain, and so he knows that he must recondition himself to change them.

The ascetic interpretation, then, has a competitor. In this competing Platonic interpretation of what happens in the soul, the conception of belief Frede suggests for the historical Socrates is not part of the explanation for the ascetic life that the character Socrates associates with the philosopher. This interpretation of the explanation is possible because the psychology in the Platonic interpretation is not intellectualist. Without this premise, it is possible to explain the "remarkable degree of asceticism" that characterizes the life of the philosopher in terms of what, on philosophical grounds, can seem to be a more plausible conception of belief than the one Frede suggests for the historical Socrates. Intellectualism collapses the distinction between beliefs and likings and dislikings. This, in turn, forces one to think that if, on the basis of their experiences of pleasure and pain, human beings develop states that motivate certain habitual behaviors, then some beliefs and the control human

⁴⁶ Cf. Christopher Bobonich, *Plato's Utopia Recast. His Later Ethics and Politics*. Oxford University Press, 2002, 25-26. See also Kamtekar 2006: 171-172.

beings have over them are “a matter of our pattern of behavior and the control we have over our behavior”.

It is conceivable of course that the ascetic interpretation is the more plausible interpretation, but to demonstrate that it is, the argument must be more than that in the *Phaedo* Socrates accepts intellectualism because he does not argue that the soul has a rational and two non-rational parts like the character does in the *Republic*. In the *Republic*, the character has a reason to give this argument. He wants to show that just as a certain arrangement of the three parts of a city constitutes justice in a city, so too a certain arrangement of the three parts of a soul constitutes justice in a soul. In the *Phaedo*, since Socrates does not have this reason, it is not surprising he does not give this argument.

Even if this is right, one might still argue that it is telling against the Platonic interpretation that Socrates does not clearly indicate that the psychology in his explanation of what happens in the soul is not intellectualist. One might think that Plato understood that the historical Socrates lived as he did because he thought some beliefs are a matter of “our pattern of behavior”. So, in the *Phaedo*, when the character Socrates explains why the philosopher lives as he does, one might think that Plato would make him indicate any departure from the conception of belief the historical Socrates held.

To this, there are two responses. First of all, it is possible that Socrates does indicate that the psychology in his explanation is not intellectualist. This is one way to read his claim that before philosophy takes possession of soul, each pleasure and pain “fastens it to the body” in such a way that it has “the same beliefs as the body” and that “it enjoys the same things” as the body. It is true that he does not interrupt his discussion to explain that the distinction he has in mind is between beliefs, on the one hand, and likings and dislikings, on the other, and that this distinction has the consequence that the psychology he accepts is not intellectualist. This indication, then, would not be as obvious as the argument for the parts of the soul in the *Republic*, but it may be in the text nevertheless.

Secondly, there is nothing to show that Plato was concerned that readers of the *Phaedo* correctly understand what the historical Socrates thought. It is possible that his aim was

philosophical, not historical.⁴⁷ If this is right, then when Plato makes the character Socrates explain what happens in the soul before and after philosophy takes possession of it, his aim is not to help his readers understand why the historical Socrates lived in the way he did. His aim is to work out the significance that the “remarkable degree of asceticism” in the historical Socrates’ life has for the Platonic conception of the good life in terms of the contemplation of the forms. Plato need not have thought that he had to work out this significance in terms of the truth of intellectualism or that he needs to make the character Socrates explicitly say that intellectualism is false if he does not work it out in this way.⁴⁸

6. Conclusion

So although the ascetic interpretation is possible and connects the historical Socrates to the Stoics in an intriguing way, the evidence is too weak to rule out the Platonic interpretation. The ascetic interpretation requires that the psychology in Socrates’ explanation in the *Phaedo* is intellectualist. Socrates, however, does not tell or ever indicate to his interlocutors that the psychology is intellectualist, and it is unnecessary to think that Plato would have felt compelled to make him inform his interlocutors if he did not accept intellectualism. Further, there is a straightforward way to understand Socrates’ explanation of what happens in the soul in terms of a psychology that is not intellectualist. This is the Platonic interpretation. On this interpretation of his explanation, Socrates uses a distinction between beliefs and likings and dislikings. If this is right, then in the *Phaedo* the character

⁴⁷ Long 1998: 119 endorses this general view of how to understand the dialogues. “Socrates is generally the vehicle or personified representation of his author’s methodology and philosophical ideals. <...> [And in] using Socrates as his philosophical vehicle, Plato is also commenting on and interpreting *the significance for philosophy of Socrates’ life*”. Cf. Matthews 2009: 440.

⁴⁸ Butler 2019: 165 maintains that “[i]f it were possible for concurrently held beliefs to be overridden by bodily desires, we would expect Socrates to mention this possibility both because it would constitute an obvious threat to philosophical practice and because it would fit naturally within the theme of the imprisoning power of bodily desires.” It is unclear, though, why the reader should expect Socrates to interrupt his discussion to “mention” the “obvious”. Rather, the argument must be that to prevent readers from misunderstanding the explanation of what happens in the soul, Plato would make the character Socrates say that intellectualism is false because Plato thinks that they expect the character to think intellectualism is true. It may be that many modern readers do have this expectation about Socrates in the *Phaedo*, but I doubt there is justification for this expectation in the text.

Socrates does not have the conception of belief Michael Frede thinks that the historical Socrates is likely to have held and the Stoics much later incorporated in their doctrine of practice. It does not follow that Frede is wrong about the historical Socrates and the Stoics, but it does follow that Socrates's explanation in the *Phaedo* is not strong evidence for Frede's interpretation.⁴⁹

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⁴⁹ I am grateful to Francesca Alesse, Travis Butler, David McElhoes, William Stephens, and Robert Wardy for discussion of several historical and philosophical issues related to my interpretation of Socrates' explanation. Butler in particular was very patient, and I remain unsure that I have successfully answered the many objections he put to an earlier version of this paper.

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