

In the Platonic corpus there is only one major discussion which treats comedy at any length separately from tragedy, and at the same time makes the phenomena of laughter and the ridiculous co-thematic. This discussion occurs in the *Philebus*, at a major juncture in the dialogue, which links the consideration of comedy to an ongoing consideration of pleasure and pain, knowledge and ignorance, and the nature of the good life. I propose to explore this discussion with the goal of understanding the apparent inconsistency of Plato's own frequent use of the comedic and condemnation of comedy.

Comedy in the *Philebus* is condemned not because it is mimetic (as in the *Republic*), but because it is malicious, as malice in turn is condemned for its unjust co-mingling of pleasure and pain. Malicious laughter occurs in conjunction with the spectacle of the ridiculous, which is defined in opposition to the Delphic command "Know Thyself." Hence, malicious comedy is grounded in self-ignorance and foolishness, both that of the ridiculed and, as it turns out, of the ridiculer. This interpretation of comedy casts attention at once on Socrates, the figure who famously strives to fulfill the Delphic command. The opposition between the self-knowledge of the Socratic philosopher and the self-ignorance of the malicious comedian echoes and reinforces the fundamental opposition between the dialogical seeker of wisdom and the eristical seeker of pleasure – the philosopher versus the hedonist – with which the dialogue begins, and around which the entire conversation about the nature of the good is formed. What appears to be a self-contained excursus about the comedic is in fact a deepening of the ongoing debate about the good life, with its contrasting extremes vividly represented by the characters themselves of the dialogue, as well as their explicitly stated positions.

But Socrates is not simply set in opposition to laughter and the comedic. Significantly, he twice mocks himself in the dialogue, both at the beginning and end of the most somber metaphysical exposition of the dialogue. In addition, he pokes fun at Philebus, and in bringing Protarchus, his principle interlocutor after Philebus' early exit from the conversation, perpetually into *aporia*, appears himself to be mimicking the mocker's humiliation of others by exposing their self-ignorance. How to explain these actions? Philebus is a hopeless case, to be defeated as quickly and efficaciously as possible, to enable constructive dialogue with Protarchus. Inducing *aporia* in Protarchus has as its end the philosophical growth of the latter, in stark contrast to the end of simple defeat and diminishment found in malicious ridicule, and in spite of Protarchus' own ultimate unsuitability for philosophy. Mocking and humiliation take on a very different cast when used to philosophical ends: the end of reorientation to the task of knowing oneself. Similarly, laughter is called for precisely at the moments of greatest philosophical solemnity in order to remind oneself and others of human limitation and the need for humility in the quest for cosmic enlightenment. Laughter is most of all appropriate when directed towards *oneself*. As the *Philebus* suggests, the philosopher laughs, both at himself and others, out of playfulness in recognition of the limits of philosophical seriousness, irony in recognition of the limits of his own task in the face of human limitations, and also, joy at the creative act of living at the highest level – in the terms of the *Philebus*, at the mingling of pleasure and thought in the forging of a harmonious human life. In sum, we should understand the significance of laughter and the comedic in Plato, both his use and treatment thereof, through the lens of the fundamental philosophical importance of laughter, and the need, consequently, to integrate laughter into human life in the best way. In a word, the redemption of laughter, as of mimesis, lies in its becoming *philosophical*.