Pleasure, Pain, and Calm: A Puzzling Argument at Republic 583e1-8

At Republic 583c3-585a7 Socrates develops an argument to show that irrational men misperceive calm as pleasant. Let's call this the "misperception argument." This paper discusses an argument that arises within the misperception argument. This sub-argument, I will call "the puzzling argument." My objective here is to dissolve the puzzling features of the puzzling argument.

In order to explain the puzzling argument, it is necessary to begin with the initial steps of the misperception argument. Socrates initiates the misperception argument by distinguishing three things: pain (λύπη), pleasure (ηδονή), and the condition of neither having pleasure nor being pained (τὸ μὴ ἔχειν χαίρειν μὴ ἔσθαι):

(1) Pain (λύπη) is the opposite of pleasure (ηδονή).
(2) There is a condition of neither having pleasure nor being pained (τὸ μὴ ἔχειν χαίρειν μὴ ἔσθαι).

Socrates then clarifies the nature of the condition of neither having pleasure nor being pained and its relation to pleasure and pain:

(3) <the condition of neither having pleasure nor being pained,> which is in the middle between both of these, <namely, pleasure and pain,> is a certain calm of the soul (ἡσυχία ... τῆς ψυχῆς) in relation to them (περὶ ταῦτα) <again, pleasure and pain>.

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1 R. 583c3-4.
2 I take it that Socrates treats "χαίρειν" and "ηδεσθαι" as equivalent.
3 R. 583c5-6.
4 R. 583c7-9.
It is unclear what Socrates means by claiming that the condition of neither having pleasure nor being pained is "in the middle between both of these," (μεταξὺ τούτων ἀμφῶν ἐν μέσῳ), namely, pain and pleasure. He might mean that during a process in which there is a transition from pain to pleasure or vice versa, the condition of neither having pleasure nor being pained intervenes. Alternatively, he might mean that on some dimension, the condition of neither having pleasure nor being pained related to the poles of pleasure and pain as a midpoint. In that case, we would like to know what dimension Socrates has in mind. In the absence of further evidence, I propose temporarily to leave the meaning of this aspect of (3) undetermined.

In (3) Socrates also refers to the condition of neither having pleasure nor being pained as a certain "calm" (ἡσυχία) in relation to (περί) pain and pleasure. I take this to imply that pleasure and pain are both conditions of absence of calm. Precisely how we should understand absence of calm is questionable. For example, perhaps Socrates understands pleasure and pain to be conditions of agitation. I will return to this question below. Hereafter I will also refer to the condition of neither having pleasure nor being pained as "calm."  

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Socrates also indicates that calm is psychic: it is a condition "of the soul." This is significant for interpreting Socrates' conception of pain and pleasure. It would be odd for Socrates to conceive calm as psychic, but not to conceive of pain and pleasure as psychic. Accordingly, we should assume that Socrates conceives of all three conditions as psychic. This in turns raises the question how we should understand the condition of calm as a psychic condition. Is Socrates referring to what the experience of calm is like? Or is Socrates referring to an objective condition of the psyche: the psyche's being at rest? At this point in the argument no evidence indicates which interpretation to prefer or whether Socrates would distinguish between the two. These considerations, which bear on the interpretation of the misperception argument, do not, however, figure in my interpretation of the puzzling argument.
The first step of the misperception argument thus begins with these—let us call them—basic distinctions between pain, pleasure, and calm. At once, however, Socrates draws attention to events that appear to undermine these distinctions:

(4) Sick men say (λέγουσιν) that being healthy is most pleasant (ἡδίστον).⁶

(5) In general, men who are in extreme pain (περιώδυνία) say (λέγοντων) that nothing is more pleasant (οὐδὲν ἡδιόν) than the cessation of being in pain (ὁδυνώμενον).⁷

In both (4) and (5) men who are in pain claim that the states of health and cessation of pain are pleasant. It is clear from the ensuing argument that Socrates himself views the states of health and cessation of pain as states of calm rather than pleasure. Thus, Socrates understands pained men as claiming that calm is most pleasant. He continues:

(6) And in many other circumstances, men who are in pain (λυπώνται) praise not being in pain (τὸ μὴ λυπεῖσθαι) and the calm (ἡσυχία) following pain as most pleasant (ἡδίστον), rather than <praising> having pleasure (χαίρειν) <as most pleasant>.⁸

The claim of pained men that cessation of pain is even more pleasant than having pleasure is ostensibly self-contradictory. But I take their claim to mean that cessation of pain is more pleasant than salient sorts of pleasure, for example, pleasures associated with eating, drinking, and sex. Pained men's praise of cessation of pain challenges

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⁶ R. 583c10-d1.
⁷ R. 583d3-5. Note also that in (5) Socrates does not simply generalize his claim in (4) by broadening the scope of those in pain from sick people to all others in pain. Socrates also clarifies the condition on which he is focusing by referring to the extreme pain (περιώδυνία). Relief from extreme pain, in particular, is said to be pleasant.
⁸ R. 583d6-9.
Socrates' basic distinctions, and the ostensible conflict between these positions invites resolution. Glaucon offers the following:

(7) "Perhaps on this occasion (τότε), <namely, when calm follows pain, calm> becomes (γίγνεται) pleasant (ηδόν) and beloved."9

Glaucon's response assumes that the claims of pained men are true, that is, that calm following pain is indeed pleasant. And this implies that Socrates' basic distinctions are indeed false.10

Socrates responds with an argument whose purpose is to show that Glaucon's explanation in (7) is untenable. Socrates' argument is the puzzling argument, whose features it is the objective of this paper to dissolve. The puzzling argument is a reductio. It begins by assuming the following premise drawn from the content of the preceding premise-set:

(8) Whenever a man ceases being pained, the calm following the pain will be pleasant.

Given this, by parity of reasoning Socrates suggests that:

(9) Whenever a man ceases having pleasure (χαίρων), the calm following the pleasure (η τῆς ηδονῆς ησυχία) will be painful (λυπηρόν).11

From (8) and (9), Socrates infers:

(10) That which is between both pleasure and pain will at some point (ποτε) be both pleasure and pain.12

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9 R. 583d10-11.
10 Incidentally, it is unclear to me what Glaucon means when he says that on certain occasions calm "becomes" (γίγνεται) pleasant. So even if Glaucon's claim were true, some exegetical work on this point would be welcome.
11 R. 583e1-3.
Yet, he insists:

(11) It is impossible for that which is neither <pleasure nor pain> to become both <pleasure and pain>.\(^\text{13}\)

Thus, Glaucon's explanation at (7) is untenable. Precisely, Socrates maintains that (8) and (9) are false.

Socrates' argument is puzzling in at least two respects. First, it is puzzling how Socrates can derive (10) from the conjunction of (8) and (9). (8) and (9) claim that under certain conditions calm is "pleasant" or "painful," but in (10) Socrates infers that under certain conditions calm is "pleasure" or "pain." Thus, Socrates appears to conflate predication and identity.\(^\text{14}\) Second, it is puzzling what justifies Socrates' assertion of (11), namely, that it is impossible for what is neither pleasure nor pain to become both pleasure and pain. Is Socrates committed to either one of the following principles?

(P1) It is impossible for not-\(F\) to become \(F\).

(P2) It is impossible for what is neither \(F\) nor the opposite of \(F\) to become both \(F\) and the opposite of \(F\).

Let's consider (P1) and (P2) in turn. (P1) makes sense insofar as "\(F\)" is taken to refer to a universal or type, conceived realistically as opposed to nominalistically: universals or types so conceived do not change. Thus, (11) does follow from (P1). However, it then becomes difficult to see what function (9) and (10) serve in the argument. Given (P1), (8) suffices to undermine Glaucon's explanation. In other words, Socrates could merely argue

\(^{12}\) R. 583e4-6.

\(^{13}\) R. 583e4-8.

\(^{14}\) It would be strange for Socrates to make such a mistake. In Gorgias, when Polus answers Socrates' question "What is rhetoric?" by saying that it is the finest of the arts, Socrates criticizes him for saying what it is like (\(\piοi\alpha\)) rather than what (\(\tauι\zeta\)) it is. (Grg. 448e6-7)
that it is impossible for what is not pleasure, namely, calm, to become pleasure.

Consequently, it seems that if Socrates' assertion of (11) depends upon either (P1) or (P2), it depends upon (P2). On the other hand, it is hard to see what substantive logical work (P2) does beyond (P1). (P1) is all that is needed for (11). This is simply because (P2) is a conjunction of two interpretations of (P1), one in which \( F \) stands for one of a pair of opposites, for example, pleasure, and the other in which \( F \) stands for the other member of the pair, for example, pain.

Given this, our second puzzle turns out to consist of two puzzles that are closely interrelated. One is what justifies Socrates' assertion of (11). The other is why Socrates argues against Glaucon's explanation in (7) using the conjunction of (8) and (9) as opposed to using merely (8).

Let's return to the problem of the conflation of predication and identity. What if we introduce indefinite articles into (10), thus rendering (10) as:

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(10r) \quad \text{That which is between both pleasure and pain will at some point be both a pleasure and a pain.}
\]

The inference of (10r) from (8) and (9) now makes better sense: in certain contexts a given condition instantiates pleasure and thus is pleasant; in certain other contexts that condition instantiates pain and thus is painful. Given this, we should also emend (11) by adding indefinite articles:

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(11r) \quad \text{It is impossible for that which is neither pleasure nor pain to become both a pleasure and a pain.}
\]
This solves the first puzzle.\textsuperscript{15}

Let's turn now to our closely interrelated second and third puzzles. I grant that (11r) may depend upon some more general principle, but before attempting to determine what that principle is, let's attend to the subject of (10r). Socrates describes the subject precisely as follows: "What we just now said was between both <pleasure and pain>, calm" (ἀμφοτέρων ἔφαμεν εἶναι, τὴν ἡσυχίαν).\textsuperscript{16} That is, Socrates uses the word "calm," but he also reminds Glaucon that calm is between pleasure and pain. Recall Socrates' emphatic statement of this in (3): "the condition of neither having pleasure nor being pained.> which is in the middle between both of these, <again, pleasure and pain>." I suggest that Socrates' reminder of this point in (10r) is important. Clearly, there are many things that are neither $F$ nor the opposite of $F$ that can instantiate $F$ and the opposite of $F$ in different circumstances. For example, the act-type of giving a person an apple, which is not justice or injustice, can be just in certain circumstances and unjust in other circumstances. However, giving a person an apple is not— I presume— "in the middle between" justice and injustice in the sense in which Socrates intends this phrase here.\textsuperscript{17} Yet in (3) Socrates emphatically states that calm is in the middle between pleasure and pain.

As we noted above, it is unclear precisely what Socrates means when he says that calm is in the middle between pleasure and pain. Assume, following the second of the two possible interpretations suggested above, that calm is in the middle between pleasure

\textsuperscript{15} I emphasize that this charitable interpretation, which is consistent with the Greek, is most likely not an accurate interpretation of the argument. I think that Socrates employs (10) and (11) in the argument, not (10r) and (11r). Thus, Socrates' argument is problematic in this respect.
\textsuperscript{16} R. 583e4-5.
\textsuperscript{17} I will clarify why I suppose this momentarily.
and pain in the sense that all three essentially stand in certain fixed relations in a single
dimension, and specifically that calm is situated between the poles of pleasure and pain in
this dimension. In that case, what is in the middle cannot be at either pole because the
relations in which the entities stand in this dimension are essential. In other words, calm
is necessarily between pleasure and pain in this dimension.

My talk of pleasure, pain, and calm situated and essentially related in a dimension
is informed by Socrates' own talk in the ensuing broader misperception argument. At
584d1-585a7 Socrates uses the analogy of spatial positions to characterize the distinction
and relations among pleasure, pain, and calm. On a vertical line segment, the high point
is analogous to pleasure; the midpoint is analogous to calm; and the low point is
analogous to pain. Socrates does not clarify the nature of the dimension in which
pleasure, pain, and calm are situated. For convenience, we may offer Socrates the
following description: pleasure, pain, and calm are situated in the dimension of
affectivity.

Granting this, let us return to the suggestion that the puzzling argument has no
logical need for (9) and (10) or (10r). On that view, the puzzling argument needs only the
following weaker version of (11r):

(11w) It is impossible for what is not pleasure to become a pleasure.

However, this is not entirely true. Just as it is possible for the act-type of giving a person
an apple to instantiate justice or injustice, it may be possible for some entity E that is not
pleasure to become a pleasure, so long as E is not essentially situated within the
dimension of affectivity. Given this, Socrates could indeed dispense with (9) and (10) or
(10r), but only so long as he emended (11) or (11r) to something stronger than (11w) such as:

(11s) It is impossible for what is not pleasure, but is essentially situated in the dimension of affectivity, to become pleasure.

But given this, it should now be easier to appreciate why Socrates does in fact construct the puzzling argument using (9) and (10) or (10r) as well as (11) or (11r): the clause "but is essentially situated in the dimension of affectivity" is doing a lot of theoretical work. My suggestion is that (9)-(11) or (9)-(11r) are doing similar, if less explicitly theoretically sophisticated, work.

Precisely, the use of (9)-(11) or (9)-(11r) serves to emphasize Socrates' point that calm is essentially situated in the same dimension as pain and pleasure and that the relations between these entities within this dimension are fixed.

This, then, resolves the closely interrelated second and third puzzles of the puzzling argument. And with these resolutions we have dissolved the puzzling features of the puzzling argument.18

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18 My account of Socrates' puzzling argument differs from that of James Butler, "On Whether Pleasure's Esse is Percipi: Rethinking Republic 583b-585a," Ancient Philosophy 19 (1999) 285-98. Butler takes the claims of pained and pleased men about quietude, his word for calm, to be predictions of future states. Butler suggests that the impossibility expressed in (11) results from the fact that one can make contrary and thus unrealizable predictions: 'How then can we make sense of Socrates' claim that the quietude will sometimes \((\pio\tau\epsilon)\) be both pleasure and pain? … Since predictions about the future state of quietude … generate the idea that the quietude will be both pleasure and pain, it might be that people sometimes make rival predictions about the same future quietude. Take the following situation: on Monday, Pete is sick and believes the sickness will end on Wednesday. So, according to his beliefs about the quietude from pain, Wednesday will be pleasant. Then on Tuesday, Pete enjoys the special attention given to him by his attendant because he is sick (the chicken soup, pillow fluffing, etc.) Pete knows the attendant will leave Wednesday when the sickness abates. Thus, according to his beliefs about the quietude from pleasure, Wednesday will be painful. So according to Pete's
Finally, let us note the following consequence of the preceding resolution. Two paths are potentially available to advance the inquiry. One path, open to Glaucon, would be to defend the pained man by contesting Socrates' basic distinctions. In particular, Glaucon could demand justification of Socrates' initial assertions that pleasure, pain, and calm are essentially situated in a set of fixed relations in a single dimension. The other path, to which Socrates has some obligation, is to explain why pained men tend to make the false claims they do. As the broader argument in fact ensues, Glaucon concedes Socrates' basic distinctions and Socrates proceeds to explain the confusion of the pained man, who is equivalent to the irrational man. Socrates' explanation is that the pained, irrational man misperceives calm as pleasant.¹⁹

¹⁹ I am grateful to Richard Parry for discussing the puzzling argument with me.