Virtue Ethics and Metaphysics in Plato's *Republic*

Contemporary virtue ethics, like its ancient ancestor, is based on claims about the good life. However, in the modern version, these claims usually lack any grounding in metaphysics. Rather, virtue ethics tends to rest on hopeful appeals to common intuitions about good ways to live.[1] In this paper I wish to show one way in which Plato's metaphysical theory is used to surprising advantage in a particular area of the moral life. Passion and desire are often the sources of delusion in immoral actions. It is not just that one's reasons for committing the act prove wrong but that they come to seem illusory. We say that one's reasoning was clouded because the pleasure so ardently desired was exaggerated in the anticipation. Then, in comparison with the consequences of the act, the anticipated pleasure is so insubstantial that its anticipation seems like a dissipated dream. The lesson, then, is that virtue requires an insight that pierces these shadows and images in order to avoid or dismiss illusions caused by desire. In the *Republic* we find that this sort of insight is a result of knowing the real as it is.

The *Republic* has a fundamental structural oddity. In Book 4, Socrates presents the preliminary account of virtue in the soul. Then, in the central books, he presents the outline of the metaphysical and epistemological theory that is meant to complete the account of virtue (504a-e). However, at that point in the dialogue, the relation between the account of virtue and the theory is left hanging.[2] After all, such an important development as the theory of forms might be supposed to have something to do with the other theoretical advance, the account of virtues. Yet one waits impatiently while Socrates sketches an account of the way the knowledge of the forms equips the philosophers to become rulers in the city (484b ff). Of course, adapting the theory of the

central books to the account of virtue presents several problems, not the least of which involves moral psychology. The knowledge of the real is not relevant to the lower two parts—spirit and appetite—because they cannot share in it.[3] Socrates introduces appetite as non-rational, *alogiston* (439d). This description implies that it is unable to calculate or reason—to make distinctions or draw conclusions—precisely what is needed to share in the knowledge of the real; the spirit is no better equipped.

Then, just at the point where one might despair altogether, at the end of Book 9, Socrates sketches out the relation between knowledge of the forms and virtue. The passage in question is the three-part contest between the philosophical and tyrannical souls to decide which is the happiest. The last two of the three contests extends the theoretical framework of the dialogue with a new account of desire and pleasure. Socrates introduces the idea that each part of the soul has its particular type of desire, the satisfaction of which is its particular type of pleasure (580d). Of particular importance for us is his characterization of the pleasure of reason as that of knowing what is true as it is (*tên tou eidenai talêthes hope(i) exei*) (581d-e) as well as that of contemplating being (*tês de tou ontos theas*) (582d). He will further explain this pleasure and enhance its role in the next section of his argument.

In the next contest, Socrates begins by claiming that pleasures, other than those of the intelligence (*tou phronimou*), are not fully true, pure, but are shadow-painted (*eskiagraphêmenê*) (583b). In what follows he explains how pleasures can be shadow-painted, not pure, and not fully true. Distinguishing between pain, pleasure, and the neutral state or calm (*hêsuchia*) between the two, he argues that the calm state is distinct from pleasure and pain. The reason is that pleasures and pains are motions (later we

learn that pleasure is a filling); the calm is obviously not motion, but the cessation of motion. However, in some circumstances, people can view the calm as pleasurable or painful. While the reader might be tempted to think the illusion is about a present state of calm that is taken to be pleasant, the context implies that this type of illusion is an expectation of pleasure. When he describes these illusions, Socrates refers to beliefs about pleasure. He says that sick men say (*legousin*) that nothing is sweeter than health, that they praise (*egkômiazousin*) freedom from pain as the highest pleasure (583c-d). Later he says that it cannot be right to think (*hêgeisthai*) the absence of pain is pleasure (584a), that those escaping pain intensely believe (*oiontai*) that they are approaching pleasure and fulfillment (585a). Socrates calls this kind of illusion a kind of sorcery (*goêteia*).[4]

By his next move, Socrates underlines that this illusion is an expectation of pleasure that ends in its absence. He claims that Glaucon might be tempted to think that pleasure is by nature release from pain. The idea of release from pain is ambiguous between the state of having been released from pain and the process of being released from pain.[5] Does Socrates mean to show Glaucon that pleasure is not by nature the state of having been released from pain or that pleasure is not by nature a process of release from pain? The first alternative is not plausible because both Socrates and Glaucon have already agreed that the state of having been released from pain is neither a pleasure nor a pain. So there is no need to convince Glaucon of this idea.[6] Finally, he has just said that pleasure and pain are motions, i.e., kinds of process. Then, if pleasure is a process and if he thinks it is by nature release from pain, Glaucon would think that it is by nature a process of release from pain. We should conclude, then, that this argument means to

counter Glaucon's idea that pleasure is by nature a process of release from pain.[7] But what of their preceding argument would have led Glaucon to believe that pleasure is by nature a process of release from pain? If Glaucon believed that the process is by nature one that ends in the neutral state, he might think that pleasure is by nature a process of release from pain. If so, he has clearly taken seriously Socrates' argument that those who expect pleasure at the end of this process will not experience pleasure. Pleasure is just the process of getting rid of pain that ends in the neutral state.

Finally, to counter Glaucon's mistake that pleasure is by nature the process of release form pain, Socrates cites the pleasure of smell, which is not preceded by pain. In talking about what pleasure is by nature, Socrates seems to have two mistakes in mind: (a) pleasure just is a process of release from pain and (b) all pleasure includes a process of release from pain. When he cites the pleasure of smell he has clearly shown (b) to be false. His explicit conclusion is that we should not believe that pure pleasure, *sc*. pleasure not preceded by pain, is (a process of) release from pain. But he seems also to think that he has shown (a) to be false because next he concedes that the most and greatest bodily occurrences called pleasures are *a kind of* release from pain (*lupôn tines apallagai*) (584b-c). The claim seems to be that these bodily pleasures are not just a process of release from pain, i.e., they are pleasures; thus (a) is false. Nevertheless, they are still a kind of process of release from pain. A similar idea is found in the *Gorgias* where bodily pleasure is a simultaneous release from the pain of desire (496c-497d).[8] If so, we can understand how these pleasures are shadow-painted and not pure. Because they are mixed with pain they are like painting which achieves its affect by a contrast between light and dark—where light is the analogue of pleasure and dark is that of pain.[9]

In turn, they are not pure pleasures because they are mixed with their opposite, pain; the mixture causes distortion. How these pleasures are not fully true awaits a further development in this passage.

Next Socrates puts together what he has said about false expectations with the idea that bodily pleasure is mixed with pain. He says that, in being a kind of release from pain, these bodily pleasures resemble anticipatory pleasures and pains (*proêsthêseis te kai prolupêseis*), i.e., pleasures or pains taken in some future pleasant state of affairs. To explain this notion, he uses a spatial analogy that depends on the idea that there is in nature an up, down, and middle. The person who had no experience of the true "up" would think, upon arriving at the middle, that he had ascended to the upper region. Just so, those who have no experience of truth and reality think that, when they are going from pain to the neutral state, they are approaching pleasure—because they have no experience of pleasure (584d-585a). That they have no experience of pleasure means that they lack an understanding of the full range of pleasure. In a few lines we will learn that the upper region is the analogue of pure pleasure (586a). So these inexperienced people do not have first hand experience of pleasure unmixed with pain. While the pain causes them to anticipate pleasure, the lack of experience causes them to mistake the kind of pleasure that they anticipate. According to the spatial analogy, they are like those who think they are arriving at the upper region. Since the analogue of the upper region is pure pleasure, they seem to think they are approaching pure pleasure—just as those approaching the mid-region think they are arriving at the upper-region. This anticipation makes sense if we see bodily pleasure as a process mixed with pain. Ignorant of pure

pleasure, one might think that the cessation of the process would result in the cessation of pain only, leaving unmixed pleasure.

In the next section, the account takes a significantly different tack, into the metaphysics of the central books. Hunger and thirst are emptinesses of the body and ignorance and folly are emptinesses of the soul. Food fills the former and wisdom the latter. The truest filling is either with what is less real or with what is more real (*tou mallon ontos*). To explain, he asks which class of things participates more in pure being (*katharas ousias*)—relish, drink, meat, and all food or true opinion, knowledge, and intelligence (585b-c). Claiming that what clings to what is the same always, to immortality, and to truth is itself of this type and comes to be in something of this type is more real, he concludes that the truest filling is with what is more real (*auto mallon on*). Since true opinion, knowledge, and intelligence fit the description of what is more real, filling the soul with them is the more real filling. Finally, since being filled with what is appropriate to our nature is pleasure:

> (R1) That which is more filled with things that are more enjoys more really and truly a true pleasure, while that which partakes of things that are less is less truly and surely filled and partakes of a less trustworthy and less true pleasure (585d-586a).[10]

So true pleasure is an ontological—not an epistemological—notion; the pleasure is true in that it conforms to a standard for pleasure, i.e., a more real filling of what is more real.

Then Socrates returns to the spatial analogy in order to correlate the metaphysical distinctions with the account he has just given of the illusion of pleasure. He matches the true pleasures of the soul with the pleasures of the upper region and the less true pleasures of the body with the pleasures of the lower region (585b-586b).[11] The

consequence of putting bodily pleasure in the lower region is that the less true pleasures of the body—those mixed with pain—are susceptible to illusion, i.e., they are shadow-painted.

The next section focuses on a particularly potent such illusion. Turning darkly dramatic, the account focuses on people who have no experience of wisdom and virtue and devote themselves to a life of feasting. Their experience of pleasure is limited to ascending to the mid-region—the place of illusions. They have never been filled with the real nor tasted stable and pure pleasure. These he describes as beast-like in their pursuit of food and sex, bending over their banquet tables like grazing cattle. But then his description turns to their violent behavior. Butting with horns and hooves of iron, they kill one another in their attempt to have more than their share (*pleonexia*) of these pleasures. Their outrageous behavior is driven by insatiable appetite (*dia aplêstian*) because, he says, they are filling what is unsound and unreal with what is unreal. Of course, they do not know that they are filling what is unsound and unreal with what is unreal. Rather, they are beguiled by pleasures that are exaggerated by mixture with pain.

> (R2) Is it not necessary for them to live with pleasures (*hêdonais*) mixed with pains (*lupais*), phantoms (*eidôlois*) of true pleasure and shadow-painted (*eskiagraphêmenais*), colored by being next to one another, so that they appear intense and engender mad erotic passions (*erôtas … luttôntas*) for themselves in the foolish and are fought over, just as the phantom (*eidolon*) of Helen, according to Stesichorus, was fought over by those at Troy, through ignorance of the truth? (586a-c).

Socrates has elevated a particularly strong illusion of pleasure—shadow-painted by sharp contrast between pleasure and pain—into the dramatic center of attention. What is developed in this account is the link between a specific psychological state—insatiability—and *pleonexia*, violently grasping for more than their share of food and sex.[12] The link is the phantom of true pleasure.[13]

Since the fundamental illusion in this passage is a false expectation of pleasure, the intense seeming mixture of pleasure and pain—the phantom of true pleasure—creates in the beast-like people an expectation that, when the process of filling the desire ceases, they will experience something that appears to them, under some guise, to be true pleasure. However, it does not matter what the content of their expectation actually is, i.e., what they think true pleasure is; they will be disappointed because what follows the cessation of filling desire is calm, the neutral state. Given their expectation, the experience would have to be disappointing. Yet the strength of the phantom is such that, when the desire for true pleasure is not fulfilled, the expectation is not killed. The failure to achieve true pleasure only leads the beast-like to try harder, thinking that more food and sex will finally fulfill their desire for what they think of as true pleasure.

So far we have seen how the lack of the knowledge of the real has deleterious effects in the soul. Next, Socrates shows how having this knowledge brings with it virtue. Here, Socrates at last fills the lacuna that, up until this point, has left the account of virtues detached from the metaphysical and epistemological theory. First of all, he modifies the earlier account of wisdom as reason's ruling with knowledge of what is beneficial for the parts to include what he has just said about pleasure (442c). Referring to the desires of the gain-loving part of the soul (his general way of referring to the bodily

desires for food, drink, and sex) and of the victory-loving part, i.e., the spirited part, he says:

> (R3) … these desires, following knowledge and reason (*tê(i) epistêmê(i) kai logô(i) hepomenai*) and, in conjunction with them, pursuing (*diôkousai*) those pleasures that the wise part (*to phronimon*) prescribes, would attain (*lambanôsi*) (them) and will receive the truest pleasures insofar as they can receive true pleasures, since they are following the truth. These are also the pleasures proper for them if the best for each of them is the most proper (586d-e).[14]

While the account in Book 4 does not specify what is beneficial for the parts, (R3) specifies what is best for each as "the truest pleasures insofar as they can receive true pleasure." This carefully constructed phrase obviously depends on the distinction between pleasures previously introduced. Since, in the previous part of this passage, knowledge is knowledge of the real—i.e., filling the emptiness of the soul with the real—we should conclude that (R3) is referring to the same knowledge. In turn, since knowledge of the real is true pleasure, it implies knowing the difference between true and less true pleasure. In the soul which knows this distinction, the phantom of true pleasure would be unbelievable because exposed as an illusion. Reason, guided by this knowledge, would countenance only pleasures that are not obscured by such illusions. In turn, bodily desires would pursue such pleasures, and thus receive "the truest pleasures insofar as they can receive true pleasure." While these pleasures are true epistemologically in that they are unmixed with illusions, they are not true in the ontological sense in that they are bodily. They are epistemologically true in a category of ontologically less true pleasures.

Socrates also modifies the definition of moderation and justice, introducing true and less true pleasures into the account.

> (R4) Then, since the whole soul follows the wisdom-loving part and does not rebel against (*stasiazousês*) it, it belongs to each of the parts to do its own and to be just (*ta heautou prattein kai dikaiô(i) einai*), and, in particular, for each to enjoy its own pleasure (*tas hêdonas tas heautou*), the best for it, and the truest insofar as that is possible (586e-587a).

In Book 4, moderation is each part sharing in the belief that reason should rule and the other two not rebelling against (*stasiazôsin*) reason (442d). By contrast, (R4) shows that it is with respect to pleasure that the whole soul follows the wisdom-loving part and does not rebel against it. Next (R4) recalls the definition of justice in Book 4—when each part does its own with respect to ruling and being ruled (443d). However, in (R4), justice is doing one's own with respect to pleasure. The consequence is that the rule talked about in Book 4 is established by reason's controlling the pleasures of the non-rational parts. This it does by stripping their pleasures of illusion so that they are as true as possible. Reason thereby makes illusion-free, less true pleasure the only ones plausible for them.

This destructive impact on illusion is the burden of the spatial analogy at 584d. The analogy applies to the beast-like people and the plausibility of their expectations. The phantom of true pleasure is the analogue of the pleasure the inexperienced expect when they approach what is really the neutral state, i.e., mid-region. Like the inexperienced, the beast-like are susceptible to phantoms of true pleasure because they have no experience of the true pleasure of knowing the real; they have never ascended to the upper region. By contrast, the analogy implies that someone with this experience

would never be fooled into thinking that bodily pleasure—even the intense mixture of pleasure and pain—would end in true pleasure. Approaching the cessation of this mixture of pleasure and pain, she would expect the neutral state, the calm that is neither pleasure nor pain.[15]

In this passage from Book 9, we find a schema for solving the problem of the relation between the account of virtues in the soul and the metaphysics of the central books. The solution takes the indirect route of connecting the knowledge of the real with the non-rational parts of the soul by means of pleasure. The virtues amount to lucidity about pleasure that depends on knowing the difference between true pleasure and less true pleasure; it has three aspects. First, it recognizes that all pleasures, true and less true, end in the neutral state. Second, it exposes illusions about bodily pleasure. Third, it puts bodily pleasure in its proper place, so to speak. Vice in the soul is the rule by one of the non-rational parts, based on pretensions about the supreme value of the pleasure of that part. However, lucidity nullifies these pretensions by showing that their pleasures are less true than those of the rational part. One then does not expect from filling bodily desire anything more than a limited and not fully satisfying pleasure that ends in the neutral state. True pleasure is reserved for knowing the real, which happens on a higher plain.

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[1] Cp. the chapters on naturalism (Chap. 9 and 10) in Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[2] At 500c-d Socrates says that the philosopher will imitate the harmony of the forms and will bring order into his soul. However, he does not explain how the philosopher will imitate the forms—especially whether the imitation is automatic or whether it requires effort.

[3] This problem is another version of a more general one: how rational are the lower parts of the soul? According to one line of interpretation, appetite is capable of means-ends calculation with respect to fulfilling its various desires. In the light of these calculations, it can appreciate that reason knows better how to achieve satisfaction for it and can even form a second order desire to follow reason. Cp. Terence Irwin (*Plato's Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) 218-222).

[4] This reading of the illusion in *Republic* 9 accords with a recurrent theme in the dialogues about illusory expectations of future pleasures. In the *Protagoras* Socrates relates another such illusion, but one based on a visual analogy. The same sized object appears larger when nearby and smaller when farther away. Socrates suggests that temporally closer pleasure, though of the same size as a temporally distant one, can seem bigger. The remedy that will render the appearance without effect is the measuring craft (356c-e). The visual analogy is also found in the *Philebus* (41d-42c). Since in both the analogue of distance is time, Socrates is talking about anticipating future pleasures (or pains) while being in a state of pleasure (or pain). Although the dimension of time is used in these three accounts of illusion, the *Protagoras* and *Philebus* differ from the *Republic*. In the first two, time alone seems to be the cause of the false expectation and the false expectation is about the relative size of the pleasure (or pain). Present pleasure just seems greater than future pain because it is closer in time while the pain is distant in

time. However, in the *Republic*, not just time but the contrast with pain creates the illusion that there will be pleasure; but, in fact, there will be neither pleasure nor pain. No wonder, then, that Socrates calls this illusion sorcery (*goêteia*).

[5] Gosling and Taylor charge that the account of bodily pleasure in this entire passage is plagued by the failure "to distinguish escape from pain as the condition of having escaped, from escape as the process of escaping." J.C.B. Gosling and C.W.W. Taylor, *The Greeks on Pleasure* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982) 114.

[6] Perhaps Socrates means something other than what he says, i.e., that pleasure is not by nature *the illusion created by* the cessation from pain. First of all, in claiming that pleasure and pain are motions, he implies that pleasure is not by nature illusory. Moreover, the subsequent argument is not about the illusion of pleasure.

[7] If we think of illness as a disruption of the harmony of one's physical nature, as in the *Philebus*, the process of restoration would be pleasant (31b-32e; 43d-44a).

[8] While the idea that bodily pleasure is associated with release from pain is not explicitly asserted by Socrates in this passage, it is an idea that is found in the dialogue. When the account of bodily appetite (*epithumiai*) is introduced in Book 4, Socrates says the appetitive part (*epithumêtikon*) is associated with fillings and pleasures (*plêrôseôn kai hêdonôn*) (439d-e). Later in Books 8 and 9, Socrates makes the account of appetites more complex. First, he distinguishes between necessary and unnecessary appetites. The former are beneficial and cannot be gotten rid of; the latter are harmful and can be gotten rid of (558e-559a). Second, he distinguishes within unnecessary appetites a type called outlaw appetites—outrageous and anti-social desires for such things as sex with one's mother, with animals, and even with gods, for shedding of blood, and for forbidden foods

(571a-d). For most of us these appetites are awakened only in troubled sleep. One can avoid such troubled sleep if he leaves the appetitive part neither empty nor filled up, so that it is lulled to sleep and, not being in a state of pleasure or pain, does not disturb the better part of the soul (571e-572a). So in this passage, Socrates explicitly says that, when the bodily appetites are empty or in need, they are painful. Moreover, the idea that unfulfilled bodily appetite is painful is an important part of Socrates' account of the tyrannical soul. This chaotic personality is taken over by a tyrannical passion and its bodyguard of outlaw appetites. He is forced to consume more and more resources to satisfy these appetites—otherwise he will be afflicted with great travails (like the pangs of birth) and pains (574a). Even at that, the tyrannical soul is like the tyrannical city, which is filled with lamenting, groaning, wailing and pains. The soul is driven mad by appetites and passions (578a-b). The tyrannical man, then, is dominated by his appetites. But, paradoxically, the life given over to extravagant pleasure is filled with pain. The reason is that unfulfilled desires are painful. The intensity of the pleasure seems to be matched by the intensity of the pain of need.

[9] Plato refers to *skiagraphia* in the dialogues ten times—but without ever explaining the phenomenon. Literally the word means shadow-painting. What is important for Plato is that it creates an illusion. Scholars have offered different ways of understanding the phenomenon. E. Keuls (*Plato and Greek Painting* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1978)) argues that *skiagraphia* "was a divisionist technique exploiting optical color fusion: patches of color contrasted sharply to the nearby viewer; but seemed to blend when observed from the appropriate distance (79)." As in pointalism, patches of contrasting color, put side by side, blend into a third color when seen from a distance. However, E. Pemberton ("A

Note on Skiagraphia" *American Journal of Archaeology* 80 (1976): 82-84) argues that *skiagraphia* creates the illusion of depth through contrast of light and dark.

[10] I have modified the Grube-Reeve translation, 1193-4.

[11] The reader of the *Republic* will recognize that the spatial analogy, having been correlated with the ontological distinction between pleasures, is now analogous to the allegory of the cave in Book 7 (514a-516c). The cave represents objects outside the soul; the spatial analogy represents pleasures in the soul. The division between perceptual objects and forms is analogous to the division between less true and true pleasures. In the cave, the prisoner ascends from perceptual objects—i.e., the less real—with their images and shadows to forms—i.e., the fully real. In the soul, the philosopher ascends from bodily—i.e., less true—pleasures, with their susceptibility to illusion, to true pleasures. Like objects in the perceptual world, which have opposite qualities, less true pleasure is mixed with its opposite, pain. In both cases, the mixture is the source of illusion. In the cave, the prisoners watch shadows cast by artificial objects (515c). In the lower region of the soul, pleasure mixed with pain is shadow-painted, giving rise to illusions (583b; 586b-c). Outside the cave, knowledge of the real objects clarifies the shadows in the cave (520c-d). In the upper region of the soul, pleasure is pure; as we shall see, this purity clarifies the mixed nature of pleasure in the lower region and dissipates its illusions. But the description of pleasures as true and less true is not simply an analogy with the metaphysical distinctions of the central books of the *Republic*; true pleasure just is knowledge of the real.

[12] Like the theme of illusion of pleasure, the theme of insatiable appetite recurs in the dialogues. Earlier in the *Republic*, the tyrant, whose outrageous behavior is reminiscent

of the beast-like, is driven by insatiable appetite (578a). In the *Gorgias*, undisciplined and insatiable appetites are compared to leaky jars (493a-494b). The idea of desires that cannot be satisfied clearly has an important role in explaining uncontrollable appetites; appetites become uncontrollable because they cannot be satisfied. However, in these passages, Socrates does not explain how desires become insatiable. In the *Gorgias*, Socrates compares a part of the soul, in the thoughtless and uninitiated, to a jar (*pithon*) because it is credulous and easy to persuade (*to pithanon kai peistikon*). In this part the desires (*epithumiai*) are like leaky jars because they are insatiable (*dia tên aplêstian*). The credulity of this part of the soul seems to account for the insatiability of its desires, although Socrates does not explain the connection.

[13] In common usage, insatiable appetite is something like a gluttonous or morbid appetite. A gluttonous appetite is one that is never satisfied no matter how much one tries. Cf. Gosling and Taylor, *The Greeks on Pleasure*, 115-122. The superficial satisfaction of eating and drinking, e.g., cannot mask the continuing, underlying hunger and thirst. In a passage in the *Philebus*, Socrates describes a morbid appetite, associated with disease (46c-d). In this situation, there is an underlying pathological condition that affects the appetite. Attempts to satisfy the appetite do not change—or may even exacerbate—the underlying condition. Cf. D. Frede, *Platon Philebus* (Gottingen: Vanderhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997) 277-78. Drinking, e.g., does not quench the thirst of the fevered person and may make it worse. So we are to think that the beast-like people are driven by desires that are like gluttonous or morbid appetites

[14] My translation.

[15] At the end of Book 9, Socrates sums up the account of moral psychology in the metaphor of the three-part man. The many headed beast represents the appetitive part; a lion, the spirit; and a man, reason. With respect to the appetites, reason is like a farmer; the tame appetites it nourishes and domesticates and the wild it does not allow to grow (588c-589b). One way to not allow a wild appetite to grow would be to rob its object of credibility. Clearly the mad erotic passion is a wild appetite. If the prospect of true pleasure from an intense mixture of bodily pleasure and pain is not believable, the appetitive disposition to desire such a thing is not possible.