

Where Socratic Akrasia Meets the Platonic Good

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ABSTRACT The *Protagoras*'s case against akrasia comes in two stages. First, at 352bc, we get an extremely quick argument grounded on knowledge as an epistemic ideal. This argument does not persuade the many, and so the dialogue turns, starting at 355a, to a technical and carefully developed argument that proceeds on an entirely different basis. This argument has considerable force, but only once we make certain idealizing assumptions about an agent's ability to grasp the unitary, homogeneous nature of value. Reading the dialogue in this way offers the further tantalizing possibility of showing us precisely where Socrates's thought leaves off and Plato's begins: that the dialogue takes off from the famous and historical Socratic rejection of akrasia and then attempts to ground that dictum in a novel argument, one that displays Plato's characteristic interest in the distance between surface appearances and ultimate reality.

KEYWORDS SOCRATES, PLATO, PROTAGORAS, AKRASIA, HEDONISM

THE MOST DISTINCTIVE AND NOTORIOUS CLAIM associated with Socrates is his denial of akrasia—that is, his insistence on the impossibility of acting against what one believes to be the better course of action. Discussion of this extraordinary thesis has been extensive and nearly continuous from antiquity all the way to modern times, and it is indeed among the doctrines that have the best claim to being genuinely, that is, historically, Socratic. Though we have good reason to think that Socrates did indeed deny the possibility of akrasia, I will argue that the text most associated with this denial, Plato's *Protagoras*, does not yield an argument—not even a bad argument—against akrasia in general. Instead, the dialogue contains two distinct arguments, each of which is more successful than is ordinarily supposed, but neither of which yields the famous Socratic thesis. In light of this, we should question just how Socratic a dialogue the *Protagoras* really is.

In brief, the *Protagoras*'s argument against akrasia runs through two different stages, founded on entirely distinct assumptions. Its quick first-stage argument turns on a purely conceptual point: that one cannot act against what one knows ought to be done, because the concept of *knowledge* refers to an epistemic ideal,

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and part of that ideal is that knowledge is sufficient for action (section 1). The dialogue immediately acknowledges, however, that most people will not find this quick argument compelling, so it goes on to offer a much more complex argument that turns on the homogeneity of value (section 2). This argument, in principle, could yield a much more thoroughgoing rejection of *akrasia*. Such a conclusion, however, would hold only for agents who are capable of recognizing the ultimate nature of value, which means that impossibility of *akrasia* follows only from very idealized assumptions (section 3).

Although the significance of this analysis is, in the first instance, philosophical, it suggests a further, admittedly speculative historical hypothesis (section 4): that the *Protagoras* is transitionally poised between the Socratic and the Platonic in a particularly well-defined way: it takes off from the famous and historical Socratic rejection of *akrasia* and then attempts to ground that dictum in a novel argument, one that displays Plato's characteristic interest in the distance between the heterogeneous flux of surface appearances and the unitary stability of ultimate reality. The fact that this Platonic argument is compatible with ordinary cases of *akrasia* reveals just how far the *Protagoras* ventures from the historical Socrates.

I. FIRST STAGE: THE EPISTEMIC IDEAL

Within a relatively long dialogue, the discussion of *akrasia* in the *Protagoras* is compressed into just a handful of pages near the end, running from 352b to 358d. But long before that point, Socrates had offered a foretaste of the view he would be taking when he remarks, in the context of a long discussion of a poem by Simonides,

[A] I am pretty sure that none of the wise men thinks that any human being willingly [ἐκόντα] makes a mistake or willingly does anything wrong or bad. They know very well that anyone who does anything wrong or bad does so unwillingly. (345d–e)¹

Nothing more is said at this point about what exactly this claim amounts to. We would, of course, like to know the sense in which the bad is always done unwillingly (or involuntarily, as the claim might equally well be translated), and we would like to know why the wise are in agreement on this surprising claim. Happily, once Simonides's poem is left behind, the issue comes back into focus, and here begins the famous extended discussion of the possibility of *akrasia*. (Although the Greek word ἀκρασία does not appear in the Platonic corpus, the *Protagoras* does repeatedly use cognate terms, and I will follow later Greek authors such as Aristotle in deploying the abstract noun to refer to wrong actions of precisely this kind.²)

¹Translations of the *Protagoras* take as their starting point the reliably literal version of Stanley Lombardo and Karen Bell in Plato, *Complete Works*, freely modified in the direction of still closer fidelity to the Greek. Translations from other Platonic works likewise take the *Complete Works* as their starting point, also with frequent modification. For the Greek text I draw on Burnet's edition of Plato, *Opera*.

²The dialogue uses forms of κρατεῖν in relevant contexts at 352c (= C), 352e, 353c, and 357c, and forms of κρείττων at 352d and 358c (= G). Elsewhere, in relevant contexts, Plato uses ἀκράτεια (*Republic* V, 461b1; *Gorgias* 525a6), although in these passages the phenomenon is clearly presumed to occur. In Aristotle, ἀκρασία refers primarily to a disposition, so it is worth stressing that in the *Protagoras* the focus is principally on a kind of action. Still, to the extent akratic acts are possible, it is easy enough within the Socratic framework to describe a corresponding disposition, identified with a kind of persistent ignorance.

That discussion begins when Socrates asks Protagoras the following series of questions:

[B] What do you think about knowledge [ἐπιστήμη]? Do you go along with the majority or not? Most people think this way about it, that it is not a powerful thing, neither a leader nor a ruler. They do not think of it in that way at all, but rather in this way: although knowledge is often present in a man, what rules him is not knowledge but rather anything else—sometimes desire, sometimes pleasure, sometimes pain, at other times love, often fear; they think of his knowledge as being dragged around by all these other things as if it were a slave. Now, does the matter seem like that to you, or does it seem to you that knowledge is a fine thing capable of ruling a person, and if someone were to recognize [γινώσκει] what is good and bad, then he would not be forced by anything to act otherwise than knowledge dictates, and intelligence [φρόνησις] would be sufficient to save a person? (352b–c)

Up to this point in the dialogue, Socrates and Protagoras have disagreed about pretty much everything of substance, but here Protagoras hastens to express his complete agreement with Socrates:

[C] It seems just as you say, Socrates, and moreover, it would be shameful indeed for me above all people to say that wisdom [σοφία] and knowledge [ἐπιστήμη] are anything other than wholly in control [κράτιστον] of human activity. (352c–d)

Socrates, in turn, hastens to congratulate Protagoras for “speaking finely the truth” (352d). Here, then, we find manifested something like the consensus among the wise alleged back at (A), but now focused on a narrower target: not that no one does wrong willingly, but that no one does wrong knowingly. Given that Protagoras, the sophist, is one of the preeminent “wise men” of his era,³ this is just the sort of agreement we ought to expect.

Notoriously, however, it is far from clear just exactly what they are agreeing on, and the contentious character of the surrounding dialogue encourages the suspicion that this agreement is likely to be fragile and narrowly based. Moreover, (A) and (B)–(C) evidently rule out significantly different kinds of possibilities. (B) rules out what we might call Knowledge Akrasia, which—anticipating some subtleties introduced below at (D) and (G)—can be framed as follows:

*Doing something known to be bad while knowing it is possible to do something better.*⁴

In contrast to (B), it is not obvious that (A) is ruling out akrasia at all, and the dialogue is far from explicit about how these claims are related. Complicating matters still further, as we will see, the dialogue later rules out what we might call Belief Akrasia:

Doing something believed to be bad while believing it is possible to do something better.

³See e.g. *Protagoras* 309c–d, 335c.

⁴Defining akrasia in terms of *the bad* suggests the moralizing perspective that ancient authors standardly assume, and that I will take for granted. Akrasia, in this tradition, is by definition a moral failing. But if one thinks of the bad simply as that which one judges to be less preferable, then we arrive at something that looks to be irrational, but that need not be morally bad. This would then reflect the usual tendency of modern discussions, beginning with Donald Davidson’s “How Is Weakness of Will Possible?,” to allow that there might be “virtuous” akratic actions. Huck Finn’s akratic refusal to return Jim to slavery serves as the leading such example, thanks to a famous paper by Jonathan Bennett, “Conscience of Huckleberry Finn.”

Moreover, immediately after ruling out Belief Akrasia in these very terms, at 358bc (G below), Socrates comes back to restating A, remarking, “No one goes willingly toward the bad or toward what he believes [οἶεται] to be bad” (358c, H below). But the dialogue does not give any clear sign that this is meant to follow from the rejection of Belief Akrasia, nor is it clear exactly how it would follow. It is further unclear just why Socrates is entitled to reject Belief Akrasia, or how its rejection relates to his rejection of Knowledge Akrasia. And of course my brief remarks so far barely make a start at defining these three forms of akrasia with any precision. All of this is to say, then, that there seems to be a bewildering variety of anti-akratic claims running through the dialogue, and no clear indications of exactly which is meant to be ruled out by which stage of the argument, or even how exactly those arguments go.

To begin to sort these issues out, I want to suggest that the *Protagoras* contains two distinct lines of anti-akratic argumentation. The second, more powerful line of thought is the one that attempts to block a certain form of Belief Akrasia; this will be the subject of the following two sections. The first line of thought, which I will consider now, rests on a point of agreement between Socrates and Protagoras. This argument, however, because it depends on a conceptual point about knowledge (ἐπιστήμη), rules out only Knowledge Akrasia, and cannot exclude akrasia more generally. A more general argument would need to turn on special features of what it is to be akratic, but at this first stage nothing like that has been agreed to by the interlocutors.

Where Socrates and Protagoras agree, at this first stage, is that knowledge, as (B) puts it, is too “fine” (καλόν) a thing to admit of akrasia. It is consistent with this line of thought that human beings can be akratic, but when they are, we ought not to say that they *know* what is to be done. The reason we should not say this is that it clashes with how we ought to conceive of knowledge. This is not a matter of ordinary language. If it were, then Socrates would have a hard time explaining why it is only the wise who speak this way, whereas the majority takes a different view. Moreover, Socrates happily moves among various epistemic terms in making his claim. Passage (B), for instance, speaks mainly of ἐπιστήμη but also of φρόνησις, and also happily switches over to the verb γινώσκω. This looseness of terminology extends into Protagoras’s responding affirmation in (C), which mentions not just ἐπιστήμη but also σοφία, and a similarly various terminology populates the remainder of the dialogue.

It is clear from other dialogues, moreover, that this idealizing conception extends beyond the case of knowledge. In the *Charmides*, for instance, temperance is said to guarantee right action: “those of us who had temperance [σωφροσύνη] would live lives free from error and so would all those who were under our rule. . . . And with error rooted out and rightness in control, men so circumstanced would necessarily fare admirably and well in all their doings and, faring well, they would be happy” (171e–172a). Admittedly, this is said in the context of a definition of ‘temperance’ that proves unworkable, but the dialogue’s closing discussion seems to confirm that this is what *true* temperance would bring us: “I think that temperance is a great good, and if you truly have it, that you are blessed” (175e). In the *Euthydemus*, we learn something similar about wisdom: “Wisdom [σοφία]

makes people succeed in every case, since I don't suppose she would ever make any sort of mistake, but must necessarily do right and be successful—otherwise she would no longer be wisdom" (280a). A similar claim is made about ἐπιστήμη at *Euthydemus* 281b: "knowledge seems to provide people not only with faring well but also with doing well, in every case of possession or action." And *Meno* 88c makes the analogous claim for φρόνησις: "all that the soul undertakes and endures, if directed by practical wisdom, ends in happiness." In each of these cases, the very concept at issue requires us to think of it as entailing success. One might have something in the vicinity of knowledge, temperance, or wisdom and yet act against it, but virtues such as these, by their very nature as virtues, are sufficient to preclude mistakes.

These claims take their place within a broader Socratic theory about the unity of the virtues and their relationship to knowledge. But those are meant to be *consequences* of these claims about the ideal character of knowledge and the other virtues. Indeed, they are precisely the consequences that get highlighted on the final pages of the *Protagoras*. What grounds those conclusions is a feature of how these various epistemic and moral virtues are conceived: that these are not ordinary terms of appraisal, but rather ideals that we rarely and perhaps never achieve. We aspire to knowledge about what we ought to do, and if we were to achieve it, then we would escape akrasia, but this is quite consistent with the prevalence of akrasia in the world around us, because few in fact have the kind of knowledge that secures right action. The scarcity of such people proves only how unwise we all are. Protagoras is clearly not so pessimistic about the prospects for knowledge, at least in his own case and perhaps that of his students, but he readily shares the broader conceptual framework that takes for granted the sufficiency for right action of knowledge and the moral virtues.

This is, obviously, not a general argument against akrasia, given that it holds only for a narrow class of agents, but it is an interesting argument as far as it goes, because it asks us to consider whether *knowledge* might be a far richer and more demanding concept than we ordinarily suppose. Moreover, this richer conception of knowledge proved highly influential for centuries to come. In the later works of Plato, the sufficiency of knowledge for right action appears in *Republic* IV's discussion of the trustworthiness of the city's guardians (443d–e), and in *Republic* VI's confidence that if the guardians can grasp the Form of the Good, the city will be perfectly ordered (506a). Aristotle, for his part, thinks that the Socratic view about akrasia cannot be entirely right, but he accepts at least that akrasia is incompatible with φρόνησις, remarking that "*no one* would say that it is the part of a practically wise man to do willingly the basest acts" (*EN* VII.2, 1146a6–7). For the Stoics, quite generally, the virtues have the status of absolute goods inasmuch as they cannot be used badly.⁵ Augustine echoes this claim in *On Free Choice of the Will* III.18–19,⁶ and those remarks would get picked up in the later Middle Ages via

⁵See Long and Sedley, *Hellenistic Philosophers*, sec. 58.

⁶In a much later letter to Jerome (Epistle 167, written in 415), Augustine calls into question the traditional philosophical thesis of the unity of the virtues, and with it the conception of a virtue as something possessed only perfectly. He describes the Stoics as conceiving of the acquisition of a virtue as all or nothing, like rising up through the water and yet being able to breathe only once one clears

Peter Lombard's *Sentences* (II.27.1), and from there widely endorsed, for instance by Thomas Aquinas (e.g. *Summa theologiae*, 1a2ae 55.4).⁷

There is, then, an enduring appeal to the line of thought that takes knowledge to be sufficient, by its very nature, to guarantee right action. This is an instance of a larger historical tendency, which runs from antiquity into the modern era, to direct epistemic theorizing toward the epistemic ideal. The concept of knowledge, on this tradition, gets reserved for a cognitive state toward which we ultimately aspire, and perhaps only rarely achieve.⁸ This perspective fits neatly with Socrates's famous doubts about whether he and his fellow Athenians possess anything that deserves to be called wisdom and knowledge. Yet if this is where things stand, at the end of this brief first stage of the discussion, then it follows that the dialogue, at this point, does not yet have a reason to deny akrasia in any more general way. Those who know will not act against what they know, but who among us is truly knowledgeable? The dialogue, however, is interested in a broader claim: the original formulation at A suggests as much, and the subsequent discussion makes it explicit, as we will see, that akrasia is impossible not just for those who have wisdom and knowledge, if there are any such, but also for those who merely believe that a thing is bad. To investigate the prospects for achieving this result, the dialogue proceeds to a further, quite distinct second-stage argument.

2. SECOND STAGE: THE HOMOGENEITY OF VALUE

Immediately after securing Protagoras's agreement to the speech quoted at (B), Socrates admits that most people (οἱ πολλοί) are not going to find their verdict persuasive. At this point, the dialogue embarks on an intricate and much-discussed argument designed to show the absurdity of what the many suppose is possible. On their view, as Socrates characterizes it,

[D] Frequently someone, recognizing the bad to be bad, nevertheless does that very thing, when he is able not to do it, having been driven and overwhelmed by pleasure. (355a–b)

The verb translated as 'recognize' is γιγνώσκων, which is not a cognate of ἐπιστήμη, but is one of the epistemic terms that Socrates treated as effectively equivalent in (B). So, if the many are right about (D), then Socrates and Protagoras are wrong to deny the possibility of Knowledge Akrasia. The added proviso that the agent must be "able not to do it" (ἔξδὸν μὴ πράττειν) usefully excludes one common class of cases that a rigorous statement of Knowledge Akrasia needs to set aside as

the surface (*On Free Choice*, 3.12). Augustine suggests instead that the process is more like steadily coming into the light, making the acquisition of a virtue gradual (3.13). Citations to Augustine follow standard book and chapter numbers.

⁷Peter Lombard is cited according to book, distinction, and section; Thomas Aquinas is cited according to part, question, and article. An idealized conception of epistemic virtue is not confined to Western philosophy. According to the Confucian tradition, to know that a thing is good, with sincerity (cheng; 誠), is to be drawn toward it immediately, without the need for any further willing. According to one prominent later Confucian line of thought, knowledge must possess such sincerity if it is to be worthy of the name. Thus Wang Yangming (1472–529) held that "there never have been people who know but do not act. Those who 'know' but do not act simply do not yet know" (Tiwald and Van Norden, *Readings in Later Chinese Philosophy*, 267).

⁸See Pasnau, *After Certainty*, lecture 1.

irrelevant: cases where the agent knows what she ought to do, and yet is unable for one reason or another to do that thing.

With this more careful statement of Knowledge Akrasia in hand, Socrates proceeds to argue that anyone can see the absurdity of the behavior described in (D) by considering the relationship between good and bad, on the one hand, and pleasure and pain, on the other. That relationship, he argues, is identity, and so his interlocutor will be unable to say that “the good is anything other than pleasure or that the bad is anything other than pain” (355a). What the dialogue here argues for, in other words, is ethical hedonism, according to which the only thing that is of value (is “good”) is pleasure. It is unclear, and controversial, whether either Socrates or Plato means here to endorse such a contentious claim, or simply offers it as a view that the many will find appealing,⁹ but it is at least clear that hedonism plays a critical role in establishing the absurdity of the majority view. That argument begins as follows:

Just how absurd this [D] is will become very clear if we do not use so many names at the same time—‘pleasant’ and ‘painful,’ ‘good’ and bad—but since these turned out to be only two things, let us instead call them by two names, first, ‘good’ and ‘bad,’ then later ‘pleasant’ and ‘painful.’ (355b–c)

Thus licensed to substitute freely from ‘good’ to ‘pleasant’ and vice versa, and from ‘bad’ to ‘painful’ and vice versa, Socrates can immediately convert (D) into the following:

[E] Someone does what is bad, recognizing that it is bad, when it is not necessary to do it, having been overcome by the good. (355d)

This, Socrates says, is quite absurd. To make the absurdity clear, he highlights two features of the situation. First, in the sort of case under discussion, the good that allegedly overcomes our agent does not outweigh the bad—not even in the agent’s own mind. The very reason we say that such an agent has made a mistake is that the good he is overcome by (say, today’s pleasure) is outweighed by the bad (say, tomorrow’s pain), and he recognizes as much. Second, and critically, this notion of “outweighing” is exactly how Socrates wants us to conceive of such cases, because there are, as he put it just above, “only two things” here. Hence, when we are asked “in virtue of what does the good outweigh the bad or the bad the good,” the answer can only be that “one is larger and the other smaller; or one is more and the other less” (355d–e). And now the absurdity of (B) becomes fully explicit, because

[F] What you mean by being overcome is taking more bad things for the sake of fewer good things. (355e)

⁹Ethical hedonism is a surprising thesis for Socrates to defend, since in other works, including dialogues judged to be early and so representative of the historical Socrates, hedonism seems to be sharply rejected. See, in particular, *Gorgias* 495–500 and *Republic* 505b–c. As Rachana Kamtekar has recently remarked, “In every other dialogue, Plato’s Socrates argues that pleasure is not the good” (*Plato’s Moral Psychology*, 3). But for prominent defenses of the view that the *Protagoras* is earnest in its defense of hedonism, see Gosling and Taylor, *Greeks on Pleasure*, ch. 3; Irwin, *Plato’s Ethics*, ch. 6; and Rudebusch, *Socrates, Pleasure, and Value*. For the contrary view, on which hedonism is offered rather as a thesis that his opponents will endorse, see e.g. Zeyl, “Socrates and Hedonism”; Vlastos, *Socrates*, 204–5, 300–302; and Callard, “Akraics as Hedonists.” See n. 14 for further discussion.

No one, Socrates thinks, could make such a choice while recognizing that this is what he is doing.

If this conclusion holds, then the dialogue has effectively extended the anti-akratic case beyond the special case of Knowledge Akrasia. The absurdity to which (E) gives rise holds regardless of whether the agent knows or merely believes that what he does is worse than an available alternative. The dialogue explicitly recognizes as much in its concluding summary of the argument:

[G] Therefore, if the pleasant is the good, then no one who either knows [εἰδὼς] or believes [οἰόμενος] that something else is better than what he is doing, something possible, will go on doing what he has been doing when he could be doing what is better. Nor is giving in to oneself anything other than ignorance, nor is controlling oneself anything other than wisdom. (358b–c)

With this, we have arrived at a conclusion that goes beyond the first-stage argument that was founded on an epistemically ideal conception of knowledge. Now it is said that “no one” willingly acts in a way that goes against what he takes to be the best available action. This seemingly yields the impossibility not just of Knowledge Akrasia but also of Belief Akrasia.¹⁰

To assess the plausibility of this argument, and to see how the scope of its conclusion is narrower than (G) suggests, we need to consider exactly why (D)–(F) are supposed to be absurd. Commentators often read the argument as a *reductio ad absurdum*, in the technical sense of an argument that leads to a formal contradiction. It is not clear, however, how we could reach an outright contradiction here, unless the argument takes for granted a premise that would effectively beg the question, as for instance that agents always choose that which they judge to be more good or more pleasant.¹¹ What seems preferable is to read the argument as showing us not that akrasia entails a formal contradiction, but that it requires the actor to be in a state that is psychologically impossible for a rational agent. This fits with the kind of impossibility that the dialogue in fact identifies: Socrates specifies in his conclusion to the overall argument that it is “*not in human nature* to want [ἐθέλειν] to go toward what one believes to be bad instead of toward the good” (358d1–2, H below, emphasis added). It is, then, *naturally* impossible to act akratically, inasmuch as it would not be consistent with rational human psychology. This is, however, a delicate line of argument to advance,

¹⁰Given the significance my reading will place on the argument’s expansion to embrace cases of mere belief at (G) and thereafter, I must disagree with those who downplay the significance of these references to belief. See, in particular, Taylor’s notes to 358b6–c3, which favor the view that the switch from ἐπιστήμη and allied terms to οἶεται is insignificant.

¹¹For a reading of this kind, see Irwin, *Plato’s Ethics*, 83–84. Socrates certainly endorses claims in the vicinity of psychological hedonism, e.g. at 356b and 358c–d. But these remarks are made *after* the key argument, and so look to be its consequences, rather than belated premises. For a careful recent discussion of why psychological hedonism should not be treated as a premise of the argument, see Kamtekar, *Plato’s Moral Psychology*, 42–45. For the general question of whether to view the argument as producing an outright contradiction, see Callard, “Ignorance and Akrasia-Denial,” 41–44. She takes the contradiction interpretation to be the majority reading, but is herself doubtful that an outright contradiction can be produced. For an intricate discussion of candidate inconsistencies in the dialogue, see Woolf, “Consistency and Akrasia.” My own no-contradiction reading of the argument, over the next several paragraphs, is similar to the one developed by Wiggins, “Weakness of Will”; and Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*, 109–17.

because those who defend the possibility of akrasia will be quick to grant that there is something irrational about it. As Donald Davidson memorably remarked at the end of his famous paper on the subject, “What is special in incontinence is that the actor cannot understand himself: he recognizes, in his own intentional behavior, something essentially surd.”¹² What the argument needs to establish, then, is that the absurdity of akrasia is *so* great as to be impossible for a human agent. This requires more than the presence within an agent of contradictory beliefs. That state of affairs, after all, is very far from being impossible for creatures such as us. What Socrates must show, then, is that an allegedly akratic agent would have to be in a state of mind so wholly and absurdly unintelligible as to be altogether impossible for beings with natures like ours.

Here is where hedonism plays its role. The absurdity of (F) lies in the idea that an agent would willingly choose a situation with more of the bad and less of the good, even while believing that a more favorable outcome is available. So described, this seems irrational but by no means impossible—indeed, it seems just what the akratic agent familiarly does. The psychological impossibility emerges only when an agent believes that the various goods and bads are entirely homogeneous. This is, admittedly, not explicit in the text, which instead tends to speak merely of identity: “the pleasure is the good” (358b6, in G). But what allows hedonism to do its work in the context of this argument is that pleasures are all of a homogeneous kind, so that the various values at stake have “turned out to be only two things” (355b, as above). The mere identification of good with pleasure is not enough, because that leaves room for the various pleasures to have greater or lesser appeal not in virtue of their quantity, but in virtue of their different modes of presentation, so that we are lured to embrace some pleasures at the expense of others, even when those others are greater. That, of course, is just what an akratic agent would do. But if all the goods are homogeneously pleasurable, and all the bads homogeneously painful, then there is no room for being seduced by certain kinds of pleasures at the expense of others. Rather, to decide among options, we need only put all the foreseen outcomes on a single scale and look to see how it comes out.

Some choices clearly do have this straightforward structure. Suppose you are donating blood, and a nurse tells you that he can use either *this* needle, which you will hardly feel, or *that* needle, which is rather painful. That difference aside, each needle works just as well as the other. You would, I think, wonder whether you had misunderstood the question. Unless we add some bizarre backstory, it would be literally unintelligible to suppose that you might choose the more painful option. Socrates is suggesting that, given the hedonism introduced here, all choice becomes like that: you simply weigh the goods and the bads and do what comes out ahead. The metaphor of a scale captures the unitary character of the necessary decision. Tacitly setting himself against the notorious subjectivism of Protagoras, who held that “a thing is for each man what it seems to him to be” (*Theaetetus* 162d),¹³ Socrates concludes that there is a unitary and common good

¹²Davidson, “How Is Weakness of the Will Possible?,” 42.

¹³There is some dispute over whether it is correct to read the *Protagoras* as having Protagorean relativism as its implicit target. For the affirmative case, see Haraldsen, “Is Pleasure Any Good?,” 114.

that, once identified and properly measured, unfailingly motivates action. This leads him to the ultimate conclusion in (G) that *akrasia* is ignorance whereas self-control is wisdom.

Hedonism is what does the work for Socrates, but nothing in the argument turns on pleasure in particular being the unitary value at stake. The argument would run equally well on any account that identifies some one monistic value, provided this value is so homogeneous as to make it unintelligible how one could willingly turn against the side perceived as greater. This means that we can understand pleasure to play the role of a convenient proxy, amenable to the masses to which Socrates is ostensibly addressing himself, but substitutable by whatever is the ultimate, homogeneous value that lies beneath appearances. In the paper's final section, I will offer this as a reason to see Plato's hand at work at this stage of the argument, but for present purposes it is not essential to decide whether the dialogue actually means to endorse hedonism.¹⁴ Accordingly, for purposes of exposition, I will continue to follow the dialogue in treating pleasure as the homogeneous value in question.

In view of the way Socrates stresses the weighing of different values, it is natural to suppose that hedonism's role is to secure *commensurability*, but that is in fact not enough to make the argument work. Commensurability, as that term is usually understood, ensures that two things can be compared according to some unit of value.¹⁵ The argument, however, needs more than that; it needs not just the commensurability of all values, but the thoroughgoing *homogeneity* of all values. After all, it would be at least arguable that all the items I have purchased over the past year are commensurable, given that they can be freely acquired through a common currency. Even so, I might be highly *akratic* with regard to some of these items: there might be something about *shoes*, for instance, that I find just irresistible, even though I am well aware that their value is less than that of other things I might buy. The job of the dialogue's hedonism is to get us to see that our ordinary valuations of things, even if commensurable, do not sufficiently cut through the appearances to articulate the ultimate structure of values. Really, all that matters are pleasure and pain, so the only value differential between shoes and groceries is a difference in pleasure. Once we weigh things properly, the choice falls out trivially, unmistakably, just as in the case of the two needles. The smoothly homogeneous structure of value, once grasped, precludes any sort of

¹⁴On the scholarly debate over this question, see n. 9. It would be easier to take the assertion of hedonism at face value if one could understand pleasure to encompass both the pleasurable and the beneficial (cf. e.g. *Euthydemus* 288e; *Gorgias* 479b; *Republic* X, 607e). But the dialogue does not say that, and such an expansion of the theory would threaten the homogeneity that I take to be critical to the argument. Moreover, at *Republic* VI, 505b, Plato expressly identifies the thesis "that pleasure is the good" as a less refined view, held by the many (-οἷς πολλοῖς), and to Glaucon's bare mention of pleasure as a candidate for the Good, Socrates is made to respond with a bare "Hush!" (εὐφήμει, 509a). It is hard to see how these remarks are consistent with the *Protagoras* having seriously defended such a view. Accordingly, I am drawn to Nussbaum's suggestion that pleasure plays a "place-holding role" in the argument (*Fragility of Goodness*, 110).

¹⁵See e.g. Chang, "Value Incomparability and Incommensurability." Richardson, "Measurement," cautions that the hedonism of the *Protagoras* is consistent with the rejection of commensurability. That may be so, but I take my argument to show why we should think the dialogue wants commensurability and still more.

irrational adherence to the lesser good. Provided we are not ignorant of that good, our choices will slide frictionlessly toward their proper place.

3. THE IDEALIZATION OF THE SECOND-STAGE ARGUMENT

As just described, this second-stage argument is fascinating and potentially powerful. Still, as Aristotle memorably put it, we know that a general denial of akrasia cannot be right, inasmuch as it “contradicts the plain phenomena” (*EN* VII.2, 1145b28). So where has this story gone wrong? For some readers, the mistake comes in the supposition of ethical hedonism, the wrongness of which is revealed by the absurdity of the anti-akratic conclusion. But if we suppose, as I do, that we are meant to take the anti-akratic conclusion seriously in some sense, as a genuinely Socratic insight, then we ought not simply to treat this stage of the dialogue as an elaborate *reductio* of hedonism.¹⁶ My own suggestion, instead, is that we should stop supposing that the dialogue attempts to establish the general impossibility of Belief Akrasia. Having distinguished between the two stages of the argument, and seen that the second stage turns on the homogeneity of pleasure, we are now in a position to find in this stage an effective argument for a more limited conclusion. Rather than barring Belief Akrasia categorically, the argument applies only to agents of an idealized sort, those who recognize that the homogeneous values of hedonism (or, at any rate, of *some* unitary value) are the only values that matter. Ultimately, as we will see, this second-stage argument reaches effectively the same conclusion as the first-stage argument, but on very different grounds.

There are, to be sure, solid textual reasons for supposing that the second-stage argument concludes with the general impossibility of Belief Akrasia. This, after all, is what the conclusion offered at the start of (G) seems to say:

[G1] If the pleasant is the good, then no one who either knows or believes that something else is better than what he is doing, something possible, will go on doing what he has been doing when he could be doing what is better. (358b)

Moreover, Socrates reiterates this seemingly categorical conclusion a few lines later:

[H] No one goes willingly toward the bad or toward what he believes to be bad, nor is it in human nature, it seems, to want to go toward what one believes to be bad instead of toward the good. And when he is forced to choose between one of two bad things, no one will choose the greater if he is able to choose the lesser. (358c–d)

These passages may well look entirely sufficient to give us confidence that the *Protagoras* means to insist on the categorical impossibility of Belief Akrasia.

A first, admittedly weak reason for doubting this reading is that it would make the second-stage argument untenable. That argument turns, as the previous section argued, on the homogeneity of pleasure. But for that form of argument to arrive at the psychological impossibility of Belief Akrasia, it requires not that pleasure *be* what is uniquely valuable, but that the agents in question *embrace* pleasure as

¹⁶For a reading on which the anti-akratic conclusion is an absurdity that serves to refute hedonism, see Haraldsen, “Is Pleasure Any Good?”

uniquely valuable. This means more than just that they accept the identification of the good with pleasure. They must, in addition, have sufficient insight into the character of the good to appreciate its homogeneous structure. This does not require a theoretical grasp of any philosophical thesis, but it does require that, in every choice, the agent be responsive to the homogeneous field of value that hedonism describes.

To be an agent like that is extremely difficult. In the real world, some people like chocolate, others like wine, and still others like philosophical conversation. Some will tolerate pain in the pursuit of pleasure, others will forgo a great deal of pleasure to avoid even a little pain. In some cases, the comparative hedonic differences make these choices straightforward, but where different goods present themselves under different guises, psychological space opens up for choices that are not pleasure maximizing. The allure of certain kinds of pleasure causes people to forego a greater pleasure. Now it may be, as a theoretical matter, that Socrates could lead any one of us by the hand, step by step, and bring us to accept his monistic picture of value, just as he taught the Pythagorean theorem to the slave boy in the *Meno*, and as indeed he argues for the truth of hedonism here at 353c–355a. Yet this would not guarantee our retaining that perspective in all our choices, for even if we accept hedonism in principle, we might in practice constantly find ourselves seduced by the superficial appearances of things. Some commentators, in effect, have treated this sort of variation among the guises of pleasure as reason to reject the argument.¹⁷ My suggestion instead is that we read the argument as aiming at a different, much more limited and so more defensible conclusion: as precluding akrasia only for those who have the wisdom to see through the apparently heterogeneous values around us and see the true values of things as they are.

This first interpretive reason is a weak one, given that it rests on various other interpretive choices that are themselves controversial. So let me hasten to a second point, which is that everyone has to accept that the seemingly categorical conclusions of (G1) and (H) require *some* sort of qualification. The antecedent qualification that (G1) does provide—“if the pleasant is the good”—is plainly not what the argument needs. For, as noted already, the second-stage argument does not, on any construal, require that hedonism be *true*. Nor can Socrates be entitled to the fully universal claim of (G1) and (H) that “no one” can be akratic. At a bare minimum, the second-stage argument yields that conclusion only for agents who somehow embrace the unitary hedonistic framework. And the dialogue has surely not established that *everyone* holds this sort of reductive view of value. The whole point of the second stage is to target a group of (imagined) interlocutors who have not accepted the first-stage argument. What gives this second argument traction in their case is their propensity toward hedonism. At a minimum, then, these conclusions have to be restricted to agents of that sort. And if we look back at the start of the second stage, we find that Socrates in fact makes that restriction implicit: “*if it is enough* for you to live life pleasantly without pain, and you are not able to say anything else than that the good and the bad are that which result

¹⁷See e.g. Stocker, *Plural and Conflicting Values*, ch. 7; and Price, *Mental Conflict*, ch. 1.

in pleasure and pain, . . . I say to you that *if this is so*, your position will become absurd” (355a2–6, emphasis added). The whole second-stage argument, which ultimately culminates in (G) and (H), should be understood to be embedded within this antecedent. Once we see that much, then the remaining question is just how deep a grasp of this unitary value scheme an agent needs to have in order to avoid akrasia. On the standard reading, the grasp need only be superficial, so that any agent who is willing to affirm hedonism will be free from akrasia. My proposal simply increases the demands on such agents. To escape akrasia, it is not enough to affirm that all and only pleasures are good. An agent must, in addition, have the wisdom to pursue steadfastly the ultimately homogeneous values of the world.

In restricting the second-stage conclusion to agents that possess a certain sort of wisdom, I mean to draw on the hitherto ignored second half of (G):

[G2] Nor is giving in to oneself anything other than ignorance, nor is controlling oneself [κρείττω ἑαυτοῦ] anything other than wisdom [σοφία]. (358c)

The standard construal of the argument requires giving this sentence a rather unnatural reading: that in fact there is no such thing as akrasia, since no one exhibits it, nor is there a distinctive capacity for self-control (the opposite of akrasia), since everyone possesses that. These concepts are to be *replaced* by the concepts of ignorance and wisdom. On this reading, strangely, even fools would exhibit self-control, free from akrasia. What the fool would lack, instead, is a proper grasp of where he should aim. Construed more naturally, however, (G2) does not *eliminate* the phenomenon of akrasia, but instead *explains* the circumstances under which it occurs. This is the more natural reading syntactically, inasmuch as this is how the Platonic corpus elsewhere, invariably, deploys the “not anything other than” formula.¹⁸ When we take the remark this way, it can be given a more plausible construal: not that no one is akratic, but that people are akratic out of ignorance, their failure to grasp the ultimate nature of value. So this gives us a third reason to deny that the second-stage argument means to reject akrasia categorically.

A fourth, more complex reason arises from the dialogue’s treatment of the art of measurement as the sort of wisdom required for self-control. This emerges from Socrates’s most concrete example of the threat of akrasia, a case where we are tempted to pursue present pleasures over future pleasures. In keeping with his unitary conception of value, he argues that there is no difficulty in principle here, because “they are not different in any other way than by pleasure and pain, for there is no other way that they could differ” (356a–b). The trouble agents have, Socrates goes on to argue, is a difficulty in measurement, and by analogy he then considers cases of sensory measurement where closer objects look larger and sound louder. We make a mistake of this same kind when we pursue immediate pleasures over remote ones. The root of the difficulty is that we must learn to use the art of measurement rather than trusting in appearances.

¹⁸The “not anything other than” formula (e.g. οὐδὲ . . . ἄλλο τι ἢ . . .) seems, across the corpus, to be always explanatory rather than eliminative. Compare just a few pages earlier in the *Protagoras*: “if you are able to say that the good is anything other than pleasure or that the bad is anything other than pain” (355a). Indisputably, that passage does not mean to deny the reality of the good and the bad. For other instances, see *Euthydemus* 292b; *Ion* 534e; *Phaedrus* 268d, 273b; *Sophist* 228a; *Alcibiades* 130c.

The standard account must treat the art of measurement as limited in its scope. After all, on that reading of the argument, no one is akratic and even the fool exhibits self-control. The art of measurement is required, then, only to ensure that the objects we pursue are the correct ones—that is, the ones that will genuinely yield the most pleasure.¹⁹ Admittedly, this is the reading suggested by a strict application of the analogy to sensory illusion (356c). Although we routinely go wrong because of perceptual illusions of one sort or another, still, when we manage to grasp the correct measurement, we can be sure that it will rightly guide us, without fear of akrasia.²⁰ The example perfectly illustrates a case where we are likely to agree there is just one homogeneous value at stake: the value of perceiving the world correctly. Imagine, for instance, that you see the Müller-Lyer lines and then, ruler in hand, you deploy the art of measurement and recognize that their apparent difference in length is an illusion. How, after that, could you still believe the lines to be of different lengths? In such a case there is typically only one thing we are after—perceiving things as they are—and so while misleading appearances are a constant danger, the art of measurement is entirely sufficient to overcome them. Here, barring some very fanciful special circumstances, akratic belief seems wholly unintelligible.²¹

If applied strictly, the analogy to sensation yields the standard reading: that agents are always in full control and nonakratically do whatever seems most pleasurable, needing the art of measurement only to discover what truly is most pleasurable. But the dialogue itself gives us reason to think that the cases are not intended to be so completely analogous. Pleasures are not only prone to be mismeasured in the way that we might mistake the length of two lines, but further, they are liable to distort our motivational structures in such a way as to deprive us of control. The dialogue thus speaks of our being “driven and dazed by pleasure” (355b). Moreover, when Socrates describes the situation of those who lack the art of measurement, he seems to be describing precisely the sort of agent who is akratically out of control:

[I] Whereas the power of appearance often makes us wander all over the place in confusion, often changing our minds about the same things and regretting our actions and choices with respect to things large and small, the art of measurement, in contrast, would make the appearances lose their power by showing us the truth, would give us peace of mind firmly rooted in the truth and would save our life. (356d–e)

¹⁹Jessica Moss takes the lesson of the dialogue at this point to be that our errors regarding pleasure are “perfectly correctable” by the art of measurement (“Pleasure and Illusion in Plato,” 507). For a reading of the *Protagoras* that, like my own, stresses the difficulty of achieving sufficient wisdom to escape akrasia, see Segvic, “No One Errs Willingly.”

²⁰There is a markedly similar discussion of perceptual illusion at *Republic X*, 602–3, although there the argument is aimed at establishing a radically different result: that the very possibility of conflicting beliefs about such cases shows that the soul must have distinct parts. On measuring across the Platonic corpus, see Freeland, “Science of Measuring Pleasure and Pain.”

²¹Some recent discussions of epistemic akrasia, although unaware of this earlier precedent, have used this sort of argument from homogeneity to argue for the impossibility of epistemic akrasia (believing what one believes one should not believe) because of the homogeneity of epistemic value. As Susan Hurley observes, “In the case of what should be done there may be conflict within an agent, there may be conflicting reasons competing for authority. But in the case of what should be believed, truth alone governs and it can’t be divided against itself or harbour conflicts” (*Natural Reasons*, 133).

The “power of appearances” not only causes us to misjudge which pleasures are greater, on analogy to perceptual error, but further gives rise to the characteristic symptoms of the akratic agent: confusion, vacillation, and regret. This seems to be precisely a picture of the sort of ignorance that breeds “giving in to oneself” (G₂), in which case the art of measurement would be the countervailing wisdom that permits “controlling oneself.” But if that is right, then the second-stage argument excludes akrasia only for agents who possess the art of measurement.

Socrates is hardly forthcoming about the details of this art of measurement, offering nothing more than the seemingly unfulfilled promise that “we will inquire later into what this art and knowledge is” (357b). But in characterizing this capacity in this way, as a *τέχνη καὶ ἐπιστήμη*, the dialogue offers a fifth and final signal that (G₁) and (H) should not be read as categorically denying the possibility of Belief Akrasia. On that standard reading, the agent motivated by hedonism needs to do nothing more than accurately measure the various quantities of pleasure. But if overcoming “the power of appearances” (I) requires “art and knowledge,” something worthy even of being called “wisdom” (G₂), then such an effort must involve more than a simple weighing of pleasures. It must instead be a complex and systematic disposition, not easily gained, and stably possessed by those who have it. But what, on the standard view, is the great challenge that this sort of wisdom overcomes? It takes no great wisdom to recognize that we tend to underestimate the weight of remote pleasures. For there to be some substantial challenge in the vicinity, conquerable only by knowledge and wisdom, the power of appearances must distort our judgments more pervasively, undermining our very ability to control ourselves. The solution, according to the second-stage argument, is to grasp the homogeneity of all value. But even those who assent to this in name find it hard to adhere to it in practice. Therein lies the true challenge.

It is significant that the dialogue at this point reverts to talking about *ἐπιστήμη*. In insisting, at (G₁) and (H), that mere belief suffices for right action, Socrates signals that we have gone beyond the first stage of the argument, which rested on the shared intuition about ‘knowledge’ expressed at (B). That first stage took its force from the conceptual idealization of the epistemic and moral virtues. This second-stage argument rests on quite a different sort of point: that we can be secure against akrasia if we grasp the unitary and homogeneous character of all value. But now we are in a position to see that such security, ultimately, requires its own kind of knowledge: one must grasp what the root of all value is, so that one will be immune to the changeable confusion of appearances. Unlike the first-stage argument, this does not turn on the difference between knowing and believing, so it would be enough to believe.²² But to achieve the sort of self-control that resists akrasia, one’s beliefs would have to go deep into the foundations of value. Here lies the sort of wisdom needed to escape akrasia.

²²Because I think the argument at this second stage puts no weight on knowledge as such, my interpretation is rather far from that of Penner, “Socrates on the Strength of Knowledge”; and Reshotko, “Socratic Theory of Motivation.” Where I agree with their view, however, is in seeing the second-stage argument as workable only when agents possess much more than simply the belief that one act is better than another.

Accordingly, the second-stage argument turns out to be very far from categorically denying the possibility of Belief Akrasia. Akrasia is impossible only for agents of a very idealized sort, those who are able to apply the hedonistic calculus to all of their choices in a way that cuts through the appearances to grasp the truth of what really matters. Although there is a sense in which the second stage turns its attention from Knowledge Akrasia to Belief Akrasia, that turns out merely to signal that the nature of the argument has changed. Ultimately, both stages of the argument are pursuing the same conclusion, that freedom from akrasia is available to all and only those in possession of a certain sort of knowledge. The difference is that whereas the first-stage argument rests on a relatively superficial conceptual point, the second-stage argument gives us a substantive explanation of why knowledge prevents akrasia, and why, lacking that sort of wisdom, we ordinarily lack self-control. At no point in the argument are we supposed to conclude, against all experience, that the phenomenon of akrasia does not exist.

4. A TRANSITIONAL DIALOGUE

We have now seen that the second-stage argument from homogeneity has considerable force, but only once we make certain idealizing assumptions about an agent's ability to achieve a higher-order grasp of the unitary, homogeneous nature of value. For such an agent, it would not be possible to choose the worse option. Those of us who fail to conceive of our choices in this way labor under a kind of ignorance, and for us, akrasia may well be a regular occurrence.

This reading of the dialogue offers the tantalizing possibility of showing us precisely where Socrates's thought leaves off and Plato's begins. First, we should accept the usual view that the anti-akratic claims made in (B), (G), and (H) are Socrates's. Aristotle's testimony provides very strong evidence of this, given that the rejection of akrasia, along with the closely connected identification of virtue with knowledge, are theses that Aristotle ascribes to Socrates over and over.²³ These are, indeed, virtually the *only* substantive and specific philosophical theses that Aristotle associates with Socrates.²⁴ Now, to be sure, Aristotle cannot always be trusted as a historian of philosophy, and he was not even born until fifteen years after Socrates's death. Still, it seems incredible that Socrates's memory would be

²³For explicit references to Socrates as having denied the possibility of akrasia, see *EN* VII.2–3; *Magna moralia* I.9, 1187a5–12; II.6, 1200b25–30; *EE* VII.13, 1246b33–35. For explicit references to Socrates as having identified virtue with knowledge, see *EN* III.8, 1116b5; VI.13, 1144b18–20; *Magna moralia* I.1, 1182a15–17, 1183b9; I.20, 1190b28; I.34, 1198a10–13; *EE* I.5, 1216b3–10; III.1, 1229a15, 1230a8. Aristotle himself hesitates over whether to regard Socrates as denying only Knowledge Akrasia or also Belief Akrasia. The discussion in *Magna moralia* II.6 (whose authenticity is doubtful) focuses on the case of knowledge, whereas *EN* VII.2 suggests the claim extends also to belief (see 1145b34: πράττειν παρὰ τὸ δόξαν βέλτιον). Both discussions consider the differing implications of the thesis, when restricted to knowledge or expanded to all belief.

²⁴Beyond the references in the previous note, the closest thing to a specific philosophical thesis Aristotle ascribes to Socrates is a passing reference at *Sophistical Refutations* 34, 183b7 to Socrates's disavowal of knowledge. I set aside various general remarks on methodology: in particular, Socrates's limited focus on ethics and his interest in definitions. I also set aside the extensive references in the *Politics* to "the Socrates" of the *Republic* and *Laws* (even though in fact, in the *Laws*, Socrates never makes an appearance!). For a complete inventory of Aristotle's references to Socrates, see Deman, *Le témoignage d'Aristote sur Socrate*.

so little cherished in the Athenian philosophical community that Aristotle might have been utterly mistaken in one of the very few claims he actually associates with him. (It is true that Xenophon, in *Memorabilia* III.9.4–5, depicts Socrates as having embraced the possibility of akrasia, but Xenophon possesses so little philosophical acuity that his testimony counts for nearly nothing.)

There is, moreover, a striking resemblance between some of the specific language that Socrates is made to use in the *Protagoras* and Aristotle's characterization of his position. *Nicomachean Ethics* VII.2 reports that "it would be strange—so Socrates thought—if when knowledge was in a man something else could control it and drag it around as if it were a slave" (1145b23–24). This directly corresponds to the words that (B) ascribes to Socrates: "[the many] think of his knowledge as being dragged around by all these other things as if it were a slave."²⁵ Now, to some, this has seemed evidence that Aristotle's source of information is simply the *Protagoras* itself, which might render it largely circular to draw on Aristotle's testimony in support of the historical accuracy of the *Protagoras*. But if Aristotle really knows nothing more about Socrates than what he read in Plato's dialogues, why does he persistently focus on the anti-akratic claim, setting aside virtually all the rest? To be sure, it cannot be ruled out that Aristotle's wording is simply an echo of Plato's formulation in the *Protagoras*. But even so, the fact that Aristotle chose these particular words, out of all the words that Plato puts into Socrates's mouth, provides the strongest evidence available to us that what we have here is a genuine Socratic fragment.²⁶

But although I take the speech at (B) to invoke the spirit of Socrates himself, I take the dialogue to make a decisive turn at 352d, where Socrates is made to admit that the majority of people fail to find his position persuasive. Here is where we begin to see the mark of the young lion's claws. I do not mean to suggest, by any means, that everything before this point is exclusively Socratic in origin, and that everything after it is exclusively Platonic. On the contrary, as I have explained, I take the conclusions of the second stage, in (G) and (H), to be Socratic, and to be effectively restatements of the anti-akratic conclusion in (B). But I take the second-stage argument to be a contribution of Plato's, offered in support of a famous Socratic doctrine but along lines that betray distinctively Platonic concerns. I offer five reasons why we should find this plausible.

²⁵Compare *EN* VII.2, 1145b23–24—δεινὸν γὰρ ἐπιστήμης ἐνούσης, ὡς ᾤετο Σωκράτης, ἄλλο τι κρατεῖν καὶ περιέλκειν αὐτὴν ὡσπερ ἀνδράποδον—against *Protag.* 352bc: ἀτεχνῶς διανοοῦμενοι περὶ τῆς ἐπιστήμης ὡσπερ περὶ ἀνδράποδου, περιελκομένης ὑπὸ τῶν ἄλλων ἀπάντων.

²⁶Charles Kahn harbors doubts about Aristotle's testimony regarding Socrates, maintaining that Aristotle, like us, would have had nothing better to go on than the dialogues themselves: "If there was any oral tradition in the Academy, we may well doubt that it could contain accurate information on the unrecorded teachings of the master, some thirty or forty years after his death" (*Plato and the Socratic Dialogue*, 87). This strikes me as quite an extraordinary claim to make about a culture so rich in its oral traditions. Educated Athenians might be expected to know by heart vast quantities of poetry and drama, as indeed Socrates puts on display in the *Protagoras*' discussion of the poet Simonides. Could it be that no one managed, a few decades after Socrates's death, to remember what he had actually said? For another recent instance, see Haraldsen, "Is Pleasure Any Good?," 104. Since Haraldsen thinks that the dialogue's rejection of akrasia is not meant as a positive thesis at all, but simply as an absurdity used to show the falseness of hedonism, he is forced to suggest that Aristotle not only depends on the *Protagoras* but has fundamentally misunderstood the dialogue's point.

First, there is an argument from silence. Even if Aristotle's reports about Socrates are informed by the *Protagoras*, it is only the anti-akratic conclusion in (B) and (G) that he has in mind. The intricate argument from homogeneity gets no mention whatsoever, nor does Aristotle say anything about hedonism in connection with these views. Given how much Aristotle has to say about Socrates's anti-akratic stance, one would expect this second-stage argument to get considerable attention, if Aristotle were simply adhering indiscriminately to the text of the *Protagoras*.

Second, at a general level, the second-stage argument looks to be characteristically Platonic in its concern with transcending the heterogeneous and changeable appearances to grasp the unitary reality of value. Although hedonism might superficially look to be the most striking feature of this stage of the dialogue, the real weight of the argument rests on the idea that there is *some* ideal value beneath the appearances, such that if we could only throw off the chains of ignorance and come to see what that is, we would find it easy to do the right thing. When we read the second-stage argument as resting not on hedonism in particular, but on the idea that there is a homogeneous value underlying the changeable appearances, we can see the *Protagoras* as attempting to forge a bond between the Socratic disavowal of akrasia and Plato's distinctive metaphysical concerns.

Third, more specifically, if the dialogue is transitional in the way I suggest, then that explains why the second-stage argument aligns rather awkwardly with the stated conclusions in (G1) and (H). Those passages seem to say that Belief Akrasia is categorically impossible, yet I have argued that the second-stage argument establishes a far more qualified result. As I read the dialogue at this point, Plato is paying homage to the famous Socratic dictum, and then offering an account of what is correct about that dictum, describing the ideal kind of knowledge that would be required for an agent to be invulnerable to akrasia.

Fourth, once we understand the *Protagoras* to leave room for akrasia in ordinary, nonideal cases, its views become more continuous with Plato's later attempts to explain how akrasia is possible. Compare *Republic* VI, 505e: "every soul pursues the good and does whatever it does for its sake. It divines that the good is something [τι εἶναι], but it is perplexed and cannot adequately grasp what it is." This retains the idea of the good as a unitary thing, which we would follow if we could, but now the weight is on our difficulty in finding it. To be sure, the *Protagoras* offers not a hint that the ultimate, unitary good might be something separate from and transcending the world around us. The second-stage argument aims at the many who found Socrates unpersuasive, and the good Plato describes there—pleasure—is one that they might hope to grasp and measure. Yet once one sees that, even in the *Protagoras*, Plato recognizes the enormous difficulty of attaining the sort of wisdom that would yield perfect self-control, the continuities with later work become clearer.²⁷

²⁷Compare Plato's discussions at *Republic* IV, 439e–440b; *Timaean* 86b–e; and *Laws* 733d–734c. Of course, the later Plato moves away from the *Protagoras* in important respects, above all in introducing the tripartite soul. This leads Plato to more complicated views about the sort of virtue required for self-control, and in this way the view becomes less intellectualist, and so less focused on ignorance as the unique explanation of akrasia. For illuminating accounts of some of the continuities across Plato, see Carone, "Akrasia in the *Republic*"; and Moss, "Pleasure and Illusion in Plato." For a helpful discussion

Fifth and last, there is a still more specific reason to think that Socrates's voice in the *Protagoras* gives way to Plato's. Earlier in the dialogue, Socrates had been made to advance his characteristic view that virtue cannot be taught (320b). That position is entirely consistent with the first-stage conceptual point that knowledge, if it could be had, would preclude akrasia. Indeed, the two doctrines go together quite neatly, given that both can be tied to an idealized conception of knowledge and the virtues. But once the second-stage argument is put onto the table, the Socratic resistance to teaching the virtues gets explicitly called into question, when Socrates is made to wonder whether, perhaps, Protagoras was right all along to think that virtue can be taught. For the upshot of the second-stage argument, if read naively, would seem to be that we can all, quite readily, do what is best—that it is a matter of simply weighing up the pros and the cons. Accordingly, the discussion of akrasia concludes with Socrates's remarking that perhaps it *is* worth the money to send one's children to study with Protagoras and other sophists (358e). No one could miss the irony here, but the remark's implications are complex. To see fully why it is ironic, one has to appreciate that the argument from homogeneity is not meant to be read naively—that is, it should not be taken to show that it is really all that easy to achieve the wisdom that gives us self-control and insight into the nature of the good. But, at the same time, that argument is genuinely meant to entertain the possibility of a knowledge of the good running deep enough to validate the famous Socratic saying. Lessons that actually could free us from akrasia certainly would be worth the price.

I speculate, then, that over the final pages of the *Protagoras* we find Plato extending Socratic ideas in new directions. At (B), we are still hearing Socrates's voice, advancing one of his most famous doctrines in his own characteristic language. But when the dialogue admits, at 352d, that the majority of people fail to find this persuasive, we enter into new territory. Here Socratic ethics begins to be enveloped within an ideal Platonic metaphysics, and Plato begins to consider the prospects for leaving behind Socrates's pervasive skepticism and achieving some kind of meaningful knowledge. When the dialogue remarks, regarding the art of measurement, that "we will inquire later into what this art and knowledge is" (357b), we are handed a promissory note that Plato spends the rest of his career attempting to honor.²⁸

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of how the tripartite soul undermines key assumptions in the *Protagoras*, see Morris, "Akrasia in the *Protagoras* and *Republic*." For an account on which the entirety of Plato's mature views is already tacitly presupposed by the *Protagoras* and other early dialogues, see Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue*. Kahn, however, goes far beyond the continuities that I would propose.

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