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Well-Being, Education and Unity of the Soul in Plato

Thomas Giourgas



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With immeasurable love and gratitude,

To my parents Nikos & Violetta and to my family



Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is of my composition and that it contains no material previously submitted for any other degree or professional qualification. The work of this thesis has been produced by myself –except where due acknowledgement is made in the text.

Thomas Giourgas



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Abstract

Is *Socrates* in the *Protagoras* a sincere hedonist? The decipherment of the latter question is fundamental to the unraveling of key aspects of Plato's ethical thought. It has been suggested that *Socrates* in the *Protagoras* finds hedonism philosophically attractive for it functions as a necessary anti-akrasia premise and therefore it fits his moral psychology. At the same time quantitative hedonism provides for commensurability of moral value and, in turn, for a more straightforward, quantifiable, and action-guiding Platonic ethical theory. Although initially appealing, the latter hypothesis is deeply problematic. On the one hand, hedonism is not a necessary theoretical tool either for commensurability of value or for a quantifiable eudaimonistic ethical theory. On the other hand a hedonistic interpretation of the *Protagoras* would result in a plethora of blatant anomalies for Platonic ethical theory as it is exhibited in the early and middle period dialogues. In particular, the endorsement of quantitative hedonism comes tied with an apotheosis of sophistic education and also with a purely instrumental conception of virtue which contradicts cardinal components of *Socrates'* and Plato's virtue theory. Therefore, a prohedonistic approach of the *Protagoras* is untenable and has to be rejected. As a result, a sufficiently plausible defense of the Socratic doctrine "no one does wrong willingly" needs to be constructed on non-hedonistic grounds.

My suggestion is that we should recast Plato's treatment of akrasia in terms of two – commonly defended by early Plato- descriptive theses of human psychology; that is, psychological eudaimonism and motivational intellectualism. This move will lead us to the conclusion that the traditional conceptualization of akrasia as a single and unified phenomenon is incomplete as it does not pay justice to the richness of Plato's moral psychology. Rather, as I will maintain, there are two types of akrasia implicit in Plato's treatment of the phenomenon: synchronic akrasia and diachronic akrasia. On this revisionary theoretical basis, the differences between early Plato and later Plato on akrasia can be understood as variations in the adherence or not to psychological eudaimonism and motivational intellectualism.



"How wonderful that we have met with a paradox; now we have some hope of making progress"

Niels Bohr

"When I was 5 years old, my mother always told me that happiness was the key to life. When I went to school, they asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I wrote down 'happy'. They told me I didn't understand the assignment, and I told them they didn't understand life"

John Lennon

"Education is an admirable thing, but it is well to remember from time to time that nothing that is worth knowing can be taught"

Oscar Wilde



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1. Introduction

In Plato's dialogue, the *Protagoras*, the character Socrates appears to espouse the *hedonistic* premise – the identification of the good with the pleasant. The hedonistic premise is exploited as the argumentative basis on which *Socrates* attempts to refute the commonsense belief in *akrasia* that we can act against our better judgment. Famously, a quantitative method is developed as a calculus of pleasure at the end of the *Protagoras*, which raises a lively debate in the literature about its attribution. Does Plato mean to endorse *quantitative hedonism* or does he intend to attribute the hedonistic position to Protagoras and to the multitude? The longstanding controversy over this matter is justified since the traditionally Socratic doctrine, the denial of the phenomenon of *akrasia*, apparently relies upon a traditionally non-Socratic premise, that pleasure is *the good* – so, as a matter of fact, everybody *always* chooses what seems best to them by choosing what strikes them as most pleasant, even in putative *akratic* actions. The decipherment of Plato's treatment of hedonism in the *Protagoras* is fundamental not only to the analysis of early Platonic ethics, and to the philosophy of education but also to the comprehension of one of the flagships of Socratic paradox, the 'no one does wrong willingly' doctrine.

The *Protagoras* controversy in outline is as follows. *Prohedonist* scholars maintain that Plato takes seriously the hedonistic argument, attracted by its theoretical, and especially its quantitative functions. First, quantitative hedonism enables *Socrates* to treat the 'pleasant' and the 'good' as equivalent terms. Thence, he is sufficiently equipped to demonstrate that the commonsense explanation of *akrasia* "overcome by pleasure" leads to an absurd conclusion. In fact, the *Protagoras* is the only Platonic dialogue which denies the possibility of *akrasia* by means of explicit argument; thus, it has been commonly held that Plato endorses hedonism in the *Protagoras* as a necessary anti-*akrasia* premise. Second, quantitative hedonism provides for a single standard of goodness (pleasure) which is quantifiable, homogeneous and directly accessible to the human mind, all powerful desiderata for any moral theory. The argument from hedonism, furthermore, as exhibited in the *Protagoras* comes tied with a derivative commensurability of moral value. This conceptual and explanatory privilege of



quantitative hedonism, it has been suggested, facilitates Plato's alleged endeavor to quantify the good and to bring ethical thought and decision-making into the province of scientific, and indeed mathematical thought. The *Socratic* remarks about an art of measurement, the knowledge of which would guarantee virtue and salvation in life, have tempted prohedonists to argue that quantitative hedonism is what Plato needs in order to systematize ethical thought and moral education at the model of sciences like geometry and mathematics. Inside this context, prohedonists interpret the *Protagoras* as Plato's tentative effort to construct a unified and universally applicable theory of the good.

On the other hand, *antihedonist* scholars maintain that Plato does not espouse the hedonistic premise. By contrast, they suggest that hedonism is deliberately introduced in the dialogue – mainly in order to challenge the Protagorean conception of virtue and his overall moral outlook. In the present work, I put forward a cumulative case in support of a strong antihedonistic reading of the *Protagoras*. As I will suggest, a prohedonistic interpretation of the dialogue overlooks the depth of the hermeneutic anomalies that it creates for Plato's cardinal ethical views. Furthermore, it fails to capture the essence of the philosophical intentions and key objectives of the dialogue. A hedonist-Socrates would not merely contradict the non-hedonist and anti-hedonist-Socrates of the other dialogues; moreover, the endorsement of the view by a hedonist-Socrates that pleasure is the good comes tied with a plethora of un-Socratic theses. As Plato clearly implies in the dialogue, the argument from hedonism renders *virtue* a mere instrument for the maximization of pleasure. It also entails a distorted construal of *arête*, excellence, which is cashed out in terms of maximized political power and capacity for rhetorical manipulation of the masses. Moreover, the acceptance of quantitative hedonism would convert *Socrates* – a renowned and consistent enemy of sophistry and of its mercenary character – into a sympathizer of sophistic education and one who openly encourages all comers to pay the respective fees to the sophists.

As I will try to show, the central theme of the dialogue is not the defense of Socratic moral psychology through the usage of hedonism; rather, it is the drawing of a sharp distinction between philosophy and sophistry. The distinction is drawn on the basis of



their divergent educational aims and methods and also with regard to their irreconcilable conceptions of virtue and eudaimonia. Plato in the *Protagoras* tells us that philosophy should not be conflated with sophistry in spite of their superficial similarities. Although philosophy and sophistry share a common educational agenda, still, the ethical and intellectual gulf between the two practices is unbridgeable. Protagoras, the most prominent among the sophists and the first to come out as a sophist, is, thus, an ideal interlocutor for *Socrates*' purposes. In the course of the dialogue we are warned about the ethos of the sophist and we are informed about his clouded, instrumental conception of virtue and his hedonistic outlook of well-being. Finally, through the distinction between true and apparent values we are told that sophistic moral relativism cannot be compatible with the teaching of genuine virtue, which needs to address the possibility of erroneous judgment. The decision of Hippocrates not to associate with Protagoras after all clearly implies that *Socratic* elenchus and moral thought is completely at odds with sophistic education and moral thought.

Nevertheless, if Plato attributes the hedonistic thesis to Protagoras in order to expose his educational and ethical deficit, then we are left with a significant explanatory gap. Quantitative hedonism appears to provide for commensurability of value, which in turn, paves the way for the elimination of *akrasia*; at the same time, it facilitates the Platonic endeavor to systematize ethical thought, and to quantify decision-making and more generally moral deliberation. How, then, can we make sense of the *Socratic* denial of *akrasia* and of the quantification of decision-making without the theoretical instrument of quantitative hedonism which provides for commensurable value? I will first suggest that the quantification of decision-making and deliberation is a major Platonic explanatory advancement which need not be abandoned along with Protagorean hedonism, which is rejected by Plato. In a number of dialogues (for example in the *Euthydemus*, the *Gorgias*, the *Meno*, the *Republic*, and the *Philebus*) Plato attacks hedonism in two different ways: (1) He repeatedly puts forward a theory of value pluralism which is incompatible with the monistic and reductionist conception of value of the *Protagoras* – all value is pleasure. (2) Plato defends the claim (especially in the *Republic* and the *Gorgias*) that some pleasures are intrinsically bad (so, not all pleasure is valuable). Therefore, there is a



straightforward incompatibility of quantitative hedonism with the consistently expressed Platonic value theory, which explains Plato's rejection of it.

More importantly, however, quantitative hedonism is only superficially relevant to the logic of *Socrates'* argument. As I will try to show, an alternative theory, *Psychological Quantitative Eudaimonism*, can not only provide for a theory of commensurable goodness, but additionally avoid the parasitic implications of hedonism. The interpretation of the Platonic theory that I propose is wholly compatible with the *Protagoras'* psychology and moral theory; what is more, it captures faithfully the richness and the depth of the Platonic moral psychology and value theory, as it is exhibited in several other dialogues (*Euthydemus*, *Meno*, *Gorgias*, *Symposium*, and *Philebus*).

I will further address the thorniest problem of early Platonic moral psychology, namely the alleged *Socratic* elimination of akrasia. Here, I put forward the argument that the *Socrates* of the early and transitional Platonic dialogues has the theoretical resources to eliminate akrasia without the appeal to hedonism. Given that Plato never uses the term 'akrasia', I propose that we should recast the examination of Plato's treatment of akrasia in terms of his adherence or not to two fundamental psychological theses:

- a. *Psychological Eudaimonism* (PE)
- b. *Motivational Intellectualism* (MI).

Both theses appear in several early and transitional dialogues (like the *Euthydemus*, the *Meno*, and the *Gorgias*, for example). According to PE, all human beings are hardwired to pursue eudaimonia and to desire the conceived good; moreover, PE entails a theory of *motivational monism* which rules out the possibility of welfare independent desires. On the other hand, MI posits a theory of motivational invincibility for the good in the presence of knowledge. According to MI, knowledge cannot be dragged about by an irrational passion or a welfare independent desire, and so it ensures right action. This revisionary conceptualization of Plato's treatment of akrasia leads us to the conclusion that there are two types of akrasia eliminated in the *Protagoras*; that is, *synchronic*



akrasia (no one errs willingly); and knowledge-based *diachronic akrasia* (knowledge cannot be dragged by passions). In addition, I attempt to show that both synchronic and knowledge-based diachronic *akrasia* are consistently ruled out in the early and transitional dialogues.

Finally, I examine the level of departure of the *Republic* from the earlier dialogues, and especially the *Protagoras*, with regard to Plato's treatment of *akrasia*. Again, it is on the conceptual basis of PE and MI that we can accurately discern the level of divergence between the two dialogues. I suggest that the *Republic*, through the partition of the soul, rejects the PE and the motivational monism of the *Protagoras* and the *Meno*. Hence, the *Republic* psychology, by allowing for welfare independent desires of appetite, paves the way for an all-out acceptance of synchronic *akrasia*. It is relatively unclear, however, whether the *Republic* also allows for knowledge-based diachronic *akrasia*. My proposal, here, is that the *Republic* conception of knowledge and epistemic stability is crucially different from that of the *Meno* and the *Protagoras*. I will show that interestingly, if we apply the *Republic* moral psychology to the *Protagoras* and the *Meno* moral epistemology, then we are led to the conclusion that knowledge-based *akrasia* too is permitted in the *Republic*. It is only when we confine knowledge at a philosopher king's level that diachronic *akrasia* seems to be ruled out. Nevertheless, such a move would set the qualifying bar for knowledge unrealistically high. Either way, however, the departure of the *Republic* from the earlier dialogues is found to be radical, given that the *Republic* denies both Psychological Eudaimonism and Motivational Intellectualism as they are cashed out in the *Protagoras*, the *Meno* and other earlier dialogues.



2. The Problem of Hedonism in the *Protagoras*

In this chapter, I will attempt an analysis of Plato's dialogue, the *Protagoras*. My analysis will concentrate on Plato's controversial treatment of hedonism, an issue which still puzzles and divides readers of Plato. In the *Protagoras*, hedonism, namely the identification of pleasure with *the good* –allegedly– serves the establishment of the Socratic doctrines “no one does wrong willingly” and “virtue is knowledge”. Both doctrines are central to early Platonic moral psychology; hence, a number of scholars have been tempted to argue that *Socrates*¹ of the *Protagoras* must have been committed to hedonism so that to present a thorough defense of his moral psychology. Following Zeyl (1980), I will call “**Prohedonists**” those who hold that *Socrates*² in the *Protagoras* finds the endorsement of hedonism (of any type) philosophically attractive and that therefore he takes the hedonistic premise seriously. On the other hand, I will call “**Antihedonists**” those who argue that *Socrates* in the *Protagoras* is not committed to the identification of pleasure with *the good*. Rather, as the general antihedonistic rationale goes, *Socrates*' aim in the dialogue is to attribute the hedonistic views to *Protagoras* and to the multitude, and to reproach the sophistic educational philosophy and methods³. The longstanding controversy over this issue is justified given that a traditionally Socratic doctrine (denial of *akrasia*) apparently relies on a traditionally un-Socratic premise, that is, quantitative hedonism.

The analysis and the settlement of the Prohedonism / Antihedonism quarrel is fundamental both to the decipherment of early Platonic moral theory and to the comprehension of Plato's philosophical intentions in the *Protagoras*. What is more, the issue at stake is basic to the understanding of the meaning and the amplitude of the Socratic doctrine “no one does wrong willingly” and, in general, of *Socratic* moral psychology and value theory. Nevertheless, given that the argument from hedonism is the

¹ *Socrates (italics)* = character Socrates of the Platonic dialogues. Socrates = historical Socrates.

² I often refer to ‘*Socrates*’ and not to ‘Plato’ in order to avoid historical ambiguity. Whether *Socrates*' views in the *Protagoras* primarily depict historical Socrates' or Plato's views is an open question which still causes controversy among scholars. I am inclined to believe that the *Protagoras* expresses Socratic ideas; however, by referring to character *Socrates* I wish to sidestep the problem of Socrates.

³ Of course, an antihedonist stance can be compatible with the suggestion that pleasure is a central ingredient of a good life and a by-product of eudaimonia.



only explicit and elaborate defense of the “no one does wrong willingly” doctrine in the Platonic corpus, to suggest that *Socrates* in the *Protagoras* is not committed to hedonism comes tied with a serious interpretative price. That is, the need to reconstruct and defend the Socratic doctrine without, this time, the appeal to hedonism⁴. If *Socrates*’ stance in the *Protagoras* is ironic or even polemic against the hedonism presented in the dialogue - as proponents of the antihedonistic interpretation suggest- then an alternative non-hedonistic line of reasoning must be put forward in defense of the so-called paradoxical thesis ‘no one does wrong willingly’. Actually, it is this putative argumentative dependence of the denial of akrasia upon the quantitative hedonism presented in the *Protagoras* which places additional philosophical weight to the attempt to clarify the authentic *Socratic* intentions with regards to hedonism.

2.1 My Antihedonistic Argumentative Strategy

In what follows, I wish to put forward a cumulative case in support of a strong *antihedonistic* interpretation of the *Protagoras*. According to my antihedonistic reading, *Socrates* does not espouse the identification of the good with the pleasant; by contrast, the central aim of his strategy is to expose the disguised hedonistic views held by Protagoras (and the sophistic movement) and ‘the many’. The *Protagoras* is not a dialogue where *Socrates* attempts to explicitly and by argument defend the cardinal tenets of his moral psychology. Rather, it the dialogue depicts *Socrates*’ endeavor to unmask the most sophisticated, influential, and popular sophist of his era. Plato attempts to reveal the deceptive practice of sophistry which is hidden under the commercial mask of a professional political training and a virtue-based education. The Protagorean promise to teach young men how to become powerful in public and private affairs conceals a

⁴ In a following chapter, I explore the possibility of a hedonism-independent defence of the Socratic doctrine “no one does wrong willingly”.



subjectivist and hedonistic outlook of virtue; hence, Plato's underlying warning is that associating with the sophists can prove to be harmful for the character and the well-being of a student. Of course, I do not intend to suggest that the *Protagoras* is a dialogue written to satisfy a shallow Platonic urge to speak up publicly in favor of his teacher's intellectual and ethical superiority over Protagoras. The scope of the dialogue expands well beyond the unmasking and the ridicule of the individual sophist. The Platonic attack aims at what Protagoras symbolizes and more specifically it aims at highlighting the detrimental implications of sophistic education. Thus, the Platonic message in the dialogue transcends the boundaries of a sterile intellectual quarrel between Socrates and Protagoras.

As a matter of fact, in the eyes of the majority, among Plato's contemporaries, Socrates was simply another sophist. An ugly, annoying sophist hopelessly perplexed about ethical issues, wandering around Athens, and corrupting the youth. It is not coincidental that the Aristophanean caricature of Socrates in his work *The Clouds* presents him as a semi-comic, semi-dangerous sophist. Interestingly enough, Socrates was accused of committing 'crimes' commonly attributed to sophistic⁵ practice; and it was on the basis of these accusations that he was compelled to drink the hemlock. For the prevailing general belief Socratic thought could not be distinguished from sophistry. In the eyes of 'the many', then, the Socratic elenchus, and his conception of virtue on the one hand, and the sophistic thought and its conception of virtue on the other hand did not appear significant differences. Socratic philosophy and sophistry were conceived by the average Athenian as the two sides of the same coin⁶. The latter assumption finds textual support in the opening scenes of the *Protagoras* (314d).

⁵ For instance, the accusation that he denied the gods recognized by the Athenian state is reminiscent of the accusation against Protagorean agnosticism. Also, the accusation that he corrupted the youth was another accusation commonly affiliated with sophistic education.

⁶ As Bartlett (2003:614) puts it, "**to the mostly –but not entirely- uninformed, Socrates and the sophists are as one**". Plato expresses his complaint against this widespread misconception in the opening remarks of the *Protagoras*.



“So we were standing in the doorway discussing it until we reached an agreement, and I think the doorman, a eunuch, overheard us. He must have been annoyed with all the traffic of sophists in and out of the house, because when we knocked he opened the door, took one look at us and said, ‘Ha! More sophists! He’s busy.’ Then he slammed the door in our faces with both hands as hard as he could. We knocked again, and he answered through the locked door, ‘Didn’t you hear me say he’s busy?’ ‘My good man’, I said, ‘we haven’t come to see Callias, and we are not sophists’”⁷.

A reasonable assumption, here, is that the eunuch of the opening scene symbolizes the uncritical masses which appear to be intellectually unprepared and thus incapable of distinguishing the Socratic elenchus from sophistic eristic. For ‘the many’, Socrates is another sophist much like Protagoras; although Protagoras was probably more popular as a professional educator of virtue and certainly a much wealthier⁸ one.

As I will argue, by ‘dethroning’ Protagoras, the most respected sophist of his time, *Socrates* hopes to give a subtle but also dramatic warning to prospective young students regarding the damaging effects of sophistic education in one’s soul. The deeper *Socratic* aim, then, is to bring into light the vague and distorted Protagorean conception of virtue and to decompose his -widely advertised- ability to teach something beneficial; Protagoras claimed that his training could be of pivotal importance for the well-being of a citizen as an individual and, in turn, for the city as an entity. Nevertheless, sophistry, *Socrates* implies in the dialogue, offers an education first and foremost designed for young, rich, egotistic and overambitious citizens who secretly aspire to gain political power in order to satisfy their narrow hedonistic desires. For Protagoras and the sophists, knowledge and virtue are devalued into mere instruments for pleasure and for the acquisition of political power. All the same, the true nature of sophistic teaching is very

⁷ What else could the presentation of this scene serve in the economy of the dialogue other than to draw a sharp distinction between Socrates and the sophists? The eunuch, much like most of Socrates’ contemporaries could not discern the difference between Socratic philosophy and sophistry. The symbolism in play here is exquisitely given to the reader.

⁸ Gagarin (1969:141) also implies that *Socrates* has reasons to draw a distinction between his philosophy and sophistry. For the average Athenian the intellectual and ethical differences between Socrates and a sophist were far from obvious.

“In spite of a certain rivalry between the two men, they are essentially in the same position; both are openly committed to educating young men, and both face the same sort of reaction from a generally hostile public”.



well disguised behind the Orwellian promise to teach one ‘how to manage one’s public and private affairs, how to acquire virtue, and how to secure salvation in life’. The central *Socratic* task in the dialogue, then, is to reveal what a sophistic education really comes down to. It is for this reason that *Socrates* needs to expose Protagoras’ true moral views in order to exhibit to young students like *Hippocrates* the detrimental consequences of trusting their education to a professional sophist.

The *Protagoras* is an ideal opportunity for Plato to designate the unbridgeable intellectual, ethical and educational gulf that separates *Socratic* elenchus and philosophical practice in general from sophistic thought and education. The dialogue is in line with the recurrent and persistent *Socratic* aim to expose sophistry and to reproach its educational methods; however, the *Protagoras* serves this Platonic aim in two additional ways. First, Protagoras is considered to be the most serious and sophisticated intellectual contender of Socratic thought. Secondly, Protagoras is eager to accept the identity of a sophist -unlike other sophists who practiced the sophistic profession under the veil of another art such as poetry, music, gymnastics, or rhetoric⁹ (317c1-c3). Therefore, *Socrates* is legitimated to treat Protagoras as a paradigmatic case of a sophist; the Protagorean thoughts on virtue, education, politics, and the good can be taken as representative of what any other sophist would advocate. Hence, the dialogue is ideally structured for the exposition of sophistry. Again, the following passage from the *Protagoras* is illuminating:

Protagoras: “I admit that I am a sophist and that I educate men, and I consider this admission to be a better precaution than denial” (*Protagoras*, 317c3)

As it becomes evident in the course of the dialogue, the Protagorean acceptance of the sophistic identity¹⁰ enables *Socrates* to convert his interlocutor into a paradigmatic case

⁹ In *Protagoras*’ words (*Protagoras*, 316d): “**Now, I maintain that the sophist’s art is an ancient one, but that the men who practiced it in ancient times, fearing the odium attached to it, disguised it....**” Plato by having Protagoras admitting his sophistic identity is in a much better dialectical position to attack sophistic education altogether.

¹⁰ Benardete (2000:189) raises an interesting point regarding *Protagoras*’ readiness to accept the sophistic identity: “**The possibility of Protagoras coming forward publicly as a sophist depends in part on his**



of sophistic thought. Having set the scene for a philosophy / sophistry debate, the *Socratic* agenda in the dialogue begins to unfold; its central scope is to underline that the major difference between Socrates and a sophist lies in their understanding of *arête*. *Protagoras* claims that a student who associates with him will become more virtuous both in the public and the private sphere. Justifiably then, the focus of the dialogue is placed on how *Protagoras* understands virtue in relation to the educational ware he is infamous to advertise¹¹. Simply put, Plato intends to reveal the sophistic confusion about the very product they are supposed to sell to their customers. *Socrates*' attack against the sophistic conception of *arête* centers on the fact that sophistic teaching does not lead to the cultivation of a genuinely virtuous character -either in the public or in the private sphere. Interestingly, this is exactly what *Protagoras* promises to teach *Hippocrates* should the latter chose to associate with him (*Prot.* 319a):

“What I teach is sound deliberation, both in domestic matters –how best to manage one’s household, and in public affairs –how to realize one’s maximum potential for success in political debate and action”.

Again, the overlap between the Socratic and the Protagorean educational agenda is quite obvious. The Platonic effort is to highlight the fact that this apparent overlap between the two thinkers is only a very superficial overlap. Thus, what underlies and finally unifies the whole argument of the dialogue is the suggestion that the *Protagorean* educational agenda comes tied with a distorted understanding of virtue. The kind of political virtue that Protagoras promises to teach is nothing but a body of training which aims at the augmentation of one’s political influence and the maximization of their personal pleasure. Now, as I will try to show, the refutation of the *Protagorean* conception of *arête* cannot be detached from the disavowal of the quantitative hedonism presented in the dialogue. If this is correct, it follows that sophistic education and its derivative conception of virtue entertain a relationship of theoretical dependence with quantitative hedonism. In other

ability to be a critic of poetry”. Given that Plato also raised doubts about the educational value of poetry, we can see another element of possible confusion between character *Socrates* and Protagoras.

¹¹ By contrast, Gagarin (1969:134) notes that **“Plato is attempting to establish the basic continuity between Protagorean and Socratic thought and to show that they agree on the most important matter, arete and paideia”.**



words, one cannot endorse the one (sophistic teachability of virtue) without endorsing the other (quantitative hedonism). Thus, *Socrates* will have to either accept both theses (quantitative hedonism & apotheosis of sophistic education) or to dismiss both theses. At a superficial level, *Socrates* appears to accept both the hedonistic premise and the beneficial nature of sophistic teaching; apparently, he comes out as a proponent of hedonism and a sympathizer of sophistic education. However, the phenomenal anomaly is deliberately exploited by *Socrates* in order to elicit the true Protagorean moral thought. As I will conclude, what *Socrates* really intends to do is to subtly reject the quantitative hedonism presented in the dialogue and to reproach the educational value of sophistry.

Socrates warns us that young students and enthusiastic learners (symbolized in the dialogue by young and aspiring *Hippocrates*) should not be left at the hands of the sophists -both for the sake of the development of their own well-being and for the sake of the protection of the well-being of the city. The primary reason for rejecting sophistic education is that it reduces education, knowledge, and virtue into mere instruments for the maximization of one's personal interests. Sophistic education aims at the cultivation of those personal talents and skills that will facilitate the pursuit of one's strictly egoistic aims. The hidden promise of sophistic education is its ability to provide the necessary training to a handful of men about how to become extremely competitive and potent egoists, without having any genuine other-regarding concerns. At the same time, it teaches them how to become influential populists and, in general, how to benefit from their sophistic education at the expense of the rest of the society. *Socrates*' grand aim in the *Protagoras* is to expose the radically egocentric and hedonist-based education offered by the sophists in a dialectical battle against the most popular representative among them, Protagoras¹².

The dialogue centers on the nature of virtue (as the title also suggests) and among other subthemes it explores the question about the teachability of virtue. *Socrates* unleashes an exquisitely subtle attack against *Protagoras* by exposing his smattering understanding of

¹² In the very apt words of Weiss (2006:28), '**Protagoras is confronted as a representative of the sophistic profession –indeed as the paradigmatic sophist. The question *Socrates* poses to *Hippocrates* concerns no what Protagoras is and what he teaches, but what sophists are and what they teach**'.



arête. The question that Plato implicitly poses to the reader of the dialogue is of key importance: How can one trust the sophists for their education when the most eminent sophist among them has been found to have a shaky and insufficient understanding of virtue, i.e. of the teaching material?

Now, it is a commonplace that *Socrates* of the Platonic dialogues is consistently opposed to the idea that sophistic teaching was not suitable for the building of a genuinely virtuous character. The *Protagoras*, as I will hold, is not an exception to this well-grounded and consistent *Socratic* position. My proposal, then, is that to interpret *Socrates* of the *Protagoras* as a quantitative hedonist entails the adoption of a purely instrumental view of virtue and of knowledge, and the approval of a philosophy of education which has been repeatedly and forcefully rejected by *Socrates* and *Plato*. Therefore, reading *Socrates* of the *Protagoras* as a hedonist comes tied with a picture of *Socratic* philosophy, moral psychology and education which is not only compatible with sophistry, but also appreciative of it. Such an anomaly, however, is undue, and extremely blatant to be any credible at first place.

Hence, one of my key endeavors will be to demonstrate the correlative relationship between a prohedonistic interpretation of the *Protagoras* and the acceptance of sophistic teaching as a beneficial educational method for the development of virtue and the acquisition of eudaimonia. Arguably, the latter claim has been openly and repeatedly dismissed by *Plato*. Thus, by highlighting the correlation between a hedonist *Socrates* and the apotheosis of sophistic practice I aim to weaken the prohedonistic hypothesis. Actually, nowhere in the Platonic corpus does *Socrates* say or even imply that sophistic education can possibly offer the educational basis for the cultivation of virtue. Conversely, *Socratic* thought consistently disregards the idea that a close association with the sophists might ever have a beneficial impact on oneself or on a polis. For instance, a recurrent Platonic objection against sophistic teaching is that it aims at persuasion through manipulation of public views (δόξα); whereas a proper (philosophical) education



aims at knowledge and at the development of the well-being of the individual and of the polis¹³ (an education grounded in *επιστήμη* and genuine virtue).

In a nutshell, I wish to suggest that a hedonist *Socrates* in the *Protagoras* would generate much greater interpretative problems than those it is supposed to solve with regards to *Socratic* ethical theory, his conception of virtue, and philosophy of education. Hence, in light of evidence internal and external to the *Protagoras*, I wish to offer an antihedonistic account which will be more plausible than any alternative prohedonistic approach, and more complete than alternative antihedonistic approaches.

At a later portion of this chapter I will deal with the putative dependence of the “no one does wrong willingly” doctrine on the hedonistic premise. My analysis will lead to the conclusion that the identification of the good with the pleasant does not serve in any of the suggested ways the defense of the Socratic tenet. The prohedonistic assumption is that hedonism functions as a multiple exegetic tool for the denial of *akrasia*. On the one hand, it provides for a more specified and commensurable eudaimonistic theory of human psychology. On the other hand it is a necessary premise so that *Socrates* can expose the absurdity in the view of ‘the many’ who express an anti-intellectualistic view of human psychology and motivation. The latter assumption, however, does not survive under a closer scrutiny of the *Protagoras*. What is needed for the exposition of the absurdity in the views of ‘the many’ is not quantitative hedonism, but any theory that can provide for commensurability of value. Such an ethical theory can be constructed independently of hedonism. I will discuss *Psychological Quantitative Eudaimonism* as an alternative theory which both provides for commensurability of value and at the same time fits early Platonic ethics and moral psychology much better than quantitative hedonism.

Let me finish this section by saying a few things about the features that distinguish my argument from other antihedonistic readings: Many antihedonistic arguments have

¹³ This particular deficiency of sophistic teaching is elaborately discussed in the *Gorgias*. There, *Socrates* underlines the dangerousness of sophistry for the human soul as it enshrines mere opinion and “**aims to convert it into πίστις, conviction, without regard for the truth of the opinion, hence a fortiori without regard for knowledge**” (Segvic, 2005:8)



followed a straightforward -and sometimes oversimplified- tack in order to refute the view of a hedonist *Socrates* in the *Protagoras*. It is not plausible, they say, to reconcile the antihedonist *Socrates* we know from the early and middle Platonic dialogues (for example from the *Apology*, the *Meno* and the *Gorgias*) with the zealot hedonist *Socrates* of the *Protagoras*. The shift seems to too gigantic to be construed even as Plato's momentary philosophical experimentation. In other words, some antihedonistic arguments have overly relied on what I will henceforth call the Inconsistency Thesis. The Inconsistency thesis is basically the assumption that the view of a hedonist *Socrates* in the *Protagoras* is blatantly incompatible with *Socrates*' treatment of pleasure throughout the Platonic corpus; therefore such a gross inconsistency by itself stands as sufficient evidence to preclude the possibility of *Socrates* taking seriously the hedonistic premise in the dialogue. Moreover, a prohedonistic interpretation would irreparably ruin *Socratic* consistency regarding his views about the role of pleasure in relation to virtue and to the good life. Thereupon, *Socrates* cannot have been taking seriously the identification of pleasure with the good. This is the general spirit of the antihedonistic arguments which heavily rely on the Inconsistency Thesis. However, there seems to be something crucially problematic in the logic of these arguments. The logical problem can be traced in how they explain away the possibility of a hedonist *Socrates* in the *Protagoras*; namely, based on the apparent discrepancy between what *Socrates* says about pleasure in the *Protagoras* and what he holds about pleasure in most Platonic dialogues. As I will try to show the latter reasoning seems to be circular and question begging. To put it schematically:

Suppose that S (*Socrates*) holds X (rejection of hedonism) at time t_1, t_2, t_4, t_5 , (in several Platonic dialogues), and that at t_3 (in the *Protagoras*) he allegedly holds $\sim X$ (acceptance of hedonism)

If the question at stake is whether S is really committed to $\sim X$ at t_3 , then it is rather problematic to suggest that S is not committed to $\sim X$ *only because* it does not fit in with the rest of his claims. Such a line of reasoning would be, I believe, circular, since what is at stake is exactly whether S holds $\sim X$ at t_3 . The mere observation that *Socrates*' treatment of pleasure in the *Protagoras* contradicts his treatment of pleasure elsewhere is



a logically shaky basis to establish an antihedonistic verdict. Thereupon, a plausible antihedonistic argument cannot be constructed merely on the basis of the Inconsistency thesis -which needs to be supplemented by additional evidence independent of the mere recognition about the apparent discrepancy between Socratic treatment of pleasure in the *Protagoras* and elsewhere. My argumentative strategy will be conveyed through the construction of a cumulative antihedonistic case which aims to prove that a possible Platonic endorsement of hedonism in the *Protagoras* would not merely contradict the standard Platonic treatment of pleasure, but the entirety of his ethical theory and moral psychology.

Suppose that we want to investigate whether S holds X or \sim X at time t_3 .

Also, suppose that S held X at t_1, t_2, t_4, t_5 .

Now, if it could be shown that by holding \sim X (hedonism), S (Socrates) is subsequently committed to \sim W, \sim Y, \sim Z -whereas Socrates has systematically defended W, Y, Z then, we have a much richer, wider, and better supported case (independent of pleasure-treatment claims) in order to suggest that S did not intend to commit himself to \sim X at t_3 . What I will try to designate, then, is the depth and the width of the interpretative contradictions and anomalies which come tied with the picture of a hedonist *Socrates* in the *Protagoras*. The adoption of a modus tollens strategy will underlie the cumulative antihedonistic case that I shall put forward:

$$\mathbf{P} \rightarrow \mathbf{Q}, \neg\mathbf{Q} \vdash \neg\mathbf{P} \quad (\text{If P, then Q. Not Q. Therefore, not P})$$

Starting my analysis by examining the assumption that Socrates espoused hedonism in the *Protagoras*, I will explore the implications of the hedonistic assumption in relation to *Socrates'* cardinal ethical views as these are presented in the early and middle period dialogues. More specifically, I will focus on *Socrates'* views regarding sophistic education as opposed to Socratic elenchus, the recurrent theme on the teachability of virtue, the relationship between virtue and eudaimonia, the value of knowledge. My conclusion will be that the implications of reading *Socrates* hedonistically in the



Protagoras are devastating for *Socratic* ethical theory and moral psychology. It is the depth and the width of the anomalies that render the prohedonistic assumption untenable.

2.2 Prohedonism Vs Antihedonism

The prohedonism / antihedonism quarrel regarding *Socrates*' treatment of hedonism in the *Protagoras* is longstanding and still vivid. Here, I shall try to present the spectrum of the relevant arguments of both camps; further, I will discuss some of the main variations of prohedonistic readings which aim to rescue *Socrates* from the charge of inconsistency with regard to his treatment of pleasure and his value theory. It is also worth noting that the two contrasting camps, prohedonism and antihedonism, are not exclusive of the possible approaches to the *Socratic* treatment of hedonism. Some of the most influential hermeneutical approaches to the issue encompass a mixture of prohedonistic and antihedonistic features. As Julia Annas (1999:167) notes, the idea that the prohedonistic and the antihedonistic views are exclusive alternatives “**does not do justice to them or to ancient views of the issue**”. Indeed, some of the views can be classified as quasi-hedonistic (most prominently, Vlastos, 1956, and Kahn, 2006). In what follows, I will also touch upon the specificities of a quasi-hedonistic reading by focusing on the respective works by Vlastos and Kahn. Now, let me give a rough sketch of the spectrum of the relevant arguments from prohedonism to quasi-hedonism.



2.3 Prohedonists on the *Protagoras*

It has been suggested by prohedonists that *Socrates*' treatment of pleasure in the *Protagoras* is genuinely hedonistic and that it depicts either historical *Socrates*' ideas and / or Plato's momentary philosophical views. Without quantitative hedonism, the argument goes, the Socratic denial of akrasia would have been left undefended by means of explicit argument; therefore, *Socrates* must have used hedonism as a necessary premise for the establishment of his doctrine "no one does wrong willingly". The latter view, which renders the *Socratic* denial of akrasia dependable on the adoption of quantitative hedonism, has been defended by Hackforth¹⁴ (1928), Tenkku (1956), Nussbaum (1984) and Irwin (1995) among others. Construing quantitative hedonism as a *necessary anti-akrasia premise* is a rather common strategy among prohedonists; there is unanimous agreement inside the prohedonist camp about the dependence of the 'no one does wrong willingly' thesis on the hedonistic premise in the *Protagoras*. In general, prohedonists agree that the introduction of the hedonistic premise in the dialogue must be placed inside the framework of the *Socratic* anti-akrasia claims.

On the other hand, prohedonists are divided over whether *Socrates* "**ever retracted this hedonism in later dialogues, and most notably in the *Gorgias***" (Russell, 2005:239). In other words, one field of disagreement among prohedonists is whether the quantitative hedonism of the *Protagoras* was *Socrates*' momentary experimentation or rather a premise of a wider Platonic ethical project. For example, Irwin (1995) has expressed the view that Plato in the *Gorgias* retracted from the quantitative hedonism of the *Protagoras*. For Irwin, the *Protagoras* is *Socrates*' hedonistic parenthesis in an otherwise non-hedonistic and antihedonistic moral theory. His reading entails a picture of development in Platonic value theory and treatment of pleasure. By contrast, Gosling & Taylor (1982), Richardson (1990), and Rudebusch (1999) hold that the hedonism espoused in the *Protagoras* is allowed in the *Gorgias*, and thus, it is compatible with the apparent antihedonism of the *Gorgias*. Moreover, they propose alternative interpretative

¹⁴ Hackforth (1928:41) from a radical prohedonistic standpoint favors the reading of a *Socrates* who is consciously converted into a hedonist: "...**the hedonistic doctrine propounded is not introduced as being that either of Protagoras or of the average man. It is forced on Protagoras in the first instance, and then Socrates represents himself as joining with Protagoras in forcing it on the multitude**".



tacks all aiming to show that the type of hedonism explicitly rejected in the *Gorgias* must be distinguished from the type of hedonism endorsed in the *Protagoras*. In a nutshell, these scholars attempt to offer a conciliatory interpretation between the *Protagoras*' treatment of pleasure and the *Gorgias*' treatment of pleasure. Although they are in congruence with Irwin in that the hedonism of the *Protagoras* is an indispensable anti-akrasia premise, they distinguish their approach from Irwin's *developmental* interpretation, in one significant respect: for them, *Socrates*' treatment of pleasure throughout the dialogues is not significantly altered and therefore there is a considerable degree of consistency between the views advocated in the *Gorgias*, the *Protagoras* and other Platonic dialogues. In other words, Rudebusch, Gosling & Taylor, and Richardson offer a 'Unitarian' reading with regard to Plato's treatment of hedonism -as opposed to the developmentalist interpretation defended by Irwin and Nussbaum. So the field of disagreement here is about whether *Socrates* was a consistent sophisticated hedonist over the span of the Platonic dialogues or a momentary hedonist who disavowed quantitative hedonism after writing the *Protagoras*.

What is worth mentioning is that Unitarian prohedonists explain away the alleged inconsistency in *Socrates*' treatment of pleasure by interpreting *Socrates* as a consistent *rational hedonist* throughout the Platonic dialogues. This idea of "rational hedonism" or of "long term hedonism" is of vital interpretative importance to Unitarian prohedonists like Gosling & Taylor and Rudebusch. The overriding concern of unitarian 'rational hedonism-like' theories is to sketch a more sophisticated picture of a hedonist *Socrates*, who, unlike most sophists and "the many", avoids the common objections which apply to a brute, selfish, narrow-minded version of quantitative hedonism.

2.4 Unitarianism and the Sophistication of Hedonism

The divisions among prohedonists, however, expand beyond this Unitarian – Developmentalist controversy with regard to Plato's overall treatment of hedonism.



Unitarian prohedonists are internally divided over the exact type of sophisticated hedonism that should be ascribed to *Socrates*. Their attempt can be understood as a reconstruction of *Socratic* hedonism in the *Protagoras* so that it can provide for a revisionary enlightened picture of the hedonist *Socrates*. At the same time, however, the Unitarian accounts aim at the reconciliation of *Socrates* of the *Protagoras* with *Socrates* of the *Gorgias*. Let me be more precise about this point: Unitarian prohedonists share the idea that *Socrates* in the *Gorgias* (and elsewhere) does not intend to disavow all types of hedonism. Simply put, the shared suggestion is that the anti-hedonistic stance in the *Gorgias* does not pertain to hedonism simpliciter; rather, it applies only to the particular brutish hedonism that is presented in the *Gorgias* (for example, the one attributed to tyrants). According to Unitarian prohedonists, there is an important distinction to be drawn. That is, the distinction between the type of hedonism presented and endorsed in the *Protagoras* and the hedonism implied (and never rejected) in the *Gorgias*. Now, disagreement arises among Unitarian prohedonists over the specificities of the type of hedonism that is being espoused in the *Protagoras* and the one that is not explicitly rejected but allowed in the *Gorgias*. In other words, they diverge in their suggestions about the exact type of hedonism which unifies the apparently contradicting treatments of pleasure in the *Protagoras* and the *Gorgias*.

For Gosling & Taylor (1982) the –overlooked- distinction that *Socrates* meant to draw in the *Gorgias* is that between ‘short term’ and ‘long term’ pleasantness; that is to say, a distinction between overall less but proximate pleasure and overall more but temporally distant pleasure. According to their view, if the reader of the *Gorgias* is careful enough, they will notice that *Socrates*’ distinction between the good and the pleasant (*Gorgias*, 500d) can be reduced into a distinction between short-term and overall long-term pleasantness¹⁵. Therefore, the suggestion goes, the *Gorgias* allows for a soft and enlightened hedonism in the context of which ‘the good’ can be identified with the ‘overall more long-term pleasure’. The conclusion they reach is that if hedonism of the

¹⁵ A similar view is defended by Tenkku (1956). For Tenkku, *Socrates* in the *Protagoras* is a proponent of *rational hedonism* -as opposed to momentary hedonism. However, she acknowledges that, *Socrates*’ endorsement of rational hedonism commits him to moral views which contradict his ethical profile. **“Perhaps the greatest reason for Plato’s acceptance of hedonism is that he does not observe a possible inconsistency between his hedonism and his moral ideas”** (Tenkku, 1956:44)



Gorgias is construed in terms of the aforementioned distinction, then, the *Socrates* of the *Gorgias* is no less a hedonist than the *Socrates* of the *Protagoras*. If they are correct, the *Socratic* attack on hedonism in the *Gorgias* is more restricted than it has been previously thought, and therefore it does not extend to the kind of hedonism defended by *Socrates* in the *Protagoras*. To put it into their words (Gosling & Taylor, 1982:76),

“..Socrates’ tirade against pleasure in the *Gorgias* contains no argument that refutes the enlightened hedonism which he maintains in the *Protagoras*...Plato failed to grasp his own distinction between long-term and immediate pleasantness, and consequently failed to see the strength of the position which he has assigned to *Socrates* in the *Protagoras*...”

One of the most serious problems of the Gosling & Taylor account appears in relation to the *Socratic* anti-akrasia argument. As I have already suggested, one of the main reasons for interpreting *Socrates* as a hedonist in the *Protagoras* is the view that quantitative hedonism –allegedly- functions as an effective anti-akrasia premise. However, the distinction drawn by Gosling & Taylor between short term pleasure and long term pleasure seems to abolish this chief interpretative advantage. In the Gosling & Taylor account the picture of the agent undergoing internal conflict before choosing between lesser but immediate gratification or distant but greater gratification seems to allow for akrasia scenarios. For example, suppose that, *S* knows that *X* is an overall more pleasant action than *Y*. However, *Y* can offer immediate gratification to *S*, whereas *X* requires patience and self-control. In such scenarios it is intelligible to think that although *S* knows that *X* carries greater pleasure, nevertheless, *S* overcome by a stronger desire for the lesser but immediate pleasure chooses *Y* willingly. Hence, the problem of the Gosling & Taylor distinction is that it introduces a criterion for evaluating pleasure (proximity) which influences an agent’s decision independently of purely quantitative concerns. Along these lines, Rudebusch (1999:24) has argued that **“the Gosling & Taylor version of hedonism does not provide for commensurability”**. For Rudebusch, commensurability of value is exactly what *Socrates* attempted to establish by putting forward the hedonistic thesis. A commensurable theory of pleasure (and therefore of goodness), Rudebusch thinks, is what enables *Socrates* to exhibit the absurdity in the views of the multitude;



further it is commensurability of value that facilitates the defense of *Socrates'* cardinal claim, i.e. that knowledge is sufficient for virtuous behavior.

Having rejecting the Gosling & Taylor account, Rudebusch -also from a Unitarian prohedonistic standpoint-, offers an alternative reconciliatory proposal. In a nutshell, his position is that *Socrates'* treatment of pleasure in the *Protagoras* can be reconciled with the polemic treatment of pleasure in the *Gorgias* and the climate of condemnation of hedonism exhibited in other Platonic dialogues. As he maintains, his account, unlike Gosling & Taylor's account, preserves the argumentative advantages related to *Socrates'* defense of the "no one does wrong willingly" doctrine as it provides for commensurability of value. For Rudebusch (1999:25), the distinction that should be drawn is one between *real and apparent magnitudes of pleasure*. This distinction, Rudebusch suggests, retains the quantitative nature of *Socrates'* hedonism while it also allows for a single standard of evaluating pleasure¹⁶. Hence, if the standard of pleasantness, i.e. of goodness is single and commensurable, then, wrongdoing can only be explained as a mistake; or, as an expression of ignorance about real and apparent magnitudes of pleasures. Rudebusch's suggestion is also better supported by textual evidence compared to the Gosling & Taylor account, as the *Protagoras* passage indicates (356c5-d3):

SOCRATES: -"Answer me this: do things of the same size appear to you larger when seen near at hand and smaller when seen from a distance, or not? ...They would agree. If then our well-being depended upon this, doing and choosing large things, avoiding and not doing the small ones, what would we see as our salvation in life?"

In other words, the Rudebusch agent is a hedonist whose wrongdoing is explained as a mistake in the measurement or the weighting of pleasures. A proximate pleasure, for example, might give the false impression to an agent that a pleasure is larger than it really is. Therefore, the Rudebusch-account agent suffers from a -momentary- cognitive incompetence to measure correctly and thence is liable to misperceive the actual 'size' of

¹⁶ It is plausible, then, to suggest that for Rudebusch the distinction between short term and long term pleasantness introduces a qualitative criterion of pleasure-value (vicinity of pleasure). It is this qualitative principle of distinction that makes pleasure incommensurable, according to Rudebusch.



a prospective pleasure. In this sense, wrongdoing is necessarily cashed out as the result of a miscalculation. On the other hand, the Gosling & Taylor-account agent is a hedonist whose wrongdoing is of a different psychological nature. Their account seems to be open to akrasia cases; the agent of their account -although she might be in a position to conduct successful measurements about the pleasure-value of alternative actions- yet she is prone to succumb into choosing the lesser overall pleasure, overcome by the *temporal* proximity of the less pleasant action. Simply put, the Gosling & Taylor wrongdoer is not necessarily construed as being ignorant of the right size of pleasures and pains which are entailed in alternative courses of action. And thus, her wrongdoing cannot always be explained as the result of a cognitive mistake but more so as an expression of impotence to delay gratification and opt for the overall greater pleasure.

2.5 *Quasi-hedonism in the Protagoras*

A number of scholars have proposed an interpretation of Plato's treatment of pleasure in the *Protagoras* which entails a mixture of prohedonistic and antihedonistic features. I will use the term 'quasi-hedonism' to refer to these interpretations of the *Protagoras* which do not clearly belong to one of the two camps, as they borrow hermeneutic elements from both prohedonism and antihedonism. Characteristic examples of quasi-hedonistic readings of the *Protagoras* are these offered by Gregory Vlastos (1956) and Charles Kahn (2006). The most essential feature of a typical quasi-hedonistic reading is the rejection of the prohedonistic claim according to which Plato *intended* to endorse the identification of the good with the pleasant. Therefore, quasi-hedonism denies the prohedonistic proposal concerning Plato's intentions in presenting the hedonistic premise. Be it 'rational hedonism', 'long-term hedonism', or real magnitude hedonism', quasi-hedonism is opposed to all prohedonistic theories which interpret *Socrates* as an all-out hedonist or even as a conscious enlightened utilitarian. So, the main point that distinguishes a quasi-hedonistic from a prohedonistic interpretation is that the former



rejects the claim that *Socrates* in the *Protagoras* intends to advocate a theory of sophisticated hedonism. On the other hand, quasi-hedonism can be distinguished from antihedonism in the following sense: most quasi-hedonists (like Vlastos) resist the antihedonistic assumption according to which *Socrates* deliberately aims to attribute a false premise (hedonism) to ‘the many’ and to Protagoras in order to delineate the sophist as a brute hedonist and, in turn, to ridicule him as a teacher of virtue. In a nutshell, a common quasi-hedonistic reading encompasses two central views:

- (a) That *Socrates* does not intend to commit himself to any type of hedonism.
- (b) That *Socrates*’ stance in the *Protagoras* should not be read as aphoristic to or polemic against the idea that pleasure constitutes a cardinal component of a virtuous and eudaimon life.

According to proponents of quasi-hedonism, like Vlastos and Kahn, the fact that *Socrates* does not intend to accept a radical hedonistic position in the *Protagoras* should not be regarded as a sign that pleasure in Platonic thought is detached from virtue and eudaimonia. As both Vlastos and Kahn maintain, Plato’s intention in the *Protagoras* is to argue that pleasure is *a* good, but not *the* good. For Vlastos, the contention that *Socrates* intentionally offers a false proposition (quantitative hedonism) in order to trick *Protagoras* and ‘the many’ and establish the “no one does wrong willingly” doctrine is ungrounded. Moreover, Vlastos suggests that it was not *Socrates*’ intention to defend the strict identification between pleasure and *the* good (**of the form, ‘all good is pleasant, all pleasure is good’**). Rather, as he maintains, the *Protagoras* is another expression of *Socrates*’ eudaimonism, according to which the virtuous action, the overall best action is always the most pleasant/less painful action (**‘all good is pleasant’**). Vlastos’ criticism, then, to *Socrates*’ of the *Protagoras* is that he failed to distinguish strict hedonism (**all pleasure is good AND all good is pleasant**) from quasi-hedonism (**all good is pleasant, but NOT all pleasure is good**). The overriding suggestion in Vlastos’ quasi-hedonistic reading is that the moral psychology of the *Protagoras* aimed to render pleasure a necessary *by-product* of virtue and eudaimonia. Further, Vlastos rejects the radically hedonistic picture sketched by prohedonists, according to which *Socrates* conceives pleasure as the exclusive final aim of human action. Inside a prohedonistic framework,



Plato appears to argue that pleasure is not merely a by-product of the good but something *identical* to the good¹⁷; Vlastos rejects this claim, although he admits that Plato has unintentionally paved the way for a stronger claim, namely for the identification of the pleasant with the good. Along the same lines, Tenkku maintains that perhaps the greatest reason for Plato's acceptance of hedonism is that he does not observe a possible inconsistency between his hedonism and his moral ideals (Tenkku, 1956:44). The common feature between Vlastos and prohedonists is the recognition that Plato is committed to the identification of the good with the pleasant. However, prohedonists tend to construe this Platonic commitment to hedonism as a deliberate philosophical move, whereas for Vlastos and Tenkku Plato simply failed to distinguish the thesis 'all good is pleasant' from the thesis 'pleasure is *the* good'.

Kahn's quasi-hedonistic approach -although it shares some of its basic features with Vlastos' approach- it crucially differs in that it proposes a radically different picture of Plato's philosophical intentions in the dialogue. For Kahn, *Socrates'* strategy is to dialectically drag Protagoras towards the adoption of a strict hedonistic position; therefore, unlike Vlastos, Kahn suggests that the presentation of quantitative hedonism in the dialogue functions as a dialectical Trojan horse. Quantitative hedonism is a theoretical tool which underpins the Protagorean claims about the teachability of virtue. *Protagoras* recognizing the attractiveness of quantitative hedonism in relation to his educational ware is practically motivated to endorse the hedonistic premise. However, for Kahn, Plato did not sincerely intend to support the educational profile of the Abderian sophist; rather, he deliberately attributed the hedonistic theory to Protagoras in order to present him as a brute hedonist and, in turn, to mock his ability to teach virtue.

On the other hand, parts of Kahn's interpretation fit very well with some distinctive prohedonistic features. For example, Kahn concedes that quantitative hedonism is a necessary premise in the logic of the *Protagoras'* argument for the refutation of 'the many'. To put it into his own words (2006:53): "**it is hedonism that permits Socrates to**

¹⁷ In other words, Vlastos suggests that Plato's intention was to defend *only* the proposition 'all that is good is also pleasant'; and not the proposition 'all that is pleasant is good'. However, as Vlastos believes, the way *Socrates* articulates his argument commits him to both propositions.



reinterpret akrasia as an error in the measurement of pleasures and pains”. In other words, he acknowledges the argumentative advantages that emerge from the move to treat the ‘good’ and the ‘pleasant’ as equivalent and interchangeable terms¹⁸. For Kahn, the interchangeability between the ‘good’ and the ‘pleasant’ is the decisive move which enables *Socrates* to construct a stronger anti-akrasia case. Nevertheless, at the same time, Kahn maintains that the denial of akrasia should not be taken as *Socrates*’ primary philosophical motivation for presenting the argument from quantitative hedonism in the *Protagoras*. Rather, *Socrates*’ primary aim, Kahn believes, is to expose the educational deficits of sophistry and the detrimental effects of its methods for one’s own soul. Finally, he holds that *Socrates*’ grand aim is to give a clear and dramatic warning to prospective students regarding the dangers that lurk should they trusted their education to the sophists. Now, as far as the *Socratic* treatment of pleasure in the *Protagoras* is concerned, Kahn, following Vlastos, argues that the only two things *Socrates* intended to defend were:

- (a) That “pleasure is *a* good”, and
- (b) That the virtuous action is always more pleasant than its alternatives (**all that is good is pleasant**).

Therefore, Kahn and Vlastos share a common view regarding Plato’s treatment of pleasure in the dialogue; however, they diverge in their understanding of the Platonic intentions with regard to the introduction of the hedonistic premise. Kahn, unlike Vlastos, holds that *Socrates* intentionally sets a ‘strict hedonism’ dialectical trap to *Protagoras* in order to ridicule the sophist and to rule out the possibility of akrasia. Hence, for Kahn it is *Protagoras* who is guilty of the logical oversight ‘**that Vlastos is inclined to attribute to Socrates**’; the ‘logical oversight’ to which Kahn refers is the confusion between ‘all good is pleasant’ and ‘all pleasure is good’. Both Kahn and Vlastos believe that *Socrates* did not intend to come out as a strict quantitative hedonist, however they crucially differ in their interpretation about the role of quantitative hedonism in dialogue. What is more,

¹⁸ By contrast, I will argue that it is not quantitative hedonism per se that enables *Socrates* to refute ‘the many’ but the derivative commensurability of value.



Kahn emphasizes that one of the key objectives of the dialogue is underlining of the Socratic dialectical superiority over Protagoras, the leading figure among the sophists¹⁹.

3. Attractions of Quantitative Hedonism

In the preceding section I have presented some of the main prohedonistic and quasi-hedonistic arguments regarding *Socrates*' treatment of pleasure in the *Protagoras*. Here, I focus on the hermeneutical attractions of hedonism in relation to Plato's philosophical aims in the dialogue. There is a variety of reasons why a reader of the *Protagoras* might be tempted to favor a prohedonistic reading of the dialogue. I will attempt a detailed presentation of the most important attractions for reading *Socrates* of the *Protagoras* as a sincere hedonist. The first attraction of prohedonism that I will examine is Aristotle's reference to Socrates in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. There, Aristotle appears to attribute the anti-akrasia argument that is presented in the *Protagoras* to historical Socrates. Aristotle's reference to historical Socrates has been taken by prohedonists as a strong indication that the views of the *Protagoras* depict the views of historical Socrates. Thereupon, they reach the conclusion that the hedonistic premise must also be taken seriously as it provides for a picture of unified seriousness in *Socrates*' argumentation in the dialogue.

Secondly, I will discuss the hypothesis that the *Protagoras*' argument should be evaluated under the prism of Plato's overall endeavor to bring ethics into the province of

¹⁹ "The entire meeting with Protagoras (the wisest man in Greece) is staged as a contest for the crown of wisdom. A highly competitive contest in which Socrates figures as the young challenger whose skill in dialectical manipulation will bring down the reigning champion in defeat." (Kahn, 2006:56)



reason and of scientific thought. As it becomes more evident -especially in the more mature period of Platonic writings- Plato attempts to establish an educational correlation between ethical thought and scientific methodology. The prohedonistic assumption, here, is that the quantitative hedonism of the *Protagoras* provides for commensurability of value and therefore for an ethical theory in which the good and the bad can be quantified. Inside this context, prohedonists suggest, the acquisition of virtue and salvation in life depend upon one's competence to accurately measure and weigh pleasures and pains. A complete education of a potent measurer in the ethical domain, however, requires a previous familiarization with the techniques of measuring and weighing; an education on sciences like mathematics and geometry is the ideal place for a student to practice, and cultivate such cognitive capacities. The *Socratic* remarks in the *Protagoras* regarding the introduction of a new art of measurement upon the knowledge of which salvation in life will depend has tempted several scholars to argue that the *Protagoras* is the first dialogue in which Plato attempts to bring ethics into the province of scientific thought. For prohedonists, quantitative hedonism is a necessary philosophical instrument for this mathematization of moral deliberation.

First, I will explore the claim that Plato attempts to convert ethical thought into a practical science more akin to the methods employed in the region of mathematics and geometry. Then, I defend the view that it is commensurability of value that allows for the quantification of ethical thought and that Plato did intend to establish a methodological relationship between scientific training and decision-making in the moral domain. Nevertheless, I will resist the conclusion that the hedonism of the *Protagoras* is a necessary theoretical instrument for these Platonic aims. The quantification of ethical thought and decision making can be attempted outside the theoretical region of hedonism; I will conclude that the hedonism of the *Protagoras* is not a necessary premise for a commensurable theory of the good, whereas it also comes tied with a number of catastrophic consequences for *Socratic* moral philosophy.

Finally, I will discuss the alleged dependency of the "no one does wrong willingly" doctrine upon the identification between the good and the pleasant in the course of the



dialogue. For prohedonism, the quantitative hedonism of the *Protagoras* serves as the argumentative basis for an explicit defense of the Socratic denial of akrasia. Given that the impossibility of willing wrongdoing is a cardinal and traditional doctrine of Socratic moral psychology, it is unsurprising that numerous scholars have assumed that the hedonistic premise of the *Protagoras* is sincerely endorsed by *Socrates*. The latter assumption, however, does not survive under a more careful examination of the dialogue. As I will try to show, hedonism provides only for a weak and narrow defense of the Socratic anti-akrasia claims. That is so because a hedonism-dependent denial of akrasia falls short of applying to a non-hedonist objector. My positive contribution here will be the suggestion that Socrates has the theoretical resources to rule out the possibility of akrasia without the appeal to hedonism.

3.1 Aristotle's Authority

“Now we may ask what kind of right belief is possessed by the man who behaves incontinently. That he should behave so when he has knowledge, some say is impossible; for it would be strange –**so Socrates thought**- if when knowledge was in a man something else could master it and drag it about like a slave; **for Socrates was entirely opposed to the view in question, holding that there is no such things as incontinence**; no one, he said, acts against what he believes best – people act so only by reason of ignorance” (NE, 1145b22-b27)

“But there are some who concede certain of **Socrates' contentions** but not others” (NE, 1145b31)

“And because the last term is not universal nor equally an object of knowledge with the universal term, **the position that Socrates sought to establish actually seems to result**” (NE, 1147b12-b14)



In the *Nicomachean Ethics* (book VII), Aristotle introduces the term ‘akrasia’ in order to describe the cognitive and psychological conditions of an agent which may give rise to an akratic break. Aristotle’s discussion of akrasia is often read as a response or even as a refinement of *Socrates’* denial of akrasia in the *Protagoras*. As the above passages from his *Nicomachean Ethics* indicate, however, Aristotle appears to attribute to historical Socrates (and not to Plato or character *Socrates* of the dialogue) the anti-akrasia views which are presented in the *Protagoras*. It is historical Socrates who is being criticized by Aristotle at the outset of the discussion, and it is historical Socrates that Aristotle (qualifiedly) agrees with at the end of his analysis. Why, then, did Aristotle choose to refer directly to Socrates? Arguably, Aristotle is one of the most reliable, if not *the most* reliable source about the Platonic philosophical thought. Thus, it comes naturally to one’s mind that if the hedonistic argument presented in the *Protagoras* was Plato’s own argument, Aristotle would have directly referred to Plato²⁰ and not to Socrates. For instance, when it comes to Aristotle’s criticisms on Plato’s metaphysics and more precisely to his objections against Plato’s theory of Forms, Aristotle directly refers to Plato and not to Socrates -or even character *Socrates*. Given that Aristotle is the most reliable authority with regards to Plato’s philosophical thoughts and ideas, we have good reasons to assume that Aristotle did not think that Plato in the *Protagoras* intended to defend the denial of akrasia based on the hedonistic premise. Or at least he believed that the doctrine (along with its alleged hedonistic defense) is more Socratic than Platonic. At any rate, the assumption in play here is that if the denial of akrasia and its putative hedonistic defense were Platonic, Aristotle would have most likely chosen to attribute the relevant views to his teacher, and not to Socrates.

Interestingly enough, however, Aristotle remains silent with regards to the presentation of the hedonistic premise in the *Protagoras*. Although Aristotle explicitly discusses the *Protagoras’* material with regards to the ‘no one does wrong willingly’ thesis, nevertheless, he refrains from touching upon the appearance of the hedonistic

²⁰ The fact that Aristotle does not ascribe to Plato the views of the *Protagoras* supports the antihedonistic assumption that Plato never espoused the identification between pleasure and the good (be it ‘rational hedonism’, ‘long-term hedonism’, or ‘real magnitude hedonism’).



theory which plays a key role in the overall *Socratic* anti-akrasia argumentation. It is a commonplace that Aristotle never favored any type of hedonism, whereas important bits of his ethics are explicitly non-hedonistic²¹. Thereupon, my hypothesis here is that Aristotle's silence about the hedonism of the *Protagoras* is of philosophical and hermeneutical value. It provides, I believe, for the assumption that Aristotle never thought that Plato or Socrates took hedonism seriously. If Plato had taken hedonism seriously, then Aristotle in his discussion about the Socratic remarks would have probably expressed his criticism against Plato's (temporary) hedonistic views. Although the matter cannot be conclusive we have good reasons to believe that Aristotle never thought that Plato ever endorsed the identification of the good with the pleasant.

Now, the Aristotelian reference to Socrates as the author of the anti-akrasia views verifies the standard claim that the doctrines exhibited in the *Protagoras* (unity of virtue and no one does wrong willingly) are genuine Socratic doctrines (or at least, more Socratic than Platonic). This line of reasoning has led ancient scholars, like Irwin²² (1995), to suggest that both the denial of akrasia and its hedonistic defense are more likely to be Socratic rather than Platonic. The denial of akrasia and the hedonistic premise appear together in the same argument and thus -at a superficial level- it seems natural to assume that Socrates would probably accept both. In other words, since it is widely accepted that the two doctrines (unity of virtue and denial of akrasia) are thought to be Socratic, the advantage of a prohedonistic reading is that it offers a picture of 'unified seriousness' in the *Protagoras*. To put it into its sharpest, the prohedonistic rationale is that the burden of proof is placed upon antihedonists to explain why quantitative hedonism should not also be perceived as a genuine Socratic thesis.

²¹ For instance, his ethical theory in book X of the *NE* expresses the view that the philosophical life of contemplation can be sufficient for eudaimonia.

²² "It is most reasonable to regard the formulation of hedonism in the *Protagoras* as Plato's contribution, to recognize the Socratic sources of it..." Nevertheless, Irwin (2008) seems to retract from his position that Aristotle's attribution of the hedonism-dependent denial of akrasia to Socrates suffices to show that historical Socrates was -at least for some time- a hedonist. As Irwin (2008:24) puts it: "**...these points give us a reasonable prima facie case for believing that in some passages, including the discussion of incontinence, Aristotle intends to discuss the views of the historical Socrates. They do not show whether Socrates held these views.**"



Thereupon, the *Protagoras* can be construed as depicting historical Socrates' views both on akrasia and hedonism; thence follows the prohedonistic assumption that hedonism must have been endorsed at some point by Socrates. As we have seen, this reading finds a phenomenal ally in Aristotle's references to historical Socrates in the *Nicomachean Ethics*; this Aristotelian reference to Socrates has tempted prohedonists to use it as evidence regarding the real *Socratic* intentions in the *Protagoras*. Kahn (2006:50) sums up the above line of reasoning very subtly: **"Aristotle takes some of the views expressed in the *Protagoras* to be the views of historical Socrates. Prohedonists take it as evidence of the seriousness of the views expressed and their authenticity"**.

What seems rather unambiguous is that Aristotle takes some of the views expressed in the *Protagoras* to be the views of historical Socrates. But which views exactly does Aristotle ascribe to Socrates and what is the source of his ascription? In order to address these two puzzling questions we will need to scrutinize the phrasing of the Aristotelian reference to Socrates and compare it to the respective *Protagoras*' passages. Indeed, a more careful examination will reveal that in discussing the Socratic views, Aristotle uses -word by word- the exact *Socratic* phrasing of the *Protagoras*; and also the same expressions that *Socrates* used in delineating the views of "the many" and in denying akrasia; For example:

"for it would be strange –so Socrates thought- if when knowledge was in a man something else could master it and drag it about like a slave", NE, 1145b24).

A reasonable hypothesis here is that Aristotle's remarks regarding the views of historical Socrates on akrasia are crucially based on the ideas expressed in the *Protagoras*. The fact that Aristotle uses the exact phrasing of the Platonic dialogue to discuss Socrates' ideas is, I believe, a strong indication that Aristotle does not refer to historical Socrates after all but directly to the *Protagoras*' text. However, if Aristotle's source regarding Socrates' views on akrasia is the *Protagoras* then the question about Socrates' views is simply pushed further back; it comes down again to the decipherment of Plato's intentions in the dialogue. If my hypothesis is correct then the Aristotelian authority ceases to be a



genuine attraction for a prohedonistic reading. Given that Aristotle's reference to historical Socrates appears to be dependent on the *Protagoras*, it is plausible to conclude that Aristotle's attribution of the anti-akrasia views to historical Socrates does not add hermeneutical strength to prohedonism. We already had the *Protagoras*. Therefore, the question is pushed back to why Plato has *Socrates* presenting the hedonistic premise in connection to the 'no one does wrong willingly' thesis.

Actually, it is not a pleonasm to suggest that Aristotle's discussion of akrasia in book VII of the NE is basically an attempt to delineate the psychological and cognitive status of the agent when she gets *dragged about like a slave* due to the force of a passion. Interestingly, all of Aristotle's references to Socrates echo not only the philosophical essence but also the exact wording of the *Protagoras*. Thereupon, a quite reasonable conjecture²³ is that Aristotle discusses the ideas of the *Protagoras* and not Socrates' authentic ideas. If this is correct, then the prohedonistic claim that Aristotle's authority supports the assumption that hedonism is taken seriously by *Socrates* (through depicting historical Socrates' views) is redundant. If Aristotle takes the *Protagoras* as his main piece of evidence²⁴ regarding the accuracy of historical Socrates' views on akrasia then his belief about Socrates' views on akrasia can be reduced into Plato's discussion in the *Protagoras* about akrasia and pleasure. Hence, we are back to square one.

Finally, it is noteworthy that nowhere else does Aristotle ascribe the hedonistic arguments of the *Protagoras* to historical Socrates. Although his analysis centers on akrasia and its Socratic treatment, he avoids relating Socrates to the hedonistic premise presented in the *Protagoras*. Aristotle addresses the Socratic denial of akrasia and criticizes Socrates on the grounds of his conclusion. However he never says or even implies that Socrates wanted to establish this anti-akrasia conclusion on the basis of the identification of the good with the pleasant. Although my last point is quite speculative, I believe that Aristotle's silence, (and the absence of any relevant criticism) with regard to

²³ Segvic (2006) and Kahn (2006) hold a similar view. Also, Irwin (2008) argues that Aristotle in book VII of NE reads the *Protagoras*.

²⁴In fact, nowhere else in his works does Aristotle offer any evidence independent of the *Protagoras* as to whether historical Socrates espoused hedonism;



the *Protagoras*' hedonism is a significant indication that neither Plato nor historical Socrates ever intended to defend the denial of akrasia on the theoretical basis of hedonism.

3.2 Turning Ethics into a Science

The attractions of prohedonism expand far beyond Aristotle's reference to historical Socrates in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. A very interesting argument advocated by prohedonists entails the suggestion that Plato saw quantitative hedonism as a necessary philosophical tool for his grand ethical project. Quantitative hedonism, the suggestion goes, facilitates Plato's endeavor to bring ethics within the province of this part of reason and scientific thought which has created sciences like mathematics and geometry. This function of quantitative hedonism, prohedonists propose, is an additional reason that made Plato favorably disposed toward a hedonistic stance in the *Protagoras*. Let me give a rough sketch of the above idea:

- (a) The *Protagoras*' quantitative hedonism provides for commensurability of moral value.
- (b) In a quantitatively hedonistic context, given that pleasure is commensurable, goodness must also be commensurable since goodness and pleasure are two names for the same thing.
- (c) Commensurability of goodness provides for a universally applicable, quantifiable, and unified theory of the good.
- (d) A quantified theory of the good would facilitate the conversion of ethics into a practical science -more akin to geometry and mathematics- where goodness can be weighed, measured and calculated.



The conclusion reached is that Plato in the *Protagoras* aims to convert moral deliberation and decision making into a measurable practical science. And quantitative hedonism is all that he needs in order to render the good measurable by a common single standard, that is, pleasure. Therefore, Plato sees hedonism as a necessary premise for the accomplishment of his ambitious ethical project.

Actually, it is not an innovative thought to suggest that Plato's philosophical dream might have been –at least for some time- to systematize ethics and convert moral thought and decision making into a subject-matter which belongs inside the scientific region where mathematics and geometry also belong. The efficiency and accuracy of scientific methods which are based on measurement, weighting, or counting numbers, sizes, shapes, etc. intrigued Plato to envisage that ethical thought could also adopt methods and educational features traditionally used inside the scientific framework of research. Now, the notion of 'measurement' in relation to moral thought and decision-making occupies a surprisingly pivotal role in many Platonic dialogues; indeed, the *Protagoras* is an illustrative example regarding the centrality and the relevance of one's competence for measurements to moral conduct and decision-making. Notwithstanding the phenomenal correlation between Plato's overall ethical project and the *Protagoras'* remarks, I am completely at odds with the prohedonistic suggestion that the *Protagoras* is the place where Plato strived to accomplish his philosophical vision through the endorsement of quantitative hedonism. *Commensurability of value* is all Plato needs in order to propose a quantified eudaimonistic theory. The quantification of such a theory, however, can be achieved without the parasitic identification of the good with the pleasant. Therefore, I will defend the claim that the hedonism of the *Protagoras* is irrelevant to the logic of Plato's overall attempt to turn ethics into a practical science. In what follows, I will try to show that:

(1) We have sufficient evidence to support the claim that Plato was philosophically attracted to the idea of bringing ethics into the province of practical sciences and reason. This is a claim that readers of Plato are quite familiar with, however I will try to reinforce it and refine it where this is feasible. My analysis will concentrate on the Platonic works written circa the period of the *Protagoras*. The *Meno*, the *Gorgias* and the *Republic*, for



example, are dialogues where Plato's rationalism and 'mathematization' of moral thought become more noticeable (especially in the *Meno* and the *Republic*). What is of great interest, however, is the observation that in those dialogues Platonic rationalism and his philosophy of education establish a strong correlative relationship between the scientific domain (mathematics, geometry, astronomy, etc) and the moral domain. This Platonic move in the *Meno* and the *Republic* has tempted prohedonists to argue that the *Protagoras* is also a place where Plato strived to systematize his ethical theory at the model of sciences like mathematics and geometry. The attractiveness of the methods employed in geometry and mathematics lies in the accuracy of the relevant investigations. Now, the *Socratic* remarks in the *Protagoras* with regards to a new art of measurement the knowledge of which would guarantee 'salvation in life', has convinced prohedonists that quantitative hedonism is exactly what *Socrates* needs in order to accomplish his ethical project.

(2) I will put forward the argument that although quantitative hedonism provides for a quantifiable theory of the good, nevertheless, it is not a necessary premise for commensurability of value and for the quantification of the good. In addition, to read the *Protagoras* as Plato's tentative effort to systematize ethics based on the hedonistic premise creates more problems than those it is supposed to solve. At a later portion of this chapter I argue that the *Protagoras* provides illuminating textual evidence for an argument of pivotal importance; that is, Plato's recognition that the endorsement of the hedonistic premise would render sophistic education a necessary educational step for the leading of a good life. Did Plato want to advertise the sophists as the ideal professional educators and the exemplars of virtue? Arguably, the latter thought has been repeatedly denounced by Plato's *Socrates*; such a major shift in *Socrates*' views would shake his ethical theory at its very foundations and in a number of different ways. Therefore, if Plato was aware of the correlation between the endorsement hedonism and the cleansing of sophistry, then it becomes evident that Plato cannot have been taking seriously the hedonistic premise.



3.3 Socratic Elenchus in the Meno and the Educative Value of Scientific Training

“Μηδείς Αγεωμέτρητος Εισίτω” (“let no one ignorant of geometry enter here”)

Tradition has it that the above inscription was engraved at the entrance of Plato’s school, the Academy. Whether the above suggestion is historically accurate²⁵ is still an open question which I do not intend to examine here. However, the meaning of the phrase fits very well with some of Plato’s thoughts with regards to **(a)** the role of scientific knowledge in achieving the highest epistemic and educational aim, that is, knowledge of the Good and eudaimonia. And **(b)** the meaning of the inscription conforms to the suggestion that Plato envisaged to incorporate the methods of measurement, weighting, and counting -which are employed in scientific investigations- into the process of ethical thought, moral discourse and decision making.

Here, I focus on the methodological linkage that Plato attempted to establish between the Socratic elenchus and scientific method. I argue that there is sufficient evidence for the proposal that epistemic progress in the moral field requires, according to Plato, a satisfactory degree of familiarization with sciences like geometry and mathematics. In this Platonic context, the acquaintance with geometrical and mathematical methods provides a binary educative advantage for the learner. On the one hand it offers a more straightforward elenctic environment where the process of discarding one’s false beliefs and preconceptions is facilitated. On the other hand, it cultivates one’s measuring and counting capacities which are necessary not merely for mathematical and geometrical calculations but for moral deliberation too.

In the *Meno*, Plato’s rationalistic argument is that knowledge is recollection (ανάμνησις); interestingly, Plato demonstrates his conclusion by interrogating an unschooled boy about a geometrical problem. The boy solves the geometrical problem after a trial and error

²⁵ The Greek word ‘αγεωμέτρητος’ is found in Aristotle’s Posterior Analytics (77b10). However, nowhere in his other works does Aristotle, a student of the Academy, suggest that this phrase was at the doorstep of the Academy.



procedure which resembles (but is not identical to) Socratic elenchus of the early dialogues. Note that the *Meno*'s central theme is about the nature of virtue and that the central questions examined in the dialogue are (1) what is virtue? and (2) is virtue teachable? Does this imply, then, that for Plato there is an educational and methodological kinship between, let's say, solving a geometrical problem and deciding how to act in front of a moral dilemma? How does a geometrical problem relate to a philosophical discussion about virtue? Plato's underlying point in the *Meno* seems to be that a previous experience with scientific-related measuring, counting, and weighing is a prerequisite for the building a well-grounded virtuous character and for the acquisition of moral knowledge. The latter point raises a number of thorny questions; for example, how does the ability to solve geometrical riddles underpin one's educational progress as far as *arête* is concerned? What is the role of mathematics and geometry in an educational corpus whose main aim is the creation of virtuous and competent decision-makers in the moral domain? I believe that the *Meno* implicitly deals with the latter questions and a closer examination of the dialogue reveals aspects of the epistemic and educational relationship between moral and scientific knowledge.

Presumably, the axiomatic truths entailed in mathematical²⁶ and geometrical investigation provide for a more accurate and beginner-friendly trial-and-error based elenchus and overall education for a student of philosophy. In geometry and mathematics, for example, the exhibition of a mistake on the part of the student commonly comes with undisputed clarity, whereas ethical disagreement does not provide for the same level of exactness²⁷. Now we are in a better position to discern a significant difference between the *Socratic* trial-and-error elenctic method of the *Meno* and the trial-and-error elenchus of the pre-*Meno* definitional dialogues. In the pre-*Meno*²⁸ 'what is X' dialogues (*Laches*,

²⁶ According to Frede (2009) Plato's confidence in a mathematically structured order of the universe that also includes human nature was greatly enhanced by the progress of the scientists of his day.

²⁷ This very point is raised by Aristotle in the *NE* (book II) where he suggests that it is the mark of the educated man and a proof of his culture that in every subject he looks for only so much precision as its nature permits. He also implies that in subjects like politics or ethics we cannot expect the same level of precision as in Mathematics and Geometry.

²⁸ No suggestion about the chronology of Platonic dialogues has been yet conclusive; however, the vast majority of scholars support the suggestion that the dialogues I refer to were written before the *Meno*.



Euthyphro, *Charmides*, etc) *Socrates* manages to reveal an *internal contradiction* in his interlocutors' beliefs; an inconsistency inherent in their attempts to define friendship, piety, temperance, etc. In the early, pre-*Meno* definitional dialogues, the trial-and-error educational procedure is embodied through the emergence and realization of an internal contradiction on the part of *Socrates*' interlocutors regarding the matter at stake. In the *Meno*, however, *Socrates*' demonstration of the geometrical puzzle to the slave boy implicitly suggests a new model of trial-and-error elenctic method and education. Plato in the *Meno* attempts to establish a methodological kinship between one's epistemic progress in the moral domain and in the scientific domain.

Let me explain this last point a bit further: In the slave boy story, the student is not, as in other Socratic dialogues, confronted with an *internal inconsistency* where the least plausible belief must be rejected and discarded from one's system of beliefs. In the *Meno*, one's epistemic progress is not achieved merely via the emergence of a contradiction of the type 'X and not-X' where the two contradictory beliefs cannot be held at the same time by the same agent. Rather, the slave boy's beliefs are tested against the Procrustean bed of mathematics and geometry. The beliefs which do not fit the rigid mathematical truths must be 'cut' or 'stretched' according to the dimensions of the given a priori truths. This new trial-and-error procedure incorporates a non-empirical criterion in view of which beliefs should be revised. The new equilibrium of beliefs will have to be adjusted to the a priori truths of geometry and mathematics. Does this mean that for questions about virtue and eudaimonia one should also look for the same level of accuracy? Or does it simply imply that this new trial-and-error model will serve as the educative basis for the prospective student of philosophy? I will opt for the second approach and I will maintain that for Plato it is on the basis of scientific education that a student receives the necessary experience in order to become a better measurer and decision maker in the moral domain.

Think again about the meaning of the slave boy story: *Socrates* in the *Meno* does not interrogate the boy about an ethical issue or a moral dilemma. That would be too advanced a test to initiate a previously unschooled young student. Rather, he chooses a



geometrical problem for the demonstration of his position. This is not accidental; in book VII of the *Republic*, Plato suggests that the vital turning point from knowing the sensible world to knowing the transcendental world of the Forms consists in the study of mathematics and geometry –among other sciences (522c-531d). Given that the *Meno* and the *Republic* were written pretty much at the same period of Platonic maturity, it makes sense to suggest that the *Meno* contains, at least in spermatic form, ideas which are presented more explicitly in the *Republic* –especially with regards to Plato’s metaphysics, moral psychology, and philosophy of education.

Scientific education, Plato implies in the *Meno*, facilitates the philosophical progress of a student by enabling her to understand in a sharper fashion the distinction between an imperfect sensible object and its immaterial invisible Form. In a nutshell, it facilitates the understanding of the distinction between an F and Fness. For example, it seems to be a more straightforward task to distinguish an imperfect triangular object (F) from the Form of a perfect triangle (Fness); or the idea of Oddness from three sensible objects. It is only at a later stage of progress that a student will be able to distinguish a just and brave action from the Form of Justice or the Form of Bravery. It would be impossible for a beginner in the ‘Academy’ to distinguish the form of Justice or the form of the Good from the everyday instances of just and good actions. What is more, the Platonic remarks suggest that a mathematical and geometrical training will endow a student with the understanding of the principles of measurement, and counting, capacities that will be of vital instrumental importance should one find herself in front of a tough decision or a crucial moral dilemma.

Inside this Platonic educational context, the boy of the *Meno* can be imagined as a fresher in Plato’s Academy whose education needs to be *structured* and disciplined. Plato’s suggestion is that geometry and mathematics provide the safe and *necessary* preliminary tools for a well-grounded philosophical education. The skills learned and cultivated inside the framework of scientific education are *transferable* to the ethical domain and can facilitate the cultivation of successful decision-makers. The transition from knowing the sensible world to knowing the abstract world of the Forms can be much smoother if it



is based on a firm educational and epistemic ground. This firm ground is provided by sciences like geometry and mathematics. For Plato, it is on this educational basis that a student of philosophy can be sufficiently equipped to distinguish the transcendental immaterial world of the Forms from their sensible material instances. It is on the basis of scientific education that a student will be trained how to measure and weigh more accurately the many different aspects and consequences of alternative actions to be chosen. It is primarily in this sense that scientific education can be construed as a prerequisite for a complete and better grounded moral education.

Just like wannabe pilots who spend hundreds of hours in simulation flights before they are sufficiently experienced to fly a real airplane, students of philosophy, Plato thinks, must be trained in mathematics and geometry before they can master the ability to discern between instances of F and F_{ness} ; or before they can become accurate measurers and counters in the more moral domain where the complexities of measurement are significantly greater. Maths and geometry, then, can be seen as the safe educational simulation flights where mistakes in a trial-and-error training are not nearly as costly as in the moral domain of conduct and character building. Therefore, proper and intense training on those sciences creates a more stable and safe cognitive environment for the development of a virtuous character. Interestingly, the *Gorgias*, a dialogue written temporally close to the *Meno* and the *Republic*, supports the claim put forward about the importance of scientific training in moral education and its connection to moral conduct. In the *Gorgias* (508a), *Socrates* makes it clear to *Callicles* that an education on geometry is crucially relevant to moral thinking.

“Yes, Callicles, wise men claim that partnership and friendship, orderliness, self-control, and justice hold together heaven and earth, and gods and men, and that is why they call this universe a world order, my friend, and not an undisciplined world disorder. I believe that you don’t pay attention to these facts, even though you are a wise man in these matters. You have failed to notice that proportionate equality (γεωμετρική ισότης) has great power among both gods and men, and you suppose that you ought to practice getting the greater share. That is because you neglect geometry”.



Evidently, for Plato, as the above passage suggests, cosmic order and psychic harmony and order (which is a prerequisite for eudaimonia) require balance and the ability for correct measurements. For *Socrates* of the early and middle period dialogues harmony and order are cardinal principles of his virtue eudaimonistic theory. As the *Gorgias* suggests the capacity to be an able measure is crucial for the achievement of internal harmony and order whereas the educative role of sciences like geometry in the ‘measurement learning process’ is of chief importance. *Socrates*’ concluding statement is epexegetic of *Gorgias*’ state of psychic disharmony: “*this is because you neglect geometry*”. This Platonic statement is, I believe, a clear indication that scientific education (say knowledge of geometry in this case) is inextricably linked to moral thought and practice because of the cognitive capacities it is likely to cultivate. It is not the mere theoretical knowledge of the Pythagorean Theorem, for example, that enables one to become a better moral thinker. This is not what Plato is trying to suggest. Rather, it is the common ground of the ‘measuring’ ability that facilitates the creation of a more competent decision-maker in the moral field. Thereupon, the general assumption in play here is that a familiarization with scientific methods of investigation provides the necessary cognitive instruments for the creation of a virtuous moral self, and in turn for the acquisition of virtue and eudaimonia.

In the *Republic*, Plato once again underlines the decisive importance of scientific education which is conceived as a prerequisite for the cultivation of a balanced and virtuous moral character. A philosopher ruler for example, has to be thoroughly trained in mathematics and geometry before she develops the reflective deliberative capacity to ‘see’ which actions participate in the Form of Justice or in the Form of Temperance; such a deliberative capacity will enable the philosopher-ruler to take the right decision with regard to her welfare and the welfare of the city (and for the right reasons too). It is this distinctive quality and the depth of justification that crucially distinguishes a philosopher ruler from people belonging to the lower classes. Non-philosophers are merely capable of doing the right thing either as a result of blind obedience to a given rule, uncritical habituation, or fear of punishment. As the *Meno* implies, and the *Republic* explicitly suggests, if a philosopher ruler is an ‘Olympian’ of virtue, then, geometry and



mathematics –among other scientific fields- are the required preliminary ‘training’ sessions where the Olympian champion of character and wisdom is built. In this sense, moral education can be seen as a component and an advancement of an education built inside the province of practical sciences and not as an independent subject altogether. The new trial-and-error educational training proposed in the *Meno* for the elimination of one’s false presuppositions in mathematics, astronomy or geometry will provide the necessary (although not sufficient) cognitive tools to the philosophy trainee so that she is better equipped to eliminate her false preconceptions in the moral domain as well.

“Let no one ignorant of geometry enter”:

Now, I believe, we are in a better position to decode the meaning of the above phrase. Moral, and in general, philosophical education are, for Plato, much more tightly connected to the province of reason and of sciences than commonly thought. The phrase (‘let no one enter’) does not *forbid* someone to enter the Academy. Obviously, the phrase does not stand as a forbiddance of physical entrance for those ignorant of geometry. Rather, it is a *warning*; an educational warning both to prospective and current students of philosophy with respect to the required educational and epistemic steps one needs to take before they can become true philosophers.

What is important to stress, here, is the etymological analysis of the Greek adjective “αγεωμέτρητος” which means ‘the person who is incapable of measuring the land’. Presumably, word ‘αγεωμέτρητος’ connotes a lot more than its literal meaning. One’s ability to measure²⁹ can be vital for one’s life -if ‘measurement’ is construed in a wider context. Actually, Plato’s insight seems to be that one’s training as a ‘measurer’ is a necessary educational step for the epistemic progress as well as for the building of one’s moral self. My assumption, then, is that the importance that Plato attaches to one’s ability to accurately measure -in this broader sense, not only the land as the word

²⁹ Interestingly, *Socrates’* interlocutor in the *Philebus*, *Plotarchus*, suggests that reason and knowledge are closely related to the notion of ‘measure’. *Socrates* agrees with *Plotarchus’* words (65d4-d8): “...**nothing more measured than reason and knowledge could ever be found**”.



“αγεωμέτρητος” literally suggests, but also numbers, distances, pains and pleasures- has tempted many thinkers to suggest that Plato’s philosophical grand aim was to bring ethics **“within the province of that part of reason that has created mathematics and the arts of counting, measuring and weighing”** (Santas, 2006:309).

It is from this thought that the prohedonistic hypothesis gains its phenomenal plausibility; according to prohedonists, the adoption of quantitative hedonism in the *Protagoras* facilitates the Platonic aim to quantify the content of ethical theory and of moral conduct and therefore to propose a new art, the art of measurement, upon the knowledge of which our salvation in life will depend (357b-c). In Plato’s thought it is in the concept and the exercise of measurement where scientific and moral education overlaps. Indeed, the idea of measurement plays a pivotal role in the *Protagoras*, both for the denial of akrasia (which is explained as a wrong measurement, a miscalculation) and for the acquisition of virtue and eudaimonia (the art of measurement is sufficient for salvation in life). Therefore, it is crucial for the decipherment of the Platonic intentions in the dialogue to examine the relationship between the hedonistic premise and the role of measurement in one’s moral education and decision-making.

3.4 Commensurability of Moral Value and Quantification of the Good

In summation of what I have explored thus far; prohedonist scholars tend to read the *Protagoras* as a preliminary tentative effort by Plato to turn ethics into a practical science and to construe moral thought in terms of an art of counting, measuring and weighing pains and pleasures. The main advantage of this reading is that a hedonist *Socrates* is legitimated to quantify goodness³⁰ and badness in terms of pleasure and pain, and thus to

³⁰ Santas (2006:311) stresses the theoretical advantages of pleasure if taken as the sole standard of goodness: “...but even though people may take pleasure in different things, there seems to be no similar ambiguity in pleasure itself. That all men desire pleasure seems as evident as that all men desire happiness, but pleasure seems a much more determinate, specific, and clearer guide to choice...”



propose a new scientific and quantifiable outlook of ethical theory and decision making. I have defended the claim that Plato envisaged to bridge the methodological and educational gulf between ethical and scientific thought; nevertheless, as I will argue in the next section I am at odds with the claim that quantitative hedonism is a necessary premise for this Platonic endeavor. What is more, the quantitative hedonism of the dialogue, cannot be set apart from the acceptance of sophistic education as the ideal place for the cultivation of virtue. As a result, my suggestion will be that the quantification of Plato's ethical theory has to be attempted outside the theoretical region of hedonism.

Now, the *Socratic* remarks in the early period dialogue, the *Euthyphro* (7b-d), indicate that Plato, by the time of writing the *Protagoras*, was fully aware of the theoretical and practical advantages of the methods employed in scientific investigation. Mathematical or geometrical questions, Plato says in the *Euthyphro*, can be settled in a very straightforward and non-ambiguous way; by contrast, ethical matters usually become the source of intense controversy. What Plato invites us to think³¹ here is that the widespread controversy in the moral domain must be attributed to the absence of an objective criterion that would attenuate disagreement between those holding conflicting moral views.

SOCRATES: What are the subjects of difference that cause hatred and anger? Let us look at it this way. If you and I were to differ about numbers as to which is the greater, would this difference make us enemies and angry with each other, or would we proceed to count and soon resolve our difference about this?

EUTHYPHRO: We would certainly do so.

SOCRATES: Again, if we differed about the larger and the smaller, we would turn to measurement and soon cease to differ...and about the heavier and the lighter, we would resort to weighing and be reconciled.

EUTHYPHRO: Of course.

³¹ Santas (2006:303) advocates a different interpretative line. According to Santas' understanding of the passage, Plato has Socrates underline the severity of dispute over ethical issues in order to highlight the incompatibility between ethical thought and scientific method. As he says, the Platonic remarks presuppose that "**the sciences of number, measurement, and weight have no application to the good, the beautiful, and the just**".



SOCRATES: What subject of difference would make us angry and hostile to each other if we were unable to come to a decision? Perhaps you do not have an answer ready, but examine as I tell you whether these subjects are the just and the unjust, the beautiful and the ugly, the good and the bad. Are these not the subjects of difference about which, when we are unable to come to a satisfactory decision, you and I and other men become hostile to each other whenever we do?

EUTHYPHRO: That is the difference, Socrates, about those subjects.

Does Plato's recognition of the deep complexities entailed in ethical thought and moral deliberation imply that we must introduce a quantitative criterion which would settle ethical questions in a more straightforward fashion? Certainly, Plato cannot have been meaning to say that in ethical matters, we can expect to reach a level of exactness similar to that found in mathematical or geometrical investigation. Nevertheless, the quantification of ethical thought and decision making is not a project out of reach altogether³². Indeed, all human beings are capable (to a lesser or a greater degree) of estimating prospective goodness and badness in an action. The ability to evaluate, i.e. to give values to aspects of an action is a cognitive and psychological mechanism that we all possess; without such mechanisms decision making would be impossible and 'decisions' would be randomly made. Actually, a considerable number of our everyday actions are – consciously or not- choices based upon measurements and calculations. From a semantic standpoint, a very common way to describe a thorough deliberation of a prospective action is by using the verb "weighing". A bad decision is usually ascribed to the lack of correct measurement and weighing of the aspects and the consequences of an action: "I did not *weigh* very well my decision before acting", or "you should weigh more carefully your options".

Just to give a very simple example; the decision to visit the dentist can be analyzed as the result of a more or less complex quantified calculation: On the positive side goes the relief from the pain, the pleasure of achieving a better aesthetic result, the ability to eat

³² A considerable number of utilitarian ethical theories rely upon the general idea that ethical thought and decision-making can and should take place in view of a quantifiable criterion of utility.



normally or the promotion of one's overall health. From these positive values we abstract the negative values: i.e. the fear of the expected pain and the actual experience of pain during the dental treatment. Having followed through a similar calculation, our decision to go to the dentist or to abstain from going would be relative to the final sum of the calculation. In a *quantitative hedonistic* context, every aspect of a prospective action is given a numerical value relative to our expectations regarding the amount of pleasure and pain it is reckoned to contain. Since the standard of evaluation is single, sensitive to experience, and immediate to our minds, the ascription of values seems to be a quite straightforward process. The simplicity and the straightforwardness of a quantitatively hedonistic theory are certainly among its main advantages.

Now, the prohedonistic suggestion is that Plato saw in quantitative hedonism the theoretical instrument that would reduce all ethical thought and decision making into a process of hedonistic calculation. The quantitative hedonism allowed for rendering the good commensurable³³ and thus, enabled Plato to develop a purely quantifiable theory of moral deliberation and action. Let me explain this point a bit further: Given that pleasure and goodness are two names for the same thing, and that pleasure and pain belong to the arts of measuring and weighing, then, goodness and badness also belong to the arts of number, measuring and weighing. In other words, goodness and badness, like pleasure and pain, are commensurable³⁴. It is this commensurability of goodness and badness which allegedly attracted Plato to take seriously the quantitative hedonism of the *Protagoras*. Without quantitative hedonism, the interpretative benefit of commensurable ethical values would probably vanish and in turn, the task to transform moral thought into a subject-matter more akin to the methods used in geometrical or mathematical thought would toughen up. In the words of Martha Nussbaum (1984:55):

³³ I am only in partial agreement with Richardson (1990:7) who maintains that there is no logical dependence between quantitative hedonism and commensurability. "**Hedonism does not imply commensurability, nor does commensurability imply hedonism**". I argue that although quantitative hedonism provides for commensurability of the good, conversely, commensurability of the good does not necessarily depend on identifying the good with the pleasant.

³⁴ Nonetheless, for Rudebusch (1999) the notion of measurement should not be taken literally; rather, it is a metaphor for what Plato really means. "...**it is only comparability that is in question, and the scales are not interval scales but ordinal scales which do not require units**".



“If ethical values are all commensurable, differing from one another only in quantity, what difference does this make? Plato gives us a stark and simple answer. The adoption of an ethical ‘science of measurement’, at the heart of which is the belief in commensurability is both necessary and sufficient for ‘saving our lives’, i.e. for giving human beings a life that will be free of certain intolerable pains and confusions...”

So, was commensurability of *the good* Plato’s main philosophical motivation for writing the *Protagoras*? Did Plato see commensurability of goodness as a necessary theoretical instrument in his endeavor to rule out akrasia and to put forward an account where all ethical evaluation is quantifiable in terms of pleasure and pain? For scholars like Irwin and Nussbaum³⁵ the answer to both questions is affirmative. The central aim of the *Protagoras*, according to their readings, was to make goodness commensurable in order to rule the possibility of akratic cases and at the same time offer a unified, quantified and action guiding ethical theory. Presumably, in a quantitatively hedonistic framework where pleasure is the ‘common value coin’ and is also considered as the ultimate end³⁶ of human action, all passions, emotions, and feelings can be given a numerical value in proportion to their expected pleasure generation. In a nutshell, the adoption of quantitative hedonism would reduce ethical and practical reasoning into a process of calculative evaluation of action whose final aim would be the maximization of pleasure relative to one’s ability for correct measurements and weightings. Even renowned antihedonist interpreters of the *Protagoras*, like Santas (2006) admit that pleasure appears as an extremely tempting standard of value for the quantification of ethical thought. In particular, Santas acknowledges the argumentative advantages of quantitative hedonism in relation to the establishment of a unified and measurable theory of the good. As he

³⁵ For Nussbaum (1984:57), the *Protagoras* is Plato’s first attempt to quantify ethical values and more generally to quantify the content of decision-making: **“It is Plato’s idea that the belief in commensurability cuts very deep: taken seriously, it will transform our passions as well our decision-making, giving emotions such as love, fear, grief, and hence the ethical problems that are connected with them, an altogether different character”**.

³⁶ I agree with Irwin (1995) that the *Protagoras* implies not only that pleasure should be sought as an ultimate end (ethical hedonism) but that human being are programmed to seek pleasure as their ultimate end (psychological hedonism). Of course, I disagree with Irwin in holding that *Socrates* (intentionally or unintentionally) submits to any type of hedonism. Rather, in my reading, it is ‘the many’ and Protagoras who are sketched as the proponents of both ethical and psychological hedonism.



notes, the hypothesis of hedonism and its derivative commensurability of goodness provide for a complete and universally applicable theory of the good as the fundamental choice-guiding concept. In his own words:

“...even though people may take pleasure in different things, there seems to be no similar ambiguity in pleasure itself. That all men desire pleasure seems as evident as that all men desire happiness, but pleasure seems a much more determinate, specific, and clearer guide to choice.”

Therefore, the chief advantage of quantitative hedonism as a theory of value in the *Protagoras* is that it reduces goodness into a single standard while it also allows for a monistic and straightforward³⁷ account of the ‘good’. Inside this context, given that all people are familiar with measurements of pain and pleasure, decision making and choosing the best action will depend upon one’s ability to calculate and weigh pleasures and pains correctly. In other words, the complex decision making process in this new picture of moral psychology comes down to how well a person has been trained to measure the units of pleasure and pain in each action. That is to say that successful deliberation and right action are reduced into a process of calculating the long term and short term pains and pleasures entailed in prospective action. Thereupon, a possible impotence to make the right choice, to do what is best, or to avoid wrongdoing cannot be anything but the result of a miscalculation. This sort of conclusion seems to facilitate two of the most central Platonic aims: the elimination of akrasia and the quantification of the good. It comes as no surprise then, that a significant number of scholars have been tempted to argue that Plato must have been espousing quantitative hedonism in the *Protagoras*.

³⁷ Irwin (1995:91) advocates a similar view when he says that, “**pleasure seems to offer a more determinate description of happiness because it seems easier to say whether someone is enjoying himself than to say whether someone is happy**”.



4. The Shortfalls of Quantitative Hedonism as a Theory of Value

Notwithstanding, there are two kinds of objections that apply to the prohedonistic view that *Socrates* endorsed quantitative hedonism for the sake of the establishment of a hedonist-based quantifiable theory of the good.

- (a) The first objection is to argue that an alternative non-hedonistic ethical theory which also provides for commensurability of the good is feasible. Moreover, this alternative non-hedonistic theory is compatible with the moral psychology of the *Protagoras* and fits better the overall Platonic ethical theory.
- (b) The second way to object to the prohedonistic claim is by showing that the implications of a hedonist-based quantifiable ethical theory are both intrinsically problematic and also incompatible with Platonic ethics.

I will suggest that both objections are supported by sufficient evidence internal and external to the *Protagoras* and that finally these objections prove to be fatal for the prohedonistic hypothesis.

(a) For many prohedonist scholars, quantitative hedonism is indispensable from commensurability of moral value and from a quantifiable ethical theory in the *Protagoras*. The underlying prohedonistic assumption (see Irwin 1995, Nussbaum 1984) is that commensurability of value is argumentatively dependant on the hedonistic premise of the *Protagoras*. In other words, quantitative hedonism is essentially attached to the logic of *Socrates*' argument. Hence, hedonism is being endorsed for the sake of commensurability which in turn serves the *Socratic* purposes in the dialogue. The root of this prohedonistic assumption is the common observation that pleasure is a single, measurable and directly accessible to the mind standard of value. When pleasure is identified with the good it generates a quantifiable, commensurable account of value and of practical reasoning. However plausible this thought might be, the confusion of the prohedonistic claim lies in that it purports to establish a relationship of logical dependence between hedonism and commensurability. However, the hypothesis that



quantitative hedonism entails commensurability of value is independent from the hypothesis that commensurability of value entails a hedonistic outlook of value.

As I wish to argue the *Protagoras*' hedonism is related to commensurability of value only at a superficial level. The presentation of hedonism serves entirely different *Socratic* aims than those served by the function of commensurability of moral value. More specifically, the hedonistic premise serves the unveiling of the true Protagorean and in general sophistic thought, whereas commensurability of value primarily serves the refutation of 'the many' who regard akrasia a common psychological phenomenon. The fact that hedonism and commensurability of value appear together in the same *Socratic* argument does not necessarily establish a relationship of dependence between the two theses. Why then is commensurability of value connected to quantitative hedonism, even at this superficial level? The answer is that quantitative hedonism of the *Protagoras* kills two birds with one stone. On the one hand it accommodates the depiction of sophistic education as being crudely hedonistic in its very heart; and on the other hand it serves as the basis of the *reductio ad absurdum* refutation of 'the many'. 'The many' are delineated as uncritical quantitative hedonists whose convictions about akrasia lead to a ridiculous conclusion. Now, Plato does not present 'the many' as uncritical, unconscious hedonists *in order* to use the derivative commensurability of value and refute their views about akrasia. He *already* believes that the majority of people lead uncritical hedonistic lives and thus he tries to exhibit the view that even in a strictly hedonistic framework it is impossible for one to err willingly. At this very point, I agree with Zeyl (1980:260) regarding *Socrates*' strategy in the dialogue:

“If I can defend a view of mine by either of two argument, only one of which I accept as sound but whose premises may be hard to defend, while I regard the other as valid, depending on premises some of which I do not accept, and I realize that the latter argument would have greater cogency against someone who does accept these premises than the former, I may have excellent reason to use the latter argument to defend my view”.



Socrates knowing that the majority and Protagoras would (for different reasons) accept the hedonistic premise, he attempts to defeat them in their own game. The Socratic thesis is that no one can ever err willingly; in the *Protagoras* he shows that even in a hedonistic context willing wrongdoing is impossible. Now, although commensurability of value and quantitative hedonism appear together as parts of the same argument their argumentative function is separate and their relationship seems to be parallel and independent, rather than intersecting and interdependent. The latter realization is of chief importance for the understanding of the *Socratic* strategy in the *Protagoras*.

4.1 Commensurability of Value without the Hedonistic Premise

Psychological Quantitative Eudaimonism

If quantitative hedonism is not a necessary premise for the quantification of the good, then how can we make sense of Plato's putative endeavor to systematize ethics through the quantification of decision-making? In other words, is it possible to construct a non-hedonistic ethical theory which provides for commensurability of value? What is more, is it possible to construct a non-hedonistic theory that provides for commensurability of value and also fits the moral psychology of the *Protagoras*? I believe that the answer to both questions is affirmative. However, it is the latter question that needs to be addressed successfully for the establishment of a sufficiently strong case against the prohedonistic hypothesis. Therefore, here I explore the possibility of replacing the quantitative hedonism of the *Protagoras* with an alternative eudaimonic account which combines three necessary features:

- 1) It provides for commensurability of value.
- 2) It avoids the good-pleasure identification.
- 3) It is compatible with the moral psychology of the *Protagoras*.



The theory presented in the *Protagoras* is a theory of psychological quantitative hedonism. What does this theory entail? First, it entails that all human beings are psychologically programmed to seek pleasure and that pleasure is the ultimate motivation of all action. Also, it entails that pleasure is the only good that is intrinsically valuable. Second, it suggests that goodness is directly proportionate to the quantity of pleasure experienced by the agent; i.e., the more overall pleasure one gets from an action, the better the action is. Third, it entails that moral deliberation and in general practical reasoning are identical to the processes of measuring and weighing pleasures and pains. Commensurability of value emerges from the second claim according to which the good is rendered quantifiable in terms of units of pleasure. The advantage of this kind of quantification of the good is rooted in the very nature of pleasure. Pleasure as a sensation is directly accessible to all human minds (except from some very rare pathological cases) and it provides for a monistic, tangible and straightforward standard of measurement. In other words, the assumption in play here is that, goodness is commensurable via the measurability of pleasure which is a direct and widely familiar standard of value. Further, in a hedonistic framework, the process of ethical deliberation is a simplified process exactly because of the singleness and the directness of pleasure. Although initially appealing, this sort of quantitative hedonism is susceptible to a number of serious counters. Before examining the most important objections against quantitative hedonism as a theory of value, let me investigate whether an alternative non-hedonistic theory which fits the *Protagoras* psychology and also provides for commensurability of value can be constructed.

I will argue that such a theory is not only feasible but more so, that it is less problematic than quantitative hedonism. Finally, I will examine whether the proposed theory is compatible with the moral psychology of the *Protagoras*. The two key objectives of my non-hedonistic account will be (a) to show that commensurability of goodness is possible outside the region of hedonism, and (b) to argue in favor of the compatibility of the proposed theory with early Platonic psychology and in particular with the psychology of the *Protagoras*.



Let us call the new theory *Psychological Quantitative Eudaimonism*. The three fundamental propositions that constitute the theory are the following:

- 1) The ultimate aim of all human motivation and action is the promotion of one's eudaimonia, or one's well-being³⁸. All human beings are hardwired to pursue eudaimonia³⁹.
- 2) The goodness of an action is in direct proportion to the action's overall contribution to one's well-being. In other words, the more one action contributes to one's well-being the better the action is.
- 3) The process of moral deliberation is nothing but an operation of measuring, calculating, and weighing the overall contribution of an action to one's well-being.

(1) The first proposition is a descriptive explanation of how human motivation works. It suggests that human psychology is programmed to be ultimately motivated to desire the action which entails the perceived greatest overall contribution to one's well-being. In other words, human motivation is inextricably connected to one's perception of the imagined all-things-considered best option for one's well-being. I will discuss this proposition in more detail at a later section of this chapter.

(3) The third proposition implies that we are endowed with the appropriate psychological and cognitive mechanisms in order to measure, weigh, and calculate the positive and negative contribution of an action to our short-term and long-term well-being. The measuring, weighting and calculative processes are the *mechanisms* of ethical deliberation and in general of practical reasoning. These mechanisms of practical reasoning and decision-making operate in a quantitative framework on the condition that value is commensurable; hence the dependency of the quantification of decision-making upon a theory which provides for commensurability of value.

³⁸ I use the term "well-being" as equivalent to eudaimonia. Although not entirely unproblematic, the term 'well-being' seems to be less problematic than alternative terms like "happiness" and "flourishing".

³⁹ Eudaimonia is taken as the only self-explanatory end of human motivation and action.



(2) Now, let me explore the pivotal second proposition of psychological quantitative eudaimonism. The second proposition purports to account for commensurability of value. The thought in play here is that every action can be ascribed a value relative to its overall contribution to one's well being. The evaluation of the contribution of an action to one's well-being is twofold:

- (a) On the one hand, it is a measurement of the contribution that a particular action makes to the various constituents of our well-being (say health, pleasure, love, virtue, honor, friendship, etc). The questions addressed here are of the type "how much pleasure action X can yield?" Or, "how harmful will action Y be to my health?", "how brave is it to act Y"? This kind of evaluation is a first order calculation which enables the agent to estimate the contribution of a specific action to the various components of our well-being.
- (b) On the other hand, it is a weighing of the contributive weight of the various constituent parts of our well-being at the moment of deliberation. The questions addressed in this kind of evaluation are of the type "Will an intake of pleasure promote better my well-being in the long run than my choice to abstain from pleasure and show temperance?" Or "Will my well-being be better served by getting a good sleep (health units) or by staying sleepless in order to take care of my sick friend (friendship units)?" Thus, we may acknowledge that an action is overall more pleasant than its alternative (taking a good sleep), and still choose the less pleasant action (staying asleep to coddle our sick partner). What explains then our decision to reject the more pleasant alternative is that at the moment of action we judge (forming a second-order calculation) that the promotion of friendship contributes more to our well-being than pleasure⁴⁰.

⁴⁰ Very importantly, quantitative eudaimonism, unlike quantitative hedonism, seems make room for genuine other-regarding concerns.



Both evaluations are crucial for a successful decision-maker. The first evaluation allows one to estimate the contribution of an action to the various components of her well-being. The second evaluation enables one to discern which components of her well-being are in the long run more contributive to the promotion of her well-being. By contrast, the hedonistic suggestion is that every action should be given a value relative to its overall contribution to pleasure; this assumption, however, is far too narrow to capture the depth of the complexities, and the width of considerations entailed in the weighting of a decision. The reduction of goodness into pleasantness sounds counterintuitive because it is based on the suggestion that seeking pleasure is more fundamental than seeking goodness (i.e. pleasure has lexical priority over goodness⁴¹). Therefore, the endeavor to reduce all human motivation and desire into considerations for maximum pleasantness is inherently problematic and doomed to failure for reasons that I will explain later. Now, let me focus on how quantitative eudaimonism can provide for commensurability of value.

Decision making can be an extremely complex and painstaking procedure given the numerous aspects that constitute an action. The complexities of decision-making are phenomenologically transparent when it comes to life-changing decisions. ‘Should I quit from my job?’ ‘Is it wise to divorce my wife?’ Presumably, it is the heavy psychological weight put in some very pivotal decisions that alerts consciousness and deceives us into thinking that the rest of our everyday decision-making is a relatively simple task. Everyday decision-making is the result of, non-conscious for the most part, calculations of what is best to do. More often than not, we are conscious of the calculative process of decision-making when confronted with important dilemmas. But even in cases where decision-making is not over a life-defining action we can become aware of the calculative process of deliberation. Take, for example, my desire to drink a third glass of wine on a Monday night. There are numerous variables that will be taken into account before I decide to have the extra drink or abstain from it. For example: ‘more wine would

⁴¹ As Irwin (1995) notes: ‘**In Socrates’ view, we regard things as good because we suppose they are pleasant, whereas we do not regard things as pleasant because we suppose they are good.** Obviously, I am at odds with the suggestion that this could ever be a sincere Socratic ethical view.



probably get me drunk and tomorrow I have to wake up early for work'. 'I don't want to get a headache and a bad sleep; I need to be productive tomorrow'. 'A third drink might help me relax and mitigate the feeling of intense stress I'm experiencing right now'. 'I will also find the courage to flirt the girl standing next to me'. 'I have to drive back home and I should not put my safety or someone else's safety at risk'. 'My friends will get another drink, so I will enjoy their jokes and their company better if I have an extra drink too'. And so on so forth.

The decisive question here is the following: What is the criterion, the standard according to which we address these questions in order to weigh the alternative possible actions? The hedonistic response is 'pleasure'. In a quantitative hedonistic account the calculations of the different aspects of an action are conducted in view of their contribution to pleasantness. Health, humor, flirting, responsibility, success, friendship, all value is being reduced into pleasure units. The ultimate aim is to maximize overall pleasantness by calculating which action carries the most pleasure-units in it. Given that all value is reduced into pleasure units, the homogeneity of the syllogism is *ex hypothesi* assured and, putatively, the process of the syllogism is facilitated.

In the account I wish to propose the unifying standard of decision-making is not pleasure but one's well-being. The homogeneity of the measurements is obtained in virtue of the contribution of an action's well-being units to one's well-being. The calculation about the overall promotion of one's well-being can be conceived as a second order calculation of what is best for the agent. As I have already suggested, it is our (perceived) well-being promotion that all motivation and action ultimately aims at. Health, pleasure, success at work, love, friendship, although they can be sought for their own sake, at the same time they are contributive components of our well-being. In other words, they are always chosen on the condition that they will promote our overall well-being⁴².

⁴² A first-order calculation then, would entail measurements about the contribution of an action to pleasure, virtue, health, etc



When I am confronted with the '*should I have the extra drink*' dilemma, for example, all second order considerations can be finally construed as considerations about the promotion of my well-being. For instance, the stressful feeling to be productive at work can be explained in terms of my motivation to keep my job or get to a promotion. Not being fired and having a job can be a crucial component of my overall well-being for a number of reasons which are quite obvious. Or, my motivation to get a promotion can be understood as my motivation for increased responsibilities, power, and liberty in the occupational field. A higher income, the pleasure of being recognized and respected at work, the enjoyment of creativity and responsibility can certainly contribute to our well-being in many different ways. Even the thought to abstain from the extra glass of wine so that I won't drive drunk is directly connected to considerations about my well-being. The sense of responsibility and respect to the law, the possible damage that I could cause to another human being; the unwelcome consequences such as getting a ticket or spending time in jail; all these thoughts which constitute the parts of the calculation and weighting of the action are ultimately motivations and considerations about one's well-being. The many different aspects of an action are evaluated in view of their contribution to our well-being. This is the unifying standard against which the various aspects and consequences of an action are measured and weighed. In other words, this is how homogeneity of decision-making is achieved.

Now, although the ultimate aim of human motivation and action is the promotion of our well-being, other things can be valued for their own sake. Pleasure, health, friendship, love, virtue, wealth are both intrinsically and instrumentally valued. It is in this sense that quantitative eudaimonism is a pluralistic theory of value, unlike hedonism which comes with a strong monistic flavor. In quantitative eudaimonism one's well being is always located at the apex of the motivational pyramid. However, the pyramid has more layers. The hierarchy of the layers in this motivational pyramid is determined according to one's judgment about what serves better her well-being. For instance, in a period that one faces a life-threatening illness it is most probable that health will be placed at the highest layers of the pyramid. Since a serious health issue might significantly undermine our well-being, the protection and improvement of our health will be given special weight.



Accordingly, our conception of what serves better our well-being will be the decisive factor about what should be motivationally prioritized (placed higher at the motivational pyramid)⁴³. The higher a component of well-being is placed in this motivational pyramid, the more its contributive weight to our overall well-being.

A possible critique to the proposed theory could be that unlike hedonism, quantitative eudaimonism does not provide for commensurability of value given that the different components of one's well being cannot be comparable in a quantified context. How can one compare in a quantified framework the contribution of pleasure as opposed to the contribution of virtue, or friendship? My hypothesis encompasses the assumption that every action is ascribed a value relative to its overall contribution to one's well being through a twofold evaluation. It is the motivation for the promotion of our well-being that unifies and homogenizes a practical syllogism which includes considerations about pleasure, virtue, love, friendship, et cetera. The reduction of all components of well-being into 'well-being units' in a second-order calculation is what provides for a commensurable value and which in turn allows for a quantified comparability among the constituent parts of our well-being. The common value coin in Psychological Quantitative Eudaimonism is the promotion of one's well-being (as opposed to the maximization of pleasure in quantitative hedonism). A follow-up objection here could be that the reduction of all value into well-being units is not a legitimate move; or at least that the move is not as straightforward as when it comes to the reduction of all value into pleasure units (quantitative hedonism). However, the reduction of all value into pleasure units is no less problematic a procedure. Take for example the historically characteristic example of Benthamite quantitative hedonism which is compatible with the *Protagoras*' quantitative hedonism. There, the weighing of the balance between pleasures and pains operates on the basis of a Hedonic Calculus. Different actions cause different amounts of pain and pleasure, therefore the Hedonic Calculus is a necessary instrument for successful decision-making. Interestingly, the Benthamite hedonic calculus takes into account a number of different aspects that contribute to the final value of pleasure. In

⁴³ Of course, this is not to say that the contributive weight of pleasure, love, work, friendship, etc. with regards to one's well-being is always or entirely the product of the agent's conscious analysis of what server better her well-being.



Benthamite quantitative hedonism fecundity, purity, certainty, propinquity, extent, intensity, and duration are the different aspects that need to be taken into account for a completely informed (and hence successful) calculation of total pleasure in an action. The more intense or the purer the pleasure the more it contributes to the final sum.

By analogy, in Quantitative Eudaimonism alternative actions promote our overall well-being at a greater or a lesser degree in proportion to their contribution to our well-being. Inside this context, a Eudaimonic calculus⁴⁴ would render virtue, pleasure, truth, love, health, knowledge, friendship, wealth the different prima facie positive aspects of an action which contribute to one's well-being. Thus, to choose an overall more virtuous action instead of an overall more pleasant action would be explained in terms of the latter being more contributive to one's well-being than the former. In other words, the virtuous action overcomes the pleasant action in well-being units because of its special contributive weight for one's well-being. Similarly, the Benthamite measurer or the hedonist measurer of the *Protagoras* might choose a more proximate pleasure instead of a more durable one. In other words, the more proximate pleasure entails more pleasure units than those entailed in the more durable pleasure. Therefore, a theory of quantitative hedonism (in its Benthamite form) entails a two-order syllogism about the value of a prospective action. The proposed theory, however, seems to be much better equipped to incorporate commonsense intuitions regarding the things which are valuable for one's well-being.

A parallel criticism which may apply to my eudaimonistic theory could be that it is hard to find a meaningful definition of 'well-being' which unifies the various subjective conceptions of what a 'well-being' consists of. Interestingly, Aristotle addresses this very point in his *Nicomachean Ethics* where he holds that everyone would agree that eudaimonia is the greatest and unconditional good but that there also exists major disagreement about the defining features of eudaimonia. However, this objection applies to Quantitative Eudaimonism no less than quantitative hedonism. The phenomenology of

⁴⁴ There seems to be no in-principle barrier to the idea of measuring, at least roughly, how eudaimon people are.



pleasure is far from being unified and stable. The pleasure of making love feels different than the pleasure experienced while sacrificing your life for your ideals. Or, the pleasure of playing chess is much different to the pleasure of eating your favorite meal. In a quantitative context, be it eudaimonistic or hedonistic, the problem of unifying the different subjective and diverse conceptions of well-being or pleasure is quite similar. This is not to deny that the theory I proposed need not address the above criticism; rather, what I am trying to stress here is that the latter criticism applies to quantitative hedonism too.

At any rate, the central point I am trying to raise here is that quantitative eudaimonism is a theory that can provide for commensurability of value in a similar fashion to quantitative hedonism. What is more, as I have tried to show it faces analogous problems to quantitative hedonism in explaining how the different aspects of an action contribute to one's final aim, be it the maximization of pleasure or the promotion of well-being. It is in this sense that the quantification of decision-making can be achieved outside the region of hedonism. If quantitative eudaimonism is a theory which provides for commensurability of value and it also fits the *Protagoras* moral psychology we have sufficient positive reasons to believe that the quantitative hedonism of the dialogue is not a necessary premise for the 'no one does wrong willingly' conclusion. In the very next section I argue that we also have very strong negative reasons to deny prohedonism given that quantitative hedonism contradicts some of the most cardinal segments of Platonic ethics.



4.2 Pleasure and Well-Being in Plato:

Pleasure is not *the Good*

I have just examined the first of the two major objections to quantitative hedonism as a theory of value in the *Protagoras*; namely, that an alternative non-hedonistic theory can also provide for a commensurable theory of the good inside the context of the dialogue. My main conclusion was that quantitative hedonism is not a necessary premise for *Socrates*' argumentative scopes in the dialogue. Here, I shall focus on the insurmountable problems inherent in quantitative hedonism as an ethical theory. Moreover, I will argue that hedonism is at odds with the *Socratic* view about the nature of virtue and eudaimonia as it develops in most Platonic dialogues. As Plato implies in the *Protagoras*, the good/pleasant identification commits one to positions incompatible with and foreign to the *Socrates* we know. It is the number and the depth of the contradictions attached to the endorsement of hedonism that leads us to the conclusion that *Socrates* does not take seriously the hedonistic premise and that its presentation in the dialogue serves aims distinct to the anti-akrasia argument.

In the *Protagoras* (351b3, 354a-d, 355b) *Socrates* commits his interlocutor and 'the many' to the position that the sets 'pleasure' / 'good' and 'pain' / 'bad' are simply two names for one thing. The only criterion in view for judging something as good is it being pleasant and respectively for judging something as bad, it being painful. In the dialogue's hedonistic framework, to regard an action which produces pleasure as a bad action would make sense only if this pleasant action deprived one of greater pleasures. The underlying meaning of this purely quantitative conception of hedonism is that the badness of an action lies in the painful consequences (and not in very enjoyment of pleasure -which is always something inherently good). Therefore, the badness of an action is entirely separate from its pleasantness. Furthermore, not only pleasure cannot be thought of as something bad in itself, but at the same time it is the only source of intrinsic value ("**...things are good only because they result in pleasure and in the relief and avoidance of pain...**", *Prot.*, 354b4).



Now, a standard critique to the idea that the sole source of intrinsic value is pleasure is the commonsensical idea that other things can intrinsically contribute to one's well-being. Health, virtue, wisdom, love are some of the candidates that most people would value as good in their own sake independently of the amount of pleasure they might yield. There can be imagined numerous scenarios where pleasure plays a secondary or even a trivial role in judgments and evaluations about the good. Take for example the case of a soldier who, captivated by the Nazis, has to choose between suffering incredibly painful tortures until he dies and revealing important national security secrets. Presumably, the option to reveal the national secrets and avoid the torturing entails less physical pain for the soldier. Here, an act of cowardice, under the theoretical umbrella of quantitative hedonism would have to be construed as a morally compelling action.

Of course, a possible counter to this criticism could be that pleasure should not be counted merely as a physical sensation; or that the soldier might find the act of resistance, sacrifice and bravery overall greater in pleasure. The former reply, however, is problematic for the coherence of quantitative hedonism given that it introduces criteria independent of the very sensation of pleasure (intensity, duration, et cetera) and thus, it opens the door for qualitative versions of hedonism. The latter response, on the other hand, relies upon the assumption that the surplus of pleasure of the brave action will be greater than the surplus of pleasure of the coward. This assumption however, does not correspond to a realistic depiction of our world. Although it is not rare to find human beings ready to sacrifice themselves (or even people who envisage a brave death) for the sake of their ideals, it is far more common to find human beings who experience no feeling of pain, guilt, or shame in choosing a rather coward behavior. In the latter cases, the sensation of pleasure for having saved their lives can be experienced free from the feeling of guilt or shame. It is for those cases that quantitative hedonism seems to be insufficiently equipped to grasp the depth and the width of evaluations regarding the goodness of an action. In discussing Psychological Quantitative Eudaimonism I have argued that, unlike quantitative hedonism, a pluralistic theory of value can survive the commonsensical objections which apply to the hedonistic quantification of goodness. Psychological Quantitative Eudaimonism (PQE) seems to be in line with a more



commonsensical conception of the nature of our well-being and with our understanding of the good; at the same time it avoids the reduction of all value into pleasure units, a reduction which has been widely criticized for its counter intuitiveness⁴⁵. In PQE, well-being components, such as honor and virtue are not reduced into pleasure, and hence, the theory provides paves the way for the development of genuine other-regarding concerns. The theory I propose expands beyond the quantitative hedonistic limits which render goodness subject to judgments based on strictly personal and subjective sensations⁴⁶.

What is more, the quantitative hedonism of the *Protagoras* is a theory clearly irreconcilable with Plato's views about the role of pleasure in a good life. In the *Gorgias* (474d-e) *Socrates* persuades *Polus* that some of the admirable and good things are such not because of their pleasantness but because they can be beneficial for oneself. The implication of this *Socratic* thought for the relationship between pleasure and *the* good is evident. Some things can be beneficial and good without being pleasant, therefore there is a conceptual dichotomy between pleasure and the good. Moreover, *Socrates* in the *Gorgias* implicitly rebuts the idea of a hedonistic calculus the knowledge of which would be vital for virtue and salvation in life. The life of a tyrant is described as a life almost free from physical pain and one in which pleasure is available in enormous amounts. However, such a life not only should not be envied, *Socrates* tells us, but it also is a life of psychic disharmony. An unjust tyrant, no matter how much pleasure can he experience, is condemned to lead a shallow life and to cultivate a brute character (*Gorgias*, 470e).

**POLUS: "...you'd know this if you had met him, but without that you don't know straight off that he's happy? –No, I certainly don't, by Zeus!
It's obvious, Socrates, that you won't even claim to know that the Great King is happy.**

⁴⁵ Nozick's thought experiment (1974), the famous 'experience machine' raises this very objection. For Nozick, if pleasure were the exclusive source of intrinsic value then we would have conclusive reasons to plug ourselves into a machine that would generate every pleasure we would ever wish to experience. The fact that the vast majority would be hesitant and unwilling to plug themselves into the experience machine stands as a strong indication that the sensation of pleasure is not the only source of intrinsic value.

⁴⁶ Thereupon, PQE allows for a notion of a well-being which is much less selfish in its nature and one that can even expand over the span of one's lifetime.



SOCRATES: Yes, and that would be true, for I don't know how he stands in regard to education and justice.

POLUS: Really? Is happiness determined entirely by that?

SOCRATES: Yes, Polus, so I say anyway. I say that the admirable and good person, man or woman, is happy, but the one who's unjust and wicked is miserable.

The very crucial point that *Socrates* raises in the *Gorgias* is not that pleasure is a destructive thing per se for one's soul (although he does hold that certain pleasures are bad and destructive for one's psychic harmony). Rather, the *Socratic* idea is that things other than pleasure (justice, virtue) can be more beneficial for the promotion of one's well-being; whereas pleasure should be sought in the context and as the product of an internally balanced life and not as the exclusive aim of human action. Later in the *Gorgias* (500d), *Socrates* agrees with *Callicles* that **"there is such a thing as good and such a thing as pleasant and the pleasant is different from the good..."**. Interestingly, the antihedonistic, or at least, non-hedonistic aura of the *Gorgias* leaves one with the impression that the hedonistic calculus⁴⁷ discussed in the *Protagoras* is more suitable to the life of a tyrant rather than to the life of psychic harmony and justice. In the *Gorgias*, the maximization of pleasure is not the ultimate, or even the central aim of one's life. The *Socratic* stance in the dialogue advocates a theory of value which is pluralistic and non-hedonistic. Again, the *Gorgias* is another indication that a theory like PQE is much better equipped than quantitative hedonism to capture the width of *Socratic* ethical theory and the richness of his theory of value⁴⁸.

⁴⁷ My point is inspired by Tenkku (1956:34-35). The distinction between real crafts and activities of flattery in the *Gorgias* indicate that the accumulation of pleasure is not the ultimate aim of human action. If that were the case, then **"...the art of a master cook as combined with dietetics producing the greatest possible amount of pleasure and painlessness would then be more honorable and useful than the sacrifices of a heroic patriot spending the rest of his life as a war prisoner in slavery and torture"**.

⁴⁸ Russell (2005:239) notices a major discrepancy between hedonism and the consistently non-hedonistic Platonic theory of value and happiness. For him, the fact that hedonism is openly rejected in the *Gorgias* and in other dialogues is sufficient evidence to support the view that *Socrates* does not endorse hedonism in the *Protagoras*.



In the *Philebus* now, a dialogue touching upon the input and the role of pleasure in a eudaimon life, Plato explicitly suggests that reason, measure, and beauty are more closely related to the supreme good and more valuable than pleasure (*Philebus*, 65b) for a good life. In other words, the Platonic suggestion is that an ethical theory of the form ‘Pleasure is *the* good’ is a theory which falls short of capturing the deep and pluralistic essence of the supreme good. As the *Philebus* tells us, pleasure can be viewed as one of the sources of intrinsic value; nevertheless, an ethical theory which renders pleasure the exclusive source of intrinsic value would make a deeply unsatisfactory ethical theory. The conclusive remarks of the *Philebus* are very informative regarding Plato’s conception of the good life and the role of pleasure in it. At the outset of the dialogue (*Philebus*, 11d) *Socrates* challenges *Plotarchus* over examining which of the constituents of eudaimonia are more decisive for one’s well-being. *Socrates* aims to refute *Plotarchus*’ proposal according to which the acquisition of pleasure can be sufficient for a eudaimon life.

SOCRATES: That each of us will be trying to prove some possession or state of the soul to be one that can render life happy for all human beings. Isn’t that so? –Quite so. You that it is pleasure; we, that it is knowledge⁴⁹.

Now, at the very end of the dialogue the investigation over the most crucial components of the human good, or one’s well-being seems to settle. *Socrates*’ verdict is that pleasure turns out to receive fifth position (*Philebus*, 67a9) in the hierarchy of the competitors for contributing to one’s well-being. Evidently, the monistic theory of value presented in the *Protagoras* of the form “pleasure is *the* good” is doubly rejected. On the one hand, the good life is described as a life of value pluralism where more than one thing can be intrinsically valuable. On the other hand, pleasure receives only the fifth position among the various components of the human good and of the contributors to a eudaimon life. Clearly then, the ethical and value theory presented in the *Protagoras* is in direct opposition to the ethical and value theory openly advocated in the *Philebus*. The theory proposed earlier, Psychological Quantitative Eudaimonism, seems to capture much better

⁴⁹ However, the *Socratic* conclusion is not that wisdom is *the* good but that it probably is the greatest (or the most contributive) among the goods that constitute a eudaimon life.



the Platonic intuitions in two different ways. First, it fits the pluralist eudaimonistic theory explicitly defended in the *Philebus* (67).

SOCRATES: “Afterwards it became most sufficiently clear that neither of those two would suffice. And did it not become clear at this point in our discussion that both reason and pleasure had lost any claim that one or the other would be the good itself, since they were lacking in autonomy and in the power of self-sufficiency and perfection? -Exactly”

The examination of what a eudaimon life consists in, Plato suggests, leads to the recognition that more than one thing needs to figure in it so that it can be complete. It is the correctly balanced mixture of the different good things that promotes one’s well being; therefore, Quantitative Eudaimonism is better equipped than any other monistic theory of value (like quantitative hedonism which reduces all goodness to pleasure units) to incorporate the Platonic proposal. Second, the quantification of decision-making attempted in the framework of Quantitative Eudaimonism is compatible with the *Philebus*’ remarks about the crucial role of measure in leading a good life. Actually, measure gains first position in the Platonic ranking of the things that are necessary for a good life: **“first comes what is somehow connected with measure, the measured and the timely, and whatever else belongs in that family (*Philebus* 66a)”**. Previously, I argued that the concept of measuring and weighting is of key importance to the understanding of the reformulation of Platonic ethics. The *Philebus*’ remarks seem to support my assumption, namely that Plato in the *Protagoras* is serious in proposing a model of quantified ethical thought for which the ability for correct measurements is of vital importance. To sum up the argument of this section: the first way to object to the quantitative hedonism of the *Protagoras* is by rejecting its defining premise “pleasure is *the good*”. The second way is by showing that Plato’s value theory is completely at odds with a monistic and hedonistic theory as the one presented in the *Protagoras*. I ended with the conclusion that we have sufficient evidence to argue that Plato opted for a pluralistic theory of value which is entirely incompatible with the identification of the good with the pleasant.



4.3 *Not All Pleasure is Valuable*

Another way to object to the quantitative hedonism presented in the *Protagoras* is by holding that some pleasures are not contributive to one's well-being. A standard critique uses the example of sadistic pleasure or generally of pleasure generated from base and pervert activities in order to point out that some pleasures are immoral and non-valuable. Take for example the case of a pedophile rapist who receives enormous amounts of pleasure in torturing and raping young children; also imagine that the pedophile rapist is a well-respected figure in his society, deeply loved by his family and friends and that he manages to get away with his crimes unpunished. Can we ever suggest without being blatantly ridiculous that this is a good life only because of the large net amounts of pleasure experienced by the agent and the avoidance of pain? The answer is obviously negative. A commonsensical reaction to such hypothetical (but unfortunately realistic) scenarios is to assume that there are more things that determine one's well-being other than the mere experience of pleasure. However, this kind of objection is not fatal for most types of hedonism. Although a stubborn proponent of crude quantitative hedonist would have to bite the bullet and concede that quantity of pleasure is all that matters - irrespective of its source- more sophisticated types of hedonism are in better position to avoid the aforementioned objection.

The move of "sophisticating" a hedonistic theory can be traced back to John Stuart Mill and his theory of qualitative hedonism. On the one hand, the natural criticism against Benthamite quantitative hedonism namely that it fails to condemn pleasure produced by perverse and inhumane activities on moral grounds; and on the other hand, the incapacity of his theory to draw a qualitative distinction between the many different sources of pleasure encouraged Mill to put forward a more sophisticated hedonistic theory. For Mill the introduction of a qualitative criterion which distinguished lower from higher pleasures rescues hedonism from criticisms that are more likely to apply to Benthamite quantitative hedonism⁵⁰. The Milleian move is quite similar to the move made by

⁵⁰ Obviously Mill's theory faces problems of its own. For example, it has been accused for abolishing its hedonistic essence given that the criterion of value is not a certain property of pleasure (intensity, duration, et cetera) but the activity itself. However, I do not intend to discuss Mill's theory any further.



Unitarian prohedonists like Gosling & Taylor, Rudebusch et al. For these scholars *Socrates* endorses an enlightened type of hedonism which avoids criticisms applying to cruder types of hedonism. What is common, then, in the different accounts of ‘enlightened’ hedonism is the argument that disvalue or immorality of an action lies not in the experience of pleasure itself but in the source, the activity which yields the experienced pleasure. In other words, for proponents of such theories the experience of pleasure is always inherently good and valuable, whereas it is the activity that carries the badness within it. However, as Russell (2005) convincingly notes, what proponents of more sophisticated types of hedonism fail to appreciate is that the reconciliation between the *Protagoras* and the *Gorgias* regarding the treatment of hedonism is not sufficient to remove the overall anomaly for Platonic theory of value and eudaimonia⁵¹. For the sake of objections more relevant to my central argument I will sidestep the question whether the *Protagoras*’ quantitative hedonism is susceptible to charges which apply to cruder types of quantitative hedonism. Rather, I will focus on a less traditional but much more effective criticism against hedonism; namely that in some cases the very experiencing of pleasure is irrelevant to the promotion of our well-being (or even detrimental).

Interestingly enough, this sort of objection (i.e. not all pleasure is valuable) applies to sophisticated and qualitative version of hedonism as well. The core of the objection is the assumption that some pleasures are inherently non-valuable or even destructive for one’s well-being. The Kagan-style (1998) scenarios, for example, illustrate in a very clear manner the criticism that not all pleasure is valuable. The general spirit of the Kagan-style objections promotes the idea that the experiencing of false pleasures cannot be contributive to one’s well-being and thereupon such false pleasures are not valuable for one’s well-being. Imagine the pleasure of a professor who is deceived into thinking that his students respect him and that they find his lectures enjoyable. However, what truly happens is that behind his back his students describe him as an extremely boring speaker and show no respect for his understanding and ability to teach his material. This certain

⁵¹ To put into his own words: “...even if the hedonism of the *Protagoras* should be consistent with the refutations of Callicles’ hedonism, none the less hedonism requires a very particular view about the very nature of happiness and of value that is at odds at the most fundamental level with the view that Plato actually develops in the *Gorgias* and elsewhere”.



pleasure of recognition and acceptance experienced by the deceived professor, the objection goes, should not be counted as a valuable pleasure for the professor's well-being even though its experience is enjoyable as a sensation. Now let's stretch the concept of the latter scenario over the span of a lifetime: assume that all pleasures⁵² experienced by an agent are false pleasures, pleasures which are brought about by false states of affairs. Would we consider such a deceitful life as a good life even if it were a life full of pleasure? Is our well-being really promoted when in an overall enormously pleasant life the experience of all pleasure is merely the product of a series of deception? Both questions, I believe, should be given a negative response. Previously, the conclusion I reached was that more things, other than pleasure, can be inherently valuable for one's well-being (in the deceived professor scenario these things are truth, genuine love, genuine respect). Here, the argument from deception suggests that pleasure is not always valuable for and contributive to the promotion of one's well-being⁵³.

Both the Kagan-style and the experience-machine-like thought experiments test our intuitions against the hypothetical role of pleasure in a complete and eudaimon life. In both cases the commonsensical outcome is (a) that pleasure should not be regarded as the exclusive source of value and (b) that pleasure is not always contributive to one's well-being. The latter criticisms against hedonism are applicable to the *Protagoras*' hedonism regardless of the level of its sophistication or the depth of its 'enlightening' rectification. That is so because both criticisms refute the fundamental and defining premise of all hedonistic theories, that is, the good/pleasant identification.

Interestingly, the aforementioned criticisms against hedonism can be traced back to Plato's dialogue the *Gorgias*. What is of particular interest, however, is that the *Gorgias* comes with a strong non-hedonistic flavor in expressing objections which apply to the

⁵² The thought here is that all pleasures are based on false beliefs. For example I take pleasure in the thought that my wife is faithful to me when in fact she's having an affair. Or, in that my children genuinely love me whereas what they really care about is financial support, et cetera.

⁵³ The general idea is that pleasure should not be identified with the good since pleasure is not regarded anymore as the exclusive source of value.



Protagoras' hedonism⁵⁴. The *Gorgias*' argument is clearly incompatible with and opposed to the hedonism presented in the *Protagoras*. What *Socrates* invites to think in the *Gorgias* is the unobserved -by the many and by the sophists- distinction between what one wants (468c) to do (βούλεσθαι) and what pleases one to do (ἐπιθυμείν). The *Socratic* argument in the dialogue aims to demonstrate that even a tyrant's enormous power to do whatever pleases him does not guarantee the choice of those actions which really promote his well-being. The tyrant might enjoy unlimited pleasures and exercise enormous power (he can put to death, expropriate, and banish whoever he wants 509d) yet the question whether his life is good and worthy is still an open one. The *Socratic* message here is that one's well-being cannot simply be reduced into things like pleasure and political power regardless of the amounts in which such goods may come to an agent's soul. Above all, however, *Socrates* puts forward the suggestion that some pleasures are inherently bad. In the *Gorgias* he maintains that there are good and bad pleasures (*Gorgias*, 499d-e). More clearly so in the *Republic* (505c) *Socrates* agrees with *Adeimantus* that there are some pleasures which are bad in themselves:

“What about those who define the good as pleasure? Are they any less full of confusion than the others? Aren't even they forced to admit that there are bad pleasures? –Most definitely”

As it has become evident by now Plato of the transitional dialogues was well aware of the sharp distinction between the good and the pleasant. His arguments in the *Gorgias*, the *Republic*, the *Philebus* and elsewhere are without doubt dismissive of the hedonistic identification between the good and the pleasant. Plato not only denies the suggestion that Pleasure=the Good (A=B); he also explicitly rejects the suggestion that all pleasure is good (all A's are B). Given that the *Protagoras* was written very closely to the *Gorgias*

⁵⁴ I am more than hesitant to embrace the possibility that a thinker of Plato's caliber would offer two arguments written at the same period (*Protagoras*, *Gorgias*) which in essence blatantly contradict each other. However, as I have explained at the outset of this chapter, it is problematic to deny the seriousness of the *Protagoras*' hedonistic argument merely based on the Inconsistency Thesis. For a different approach see Russell (2005:240) “...philosophers change their minds, even at the most fundamental levels and there is no a priori reason to expect Plato to be exempt from such change”.



and the *Republic* it is rather safe to assume that it is untenable to read *Socrates* as a hedonist (of any type) in the *Protagoras*.

In this section I have addressed the first block of objections against quantitative hedonism as a theory of value. First, I argued that an alternative non-hedonistic ethical theory can also provide for commensurability of value. I proposed a new interpretation of Platonic moral theory which I termed ‘Psychological Quantitative Eudaimonism’. My suggestion was that the proposed theory captures much better than quantitative hedonism, Plato’s pluralistic intuitions on value and eudaimonia; at the same time, the proposed eudaimonistic theory is fully compatible with the *Protagoras*’ moral psychology, avoiding the easy criticisms which apply to hedonism, whereas it also creates a more unified and consistent picture of Plato’s ethics. A reasonable assumption is that Plato cannot have been unaware of alternative non-hedonistic tacks which would bring about the argumentative advantages that he allegedly saw in hedonism. The prohedonistic claim has traditionally been that hedonism is endorsed by *Socrates* for the sake of commensurability of value and for the denial of *akrasia*. Until now I have tried to show that there is no argumentative dependency between a commensurable moral value and quantitative hedonism. In what follows, I focus on the detrimental consequences of a hedonistic theory on *Socratic* ethics and I reject the claim that hedonism is a necessary premise for the denial of *akrasia* in the *Protagoras* and in other early Platonic dialogues.

4.4 Interlude: Commensurability and ‘the many’ on akrasia

A crucial question I have not yet fully addressed is the following: what is the utility of a commensurable value for the economy of the *Protagoras*’ anti-*akrasia* argument? Previously, I touched upon the function of commensurability with regards to Plato’s putative endeavor to bring ethics into the province of scientific thought, education and method. Here, I will examine an alternative function of commensurability. More specifically, I will try to demonstrate how a commensurable theory of a purely quantified



good can work as a catalyst for the refutation of ‘the many’. ‘The many’ in the *Protagoras*, maintain that knowledge of the good can be defeated by a strong passion as far as an agent’s action is concerned (*Protagoras*, 352b-c). In other words, they deny that knowledge of the good is motivationally invincible; for ‘the many’ a strong passion can overpower even the present at the moment of action full-fledged knowledge of what is best to do. *Socrates* invites us to criticize the folk psychology advocated by the majority on the grounds that it is defective, oversimplified, and untenable; however, he also makes a much stronger claim by putting forward the argument that the majority’s views on *akrasia* lead to an absurd⁵⁵ conclusion (*Protagoras*, 355d).

The *Socratic* strategy in the dialogue is fairly evident: If knowledge is motivationally lordly (*Protagoras*, 352c) so that to dictate action when present (motivational intellectualism); and if human beings are hardwired to always go after the all-things-considered imagined good (*Protagoras*, 345e, psychological eudaimonism)⁵⁶; then all *Socrates* needs in order to expose the *absurdity* in the views of the majority is a theory which quantifies decision-making on the basis of a commensurable theory of the good. As I will maintain, it is commensurability of value -and not hedonism per se- the theoretical instrument which enables *Socrates* to convert the ‘commonsensical’ folk psychology on *akrasia* into an absurd statement.

Initially, ‘the many’ argue that choosing the worse course of action willingly is a common phenomenon and the etiology they offer for their position is that knowledge of what is best can be dragged about like a slave by passions (*Protagoras*, 352c2). In the words of ‘the many’, people go willingly after bad things because knowledge can be “overcome by pleasure” (*Protagoras*, 353a5). The fact that *Socrates* is provoked to refute the “overcome by pleasure” version of *akrasia* can partly explain the introduction of the hedonistic premise. Pleasure is considered by the majority as the most powerful passion and the most likely candidate to dethrone knowledge from being the ultimate motivator

⁵⁵ I understand the *Socratic* thesis to be that the views of the many lead to a logical absurdity. However, I do not intend to examine the nature of the absurdity here.

⁵⁶ I offer an elaborate account of the anti-*akrasia* function of the two *Socratic* theses in the chapter that follows.



of human action. Thus, the presentation of the hedonistic premise comes as a natural response to the folk moral psychology presented in the dialogue. Nevertheless, not any kind of hedonism can do the trick for *Socrates*, i.e. expose the absurdity in the views of ‘the many’. Hence, in *Protagoras* 354a-3 the *Socratic* move is to commit ‘the many’ to hedonism in a strictly quantitative framework, and not to a more general or qualitative hedonistic theory. The simple explanation for this move is that without a strictly quantitative theory of the good *Socrates* would be unable to support his stronger claim, namely that the majority’s views on *akrasia* are *absurd*.

Where, then, does the absurdity in the views of the majority lie? When ‘the many’ finally endorse quantitative hedonism *Socrates* is legitimated to treat the ‘good’ and the ‘pleasant as equivalent terms. What is more, ‘pleasure’ supplies the necessary conceptual tools for the quantification of decision-making. Pleasure is the common value coin which supposedly facilitates the straightforwardness and homogeneity of the quantified measurements and weightings of an action. Now, *Socrates* is ready to unfold his *reductio ad absurdum* argument:

A

1. *S* knows that *X* is an overall better option than *Y*.
2. *S* thinks that *Y*, although an overall worse option, is more pleasant than *X*.
3. *S* does *Y* overcome by *Y*’s pleasantness

“So let’s now go back and apply the names ‘the pleasant’ and ‘the painful’ to these very same things” (*Protagoras*, 355e5). Since it has been agreed by *Socrates*’ interlocutors that ‘good’ and ‘pleasure’ are two names for one thing, the commonsense conceptual explanation of *akrasia* ‘overcome by pleasure’ can be transformed into A1&A2:

A1

1. *S* knows that *X* is an overall better option than *Y*.
2. *S* thinks that *Y*, although an overall worse option, is more pleasant than *X*.



3. *S* does *Y* overcome by *Y*'s *goodness*.

A2

1. *S* knows that *X* is an overall more pleasant option than *Y*.
2. *S* thinks that *Y*, although an overall less pleasant option, is more pleasant than *X*.
3. *S* does *Y* overcome by *Y*'s *pleasantness*.

The first transformation (A1) leads to the oxymoron conclusion that *S* chooses the worse alternative option overcome by its goodness. *Socrates* (*Protagoras*, 355d2) holds that it is untenable to hold that one can do what is bad, knowing its badness, when he is not compelled to do it, because one is overcome by the worse option's goodness. Nevertheless, *Socrates* refrains at this point from accusing 'the many' of putting forward an *absurd* conclusion. The reason is that A1 does not entail any logical absurdity. The proposition '*S* does *Y* overcome by *Y*'s goodness' can be analyzed into *S* willingly gets **"more bad things for the sake of fewer good things"** (*Protagoras*, 355e2). In other words, although *S* knows that *X* is an overall better option than *Y* still he chooses to act *Y*, overcome by an aspect of *Y*'s goodness. This description of *akrasia*, after all, allows for scenarios where *S*, tempted by a certain good to be experienced in *Y*, ends up having his 'knowledge dragged about like a slave'. The underlying meaning of the first transformation of the popular view on *akrasia* is that we cannot rule out *akrasia* on logical grounds (absurdity) unless the goods measured and weighed entertain a status of qualitative homogeneity.

For example, think about the following scenario: In an imaginary world, "chocolatism" is the true ethical theory (chocolate=good, the more chocolate included in a food the better the food). Now, imagine that a girl is confronted with the following dilemma: She can either choose to eat 5 bars of chocolate, or one piece of her favorite chocolate cake. The girl knows that the 5 bars include more chocolate (goodness) than the one piece of her favorite chocolate cake. Nevertheless, she chooses to go for the chocolate cake. Now, in this qualitatively hedonistic context of the imaginary scenario, the desire for a good (chocolate cake) can possibly overpower the desire for the (quantitatively) better option



(5 chocolate bars) without rendering the thought absurd. What renders the above akrasia story conceptually intelligible is that there is no qualitative homogeneity among the different forms in which one can find chocolate (goodness). In this scenario, evaluations and judgments about the good are open to qualitative criteria which in turn break the homogeneous purity of the syllogism. By analogy, *Socrates* needs to explicitly put forward the second transformation (A2) in order to highlight the absence of qualitative criteria⁵⁷ in evaluating the good/the pleasant in the account offered by the majority. That explains his effort to persuade ‘the many’ to endorse hedonism in a strict quantitative context⁵⁸ -before he can show that their position leads to an absurd conclusion (*Protagoras*, 356a-b).

Therefore, in A1, a certain good, i.e. a certain pleasure, can tempt one to succumb into choosing the overall worse course of action. Akratic cases which fall under A1 description are not logically impossible⁵⁹. This is exactly why *Socrates* characterizes the ‘overcome by goodness’ conclusion (A1) untenable and not ‘absurd’. The absurdity in the views of ‘the many’ follows from the second transformation (A2).

The second good / pleasant substitution (A2) aims to exhibit the absurdity in the explanation of akrasia offered by the majority: *S* willingly chooses to go for *Y*, which is a more painful option, overcome by its pleasure. What *Socrates* invites us to realize here is that when pleasure is measured and weighed in a purely quantitative context it provides

⁵⁷ As Tenkku (1956:31) suggests, “**In spite of Protagoras’ attempts to object, Socrates disregards all qualitative differences between different pleasures in their ethical evaluation. Instead, he says that pleasures as well as pains differ from each other only quantitatively**”. The *Socratic* resistance to allow qualitative criteria between different pleasures can be explained only as part of his strategy to refute ‘the many’ and not as a thesis which *Socratic* sincerely adheres to.

⁵⁸ The thought in-play here is that it is not the hedonistic premise per se but commensurability of a single and homogeneous standard in a strictly quantitative theory of value that enables *Socrates* to show that the ‘overcome by pleasure’ explanation is absurd.

⁵⁹ By means of example: imagine a diabetic who is in a strict sugar free diet. It is not difficult to realistically hold that although the diabetic knows that eating a piece of chocolate cake is overall worse than abstaining, nevertheless he eats it succumbing into the pleasure of the moment. In this case, the desire for *a* good overpowers the motivation and the desire for *the overall better* action.



for qualitative homogeneity in the standard of measurement. Therefore, if one weighs actions X and Y in view of an entirely homogeneous qualitative criterion and finds that X outweighs Y then it would be rather absurd to suggest that S chose Y overcome by its pleasantness. Now, the common value coin is not only commensurable but also qualitatively homogeneous. While it provides for a commensurable value it also renders the goodness/pleasure units qualitatively identical. All qualitative evaluations and judgments about the good are reduced into quantitative ones.

Suppose again, that the girl of the chocolate-world scenario is confronted with the following dilemma: she can either have 5 bars of chocolate or one piece of chocolate cake. Also suppose that in this quantitatively hedonistic context goodness is identical and directly proportional to quantity of chocolate. In other words, chocolate/goodness is clearly commensurable by means of strict quantitative criteria. Now, if the girl chose the one piece of chocolate cake instead of the 5 bars of chocolate which are superior in goodness (quantity of chocolate) how would 'the many' explain her action? Presumably, the explanation they would offer would be that the girl chose the 1 unit of chocolate instead of the 5 units, overcome by the quantity of chocolate to be found in the cake (1 unit). Evidently, this explanation would be absurd.

Thereupon, the *Socratic* conclusion is that choosing the worse course of action should not be explained as a defeat of knowledge under the pressure of pleasure; rather it should be explained as the result of ignorance / miscalculation regarding the real goodness-value of the alternative actions. Hence, inside the context of the second transformation (A2),

- If one goes after the imagined good by psychological necessity (psychological eudaimonism);
- and if good=pleasure in a strictly quantitative context, then

To say that S knows that X is more pleasant than Y, nonetheless S chooses Y overcome by Y's quantity of pleasure is evidently an absurd position. This explanation of akrasia, *Socrates* says, is not merely untenable but also absurd. Actually, in discussing the second



transformation of akrasia (A2) *Socrates* implies that it is only a quantifiable (and qualitatively homogenous) standard that will reveal the absurdity in the views of ‘the many’:

“But how else does pleasure outweigh pain, except in relative excess or deficiency? Isn’t it a matter of larger and smaller, more or fewer, greater or lesser degree? For if someone were to say: -But Socrates, the immediate pleasure is very much different from the pleasant and the painful at a later time- I would reply, -they are not different in any other way than by pleasure and pain, for there is no other way that they could differ. Weighing is a good analogy; you put the pleasures together and the pains together, both the near and the remote, on the balance scale, and then say which of the two is more”
(*Protagoras*, 356a-b).

The above passage is extremely illuminating with regards to *Socrates*’ strategy: It suggests that even in a hedonistic context, a simple substitution of the good with the pleasant cannot be sufficient for the establishment of an anti-akrasia argument which logically rules out the moral psychology of ‘the many’. The theoretical framework needs to be a strictly quantitative one and all value has to be commensurable and free from any qualitative criteria.

In this section, I have attempted to argue that the hedonistic premise per se is only superficially relevant to *Socrates*’ endeavor to expose the absurdity in the views of ‘the many’. As I have attempted to show, commensurability of value is not an exclusive theoretical privilege of hedonism. Any theory which can render the good quantifiable in a strictly quantitative sense (chocolate world scenario) would be equally effective in demonstrating the absurdity in the views of the majority. In a nutshell, the relationship between hedonism and the refutation of the popular opinion about akrasia is rather superficial in terms of the logic of the argument. It is the qualitative homogeneity of a commensurable value which reveals the contradictions inherent in the views of the majority, and not hedonism per se. The refutation of ‘the many’, thus, first and foremost, lies in the derivative commensurability of value that springs from the hedonistic identification. It is this function of commensurability that allows *Socrates* to convert the apparently commonsensical view of the majority into an absurd statement.



5. *Socrates*, Virtue and Sophistic Education

In the previous sections of this work I have attempted to argue that the hedonistic premise is irrelevant to the logic of *Socrates*' argument in the dialogue. More specifically, I have suggested that commensurability of value, the quantification of decision-making, and the refutation of 'the many' rely only superficially on the quantitative hedonism of the *Protagoras*. Admittedly, it would be unreasonable to ask from the untutored reader to notice the lack of dependability of *Socrates*' arguments on hedonism and to figure out alternative non-hedonistic ways in which these aims can be served. Unsurprisingly then, the shadow of hedonism has created an interpretative environment of perplexity and obscurity regarding Plato's philosophical intentions in the dialogue. This sense of perplexity can be summarized into the question, "how can we explain the fact that traditionally *Socratic* ideas and doctrines rely upon a very un-*Socratic* premise"? A serious number of much respected ancient scholars have followed the prohedonistic interpretative path by suggesting that *Socrates* endorses the hedonistic premise in order to defend his moral psychology by means of explicit argument. However, this explanation is deeply unsatisfying, in that, if anything, it fails to detect the central *Socratic* aims in the dialogue. The advocacy of a prohedonistic interpretation of the *Protagoras* comes inextricably attached with an apotheosis of sophistry and with the acceptance of the conflation of the philosopher with the sophist. It also leads to the conclusion that *Socrates* and *Protagoras*, philosophy and sophistry coincide in their outlooks of virtue, education, and well-being. As I will argue, the prohedonistic stance is conclusively untenable; not only because it contradicts the consistently expressed Platonic anathema against the sophists, but also because Plato in the *Protagoras* provides us with sufficient internal evidence regarding the fundamental differences in the ethical orientation of philosophy (*Socrates*) and sophistry (*Protagoras*). Hence, my central contention here will be that the grand aim of the *Protagoras* is to draw a distinction between philosophy and sophistry. The choice of the main topic (virtue) and the choice of *Socrates*' interlocutor (*Protagoras*) were made in view of Plato's endeavor to emphasize the distinction between philosophy and sophistry.



5.1 *The conflation of Socrates with the Sophists*

In a number of Platonic dialogues we see *Socrates* either directly conversing with sophists (*Euthydemus*, *Hippias Minor*, *Hippias Major*, *Gorgias*, *Republic*) or discussing about ideas advocated by sophists and sophistry itself (*Apology*, *Sophist*, *Theaetetus*). As alluded to above, one of the main reasons for the philosophy-sophistry juxtaposition in Plato's works is the widespread misconception that philosophy and sophistry are just two names for the same practice. This misconception might in large explain why the drawing of a distinction between Socrates and sophistry is a central theme in Plato's dialogues. Aristophanes in his comedy work, *Clouds*, presents Socrates as an immoral charlatan sophist who takes fees from his students in exchange to an educational package that will teach them how to manipulate and take advantage of their fellow citizens. The conflation of Socrates with the sophists, or more generally of philosophy with sophistry is, however, to an extent justified. The common educational agenda and the superficially similar interests shared by philosophy and sophistry led many of Plato's contemporaries to the conclusion that nothing really essential distinguished the one from the other. Plato, in the opening remarks of the *Protagoras* and in unique subtlety, acknowledges this widespread view according to which Socrates was simply another sophist (*Protagoras*, 314d). The eunuch doorman at *Callias*' house confuses *Socrates* and young *Hippocrates* for sophists and announces them in a rather scathing tone: "**ha! More sophists!**". *Socrates* hastily clarifies to the eunuch that he is not a sophist: "**...we haven't come to see Callias, and we are not sophists**". From the very beginning of the *Protagoras*, then, Plato prepares his readers for the central theme of the dialogue which is the fundamental divide between philosophy's and sophistry's educational aims and ethical orientation. Besides, the two main characters of the dialogue, *Socrates* and *Protagoras* were the most prominent figures of philosophy and sophistry respectively. Hence, the *Protagoras*' scene is ideally set not for a personal dialectical battle between *Socrates* and *Protagoras*, but for the emergence of the basic differences between philosophy and sophistry.

Another factor which is largely responsible for the conflation of Socrates with sophistry is the superficial similarity between the Socratic elenchus and the sophistic educational methods. Both *Socrates* and the sophists were capable of converting initially implausible



positions into positions that their interlocutors could not but accept. In the *Apology*, *Socrates* is faced with the charge that he ‘makes the weaker argument defeat the stronger’, an accusation commonly applied to sophistry. Both *Socrates* and the sophists were notorious for creating feelings of perplexity, intellectual numbness, and astonishment to their interlocutors which unfolding their arguments. On a methodological basis, then, these similarities (even at a superficial level) justify to an extent the prevailing confusion of the mean Athenian concerning the elements which distinguish Socratic philosophy from sophistry. My suggestion is that in order to grasp the deeper essence of the Socrates-sophistry divide we will need, above all things, to understand the different conceptions of virtue⁶⁰ that *Socrates* and the sophists held. Hence, the *Protagoras* is the ideal place to draw the distinction between the ethos of philosophy and that of sophistry through the examination of the differences between the Socratic and the sophistic outlook of virtue and education.

5.2 *The Pivotal Role of Protagoras*

The divide between philosophy and sophistry is personified in the debate between *Socrates* and *Protagoras* in the homonymous dialogue. Actually, the choice of *Protagoras* at the role of *Socrates*’ interlocutor is meaningful and deliberate as the sophistication and popularity of Protagorean thought serves Plato’s aim to highlight the philosophy-sophistry contrast. Interestingly, the conflation of philosophy with sophistry is also depicted in the (superficial) agreement between *Socrates* and *Protagoras* in a number of important issues (quantitative hedonism, refutation of ‘the many’, teachability of virtue, usefulness of sophistic education, and the decisive role of an art of measurement for one’s well-being). Ironically, however, these apparent similarities do not signify any convergence in the ethical views of *Socrates* (philosophy) and *Protagoras* (sophists);

⁶⁰ Nehamas (1990) suggests that the distinction between Socratic and the sophists should not be drawn on the basis of methodological differences. Rather, we should focus on the contrast between the overall purpose of Socratic constructive skepticism through his elenctic method on the one hand, and sophistic epistemic dogmatism on the other hand.



rather, the apparent similarities designate in a very subtle and sophisticated manner the reasons of the widespread confusion between philosophical and sophistic activity. It is on these very issues (hedonism, conception of *arête*, true aims of sophistic education) that Plato will draw the line of demarcation between Socrates and Protagoras, between philosophy and sophistry.

Now, let's examine how the presentation of Protagoras as a thinker facilitates the Platonic aim to distinguish between the moral standards of *Socrates* and the ethical orientation of the sophists. First of all, Protagoras was the most prominent sophist of his era. His reputation as a thinker and educator placed him at the apex of the most influential figures of the sophistic movement. What is more important, however, is the Protagorean acceptance of the sophistic identity:

“I admit that I am a sophist and that I educate men, and I consider this admission to be a better precaution than denial. And I have given thought to other precautions as well, so to avoid, God willing⁶¹, suffering any ill from admitting I am a sophist” (*Protagoras*, 317c).

The fact that Protagoras does not disavow the sophistic identity allows *Socrates* to confront him as such and not as a sophist disguised and protected under the veil of rhetoric, poetry, gymnastics, et cetera. Protagoras, unlike other sophists (Gorgias, Thrasymachus, and Euthydemus for example) enables Plato to present his moral views as the most representative sample of sophistic ethical thought. It is the level of sophistication⁶² of Protagoras' thought and his willingness to declare his sophistic

⁶¹ The Protagorean willingness to identify himself as a sophist comes with a well-disguised irony regarding the dangers for an educator's reputation should he accepted the sophistic identity. His reference to God's will, a manifestly ironical comment given that Protagoras was a renowned agnostic, reveals the aggressive and cocky stance of the sophist with regards to public opinion.

⁶² Weiss (2006:29) believes that the Platonic expression of respect and recognition to Protagoras' thought is entirely false: **“To think well of the character Protagoras, or to think that Plato does, is to miss the humiliation and defeat that he is made to suffer in the dialogue –and not only at its end- at Socrates' hand. It is to fail to detect the mockery behind the false flattery that Socrates lavishes on his famous interlocutor”**. Although I too recognize the manifest *Socratic* irony against *Protagoras*, I take Weiss' reading as an exaggeration. The Platonic recognition lies not in the acceptance of Protagoras' views, but in the fact that Protagorean sophistry outclassed in sophistication more simplistic articulations of the movement.



identity the two crucial features that facilitate a straightforward and accurate depiction of sophistry. The portrayal of Protagoras as an educator who identifies himself as a sophist provides *Socrates* with the opportunity to ascribe thoughts and doctrines -accepted by *Protagoras* in the dialogue- to sophistry altogether.

Another important and relatively neglected point about the *Protagoras* relates to the accusation against Socratic elenchus, namely that much like the sophists he had the ability and the tendency to make the weaker argument appear better than the stronger argument. Indeed, at first glance, some of the central Socratic tenets sound paradoxical (it is better to suffer injustice than to commit it, no one errs willingly, virtue is knowledge). Socrates had the dialectic ability to provide reasons in support of such paradoxical doctrines and convert them into plausible and commonsensical theses in the eyes of his interlocutors. Many Athenians could not distinguish the Socratic dialectic talent and his unconditional pursuit for knowledge of moral standards from the eristic charlatanism of the sophistic movement which aimed exclusively at persuasion. Interestingly, Protagoras himself advertised his ability to make the weaker logos seem the better one. Aristotle refers to the Protagorean claim in his *Rhetoric* (1402a1):

“...this sort of argument illustrates what is meant by making the worse argument seem the better (τον ήττω δε λόγον κρείττω ποιείν). Hence, people were right in objecting to the training Protagoras undertook to give them. It was fraud; the probability it handled was not genuine but spurious, and has a place in no art except Rhetoric and Eristic.”

The Aristotelian remarks about Protagoras and his promise to train students so that they can make the weaker argument appear as the better one can largely explain why Plato wanted to draw a sharp distinction between the ethos, the ethical orientation of his teacher (and of philosophy in general) on the one hand and Protagoras' educational aims and moral character on the other hand. The conflation of Socrates with the sophists put in danger not only Socrates' reputation as a thinker but also philosophy as a practice altogether. If Socrates, the most prominent philosopher, tended just like Protagoras, to teach those who associated with him how to manipulate others through rhetorical tricks,



then, the validity of philosophy as a practice would be dramatically undermined. Aristotle informs us that people of his era objected to Protagorean education by accusing it for being a fraud and not a genuine art. My contention, then, is that Plato in the *Protagoras* wants to defend his teacher from similar objections which were ascribed to Protagoras and the other sophists by the mean Athenian. The deeper aim of the Platonic defense, however, expands beyond the personal relationship, sympathy and admiration for his teacher. The distinction between philosophy and sophistry in the *Protagoras* can be construed as Plato's effort to defend philosophy from the objection that philosophy is not a genuine art / practice; and rather it should be conceived as a form of rhetoric, or eristic, just like sophistry.

Finally, Protagoras is one of the few, and certainly the most prominent among the sophists, to advertise as part of his educational ware, his ability to teach his students how to become virtuous. More specifically, in the *Protagoras* (318a), the sophist enumerates to young *Hippocrates* the benefits should he associated with him and entrusted his soul to his teachings:

“Young man this is what you will get if you study with me: The very day you start, you will go home a better man, and the same thing will happen the day after. Every day, day after day, you will get better and better”.

Of course, *Socrates* could not leave unquestionable the Protagorean claim, namely that he is able to teach virtue. For *Socrates*, virtue is the most cardinal component of a good life and the investigation of its nature in the early and transitional dialogues has been inextricably related to the *Socratic* question “how should one live”. Therefore, *Socrates* in the *Protagoras* finds a unique opportunity to examine the man who professes to be a teacher of virtue.



5.3 Moral Relativism and the Art of Measurement

Once *Protagoras* has come out as a professional sophist, *Socrates* puts forward an agenda that will expose the true Protagorean moral views and will unveil their inherent contradictions. The general *Socratic* strategy is to strip the sophist off the cloak of his superficial sophistication and expose in a subtle –but also manifest to the careful reader–manner the Protagorean confusion regarding the nature of virtue⁶³. *Socrates* does not intend to express in detail his own views on virtue or to put forward his own arguments in defense of his moral psychology; rather he intends to elicit Protagoras' moral views in relation to his promise to teach something beneficial to his students. As Zeyl (1990:253) nicely puts it, the *Socratic* stance is strictly *diagnostic*. The text confirms the latter assumption: **“I could see he was uncomfortable with his previous answers and that he could no longer be willing to go on answering in a dialectical discussion, so I considered with him to be finished”** (*Protagoras*, 335b). The diagnosis of *Protagoras*' views, then, reveals a serious lack of clarity regarding the content and educational aim of his teaching; at the same time *Protagoras* describes in a rather vague and general manner what his students will experience should they choose to trust him for their education:

“What I teach is sound deliberation, both in domestic matters –how best to manage one’s household, and in public affairs –how to realize one’s maximum potential for success in political debate and action” (*Protagoras*, 319a).

The Protagorean move is to underline that the educational package he promises to teach has to be distinguished from the training other sophists used to offer⁶⁴ (*Protagoras*, 318d5). His promise is to make one a better person and a better citizen, and overall a better decision-maker. In other words, *Protagoras* advertises himself as a teacher of (political) virtue. Unlike other sophists who steered their students back into subjects

⁶³ For Protagoras, virtue is teachable, and one has to possess virtue in order to pass it to others. The *Socratic* aim is to demonstrate the sophist's lack of understanding regarding the concept of virtue and thus undermine his promise to pass virtue to others.

⁶⁴ Protagoras: **“If Hippocrates comes to me he will not experience what he would if he studied with some other sophist. The others abuse young men, steering them back again, against their will into subjects the likes of which they have escaped from at school, teaching them arithmetic, astronomy, geometry, music, and poetry...”**



taught in school (astronomy, poetry, or gymnastics) Protagoras' breakthrough is signified by the shift of his educational focus on ethics, and more specifically on (political) virtue⁶⁵. By the end of the dialogue, however, *Protagoras* has committed himself to ethical views which contradict his known doctrines. It is a commonplace that Protagoras maintained that 'man is the measure of all things'. In the *Theaetetus* (152a) Plato directly attributes to Protagoras a relativistic argument: **"...for Protagoras says, you know, that man is the measure of all things: of the things which are, that they are, and of the things which are not, that they are not"**. Now, Protagorean relativism⁶⁶, extended to the moral realm results in a theory of moral relativism. Again, the *Theaetetus* is explicit regarding the extension of Protagorean relativism in the moral domain:

"Similarly the wise and efficient politician is the man who makes wholesome things seem just to a city instead of pernicious ones. Whatever in any city is regarded as just and admirable is just and admirable, in that city and for so long as that convention maintains itself; but the wise man replaces each pernicious convention by a wholesome one, making this both be and seem just. Similarly the professional teacher who is able to educate his pupils on these lines is a wise man, and is worth his large fees to them" (*Theaetetus*, c-d2).

The passage from the *Theaetetus* speaks for itself. Protagorean moral relativism entails the denial of objective standards of goodness, justice and morality. Whether the removal of objective moral standards is an ontological one (i.e. there are no objective moral standards at all) or epistemological (i.e. human beings cannot acquire epistemic access to objective moral truths), it makes no real difference to the sophist's anti-objectivist claims. Obviously, Protagorean moral relativism is at odds with Platonic ethical theory. What is more interesting, however, is the blatant contradiction between Protagorean moral relativism and the theses endorsed by Protagoras in the homonymous Platonic dialogue. More precisely, the most striking contradiction results from Protagoras' assent to

⁶⁵ The comparison with Socratic philosophy is, once again, inescapable, given the exclusive Socratic focus on ethical questions.

⁶⁶ The analysis of Protagoras' relativism has been an issue of controversy. Here, I do not favor any specific ontological or epistemological interpretation of his relativism.



Socrates' proposal according to which our salvation in life depends upon knowledge of an art of measurement (*Protagoras*, 356e-357a).

The *Socratic* proposal implies that the necessary and sufficient condition for successful (ethical) decision-making is the acquisition of knowledge of the “metretike techne”. Specializing in this art provides one with the ability to conduct accurate measurements **“of odd and even, when the greater and the lesser had to be counted correctly, either the same kind against itself or one kind against the other, whether it is near or remote”**. It is this kind of knowledge that can help one make right choices and avoid wrongdoing –which, in turn, has been shown to be the product of miscalculation and defective measurement. A problem of consistency for Protagorean thought has now made its appearance. Knowledge of the metretike techne entails an account of (moral) objective standards⁶⁷. Choices and decisions which depend on measurements of odd / even, greater / lesser, nearness / remoteness, and real size are truth apt.

As *Socrates* explicitly argues (*Protagoras*, 356c-d), things of the same size might appear larger when seen near at hand and smaller when seen from a distance. And the same distinction applies to sounds; equal sounds seem louder when near at hand, but softer when farther away. What Plato invites us to think here is that forming beliefs, deliberating, and acting, based on how things appear to be, most of the times turns out to be a deceitful, confusing, and destructive strategy. Decision-making should not rely upon how things appear to be, but on how things are. As *Socrates* argues, our well-being depends upon doing and choosing larger things instead of smaller alternatives; thus our salvation in life depends upon the art of measurement and arithmetic. Now, since Protagoras appears to accept the distinction between how things appear to be and how things are, and also if there is a way to know (art of measurement) how things really are, then Protagoras seems to commit himself to the following theses:

⁶⁷ Richardson (1990:12) raises a very interesting point: **“The way Socrates develops the metretike techne indicates that he is not interested in the sort of subjective comparison involved in what is nowadays called “forming a preference” –a rather more Protagorean operation. Instead, Plato would have been interested only in what Aristotle called “true commensurability” (συμμετρία ἀληθείας), in contrast to the mere “commensurability sufficient with respect to our needs”.**



- (a) There exist objective (moral) truths and standards.
- (b) These objective (moral) truths can be known by the agent.

The surprising Protagorean adherence to the above theses is made explicit at the end of the dialogue. There, the sophist agrees⁶⁸ with *Socrates*, in that, between the art of measurement and the power of appearance, it is only the former that enables one avoid wrongdoing and to promote her well-being, whereas the latter can be severely detrimental for one's life.

“What would we see as our salvation in life? Would it be the art of measurement or the power of appearance? While 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 minds firmly rooted in the truth and would save our life” (*Protagoras*, 356d3-e).

Protagoras concedes that the art of measurement enables one to see the *truth* by making the (false) appearances lose their power. But, how can this objectivist view ever be compatible with the Protagorean, and more general, with the sophistic exclusion of absolute standards for the judgment of truth⁶⁹? The problem for *Protagoras* is even deeper than it initially looks and the sophist seems to be dialectically trapped by *Socrates*. The above passage, quite explicitly, commits *Protagoras* to a distinction between the real and the apparent. The recognition of such a distinction, nonetheless, stands in direct opposition to the Protagorean doctrines as these are exhibited in the *Theaetetus* (‘man is the measure of all things’ and ‘as things appear to man, so they really are’). In general,

⁶⁸ Gagarin, from an opposing interpretative standpoint raises a similar worry regarding the coherence of Protagorean moral theory: **“Socrates does make the statement that this art of measuring is directly opposed to the power of appearance (356d), which may at first glance appear to be a clear rejection of Protagoras’ view as presented in the Theaetetus, that everything is as it appears to each man”** (1969:159).

⁶⁹ As Donovan (1993:35) suggests, a natural reaction by Protagoras and Gorgias to such an objectivist account of truth and knowledge would have to be highly disapproving. It is more than surprising that *Protagoras* is presented to adopt the terms knowledge and truth in their classic objective sense.



the apparent/real distinction is at odds with the sophist's consistently expressed moral relativism and moral anti-realism; the admission of such a distinction signifies a gigantic shift in Protagoras' thought. What is more, it signifies a gigantic shift for the whole sophistic movement given that the 'man measure' fragment was the most famous sophistic utterance (Donovan, 1993). Now, let's extend the Protagorean admission in the moral realm; since the real just is distinct from the apparent just, Protagoras cannot but submit to an objectivist moral theory (both in an ontological and an epistemological sense). Necessarily, then, he would have to abandon his previously expressed relativistic ethics. Whatever a city or an agent subjectively regards as just and admirable is subject to criticism in view of objective moral standards (and not merely in view of a more functional pragmatism as far as the city or the agent is concerned). What seems just and admirable to an agent or to the majority is not necessarily just and admirable. Hence, *Protagoras* is forced to abandon the moral relativism he himself defended in the very same dialogue.

Presumably, the anti-relativistic stance is too sudden and radical a shift to be construed as a position that historical Protagoras would easily endorse. Thus, a few scholars have accused Plato for not paying justice to the genuine Protagorean views. Levi (1940:229) for example, suggests that Protagoras would never accept without serious objections the real / apparent distinction and the pivotal educational role of an art of measurement⁷⁰ in one's life. Nonetheless, I believe that Plato by presenting a Protagoras reconciled with moral anti-subjectivism is not trying to depict historical Protagoras' views. Rather, what Plato invites us to explore is the theoretical implications of the Protagorean line of reasoning.

Protagoras is presented to support and defend three central claims in the dialogue:

- (1) The identification of the good with the pleasant (quantitative hedonism)
- (2) The refutation of the moral psychology of 'the many' (denial of akrasia)

⁷⁰ In his own words: "That we cannot recognize a faithful rendering of Protagoras' thought in the assertions attributed to him is evident, if from nothing else, from the fact that he accepts without objection the decisive force of the metretic art in the valuation of quantitative relations of pleasures and sorrow, while the sophist as we know him from history had criticized mathematics".



(3) His ability to teach virtue (i.e. his ability to teach the art of measurement)

Now, the refutation of ‘the many’ has been grounded in the premise that wrongdoing is the unwilling choice of the apparent good instead of the real good. In other words, the denial of akrasia as articulated in the dialogue encompassed the distinction between what seems as the best option and what really *is* the best option. Since *Protagoras* promises to teach the art of measurement, what he promises, in essence, is to teach people how to discern the real good and how to distinguish the real from the apparent good. Without the real / apparent good distinction Protagoras would remain a consistent moral relativist but at the same time he would also be committed to the position that all moral views are equally valid. If however, all views about virtue and the good are equally valid, what is the worth of hiring Protagoras as a teacher?

A possible Protagorean move (as the *Theaetetus* tells us) would be the suggestion that although all opinions about virtue are equally valid, some of them are more useful (in terms of their consequences) than others for the individual or for the society. Protagoras, then, would resort in a peculiar sort of pragmatism⁷¹ in order to reconcile his usefulness as a teacher of virtue and with his effort to rescue the consistency of his anti-objectivist doctrines. However, the language of the *Protagoras* rules out this Protagorean move, i.e. the resort to pragmatism. The distinction endorsed by both *Socrates* and *Protagoras* is not one between the apparent and the useful. The distinction drawn is clearly one between the apparent and the *real* (“**the art of measurement in contrast, would make the appearances lose their power by showing us the truth, would give us peace of minds firmly rooted in the truth and would save our life**”). What distinguishes the apparent from the real good, then, is not some kind of pragmatic difference in the consequences of our actions. Rather, it is truth, and objective moral standards that distinguishes the good from the bad, the beneficial from the detrimental action.

⁷¹ For example, as Donovan (1993:41) construes Protagoras’ pragmatism: “when a city collectively holds certain things to be just and lawful, it is necessarily correct, but it can err in deciding what is expedient. Either way man is the measure; but while human opinions vindicate themselves as true, only consequences can vindicate them as useful, and one person or state can be wiser and do better than another in foreseeing and controlling those consequences”.



Therefore, Plato invites us to think that both Protagorean claims (2) and (3) (which depict historical Protagoras' views) become dependent on the admission of the distinction between apparent justice, goodness, et cetera and real justice, goodness, et cetera. However, the latter distinction, is at odds with Protagorean relativism ('man is the measure of all things of the things which are, that they are, and of the things which are not, that they are not') and Protagorean phenomenalism ('as things appear to man so they are'). *Socrates*, in sublime subtlety, has led *Protagoras* to an argumentative stalemate.

On the one hand he forced Protagoras to concede that the real / apparent distinction is a necessary premise in order to refute 'the many'; Protagoras needed the real / apparent good distinction in order to underpin his most cardinal claim, namely that he has something educationally worthy to offer to those keen to pay the fees. On the other hand, the endorsement of the anti-relativistic real / apparent distinction reveals a blatant theoretical confusion in the very heart of Protagorean thought. *Protagoras*, just like every other interlocutor of the Socratic dialogues is confronted on the basis of an untenable contradiction inherent in his system of ethical beliefs. The *Socratic* message is that cultivation of genuine virtue and moral relativism cannot go together. The cultivation of virtue presupposes the existence of moral standards which cannot be relative to a person's or a society's momentary moral judgments (or even relative to the usefulness of their moral views and actions). Protagoras, then, will have to either abandon his claim that morality is relative and that man is the measure of all things, or his claim that he can be a teacher of virtue. As I will try to show at the next section, *Socrates*' position is that Protagoras is not entitled to advertise himself as a teacher of virtue as his conception of *arête* is irrevocably distorted.



5.4 *Virtue as Political Power and its Mercenaries*

I have just argued that the conflation of Socrates with sophistry can be explained as a failure to distinguish the Socratic elenchus and ethical thought from sophistic (most notably Protagorean) moral relativism. Further, I have maintained that Protagorean relativism is incompatible with the sophist's central claim, namely that he is a teacher of a kind of knowledge that is beneficial for a person as an individual and as a citizen. Protagoras has been pushed by *Socrates* to a dialectic impasse and the sophist encounters an almost insolvable dilemma: Teachability of virtue comes attached with moral objectivism (real / apparent values distinction); whereas sticking with his renowned moral relativism carries a serious reputational risk with regard to his ability to teach the art of measurement (which, as it has been agreed in the course of the dialogue guarantees virtue and eudaimonia). At any rate, what is worth noting here is that Protagoras, much like any other interlocutor of early Platonic dialogues is confronted with an internal contradiction in his system of ethical beliefs.

Now, the line of demarcation between Socrates (philosophy) and Protagoras (sophistry) becomes transparent when we consider the Platonic remarks regarding the *Protagorean* - and the overall sophistic- conception of virtue. Here, I aim to argue that the *Protagoras* recapitulates the two main *Socratic* objections against the educational character of the sophists: (1) *Socrates* objects against the sophistic conception and construal of virtue in relation to the good for oneself and for the city. (2) *Socrates* objects to the mercenary aspect of sophistic education. What is more interesting, however, is the correlation that Plato envisages to establish between hedonism and sophistic education: simply put, if *Socrates* is serious regarding the adoption of hedonism, then both objections cease to be applicable to sophistry. Plato, as it will become evident, was aware of the correlation between the adoption of the hedonistic premise and an apotheosis of sophistic education. My antihedonistic argument, here, takes its final form in a modus tollens style:

- (a) If *Socrates* endorsed hedonism then he became a sympathizer of sophistic education.
- (b) *Socrates* denounces sophistic education.
- (c) Therefore, *Socrates* did not endorse hedonism.



First, I shall attempt to demonstrate that *Socrates* is directly opposed to the *Protagorean* and in general sophistic conception of virtue which is understood by the sophists in terms of political power. Then, I will argue that through the usage of complex irony, *Socrates* relates the approval of sophistic education to the endorsement of hedonism. Once it has been shown that *Socrates* denounces sophistic education altogether it will also become evident that hedonism is not taken seriously at any level. Hence, by dissolving the hedonistic anomaly of the *Protagoras*, I will suggest that we have sufficient evidence to reject any prohedonistic approach to the dialogue.

Much like *Socrates*, *Protagoras* was eager to show that one would be significantly benefited should one chose to associate with him⁷². This overlap between the two thinkers centers on the suggestion that cultivation of virtue, or of an art of leading a good life to use the *Protagoras*' jargon, is of decisive importance to one's well-being. The convergence is limited, however, given that *Socrates*, unlike *Protagoras*, never claims that he is a teacher of virtue. *Socrates* in the *Apology* stresses that he has never been anyone's teacher, whereas in the *Meno* he seems to be puzzled about the very nature of virtue. Plato, then, through the persona of young *Hippocrates* raises the crucial question: What is the exact benefit for one's soul in hiring a sophist for her education?

First of all, the *Protagorean* contention is that virtue, or at any rate, political art is teachable; moreover, the transmission of virtue/political art to a young student can eventually lead to a better citizenship while it also guarantees a better management of one's personal life. It is worth noticing that *Socrates* leads *Protagoras* to treat political art (πολιτική τέχνη) and political virtue (πολιτική αρετή) as equivalent terms. It is not entirely clear whether *Protagoras* favors a construal of virtue principally in a moral sense or in the context of a practical knowledge. The latter option seems to be more faithful to *Protagorean* thought and to the character's overall stance in the dialogue; however, the sophist does not resist the temptation to use the term in both senses (political virtue and

⁷² "In spite of a certain rivalry between the two men, they are essentially in the same position; both are openly committed to educating young men" (Gagarin, 1969:141).



political art); in other words, virtue is treated as connoting both a moral capacity and a more practical one. In fact, historical Protagoras would probably be eager to accept the equivocation between political virtue and political art given that he must justify himself as a teacher of virtue. If political virtue is taken like another art (a body of knowledge possessed by a restricted number of people) then Protagoras would be able to advertise his educational ware as the passing of this specific body of knowledge on young students. At the same time, however, Protagoras would have to show that, unlike other arts, virtue is a general quality that can be taught to all comers⁷³. His own words are indicative of his aim to construe virtue as a special kind of art. An art which only a specialized group of people can master⁷⁴, but also one that can be taught to the masses, at least to a decent level (dependent on their given natural capacity to cultivate it).

“What I teach is sound deliberation, both in domestic matters –how best to manage one’s household, and in public affairs –how to realize one’s maximum potential (δυνατότατος) for success in political debate and action”
(*Protagoras*, 319a).

Protagoras suggests that by hiring him, a young man can be benefited in three different ways:

- (1) He will be taught how to deliberate better in public affairs.
- (2) He will be taught how to deliberate better in private affairs.

⁷³ The deeper problem for Protagoras can be traced to the relationship between art and virtue. If virtue was to be taught by professional teachers, the sophists, that would imply that there is only a restricted number of people that can take the relevant education (much like in every other art). However, such an admission would mean that a considerable number of students (clients) would be discouraged to pay the respective fees for an education on virtue. If virtue were simply another art, then it would be confined to a group of specialists. Hence, Protagoras suggestion that virtue is not like any other art mainly serves commercial purposes. As Annas (1999:167) put it, **“Protagoras hopes to find customers in Athens for his supposed expertise....Protagoras claims that his teaching furthers something that everybody has an aptitude for”**.

⁷⁴ Here, I agree with Segvic (2004:11). According to her approach when Protagoras claims that he can impart political virtue what he really means is that he is able to pass virtue onto others by teaching them the political art. Also, judging from *Protagoras’* speech one can reach the conclusion that for the sophist, **“virtue in its highest form, as possessed by a teacher of virtue, is a τέχνη”**. Therefore, as any other art it would have different levels of mastery.



(3) He will become a successful (δυνατώτατος) political speaker and decision-maker. As I will try to show, *Socrates* believes that (1) and (2) are not teachable as finished products of knowledge, whereas he maintains that (3) underlies an irrevocably distorted view of virtue held by Protagoras and the other sophists.

(1) In response to *Protagoras*' claim that one can be taught how to become a better citizen, *Socrates* raises a very forceful objection. He argues that when it comes to deliberation in public affairs, everyone, regardless of his social or economic status, may rise to express his opinion without being accused of being incompetent to do so. The essence of this objection lies on the commonsensical observation that there is no prerequisite of a special expertise before one can take part in a political debate. Counseling on political and ethical issues is open to all and no expertise is ever recognized. If the matter at stake, however, requires a decision on purely technical issues (say architecture or shipbuilding) then it is only the consultation of those mastering the relevant expertise that will be taken into account. This *Socratic* objection aims at deconstructing the *Protagorean* claim that young men need to receive a sophistic education before they can be competent to deliberate and express their opinions publicly and for matters of political and ethical interest. Deliberating about political and ethical issues regarding the management of the city, *Socrates* believes, does not require any prior teaching under a teacher.

(2) The second *Socratic* objection aims at the refutation of the Protagorean claim that he can teach young men sound deliberation in private affairs: **“Public life aside, the same principle holds also in private life, where the wisest and best of our citizens are unable to transmit to others the virtues that they possess”** (*Protagoras*, 319e).

According to the first objection, political art is inherent to all without exception; therefore a teacher of this art would be gratuitous. The second objection suggests that political art is not teachable at all. The *Socratic* argument is based on a general observation of the Athenian society: given that the acquisition of virtue / political art is pivotal for a good



life, the wisest and most virtuous of men (like Pericles⁷⁵) would certainly care to hand it on to their children. However, they seem unable to do so, which implies that virtue cannot be taught at all. Athenian society, Plato tells us, did not believe that virtue is teachable. This widespread impression about the (non) teachability of virtue was strengthened by the impotence of the most noble and virtuous men to reliably transmit the virtue they possessed onto their children. At this point, *Protagoras* seems to be dialectically trapped between two mutually exclusive alternatives. Either the Athenians are correct in thinking that virtue cannot be taught, which means that Protagoras' educational ware is useless. Or, the Athenians are wrong, and therefore virtue should be recognized as an expertise passable from man to man through education, teaching, and human practice. The latter alternative, however, would lead to the assumption only a few, an elite of citizens is competent to express political opinion about the city's management at the Athenian assembly. Obviously, this would generate insurmountable problems for a proponent of moral relativism and of the democratic regime, like Protagoras⁷⁶. In the words of Segvic (2004:13) "...**either the reputation of the Athenians as wise has to go, or Protagoras' own reputation as a teacher of virtue has to go**".

(3) The first two *Socratic* challenges push *Protagoras* to defend his standing as a teacher of virtue. His response comes through the telling of a strikingly allegorical myth (*Protagoras*, 320c-328d) which centers on the creation and endowment of human race by the gods; essentially, the myth underlies the Protagorean⁷⁷ conception of virtue and the

⁷⁵ Socrates suggests that if virtue could be taught, then Pericles would have imparted it to his children, but he failed to do so. Socratic irony is manifest here. As Woodruff (2005) notes, "**this argument might convince Socrates' audience, but it cannot have convinced Socrates, who was no great admirer of Pericles**". Moreover, the Protagorean claim that virtue can be imparted from virtuous teachers to their students is undermined by the example of Callias who associated with Protagoras; nevertheless he was infamous for his profligacy, his anti-social conduct, and his hedonistic life.

⁷⁶ Protagoras used to adopt a flattery stance towards the people whose city he was each time visiting. Therefore, he would be at great pains to even imply that the Athenians are not wise in thinking that everyone is competent enough to counsel about political issues at the Assembly.

⁷⁷ "It is generally admitted that the myth related by Protagoras is a re-elaboration or an imitation of a theory on the formation of human civilization given by the sophist in his ("On the Primitive Condition [of Mankind]"). As the myth is an interpretation and a development of the logos, the thoughts contained in the former must also be considered as Protagorean; unless one holds that the Sophist had expressed them only in a logos and that the mythical form belongs to Plato (Levi, 1940:289).



upshot is that all men are endowed with a capacity for virtue which is construed as a component of living peacefully in societies. Interestingly, the sophist appears to take virtue as covering the ground that the language of the myth expresses as shame (αἰδώς) and justice (δίκη). In order to develop and actualize this capacity, however, one needs to be educated by means of teaching, practice, and exercise. In addition, *Protagoras* puts forward an educational theory of punishment (as a tool for deterrence and not for retribution). Now, the fact that all men are bestowed with a capacity for political virtue is taken by the sophist as a necessary condition for the establishment of a polis. This universal capacity for political virtue, then, explains the Athenian tendency to accept advice from anyone when debating ethical and political matters, **“for they think that this particular virtue, political or civic virtue, is shared by all, or there wouldn’t be any cities”** (*Protagoras*, 323a). On the other hand, the fact that political virtue is endowed to man as a potentiality (i.e. only the capacity is present) and not as an actualized state facilitates the Protagorean suggestion that there is room for its cultivation through (sophistic) education.

At first glance, the myth with its underlying symbolisms leaves the reader with the impression that *Protagoras* has successfully addressed both *Socratic* objections. The conflation of political virtue with political art enables the sophist to underpin his claim that virtue is teachable and to pave the way for his self-promotion as a professional teacher of virtue. Yet, it is still hardly clear what does the education offered by the sophist consist in. Is it justice and temperance that Protagoras promises to teach? Much like any other sophist, Protagoras never claimed that his education entails the cultivation of justice, piety, or temperance⁷⁸. What does Protagoras have in mind, then, when he claims that one can become better by associating with him? The answer⁷⁹ lies in the analysis of the final *Protagorean* educational promise to *Hippocrates* according to which a young man can be taught how to become most powerful (δυνατώτατος) in political

⁷⁸ What is more, as Weiss notes, “it is hardly in order to become superlatively just and temperate that young men eagerly lavish on Protagoras all the money they can lay their hand on” (2006:32).

⁷⁹ For this argument, I am greatly indebted to Segvic’ interpretation (2004): **“When Protagoras says that his teaching is how to become δυνατώτατος in word and deed with regards to the affairs of the polis, he might not have in mind only becoming most capable of handling such affairs, or most competent in handling them. He might have in mind becoming very powerful in running them”**.



activity; **“how to realize one’s maximum potential for success in political debate and action”** (*Protagoras*, 319a). *Protagoras* suggests that he can teach *Hippocrates* how to become superlatively powerful in political debate and action. The hidden promise here is that *Hippocrates* will be taught how to become politically influential and powerful in his city.

In other words, *Protagoras* promises to impart to his students the most effective rhetorical techniques which, in turn, will render one persuasive in political debates. Young men who hire *Protagoras* for their education will be taught how to persuade the masses about matters of public interest. Hence they will become powerful in political debate; this kind of power, however, does not come alone. Persuasiveness in the public sphere allows one to determine the political direction of a city’s affairs and management. The more influential one becomes in words, the more he can determine the strategy and the decisions taken in the polis. That way, and by ascending in political hierarchy, one becomes most powerful (δυνατότατος) in political decision-making too. One way to summarize the *Protagorean* promotion of his educational ware is by saying that what he eventually promises is to turn his students into a new *Pericles* –given that their abilities permit it.

In a number of Platonic dialogues (most prominently in the *Gorgias* and the *Republic*) *Socrates* objects to the sophistic suggestion that political power can be of decisive importance for eudaimonia. A good life, Plato believes, requires first and foremost knowledge of the good. Much like any other external good (say wealth) political power without knowledge can be detrimental for oneself. In the *Gorgias*, *Gorgias* maintains that **“orators are the ones who give advice and whose views on these matters prevail** (456a). More importantly, he holds that oratory and political power are the greatest goods for humankind (*Gorgias*, 452d). Thus, he establishes a direct relationship between political power and a good life. Political power is conceived by sophistry as a necessary good for eudaimonia and for some sophists, like *Gorgias*, political power is *the good*⁸⁰.

⁸⁰ *Gorgias* holds that orators and tyrants are powerful and so they can do whatever they want. The Socratic objection is that one can wish to do only what is really beneficial and good for him. In this sense, tyrants



The *Socratic* attitude toward the sophistic remarks about oratory and political power is extremely sarcastic and polemic; he undermines the value of oratory by suggesting that its power **“seems to me to be something supernatural in scope”**. Later in the dialogue, *Polus* suggests that orators are held in regard in their cities as they have the greatest power over anyone else (*Gorgias*, 466b). *Socrates*, however, draws a distinction between political power and the good, whereas he makes it clear that political power is not unqualifiedly a good (and certainly not the greatest one): When *Polus* insists that political power is the greatest good *Socrates* immediately rejects his claim: **“No, if by ‘having power’ you mean something that’s good for the one that has the power”**.

The Platonic criticism to the sophistic overestimation of oratory and political power and their relation to the good life is a recurrent theme of his dialogues. Plato’s critique centres on the observation that success in the Athenian political sphere requires the ability to be powerful in words, i.e. a capacity to persuade. What Plato seems to imply in the *Protagoras*, then, is that Protagoras does not differ from the other sophists who took political power as the most crucial component of a good life. In fact, Protagoras himself construes political virtue in terms of ‘political success’ for which a capacity for persuasive oratory (δυνατότατος in words) is a precondition. Hence, Plato’s aim is to unmask the renowned sophist who, unlike other sophists, professes to teach virtue. What Plato invites us to think, is that under the veil of “(political) virtue” Protagoras⁸¹ conceals his true educational agenda which primarily aims at passing the skills of persuasion and the relevant techniques that can make one a person of political influence in his city. In other words, Protagoras’ conception of political virtue seems to be distorted since it is reduced⁸² into rhetoric and an art of persuasion. By developing the politically

and orators may have superlative political power and yet be unable to do what they wish (although they are able to do whatever they see most fit to do). As in the *Protagoras*, a real / apparent good distinction underlies the Socratic objection against the sophistic conception of virtue and of the good.

⁸¹ Much like many other sophists who hid their real identity behind poetry, oratory, et cetera, Protagoras hides his real educational agenda behind a superficial and misleading conception of arete.

⁸² Interestingly, Aristotle seems to hold a similar view. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1181a), he accuses the sophists of reducing political virtue into the practices of oratory and persuasion; he also suggests that they overestimate the role of those pseudo-arts in the political sphere.



‘omnipotent’ skill of persuasion one prepares his ascent towards political power and manipulation of the masses.

Finally, I will focus on a traditional and recurrent *Socratic* objection against sophistic education. Regularly, *Socrates* expresses his disdain about the sophistic practice of making profit from educating young men. In the *Apology*, *Socrates* clarifies that, unlike the sophists, he never charges fees to the students⁸³ he associates with. In the *Euthydemus*, he criticizes sophistry for treating virtue as a finished product for sale to all comers regardless of their age or ability to learn (304b-c). There, Plato sketches the sophists as greedy salesmen who first and foremost care to make profit. The education they offer is of a very low quality and the sole criterion for accepting a student is one’s willingness to pay the fees. The Platonic anathema against sophistic education continues in *Greater Hippias*. There, *Socrates* shows his contempt for the sophists who sell ‘wisdom’ indiscriminately to all comers in order to make more money: **“But Gorgias and Prodicus each made more money from wisdom than any craftsman of any kind ever made from his skill. And Protagoras did the same earlier”** (282c). Later in the dialogue, *Socrates* implies that the more one is preoccupied with monetary concerns, the less intelligence (*νοῦς*) there is in his ‘wisdom’. Obviously, the latter accusation applies to the most prominent sophists, including Protagoras. Plato seems to suggest that some sophists like Protagoras were first and foremost money-loving businessmen and hardly could they be thought of as true lovers of wisdom⁸⁴.

The anti-sophistic tirade against the mercenary character of this kind of education is consistent and appears in more dialogues (for example in the *Theages*, 128d and the *Sophist*, 282c). There, *Socrates* suggests that sophistry does not relate to the cultivation of virtue or to the ethical agenda at any level; therefore, to pay a great deal of money to a

⁸³ Weiss (2006:34) offers an interesting point about the Socratic denial to charge fees to those associating with him: **“As Socrates sees it, if by teaching arete to others we first and foremost benefit ourselves, that in itself ought to be sufficient reason not to charge a fee for our instruction”**. What is more, it is worth noticing that students of Plato’s Academy were not required to pay fees in exchange for their education.

⁸⁴ As Xenophon suggests, the difference between *Socrates* and the sophists is the difference between a lover and a prostitute. The sophists, for Xenophon’s *Socrates*, are prostitutes of wisdom because they sell their wares to anyone with the capacity to pay (*Memorabilia*, I.6.13).



sophist at the prospect of receiving an education on virtue is not a reasonable decision. Surprisingly, however, *Socrates* in the ending remarks of the *Protagoras* (357c-358a) apparently comes out as a sympathizer of sophistic education. Not only that, but he appears to encourage all and everyone to hire a sophist and pay the respective fees in order to save their lives.

“...you (the many) asked it, if you remember, when we were agreeing that nothing was stronger or better than knowledge, which always prevails, whenever it is present, over pleasure and everything else. At that point you said that pleasure often rules even the man who knows; since we disagreed, you went on ask us this: Protagoras and Socrates, if this experience is not being overcome by pleasure, what is it then; what do you say it is?”

Tell us. If immediately we had said to you ‘ignorance’, you might have laughed at us, but if you laugh at us now, you will be laughing at yourselves. For you agreed with us that those who make mistakes with regard to the choice of pleasure and pain, in other words, with regard to good and bad, do so because of lack of knowledge, and not merely a lack of knowledge, but a lack of knowledge you agreed was measurement.

And the mistaken act done without knowledge you must know is one done from ignorance. So this is what ‘overcome by pleasure’ is –ignorance in the highest degree and it is this which Protagoras and Prodicus and Hippias claim to cure. But you, thinking it to be something other than ignorance, do not go to sophists yourselves, nor do you send your children to them for instruction, believing as you do that we are dealing with something unteachable. By worrying about your money and not giving it to them, you all do badly in both private and public life”.

Now, even the most devoted prohedonist scholar would be extremely hesitant to come to terms with the suggestion that this *Socratic* utterance is made in complete seriousness. The confusion about this point of the dialogue is justified, nonetheless, given that Plato has consistently and forcefully attacked the mercenary aspect of sophistic education. Why, then does he present *Socrates* undertaking the business of promoting and advertising sophistic education? The possibility of *Socrates* being serious on this very point would constitute a gigantic anomaly for *Socratic* ethics. Can we reconcile the *Socrates* who consistently expresses his disdain and contempt over the mercenary character of sophistic education with the *Socrates* of the *Protagoras* who unpacks an argument of sophistic apotheosis? The magnitude of the anomaly can be comparable only



to the anomaly of endorsing hedonism. Crucially, however, these two apparent radical shifts in Platonic ethics appear in the same dialogue. More importantly so, hedonism and sophistic apotheosis in the *Protagoras*, entertain a relationship of argumentative dependence. Simply put, you cannot get the one without the other. The Protagorean claim that he is able to teach virtue relies upon the introduction of an art of measurement of pleasures and pains. It is hedonism that renders virtue a kind of knowledge, and therefore, it is hedonism that renders virtue teachable⁸⁵. Without hedonism *Protagoras* would not be sufficiently equipped to argue that he is a teacher of virtue.

The above *Protagoras*' passage tells us something really useful for the decipherment of Plato's intentions in the dialogue. It reveals Plato's awareness regarding the theoretical implications of hedonism. Actually, *Socrates*' words can be construed as an implicit but also dramatic warning that the endorsement of the hedonistic premise comes conjoined with the approval of sophistic teaching. In other words, to accept the hedonistic premise is to adopt a favorable stance toward sophistic teaching; more so, it is to advertise sophistry as the educative place where one can be taught how to be virtuous and avoid wrongdoing. This point has been neglected by the vast majority of ancient scholars. Only very few of them have noticed that Plato leaves a clear sign at the end of the dialogue in order to dissolve the mystery and dispel the shadow of hedonism. Morris (2006), for example, argues that Plato is beyond reasonable doubt aware of the argumentative correlation between the endorsement of quantitative hedonism and the apotheosis of sophistic education.

“As for the quantitative conception of value, the clearest reason for thinking that Plato does not suppose that an argument which he endorses depends on it is that Socrates here takes the quantitative conception of value to provide an argument for paying money to sophists: surely no one can think that he is seriously endorsing something which has that consequence?”

⁸⁵ Irwin (1995) raises a similar point with regard to the argumentative relationship between the teachability of virtue and hedonism.



In a very subtle but also straightforward fashion, then, Plato converts his readers into his imaginary interlocutors who undergo an idiosyncratic elenctic examination⁸⁶. As *Socrates* suggests, the teachability of virtue and the refutation of the ‘overcome by pleasure’ explanation are not only dependant upon the hedonistic hypothesis but also inseparably conjoined with the hymn of praise to sophistic education. The reader of the dialogue, Plato tells us, will have to either embrace the hedonistic line of reasoning and bite the bullet of sophistic apotheosis, or reject the hedonism that is presented in the dialogue and overhaul the ‘no one does wrong willingly’ defense on a new, non-hedonistic basis. Plato, through the example of young *Hippocrates* who finally decides not to trust his education to Protagoras, advises us to do the latter; namely to reject an education which cultivates sophisticated hedonists whose only concern is the maximization of pleasure and the acquisition of political power.

⁸⁶ The hedonistic premise comes conjoined with the approval of sophistic education and the acceptance of the sophistic conception of virtue (i.e. as mere instrument to the maximization of pleasure). It also relates to the sophistic conception of the good life and their personalities as examples of the good life they promise to teach to others. **“Socrates permits us to put ourselves to the same tests to which he subjects Protagoras and so to begin to understand our own concern for virtue –a service that being carried out without expectation of payment, makes clear both Socrates’ relative indifference to lucre and the generosity that is compatible with the pursuit of true virtue”** (Bartlett, 2003:623).



6. Denial of Akrasia in Plato

In the preceding chapters I explored the main interpretative attractions for a prohedonistic reading of the *Protagoras* and the respective antihedonistic responses. My central suggestion was that we have sufficient evidence to conclude that a prohedonistic interpretation of the dialogue is untenable. The rejection of the prohedonistic hypothesis, however, comes with an interpretative price. That is, the subsequent removal of the hedonism-based argument for the denial of akrasia. The *Protagoras* presents the only known explicit defence of the “no one does wrong willingly” doctrine. Nowhere else in the Platonic corpus, in Xenophon’s works, or in the writings of philosophers inspired by and linked to Socrates can one find an alternative explicit defense of this Socratic thesis. Apparently, then, and in a non hedonistic context, the Socratic denial of akrasia seems to be left undefended by means of explicit argument.

My contention here will be that *Socrates* of the early and transitional dialogues has the conceptual resources to defend the “no one does wrong willingly” doctrine without the theoretical assistance of the hedonistic premise. The necessary and sufficient conceptual tools for the denial of akrasia are two descriptive theses which consistently appear throughout the early and transitional Platonic dialogues. On the one hand, it is *psychological eudaimonism*, a descriptive theory about human motivation and desire; and on the other hand it is *motivational intellectualism*, a descriptive theory about the relationship between knowledge, motivation and right action. As in the *Protagoras*, the two theses make their appearance in a number of early and transitional Platonic dialogues. One of my key suggestions will be that the two theses combined constitute the necessary and sufficient conditions for the denial of akrasia.

The traditional conceptualization of akrasia as a single and unified phenomenon is incomplete as it fails to capture the richness and the implications of Plato’s moral psychology. Thus, my attempt to provide a revisionary conceptualization of the Platonic denial of akrasia aims to shed light on the Platonic understanding of the phenomenon and to clarify the paradoxical elements of the doctrine. Moreover, I will propose that the way Plato puts forward his anti-akrasia thesis in the *Protagoras* and elsewhere, calls for a



distinction between two types of akrasia: *synchronic akrasia* and *diachronic akrasia*. Roughly put, synchronic akrasia occurs when *S* acts against a here and now belief / knowledge about what is the best thing to do. Diachronic akrasia occurs when *S* at t_2 acts against a previously formed belief / knowledge about what is the best thing to do. The focus of my interest here will be placed on whether Plato thinks that knowledge of what is best can be defeated over time by a competing motivation. In what follows, this distinction will serve as the basis of my analysis of Plato's treatment of akrasia.

I will begin my analysis by exhibiting the passages where psychological eudaimonism and motivational intellectualism appear in the Platonic corpus. Then, I will try to show how the two theses combined entail the denial of akrasia. Finally, I will attempt to draw a distinction between two different types of akrasia (synchronic and diachronic akrasia). This distinction, I will suggest, is not only fully compatible with the Platonic analysis of the phenomenon; more than that, it is a necessary theoretical tool for the decipherment of the ambiguities that the phenomenon of akrasia traditionally carries within it. At some points, I will return to the *Protagoras* text which has justifiably gained the lion's share of attention with regards to Plato's treatment of akrasia. In particular, I will compare my findings to the famous passage where *Socrates* claims that knowledge is motivationally invincible (*Protagoras*, 352b-c). There, *Socrates* holds that when knowledge is present in a man, then it cannot be dragged about like a slave by any other competing motivation. The motivational power of knowledge, the *Socratic* suggestion goes, is capable of ruling an agent's actions. When *S* knows that *X* is the best available course of action, then no amount of pleasure, fear, anger, et cetera, can ever force *S* to act otherwise than *X*. Hence, when knowledge is present akrasia is impossible.

6.1 Psychological Eudaimonism in Plato

The vast majority of scholarly work on Platonic ethics has focused on the normative part of his moral theory. This huge interest on the normative aspect of Platonic ethics is justified given that in most of the dialogues we see *Socrates* discussing virtue,



knowledge, or pleasure in relation to the good life. The ‘how should one live’ and ‘what does a good life consist in’ questions are dominant themes in the early and middle period Platonic dialogues. Unsurprisingly then, the prescriptive or protreptic segment of Platonic ethics has received more attention than the descriptive claims that *Socrates*, rather casually, defends. Platonic moral psychology, as I will suggest however, fundamentally depends upon two descriptive theories: Psychological Eudaimonism (PE) and Motivational Intellectualism (MI).

In the *Euthydemus* (278e7) *Socrates* implies that before we address the “how are we to live well” question we need to establish the descriptive point that “we all wish to do well”. Hence, Plato invites us to think that in order to be better prepared to understand the anti-akrasia argument as it exhibits in the *Protagoras* we need to comprehend the theoretical implications of these two descriptive tenets (PE) & (MI). As alluded to above, the combination of the two theses entails the Socratic denial of akrasia. Here, I will examine the conceptual function of Psychological Eudaimonism with regard to the *Socratic* denial of akrasia. Psychological Eudaimonism, as I wish to show, is the cornerstone of Platonic moral psychology. The mystery of the traditionally perplexing puzzle of akrasia can be dissolved only if we touch upon the Platonic insights regarding the psychological mechanisms of human desire and motivation.

The first task I need to address is definitional: what does (PE) entail? Psychological Eudaimonism is a descriptive theory about human desire and motivation. It postulates that:

(A1) We are psychologically hardwired to desire our eudaimonia. This desire for eudaimonia is universal, i.e. nobody lacks it. Also, the desire for eudaimonia is by psychological necessity motivationally dominant.

(A2) All human desire and motivation ultimately aims at the imagined good. In other words, there are no objects of desire which function independently of considerations about one’s welfare. Therefore, all desire and motivation must be welfare-dependant.



Although (A1) and (A2) exhibit striking similarities in what they purport to establish, the two propositions are not identical nonetheless. (A1) posits a teleological eudaimonic psychology according to which the ultimate aim of the dominant human desire is eudaimonia. (A2) proposes a theory of motivation according to which all human desire is welfare-dependent. Simply put, the suggestion in play here is that the object of desire is always dependant upon considerations about the imagined good. Thus, there is only one kind of motivation, that is, motivation for the perceived good. (A2), then, entails the picture of a unified soul given that at the moment of action, one soul cannot have opposing desires for the same object.

Both propositions which are constitutive of Psychological Eudaimonism casually make their appearance in Plato's dialogues. In the *Protagoras* (352d3-353a4), *Socrates'* criticism against the multitude implies that all people desire what is best. As he says, no one lacks the desire (and the respective dominant motivation) to do what is best: **“You realize that most people aren't going to be convinced by us. They maintain that most people are unwilling to do what is best.**

Again in the *Protagoras*, at 345e the discussion centres on Simonides' poem (“all who do no wrong willingly I praise and love). There, *Socrates* distorts the original meaning of the poem in order to argue that there is no human being that would ever choose the worse course of action willingly. He also implies that it is a matter of common sense to realize that by psychological necessity all men try to avoid bad things and opt for the best option available.

In the *Symposium* (205a-c), the conclusion that *Socrates* reaches aided by *Diotima's* insights is that the ultimate aim of human motivation is eudaimonia. It is in virtue of eudaimonia that all action is being chosen. As (A1) postulates, all human beings are psychologically hardwired to pursue eudaimonia as their ultimate aim. Thereupon, the *Symposium* passage seems to assert the teleological character of psychological



eudaimonism. The ultimate telos of all desire and motivation is pre-fixed, *Socrates* says, because all eudaimonia is a self-explanatory end:

“And what will he have, when the good things he wants have become his own? This time it’s easier to come up with the answer. He’ll have happiness (eudaimonia). That’s what makes happy people happy, isn’t it –possessing good things.

**There’s no need to ask further, ‘What is the point of wanting happiness? The answer you gave seems to be final.
True, I said.’”**

What is more, the *Symposium* highlights the universal character of psychological eudaimonism. The relevance and the application of PE to all human beings without exception should not go unnoticed. Once again, Plato puts emphasis on the descriptive aspect of his moral psychology and he underlines the fact that nobody lacks the relevant psychological mechanism which is necessarily and firmly directed towards the occasional imagined good. In the *Symposium* he also implies that eudaimonia is the only self-explanatory end: **“that’s because what everyone loves is really nothing other than the good”**.

“Now this desire for happiness, this kind of love –do you think it is common to all human beings and that everyone wants to have good things forever and ever? What do you say?

Just that, I said. It is common to all.”

“The main point is this: every desire for good things or for happiness is ‘the supreme and treacherous love’ in everyone.

That’s because what everyone loves is really nothing other than the good”
(*Symposium*, 205d).

In the *Lysis*, *Socrates* draws a distinction between an object of love that is chosen only for its own sake and objects of love which are chosen for the sake of the primary object of love. As he maintains in the dialogue (219d-e), it is rather deceitful to believe that we may choose many different things only for their own sake. What Plato seems to imply here is that, there exists a supreme object of love (the good) for the sake of which all the



other objects of love are chosen. The chain of value of all subordinate valuable things terminates at the good (eudaimonia) which is regarded as a super-value and for the sake of which we pursue everything else. The Platonic claim is very strong with regards to the psychology of motivation and action. His suggestion is not that we *should* make our choices aiming at the primary object of love (the good). The Platonic proposal is strictly descriptive as far as the aim of all action is concerned. Plato explicitly holds that it would be deceitful to believe that there exist be any action which does not aim at the imagined good. Hence, it is impossible to imagine an action whose ultimate motivation is not directed towards the imagined good⁸⁷.

Furthermore, in the *Philebus*, a dialogue dedicated to the analysis of the contributive weight of pleasure, of knowledge and of other goods as components of eudaimonia, Plato sheds light to the descriptive bits of his moral psychology. Interestingly, at 20d, we encounter the descriptive claim that by psychological necessity, all beings that have a notion of the good are programmed to desire it and hunt it. Both PE propositions (A1 & A2) are affirmed by *Socrates*' position: The desire and the ultimate motivation for the imagined good are universal to all human beings; all desire is nothing but desire for something qua good. In a nutshell, *Socrates* explicitly holds that everyone is ultimately motivated to fare well and to choose the perceived overall best option.

“Now, this point I take it, is most necessary to assert of the good: that everything that has any notion of it hunts for it and desires to get hold of it and secure it for its very own, caring nothing for anything else except for what is connected with the acquisition of some good.”

In the *Euthydemus* now (278e), PE emerges in a more straightforward fashion. The position defended by *Socrates* is that all human beings are psychologically hardwired to ultimately desire the promotion of their well-being. Plato has *Socrates* make the claim

⁸⁷ Irwin (1995) disagrees that the *Lysis* provides sufficient evidence for the establishment of an account of psychological eudaimonism in which there is only one primary object of desire. However, the *Lysis* is fully compatible with other Platonic dialogues (like the *Euthydemus*, the *Protagoras*, and the *Meno*) where *Socrates* puts forward arguments in favor of a psychological eudaimonism which entails motivational monism.



that it goes without saying that everyone is ultimately motivated to act according to what seems to them the best course of action.

Socrates: **“Do all men wish to do well (εὖ πράττειν)? Or is this question one of the ridiculous ones I was afraid of just now? I suppose it is stupid (ανόητον) even to raise such a question, since there could hardly be a man who would not wish to do well.**

Clinias: **No, there is no such person.**

(A1) is also confirmed by the *Meno* remarks (77d-78b). All men desire to be eudaimon; human desire is always directed towards the perceived good:

Socrates: **And do they not think that those who are harmed are miserable to the extent that they are harmed?**

Meno: **That is inevitable too.**

Socrates: **And that those who are miserable are unhappy?**

Meno: **I think so.**

Socrates: **Does anyone wish to be miserable and unhappy? No one then wants what is bad, Meno, unless he wants to be such. For what else is being miserable but to desire bad things and secure them?**

Meno: **You are probably right Socrates, and no one wants what is bad.**

Once again, *Socrates* attempts to propose a descriptive thesis about human desire. The suggestion is not protreptic; it does not say that we should not go after bad things. As clearly as possible, the suggestion is that we *cannot* desire to go after bad things. If *S* believes that a thing is bad, under any description, then it is impossible for *S* to desire it. Human beings, *Socrates* tells us, cannot desire and cannot be motivated to choose an imagined evil⁸⁸. The above passage implicitly verifies both propositions of Psychological Eudaimonism (A1 & A2). On the one hand, it establishes the universal applicability of psychological eudaimonism as a theory of human desire and motivation (no one desires what is bad). On the other hand, it precludes the possibility of welfare-independent desires. In other words, the *Meno* passage implies that all human desire aims at the

⁸⁸ Or at least human beings cannot be motivated to choose the worse option between two evils.



imagined good. The latter claim (A2), namely that all human desire is welfare-dependant, emerges in a sharper tone at 77c:

“It is clear then that those who do not know things to be bad do not desire what is bad, but they desire those things that they believe to be good but that are in fact bad. It follows that those who have no knowledge of these things and believe them to be good clearly desire good things.”

Evidently, the above passage provides sufficient evidence for (A2). For example, when *S* desires *X* which is a bad thing, *S* does not desire *X* qua a bad thing. By contrast, *S*'s desire for *X* is grounded in his belief that *X* is a good thing. Therefore, *S*'s desire to act *X* is motivationally driven by his perception of *X* qua good. Clearly then, the *Socratic* proposal is that *everyone desires good things qua good things and bad things qua good things too*. Therefore, all human desire is dependant upon considerations about the imagined good. As it follows from *Socratic* PE then, there are no welfare independent desires and the soul is always unified at the moment of action.

6.2 Motivational Monism, Conflict and Unity of the Soul

The comprehension of the fundamental role of PE in Platonic moral psychology is of pivotal significance. As I've tried to show, Plato in a number of dialogues⁸⁹ presents a consistent psychological theory which precludes the possibility of desiring the perceived worse option. The upshot of *Socratic* psychological eudaimonism, then, is that since all desire aims for the imagined good there can only be one source of motivation, that is, motivation for the perceived good. This *motivational monism* is the theoretical basis on which the possibility of conflict between different sources of motivation is ruled out. The underlying insight here is that all desire is homogenized by being reduced into considerations about the imagined good. In the context of PE, my desire for pleasure,

⁸⁹ And the list presented in not exhaustive of the PE appearances in the Platonic corpus.



health, wealth, knowledge is not merely a desire for pleasure, wealth, health, knowledge *per se*. At the same time and by psychological necessity it is a desire for pleasure, wealth, health, knowledge qua good. Interestingly, the implications of PE fit perfectly with the theory of Psychological Quantitative Eudaimonism that I put forward at a previous portion of this work. Inside the PQE context, all desire aims at the imagined good while there is only one source of motivation; that is, motivation for the maximization of one's (perceived) well-being. In the quantified framework of PQE, I suggested earlier, all pleasure, knowledge, or health units can be reduced into well-being units. The psychology of PQE, then, is fully compatible with the Platonic remarks on PE.

Now, Platonic psychological eudaimonism entails a picture of a unified soul. The conception of the soul which results from PE does not allow for division between different parts of the soul -given that it only permits a single source of motivation. Thus, it posits a unified subject which undertakes to perform the task of deliberation and of decision-making. If the subject performing the tasks of practical reasoning and of decision-making is unified, so unified is its function. If the function of the soul is unified and motivationally homogeneous then there is no room for internal conflict between different types of desires. Therefore, a derivative implication of PE postulates the absence of conflict between competing motivations in the agent's deliberative and decision-making process. The latter point calls for further clarification. The suggestion that internal conflict between different objects of desire is ruled out by PE seems to be in striking opposition to the commonsense phenomenology of decision-making. A typical description of internal conflict entails the sketching of a battle between a desire to choose what seems to be overall best to do, and a desire to choose what seems more pleasant or less painful. In a schematic form:

- (i) *S* at *t* thinks that *X* is overall better than *Y*; therefore, *S* desires to do *X* motivated by the imagined good.
- (ii) *S* at *t* is thinks that *Y* is more pleasant than *X*; therefore, *S* desires to do *Y* motivated by the pleasant qua pleasant.
- (C) *S* at *t* desires and does not desire to do *X*. *S* at *t* desires and does not desire to do *Y*.



The above depiction of internal conflict underlies a pluralistic theory of motivation. It also paves the way for a division of the soul in a *Republic* fashion (principle of opposites). Thus, we can say that Plato in the *Protagoras* attributes to the majority a psychology of a divided soul. The underlying suggestion is that *S* desires *X* qua good and at the same time *S* desires *Y* qua pleasant. In other words, a conflict between *X* qua good and *Y* qua pleasant is perfectly possible. This is exactly the core of the objection that ‘the many’ raise in the *Protagoras*. In essence, what ‘the many’ attempt to establish is that more than one source of motivation operates in human psychology at the same time and for the same object. It is on the basis of motivational pluralism that ‘the many’ vindicate the occurrence of akrasia. And it is on the basis of motivational pluralism that value becomes incommensurable in order to allow for akrasia cases. Now, ‘the many’ are presented as proponents of the mainstream view with regard to the psychology of human motivation. Naturally then, the view that Plato attributes to the majority is an argument from motivational pluralism. ‘The many’, who in effect symbolize the superficial phenomenology of internal conflict, establish their ‘overcome by pleasure’ explanation of akrasia on the basis of motivational pluralism.

In light of this analysis, it comes as no surprise that the Platonic move is to commit ‘the many’ to a type of Psychological Eudaimonism⁹⁰ (psychological hedonism) which in turns entails motivational monism. By pushing them to concede that all human desire is ultimately motivated by the imagined greater pleasure he commits the majority to a monistic conception of motivation. If all motivation is reduced into considerations about the good; and if all good is pleasure; then all motivation is reduced into motivation for pleasure. By psychological necessity then, ‘the many’ are dialectically forced to admit, all human motivation is welfare dependant. The problem that *Socrates* faces in the *Protagoras* and elsewhere is that most people disagree that all human motivation is welfare dependant. The desire for pleasure which many times turns out to be destructive is conceived by most people as an empirical indication of the existence of welfare independent motivation in human psychology. In the *Protagoras*, then, hedonism

⁹⁰ As Thero (2006:15) notes, “**the sort of eudaimonism that Socrates endorses elsewhere can be accommodated with the purview of the psychological hedonism of the *Protagoras*.**”



functions as the dialectical device which persuades the majority to abandon their underlying motivational pluralism and embrace a psychology of motivational monism. Motivational monism rules out this type of internal conflict (X qua good competing Y qua pleasant) which serves as the conceptual basis for the description of akrasia cases. ‘The many’ accept the *Socratic* claim that all internal conflict is either of the type:

- (a) X qua good competing Y qua good, or
- (b) X qua pleasant competing Y qua pleasant

In both scenarios, the majority is committed to a type of Psychological Eudaimonism, to motivational monism and to a conception of internal conflict in which the subject which undergoes the conflict is undivided. Now, since the conflict between X qua good and Y qua good is a conflict between homogeneous motivations, ‘the many’ have come to realize that their denial of a unified soul is erroneous and their conception of motivational pluralism untenable. Their proposal that *S* thinks that X is the overall best option (qua good) but does Y overcome by his desire to do Y qua pleasant has collapsed and so has their explanation of akrasia.

So how are we to construe the phenomenology of internal conflict between competing motivations in the context of psychological eudaimonism and its derivative motivational monism? As I just maintained, PE presupposes that all conflict takes place in an environment of motivational homogeneity. In a schematic shape:

- (i) *S* at *t* thinks that X is overall better than Y; therefore, *S* desires to do X motivated by the imagined good.
- (ii) *S* at *t* is thinks that Y is more pleasant than X; therefore, *S* desires to do Y motivated by the pleasant qua imagined *good*.
- (C) *S* at *t1* is ultimately motivated to desire either X or Y subject to X’s and Y’s perceived contribution to goodness.



Hence, in the context of PE and in a psychological environment of motivational monism the nature of conflict obtains a purely quantitative and thus commensurable character. The conflict between X and Y is not a conflict between different types of motivation. My desire for X and my desire for Y spring from a common motivational tank, that is, the motivational tank for the imagined good. The conflict between a desire for X and a desire for Y, then, is a conflict which takes place on quantitative grounds. As I argued earlier, this assumption fits very well with Plato's remarks on education regarding the role of measurement in decision making. Besides, as *Socrates* explicitly suggests in the *Protagoras*, salvation in life depends upon one's ability to weigh and measure the real value of an action. The consistency with which Plato expresses his argument from Psychological Eudaimonism is indicative of the importance of the thesis for the Platonic moral psychology of the early and transitional period. The PE thesis in those dialogues comes attached with a theory of motivational monism, a conception of a homogenous internal conflict, and a unified soul. Last but not least, the decipherment of Platonic Psychological Eudaimonism is of fundamental significance to the comprehension of Plato's treatment of akrasia. A more complete understanding of the Platonic treatment of akrasia, however, demands an analysis of the other fundamental Platonic thesis, that is, Motivational Intellectualism (MI). The examination of *Socratic* (MI) and the recasting of the problem of akrasia in terms of the two theses (PE and MI) will facilitate the expounding of a revisionary account of Plato's treatment of akrasia.



6.3 Motivational Intellectualism

One of the most paradoxical claims that we find in the early Platonic dialogues is the suggestion that ‘virtue is knowledge’. This *Socratic* thesis, which has struck many thinkers as counter intuitive, entails the view that knowledge is sufficient for virtuous conduct. An inevitable implication of the ‘virtue is knowledge’ doctrine is that when knowledge of the good is present in a man, wrongdoing is ex hypothesi ruled out as a possibility. In other words, the presence of knowledge ensures right action; the underlying assumption in play is that the power of knowledge is always motivationally invincible. Now, the *Socratic* thesis has traditionally been read as a clear-cut example of intellectualism given that it presupposes that wrongdoing involves some kind of cognitive failure. That is to say, any cognitive state which falls short of knowledge renders an agent susceptible to wrongdoing. According to Socratic MI, however, the presence of knowledge of what is best suffices to ensure right action.

Let us call *Motivational Intellectualism* (MI) the thesis according to which knowledge of the good is motivationally undefeated and guarantees right action. Motivational Intellectualism is a descriptive theory which posits a necessary psychological relationship between a certain cognitive state (knowledge of the good), a dominant motivation and desire for the good, and right action. The (MI) thesis occupies a central role in early Platonic moral psychology and is directly related to the anti-akrasia argument that is exhibited in the *Protagoras*. Nevertheless, *Socratic* (MI) makes its appearance in a number of Platonic dialogues, such as the *Euthydemus*, the *Charmides*, and the *Meno*. In the *Euthydemus* (280a-281b), for example, *Socrates* maintains that knowledge of the good always makes one fortunate because it can never lead to mistakes and wrongdoing. Knowledge of the good, Plato tells us in the *Euthydemus*, will **“necessarily do right; otherwise it would no longer be knowledge. If a man has knowledge he has no need of any good fortune in addition”**. The *Socratic* suggestion is evident; knowledge of the good is sufficient for the avoidance of wrongdoing. It ensures that the agent will choose the best available course of action

“And also I said with regard to using the goods we mentioned first –wealth and health and beauty -was it knowledge that ruled and directed our conduct in



relation to the right use of all such things as these or some other thing? It was knowledge he said.

Then knowledge seems to provide men not only with good fortune but also with well-doing in every case of possession or action. He agreed.” (*Euthydemus*, 281a-b):

Knowledge is understood in the *Euthydemus* as a cognitive state which endows its possessor with a ruling and dictating motivational power for the good. The motivational omnipotence of knowledge, Plato holds, provides an agent with the guarantee that she will act rightly⁹¹. This *Socratic* intuition about the lordly character of knowledge is a clear-cut expression of Motivational Intellectualism. The apotheosis of knowledge and its beneficial function for the agent are recurrent themes in early Platonic dialogues. In the *Charmides* (174b-c), Plato puts forward the argument that knowledge of good and evil suffices to ensure well-doing and even a eudaimon life. Whereas in the *Meno* it is implied that knowledge is sufficient to guarantee a virtuous behavior and to secure good things for its possessor.

All these different expressions of *Socratic* motivational intellectualism constitute a consistent picture about the ruling motivational power of knowledge. What Plato invites us to consider then, is that an agent’s knowledge about the goodness of a certain action ensures that the action will be performed by the agent. Regardless of the power of other psychological forces and impediments (such as fear, pleasure et cetera), knowledge, inside the framework of (MI), is ascribed an omnipotent and invincible motivational capacity which ensures well-doing.

The most straightforward and extended defense of *Socratic* Motivational Intellectualism, however, emerges in the *Protagoras*. There, *Socrates* and *Protagoras* affirm in a rather bold and celebratory tone that when knowledge is present in a man it guarantees the performance of the best available course of action: As *Socrates* states, knowledge is “**a fine thing capable of ruling a person, and if someone were to know what is good and bad,**

⁹¹The *Socratic* claim here is very strong. It can even be construed as an attempt to designate knowledge of the good as a necessary and sufficient condition for eudaimonia.



then he would not be forced by anything to act otherwise than knowledge dictates...”.
(*Protagoras*, 352c)

Protagoras, without raising the slightest of objections affirms the *Socratic* argument from motivational intellectualism: “**Not only does it seem just as you say Socrates, but further, it would be shameful indeed for me above all people to say that wisdom and knowledge are anything but the most powerful forces in human activity**” (352d).

The *Socratic-Protagorean* agreement with regard to the verification of motivational intellectualism comes as a response to the popular belief that knowledge can be overpowered by other psychological forces, most notably by pleasure. The majority of people, as Plato explains, maintain a view of human motivation which is at odds with motivational intellectualism: “**Most people think this way about knowledge, that it is not a powerful thing, neither a leader nor a ruler...**” (*Protagoras*, 352b2) At the end of the dialogue (*Protagoras*, 356c-e) *Socrates* unfolds an argument which relates to how MI enables an agent to avoid wrongdoing. It is the part of the dialogue where *Socrates* draws a distinction between real and apparent values. Things of the same size, for example, might appear larger when seen in proximity and smaller when seen from distance. The power of appearance, Plato suggests, is not a reliable guide to help one discern the real value of an action. Knowledge of the good, however, can safely lead to accurate evaluations of goodness in each available action. Presumably, Plato in the *Protagoras* acknowledges the counter-intuitiveness of motivational intellectualism and presents ‘the many’ as the mouthpiece of the common sense view. Instead of giving a straightforward response to the majority’s anti-MI claims, however, Plato diverts the discussion to the explanation of *akrasia* given by ‘the many’.

“You realize that most people aren’t going to be convinced by us. They maintain that most people are unwilling to do what is best, even though they know what it is and are able to do it. And when I have asked the reason for this, they say that those who act that way do so because they are overcome by pleasure or pain or are being ruled by one of the things I referred to just now....let’s try to persuade people and to teach them what is this experience which they call being overcome by pleasure, because of which they fail to do the best thing when they know what it is”. (*Protagoras*, 352d3-353a4)



The objection of ‘the many’ aims at the very heart of motivational intellectualism:

- (i) *S* knows that *X* is the overall better option compared to *Y*.
- (ii) *S* thinks that *Y* is the most pleasant option, but overall worse than *X*.
- (iii) *S* chooses *Y* overcome by *Y*’s pleasure.

Given that *Socrates* is committed to (MI) he naturally denies (iii) namely that it can ever be possible for *S* to choose *Y* while knowing that *X* is the overall better option. However, the *Socratic* refutation of the common sense view is not accompanied by any argument in defense of motivational intellectualism. Plato does not tell us how and why knowledge carries a motivational omnipotence as a special cognitive status so that to ensure right action. The *Protagoras* is rather uninformative when it comes to explaining the ‘lordly’ and ‘dictating’ nature of knowledge. Surprisingly, no further argument is offered about how knowledge of the good ensures right action. It is legitimate to assume, then, that *Socrates* treats motivational intellectualism as a theory which comes with a truistic flavor⁹². At any rate, however, as it becomes evident in the course of the dialogue, Plato diverts the discussion from (MI) to (PE) in order to refute the anti-intellectualistic of ‘the many’.

“Come with me, then, and let’s try to persuade people and to teach them; what is this experience which they call being overcome by pleasure because of which they fail to do the best thing when they know what it is”.

Instead of demonstrating how knowledge rules out the possibility of wrongdoing, *Socrates* focuses on the hedonic defeat of knowledge. His effort until the end of the dialogue is to reduce the ‘overcome by pleasure’ explanation of akrasia into an absurd statement. A serious counter to this *Socratic* move could be that this kind of response does not apply to a non-hedonist. For a non-hedonist who holds an anti-MI position the

⁹² Milo (1966:75) states that for Socrates and Plato knowledge is a principle of strength. **“How can a man exhibit weakness in the face of them?”** For Milo, Socrates shows a blinding faith in the power of human reason, whereas Aristotle too never questions this faith in the indefeasibility of full-fledged knowledge.



Socratic move would seem a rather narrow and unsatisfying defense of motivational intellectualism. And so a legitimate complaint here is that MI is left undefended.

- (i) *S* knows that *X* is the overall better option compared to *Y*.
- (ii) *S* thinks that *Y* is the most pleasant option, but overall worse than *X*.
- (iii) *S* chooses *Y* overcome by *Y*'s pleasure.

Socrates, instead of showing how (iii) is an erroneous conclusion, he rather resorts to the argument from psychological eudaimonism (and in particular, psychological hedonism) in order to prove that (ii) is an absurd statement. If (ii) is a self-contradictory and absurd premise, the *Socratic* argument goes, then (iii) necessarily collapses. But the refutation of (ii) as I have argued above depends entirely on the adoption of psychological eudaimonism. It is the absence of welfare independent desires that renders (ii) an absurd statement. In other words, the conceptual resources of Psychological Eudaimonism suffice to rule out the possibility of *S* choosing the worse thing *willingly*. *Socrates* does not need the theoretical assistance of MI in order to refute 'the many'. Motivational Intellectualism is irrelevant to the logic of the argument which finally refutes 'the many'. Why then does MI occupy such a central role in the economy of the dialogue? More specifically why does Plato relate MI to the anti-akrasia argument? I address both questions in the next section.

6.4 Synchronic and Diachronic Akrasia

In summation of what I have explored thus far with regard to Psychological Eudaimonism and Motivational Intellectualism: We have sufficient evidence to argue that Plato is consistently committed to a descriptive and psychological type of eudaimonism. PE, as presented in most Platonic dialogues, entails a theory of motivational monism; namely, by psychological necessity there can be only one source of motivation, that is, motivation for the imagined good. PE presupposes that all men, without exception, are hardwired to desire eudaimonia as their ultimate aim and the only unconditional good.



Given that all human desire ultimately aims for the imagined good, it follows that all human desire must be welfare-dependant. If all human desire is welfare-dependant then a conflict of the type: X qua good Vs Y qua pleasant is not psychologically possible. On this theoretical basis, I proposed that PE is a sufficient premise to rule out the ‘overcome by pleasure’ explanation of akrasia. In other words, Psychological Eudaimonism and its derivative elimination of welfare-independent desires suffice for the establishment of the ‘no one errs willingly’ doctrine.

Then, I discussed another descriptive thesis which is put forward by Plato mostly in his early dialogues, that is, Motivational Intellectualism. The central claim of MI is that knowledge of the good brings about a state of motivational invincibility. That is to say, when knowledge is present in a man it ensures virtuous behavior and right action. Hence, in the context of MI, moral knowledge and (moral) failure are incompatible. Moreover, as the *Protagoras* suggests, knowledge cannot be dragged about by any other competing motivational force or passion. Therefore, if S at t knows that X is the best available course of action, then it is guaranteed that at $t1$, $t2$, or tn , X will definitely perform X . Thus, knowledge endows its possessor with a motivation for the good which comes with superlative stability. Both PE and MI make their appearance in the *Protagoras* and supposedly they serve as the necessary anti-akrasia premises. Motivational Intellectualism, however, is not a necessary premise for the refutation of the folk psychology presented in the *Protagoras*. The reduction of the ‘overcome by pleasure’ explanation of akrasia into absurdity can be complete and successful without the supplementation of MI. Why then does MI occupy an overriding place in the *Protagoras*’ anti-akrasia argument?

As I will argue here, Motivational Intellectualism is not presented in the *Protagoras* as a necessary thesis for the establishment of the ‘no one errs willingly’ thesis. MI does not make up for a theoretical deficiency in *Socrates*’ argument that no one chooses the wrong thing willingly. Rather, MI comes as an extension to the ‘no one errs willingly’ thesis. To put it into its sharpest, *MI functions as an extension of the denial of akrasia in that it denies something extra in addition to what the ‘no one errs willingly’ thesis denies*. PE



posits that at the moment of action one cannot go against his best belief or knowledge. In other words it rules out the synchronic existence of right belief and wrong action. Nevertheless, PE does not preclude the possibility of confusion, miscalculation, and finally of wrongdoing - even if this is always construed as unwilling. MI on the other hand, establishes the additional claim that when knowledge is present, confusion about the good, miscalculation or wrongdoing is ruled out. Knowledge offers a *diachronic* guarantee for right action; a diachronic guarantee of success in (moral) decision-making. PE does not offer this kind of guarantee; PE merely tells us that when one chooses the worse course of action, this choice is by psychological necessity unwilling.

Thereupon, we are led to the conclusion that the *Protagoras* calls for a distinction between two types of akrasia: Synchronic akrasia (denial of PE) and Diachronic knowledge-akrasia (denial of MI). The distinction will be drawn on the basis of the function of PE and MI. While PE proposes an eliminative theory about synchronic akrasia, MI posits an eliminative theory about diachronic akrasia. This is, I will maintain, the most accurate way to frame the problem of akrasia in Plato's dialogues. Given that Plato never uses the term 'akrasia', my suggestion is that we need to recast the 'no one errs willingly' doctrine in terms of PE and MI in order to pay justice to Plato's intuitions about akrasia. What is more, the proposed revisionary conceptualization of akrasia will enable us to comprehend at a deeper level what differentiates the *Republic* from the *Protagoras* with regards to their divergent treatments of akrasia.

In the *Meno* (78b), *Socrates* puts forward an argument which encapsulates the central claims of PE⁹³ and MI:

⁹³ The *Meno* passage is in congruence with the *Socratic* treatment of the *Simonides*' verse in the *Protagoras* (345d): "**All who do no wrong willingly I praise and love**". Here, *Socrates* takes it as a given truth that no one would ever do wrong willingly (PE). As he notes, none of the wise men or even of the averagely educated would ever think that someone might choose the worse course of action willingly. And as he maintains at a later point in the dialogue, it is knowledge / virtue that reliably enables one to secure the good things in life (MI). Knowledge of the art of measurement can guarantee salvation in one's life. The *Meno* and the *Protagoras* present a consistent moral psychology which is constructed on the grounds of Psychological Eudaimonism and Motivational Intellectualism.



“You are probably right, Socrates, no one wants what is bad.

SOCRATES: Were you not saying just now that virtue is to desire good things and have the power to secure them? –Yes, I was.

The desiring part of this statement is common to everybody, and one man is no better than another in this? –So it appears.

Clearly then, if one man is better than another, he must be better at securing them. –Quite so.

For *Socrates* the desire for the imagined good is both inherent and universal. No one can desire the perceived bad, and everyone desires to secure good things. The *Meno*, the *Protagoras*, and the *Euthydemus* (among other dialogues) are notable examples of Platonic PE. What the *Meno* passage adds to the regularly expressed PE is the explicit *Socratic* remark about how one can secure good things, and not merely desire them. When one acquires knowledge of the good, *Socrates* suggests (77d-e), she will certainly desire the real good (and not merely the apparent good). What is more, knowledge of the real good suffices for the reservation of those good things. In other words, the desiring of the imagined good is common to everybody (PE); therefore, what differentiates those who secure good things from those who do not reliably secure good things is knowledge of the good. The power of knowledge, as the *Protagoras* also suggests, can infallibly lead one to right choice (MI).

Now, the two theses, PE and MI can be viewed as two separate and independent from each other theses with regards to the analysis of akrasia. This is an observation that has not received the due attention. I will focus on the *Protagoras* to clarify this point: As I have attempted to argue, even if MI was absent from the *Socratic* argumentation, Plato would still have the resources to show that the majority’s explanation of akrasia is self-contradictory and erroneous. Roughly put, and based entirely on the resources of PE:



1. *S* by psychological necessity ultimately desires the maximization of the imagined good⁹⁴.
2. Suppose that the imagined good is always reduced into imagined Zness.
3. *S* believes at the moment of action that X entails more Zness than Y.
4. *S* believes at the moment of action that Y entails more Zness than X.

The key realization here is that in an environment of PE where all desire is welfare-dependant, there is no room for competing motivations at the moment of action. In the context of the *Protagoras*' psychology, propositions (3) and (4) cannot be held together; either (3) can be true of the agent's belief at the moment of action or (4). Most, if not all akrasia scenarios presuppose a picture of conflict between different kinds of motivation where the agent succumbs to the motivation which entails the less (imagined) goodness. The *Socratic* move is to uproot this presupposition based on the theoretical implications of PE. Thereupon, what *Socrates* does not allow here is the synchronic existence of conflicting motivations. The synchronic existence of conflicting motivations at the moment of action is ruled out on account of *Socratic* motivational monism.

The *Protagoras* (but not only the *Protagoras*) is explicitly advocating PE, and in turn the dialogue implies a theory of motivational monism. It is fair to say then that the *Protagoras* precludes the possibility of synchronic existence of conflicting motivations at the moment of action. Thereupon, it has now become obvious that the *Protagoras* rules out the possibility of *synchronic akrasia*. Let me elucidate this very crucial observation. The *Protagoras*' agent, Plato wants to say, cannot choose the wrong thing willingly because his actions are by psychological necessity in accordance with his best momentary belief. The *Socratic* effort to explain wrongdoing as a miscalculation of the moment is entirely dependent on the argument

⁹⁴ Just like a compass which always points to North.



from PE. If PE is correct, the *Protagoras*' agent cannot be susceptible to synchronic akrasia⁹⁵.

Motivational Intellectualism, on the other hand, has a distinct function in the economy of the anti-akrasia argument in the *Protagoras*. Unlike PE, MI posits a psychological story of necessary success for the agent as a decision-maker and an actor. *Socrates*' claim is that knowledge is ruling and dictating and, thus, it cannot be dragged about like a slave by any other passion. In other words, the presence of knowledge ensures right action.

1. *S* knows that *X* is overall better than *Y*.
2. *S* believes that *Y* is more pleasant than *X*.
3. If *S* at *t* knows what is the all-things-considered best option (between *X* and *Y*) *S* will act according to his knowledge of what is best at *t*, *t1*, *t2*, *tn*.
4. *S* will definitely perform *X* at *t*, *t1*, *t2*, *tn*.

There are a few things that call for clarification. First of all, *Socratic* MI posits a theory of incompatibility between knowledge of what is best and wrongdoing. Secondly, it puts forward the hypothesis that knowledge of what is best can endure over time the pressure of contradicting motivations and desires. Unlike other epistemic statuses which over time are liable to get dragged about under the pressure of pleasure, fear, pain, et cetera, knowledge provides the agent with a shield of motivational invincibility. Presumably then, MI does not ex hypothesi rule out the possibility of different kinds of motivations in the agent's psychology at the moment of action. A picture of motivational pluralism, then, is compatible with MI; however, the motivation for the best available course of action -when grounded in knowledge- renders the motivation for the good the prevailing motivation. Now we are better prepared to detect another major difference between MI and PE. Not only MI

⁹⁵ A standard critique to Socratic moral psychology is that it over-intellectualizes human action. However, a construal of synchronic akrasia as being dependent on PE is not prone to such a criticism. The reason is that PE does not suggest that knowledge or any other epistemic status ensures right behaviour. Rather, it proposes a view of human psychology which entails a monistic conception of motivation along with a pre-fixed desire for the imagined good.



guarantees right action when knowledge is present but it also allows for a psychology of motivational pluralism.

Now, MI construes knowledge as an epistemic status which can bring about an undefeated motivation for the good. This function of MI is described in the *Protagoras* as an agent's ability to discern real from apparent value in an action. Much like a pair of glasses that can help a short-sighted person to accurately and reliably discern sizes and figures; knowledge enables an agent to accurately and reliably estimate the real value of goodness in a prospective action. False beliefs can be destructive for an agent and mere true beliefs are not motivationally stable and unmovable under the pressure of strong, persistent welfare independent passions. Knowledge of the good, however, offers a diachronic guarantee that when the agent has her 'glasses' on she will reliably be able to estimate the real value of goodness in an action. This unmovable stability of the motivation for the good which springs only from knowledge (MI) allows us to suggest that Plato in the *Protagoras* rules out the possibility of *diachronic akrasia*. If Plato is correct about his theory of Motivational Intellectualism, then the *Protagoras*' agent is not susceptible to diachronic akrasia when knowledge is present.

One serious counter to MI in relation to the elimination of diachronic akrasia is that MI does not rule out ex hypothesi the existence of welfare independent desires. Simply put, Plato does not tell us why knowledge is sufficiently powerful to overcome the competition of destructive passions and of welfare independent desires which might be present at the moment of action. The objector of MI would challenge premise (3) of the MI syllogism:

1. *S* knows that *X* is overall better than *Y*.
2. *S* believes that *Y* is more pleasant than *X*.
3. If *S* at *t* knows what is the all-things-considered best option (between *X* and *Y*) *S* will sometimes **not** act according to his knowledge of what is best at *t*, *t1*, *t2*, *tn*.



4. S will **not** definitely perform X at $t, t1, t2, tn..$

Plato does not offer any additional account about how knowledge provides this kind of invincible motivational stability towards the good in the presence of powerful welfare independent motivations. This is the essence of the objection raised by ‘the many’. The common sense objection raises doubts about the plausibility of premise 3. ‘The many’ believe that knowledge does not guarantee that S will choose the all-things-considered best option at $t, t1, t2, tn$. As I previously meant to suggest, one possible way to address the Platonic argumentative impasse with regards to the denial of diachronic akrasia is to construe MI as an axiomatic truth. However, this is not a satisfactory response to the serious objection raised by the majority. The Platonic move in the *Protagoras* is to divert the discussion to PE which serves as the argumentative basis for the elimination of synchronic akrasia. This move is not coincidental in the economy of the *Socratic* argument; presumably, Plato suggests that MI has to be constructed on the theoretical grounds of PE. When PE has been accepted Plato is facilitated to propose an even stronger claim regarding the impossibility of akrasia. If MI is viewed as an addition to PE and not as an independent thesis altogether then Plato is in better position to explain how MI leads to the elimination of diachronic akrasia.

All in all, with the argument from PE *Socrates* in the *Protagoras* attempts to show that no one can ever be motivated towards or desire the imagined evil. His argument from PE enables *Socrates* to reach the conclusion that “**no one does wrong willingly**”. Hence, the central aim of the argument from PE is the elimination of welfare independent desires, and in turn, the elimination of *synchronic akrasia*. With the argument from MI *Socrates* attempts to show that when knowledge is present no one can ever fail to choose the best available action: “**no one does wrong (knowingly)**”.

The central aim of the argument from MI in the *Protagoras* is to underline the superlative motivational power of knowledge, and in turn, to eliminate the possibility of *diachronic akrasia*. However, the moral psychology of ‘the many’ is clearly at odds with MI, as they hold that knowledge can be dragged about under the force of other kinds of motivation



and under the pressure of passion. In other words, ‘the many’ believe in the possibility of diachronic akrasia even when knowledge is present. Plato in the *Protagoras* realizes that his argument from MI needs to be proposed on the basis and as an extension of PE. As the *Meno* suggests (78b) to show that all people desire the imagined good has argumentative priority over the exhibition of how one can secure the real good things. Now, if *Socrates* makes his interlocutors agree that all human desire is directed towards the imagined good then his endeavor to rule out diachronic akrasia would be reduced into a proof that knowledge, unlike other epistemic statuses, provides superlative motivational stability. But the elimination of diachronic akrasia (when knowledge is present) seems to depend on the argument from PE. Several dialogues, but most notably the *Protagoras*, embody the *Socratic* effort to show that all human beings pursue eudaimonia by psychological necessity, and that there are no welfare independent desires. This cardinal thesis of Socratic moral psychology paves the way for the suggestion that knowledge endows an agent with motivational stability towards the good (MI) which reliably ensures right action. Now, I believe we are better equipped to understand how the distinction between knowledge and true belief that is explicitly drawn in the *Meno* can be relevant to the analysis of akrasia.

6.5 Knowledge, Belief and Akrasia

Until now I have suggested that synchronic akrasia is not compatible with the type of Psychological Eudaimonism which entails a monistic view of human motivation and which, in turn, rules out the possibility of welfare independent desires. This suggestion, however, is not dependent on any assumptions about the epistemic status of the agent at the moment of action. That is to say, whether the agent knows or merely believes that X is the best option at the moment of action, is irrelevant to the PE-based conclusion that synchronic akrasia is impossible. The *Protagoras* (358d) affirms the latter assumption; as *Socrates* tells us, it is not in human nature to choose what one **knows or believes** (at the moment of action) to be bad.



“And when is forced to choose between one of two bad things, no one will choose (εἰδώς or οἰόμενος) the greater (evil) if he is able to choose the lesser (evil)”.

The *Socratic* reference to belief (οἰόμενος) in relation to the impossibility of willing wrongdoing can make sense only in the context of eliminating *synchronic akrasia*. Certainly, Plato would not like to suggest that mere (true) belief has a motivational force which is of equal power to that which springs from knowledge of the good. Thereupon, we can plausibly suggest, that the distinction between knowledge and belief is irrelevant to the discussion about the possibility of synchronic akrasia. The synchronic / diachronic distinction, therefore, enables us to solve a serious puzzle regarding the usage of the word ‘οἰόμενος’ in the rejection of akrasia. Belief of what is best (not even *true* belief) in a PE environment suffices to rule out the possibility of synchronic akrasia no less effectively than knowledge of the good. This is not the case, however, for *diachronic akrasia*. As it has probably become obvious to the reader, diachronic akrasia is ruled out in the *Protagoras* only in those cases where the agent *knows* that X is the best course of action (MI). Only knowledge is lordly, ruling and sufficiently powerful to always sustain the pressure of strong passions. Naturally then, we might wonder whether diachronic akrasia is allowed in the *Protagoras* and elsewhere in cases where an agent’s thought of what is best to do is grounded on mere true belief and not knowledge.

It is worth noticing that in all dialogues where MI makes its appearance, *Socrates* refers only to the ruling motivational power of knowledge and never to that of mere (true) belief. The *Protagoras* is probably the most characteristic example of MI, but certainly not the only one. In a rather consistent manner, *Socrates* of the early dialogues establishes a necessary relationship between *knowledge* of the good and right action. As Vlastos (1969:72) notes, **“No one would seriously suggest that Socrates would have wished to say the same thing about belief ungrounded in knowledge”.**

In the *Meno*, however, *Socrates* puts forward a puzzling distinction between knowledge and true belief. *Socrates* implies that knowledge and true belief are equally beneficial for



their possessor and *Meno* objects that true belief must be less useful than knowledge because it can sometimes be unsuccessful. The *Socratic* reply is that this is not correct given that he who has the true belief will always succeed *as long as his belief is true* (*Meno*, 97c). In the realm of decision-making and action, Plato suggests that true belief and knowledge must be equally beneficial since both cognitive states enable one to avoid moral failure and wrongdoing.

What is, then, the distinctive value of knowledge that distinguishes it from true belief? One possible response is to argue that knowledge is more reliable than mere true belief (in terms of counterfactual reliability, for example). Sometimes, a true belief about what is best to do can lack the appropriate justification and allow a lot of room for luck. Presumably, there are some cases where if the situation were a little bit different then the agent would not have formed a true belief about what is best. In other words, when it comes to right action grounded in mere true belief (unlike knowledge) there exist many nearby possible worlds where the agent fails to perform the right action. However, counterfactual reliability aside, when it comes to the actual results that are brought about by knowledge and true belief there seems to be no pragmatic difference. Both true belief and knowledge, Plato suggests in the *Meno*, are sufficient and equally successful in guaranteeing right choice.

Nevertheless, *Socrates* insists at the very end of the dialogue that knowledge should be distinguished from true belief since knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief (*Meno*, 98a). As Plato suggests, the difference in value between the two epistemic statuses lies in that knowledge, unlike true belief is tied down by ‘an account of the reason why’ (*Meno*, 97e). .

“To acquire an untied work of Daedalus is not worth much, like acquiring a runaway slave, for it does not remain, but it is worth much if tied down, for his works are very beautiful. What I am thinking of when I say this? True opinions; for true opinions, as long as they remain, are a fine thing and all they do is good, but they are not worth much until one ties them down...”



In a nutshell, the *Meno* puts forward the assumption that knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief because it is more stable as an epistemic status. So, the difference in value between knowledge and true belief can be reduced in terms of difference in stability. Just like the tethered statues of Daedalus are more valuable than the untied works of Daedalus, so knowledge that is ‘tied down’ is more valuable than mere true belief which is liable to ‘run away’. As *Socrates* concludes, knowledge, unlike true belief, is not liable to wander away. Now, a persistent but nonetheless legitimate counter to the *Socratic* distinction between the value of knowledge and that of true belief could be that in a pragmatic context, knowledge does not seem to be any more valuable than mere true belief. Nevertheless, *Socrates* appears to insist that knowledge is more valuable than true belief in a pragmatic and a practical sense too.

Besides, who wants to have a runaway slave instead of a loyal and devoted to his master slave? Any slave can carry through a number of jobs and help his master when present but a runaway is liable to wander away and let down his master when needed. The runaway slave symbolism implies that there will be times that true belief will be needed but won’t be there; it will have escaped the agent’s mind. It will fail to guarantee right action. Actually, in most early Platonic dialogues virtue is construed in terms of knowledge. And *Socrates*’ **“only interest in true opinion ungrounded in knowledge is polemical: he brings it up only when attacking its master-manipulator, the sophist”** (Vlastos, 1969). Thereupon, to read *Socrates* of the *Meno* as suggesting that there is no *practical* difference between the value of knowledge and the value of true belief is to miss a cardinal and consistent segment of Platonic moral epistemology.

In order to understand the practical difference in value between knowledge and true belief we need to go back to the *Protagoras* and the Platonic treatment of *akrasia*. The key move for the decipherment of the epistemological puzzle lies in the comprehension of the concept of epistemic stability. A first striking similarity between the *Protagoras* and the *Meno* is that in both dialogues knowledge is ascribed a unique stability as an epistemic status. Knowledge in the *Protagoras* provides the agent with a stable motivational power whose prevalence is immovable under the pressure of passions –



knowledge of the good can not be dragged about by any other motivation. In the *Meno*, knowledge is, again, ascribed superlative stability and is conceived as an immovable epistemic state just like the tethered statues of Daedalus. In both dialogues, knowledge not only ensures right action when present at the moment of action; it also ensures right action at a diachronic level. In other words, if *S* knows at *t* that *X* is the overall best course of action, it is impossible for *S* not to perform *X* at *t1*, *t2*, *t3*, *tn*. Much like the *Protagoras* where MI purports to eliminate diachronic akrasia, the *Meno*, as well, implies that diachronic akrasia is ruled out because of the stable epistemic nature of knowledge. In other words, the *Meno* agent and the *Protagoras* agent are psychologically identical with regards to the phenomenon of akrasia. Both dialogues rule out the possibility of diachronic akrasia when *S*'s true belief that *X* is the overall best course of action is tied down on knowledge.

What about those cases, however, where *S*'s true belief that *X* is the overall best option is ungrounded in knowledge? Can we say that the *Protagoras* and the *Meno* allow the possibility of diachronic akrasia when an agent's epistemic status falls short of knowledge? This is a complex question and it needs to be addressed on its own; nevertheless, what can be said with certainty is that none of the two dialogues (or any other Platonic dialogue) propose an eliminative theory of diachronic akrasia when the agent has mere true belief. Again, the two dialogues present a very similar approach to the possibility of diachronic akrasia when only true belief is present. The *Protagoras* (356c-d) implies that a true belief about the real value of an action can be lost under the pressure of a passion. Plato invites us to think how proximity of a passion can distort one's (true) belief about the real value of an action: Things of the same size appear to one larger when seen near at hand and smaller when seen from distance.

1. *S* at *t1* truly believes that *X* is an overall better option than *Y*.
2. *S* at *t1* thinks that *Y* entails more pleasantness than *X*.
3. *S* at *t2* (falsely) believes that *Y* is an overall better option than *X*.
4. *S* at *t2* performs *Y*.



In the *Protagoras*' context, then, a true belief does not guarantee stability of correctness in one's judgments about the good over time. At a synchronic level knowledge is pragmatically no better than true belief (*Protagoras*, 358d). But at a diachronic level, knowledge provides the agent with an invincible motivational power for the good and a stable clarity in relation to the real goodness-value of the alternative actions. It is in the latter sense that knowledge is more valuable than true belief in a pragmatic and practical sense.

The very same intuition is expressed in the *Meno*. Knowledge must be prized more than true belief because it provides the agent with an epistemic and motivational stability that true belief falls short of offering in a diachronic level. At the moment of action, the *Meno* tells us, true belief cannot be pragmatically distinguished from knowledge. At a synchronic level both knowledge and true belief ensure virtuous action. When true belief is ungrounded in knowledge, however, there will be occasions that the slave (true belief) will run away. True belief⁹⁶, then, both in the *Protagoras* and the *Meno* does not diachronically ensure the performance of the right action. In other words, diachronic akrasia for epistemic statuses that fall short of knowledge is not ruled out in these two dialogues. On the other hand, it is far from obvious that this kind of belief-based diachronic akrasia is allowed in the *Protagoras* and the *Meno*. The problem of reading early Platonic moral psychology as permitting the belief-based diachronic akrasia is that *Socrates* is not clear about what happens to a true belief which fails to remain operative until the moment of action.

The *Protagoras* implies that under the pressure of proximate passions a true belief about the real value of an action is *replaced* by a false belief which picks out the apparent value of an action. And the *Meno* language as well, implies that true belief is liable to *fly away* like a non-tethered statue, or *run away* like a slave. Hence, a reading more faithful to the language of the *Protagoras* and the *Meno* would suggest that true belief is not simply

⁹⁶ Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (1146b25-30) holds that those who have mere opinion are not more likely to act against their best judgment than those who know. **“There need be no difference between knowledge and opinion in this respect; for some men are no less convinced of what they think than other of what they know”**.



non-operative at the moment of action, but altogether replaced by a new false belief. If this approach is true, then it seems that no type of akrasia at all is being allowed in early Platonic moral psychology. The case, however, cannot be conclusive about whether Plato intends to allow belief-based diachronic akrasia in the *Meno* and the *Protagoras*. Certainly, inside the context of a broader conception of akrasia in which the agent appears to immediately regret his action we could pick out his action as (belief-based) diachronically akratic.

Until now, I have argued that in order to understand Plato's treatment of akrasia in the early and transitional dialogues (most notably in the *Protagoras* and the *Meno*) we need to analyze the *Socratic* arguments in terms of two cardinal theses of his moral psychology. The two descriptive theories that *Socrates* consistently defends in the earlier period (but not only there) are (a) Psychological Eudaimonism and (b) Motivational Intellectualism. By recasting the problem of akrasia in terms of these *Socratic* theses we were led to the conclusion that there are two distinct types of akrasia that early Plato denies; synchronic akrasia and diachronic akrasia (the latter only when knowledge is present). Synchronic akrasia is being ruled out in virtue of the elimination of welfare independent desires. And diachronic akrasia is being denied in virtue of the motivationally omnipotent power and the stable, immovable nature of knowledge. Psychological Eudaimonism of the *Protagoras* and the *Meno*, its derivative motivational monism and the subsequent denial of synchronic akrasia establish the Socratic thesis that 'no one does wrong willingly'. On the other hand, the Motivational Intellectualism of the *Protagoras* and the *Meno* intends to establish the conclusion that knowledge of the good ensures right action in a diachronic level too (no one does wrong knowingly).

Famously, later Plato, of the *Republic* and the *Phaedrus* is interpreted as embracing innovative doctrines in his moral psychology. The development of Platonic moral psychology is mainly reflected in the tripartite division of the soul in book IV of the *Republic*. There, Plato puts forward an argument according to which different mental states and desires belong to a distinct part (μέρος, εἶδος) of the soul. The view of the divided soul that Plato espouses in the *Republic*, however, is at odds with the picture of a



unified soul that we get from the *Protagoras* and the *Meno*. In particular, Plato suggests that there are three independent sources of motivation which are seated in the three different parts of the soul; the rational part, the appetitive part and the spirited part. As it has been shown earlier, the denial of synchronic akrasia lies in embracing a eudaimonic reductionist theory of motivational monism according to which the sole motivation in a human soul is the motivation for the imagined good.

In the *Republic*, however, Plato seems to allow for an anti-reductionist picture of motivational pluralism which, in turn, allows for welfare independent desires. If this is true, then a conflict between X qua good and Y qua pleasant is perfectly possible, and subsequently, synchronic akrasia is not ruled out ex hypothesi. Traditionally, the thorniest problem in presenting a consistent picture of Plato's views on akrasia is the apparent discrepancy between the moral psychology of the *Protagoras* and the moral psychology of the *Republic*. My suggestion here will be that in order to comprehend the nature of the differences and to determine the significance of the departure of later Plato from earlier Plato on akrasia, we will need to examine the stance of the *Republic* towards the two anti-akrasia theses, Psychological Eudaimonism and Motivational Intellectualism.

6.6 Division of the Soul in the Republic and Synchronic Akrasia

The picture of a unified soul of the sort Plato postulates in the *Protagoras* and the earlier Platonic dialogues does not leave any room for the possibility of akrasia -at least for the possibility of synchronic akrasia and knowledge-based diachronic akrasia. A unified soul is wholly committed to considerations about the imagined overall well-being of the agent and therefore its desires are, by psychological necessity, welfare dependant. The underlying anti-akrasia theory of motivational monism and its derivative denial of welfare independent desires, however, are rejected in the *Republic*. In book IV of the



Republic Plato puts forward one of his most discussed arguments, that is, the argument for the tripartite division of the soul. The Platonic division of the soul entails a position of motivational pluralism which, in turn, allows for internal conflict between different kinds of desires (of the type X qua good Vs Y qua an appetite simpliciter). Therefore, synchronic akrasia seems to be allowed in those cases in which powerful bodily urges succeed to overpower the co-existing desires for the long term overall well-being of the agent. It is in this sense that the *Republic* can be interpreted as a rebuke of the *Protagoras* and more generally of the early Platonic moral psychology. What seems to be clearly repudiated in the *Republic* is the consistently defended psychological eudaimonism of the earlier dialogues and its derivative monistic view of the soul and of motivation. Hence, in order to understand the nature of the divergence in the moral psychology of the *Republic* we will have to examine the Platonic argument about the division of the soul and its implications for PE and synchronic akrasia.

The justification of the Platonic division of the soul is grounded in the introduction of the principle of opposites, in book IV of the *Republic*. Simply put, the principle of opposites tells us a way to distinguish the different (and independent) parts of a human soul. The Platonic intuition underlying the principle of opposites is that there must be different motivational agencies⁹⁷ in the human soul in order to explain the existence of opposite desires for the same subject and at the same time (*Republic*, 436b).

“It is obvious that the same thing will not be willing to do or undergo opposites in the same part of itself, in relation to the same thing, at the same time. So, if we ever find this happening in the soul, we’ll know that we aren’t dealing with one thing but many”.

Plato defends his principle of opposites by arguing that, in general, when one and the same subject moves towards opposite directions at the same time, then one can assume that this subject must be multi-parted. For example, while driving, S stands still but at the

⁹⁷ Interestingly enough, Shields (2007:72), from a Unitarian standpoint suggests that: **“the soul-division of the Republic IV, while not in fact generating essentially distinct parts, at least allows for the existence of distinct and differently focused sources of motivation”.**



same time S moves his head and his hands in order to drive the car. Now, a general description of the sort ‘ S is moving and S is standing still at the same time’, Plato tells us, is not a satisfactory description of the event. Rather, we would need to recognize that one part of S is standing still and another part of S is moving. It is not possible, *Socrates* suggests, for one and the same subject to stand still and move at the same time. Or, to do and suffer opposites at the same time; it is not possible for a single-parted subject to move to and away from the same object at the same time. Therefore, as *Socrates* concludes, it is evident that the same thing cannot ‘be, do, or undergo opposites, at the same time, in the same respect, and in relation to the same thing’ (*Republic*, 436e). The conceptual basis of the principle of opposites (“**let’s hypothesize that it is correct and carry on**”, 437a) enables Plato to make room for his innovative moral psychology; once the principle is accepted, Plato applies it to the functions of the soul. The first move is to demonstrate that certain mental states and desires constitute pairs of opposites: for example, assent and dissent, wanting to have something and rejecting it, taking something and pushing it away; these pairs should be considered as mutually exclusive opposites for one and the same subject at time t .

Similarly, the same principle can be applied to acts of desiring; one and the same subject cannot at the same time accept and reject a pleasure, move to and away from the same appetite.

1. S at t has a desire to have an extra piece of cake.
2. S at t has an aversion to have an extra piece of cake.
3. S at t both wishes and averts to have an extra piece of cake.

The application of the principle of opposites on desiring, Plato attempts to argue, comes with the ontological recognition of the existence of a multi-parted soul. It is not possible for a unified soul to aim and avoid, will and reject, desire and avert at the same time, the same piece of cake. Therefore, we have to make ontological room for more than one property in a human soul in order to explain the simultaneous existence of opposite desires. The principle of opposites, applied in the realm of desires, signifies a spectacular



innovation in Plato's moral psychology and has been commonly construed as a recognition of the explanatory and empirical inadequacy of the earlier psychology in the *Protagoras*. In particular, the partition of the soul in the *Republic* posits a theory of conflicting types of desires and of conflicting sources of motivation. When *S* has at time *t* has both a desire and an aversion for the same piece of cake, then *S* undergoes an internal conflict of a sort that is not allowed in the *Protagoras* and the *Meno*.

Now, Plato's explanation of this sort of psychic conflict lies in the co-existence of independent and competitive motivations in a human soul. However, the nature of contrariety between different kinds of desires is not clarified until a later point in the dialogue (*Republic*, 437e). Plato's principle of opposites postulates a multi-parted soul; nevertheless, Plato cannot have meant that the number of the parts is to be determined according to the number of conflicts between different opposing desires. The distinction that Plato attempts to draw is not one between any contrary desires; such a move would dramatically diminish the explanatory efficacy of the partition.

For example, at time *t* I crave for some sugar and when I look at a piece of cheesecake in front of me I desire to have it; however, cheesecake is a desert which I do not enjoy eating. Hence, at the same time and for the same object I might develop opposing desires of the sort 'I want to have X' & 'I want to avoid X'. The existence of simultaneous and for the same object desires does not issue, however, a partition of the soul on the basis of the opposing desires per se. The introduction of such a broad criterion for the division of the soul would result into a picture of an overwhelmingly fractured soul and a conception of internal conflict that would carry trivial explanatory power.

Naturally then, in order to avoid the introduction of a multi-fractured soul which would force the recognition of numerous different types of motivation, Plato resorts to a distinction between welfare dependant and welfare independent desires. This is the main criterion in virtue of which Plato draws his distinction between the two larger -and often competing- parts of the soul; the rational part, and the appetitive part⁹⁸. Welfare

⁹⁸ The discussion about the spirited part, the method of distinguishing the desires of the spirited part from the desires of the other two parts and the relevant criticisms against Plato's introduction of a third psychic



dependant desires are seated in the rational part of the soul, whereas, welfare independent desires are seated in the appetitive part. This way of demarcating different kinds of desires, i.e. rational from non-rational desires, comes tied with a theory of motivational pluralism. There are at least two types of independent motivations in the human soul, Plato tells us in the *Republic*; (1) a motivation for the imagined good, and (2) a motivation for the satisfaction of desires which do not aim for the imagined good (for example appetites like hunger, thirst, or sex). The ‘thirst’ example, which has caused a vast amount of controversy, intends to show, I maintain, that not all desire can be reduced into desire for the overall well-being of the agent. In this respect, we can identify the first major departure from the moral psychology of the *Protagoras* and of the earlier dialogues. That is, the recognition of a source of motivation and of a type of desires which function independently of considerations about the overall well-being of the agent. In other words, there is a part of the soul, the appetitive part, which is blind to considerations about the overall good of the human soul.

“Now, insofar as it is thirst, is it an appetite in the soul for more than that for which we say that it is the appetite? For example, is thirst, thirst for hot drink or cold, or much drink or little, or in a word, for drink of a certain sort? ...but thirst itself will never be for anything other than what it is in its nature to be for, namely, drink itself, and hunger for food” (*Republic*, 437d-e)

Plato, in this widely discussed passage of the *Republic*, refers to a class of desires under the broad title ‘appetites’. Presumably, he refers to the desires seated in the appetitive part of the soul; the clearest examples of appetitive desires, Plato suggests, are hunger and thirst; naturally then, he uses the thirst example as a characteristic appetitive desire in order to establish his argument about the distinction between the rational and the appetitive part of a human soul. As I already noted, the rational / appetitive desires distinction can be reduced into the welfare dependent / welfare independent desires distinction. The welfare dependent desires can be thought of as the intellectualized, reasoned and reflective desires; whereas, welfare independent desires per se are usually primitive, non-intellectualized and unreflective desires.

property are irrelevant to the core of my argument. Therefore, I will remain silent with regards to the examination of those desires which aim at honor, or victory (to use the Platonic jargon).



As *Socrates* implies (438a2) an appetitive desire is not pursued as a desire qua good, but simply as an appetitive desire simpliciter. Furthermore, Plato suggests that we should be prepared to disavow the reduction of a motivation for an appetitive desire to a motivation for the imagined good (*Republic*, 438a). I will return to this ambiguous Platonic warning at the end of this chapter.

Now, it is a commonplace that there is an apparent discrepancy between these *Republic* remarks and the argument against ‘the many’ in the *Protagoras*. The essence of the refutation in the views of the majority lies in the reduction of all desires into desires for X qua good. This reductionist account of desire is being explicitly denied in the *Republic*. However, it is rather premature to argue that the introduction of motivational monism and of welfare independent desires in the *Republic* signifies an all out acceptance of akrasia. According to the standard reading of the *Republic*, the partition of the soul along with the recognition of irrational desires which do not aim for the good, make room for internal conflict and, thus, for the acceptance of akrasia.

The ‘thirst’ example in the *Republic*, however, does not by itself issue an all out acceptance of akrasia. A more accurate interpretation of the discrepancy between the *Republic* psychology and the *Protagoras* psychology must acknowledge both types of akrasia that the *Protagoras* intends to eliminate (synchronic and diachronic akrasia). And the ‘thirst’ example seems to allow only one of the two types, that is, synchronic akrasia. *Socrates* in the *Protagoras*, as I argued earlier, attempts to defend MI, i.e. the claim that knowledge is motivationally invincible, based on the premise that there not exist any welfare independent desires (PE). The elimination of welfare independent desires, as it has been shown, rules out the possibility of synchronic akrasia. Also, in order to rule out diachronic akrasia *Socrates* argued that full-fledged knowledge is not liable to be dragged about by any passion. Thereupon, it is one thing to postulate the existence of desires which are blind to the good and thus can lead to an akratic break, and a different thing to say that knowledge is susceptible fall short of guaranteeing right action. Hence, the mere existence of welfare independent desires in the human soul constitutes an



insufficient argumentative basis for the conclusion that an irrational passion can overpower a desire for the good which is grounded in knowledge.

The ‘thirst’ example does not suggest or even imply that knowledge can fall short of securely leading an agent to virtuous action. The core of the ‘thirst’ example is that there exists a type of desires (originating from a goodness-independent source of motivation, the appetitive part of the soul) which does not aim for the overall well-being of the agent (**“But thirst itself isn’t for much or little, good or bad, or in a word, for drink of a particular sort. Rather thirst itself is in its nature only for drink itself”**, *Republic*, 439b).

Simply put, there exist some appetites, like thirst, or desire for food, which are not responsive to what *S* believes to be good. Therefore, what the *Republic* denies here is the motivational monism of the *Protagoras* and subsequently the early *Socratic* claim⁹⁹ that all desires can be re-interpreted as desires for X qua good. It is the plausibility of PE that is questioned, criticized and finally rejected in the *Republic* (**“let no one catch us unprepared or disturb us by claiming that no one has an appetite for drink but rather good drink”**, 438a). What is more, the Platonic warning for caution against a possible objector to the motivational pluralism of the *Republic* is suspiciously relevant to the *Protagoras* moral psychology. It looks credible to assume that Plato with this warning signifies the recognition of the conceptual inadequacy of the *Protagoras*’ view of the soul. This recognition comes tied with the postulation of welfare independent desires and, in turn, with the acceptance of the possibility of synchronic akrasia.

⁹⁹ Irwin, along the same lines, argues that Plato rejects the *Protagoras*’ thesis that all action rests on a desire for the imagined good and the belief that the action we choose is the overall best available action.



6.7 Epistemic Stability and Diachronic Akrasia in the Republic

At this point, one might object that Plato in the *Republic* adopts a psychology identical to the psychology of ‘the many’, and complain that the shift is too radical to be any credible. Once again, we need to recast the Platonic treatment of akrasia in terms of the two anti-akrasia theses (PE and MI) in order to accurately determine the depth of the discrepancy between the two dialogues on akrasia. ‘The many’ in the *Protagoras* are presented to hold two separate theses: (i) that even full-fledged knowledge is not sufficient for right action; and (ii) that there exist irrational passions which are not responsive to beliefs about the good and can eventually take control of human action.

Now, Plato in the *Protagoras* rejects (ii) and implies that the elimination of (ii) entails the elimination of (i). As it has become evident, later Plato endorses (ii) in the *Republic* through the postulation of the principle of opposites (partition of the soul) and the recognition of welfare independent desires which are seated on the appetitive part of the soul. This adoption of (ii) in the *Republic*, however, although it induces a radical departure from the moral psychology of the *Protagoras*, still it does not entail the rejection of (i). Therefore, given that the *Republic* rejects the Psychological Eudaimonism of the *Protagoras*, it remains to be examined whether it also rejects the Motivational Intellectualism of the earlier dialogues. If the *Republic* is found to embrace a rejection of Motivational Intellectualism too, then it follows that the Platonic treatment of akrasia in the *Republic* is completely at odds with the *Protagoras* views on akrasia.

The decipherment of the Platonic stance towards MI in the *Republic* is a complicated task nonetheless. That is so, because the Platonic views regarding the necessity or sufficiency of knowledge for right action in the *Republic* come with a significant degree of ambiguity –given the complexity of the whole *Republic* argument (via the city-soul analogy) on moral psychology and moral epistemology. Thus, a number of things call for clarification. Plato in the earlier dialogues puts forward the claim that knowledge is



sufficient for the choice of the best available action. As the *Protagoras* explains, knowledge is (a) a motivationally ruling thing when present in a man and (b) it can not be dragged about by any other passion. In other words, knowledge ensures right action both synchronically and diachronically. Thus, the *Protagoras* agent is not liable to losing his knowledge about the real value of a prospective action which, in turn, provides her with a guarantee of well-doing. That is so, because, as both the *Meno* explicitly and the *Protagoras* implicitly suggest, correct belief grounded in knowledge is superior to any other cognitive state in terms of stability. Thus, it is evident that in the presence of knowledge the earlier dialogues and most notably the *Protagoras* and the *Meno* rule out the possibility of diachronic akrasia. The *Republic*, however, is far from clear with regards to the treatment of MI and the possibility of diachronic akrasia when an agent has knowledge of the best available action. Now, the distinction between the value of mere true belief and the value of knowledge in the earlier dialogues is construed as a difference in epistemic and motivational stability. If that is correct, *knowledge can be understood in the pre-Republic dialogues as an epistemically immovable and motivationally invincible true belief*. Epistemic and motivational stability is what distinguishes a true belief that is knowledge from a true belief that falls short of knowledge.

In the *Republic* (429b-c), however, Plato appears to reject his earlier hypothesis, namely that it is stability the criterion upon which we can single out knowledge from mere true belief. In discussing the case of bravery, Plato seems to imply that one need not have knowledge in order to reliably commit the right (i.e. brave) action.

“The city is courageous, then, because of a part of itself that has the power to preserve through everything its belief about what things are to be feared, namely, that they are the things and kinds of things that the lawgiver declared to be such in the course of educating” (*Republic*, 429c)

The latter suggestion relies on the assumption that stable true belief (about what should be feared) is sufficient for virtuous -in terms of bravery- action. Here, the departure from the *Protagoras* and the *Meno* is radical for different reasons, nonetheless. In the



Protagoras, *Socrates* maintains that only knowledge is sufficiently stable so that to ensure virtuous action and not become prey to a forceful passion; whereas in the *Meno*, *Socrates* holds that only knowledge is tied down like the tethered statues of Daedalus - unlike mere true belief which is conceived as a relatively unstable epistemic status - symbolized by the runaway slave. The *Republic*, however, appears to deny both the *Protagoras* claim that only knowledge is sufficient for right action and the *Meno* claim that only knowledge is reliably stable. Interestingly, Plato underlines this point by telling us that true belief can operate as a stable epistemic status and reliably ensure right action even under the pressure of pleasure which is the most potent passion (*Republic*, 430a4):

“I mean that courage is a kind of preservation...the preservation of the belief that has been inculcated by the law through education about what things and sorts of things are to be feared. And by preserving this belief ‘through everything’, I mean preserving it and not abandoning it because of pains, pleasures, desires, or fears”
(*Republic*, 429c5-d1)

A rather superficial reading of the *Republic* remarks on true belief might tempt one to interpret Plato as suggesting that true belief is no less valuable than knowledge since it can, much like knowledge, reliably ensure right action. In the *Meno* and the *Protagoras*, Plato tells us a way to distinguish knowledge from true belief; that is the tenacity, the stability, and the endurance of those true beliefs which are grounded in knowledge. In the *Republic*, however, stability or endurance of true belief ceases to be the point of reference which distinguishes knowledge from true belief. Does this constitute a reason to think that true belief, much like knowledge can be lordly, ruling and motivationally invincible, to use the *Protagoras* jargon?

The description of the tenacious and stable true beliefs of the auxiliary class with regards to bravery appears to be identical to the description of knowledge in the *Protagoras* and the *Meno*. If this is correct, then, there must be a species of stable true beliefs which is not liable to wrongdoing, although it falls short of being knowledge. Plato delineates this kind of stable true beliefs -possessed by the properly educated auxiliary class in the ideal city- as a kind of true belief that preserves its correctness over time and regardless of the



pressure of passions, desires, pleasure, pain or fear. As a consequence, a number of thorny questions call for clarification: Does Plato mean to propose that the existence of this kind of stable true beliefs rules out the possibility of diachronic akrasia much like knowledge eliminates the possibility of diachronic akrasia in the *Protagoras* and the *Meno*? And if this is what Plato intends to argue does it follow that there is no difference between the value of a stable true belief and that of knowledge at a pragmatic level and with regards to right action?

The ambiguity of the issue at stake can be traced back to the Platonic claim in the *Republic*, according to which a certain kind of true belief cannot wander away even under the pressure of pleasure, fear, or of any other passion. This claim is reminiscent of the Platonic claim about knowledge in the *Protagoras*, namely that knowledge cannot be dragged about like a slave regardless of the force of pleasure, fear, or of any other welfare independent passion. However, as I will argue, Plato does not intend to argue that unqualifiedly a kind of stable true beliefs can rule out the possibility of diachronic akrasia, just like knowledge does. Nor does Plato want to suggest that knowledge is of equal value to stable true belief.

First, Plato attributes the stability of the virtuous (brave) behavior of the auxiliary class to the education they have received and to the faithful adherence to the declaration of the lawgiver. The preservation of the true beliefs, *Socrates* suggests, comes as the result of the inculcation by the law through education about what things are to be feared (*Republic*, 429c5). This kind of indoctrination by the law through education protects a member of the auxiliary class from abandoning her true belief because of pains, pleasures, irrational desires, or fears. The analogy that Plato uses in order to make his point clearer is the analogy of the dyers who want to dye wool purple (*Republic*, 429d-e)

The technique which dyers employ is to ‘first pick out from the many colors of wool the one that is naturally white’ and prepare it so that it absorbs the color as well as possible. Then, they apply the purple dye: **“When something is dyed in this way, the color is fast –no amount of washing whether with soap or without it, can remove it”** (429e1-



2). To put it into its sharpest, it is a certain kind of education (music and physical training, *Republic*, 430a1) and the inculcation of the law that enables a member of the auxiliary class to preserve one's correct belief and remain courageous. Nevertheless, as the 'dyers analogy' implies this kind of stability of correct belief is not a product of genuine reflection of the relevant circumstances. Stability of true belief is not the product of justification about the right reasons for right action. The auxiliary class is educated so that to recognize and desire a brave action, however, it lacks the reflective capacity to genuinely justify their reasons for right action.

Plato puts forward an analogy which comes with a eugenic flavor; dyers pick out from the many colors of wool the one that is *naturally* white. Then, music and physical education comes into the picture as a necessary step (the dyers prepare the naturally white wool so that it absorbs the color as well as possible). Finally, when the educational period of training is finished the agent is ready to be inculcated the law ('then they apply the purple dye). Interestingly, the whole 'dryer analogy' delineates the cultivation of moral agency of the auxiliary class in terms of epistemic passivity or, at least, of justificatory heteronomy. Although the auxiliaries might become capable of recognizing which fears ought to be taken or avoided and also sustain their right beliefs, still they remain incompetent to give an account of the reason why X should or should not be feared independent of the law. What is more important, however, is that the acquisition of stable *right* beliefs, and not simply of stable beliefs, is subject to the quality of the education and of the lawmaking of the rulers. As Plato tells us, the lawgiver declares some things to be worthy of being feared and some others unworthy of being feared. The lawgiver declares some things to be morally right and some others to be morally wrong. The auxiliaries will uncritically endorse the moral outlook of their lawgivers and educators.

Thereupon, we can credibly assume that the auxiliary class lacks the ability to revise its moral beliefs should the circumstances called for revision. In a counterfactual environment, for example imagine the case of unwise or morally corrupted lawgivers, the members of the auxiliary class would be educated to fear the wrong things or to be rush



in cases that they should hold back¹⁰⁰. This lack of reflectiveness and of justificatory competence for right action renders this kind of stable true belief counterfactually unreliable¹⁰¹. The auxiliaries in many scenarios can end up having stable but unreliable true beliefs. In other words, reliability and stability of correct belief in the *Republic* are set apart –at least in the case of bravery. In this sense, we have spotted the first major difference between the moral epistemology of the *Republic* and the moral epistemology of the *Meno* (and most likely of the *Protagoras* too). The departure is radical given that in the *Meno* Plato tells us that knowledge differs from mere true belief because it is tied down like the statues of Daedalus. Unlike mere true belief which is untied, unstable and liable to escape a man's mind, knowledge is more worthy because it is tied down and exhibits a phenomenal degree of stability.

Stability in the *Meno*, however, is defined as the ability to give an account of the reason why. Knowledge, unlike true belief, is stable because the agent who possesses it can justify the rightness of her actions and also explain why a true belief is true. In the *Republic*, however, Plato submits to the position that there exist stable true beliefs which fall short of knowledge (probably because they cannot give an account of the reason why) and also stable true beliefs which are not entirely reliable (because they are not counterfactually sensitive). Hence, the two conclusions of the *Republic* which constitute a significant departure from the earlier Platonic moral epistemology and psychology are:

- (i) Stability in true belief is not identified with genuine justification of why the respective belief is true, and
- (ii) A stable true belief does not reliably ensure right action under any possible circumstances.

¹⁰⁰ Plato at a later point (*Republic*, 440d4) uses the analogy of a shepherd and its dogs in order to encapsulate the relationship between the ruling class and the auxiliaries. The auxiliaries are just like the obedient dogs which adhere to the rulers' (shepherds) moral commands. Thus, it seems plausible to suggest that the auxiliaries are heteronomously determined as moral agents. Thence follows their inability to revise their stable true belief should these beliefs cease to be true.

¹⁰¹ To put it more precisely; a stable true belief of the auxiliary class can reliably ensure right action on the condition that the ruling class prescribes the right moral law and a sufficiently thorough moral education.



Therefore, the departure from the *Meno* and the *Protagoras* resides in a deviant conception of *stability* as an epistemic and motivational property of true belief. Furthermore, given that stable true belief appears to fall short of knowledge we have reasons to suspect that the requirements for knowledge in the *Republic* are much stricter than the respective account of knowledge in the *Meno*. I will come back to this point at the end of this chapter. Now, I will explore the implications of Plato's moral epistemology in the *Republic* in relation to his treatment of diachronic akrasia.

The *Protagoras* and the *Meno*, based on MI, make it clear that knowledge can diachronically ensure right action. Thus, it seems plausible to hold that the earlier dialogues rule out the possibility of diachronic akrasia when knowledge is present in a man's mind. Now, in order to explore the *Republic* stance towards the possibility of diachronic akrasia we will need to examine the story of Leontius in book IV. The story of Leontius is discussed by Plato for two main reasons; first as an empirically-based example that the spirited part ('the part by which we get angry, 349e2) is distinct from the appetitive part. And second, in order to demonstrate that in cases of psychic conflict between the rational and the appetitive part, the spirited part aligns itself far more with the rational part (*Republic*, 440e4).

As Leontius was walking he happens to see naked corpses lying at the executioner's feet (*Republic*, 439e). His urge to look at the corpses originating from the appetitive part of his soul conflicted with his disgust in front of the satisfaction of such a base desire. Leontius, the story continues, experienced an internal conflict, a civil war between the appetitive part which desired to look and the rational part which averted the desire to look at the corpses. After having struggled about what to do, Leontius, overcome by the appetite, pushes his eyes wide open and rushes towards the corpses, saying: **"Look for yourselves, you evil wretches, take your fill of the beautiful sight"** (*Republic*, 440a1-2). Plato uses the example of Leontius to prove the existence of a third source of motivation, namely the one seated on the spirited part of the soul¹⁰². However, the story

¹⁰² If anger can be opposed to an appetite at *t*, it follows that, as the principle of opposites posits, it must belong to a distinct part of the soul, that is, the spirited part.



can be exploited for the derivation of useful assumptions with regards to the Platonic treatment of *akrasia* in the *Republic*.

As the story of Leontius suggests, an agent in a state of internal conflict is liable to be forced by appetite to act contrary to rational calculation (440a5). The fact that anger (which has allied with rational calculation) is operative at the moment of wrongdoing supports the assumption that true belief about what is best is also present at the moment of wrong action¹⁰³. Or else Plato would not be able to account for the simultaneous appearance of legitimate anger which is expressed in alliance with the calculations of the rational part. In other words, Leontius has a true belief about what is best to do while acting against what he thinks as best; however, this true belief is insufficient to ensure right action. More importantly, this true belief, as it is implied by the story, is a stable true belief.

Leontius believes at t that it is wrong to look at the corpses. At t_2 , that is, at the moment of action, Leontius' true belief is still present which explains the burst of synchronic anger that operates in alliance with the conclusion of the rational calculation. Hence, the *Republic* tells us a story where it becomes clear that a stable true belief appears to be insufficient for right action. At (441c) Plato tells us that the part that is angry (the spirited part) is different from the part that has calculated about better and worse (the rational part). The spirited part is unable to execute calculations about the overall well-being of the agent; therefore, it is crystal clear that when Leontius bursts in anger synchronically to wrongdoing, this anger must stem from the outcome of a present true belief (a rational calculation) about what is better and worse. Now, we are better equipped to determine the stance of the *Republic* with regards to diachronic *akrasia*. As it has already become evident, the *Republic* allows for the possibility of synchronic *akrasia*; the case of diachronic *akrasia*, however, calls for further clarifications.

The story of Leontius indicates that stable true belief may not be sufficient for right action. Even though the true belief of Leontius is tenacious enough to survive until the

¹⁰³ The Leontius case supports my previous hypothesis according to which the *Republic*, unlike the earlier dialogues, allows the possibility of synchronic *akrasia*.



moment of action, it is overcome by the force of appetite nonetheless. Thus, a stable true belief may be diachronically insufficient to lead to correct action. The contrast with the *Protagoras* and the *Meno*, the most representative dialogues of Socratic PE and MI, is transparent. The *Meno* describes knowledge as a stable true belief which guarantees well-doing. The *Protagoras* suggests that in the presence of correct calculations wrongdoing is impossible. The *Republic*, by contrast, rejects both assumptions of the earlier Socratic moral psychology. Does this mean that the *Republic* paves the way for the possibility of diachronic akrasia too?

What can be said with certainty is that the *Republic* allows for scenarios of belief-based diachronic akrasia. It is not clear nevertheless, whether it also rejects the MI thesis, namely that knowledge of the good is motivationally invincible. The problem in addressing the possibility of knowledge-based diachronic akrasia in the *Republic* is the discrepancy between the conception of knowledge in the *Republic* and the conception of knowledge in the earlier dialogues. Knowledge in the *Protagoras* endows its possessor with the ability to conduct correct calculations about the good, and in turn, with a motivational stability which ensures right action. And the *Meno* construes knowledge as an immovably stable true belief which, infallibly, ensures right action. In the *Republic* the ability to conduct correct rational calculations (441c) and the subsequent stability of the correctness of the relevant true beliefs does not guarantee right action. Thereupon, my proposal is that for the epistemological standards of the *Protagoras* and the *Meno*, the *Republic* signifies an important departure. The *Republic* appears to favor the possibility of knowledge-based diachronic akrasia if knowledge is conceived at the standards of the earlier dialogues.

The case of Leontius may help us clarify this point. For the standards of the earlier dialogues, Leontius acts against his *knowledge* of what is best, given that his true belief is stable and is also the result of correct calculations about the better and the worse. It is in this sense that the earlier dialogues would deny the description of Leontius' story as a possibility for a knowledge-based akratic break. Seen from the lenses of the earlier dialogues Leontius appears to be susceptible to both synchronic and diachronic akrasia.



Given that both types of akrasia are eliminated in the earlier dialogues the *Republic* has been found to be completely at odds with the previously espoused moral psychology and the treatment of akrasia of the *Protagoras* and the *Meno*.

All the same, the *Republic* presents a revisionary account of knowledge, which is put forward in relation to some significant Platonic innovations in his metaphysical and ontological theory. More specifically, the account of knowledge in the *Republic* is tightly connected with the doctrine of the Forms. The requirements for moral knowledge in the context of the *Republic* appear to be much stricter than those of the earlier dialogues. A tenacious, tied down, stable true belief does not necessarily amount to moral knowledge, since knowledge in the later Plato amounts to an intellectual apprehension of the eternal Forms (Thero, 2006:45).

Throughout this section I have examined the attitude of the *Republic* against the earlier claim that knowledge cannot be dragged about by any passion; and that therefore knowledge-based diachronic akrasia is impossible. I have reached the conclusion that the *Republic* rejects the MI of the earlier dialogues and therefore that it allows for diachronic akrasia. Now, one possible way to deny this radically developmentalist reading is by suggesting that for the *Republic*'s conception of knowledge, diachronic akrasia is being ruled out too. This kind of Unitarian interpretation of knowledge-based akrasia in Platonic thought aims at showing that knowledge of the good is always incompatible with wrongdoing. For a Unitarian reading Plato does not change his mind regarding the MI conclusion according to which knowledge of the good cannot be dragged about by irrational passions.

For example, Shields (2007:63) correctly states that for the philosopher of the *Republic* diachronic akrasia is impossible. According to his reading, the philosopher-king is the 'closest agent to the highly unified Socratic agent of the *Protagoras*'. In the presence of knowledge, Shields believes, diachronic akrasia is permitted or eliminated for the *Protagoras* and the *Republic* agent to the same level and to the same degree. His position



advocates the view that Plato continues to consistently propagate the motivationally invincible nature of knowledge (MI). In his own words:

“Further, if the Republic entertains the possibility of highly unified souls, then these souls will be no less susceptible to akrasia¹⁰⁴ than were the highly unified agents of the Protagoras. Consequently, on the assumption that there are such souls, any linear opposition between the Republic IV and the Protagoras will be highly distorting” (Shields, 2007:73):

As I have tried to argued, the problem with such a Unitarian approach to Plato’s treatment of diachronic akrasia is that the *Republic* conception of a highly unified soul is divergent from that of the earlier dialogues. The highly unified soul of the philosopher in the *Republic* amounts to a width of education and an intellectual maturity which deviates from the conception of the *Protagoras*’ unified soul. Presumably, if we set the qualifying bar for knowledge of the good at the level of the philosopher king then we can assume that diachronic akrasia is not allowed in the *Republic* too. However, that would result in a different kind of interpretative anomaly. As Plato stresses, only a very small minority of human beings is naturally endowed and appropriately trained to belong at the higher class of the ideal city.

“Indeed, of all those who are called by a certain name because they have some kind of knowledge, aren’t the guardians the least numerous? –By far. Then, a whole city established according to nature would be wise because of the smallest class and part in it, namely, the governing or ruling one. And to this class, which seems to be by nature the smallest, belongs a share of the knowledge that alone among all the other kinds of knowledge is to be called wisdom. –That’s completely true” (*Republic*, 428e)

Hence, a serious counter to this Unitarian reading of Plato’s treatment of akrasia is that indefeasible wisdom -in the context of the *Republic*- can be acquired only by an extremely restricted elite group; namely by those agents who are intimately acquainted

¹⁰⁴ Shields refers to ‘narrow’ akrasia. I have omitted the word ‘narrow’ in order to avoid terminological confusion.



with the Form of the Good. And thus, this kind of invincible knowledge which secures right action is not available for the lower but numerically much larger classes. If this is correct, then only a very small minority of human beings is not prone to diachronic akrasia, given that only very few people can be sufficiently competent to acquire this kind of knowledge. At any rate, the elimination of knowledge-based diachronic akrasia in the *Republic* comes tied with a very stringent conception of knowledge. In this scenario, Plato appears to set the qualifying bar for knowledge unrealistically high. Even if we accept that knowledge-based diachronic akrasia is not allowed in the *Republic* the departure from the treatment of Motivational Intellectualism in the earlier dialogues is radical. That is so, because Plato in the *Republic* conceptualizes knowledge in a significantly different way than that of the *Protagoras* and the *Meno*. Thereupon, we can conclude that the *Republic* has been found to be at odds with the two fundamental anti-akrasia theses, that is, Psychological Eudaimonism and Motivational Intellectualism.



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