

Akratics as Hedonists: *Protagoras* 352b-355a

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Sometimes we do one thing, though we take ourselves to have more reason to do another. This phenomenon is known as ‘akrasia’, and in the contemporary literature, such agents are depicted as acting on (and against) a wide variety of reasons. Donald Davidson, for instance, makes a point of the fact that the specification of an action as akratic does not involve reference to any particular value achieved or forgone by the akratic agent (2001, 30). Contemporary theorists of akrasia describe the phenomenon in a value-neutral way, as unified by the formal fact that such agents act against their better judgment. I will present and defend an alternative account, found in Plato’s *Protagoras*, on which the only value that can be at stake in an akratic choice is pleasure.

In the *Protagoras*, Socrates famously rejects the standard ways in which people are prone to describing akratic actions. Although ‘the many’ (οἱ πολλοί) understand akrasia as *being overcome by pleasure or knowingly doing what is bad or acting against belief*, Socrates wants to show that such locutions are in some way incoherent. His argument has two parts: the first, which I shall call ‘the hedonism argument’ (352b-355a), secures the key premise of the second (355a-356a), which is standardly dubbed ‘the ‘ridiculous’ argument’. In the second part Socrates translates the akratic’s claim to have chosen a lesser good because he was overcome by the pleasure into the ‘ridiculous’ (γελοῖον) claim that he willingly chose a lesser pleasure over a greater one, being free to choose otherwise, when seeking only pleasure. My topic is the first part, an argument that establishes the hedonism deployed in the second part. Hiding in this seemingly preparatory section of the text is, I claim, an underappreciated argument for a restricted form of hedonism.

Interpreters of the hedonism argument tend to focus on the question of whether Socrates there commits himself to hedonism. The majority of recent commentators, moved by widespread evidence from other texts, argue that we should not attribute the hedonism therein to Socrates.¹ They understand him to be arguing with ‘those low characters, those people of the multitude’ (Vlastos 1969, 78) who happen to be hedonists. There are, however, features of the passage that resist this line of interpretation, most notably the fact that Socrates’ interlocutors do not espouse hedonism until Socrates argues them into it: they enter the dialogue, at 351c, as examples of people who come under Socratic fire for their *resistance* to

¹ This group includes Sullivan 1961, Santas 1966, Zeyl 1980, Kahn 1988, Wolfsdorf 2006, and Morris 2006.

hedonism.² Socrates seems to be saying not that ‘the many’ actually are hedonists, but that they should be or must be hedonists. But we will misconstrue Socrates’ argument for hedonism if we read it, in the manner of older commentators, as a straightforward endorsement of hedonism. For the premises of the argument for hedonism advert, in true Socratic style, to the point of view on value adopted by ‘the many’—a point of view Socrates does not share. Socrates is trying to pin hedonism on a group of people that precisely excludes himself, namely, those who describe themselves as ‘being overcome by pleasure’ or ‘knowingly doing what is bad’ or ‘acting against belief’. The aim of Socrates’ first argument is to show that people who ascribe to and take themselves to fall under the standard conception of *akrasia* are, *therefore*, hedonists.³

I propose that we set aside the question of Socrates’ views on pleasure as orthogonal to the ‘hedonism argument’, and investigate instead the group of people of interest to Socrates: ‘the many’. Since the ‘faulty’ descriptions of *akrasia* that they embrace are still used by ‘the many’ today—Socrates’ ‘refutation’ of the standard view has won few adherents!—the first part of Socrates’ argument has direct bearing on contemporary discussions of *akrasia*. When we say akratics ‘act against their better judgment’, this could be a translation of one of the *akrasia*-descriptions Socrates attributes to ‘the many’. In light of this fact, I will take the liberty of adopting a few abbreviations: I will (often) shorten ‘*akrasia* as it is standardly conceived’, to ‘*akrasia*’, and ‘those who qualify as akratics according to the standard conception of *akrasia*’ to ‘*akratics*’.⁴ In addition to facilitating

² This argument tends to be pressed by those who take Socrates to be offering us his own view in the hedonism argument, a position less popular among recent commentators. Irwin 1995, ch. 6 §§ 60-64) and Gosling and Taylor 1982, ch. 3 remain its core constituents (see Dimas 2008, 253n3 for more references); Woolf 2002, 226-227 n7, 248n44 concurs, if weakly; Dimas 2008, also takes Socrates to be espousing his own views at *Protagoras* 352b-354e, but understands the hedonism in question to be of a very restricted kind. He thinks that Socrates is arguing for a hedonistic construal only of the set of examples listed at 354a (athletics, military training, cautery, medicine, starvation diet). Nussbaum 1986 and Vlastos 1969 want to commit Socrates, if not to hedonism, at least to a quantitative conception of value as commensurable and to be maximized.

³ Ferrari 1990, Weiss 1985, 1989, 1990, and Dyson 1976 likewise aim to give place both to Socrates’ failure to avow hedonism as well as to the power of his argument for it. Ferrari does not think that *either* the many or Socrates are hedonists, but that Socrates is ‘casting’ the many as hedonists in order to ‘expose their impoverished conception of reason’. If this were right, however, one would expect that the many’s resistance to hedonism would take center stage in the *akrasia* argument, as it does not. The many seem perfectly happy to be hedonists, once Socrates shows them that they must be. Weiss 1989 takes hedonism to be locally essential to the *akrasia*-argument; but more globally Weiss 1985 takes it that Socrates is not himself committed to this position. Rather, he is working out what courage would have to look like if it were teachable by Protagoras; the hedonism in question is part of an expose of the sophists’ fraudulent claim to teach virtue (Weiss 1990). Dyson 1976 likewise takes an ironic view: inverting the relative importance of the ‘prologue’ and the ‘ridiculous argument’, he contends that Socrates’ argument against *akrasia* is actually directed at getting the many to *drop* their hedonism. My reading of the role of hedonism in the *Protagoras* is less tortuous than Dyson’s, Weiss’ or Ferrari’s, does not rest on irony, and offers a unified account of the hedonism thesis and the thesis of value-commensurability.

⁴ For an account of the Socratic conception of *akrasia*, see Callard 2014, in which I argue against

exposition, such abbreviations expose the provocativeness of the Socratic thesis: he presents us with an argument to the effect that the conception of akrasia we all have commits us to hedonism. In my conclusion, I will make a suggestion as to how that hedonism manifests itself in the contemporary literature on akrasia.

I present Socrates' argument in four stages. Socrates, I claim, offers us the argumentative resources to establish each of four increasingly strong theses about the way the akratic must understand the value of the action he takes (the akratic action) as compared to the value of the action he thinks he should have taken (the enkratic action):

(1) Value Comparability: the akratic judges the akratic action to be worse than, and therefore comparable in respect of goodness to, the enkratic action.

(2) Value Commensurability: the akratic judges the akratic action to offer less of some value also offered by the enkratic action.

(3) Hedonic Commensurability: the akratic judges the akratic action to offer less of some value also offered by the enkratic action, where that value is commensurable with pleasure.

(4) Hedonism: The akratic judges that the akratic action offers less pleasure than the pleasure offered by the enkratic action.

These stages do not have analogues in the text, but are, rather, divisions I have introduced, the better to bring Socrates' argument into conversation with contemporary treatments of value commensurability. Though I advert, here and there, to places in the text in which one can find evidence of Socrates' commitment to (1)-(3), my exposition of those theses in part I is primarily of a directly philosophical nature. I discuss (4), the claim explicitly made by Socrates, in part II. It is a failure to see the way in which (1)-(3) underlie (4), along with a misdirected interest in the Socratic position on pleasure, that has obscured Socrates' powerful argument that there is conceptual connection between hedonism and (the standard conception of) akrasia.

I. Comparison and Commensuration

Socrates' argument in the *Protagoras* calls upon akratics to compare the value of two actions: the akratic action that they take (henceforth 'AA') and the enkratic action that they think they should have taken (henceforth 'EA'). Moreover, Socrates seems to think that such comparison must proceed by assessing which of the two options offers the agent more of some shared value. Nussbaum 1986 has criticized Socrates for helping himself to the assumption that such a commensuration is always possible.⁵ She takes the thesis of value-commensura-

the claim that Socrates, in the *Protagoras*, is out to deny the possibility of akrasia. Instead, I claim that he offers a radical reconception of akrasia: akrasia is not acting against your knowledge of what to do, rather it is the condition in which you experience your own failure to have that knowledge as painful. Socrates identifies the distinctive phenomenology of akrasia as a way in which the akratic is registering his own ignorance about the good. He relies on the reality of akrasia in order to make his protreptic point, which is that knowledge alone is the cure for akrasia.

⁵ Nussbaum 1986, 106-117 esp. 451-452 n66 follows Wiggins 1980; I cite her rather than him

bility to be Socrates' own view, and one that he unfairly imputes to his interlocutors. For she understands value-commensurability to fly in the face of our everyday experiences of the heterogeneity of value, experiences among which our akratic episodes figure prominently. Nussbaum's attack misses its mark if, as I will argue, value-commensurability is not a view belonging to Socrates, but a view entailed by the popular conception of *akrasia*.

As a first pass at a definition of commensurability, to be refined below, I offer the following: two items (be they physical objects, actions, or values) are commensurable if and only if there is a 'covering value' in respect of which they can be compared.⁶ In this kind of comparison, one item will count as better than the other because it offers us more of the covering value.

The argument from *akrasia* to commensurability is simple. Socrates offers the materials for making it in the following passage, taken from the 'ridiculous' argument:

So, he will say, 'within yourself, does the good outweigh the bad or not?' We will clearly say in reply that it does not; for if it did, the person who we say is overcome by pleasure would not have made any mistake. 'In virtue of what,' he might say, 'does the good outweigh the bad or the bad the good? Only in that one is greater and one is smaller, or more and less.' We could not help but agree.⁷ (355d-e)

Suppose that the akratic chooses the action offering immediate pleasure over the action offering long term success. If he felt those values to be incommensurable, he would not take himself to be in a position to assert that he had made the wrong choice. The akratic takes himself to have made a *mistake*, which is to say, he takes himself to have ascertained that the value of the pleasure he chose was smaller than the value of the success he could have chosen. It follows that he must have found *some* covering value by which to compare them. Perhaps he judged that the one offered him less total pleasure than the other, or perhaps he compared them in terms of a third value such as 'my overall well-being'.

because she is more explicit in framing the claim with reference to Socrates' argument in the *Protagoras*. Wiggins' point is that a conception of value on which 'there is something such that all actions we have reason to do are actions that will maximize that' is 'oversimplified', and that such simplification is made dubious by (but not only by) weakness of will (242). See also Wiggins 1997, 267n13. If Wiggins is right, Socrates begs the question against the many by going into the 'ridiculous' argument with the assumption of value-commensurability. If I am right, Socrates' assumption of value-commensurability is a charitable concession to the many; he is granting to them the only conception of value on which they could hope to make sense of their weak-willed action. Stocker 1986 presses a weaker point than mine against Wiggins and Nussbaum: that *akrasia* is *possible* when the choice is among commensurables.

⁶ I take the term 'covering value' from Chang 1997, who gives a very similar definition of what she calls 'comparability'. I use that term more loosely, to indicate the possibility of a comparison not based on quantities of a shared value.

⁷ Translations throughout are by Lombardo and Bell (Plato 1992); Greek text is from Burnet 1968.

I will now consider three responses to this argument on the part of the would-be anti-commensurabilist. These responses will help us refine the sense of ‘commensurability’ at play in Socrates’ argument. The first two address the scope of the commensurabilism thesis, and the third concerns whether the argument is strong enough to support the claim that the values are subject to commensuration as distinct from a weaker form of comparison.

(A) *Partial vs. Complete commensurability*. Could the anti-commensurabilist, in response to this argument, grant that the values are somewhat commensurable, but deny that they are *fully* so? Nussbaum’s point would be preserved if she could grant that AA is measurably worse than EA in respect of, e.g., total pleasantness but also better in some other way that is not captured or included in the value of ‘total pleasantness’. It might, for instance, offer a peculiarly piquant or distinctive pleasure. The choices would then be commensurable in respect of the amount of pleasure (i.e., $AA < EA$) and commensurable in respect of the piquancy of the pleasure (i.e., $AA > EA$), but not commensurable in respect of both values, taken together.

This sort of ‘partial commensurability’ will not suffice for the articulation of a case of akrasia as standardly conceived. Socrates is in a position to argue that the akratic must take the choices to be commensurable without remainder—for only such commensurability will support the akratic’s judgment that he has made a mistake. The fact that EA is more pleasant than AA, if AA offers some value not measureable as a quantum of pleasure, is insufficient to ground the judgment that EA is the right choice. Perhaps the piquancy of AA is worth, so to speak, more than its weight in pleasure.⁸ The Trinidadian Scorpion Butch T pepper, before it plunges the eater into hours of agonizing pain, reportedly offers a brief experience of a unique floral taste. The pleasure does not outweigh the pain in intensity or duration, but its distinctiveness might be a reason for some to—nonakratically!—choose it nonetheless.

Someone who takes himself to have done something pleasant and yet bad is only akratic if his judgment that the action is bad is not thoroughly independent of the fact that it pleasant. Whatever grounds the agent’s judgment of AA’s badness—whether it be pain, dishonor, or poverty—must represent *enough* badness to compensate for AA’s goodness—whether that goodness be a matter of the amount of pleasure, the distinctiveness of the pleasure, or the piquancy of pleasure.

We can, however, acknowledge a caveat. Perhaps only rarely will the covering value capture all the values that two real-life options offer us. It would be something of a cognitive feat to make oneself aware of *all* potential sources of value and disvalue. Nor should articulating a case of akrasia require the agent to think that hard. For instance, suppose that, having committed to attending a party tomorrow, I receive a last minute invitation to attend another party, tonight. I

⁸ E.g., Stocker 1986, 204-205, ‘It is possible to be so charmed by the particular piquancy, say, of an act’s pleasure that one desires and does the act even though another and even more pleasurable act is seen to be possible.’

might decide that catching up on work tonight will enable me to enjoy the party tomorrow, and that this adds up to more fun overall than attending two parties weighed down by work stress. In this comparison, I might neglect to consider the fact that if I go to the party tonight, I will save money by eating food prepared by others rather than depleting my own stock; or that I will get exercise by walking to the party; or that I can mail a letter on my way there, etc. Failure to attend to these considerations does not disqualify my choice from counting as akratic—assuming, that is, that I go to the party for none of those reasons. The value of money or exercise or having my letter mailed (likewise, parallel values on the other side, such as, e.g., the possibility of doing laundry while at home) are not relevant to my choice about the party. Trying to factor them in would be more trouble than it is worth. I either dismiss them as practically irrelevant, or, more likely, these values do not present themselves for my consideration, precisely because they *are* practically irrelevant.

Deliberation as to what would be best to do presupposes a predeliberative ‘framing’ in which options are selected for relevance; only values that make it inside the frame need figure in the akratic’s comparison. The ‘completeness’ of an act of commensuration should be understood relative to such a frame. This is the sense of ‘all’ in the ‘all-things-considered’ judgment that Davidson characterizes akratics as acting against. The kind of commensuration that grounds an akratic action is one that the agent takes to embrace *all the practically relevant* values and disvalues of the action/s under consideration.

(B) *Extra- vs. Intra- Akratic Commensurability*. Could the anti-commensurabilist still deny that all values are commensurable? Consider Sartre’s soldier, who claims to see the values of patriotism and filial duty as incommensurable—he is torn between going off to fight and staying home to take care of his mother. So long as he does not claim to know which is the right or best action, can we not allow him this incommensurability? The answer here is yes, so long as he admits—as he should—that neither choice will qualify as akratic. My reading of the value-commensurability thesis is weaker than the standard interpretation of the passage, which assumes that Socrates requires all values—and not only those of the akratic—to be commensurable. This assumption is not usually made explicit by commentators, but we can see it when, e.g., Wiggins 1980, 255 gives Aristotle’s espousing of value pluralism in the *Politics* as a reason why he could not share Socrates’ view of akrasia in the *Protagoras*; or in fact that Nussbaum 1986, 117 intends the banal observation that ‘From our ordinary viewpoint, things do look plural and incommensurable’ to contrast with the Socratic view. The text gives us reason to invoke only the weaker view, given the fact that Socrates has no interest, at this point in the *Protagoras*, in either offering or having his interlocutor agree to a general thesis about value. His argument is only strong enough to commit his interlocutor to the commensurability of the values at play in an action that the interlocutor wishes to call akratic. And, given that his target is the coherence of their conception of akrasia, that is exactly how strong it needs to be.

(C) *Commensurability vs. Comparability*. Someone could object that the above argument from ‘the akratic judges EA better than AA’ to ‘the akratic takes EA and AA to be commensurable’ neglects the following possibility: what is incommensurable could nonetheless be *comparable*. If two items are comparable then it is possible to make a rational, i.e., non-arbitrary, choice between them. Such a chooser would, unlike Sartre’s soldier, be in a position to assess one of his options as right and the other as wrong. Commensuration—that is, seeing the items as representing more or less of a single shared value—is only *one* way of making such a choice. If we challenge such an objector to specify an alternative to commensuration, she can point out that sometimes we choose between incommensurables on the basis of *rules*.

Consider, for instance, Rawls’ ‘lexical’ subordination of equality-oriented demands of justice to liberty-oriented demands. Rawls would say: it is not that such-and-such an amount of equality is *less* valuable than such-and-such an amount of liberty. Rather, it is wrong to even consider *how much* equality could be achieved by forsaking liberty. Equality is not a practically relevant value until liberty has been achieved. Since a rational choice between the equality and liberty can be made on the basis of a principle rather than any comparison of value-quantia, Rawls can assert that equality and liberty are incommensurable values. Why, presses the objector, could the same not obtain in a case of akratic action?

We might respond to this objection by pointing out that it is possible to derive a form of commensurability from the fact of comparability. If, in circumstances C, I have reason to pursue V instead of V’, it *follows* that there is some sense of the phrase ‘more valuable than’ where it is true to say that, in C, V is more valuable than V’. The concept ‘value’ will always serve as a basis for commensuration for actions between which a rational choice has been made. The commensuration thus achieved is one that follows upon, rather than leading to, the choice in question—I will call it ‘consequential’. Consequential commensurability is not a source of reasons to pursue V instead of V’; that choice would have to be determined antecedently, by the presence of, e.g., a rule for how to choose in this kind of scenario. Rawls need not deny that, given that I have reason to pursue liberty over equality—a judgment not based on commensuration but on rules—there is *therefore* a sense in which, in this situation, equality is less valuable to me than liberty.

Once we acknowledge this difference between strict (antecedent) commensurability and the merely consequential ‘commensurability’ issuing *from* comparisons, we can see that the latter is of no help in the present context.⁹ Socrates’

⁹ The valuable defense of commensurability by Chang 1997 is marred by a failure to acknowledge this distinction. She thinks that sometimes we fail to notice that there is a covering because it is ‘nameless’ (32). Furthermore, she notes that proponents of incommensurability (Anderson, Taylor, Wiggins, etc.) do refer to ‘what is really important’ or ‘self-ideals’ or ‘integral human fulfillment’ in speaking of choices between incommensurables. She takes these philosophers to be attempting to articulate these nameless values, and thus in a backhanded way to be committed to the commensurability of the items in question. Better, I think, to attribute both the namelessness and lack of substantial guidance offered by such values to the fact that they are indicators of merely consequential

argument clearly relies on the kind of commensurability that would be the basis of, and not the product of, the act of comparison. In the passage I quoted above (355d-e) Socrates insists that akratic must explain ‘outweighing’ by invoking relative size: ‘In virtue of what (κατὰ τί), he might say, ‘does the good outweigh the bad or the bad the good? Only in that (ἢ κατ’ ἄλλο τι) one is greater and one is smaller, or more and less.’ The most natural reading of the two instances of κατὰ in this passage is that A outweighs B *because* (κατά) it offers greater as opposed to smaller, or more as opposed to fewer. If size comparison grounds the judgment of outweighing, then the items must be more than consequentially commensurable. If we read κατὰ τί as meaning ‘how’ rather than ‘why’, Socrates could be saying that what it is for goods to outweigh evils is for them to be greater. This reading would be compatible with using ‘greater’ in the sense of consequential commensurability, but it makes little sense of a distinction Socrates goes on casually to allow for between, on the one hand, comparison of magnitude, of greater (μείζω) and smaller (σμηκρότερα), and, on the other hand, comparison of multitude, of more (πλείω) and less (ἐλάττω). Consequential commensuration does not invoke measurement robustly enough to warrant a distinction between ways in which the two items could be commensurated.

Beyond this passage, Socrates’ description of his solution to the problem of akrasia indicates quite clearly that he conceives of the problem as one involving *antecedent* commensurability. He tells us that it is a science of measurement, defined as the ‘art of the greater and lesser’ (357a2) and the ‘study of relative excess and deficiency and equality’ (357b2-3) that will serve as the akratic’s salvation. This could only hold if it were always possible, in what would have amounted to a case of akrasia, for an agent to make determinations of more or less or greater or smaller, generating thereby the correct judgment would have displaced the ignorant, ‘akratic’ judgment.

I conclude that Socrates takes the akratic to be committed to the antecedent commensurability of EA and AA. I will now show that he has reason to do so. Thus far, we have drawn on one feature of akratic action, which is that it is *mistaken*. Socrates pointed us to another feature of akrasia when he introduced the view of the many at the opening of the argument:

Right you are. 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 them the reason (αἴτιον) 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. (352d-e)

Socrates represents his ‘conversation with the many’ as, for the most part, fictional. The exception comes in this passage, with a reference to a question Socrates claims actually to have posed to people regarding the explanation

commensurability; which is to say that the authors in question have indeed located instances of strict (antecedent) incommensurability.

(ἀίτιον) for their akratic action. What I want to draw attention to is not the substance of their answer, but the fact that they have one. When he asks people who call themselves akratic why they did the wrong thing, they are, as a matter of fact, ready with an answer. This is not a general truth about all mistaken actions. Sometimes when presented with something I did wrong, I wash my hands of it, saying, ‘I do not know what got into me’ or ‘no reason’ or ‘I was a different person then.’ Socrates is right to point out that these are not options for the akratic, who must have access to the (outweighed or overridden) value of the action he performed. He cannot claim to have ϕ -ed akratically and claim not to see the appeal of ϕ -ing.

To adapt Davidson’s phrase, the akratic still sees whatever ‘he saw, or thought he saw, in his action’ (Davidson 1963, 3). Akratics find that their action continues to make sense to them—so much so, that they can typically see their way to doing the same thing again. The language in the akrasia argument suggests repeated actions, extending into the future: ‘you are often overcome by pleasant things...you do these things all the while knowing that they are ruinous’ (353c5-8). Akratic action-types represent sources of continued appeal, attraction or desire. The agent who is prone to them finds them *alluring*. The vivid sense that ‘the many’ have of the weakness of their knowledge stems not only from the memory that they once acted against it, but from their continuing awareness of the force that would motivate them to act likewise in similarly tempting circumstances. Both when they act and after they act, they see some reason to act akratically.¹⁰

But the akratic’s action will only have the requisite allure if we suppose that his options were strictly (which is to say, antecedently) commensurated. We saw above that the alternative to antecedent commensuration was for the one value to be chosen over the other on the basis of some kind of a rule. In a rule-based as opposed to measurement-based comparison of values, the rejected value does not present itself as offering us some smaller amount of a generic substratum of value. Rather, the two values stand in something like a ‘trumping’ relation—if you play a non-trump against a trump, the value of your card just does not matter. We can say that the trumped value is ‘less valuable’ but only consequentially, that is to say, in virtue of losing. It does not lose by any amount, but is instead deemed practically irrelevant.

Commensuration is a defeat that involves the recognition of the defeated item as nonetheless possessing some determinate amount of a value; trumping is not. When I refuse to sell an item for any amount of money (‘it’s priceless’) I do not mean that it is worth *more dollars* than 1 million dollars, more than 5 million dollars, etc. What I mean is that from the point of view of appreciating the value of this thing, I am blind to the amount of money I am being offered. I would say ‘I don’t care about the amount.’ If you have ruled out the pursuit of value V inde-

¹⁰ Davidson 2001b, 42n25, ‘of course he has a reason for doing a, what he lacks is a reason for not letting his better reason for not doing a prevail’; Wiggins 1980, 241, ‘the weak-willed man acts, not for no reason at all—that would be strange and atypical—but irrationally’.

pendently of *how much* V the option in question offers, what you have decided is that the quantity of V is practically irrelevant. To take V as trumped by V' is to take the quantity of V on offer as not being practically relevant. But this is exactly what the akratic claims moved him—*how much* pleasure was on offer.

The fact that trumping relations do not support akrasia is illustrated in our lives by the fact that they are the province of those who claim not even to be tempted. Someone who resists an extraordinary incentive of money or pleasure or power will typically say that 'it was not a matter of money or pleasure or power'. He is trying to explain that those considerations were ruled out from the start as not to be counted. He did not see his choice as a question of *how much* pleasure or money or power was on offer. He did not, having made the decision, have to struggle against the force of just how valuable the alternative was. Despite seeing the opposing value as a genuine value, he discounted it as not meriting consideration in this context.

Agents deciding between incommensurable values do, of course, often struggle with the *decision* of which value to pursue. Wiggins 1997, 56, in his argument for the existence of incommensurable value, reminds us of circumstances in which it is 'agonizingly difficult to decide how to hold the right balance', and 'the choice may represent a terrible challenge to the chooser'. These choosers are in a position where, even if they take themselves to succeed in choosing rightly, are aware of suffering a terrible loss. But in such a case, the loss in question is precisely that of having to discount, as not-to-be-pursued-in-these-circumstances, something of great value. To decide against a value incommensurable with the one you decide on is to put yourself in a position where you will not be pursuing *any* of that value anymore: the soldier who chooses country is closing the door on his mother, and vice versa. Such a person might even go back and forth, repeatedly reversing his judgment as to what he should do because he cannot bring himself to discount either value.

None of this is what akrasia looks like—akraties do not find their decisions difficult, they do not go back and forth, they have not closed the door on the value at play in the rejected option. Their struggle lies not in figuring out what the right thing to do is, but in doing it. When the akratic describes himself as 'overwhelmed by pleasure', he is citing the fact that the akratic option seemed *so pleasant*. The fact that the option is *very* X has no more relevance to the one who takes X to be trumped by Y, than the fact that this is such a high club has to the one who takes it to be trumped by a spade. Akrasia would be a sign of not having discounted the opposing value; for the akratic must, even when he knows that one of his options has been defeated, still be in a position to see that very option as having *some* of the relevant value. Defeat by trumping is too complete to leave room for akratic motivation: my pursuit of a value I judge to have been trumped either reflects or constitutes a revision of that judgment.

I conclude that Socrates has reason to claim not only comparability, but also commensurability—more specifically, complete and antecedent commensurability—for the akratic's options. Commensurability turns out to follow from two

features of the akratic's action that are central to the standard conception of akrasia: the agent who performs them takes them to be mistaken, and yet alluring.

II. Hedonism

Socrates' actual claim is, however, an even stronger one: he insists that the akratic must understand his options to be commensurable *specifically in terms of pleasure*. His justification for doing so rests, ultimately, on the *content* of the akratic's explanation of his action. According to Socrates, akratics claim that they do what they do because of pleasure or pain (352d8-e1). If pleasure or pain are to figure as motivators, the akratic must see pleasure as valuable, pain as disvaluable.¹¹ It follows that whatever the value is on the side of the 'enkratic action'—be it honor, or money, or virtue, or more pleasure and pain—will have to be fungible with pleasure and pain.

If pleasure is that in terms of which the goodness of any opposing value can be understood or measured, it serves as a kind of common denominator. The value the akratic loses has to be able to be understood in terms of the loss of just so much pleasure, or the incurring of just so much pain. But Socrates seems to want to go a step further, and say that akratics, qua akratics, are committed to the view that pain and pleasure are not only units of measurement but are themselves the values at issue. A certain honor could have the value equivalent to just so many units of pleasure, without its being the case that that honor was in any way pleasant or productive of pleasure. A value that is fungible with pleasure and pain is not necessarily a *hedonic* value. Once again, Socrates seems to opt for the stronger thesis: instead of saying that the many are committed to all goods being *measurable* in terms of pleasure and pain, Socrates says that the many are committed to all goods' being measurable in terms of the pleasure and pain *to which they give rise* (ἀποτελευτᾷ 353e7, 354b6; εἰς ταῦτα τελευτᾷ 355a4-5). On this view, pleasure and pain are not merely the common coin of value-exchange, but they represent the actual source of value.

Let us step back and reflect on the four increasingly strong theories we have had occasion to consider about the way the akratic must understand the relationship between the value of the akratic action (AA) as compared to the value of the enkratic action (EA):

(1) Value Comparability: the akratic judges AA to be worse than, and therefore comparable in respect of goodness to, EA.

(2) Value Commensurability: the akratic judges AA to offer less of some value also offered by EA.

(3) Hedonic Commensurability: the akratic judges AA to offer less of some

¹¹ Socrates' many do not try out the move of seeing pleasure and pain as *merely* causal forces pushing the agent around, ones to which no evaluational component corresponds. This unexplored possibility is not a live option, for reasons given in Santas 1966, 27-33: in order for the akratic to count as acting *willingly* (a requirement clearly accepted by both sides: οὐκ ἐθέλειν 352d6, ἐξὸν μὴ πρόπτειν 355a8) he must see what moves him as having some value to it. Otherwise what we have is not akrasia but psychological compulsion. Santas' modus ponens is Watson's modus tollens: see Watson 1977 for an idiosyncratic but closely argued account of akratic action as unfree.

value also offered by EA, where that value is commensurable with pleasure.

(4) Hedonism: The akratic judges that AA offers less pleasure than the pleasure offered by EA.

Something that should strike us about the argument for (1)-(3) that I have been presenting is that I have not touched down in the part of the *Protagoras* (namely, 354c-355a) in which Socrates argues for the premises that he will deploy in the ‘ridiculous’ argument. While the text of the ‘ridiculous’ argument allows us to draw out arguments for (1)-(3)—which makes sense, since they are entailed by (4)—Socrates’ own interest really does seem to be in arguing, directly, for (4).

It is a kind of theme of the argument from 354c-355a that Socrates insists the akratic *must* understand all value in terms of pleasure: at multiple points (354b7, 354d2-3, 354e1, 354e2, 355a1, 355a3) he insists that they will not be able to point (εἰπεῖν...οὐχ ἔξετε) to any other criterion (εἰς ἄλλο τι τέλος ἀποβλέψαντες) of goodness or badness than pleasure or pain. One might read these various instances of οὐχ ἔξετε with an emphasis on the subject: you will not be able to point. But we do not have to hear this phrase as a comment on the ethically impoverished condition of the many, or an invitation to attribute to the many whatever view makes the argument work out. For the language of οὐχ ἔξετε is continuous with all the points in the ‘ridiculous’ argument where Socrates will go on to insist that the many are compelled by the force of argument to agree to what he is attributing to them (e.g., οὐχ ἔξομεν 355e1). If we abandon the ‘people like you’ reading of οὐχ ἔξετε in favor of understanding the locution as a reference to being compelled by the force of argument, the demands on Socrates are greater—he must be able to show why the many are unable to point to any other criterion than pleasure or pain.

The many do not start off as people who can identify no good other than pleasure. Consider this exchange:

Then again, suppose we were to ask them the opposite question: ‘You who say that some painful things are good, do you not say that such things as athletics and military training and treatments by doctors such as cautery, surgery, medicines, and starvation diet are good things even though painful?’ Would they say so?

Yes.

Would you call these things good for the reason that they bring about intense pain and suffering, or because they ultimately bring about health and good condition of bodies and preservation of cities and power over others and wealth? Would they agree?

Yes.

These things are good only because they result in pleasure and in the relief and avoidance of pain? Or do you have some other criterion in view, other than pleasure and pain, on the basis of which you would call these things good? They say no,

I think. (354a3-c2)

We only willingly undergo athletic training, military drills, or medical treatment for the sake of some further end. The many offer a list of goods that could plausibly qualify as further ends: health, bodily soundness, the preservation of cities, rule over others, wealth. These are goods whose pursuit no Greek would question. It should not strike us as immediately obvious that they too need justification by means of yet a *further* end to which they give rise (ἀποτελευτᾷ 354b6). Health occupies a different place in our value-structure from cauterization. What, then, is the source of pressure that Socrates brings to bear on the many to identify *any* further end that gives these goods value, let alone to identify pleasure as that end?

Socrates seems to think (353c-d, 353e-354a, 354d) that the reason he can make this assumption is that the many only call being pained itself (αὐτὸ τὸ λυπεῖσθαι) good, or being pleased itself (αὐτὸ τὸ χαίρειν) bad, if the first leads to goods or the second to evils. His reasoning here is somewhat opaque, if only because the point is so simple. He takes the fact that the many can pick out being pleased as evil *only* with reference to its effects, and the same, *mutatis mutandis*, for being pained, to indicate that the many hold the following theses:

(i) being pained *itself* (i.e., considered without reference to its effects) is bad

(ii) being pleased *itself* (i.e., considered without reference to its effects) is good

Perhaps (i) and (ii) seem innocuous enough that anyone would accept them, but let us nonetheless consider by what right Socrates attributes them to the many. The many, when asked to explain their akratic action, cite pleasure or pain (352d8-e1). Socrates hears their explanation not as merely causal ('Why did you jump?' I got an electric shock), but as an attempt to cite the good of the action in question. And he is surely right to hear them this way: as we mentioned above, akratics are typically in touch with the value of their action—so much so that they could both imagine doing and in fact end up doing the same thing over and over (πολλάκις 353c6) again. They do not answer the 'why' question by saying, 'I don't know what got into me' or 'no reason' or 'I was a different person then', since they see their action as something they did for a reason. And the reason in question is nothing other than the fact that some option was pleasant. Given that what is good about the action—what I have called its 'allure'—is nothing other than the feeling of pleasure, they must think of the feeling of pleasure itself as good; likewise, that of pain itself as bad.

The thesis that the very condition of being pleased is good is importantly stronger than the thesis that being pleased is something good. Consider three ways in which someone might think that being pleased is good without thinking that being pleased itself is good.

He might value pleasure instrumentally, e.g., someone who wants to be pleased because he knows that others enjoy seeing him be pleased.

He might value pleasure as a constituent of the good, e.g., someone who values pleasure insofar as it contributes to human happiness.

He might value pleasure as an instance of a good kind: a depressed person who wants to feel something—anything. He would value pleasure—and also pain.

To value pleasure instrumentally, or as a constituent, or as an instance of a good kind, is to see the value of pleasure generically, i.e., in such a way that something other than pleasure could offer the same sort of goodness pleasure does. Generic lovers of pleasure do not think that a case of being pleased is good just insofar as it is a being pleased. Rather, they think that it is good insofar as it is good for others, or contributes to happiness, or is a way of feeling something. In each of the three cases, space opens up for pleasure-substitutes: the appearance of being pleased, other contributors to happiness, or other feelings/sensations. These characters present pleasure as valuable by looking to some other end (εἰς ἄλλο τι τέλος ἀποβλέψαντες 354d2). By contrast, if someone thinks that being pleased itself is what is good, he thinks of its goodness in a non-general way. Its goodness just is nothing other than its pleasantness. (i) and (ii) are ways of saying that *pleasure is a sui-generis form of value, pain a sui-generis form of disvalue*. If the only way in which X offers any value at all is by being pleasant, then the only way something can offer more of a value which is commensurable with X's value is by offering more pleasure.

Socrates' argument for hedonism relies on the rule that whatever cannot be assessed in terms of anything simpler must serve itself as the term of assessment. If something is valuable just for being the kind of thing it is, it is incommensurable with anything that lacks that property.¹² The akratic's understanding of the value of pleasure is one that makes it incommensurable with anything other than pleasure.

Anyone who takes himself to be akratically moved by pleasure is—perhaps unwittingly—committed to hedonism. Socrates does not espouse hedonism; what he does is accuse us of it. If Socrates is right, anyone who claims that he chooses the lesser good because of pleasure or pain is thinking hedonistically about value. The claim that pleasure is the only good presumably stands, like Socrates' claim that the art of measurement is what would save our lives, inside the parenthetical bracketing of the akratic scenario. The art of measurement is what saves us *insofar as our problem was akrasia*; pleasure is the only good *in an akratic choice in which it has been nominated as motive*.

The argument I have just outlined hangs the attribution of hedonism to the akratic on the fact that he describes himself as 'overcome by *pleasure*'. Why could the akratic not claim to be 'overcome' (ἡττωμένους...κρατουμένους 352e1-2 et passim) by something else? Early on, Socrates acknowledges that akratics describe themselves as moved by pleasure or pain *or fear or love or anger* (352e1, which refers back to the list at 352b7-8), but his argument proceeds to ignore the last three items.

The Socratic response to this objection is to insist that the akratic can only

¹² This kind of value puts limits on commensurability—but not comparability. Socrates is not making the absurd claim that there is no rational choice possible between something with sui generis value and something that does not have that value. Here we must draw on our trumping argument from above: I can make choices between options without commensuration, but not if I am going to be akratic.

describe himself as moved by love or fear if he admits the possibility of reducing these motives to pleasure or pain. The mechanism of reduction will, once again, be value commensurability. Whatever explains AA must be of such a sort as to also justify EA. Whatever prodded the agent down the akratic path must also be of the right kind as to appear (in greater quantity) as the light at the end of the tunnel not taken. If the feeling that the akratic cites as his motive needs to be intelligible as a goal, then only two of the items on the akratic's initial list will serve: pleasure and pain. Just as the akratic who *claims* to have 'akratically' given up on a value such as the 'preservation of cities' can be argumentatively compelled into admitting that such preservation only derives value from the fact that it 'gives rise' to pleasure, so too the akratic who claims to be moved by fear or love can be moved to dig deeper and discover that fear and love moved him *by being* experiences of value, namely, the value of pleasure or pain. The language of desire is notably absent from the *Protagoras* argument. This makes perfect sense if, like fear and anger, desire is not something that is itself an item of value. The satisfaction of desire, the extinction of fear, the release of anger, the expression of love—these are ends towards which an agent might intelligibly be understood as aiming. But they are not *feelings*, or, to the extent that they are, they are feelings of pleasure and pain. Hedonism is the language in which the akratic's motivating state and his evaluative judgment can converse with one another.

The hedonism argument is but a prologue; it does not, by itself, purport to establish the famous Socratic thesis that 'no one acts against his knowledge or belief as to what is best'. It shows only that akrasia, as standardly conceived, requires an agent to understand the pluses and minuses of a choice in terms of pleasure and pain. It is in the subsequent 'ridiculous' argument that Socrates will try to establish that *if* someone understands his choice in this way, he cannot choose the smaller quantum of pleasure, or the larger one of pain. Whatever we make of the ridiculous argument in which the thesis of hedonism is deployed, I have been arguing that Socrates has a right to deploy it. This is not because he is a hedonist, but because, as he shows, akratics are.

Conclusion

According to Vlastos 1969, 78 Socrates's reliance on hedonism means that he contents himself with vindicating his claim within a limited area: that zone of moral choice in which he too would admit that one can make sound judgments even if one takes nothing but pleasure and pain (immediate and eventual) into account. There are cases, thousands of them, in which not only those low characters, those people of the multitude, but even the most upright of men (Socrates himself, for instance) could reach correct assessments of the goodness or badness of actions without resorting to any standard other than that of pleasure and pain. In these cases the convertibility of 'good' with 'pleasant' and of 'evil' with 'pain' need not be chal-

lenged; it may be taken as simply expressing a normal principle of low-grade moral choice.

Vlastos ignores how naturally we all—not only commoners among us!—gravitate towards these kinds of examples of akrasia. If we want a quick indication that Socrates is *right* about hedonism and akrasia, we need look no further than the stock examples of akrasia purveyed in philosophical discussions from Socrates onwards. You will find the akratic overeating or underperforming, smoking one more cigarette or surfing the internet instead of grading students' papers. Theorists of akrasia do not regale us with tales of love or betrayal. Contemporary discussions of akrasia follow dutifully the pattern Socrates lays out, presenting the akratic as taking a present pleasure instead of a larger future one, or avoiding a present pain at the cost of more pain in the future. Philosophers crafting examples of akrasia seem to be carefully selecting actions whose difference in value can be measured in pleasure and pain.¹³

In one sense, of course, any value can be measured in pleasure and pain, so long as we are willing to equate a value such as love, or honor, or friendship, or morality, with its reductively impoverished hedonic variant. Socrates' thesis explains why, though we can imagine akratic actions involving other kinds of values—love, honor, friendship, morality—we do not like to. If we are tempted away from service to honor, friendship or the good of another, we are going to have to measure those values in terms of the pleasure to which they give rise or the pain they spare us from. If anger or love are presented as tempters, we will have to—reductively—understand those emotions in terms of the pleasure or pain they make us feel. We are, Socrates would say, right to offer up as a fodder for akrasia only the parts of our lives hedonism can make sense of. The move towards 'high grade moral choice' is not ennobling, as Vlastos' interpretation suggests it would be, but rather the opposite. When a genuine moral value is sacrificed, as in, for instance, a case of betrayal, we are much more prone to assert that the person 'didn't really believe' that he should not do that. Our skepticism about cases of high-grade moral akrasia stems, I think, from our unwillingness to measure out those values in pleasure and pain. If I am right that the shape of the standard case of akrasia reflects the demand that it lend itself to a hedonistic account, this confirms the validity of Socrates' hedonism argument.

¹³ Rorty 1980 *does* offer us a tale of love and betrayal in the story of Mohammad and Fatima; but it is a story in which it is hard to locate the precise moment of akrasia. This is, of course, exactly her point—but the diffusion of 'akrasia' in her story over everything from the agent's perceptions, belief-formations, and emotional reactions suggests that her topic is at a tangent to Socrates'. Her interest is in the wide variety of ways in which agents can go wrong while being in *some* sense aware—but in many other senses unaware—that they are doing so. The example in Bennett 1974 of Huck Finn's 'akratic' choice not to betray a runaway slave, as well as similar examples discussed by Arpaly 2000 and Jones 2003, likewise invoke attributions to agents of judgments and reasons of which they are not aware. The introduction of drama into the story of the akratic seems to go hand in hand with denying the akratic an accurate understanding of his choice-situation. Socrates' interlocutors, by contrast, are people who at least *claim* to know full well what has happened to them. The more we move towards articulating the 'hard cases' of 'clear-eyed akrasia', the more banal our agents get.

In well-known passages of the *Phaedo*, *Gorgias*, *Republic*, and *Philebus*, Plato has Socrates present accounts of pleasure that he does not hold at arm's length; those texts are the proper sources for Socrates' (or Plato's) views about pleasure.¹⁴ The *Protagoras*, by contrast, seeks to work out not the Socratic position, but rather the position on pleasure attributable to an anti-Socratic who rejects Socrates' idiosyncratic approach to akrasia. Since we all, in this respect, qualify as anti-Socratics, the *Protagoras* aims to tell us what we think about pleasure—and it is not what we think we think. Philosophers have not seen fit to diagnose the banality of their own akrasia examples. To the contrary, since Davidson (2001, see esp. 29-30), it has become a philosophical commonplace to conceive of akrasia in what we might call *structural* as opposed to *substantive* terms. Akratics 'act against their better judgment' or 'pursue the lesser good' or 'do what they want less' or 'overreadily revise their intentions'—but *what* they do or want or think best or pursue or intend is thought to be something we must, as theorists of akrasia, leave open. Socrates tells us that if we look to our own akratic examples we will see written into them a substantive theory of value we may not have known we espouse, namely, hedonism.

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¹⁴ For a systematic survey of the relevant passages, see Gosling and Taylor 1982.

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