

Ignorance and Akrasia-Denial in the *Protagoras**

In the *Protagoras*, we learn that ‘most people’ (*hoi polloi*) take the phenomenon of akrasia to attest to the weakness of knowledge. They claim that knowledge is insufficient for living well, since it is possible to be overcome by pleasure or pain or hope or fear in such a way as to act against one’s knowledge (352c). Socrates seeks to rehabilitate knowledge by demonstrating the ‘ridiculousness’ (*geloion*) of the idea that we might be ‘overcome by pleasure.’ My topic in this paper is the argument in which he does so, his ‘ridiculous’ argument at 355a-357e. I will try to show that this argument does not constitute a rejection of the possibility of akrasia, though it does require a revision in the popular conception of akratic action. This revision is itself, however, merely an implication or offshoot of the truly counterintuitive suggestion Socrates puts forward with the ‘ridiculous’ argument. Socrates’ big innovation is not about akrasia, but about knowledge.

Before laying out my thesis in more detail, however, I must confront an obstacle to reading the ‘ridiculous’ argument as yielding any conclusions about *knowledge*, as distinct from belief. Let us draw, as Terrence Penner¹ does, a distinction between ‘knowledge-akrasia’ — acting against

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¹ In T. Penner, “Knowledge vs. True Belief in the Socratic Psychology of Action,” [‘Belief’] *Apeiron* 29 (1996), 199-229 at 119-200. (Works by authors with multiple entries in the bibliography are subsequently referred to by the author’s name and an abbreviation of their title

one's knowledge of what is best, and 'belief-akrasia' — acting against one's belief as to what is best. Against which of the two is Socrates' argument directed?

The denial of 'belief-akrasia' would not seem to serve Socrates' purposes. As Vlastos² and Penner ('Belief') have emphasized, Socrates clearly does not hold a 'power of belief' thesis. Socrates' conclusion is that knowledge "destroys the power of appearance" and that "only knowledge...would save our lives" (356e8-7a1), suggesting that he takes the phenomenon of akrasia to reveal the superiority of knowledge to belief. One would, therefore, expect his account of akrasia to be that one cannot act against one's knowledge, but one *can* act against one's belief.

Furthermore, while the denial of belief-akrasia strikes us as immediately counterintuitive, the denial of knowledge akrasia does not. It does not 'fly in the face of the evident facts', to borrow the language of Aristotle's charge against Socrates (*Nicomachean Ethics* VII.2, 1145b28), to insist that those who act against P cannot fully know P. In any case, such a move would constitute a form of revisionism about akrasia with which Aristotle should have been familiar, since he himself claimed that no one acts against *phronēsis* (practical wisdom) but only against *proairesis* (choice). No one versed in contemporary debates about akrasia should find such a

(e.g., Penner, 'Belief'); works by authors with a single entry in the bibliography are, after the initial citation, referred to by the author's name alone.)

² G. Vlastos, "Introduction," in *Plato's Protagoras*, ed. G. Vlastos (New York, 1956), vii-lvi.

move surprising, either, since Davidson's³ view is that no one acts against his unconditional judgment, but only against his all-things-considered (conditional) judgment. Many philosophers want to dispute the common conception of what akratics act against, and insist that, rather, they act against something *else*. The assertion that akratics act against belief but not knowledge would simply have entered Socrates into the debate between Aristotle and Davidson (and Bratman, Watson, Frankfurt et al.⁴) and as to whether the akratic acts against his *prohairesis* or his all things considered judgment (or his intention or his evaluation or his volition or ...). The theorist of akrasia who wishes to deny that some state can be akratically violated can forestall accusations of akrasia-denial by offering, in its place, a state that *does* admit of akratic violation. Belief could supply Socrates with the necessary fallback state.

Socrates does not, however, take this way out. He (twice) explicitly denies not only action against knowledge, but also action against belief:

“...no one who knows *or believes* (οὔτε εἰδὼς οὔτε οἰόμενος) there is something else better than what he is doing, something possible, will go on doing what he has been doing when he

³ D. Davidson, “How is Weakness of the Will Possible?,” in Joel Feinberg (ed.) *Moral Concepts* (Oxford, 1969), 93-113.

⁴ M. Bratman, “Practical Reasoning and Weakness of the Will,” *Nous* 13 (1979), 153-171; H. Frankfurt, “Identification and Wholeheartedness,” in his *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge, 1988), 159-176; G. Watson, “Skepticism about Weakness of Will,” *The Philosophical Review* (1977), 316-339.

could be doing what is better. To give in to oneself is nothing other than ignorance, and to control oneself is nothing other than wisdom.” 358b7-c3)

“Now, no one goes willingly toward the bad or what he believes to be bad (ἐπί γε τὰ κακὰ οὐδεὶς ἐκὼν ἔρχεται οὐδὲ ἐπὶ ἃ οἴεται κακὰ εἶναι) ; neither is it in human nature, so it seems, to want to go toward what one believes to be (ἐπὶ ἃ οἴεται κακὰ) bad instead of to the good.” (358c6-d2)⁵

Socrates does, then, deny belief-akrasia. It is worth looking, in addition, at an exchange between Socrates and Protagoras later in the dialogue where Socrates deploys the conclusion of the akrasia-argument:

Socrates: “Do the cowardly go forward to things which inspire confidence, and the courageous toward things to be feared?” Protagoras: “So it is said by most people.”

Socrates: “What do *you* say the courageous go boldly toward: toward things to be feared, believing them to be fearsome, or toward things not to be feared?” Protagoras: “By what you have just proven (ἀπεδείχθη), the former is impossible.”

⁵ Translations of the Protagoras are by Stanley Lombardo and Karen Bell, from J. Cooper, ed., *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis, 1997). I have made some small changes to their translation. At all (but not only) these points, I have provided the Greek in parentheses. Greek text of Plato is from J. Burnet, ed. *Platonis opera*, vols. 2 and 3 (Oxford, 1968); text of Aristotle is from I. Bywater, ed. *Aristotelis Ethica Nicomachea* (Oxford, 1980).

Socrates: “Right again; so if our demonstration has been correct (ὀρθῶς ἀπεδείχθη), then no one goes toward those things he considers to be fearsome, since not to be in control of oneself was found to be ignorance.” (359c5-d6)

With the word ‘demonstration,’ (ἀπεδείχθη 359d3,5) Socrates and Protagoras refer to the ‘ridiculous’ argument, which was described as a demonstration both at its outset (ἀποδείξαι 354e6, πᾶσαι αἱ ἀποδείξεις, 354e8) and its conclusion (τὴν ἀπόδειξιν, 357b7). Socrates invokes his earlier ‘demonstration’ in order to dismiss the view that the courageous go towards what they believe fearsome. That is impossible, since no one goes towards what he believes bad. Socrates relies, here, on having established the impossibility not only of acting against knowledge, but also of acting against belief. Socrates’ ridiculous argument must, then, aim to deny belief-akrasia⁶.

⁶ Pace G. Vlastos ‘Socrates on Acrasia’, [‘Socrates’] *Phoenix* 23 (1969), 71-88 at 72, who suggests reading ‘believes’ at 358b-d as meaning ‘believes when he knows.’ As a reading of 358b-d, this is highly doubtful, given that in Socrates (twice: οὔτε εἰδὼς οὔτε οἰόμενος b7, ἐπὶ γε τὰ κακὰ vs. ἐπὶ ἃ οἴεται κακὰ c6-7) specifies belief as an *alternative* to knowledge/truth. But as a reading of the courage-is-knowledge argument, it is straightforwardly impossible, since there we need the claim that cowards do not go towards what they *believe* to be bad. J. Clark (‘The Strength of Knowledge in Plato’s Protagoras,’ *Ancient Philosophy* 32(2), (2012), 237-255) likewise divorces the conclusion of the ‘ridiculous’ argument from the courage-is-knowledge argument, claiming that only the latter is based on psychological hedonism, a thesis that Socrates (somehow) gets Protagoras to agree to at 358cd. But 358cd doesn’t express psychological hedonism (see below, n.23). Moreover, this interpretation renders the akrasia-discussion either a

And this, we can now see, is doubly puzzling. In asserting that no one ever acts against his belief, Socrates does not only say something contrary to *our* intuitions. He also says something

confusingly irrelevant digression, or a bit of sophistry designed to get Protagoras to conflate ethical and psychological hedonism. Penner, who has engaged with this problem most deeply and directly, understands Socrates to assert both the impossibility of acting against knowledge and the impossibility of acting against belief, but denies that Socrates understands the former in a way where it should follow from the latter. By ‘acting against knowledge,’ Penner (“Socrates on the Strength of Knowledge: Protagoras 351b-357e,” [‘Strength’] *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 79 (1997), 117-149) understands Socrates to assert the impossibility of acting, at any time, against what one knows, at any other time. The impossibility of belief-akrasia is merely synchronic: one cannot act against the belief that *p* while believing *p*. Penner (both in ‘Belief’ and in ‘Strength’) takes the strength of knowledge to consist in its being a *stable* motivator, and takes the impossibility of acting against knowledge to require an independent argument from the impossibility of acting against belief. The textual problem with this interpretation is that Socrates seems to present us only with *one* argument. It is unsurprising that Penner’s articulation of one of the arguments—the argument against ‘belief-akrasia’ (as presented in T. Penner, “Plato and Davidson: Parts of the Soul and Weakness of the Will,” [‘Weakness’] *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Supplementary Volume 16 (1990), 35-74)—proceeds virtually without reference to the text of the *Protagoras*. This leaves him, like Clark, severing the ‘ridiculous’ argument from its context. Hence the ‘ridiculous’ argument strikes him as having been “inserted with apparent irrelevance between two discussions of the identity of courage and wisdom” (Penner, ‘Strength’). For further discussion of Penner’s view, see footnotes 56 and 57 below.

which seems to undermine his own project of championing knowledge. He who insists on *belief's* power to motivate action does not in any obvious way champion the power of *knowledge*. If everyone—the believer and the knower alike—is immune to akrasia, akrasia cannot be the sickness for which knowledge is the cure.

Does the denial of belief-akrasia entail a commitment to such wholesale akrasia-immunity? I will argue that it does not. Socrates does indeed insist that everyone who believes that he should φ , φ -es—but he might nonetheless offer up some way of distinguishing between those who φ akratically, and those who φ non-akratically. If he can make out this distinction, he could argue that knowledge (alone) makes one immune to akrasia. He would then be able to say that belief and knowledge both entail action, but only knowledge entails non-akratic action. This is the argumentative path I want to forge on his behalf. My aim includes that of rescuing Socrates from an age-old charge of blindness to the facts of everyday life, but extends beyond that. For my hope is to thereby rescue the argumentative thread of *his* defense of knowledge.

My contention is that Socrates does not deny akrasia because, like Aristotle and Davidson and the rest, he does have recourse to a fallback state. He thinks one cannot act against knowledge or belief, but one can act against another kind of mental state weaker even than belief.

Socrates, as I understand him, accepts this much of the akratic's self-described phenomenology at face value: he contains within himself a representation of his own action as bad (or painful) overall. What Socrates denies is that this representation constitutes either knowledge or belief. A great variety of cognitive representations could be described as being, relative to either belief

or knowledge, at a remove from the task of depicting reality. Daydreams do not purport to show us what actually lies before us; hypotheses are merely supposed until they can be verified; assumptions are made, sometimes counterfactually, for the purpose of argument; optical illusions, once recognized as such, present us with images we no longer take for veridical, as do figments of the imagination, so long as they do not develop into full-blown hallucinations. Socrates differentiates the akratic with reference to the presence and power of a representation belonging to this general class. Socrates himself, at 356d8, describes a representation of this kind as a φάντασμα. This word is often translated “appearance” or “impression”; in order to emphasize the connotation of illusoriness, I will, instead, adopt the translation, “simulacrum.”

The akratic, contends Socrates, claims as belief a representation that contradicts both what he believes and what he does. Furthermore, continues Socrates, the akratic dismisses what he really *does* believe—that his action is good, appealing, right—as itself a simulacrum, a mere ‘appearance’ of goodness. Akratics thus deeply misunderstand their own cognitive make-up, *conflating simulacrum and belief*. The Socratic picture of the akratic’s mental life contains all the familiar players, while inverting their traditional roles. What we call the akratic’s “better judgment” Socrates calls “simulacrum”; what we call “a deceitful appearance of pleasure” Socrates calls “his belief”—but never “knowledge.” He who knows, insists Socrates, knows *not* to call his knowledge “simulacrum.” Nor would someone who knows take himself to believe (let alone know) what is in fact a mere simulacrum.

Akrasia is, therefore, a condition of ‘ignorance’ (ἀμαθία 357d1 *et passim*). The akratic is ignorant because he lacks knowledge, and, more fundamentally, he is ignorant because he lacks a

kind of self-understanding. But Socrates thinks *everyone* is ignorant, and that just about everyone is ignorant of his own ignorance. When he says, of the akratic, that his *pathos* (352e) or *pathēma* (353a, 357c) is ignorance, Socrates sounds as though he is making a point specific to akrasia. And, I will argue, he is⁷. Unlike other forms of ignorance, or even ignorance-of-ignorance, the simulacrum-belief confusion characteristic of akrasia carries with it a distinctive phenomenology of conflict and psychological strife. Though the akratic does not recognize this feeling as ignorance, that is what his feeling is in fact a feeling of. I will illustrate the way in

⁷ H. Segvic and G. Ferrari, who also want to rescue Socrates from the charge of blindness to the facts, fail to establish this point. Segvic: “The akratic agent not only lacks knowledge of what is better or best; he also wrongly believes that he possesses this knowledge...What is specific to the central type of wrongdoing that the many incorrectly describe as akratic is the specific ignorance of one’s own ignorance that this type of wrongdoing involves,” H. Segvic, “No One Errs Willingly: The Meaning of Socratic Intellectualism,” in her *From Protagoras to Aristotle: Essays in Ancient Moral Philosophy* ed. Myles Burnyeat (Princeton, 2008), 47-85 at 73.

Likewise, Ferrari: “It is not only ignorance that they demonstrate, then, but ignorance of their own ignorance—Socrates’ great bugbear. They do not know that they do not know what is best,” G. Ferrari, “Akrasia as Neurosis in Plato’s *Protagoras*,” *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 6, (1990), 115-140 at 115. Exactly because ignorance of one’s own ignorance is Socrates’ familiar ‘bugbear,’ it cannot count as what is distinctive about akrasia. In the *Apology*, when Socrates speaks of the meta-ignorance of the craftsmen, politicians, etc., he is surely not inveighing against *akrasia* specifically. My interpretation creates room for the distinctiveness of akratic ignorance by insisting that the akratic is not ignorant of, but (incompletely) *aware* of his own ignorance.

which the Socratic account of akrasia gives pride of place to the akratic's tortured and conflicted experience of himself by demonstrating that it stands behind Plato's own most vivid depiction of an akratic: Alcibiades in the *Symposium*. The speech of Alcibiades illustrates the fact that in akrasia, ignorance is felt as pain. Just as physical pain is the sensing of a bodily injury of which we are at times unaware, so too psychological pain can be the sensing of epistemic injury the person doesn't fully fathom. When he says that the akratic has an experience (*pathos/pathēma*) of his ignorance, Socrates is pointing to the fact that the akratic is the one whose ignorance does not *completely* escape his own notice. What interests Socrates about akratics is not how ignorant they are, but how close they come to acknowledging that fact. But, if they come so close, why don't they get all the way?

What is it that stops akratics from acknowledging their (painful) ignorance as ignorance, and, consequently, from seeking the knowledge that would save them (σωτηρία ..τοῦ βίου 356d3, e5-6, σώζειν e4)? Socrates, I argue, pins the blame on a widely-held misunderstanding of knowledge. In the *Protagoras* and *the Symposium* (as well as elsewhere) Socrates criticizes a picture of souls as 'containers' of knowledge; or, equivalently, of knowledge as alienable from and transferable between souls. I call this picture, 'the container view,' and argue that the view amounts to a reductive conception of the relation between knowledge, belief, and simulacrum. The container theorist understands a simulacrum as the basic case of a mental state, from which belief and, in turn, knowledge are built up. Socrates, by contrast, understands knowledge to be the basic case of a mental state, of which belief is a defective, and simulacrum an even more defective, manifestation.

The akratic in the grip of the container view is, for reasons I will explore below, not in a position to see knowledge as his salvation. He conceives of knowledge as, or as akin to, the kind of (useless!) mental state he already has in his possession. Such a person's cognitive outlook is marred by a kind of false ceiling; thus he fails to leave room for the existence of the very thing that his (akratic) condition points him towards. Socrates' akrasia-argument is, indeed, a defense of the power of knowledge, a defense that does not deny but instead must rely on the reality of the phenomenon of akrasia. For akratics are the people who feel the pain that, Socrates is claiming, knowledge alone can cure. The fact that their ignorance is phenomenologically present puts them in a uniquely good position to see their own need for knowledge—so long as Socrates can help them reconceive knowledge. Rebutting the container view is the true aim of that part of Socratic intellectualism traditionally taken to be devoted to the denial of akrasia. Socrates wants us to rethink our ordinary conception of akrasia because, more fundamentally, he wants us to rethink our ordinary conception of knowledge.

My argument proceeds in three parts. First, on the basis of the 'ridiculous' argument, I defend the claim that Socrates understands akrasia as simulacrum-belief confusion. Second, I apply this Socratic account of akrasia to the speech of Alcibiades in the *Symposium*, to reveal the way in which akratics experience their ignorance. Finally, I discuss the 'container view'—both its connection to akrasia, and Socrates' objection to it.

I. The Ridiculous Argument

A. The Parameters of the Argument

The ‘ridiculous’ argument is Socrates’ attempt to demonstrate the power of knowledge by refuting the claim that “...people are unwilling to do what is best, even though they know what it is and are able to do it... because they are overcome by pleasure or pain...” (352d6-e1) Socrates associates this claim with ‘most people,’ (*hoi polloi*), a phrase Protagoras hears as a derogatory reference to the vulgarity of ‘commoners.’⁸ Socrates himself, however, seems to intend to associate this view with, roughly, everyone—including, arguably, Protagoras⁹. If Socrates were putting forward the view in question as the standard view, he would be right, now as then. Most of us *do* describe *akrasia* as a matter of knowing what to do but being unable to resist temptation. In order to approach Socrates’ argument as critically as possible, it is best to avoid the

⁸ “Socrates, why is it necessary for us to investigate the opinion of ordinary people, who will say whatever occurs to them?” (353a7-8)

⁹ Though Protagoras exempts himself from the many, the conclusions of the argument turn out to bear directly on his own views—he comes to endorse hedonism when and as a result of the fact that they do. Socrates ends his exchange with the many admonishing them not to laugh at himself and Protagoras because, ‘if you laugh at us you will laugh at yourselves.’ (357d1-2) If he’s right, the admonishment reverberates to Protagoras’ dismissal of the many. It is one of Socrates’ aims in this section to show Protagoras and the other sophists that in order to put themselves forward as teachers of ‘the many,’ they must acknowledge a certain kinship with them.

Protagorean temptation to tie the views of “*hoi polloi*” to the uneducated, the unsopisticated, or more generally to any group of people characterized in such a way that we can distance ourselves from them. When one is arguing against an absent interlocutor, as Socrates is doing here, one must guard actively against turning him into a straw man. If ‘the standard view’ is under attack, we will not be tempted to pave the way for Socrates’ conclusion by heavy-handed attribution of views. I will, therefore, understand ‘*hoi polloi*’ not in the Protagorean vein but in what I take to be the Socratic one, the better to engage with the question of whether Socrates’ ‘refutation’ can pass muster.

Hearing the argument as having such broad application does not force me to downplay the *ad hominem* elements of the argument¹⁰. If Socrates’ interlocutors are espousing the standard view of akrasia, reading the argument as *ad hominem* means reading it as directed to proponents of the standard view *in their capacity as akratics*. Socrates does, in fact, address them as such, both at the opening of the argument and at its close. Socrates begins by asking his interlocutors to think about what happens to *them* in circumstances of the kind they are trying to describe:

Do you hold, gentlemen, that this happens to you in circumstances such as these (ὁμῖν τοῦτο γίνεσθαι ἐν τοῖσδε)—you are often overcome by pleasant things like food and drink or sex, and you do all these things knowing all the while that they are ruinous” (353c4-8)

¹⁰ Emphasized by Ferrari and others, whom he lists in his n. 29. This feature of the argument is also particularly important to R. Woolf, “Consistency and Akrasia in Plato's Protagoras,” *Phronesis* 47 (2002), 224-252. Woolf’s version of ‘ridiculousness’, “word-deed inconsistency”, has the many’s speech contradicting *the many*’s actions.

At the close of the argument (57e), Socrates reproaches the many: since ‘being overcome by pleasure’ has been shown to be just what sophists claim to cure, the many make a mistake in not presenting themselves to sophists for instruction. Socrates understands himself to be addressing the many as sufferers of the very *akrasia* they are describing¹¹. The invocation of the point of view of the akratic upon himself is also crucial for understanding the enigmatic reference to the point of view of the many at the heart of the argument (‘ἐν ὑμῖν’ 355d4, discussed below): “within yourself, does the good outweigh the bad or not”. It is only if the many are themselves akratic that the question of how the good and bad stand *in them* would be germane to the argument. He understands his interlocutors as people with a first-personal experience of *akrasia*—the ‘*pathēma*’ (353a5) for which they seek an explanation.

Moreover, the substitutions upon which the ‘ridiculous’ argument relies call for such a reading. Taylor revealed as much when he worried over the fact that ‘X desires what is good’ does not follow from ‘X desires what is pleasant’ even if X believes that all pleasant things are good. (pp.180-181) On the *ad hominem* reading I (and others, see fn.10) propose, so long as it is rational for the interlocutor to make the relevant substitution and draw the relevant conclusion in his own name, the inference is warranted. For *he* is the very akratic he is describing. Socrates is not, in the first place, denying most people the possibility of speaking in a certain way about *akrasia*. He is denying most akratics the possibility of speaking in their accustomed way *about*

¹¹ This is also clear from 352d5-7, where Socrates is explicit that the people whom the many are describing as akratic are, in fact, the many—which is to say, themselves: “ὅτι οἱ πολλοὶ τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἐμοί τε καὶ σοὶ οὐ πείθονται, ἀλλὰ πολλοὺς φασι γινώσκοντας τὰ βέλτιστα οὐκ ἐθέλειν πράττειν.”

themselves. His argument will indeed succumb to Taylor's fallacy unless we appreciate that he is trying to engage with the self-understanding of the akratic.

The *ad hominem* quality of the argument gives it a familiarly Socratic feel: it is characteristically Socratic to attack someone's theory by showing him that his theory renders him unable to account for his *own* life or activity or practices¹². I do not want, however, to suggest that the 'ridiculous' argument is a garden-variety Socratic elenchus. In part II, below, I will expose the peculiarity of the failure of self-knowledge at stake here. At the moment, my point is only that Socrates does wish to expose a failure of *self*-knowledge, and this requires him to speak not only *about* the akratic but also *to* the akratic.

B. Two Methods of Interpreting 'Ridiculousness'

With this account of the argument's aim in place, we can examine whether it succeeds. Socrates' central contention is that it is a mistake to describe oneself as 'acting against knowledge', or 'being overcome by pleasure', or 'knowingly acting badly.' He claims that one can translate such familiar statements into ones that are 'ridiculous' (*geloion*):

¹² Dialogues showcasing this strategy are the *Euthyphro* (a priest can't explain piety), *Ion* (a rhapsode can't explain Homer), *Gorgias* (an orator can't explain oratory), *Laches* (generals can't explain courage).

(R1) "...a man, knowing the bad to be bad, nevertheless does that very thing, when he is able not to do it, having been driven and overwhelmed by pleasure."¹³

(R2) "Someone does what is bad, knowing that it is bad, when it is not necessary to do it, having been overcome by the good."¹⁴

(R3) "A man does ... painful [things], knowing they are painful things, but being overcome by pleasant things, although it is clear that they do not outweigh them."¹⁵

Commentators disagree as to exactly what is 'ridiculous' about R1-R3. I paraphrase five proposals for locating the absurdity:

Sedley, Weiss: 'Someone does what is bad because of the good.'

Santas, Klosko: 'Someone knowingly and willingly exchanged larger pleasures for smaller ones.'

Wolfsdorf: 'Overcome by good/pleasure, someone chose the lesser good/pleasure.'

Vlastos ('Socrates'), Woolf: 'Someone knowingly chose the smaller good/pleasure.'

¹³ γινώσκων τὰ κακὰ ἄνθρωπος ὅτι κακὰ ἐστίν, ὅμως πράττει αὐτά, ἐξὸν μὴ πράττειν, ὑπὸ τῶν ἡδονῶν ἀγόμενος καὶ ἐκπληττόμενος (355a7-b1)

¹⁴ πράττει τις κακὰ, γινώσκων ὅτι κακὰ ἐστίν, οὐ δέον αὐτὸν πράττειν, ἡττώμενος ὑπὸ τῶν ἀγαθῶν. (355d1-3)

¹⁵ Ἄνθρωπος πράττει...τὰ ἀνιαρά, γινώσκων ὅτι ἀνιαρά ἐστίν, ἡττώμενος ὑπὸ τῶν ἡδέων, δῆλον ὅτι ἀναξίων ὄντων νικᾷν. (355e6-a1)

Taylor, Gallop, Clark: ‘The akratic knows his action is bad.’¹⁶

Acknowledging that none of these statements constitutes a contradiction, each commentator supplements his or her reading of R1-R3 with what I’ll call a ‘supporting thesis’:

Socratic Intellectualism: no one knowingly chooses a smaller good (Vlastos¹⁷)

¹⁶ D. Sedley, “Platonic Causes,” *Phronesis* 43 (1998), 114-132; R. Weiss, “Hedonism in the *Protagoras* and the Sophist’s Guarantee,” *Ancient Philosophy* 10 (1990), 17-39; G. Santas, “Plato’s *Protagoras* and Explanations of Weakness,” *Philosophical Review* 75 (1966), 3-33; G. Klosko, “On the Analysis of *Protagoras* 351b-360e.,” *Phoenix* 34 (1980), 89-122; D. Wolfsdorf, “The Ridiculousness of Being Overcome By Pleasure,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 31 (2006), 113-136; C. Taylor, 1976: *Plato: Protagoras* (Oxford: Oxford University Press); D. Gallop, “The Socratic Paradox in the *Protagoras*,” *Phronesis* 9 (1964), 117-129.

¹⁷ If Vlastos (‘Socrates’) were right, the ‘ridiculous’ argument would hardly be needed—the many would already be Socratic intellectualists. As Gallop (pp.118-119) points out, what Vlastos calls *self-evidently* absurd is rather the claim whose absurdity Socrates sets out to *demonstrate*. Though Gallop levels this charge against Vlastos’ earlier ‘Introduction’, it applies equally to his later paper (‘Socrates’), where the argument Vlastos provides for the claim I’ve labeled ‘Socratic Intellectualism’ (a) relies question-beggingly on Socratic tenets such as ‘everyone always wants more what he believes better’ and (b) is, even as such, not one that Vlastos can locate in the text of the *Protagoras*. On Vlastos’ reading, it would not be appropriate for Socrates to describe himself as having *proved* (ἀπόδειξιν 357b7) anything.

Socratic Explanation: A principle from the *Phaedo* that ‘F-ness cannot be explained by non F-ness’ (Sedley¹⁸)

Definition of ‘overcome’: The phrase ‘overcome by X’ means ‘doing what secures me more of X.’ (Wolfsdorf¹⁹)

Psychological hedonism²⁰, in one of two forms:

¹⁸ Sedley’s *Phaedo* principle rings false in an intentional context: it is obvious that I *can* do what’s bad because of what’s good or vice versa, since I can make mistakes. Invocation of this principle here would legitimate Taylor’s worry, cited above, of fallacious substitutions. Even the intentional version of Sedley’s principle (what’s believed good/bad can’t cause what’s believed bad/good) seems to admit of counterexamples such as doing what is bad (in part) because of what is good (overall). If we specify that we are speaking of badness/goodness simpliciter (no one does what he believes bad overall because of what he believes good overall), what we rule out is not akrasia, but belief in a logical contradiction.

¹⁹ This is not, I think, a good definition of ἠττωμένος or κρᾶτουμένος, since those words, like their English counterparts, allow the possibility that, e.g., a larger army is overcome or bested by a smaller one. But, supposing it were a good definition, why shouldn’t the many want to try out the move of adopting a different expression, such as being moved by pleasure, being influenced by pleasure, being attracted by pleasure or *any* expression that doesn’t immediately and obviously contradict their claim to be taking a lesser pleasure? For further discussion of Wolfsdorf, see n. 32 and corresponding text.

²⁰ Given that the many don’t *enter* the discussion accepting that they or others always pursue pleasure (let alone the greatest one), why would they embrace such an evidently akrasia-

(a) generic “everyone always chooses the greater pleasure” (Santas, Klosko)

(b) personalized: “I always choose the greater pleasure” (Woolf)

A Psychological Law to the effect that good/pleasure cannot cause someone to choose bad/pain. (Weiss²¹)

The Socratic Account of Akrasia: the akratic does not know that his action is bad (Taylor, Gallop, Clark²²).

incompatible view when offering akrasia as counterexample to the power of knowledge?

Klosko, Santas and Woolf turn Socrates’ interlocutors into straw men.

²¹ I am fleshing out Weiss’ view somewhat by calling this a psychological law. Weiss has little enough to say about the grounds for this claim that perhaps her view may belong rather with those I classify (below) as ‘anti-contradictionists.’ See Wolfsdorf, n. 11 and n.16 for an extensive discussion of Weiss. Though Wolfsdorf does not explicitly make this claim, his two footnotes, taken together, suggest (correctly, I think) that Weiss’ view must reduce either to Sedley’s or that of M. Dyson, “Knowledge and Hedonism in Plato's Protagoras,” *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 96, (1976), 32-405, discussed below at n.24.

²² Gallop (followed by Taylor) invokes the claim that akrasia is ignorance to explain the ridiculousness, which is surely backwards. See Vlastos’ criticism of the Gallop/Taylor view on this point (n. 37). Gallop (but not Taylor) also invokes psychological hedonism in its generic form (on which see n. 23) in order to secure the claim that the akratic does not know: if he truly knew that this action were more pleasant, he would be psychologically necessitated to choose it. Gallop grants (p.129) that the argument therefore begs the question, agreeing with my criticism in n. 20. Clark’s view differs from Gallop’s in that he rests the akratic’s ignorance on ‘psychological eudaimonism,’ the claim that everyone necessarily pursues happiness. Clark’s

The problem with all of these interpretations is that Socrates does not refute the many if one does *not* attribute to them the supporting thesis in question. The interpreters offer no philosophical ground for attributing these views to the many, other than the fact that they help Socrates secure a contradiction. This is precisely the kind of liberty that we will not feel we can take with the argument if ‘the standard view’ is at stake. If Socrates is to have something radical to say, quite generally, about how akrasia should be understood, it cannot depend on any premise someone would readily reject before revising that understanding. Furthermore, nothing in the text itself indicates that Socrates *does* attribute any of these views to the many²³.

Socrates allows the pursuit of a (recognizedly) lesser pleasure /greater pain, but “only under circumstances in which the agent underestimates the impact this will have on her life as a whole.” (p.252) Under these circumstances, claims Clark, the agent does not know the bad thing *as bad* (miserable-making), though he knows it as overall painful. This interpretation cannot fit the text, relying as it does on a distinction between bad and painful (and between good and pleasant) that the argument seems precisely to reject. Clark’s view also cannot explain the ridiculousness of R3, since, if he were right, Socrates would think it is not absurd but perfectly possible to choose an acknowledgedly lesser pleasure/greater pain.

²³ Some interpreters (Klosko, Gallop, Taylor, Santas) have claimed to find textual evidence for psychological hedonism, both in the prologue (at 353c1-354e2) and after ‘ridiculousness’ has been secured (356bc). The point in the prologue passage is that the goodness of pleasure/badness of pain lies in itself rather than in its consequences. Since Socrates says nothing about what one must or even should do in response to this fact, it should not be taken as evidence for psychological hedonism. Santas suggests (n.12) that the claim that the many *pursue*

pleasure as good at 354c4, as opposed to merely *calling* it good, points to psychological hedonism. But the sentence about what the many ‘pursue’ is embedded amongst sentences about what they ‘call’ good in a way which suggests synonymy: Socrates does not signal that he is, e.g., drawing conclusions about what they pursue from premises about what they call good. Furthermore, ‘pursue’ does not mean ‘must pursue’ or ‘necessarily pursues’—it is only at 356bc that we find language we could translate this way, in the form of the verbal adjectives ληπτέα, προακτέον and οὐ προακτέα. Whether 356bc asserts psychological hedonism depends on how one reads the verbal adjectives—as commendatory ‘shoulds’ or as compulsory ‘musts’. My own view (see text at n. 43) is that Santas is not—as the current consensus takes him to be—wrong to hear some form of necessity in those sentences. Nonetheless, I think the necessary connection Socrates is pointing to is not a psychological one between pleasure and action, but an action-theoretic one between reason and motivation. See Wolfsdorf (121-126) and Clark (242-246) for detailed analyses of 356bc, both of which conclude on the basis of textual parallels, verbal features of the passage, and interpretative charity that the passage should not be read as invoking psychological hedonism. Clark, idiosyncratically, hears psychological hedonism at 358cd in Socrates’ claim that no one willingly goes toward what he believes bad. But this passage does not mention pleasure, and is simply a restatement of the conclusion of the ‘ridiculous’ argument. The remarkable feature of 358cd is that Socrates seems to extend the conclusion from knowledge to belief, but this has nothing to do with psychological hedonism.

A small minority of commentators²⁴ refuse to try to locate a contradiction in R1-R3, describing them instead as “immediately felt to be fatuous” (Dyson, p.32). Ferrari is right to caution against “attributing undue logical rigor to the casual term ‘geloion.’” (n.6) Consider the fact that Socrates concludes his discussion with the many by saying that they would have laughed at him (κατεγελᾶτε ἂν 357d2) had he opened the discussion with the claim that akrasia is ignorance.

²⁴ Ferrari and Dyson, perhaps Weiss (see n. 21 above), and perhaps also M. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: 1986), ch.4, 89-122. Nussbaum instantiates the ‘ridiculous’ claim as follows: ‘A, offered the choice between \$50 and \$200, chose the \$50, even though he knew that \$200 was more than \$50, because he was overcome by the quantity of the \$50.’ And that does seem absurd.” Why? What work is ‘overcome by the quantity of the \$50’ doing in the absurdity? In this discussion, she cites D. Zeyl, “Socrates and Hedonism: Protagoras 351b-358d,” *Phronesis* 25 (1980), 250-269. Zeyl says that the problem is that the explanation “conflicts” with the description of the action it is supposed to explain. He then refers to a different paper of his own (D. Zeyl, “The Socratic Argument Against Akrasia in the *Protagoras*,” [‘Akrasia’] *The University of Dayton Review* 16 (1982), 89-93), not cited by Nussbaum, in which he does describe that ‘conflict’ explicitly as a logical contradiction. He states the contradiction as one between ‘S does X because he is overcome by F-ness’ and ‘S knows X is un-F.’ But how do those two propositions contradict one another? Zeyl (‘Akrasia’) goes on to argue that they actually don’t, because Socrates’ argument is fallacious. I have not included Zeyl’s view on my list of supporting theses, since he doesn’t in the end identify what he takes to be a contradiction. I doubt Nussbaum would follow him all the way to his critique of the argument, which means she either rests with the anti-contradictionists, or fails to specify a contradiction.

Surely we are not to suppose that the many would have taken themselves to locate a logical contradiction in *that* statement²⁵. These “anti-contradictionists” could also point out that it would be surprising if Socrates, having gotten his hands on a logical contradiction, was so coy about stating it. Given how much fuss he makes over how ridiculous the many are being—forms of the adjective *geloion* and its cognate verb appear four times in the space of a single Stephanus page (355a6, b4, c8, d1)—it is remarkable that Socrates does not ever say state the contradiction behind the ridiculousness of R1-R3. Such reserve is not the norm for Socratic argumentation, as Woolf notes: “In most cases, Socrates takes great pains to spell out the premises he is using and how he is using them to generate the relevant conclusion...the mechanics of his argument—how certain premises are being used to support a certain conclusion—are usually made absolutely explicit.”²⁶ It is, of course, Socrates’ failure to specify the source of the ridiculousness that has

²⁵ In further support of Ferrari’s word of caution, I note that the only use of γελοῖον in the dialogue outside this passage is when Socrates dispenses with an interpretation of Simonides: “the sense here is not that all is white in which black is not mixed, which would be ludicrous in many ways (γελοῖον γὰρ ἂν εἴη πολλαχῆ)...” (346d1-2) “πολλαχῆ” attests to the failure to have located any specific contradiction.

²⁶ Woolf (p.227) goes on to cite a nice example of Socratic explicitness in spelling out an inconsistent triad of propositions from earlier in the dialogue. He’s wrong, however, to understand his own view as having circumvented the quest to find a logical contradiction in the ridiculous argument. He aims to supplant the ‘word-word inconsistency’ located by those who seek a contradiction with a ‘word-deed inconsistency’ between the akratic’s self-description and his action. But since the self-description in question is “I always pursue the greater pleasure,” and since the many not only pursue a lesser pleasure but also, in the ‘ridiculous’ argument,

generated these interpretative disagreements; but a better response might be to stop trying to insert a set of contradictory claims where there simply aren't any in the text.

The anti-contradictionist's interpretation is, however, unsatisfying both textually and philosophically. They erase the argument from the heart of the 'ridiculous' passage²⁷, but do not compensate by shedding light on the textual details. Why does Socrates need *three* moments of 'ridiculousness'? Indeed, why not stop by describing the akratic's original statement, 'I did what I knew to be wrong because I was overcome by pleasure,' as 'absurd' or 'ridiculous'? Why invoke word-substitutions²⁸ at all? Philosophically speaking, the many have a good response that Socrates (and the anti-contradictionists) do not consider: *akrasia* itself *is* a pretty strange thing. They might argue that the strangeness of a description is a virtue of it, accurately reflecting the strangeness of what it purports to describe. So long as we don't have a contradiction but just a strangeness or surprisingness, it seems open to the many to embrace it. The neglect of this possibility is glaring in the face of Socrates' observation that if he had opened with his own analysis of *akrasia*, it would have sounded just as absurd to the many as theirs did to him (κατεγέλᾳτε ἂν 357d2)—and yet he invites them to embrace it anyway. Socrates is not

describe themselves as such, Woolf's view does in fact (also) locate what he calls word-word inconsistency in the passage.

²⁷ Taylor rightly observes that "the absurdity of the view in question is not merely asserted, as something obvious, but is intended to be shown by some argument." (p.183)

²⁸ Clark (n. 9) also raises this point against Dyson.

someone who shies away from the possibility that the truth might be strange enough to prompt laughter²⁹.

I conclude that the interpretative challenge facing a reader of the ‘ridiculous’ argument is twofold. We must explain in what sense the many, at the end of the argument, stand refuted. And we must map out the argumentative path *to* this defeat without begging the question against them.

C. A New Interpretation of ‘Ridiculousness’

Let us return to our pivotal sentences, R1-R3:

(R1) “...a man, knowing the bad to be bad, nevertheless does that very thing, when he is able not to do it, having been driven and overwhelmed by pleasure.” (355a7-b1)

(R2) “Someone does what is bad, knowing that it is bad, when it is not necessary to do it, having been overcome by the good.” (355d1-3)

(R3) “A man does ... painful [things], knowing they are painful things, but being overcome by pleasant things, although it is clear that they do not outweigh them.” (355e6-a1)

²⁹ The most striking example is the man who returns to the cave in *Rep.* VII, provoking laughter (γέλωτ’ ἂν παράσχοι 517a2) and appearing ridiculous (φαίνεται σφόδρα γελοῖος 517d6).

Socrates presents as the moral of his story the injunction that one should not laugh unthinkingly at people who seem ridiculous (οὐκ ἂν ἀλογίστως γελῶν 518a6), lest one’s laughter itself become laughable (εἰ γελᾶν...καταγέλαστος ὁ γέλως) 518b2, 3. Socrates regularly calls upon his interlocutors to distinguish what sounds γελοῖον from what is false or refuted: *Phaedr.*

252b4, *Gorg.* 473e, *Rep.* 452 *passim*.

I will attempt to expose the ridiculousness of these sentences without relying on any of the ‘supporting theses’ listed above, or indeed, invoking any proposition (be it a theory of motivation, a definition, or an analysis of akrasia) from which the impossibility of akrasia immediately and tendentiously follows. Akkratics, then as now, say things like R1. Deploying the identification of pleasure/pain with good/bad³⁰ to which Socrates has secured his

³⁰ Does not the role of ethical hedonism in the argument itself require what I’ve called a ‘Protagorean’ reading of ‘οἱ πολλοί’? An objector might point out that if the argument speaks only to hedonists, it must speak to a specific group of people rather than straightforwardly attacking ‘the standard view’ of akrasia. I respond by pointing out, as many others have (see Ferrari n. 29), that the argument cannot simply be directed at those who antecedently self-identify as hedonists, since ‘οἱ πολλοί’ *resist* hedonism until Socrates argues them into it. In my ‘Akkratics as Hedonists,’ I address the vexed issue of the role of hedonism in the *Protagoras* by offering a new reading of the prologue to the ‘ridiculous’ argument (352b-354e). I contend that the prologue aims to establish, not the truth of ethical hedonism, but a conceptual connection between hedonism and akrasia: akkratics must understand their akkratic choices hedonistically. I show that Socrates offers us the argumentative resources to establish each of four increasingly strong theories about the way the akkratic must understand the value of the action he takes (action A) as compared to the value of the action he thinks he should have taken (action B):

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

(2) Value Commensurability: the akkratic judges action A to offer less of some value also offered by action B.

interlocutor's agreement in the prologue to the ridiculous argument (352b-354e), we get R2 or R3. What is ridiculous about these sentences?

Consider a decidedly unridiculous case in which someone might do what is unpleasant or bad: he experiences a jolt of pain upon biting into what he thought was an apple but was in fact a cleverly painted lump of wood. Such a person, before he acts, sees the action he is about to do as attractive but not mistaken. He thinks he has reason to bite into the apple—biting into the apple is good or appealing to him—and he in no sense thinks the action is a bad idea. Once he

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

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

Socrates' claim is precisely that 'most people,' insofar as they are akratics, are hedonists. Those who do not want to grant Socrates (1)-(4), even provisionally, can still engage with the argument of this paper: unlike the supporting theses relied upon by other interpreters, hedonism is not, on the face of it, inconsistent with akrasia. If Socrates could show that his account of akrasia were true of a subset of cases of akrasia (namely, akratic acts perpetrated by hedonists) that would on its own be an interesting result. Furthermore, as many commentators have pointed out, the 'ridiculous' argument really only requires (2). It is equally absurd that someone, overcome by honor, chooses the lesser honor. Socrates specifies the commensurating value as pleasure, but if we found a substitute, the argument would be freed from any hedonistic premises.

has bitten, he sees the action as mistaken, but not alluring. He no longer sees any reason to bite into the apple³¹, and is not tempted to bite into it.

The akratic has to be someone who feels he can tell two stories: the one is the story of the mistakenness of the akratic action, and the other is the story of its allure. Unlike the unridiculous tale of the wooden apple, the akratic wants to tell these two stories at the same time, of the same action. What Socrates is trying to bring out in his argument is that these stories get in the way of each other. The akratic is trying to present a picture of a *complex* action—pleasant, yet bad. But he has also agreed that the pleasant is the good. The seeming intelligibility of pursuing what is bad but pleasant is based on a contrast between bad/pain that turns out to be merely terminological. Once he stops needlessly using many words (355b4), it becomes apparent that the two parts of the akratic's story tread on one another's toes.

But how, exactly? Why can't we be overwhelmed by the pleasantness of X *and* judge X to be, overall, not pleasant? If we follow Wolfsdorf³² in understanding 'overwhelmed by the

³¹ Of course he can still understand why, earlier, he took himself to see such a reason.

³² Wolfsdorf's is the most exhaustive recent treatment of the argument, (see especially p.117, 127-131), and it may be helpful, by way of contrast with my own approach, to look at his overall strategy for interpreting the argument. On his account, Socrates refutes the many by showing them that description of akrasia as 'being overcome by pleasure' contradicts the meaning of the word 'overcome.' (see above, n. 19). He substitutes for their description of akrasia 'I did what I knew to be wrong because I was overcome by pleasure,' his own 'you did what you falsely believed to be right, because everyone always does what he believes best,' without offering any

additional or independent argument for the latter claim. But the gulf between these two positions is egregious—why would someone who had just been subjected to the refutation Wolfsdorf thinks Socrates has made be moved all the way to assimilating akrasia to acting on a belief that happens to be false? T. Brickhouse and N. Smith (“Socrates on Akrasia, Knowledge and the Power of Appearance,” in Bobonich, C. and Destree, P. (eds). *Akrasia in Greek philosophy, from Socrates to Plotinus* (Boston, 2007), 1-17 at 8) rightly dismiss an interpretation (though they do not associate it with Wolfsdorf) on the grounds that the many would have to count as akrasia, “every instance in which an agent decides that it is in his interest to pursue something after he has been misinformed that it is not really, on balance, harmful.” Even if Socrates *were* working his way to such a position, you cannot get there from Wolfsdorf’s conception of the ‘ridiculous’ argument. Conversion to radical intellectualism cannot be bought so cheaply. (Wolfsdorf understands what I’ve called ‘the gulf’ as two independent theses: “Ultimately, then, Socrates’ critique presents two different reasons for rejecting the popular conception of akrasia. The first *argues* that the concept of being overcome by pleasure is ridiculous because self-contradictory. The second *suggests* that knowingly doing bad is psychologically impossible” (my emphasis, p.117). The contrast between what Socrates “argues” and what he “suggests” is telling, and marks the absence of any argument Wolfsdorf is able to locate in the text for the second thesis, the implausible one.) My reading of the ‘ridiculous’ argument is one on which Socrates indicts not only the many’s word-choice but their whole way of thinking about akrasia. This is the first part of an attempt to narrow the gulf. The rest of the paper will work on the other side, trying to bring the goal-position closer in by interpreting the conception of akrasia Socrates wants to sell to the many as less radically ‘intellectualist’ than it is usually taken to be. In particular, I, unlike

pleasantness of X' as *meaning* 'judging that X is, overall, pleasant,' the contradiction is evident.

But this move, I've argued, begs the question against the many. We should not flatten the many's self-description of being moved, struck, impressed, overwhelmed (ἀγόμενος καὶ ἐκπληττόμενος (355b1), ἠττώμενος (355b3 *et passim*)) by the immediate (παραχρῆμα 355b3) pleasantness of the action into an impartial assessment of pleasures outweighing pains. The many are not trying to say that they 'weighed' the plusses and minuses *two* times, once producing the judgment that the action was more pleasant than painful, and another time producing the judgment that it was more painful than pleasant. The many are not describing ambivalence.

If they are not claiming to have made two judgments about the pleasantness of the action, what are they claiming? Socrates' response to their answer reveals how he, at any rate, understands them. He gives a central role to the deceptive power of appearances (ἡ τοῦ φαινομένου δύναμις 356d4) in both his analysis of the problem and his proposed solution to it (356c3-e4, discussed below). When the many protest that "the immediate pleasure is very much different (πολὸν διαφέρει) from the pleasant and painful at a later time," (356a5-7) Socrates reasonably understands them as trying to draw a contrast between 'knowledge' that the pleasures were not greater than the pains, and a point of view from which the pleasantness of the action *loomed larger* than its pains. He hears the many as claiming to have made one judgment about which pleasure *is* larger, and another judgment as to which pleasure *seems* larger. His subsequent reference to how closer objects look larger than they are (356e5-6) indicates that he understands

Wolfsdorf, do not hold Socrates to require the many to jettison the distinction between akrasia and being misinformed.

the many as having relied on the intuition that closer pleasures *seem* larger even when one knows that they *are* smaller.

The importance of the concept of appearance to the many's understanding of akrasia³³ explains why the argument does not culminate in R2: 'pleasant' is, like 'red' or 'large', a way that things can seem. Of course, things can also seem good, but they usually do so by seeming pleasant or honorable or profitable. The good appears, when it appears, in some guise or other. R2 captures the thought of the many only insofar as R3, or something like it, does so first³⁴; correlatively, Socrates' refutation is only complete when he reaches R3. The many wish to explain their action by citing the persistence or recalcitrance of an appearance of the good that takes the form of pleasure; Socrates insists they cannot do this, and *also* claim possession of knowledge to the contrary.

³³ This is a feature of the argument rightly emphasized by R. Singpurwalla, "Reasoning with the Irrational: Moral Psychology in the Protagoras," *Ancient Philosophy* 26 (2006), 243-258., D. Devereux, "Socrates' Kantian Conception of Virtue," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 33, (1995), 381-408, and Brickhouse and Smith, as against earlier interpreters who tended to treat it as invoking only belief and knowledge.

³⁴ Most commentators (see my "Akratics as Hedonists," n. 5, for references) take pleasure to be a placeholder in the ridiculous argument. Without disagreeing, I would point out that the place it holds is that of a value that also constitutes a way in which the good makes an immediate appearance to us.

In the opening of the ‘ridiculous’ argument, Socrates quite uncharacteristically pronounces himself a ‘teacher’ (διδάσκειν 352e6) of the many. We should expect him, therefore, to provide an explanation of why this combination of knowledge with its conflicting appearance is impossible. He does so in the comments on perspective (356c4-e4) with which he follows up the ‘ridiculous’ argument:

"Since this is so, I will say to them: '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 say they do. 'And similarly for thicknesses and pluralities? And equal sounds seem louder when near at hand, softer when farther away?' They would agree."

We can illustrate Socrates’ point by imagining two conflicting representations of the relative sizes of two objects, H and L:

fig. 1: H_L fig. 2: L_H

Socrates continues:

“ ‘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? Would it be the art of measurement or the power of appearance (ἡ τοῦ φαινομένου δύναμις)? 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—”

I break off again to illustrate. Suppose that someone vacillates between fig. 1 and fig. 2 as his position relative to H and L changes. Such is the ‘power of appearance’ that when fig. 1 is present to him, he acts as though H were bigger, and when fig. 2 is present, he acts on the basis of the thought that L is bigger. I take up Socrates’ speech once more:

—the art of measurement, in contrast, would make this appearance (τοῦτο τὸ φάντασμα) lose its power by showing us the truth, would give us peace of mind firmly rooted in the truth and would save our life.’ Therefore, would these men agree, with this in mind, that the art of measurement would save us, or some other art?”

Now suppose that, though fig. 1 is and continues to be how things *look* to A, he learns—and learns with scientific certitude (“ἐπιστήμη... μετρητική” 357a1)—that fig. 2 is in fact the correct representation of the actual size relation between H and L. In learning this, he will learn something about fig. 1, namely, that it is an illusion. The recognition of fig. 2 as veridical does not eliminate fig. 1, but it does demote fig. 1 to the status of *mere* appearance. We could represent A’s newly detached variant of fig. 1 by drawing a box around its contents:

fig. 1*: $\boxed{H_L}$

If we imagine that the “H” stands for pleasure (*hēdonē*) “L” for pain (*lupē*), we can use these diagrams to describe Socrates’ dispute with the many. So long as the many insist that they knew the action was less pleasant—we depict this as L_H —they must consider an appearance of it as overwhelmingly pleasant to be a *mere* appearance: $\boxed{H_L}$. Socrates, however, denies that what

seems has power to move us³⁵ after it has been ‘boxed’ as illusory by knowledge to the contrary. They could not have been moved by $\boxed{H_L}$ but only by H_L . But if they had H_L , Socrates can conclude that they do not have what contradicts it, namely, L_H . Q.E.D.

This account of the argument raises two questions:

- (1) Why does Socrates think that ‘boxed’ representations can’t motivate?
- (2) If they cannot motivate, what ‘power’ could knowledge remove from them?

D. The Motivational Impotence of Simulacra

It will be convenient, in what follows, to have a generic term for ‘boxed’ representations such as $\boxed{H_L}$. I will call them *simulacra*. “Simulacrum” corresponds to “φάντασμα” as Socrates uses it at 356d8, when he points out that knowledge renders the appearance to the contrary (τοῦτο τὸ φάντασμα) powerless³⁶. A simulacrum is a representation not believed to be veridical by the one

³⁵ Here and throughout, when I speak of a cognitive representation (belief, knowledge, appearance, simulacrum) as motivating someone to act, the Humean theorist of motivation should feel free to add, ‘in connection with the relevant desire.’ I leave off mentioning the desire because Socrates does the same, an omission facilitated by the fact that the cognitive representations under discussion concern pleasure and pain. For a discussion of the role of desire in this argument, see n. 45 below.

³⁶ I have chosen the Latinate ‘simulacrum’ over the transliteration ‘phantasm’ for three reasons.

(1) The transliteration would suggest a more direct textual basis for my central interpretative move than I in fact have. Socrates nowhere says that akratics have φαντάσματα of the

who has it. Simulacra appear in a variety of mental guises, including but not limited to the list I gave at the opening of this paper: figments of the imagination, hypotheses, assumptions, daydreams, recognized optical illusions. Socrates, on my reading, assumes that such states can't motivate action—or, rather, he makes that claim about a special subset of them.

Socrates' argument against the many refutes their claim to possess the simulacrum $\boxed{H_I}$, and identifies the item in question as the belief H_L . Socrates understands the many as mistaking what is in fact a belief for a simulacrum. If the reverse were also possible—if someone could mistake what is in fact a simulacrum for a belief—then some simulacra would not be acknowledged as such. We shall come to see the importance of this class of simulacra in what follows. For the moment, however, we are concerned to show the impotence of simulacra in the *other* class, namely, ones where the agent himself acknowledges the non-veridicality of the representation in question. The plausibility of the ridiculous argument hangs, then, on the plausibility of the thesis that acknowledge simulacra can't motivate—a thesis I will call, 'the impotence claim.'

wrongness of their actions, though I am prepared to argue that this is the best way to understand what he does say. (2) I need a word that will function as a technical term, and while I believe that Socrates uses φάντασμα as I want to use 'simulacrum' at 356d8, it would be very difficult to make the case that Socrates ever uses any word with the kind of rigorous consistency appropriate to a technical term, and certainly impossible in the case of φαντάσμα in the *Protagoras*, which only appears once! (3) The word 'simulacrum,' with its suggestion of being a second-best or replica, conveys what I will argue (in part III) is the correct connotation, according to Socrates, for the kind of representation in question.

If we want to evaluate how this interpretation fares against its rivals, we must ask whether the impotence claim escapes characterization as yet another Socratism question-beggingly foisted upon the many in an artificially orchestrated ‘refutation.’ There is, in addition, the worry that the parts of the text in which it can claim grounding (356d7-e2, cited above, and, I will argue, 356a8-c3) follow R1-R3 above. Is it legitimate to make the ‘ridiculousness’ depend on a premise to which agreement is not secured until *after* the many are supposedly ‘refuted’? When a premise in an argument is as controversial as, e.g., psychological hedonism, or as blatantly question-begging (with respect to a refutation of the many’s view) as, e.g., the Socratic theory of akrasia, it is the refuter’s job to secure assent en route to the conclusion. But sometimes, we can legitimately work in the other direction, and use the conclusion of a refutation to retrospectively shine a spotlight on a hidden premise. We can do this when the premise is truistic enough that, had it not turned out to be load-bearing in this argument, we wouldn’t have thought to articulate it.

I want to suggest that, for Socrates, the impotence claim is just such a claim; he presents the thought as an obvious one in *Rep.* VI: “when it comes to the good nobody is content with the possession of the appearance but all men seek the reality, and the semblance satisfies nobody here³⁷.” Socrates takes it as obvious that we don’t *want* the apparent good, we want the actual good. He insists that as soon as an appearance stops promising to get us there, we lose interest in it. Is he right to assume this? Once what might have gone without saying has been said, we can

³⁷ ἀγαθὰ δὲ οὐδενὶ ἔτι ἀρκεῖ τὰ δοκοῦντα κατ᾿ἄσθαι, ἀλλὰ τὰ ὄντα ζητοῦσιν, τὴν δὲ δόξαν ἐνταῦθα ἤδη πᾶς ἀτιμάζει; (505d7-9; the translation quoted above is from P. Shorey, *The Republic* (Cambridge, Mass, 1935).

take the opportunity to look more closely. Let us consider two examples of agents who might be in a position to claim that even after they saw through the benefits or dangers of action X as illusory, the simulacrum of the action as having those benefits or dangers had power to move them:

- (1) Shipwrecked sailors who drink salt water knowing that it won't quench their thirst.
- (2) Tourists who won't step out onto the Grand Canyon glass skywalk, though they are aware that the 5000' drop which that step seems to promise is a 'mere appearance'³⁸.

Faced with these potential counterexamples, it is possible to imagine a number of responses on Socrates' behalf. The first and simplest would be to dispute the descriptions I have given. He could insist that the agents in question never knew, or that they must have briefly forgotten, the bit of information indicting the appearance in question as illusory. But he needn't take this route. Socrates could also understand these simulacra as *compelling* the agent rather than motivating him to act; this is a particularly plausible interpretation of the sailors, who might say "We couldn't help ourselves, after days of dehydration the image of the water as thirst-quenching compelled us to drink." As Socrates repeatedly insists³⁹, *akrasia* must be voluntary. Socrates has no cause to deny that, e.g. in the case of madness, a simulacrum can cause us to make movements over which we do not have control. More banal forms of compulsion appear in cases

³⁸ I take this example from T. Gendler, "Belief and Alief," *The Journal of Philosophy* vol. 105(10), (2008) 634-663 at 634.

³⁹ ἐξὸν μὴ πράττειν 355a8, οὐκ ἐθέλει 355b2 (and similar at 352d6, 358ad2), οὐ δέον αὐτὸν πράττειν 355d2.

where simulacra are responsible for the ‘coloring’ of an action⁴⁰: my trembling as I walk out onto the platform, my mouth watering as I look at (but refuse to drink from) salt water, etc. Socrates is free to allow that simulacra can have a compulsive behavioral impact, either where there is no reason/action (irrational behavior), or where there is an action done for a different reason.

A third possibility is to understand such agents as motivated not by the simulacrum itself, but by a rational recognition of its psychological impact. Someone could reasonably decide: “The fact that this seems scary—even though I know it isn’t—is reason enough not to step forward. I’m

⁴⁰ This is how Socrates would handle most of the cases detailed in Gendler. Socrates would not want to deny that what she calls ‘aliefs’ have psychological consequences, occasioning what she calls “affective response patterns (feelings of urgency)”, or “motor routines (tensing of the muscles, an overcoming of certain sorts of inertia)” (pp.640-642); or that these consequences determine the manner in which an action is performed. Nor would she want to assert that the ‘aliefs’ in question straightforwardly fill the role of belief in a motivating belief-desire pair, since her aim is to argue that aliefs are *not* a species of belief. So, for instance, Gendler (p.657) describes a case in which subjects are given a list of words to read, and then find themselves seeking further instruction from the experimenter as he converses with a person who they take to be a fellow experimental subject (he is in fact a fellow experimenter). Those subjects upon whose lists the word ‘polite’ had appeared were quicker to interrupt the experimenter than those on whose list the word ‘rude’ appeared. Socrates can allow that the words have an impact on their *readiness* to interrupt while insisting that, when they do interrupt, they do so from an unrelated belief-desire pair, such as: a desire for instruction on the next stage of the experiment, a belief that the experimenter can provide them with instruction.

on vacation, why torture myself?” Even when p merely appears to you to be the case, the fact that p does so appear is a truth you can take account of in deliberation. Such a response is suggested when Socrates leaves room for the agent (356b2) to weigh proximity of pleasure alongside quantity in his deliberations⁴¹. The agent might take the fact that he experiences the proximate pleasure as larger as itself being a reason to give that pleasure some prominence. Socrates can insist that such simulacra can’t motivate while acknowledging ways in which they can either cause us to behave unwillingly, or figure as factors in our deliberation.

But why *must* we hear the story of the sailor or tourist in one of these ways? Why not think that the simulacrum—and not the fact that we have it—can move without compelling? It is this idea that Socrates’ accusation of absurdity fundamentally attaches to. If I learn the apple is wooden, and I’m in my right mind, I won’t bite it. It becomes *impossible* for me to willingly eat it—and this despite the fact that the apple underwent no change in ‘appearance.’ Once I’ve been informed of the fact that it is made out of wood, I cannot cite the fact that ‘it still *looks* like an apple’ to explain my (uncompelled) bite. This necessity is what, I contend, Socrates is trying to express in his famous speech at 356a8-c3:

⁴¹ I follow Wolfsdorf in reading 356b2 “τὸ ἐγγύς καὶ τὸ πόρρω στήσας ἐν τῷ ζυγῷ” as Socrates making an allowance for the possibility of *weighing in* the added value of getting the pleasure sooner as opposed to later. The alternative reading (which is suggested by most translations) is simply that the agent needs to put all the relevant pleasures, irrespective of distance, in the scales. See Wolfsdorf’s discussion of the two readings, and defense of his own, in his n. 20.

For if you weigh pleasant things against pleasant, the greater and the more must always be taken (ληπτέα); if painful things against painful, the fewer and the smaller. And if you weigh pleasant things against painful, and the painful is exceeded by the pleasant—whether the near by the remote or the remote by the near—you have to perform (πρακτέον) that action in which the pleasant prevails; on the other hand, if the pleasant is exceeded by the painful, you have to refrain (οὐ πρακτέα) from doing that. Does it seem any different to you, my friends? I know they would not say otherwise.

I'll call this *the motivation passage*, since what is clear about it is that Socrates is trying to say something about how motivation for action works. In order to determine what he is saying, we must consider how Socrates is using the verbal adjectives (ληπτέα, πρακτέον, οὐ πρακτέα). Verbal adjectives cover a range of senses extending from a weaker normative set of meanings (should/ought/it would be good to) to meanings expressing an idea of necessity, compulsion, or force (must/cannot/has to)⁴². Santas insists on the necessity meaning in order to hear in this passage the psychological hedonism that he sees as the key to securing ridiculousness. The philosophical consensus has established itself in opposition to Santas and in favor of Taylor

⁴² See W. Goodwin, *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses of the Greek Verb* (Boston, 1879), section 923 (368-369). Although the fact that he offers δεῖ (and not χρεῖ) as the verbal equivalent might suggest that Goodwin favors the 'necessity' reading, his list of citations include uses of the verbal adjective that he himself translates with "be obliged to" and "be best for."

(pp.189-190)⁴³, who argues that ληπτέα, πρακτέον, and οὐ πρακτέα should be heard strictly as terms of ‘commendation.’ He holds that they should be translated by ‘should’ or ‘ought,’ carrying no connotation of ‘must’ or ‘necessity.’ On this reading, the point of the passage is to express the ethical hedonism introduced in the prologue to the ‘ridiculous’ argument. The problem with this interpretation is likewise one of context: why reassert ethical hedonism here, once it has served its function of establishing the ridiculousness of being overcome by pleasure?⁴⁴ While Santas tries to make this passage do too much by resting the ‘ridiculous’ argument on it, his opponents can be charged with making too little of it.

⁴³ Wolfsdorf, though he ultimately sides with Taylor for philosophical reasons, argues persuasively (through an exhaustive consideration of parallels, pp.121-126) that the textual arguments that have been marshaled on either side are inconclusive. See also Clark, 242-246.

⁴⁴ Clark’s ‘neutral restatement’ of the argument suggests (p.240-241) that Socrates is *advising* the many as to how they ought to deliberate. In order to give content to the advice (they are already ethical hedonists), Clark has to understand Socrates’ reference to weighing as a proleptic recommendation that the akratic employ the art of measurement Socrates will discuss at 356c-e, and employ it so as to give equal weight (why?) to proximate and distant pleasures. This reading is a stretch: even if we hear the verbal adjectives as offering advice, and understand “τὸ ἐγγύς καὶ τὸ πόρρω στήσας ἐν τῷ ζυγῷ” in the way I rejected above (see n. 41), the content of Socrates’ suggestion would not be *that* agents deliberate (or that they deliberate in any particular way), but that, having deliberated, they choose the greater of the pleasures or the lesser of the pains.

On my reading, the motivation passage expresses the impotence claim by pointing to the necessity of acting in accordance with knowledge. Suppose I am right that, going into this argument, Socrates hears the many as wishing to contrast the *knowledge* they have of the relative sizes of the pleasures and pains (through, e.g. weighing pros and cons) with an appearance to the contrary. Socrates' claim is that the deliberatively-secured conclusion that L is actually bigger than H both should and would *have* to trump any appearance to the contrary. I don't think we need to choose between hearing the 'to-be-done's' of the motivation passage as a matter of commendation or necessity. The argument does not call for a higher level of precision than the text itself provides us. If someone takes himself to *know* that L is bigger than H, he won't willingly follow the discredited appearance that H is bigger than L. If you know it's made out of wood, you *can't* be so 'overwhelmed' by its resemblance to a real apple that you (willingly) bite into it. This is not a psychological law as opposed to a normative one, such as psychological hedonism, nor is it a normative as opposed to psychological law, such as ethical hedonism. Socrates' point is action-theoretic, picking out a place where a normative difference—the authority of knowledge over the appearance it discredits—translates into a psychological one. If simulacra are not reasons to act, they *cannot* motivate intentional action.

I do not want to pretend that what we have at 356a8-c3 is an argument for, as opposed to a bald assertion of, the impotence claim. My claim is only that the view thus baldly asserted is subject to no devastatingly obvious objection. For all that, it could of course be wrong. Like the interpreters I've labeled 'anti-contradictionists', I deny that Socrates' 'refutation' traps his opponents in the assertion of a logical contradiction. Socrates has not foreclosed the possibility that a member of 'the many' will step forward with a clever objection or counterexample to the

impotence claim. If ‘acknowledged simulacra motivate’ is merely a mistaken claim and not a self-contradiction, then Socrates does not need the kind of knock-down argument that most commentators have sought to provide him with. What he should—and, I will argue, does—offer us is a view of *akrasia* that avoids the mistake.

E. The Power of Simulacra?

If simulacra cannot motivate, what power can knowledge remove from them? The key to answering this question, and the central move of my interpretation, lies in the identification of *which* simulacrum Socrates is referring to with the phrase ‘τοῦτο τὸ φάντασμα.’ I have argued that Socrates takes the akratic to *lack* the simulacrum he claims to have, $\boxed{H_L}$. This cannot, then, be the simulacrum whose power knowledge would remove. I submit that Socrates must be referring, instead, to the simulacrum of the pains outweighing the pleasures: $\boxed{L_H}$.

That Socrates grants possession of this simulacrum to the akratic is an interpretative option neglected by previous commentators; yet it is available, even in the face of Socrates’ denial of action against belief. The many described their *akrasia* as a case where they ‘knew’ that the pains were greater than the pleasures but the pleasures nonetheless *appeared* overwhelmingly great. They claimed L_H and $\boxed{H_L}$. Socrates showed them that they would not have acted on $\boxed{H_L}$ but only on H_L . Since H_L contradicts L_H , they cannot have L_H , which is to say they cannot have known or believed that the pains outweighed the pleasures. The point on which my interpretation rests is the following: $\boxed{L_H}$, unlike L_H , is fully compatible with H_L . My interpretation of Socrates’ refutation of the many’s account of their own *akrasia* centered on the

charge that they mistakenly demote the belief H_L to the status of simulacrum $[H_L]$; my defense of the phenomenological faithfulness⁴⁵ of Socrates' positive view has him charge them with another mistake, namely promoting the simulacrum $[L_H]$ to the status of the belief L_H . Socrates' account of

⁴⁵ Traditionally, interpreters of the Protagoras (see, e.g. M. Frede, "Introduction" in *Plato: Protagoras*, S. Lombardo and K. Bell (trans.) (Indianapolis, 1992), vii-xxxiii at xxix-xxx, T. Irwin, *Plato's Ethics* (Oxford, 1995), p.209 and Penner, 'Weakness'. For more references see Singpurwalla, p.244) have taken Socrates to deny that the distinction between rational and irrational desire has any role to play in accounting for akrasia. A number of recent commentators (Singpurwalla, Devereux, Brickhouse and Smith) have sought to blunt the edge of Socrates' intellectualism by arguing that he leaves room for akratic actions to be motivated by irrational desires. I agree with them that there is no reason to think that Socrates denies the existence of such desires in motivating akrasia. Nonetheless, it is hard to see precisely how reference to such desires takes away the sting of Socrates' denial that the akratic acts against his belief. Moreover, the traditionalists have an excellent textual basis for their claim: Socrates' argument proceeds (somewhat remarkably) without reference to desire of any kind. I will take up the challenge of defending his account as phenomenologically accurate while remaining within the bounds of the set of mental states he makes explicit reference to: knowledge, belief, ignorance, pleasure, pain, φάντασμα (simulacrum). Singpurwalla, Devereux, Brickhouse-Smith rightly criticize the traditionalists for failing to appreciate the importance to Socrates' account of akrasia of his reference to the fluctuation of appearance at 356c4ff.; I am offering a way to read this passage as doing justice to akratic phenomenology without describing these appearances as—but also without denying that they might be—the content of irrational desires.

akrasia will, I claim, be able to boast phenomenological accuracy if he can grant the akratic a representation of pains outweighing pleasures, even if only in boxed form.

Socrates' claim that knowledge 'would remove the power of this simulacrum' (ἄκυρον μὲν ἂν ἐποίησε τοῦτο τὸ φάντασμα, 356d8) is not merely an observation about knowledge, but, I suggest, the Socratic answer to the challenge raised by the many. In order to allay their doubts about the 'power of knowledge,' he needs to show them exactly what that power consists in and how it could serve akratics. If the Socratic theory puts forward simulacrum-undermining *as* the power of knowledge, we should attribute *some* simulacrum to the akratic which could serve as the simulacrum whose power knowledge would remove. We cannot invoke $\boxed{H_1}$, since, if my interpretation is correct, it has been eliminated by Socrates' argument; $\boxed{L_H}$ remains—and it remains, I note, in spite of Socrates' denial that the akratic has the belief L_H . In order to access the Socratic argument that knowledge is the cure for akrasia, we need to find some way to make simulacra play an essential role in the Socratic account of akrasia. Moreover, that role cannot be restricted to their mere presence. Like other commentators⁴⁶, I am struck by the fact that Socrates does not claim that knowledge *eliminates* the simulacrum, only that knowledge removes the power of that simulacrum. What power can knowledge remove from a simulacrum?

Since $\boxed{L_H}$ is an *unacknowledged* simulacrum—far from granting that its content is false, the akratic claims to *know* its content—it is untouched by the impotence claim. However, this doesn't help us locate its power since, of course, $\boxed{L_H}$ is precisely what *doesn't* motivate the agent. Since it is already a nonmotivating representation, knowledge cannot remove its

⁴⁶ This point is pressed by Singpurwalla, p.252 and following.

motivating power. Rather, I will claim, what knowledge removes is the *confounding* power of this appearance: the power by which it moves the agent to assert its content as knowledge. My suggestion, then, is that the simulacrum of which Socrates speaks in his praise of knowledge refers, quite generally, to the item that the akratic wrongly insists that he knows (or believes), and the *power* of that simulacrum consists—in ways that are to be detailed below—precisely in its ability to get itself confused for knowledge or belief.

To make the case that this interpretation is not only possible but credible, I will have to offer a fuller characterization of an akrasia in which what we've learned to call the akratic's 'better judgment' is in reality a mere simulacrum. I will also need to articulate the place within Socratic intellectualism of such a conception of akrasia, so as to plausibly characterize it as a Socratic one. My hope is that, those tasks accomplished, the view I have explicated and attributed to Socrates will be recognizable as an (admittedly radical) conception of what *we* call akrasia. Before embarking on this defense, I want to point out a small textual point in favor of my interpretation: there is a standing interpretative quandary which turns out to be easily resolvable by invoking LH.

In the 'ridiculous' argument itself, the presence of the representation opposing his action in the akratic is indicated by a phrase that has puzzled commentators: 'ἐν ὑμῖν.' This phrase appears in the interlocutor's question "within yourself, does the good outweigh the bad or not?" 'οὐκ ἀξίω ὄντων νικᾷ ἐν ὑμῖν τῶν ἀγαθῶν τὰ κακά, ἢ ἀξίω;' (355d3-4) The traditional translation of this sentence takes ἐν ὑμῖν as indicating a struggle in the akratic agent, either linking it with τῶν ἀγαθῶν as meaning, "the goods in you" (Adam, Guthrie) or with νικᾷ as "prevail in you."

(Gallop)⁴⁷. Vlastos points out two problems with this translation: (1) It makes a superfluous reference to struggle in the soul of the agent between goods and evils, where what the argument seems to call for is simply the agent's estimation of the relative sizes of pleasures/pains. (2) The akratic agent is, until this point in the argument, referred to in the third person singular.

Vlastos suggests that we read 'ἐν ὑμῖν' parenthetically as 'according to you,' or, as he puts it, 'before your tribunal.' Heard this way, it refers to the opinion of the many rather than that of the akratic agent. He cites as a parallel *Gorg.* 464d5: "If a baker and a doctor had to compete before children (ἐν παισὶ διαγωνίζεσθαι) or before men as foolish as children (ἐν ἀνδράσιν οὕτως ἀνοήτοις ὥσπερ οἱ παῖδες)"; Wolfsdorf, who follows Vlastos' translation, adds a parallel at *Laws* 916b5: "Let it be tried before a bench of doctors" (διαδικαζέσθω δὲ ἐν τισὶ τῶν ἰατρῶν).

The problem with Vlastos' translation, however, comes out if we look at those parallels.

Unsurprisingly, they invoke a point of view *for a reason*, picking out a group of people who will, in virtue of being members of that group, make a distinctive kind of judgment on the subject matter in question. If we are to see 'the many' as being asked to offer *their own* assessment, there must be an implied contrast group. Indeed, the contrastive force of 'ἐν X' should be even more marked here than in the *Gorg.* and *Laws* passages, since here the phrase 'ἐν X' occurs in a question addressed to X. We need to supply some reason for the invocation of a point of view that is already in play. The only assessment it makes sense to contrast the many's with is that of the akratic under discussion. But Socrates cannot be asking the many, 'how do you, as opposed

⁴⁷ See Vlastos 'Socrates,' n. 28 for these references, as well as for his statement of his own position.

to the akratic, weigh the goods/evils?’ For the only question of interest to either Socrates or the many is how the *akratic* weighs them. Nor can Vlastos himself understand the passage as making such a contrast, since he goes on to gloss it as follows: “the man chooses to do Y, knowing it to be an error (a bad choice, the choice of a bad alternative.)” pp.80-81. To assume, at this point in the argument—i.e., before it has been completed—that the akratic *doesn’t* judge that the evils outweigh the goods would be both question-begging and abortive of the climactic pronouncement of ridiculousness (R3). The only way Socrates can make use of the outweighing claim in R3 is if it (also) represents the akratic’s point of view, and can therefore be paired with the akratic’s claim to be overcome by pleasure. It makes no sense for Socrates to be drawing a distinction between the perspective of the many and that of the akratic; he must, instead, as I insisted from the outset, be interrogating the many in their capacity as (occasional) akratics.

Overtranslating to bring out the meaning, I propose the following for 355d3-4: “is/was the representation present in you—the one in virtue of which you call/called the action mistaken⁴⁸—a representation of goods outweighing the evils, or the reverse?” “ἐν ὑμῖν” doesn’t mean ‘according to you’ as opposed to ‘according to the akratic,’ nor does it refer to the ‘seat’ or location of a battle which occurs only at the time of the akratic action. What we have here is Socrates reminding us, mid-argument, of its ad hominem quality: it concerns *both* the one in the throes of akrasia, *and* the one who views his akratic episodes from a (prior or posterior) spectatorial distance. Now Socrates must allow that there is a change in the akratic’s beliefs from the one time to the other. When he acts, the akratic (according to Socrates) believes the pleasures outweigh the pains; when he looks back with regret, suffering the consequences of his

⁴⁸ The phrase between the dashes translates the qualification introduced at d5-6.

akratic misdeed, he believes the pains outweigh the pleasures. But here Socrates speaks of what is true of the agent at both times; and he must do so without recourse to our usefully neutral word, ‘representation.’ Hence instead of using a word for belief or judgment or opinion he opts for the awkward genitive absolute. He likewise avoids using a word for ‘believe’ or ‘know’ at 356a1 when he restates the point, “δῆλον ὅτι ἀναξίων ὄντων νικᾶν.” He fails to specify in what way the relevant fact is ‘clear,’ leaving room for two very different ways in which it can be so.

I submit that the best explanation for this difficult phrase is that Socrates wishes to allow his interlocutor, the akratic, to attest to the continuous presence in himself of ‘evils outweighing goods.’ Socrates does not want to deny the existence of a representation to this effect, but only the akratic’s claim to have that representation be counted as knowledge—or even belief.

But this interpretation will only be open to us if we can make sense of replacing L_H with $\boxed{L_H}$ in our account of akrasia. I have defined a simulacrum as a representation not believed to be veridical by the one who has it. Akratics assert that the pains really do outweigh the pleasures, and the one who admits the existence of akrasia allows that they assert this sincerely; furthermore, akratics sincerely deny that they believe the pleasures outweigh the pains, describing this as what merely *seems* to them to be the case.

Victims of simulacra-belief confusion sincerely assert what they do not believe, and sincerely disavow what they do. Is this even possible?⁴⁹ Consider the following example: an avowed liberal who treats people differentially (and unfairly) in a way that corresponds to their race. He can rattle off famous civil rights speeches verbatim; he is adept at refuting the arguments of bigots; when he says that he “knows” that people should not be subjected to racial bias, he sounds sincere. But he clearly does not know this, as his behavior attests. Perhaps he is an accomplished liar; but surely, we want to leave room for the possibility that he is sincere. Here is one way to make sense of a racist who rhapsodizes on racial tolerance: he has confused the *idea* of tolerance with tolerance itself. He has a representation of racial equality that he does not project outward onto the world as he would have, had he harbored the belief-variant of this representation. He looks at the idea of equality as we ‘look’ at the images that appear before our mind’s eye when

⁴⁹ Psychoanalytic theory offers one way to tell the motivational story behind such mistakes: S believes that p, but sincerely asserts that he doesn’t, because his belief that p is an unconscious belief. It is tempting to avail oneself of Freud when we hear Socrates pronounce upon what the many ‘really’, contrary to their protestations, believe. Such pronouncements are part of any interpretation of the *Protagoras*, not only mine—for even if one does not think that Socrates corrects $\boxed{H_L}$ to H_L or L_H to $\boxed{L_H}$, he certainly corrects their beliefs in some way, as well as ‘informing’ them, in the prologue to the argument, of their hedonism. (See, e.g., Ferrari for a Freudian reading of Socrates’ ascription of hedonism to the many). In part III of this paper, I will offer a non-Freudian explanation of sincere-but-mistaken self-ascriptions of knowledge. Socrates attributes these mistakes not to hidden parts of the mind but to a reductively impoverished *theory* of the mind by which he understands most people (οἱ πολλοί) to be gripped.

our eyes are closed. If I have drawn this character well, it follows that we can make sense of someone conflating simulacrum with belief.

But I fear I have not drawn this character well. It might take some considerable dramatic talent to force an audience to grant the sincerity of someone claiming to believe what he obviously doesn't. One inclined to suspect that evidently false self-representations cannot be put forward in seriousness will resist ascribing to my racist the confusion about himself that I claim is at the heart of the Socratic account of akrasia. The only way to *compel* someone to acknowledge the possibility of someone's making this kind of mistake about himself is to offer her a story that, quite simply, rings true. We are fortunate, then, that Plato himself took on just that project in the *Symposium*, when he put in the mouth of Alcibiades the speech of the akratic. Let us examine this speech in detail, for it serves not only to instantiate the simulacrum-belief confusion account, but also to help us see that there might be something salutary in the confusion of the akratic.

II. Alcibiades and the Socratic Theory of Akrasia

“You know, people hardly ever take a speaker seriously, even if he's the greatest orator; but let anyone—man, woman or child—listen to you or even to a poor account of what you say—and we are all transported (ἐκπεπληγμένοι⁵⁰ ἔσμεν), completely possessed. If I were to describe for you what an extraordinary effect his words have always had on me (I can feel it this moment

⁵⁰ This is the word that the many in the *Protagoras* use to describe their akrasia (ἐκπληττόμενος 355b1). Note also the fact that he uses the verb πάσχειν six times in this excerpt from his speech. Like the many, he struggles to articulate just what his πάθημα is.

even as I'm speaking), (οἷα δὴ πέπονθα αὐτὸς ὑπὸ τῶν τούτου λόγων καὶ πάσχω ἔτι καὶ νυνί) you might actually suspect that I'm drunk! Still, I swear to you—the moment he starts to speak, I am beside myself: my heart starts leaping in my chest, the tears come streaming down my face, even the frenzied Corybantes seem sane compared to me—and, let me tell you, I am not alone. I have heard Pericles and many other great orators, and I have admired their speeches. But nothing like this ever happened to me: they never upset me so deeply that my very own soul started protesting that my life—my life!—was no better than the most miserable slave's. And yet that is exactly how this Marsyas here at my side makes me feel all the time: he makes it seem that my life isn't worth living! You can't say that isn't true, Socrates. I know very well that you could make me feel that way this very moment if I gave you half a chance. (καὶ ἔτι γε νῦν σύνοιδ' ἐμαυτῷ ὅτι εἰ ἐθέλοιμι παρέχειν τὰ ὄτα, οὐκ ἂν καρτερήσοιμι ἀλλὰ ταῦτ' ἂν πάσχοιμι.) He always traps me, you see, and he makes me admit that my political career is a waste of time, while all that matters is just what I most neglect: my personal shortcomings, which cry out for the closest attention. So I refuse to listen to him; I stop my ears and tear myself away from him, for, like the Sirens, he could make me stay by his side till I die. Socrates is the only man in the world who has made me feel shame—ah, you didn't think I had it in me, did you? Yes, he makes me feel ashamed: I know perfectly well (σύνοιδα γὰρ ἐμαυτῷ) that I can't prove he's wrong when he tells me what I should do; yet, the moment I leave his side, I go back to my old ways: I cave in to my desire to please the crowd (ἠττημένῳ τῆς τιμῆς τῆς ὑπὸ τῶν πολλῶν). My whole life has become one constant effort to escape from him and keep away, but when I see him, I feel deeply ashamed, because I'm doing nothing about my way of life, though I have already agreed with him that I should. Sometimes, believe me, I think I would be happier if he were dead. And yet I know that if he

dies I'll be even more miserable. I can't live with him, and I can't live without him! What can I do about him? (215d1-216c3)⁵¹.”

Alcibiades is akratic: despite the fact that Socrates ‘makes him admit that his political career is a waste of time,’ he nonetheless goes on to pursue it. Even when he is not talking to Socrates, Alcibiades experiences the Socratic point of view as an oppressive presence pouring forth censure onto his way of life. Alcibiades takes himself to be channeling Socrates when he castigates his own life as “not worth living” or no better than that of a “common slave”; and when he says that he “neglects himself while attending to the affairs of Athens,” his language does have an authentically Socratic ring. He claims to *know* that Socrates is right while nonetheless being overcome (he uses the many’s word: ἡττημένῳ b4) by the value (honor) Socrates has taught him to discount.

Alcibiades insists on a vivid and intense access to the experience of being refuted by Socrates, even now (καὶ νυνί 215de, καὶ ἔτι γε νῦν 216a), that is, *when he is not being refuted by Socrates*. He insists that he is in a position to dismiss honor as something that ‘overcomes’ him. He describes the effects of Socrates’ speech as something he can “still feel even at this moment” (πάσχω ἔτι καὶ νυνί)—but this cannot quite be right. For when Socrates refutes him, Alcibiades, by his own reckoning, behaves like a Corybant: “I find my heart leaping and my tears gushing forth at the sound of his speech.” But his heart is not, as he speaks, leaping, nor are tears gushing forth—for if they were, Plato would have found a way to describe those events. If Socrates *could* make him feel that his life is not worth living, that can only be because he *doesn’t*

⁵¹ Translation by Nehamas and Woodruff, from Cooper.

currently feel that way. Alcibiades is clearly referring to an experience that both he and others have had *at another time*, namely, when they were being refuted by Socrates. Alcibiades feels that he has a grip on ‘Socratism’: “I am still conscious that if I consented to lend him my ear, I could not resist him, but would have the same feeling again.” This sentence expresses in a wonderfully vivid way both the room Alcibiades makes for the Socratic contribution, and the way in which that contribution is currently absent from Alcibiades’ experience. Alcibiades is presently aware (καὶ ἔτι γε νῦν σύνοιδ’ ἐμαυτῶ) of his own weakness (οὐκ ἂν καρτερήσαιμι), of just what he would be experiencing (ταῦτὰ ἂν πάσχοιμι) at the hands of Socrates. But the sentence is a conditional, and he does not *exhibit* that weakness at the moment. As he speaks, he is a lover of honor, motivated to flee from Socrates.

Alcibiades says that only Socrates can make him feel ashamed, seeming to glory in the fact that, Socrates aside, he is renowned for his immunity to shame (“ah, you didn't think I had it in me, did you?”, 216d1). This claim to shamelessness is substantiated by the abandon with which he goes on to recount his sexual rejection by Socrates. Alcibiades comes across very clearly as the shameless lover of honor who is the target of Socrates’ criticisms. Socrates responds by accusing Alcibiades’ speech of being nothing but a cunning circumlocution (κομπῶς κύκλω περιβαλλόμενος 222c4-5) designed to separate Agathon from Socrates. Alcibiades himself attests to the fact that this was at least one of his intentions (222e6-8). Undoubtedly, there are many and varied subtle undercurrents of emotion, intention and judgment in Alcibiades’ speech; nonetheless, the overall thrust of it represents business as usual for the Alcibiades who seeks to become the target of everyone’s exclusive affection. Alcibiades acts out the truth of his self-description as ‘victim to the favors of the crowd.’ The mere presence of Socrates is, in *this*

instance, clearly insufficient for generating shame or motivating Alcibiades to whip himself into shape. If the sight of Socrates really does typically strike fear and shame into the heart of Alcibiades, that can only be because on those occasions it represents something it does not in the context of this drinking-party: the imminent threat of being refuted.

In one way, Alcibiades has independent access to the Socratic point of view, and in another way he doesn't. He has a kind of grip on the kinds of things Socrates will say to him, and the ways that his actions, choices, and desires will look and feel to him when he is talking to Socrates. But they don't look or feel in those ways. He doesn't, as he speaks to the assembled company, hear Socrates' voice in his head, but a simulacrum of Socrates' voice, one that uses Socratic phrasing or terminology but lacks the Socratic *bite*. It is only when Socrates actually begins to speak that the accusations ringing in Alcibiades' ear will really seem to him to be the case. Plato presents Alcibiades as wonderfully tortured in just the way Socrates thinks is characteristic of the akratic: he can almost see what it would be like to see things differently, but he doesn't get all the way to *seeing them differently*. Plato shows what it looks like when someone taps into a point of view to which he nonetheless does not lend credence.

The case of Alcibiades shows us how an image containing a representation of a way the world doesn't currently seem to you, has, if not the power to motivate you, a kind of psychological power nonetheless. Alcibiades acts in accordance with his belief that he ought to live a life of ambition and favor-carrying—and yet Socratic thoughts torture him. He sees Socrates as a source of painful but nonveridical experiences, and yet his relationship with Socrates is love-hate, not hate-hate. Alcibiades dismisses his (motivating!) belief in the value of honor as

illusion, while promoting his disbelief in the value of Socratism to the status of knowledge.

Alcibiades undoubtedly exhibits cognitive instability—but what is remarkable is not the instability itself, but the fact that it does not escape his own notice.

Even someone with regularly shifting beliefs could feel foolishly certain at each moment, repeating to himself, *now* I know. Such a person would live in a kind of blissful ignorance, untroubled by the thought that he used to or might come to see things differently. Alcibiades, however, *is* troubled. He is plagued by something he doesn't think, to the point where it gains introspective prominence over what he *does* think. It is because there is such a thing as a simulacrum that Alcibiades has room to torture himself the way he does. Simulacra cannot show us the truth about the world, but they give us a way to see a truth about ourselves: that we are in a cognitively defective or confused state, one we cannot characterize as knowledge. The one who conflates simulacrum with belief makes a nod at his own ignorance.

If Socrates is right to describe Alcibiades and his fellow akratics as ignorant, Socrates must, in the *Protagoras*, recognize the existence of a distinctively blissless form of ignorance⁵². Aristotle

⁵² I should note that it is possible for one person to vacillate, over time, between akrasia and more blissful forms of ignorance. This is, in fact, my solution to an interpretative dispute as to whether the ignorance with which Socrates charges the akratic in the *Protagoras* outlasts his akratic episode. I agree with Penner, against Singpurwalla and Devereux, that the akratic is ignorant before, during, and after he acts. Singpurwalla (n.4) and Devereux (p.392) read Aristotle's complaint, in the context of his criticism of the Socratic view, that the akratic 'didn't think of doing this, before he got into the condition' (ὅτι γὰρ οὐκ οἶεταί γε ὁ ἀκρατευόμενος πρὶν

ἐν τῷ πάθει γενέσθαι, φανερόν) as a suggestion on Aristotle's part that we charitably interpret Socrates as offering a temporary ignorance view. But consider the passage as a whole:

Σωκράτης μὲν γὰρ ὅλως ἐμάχετο πρὸς τὸν λόγον ὡς οὐκ οὔσης ἀκρασίας· οὐθένα γὰρ ὑπολαμβάνοντα πράττειν παρὰ τὸ βέλτιστον, ἀλλὰ δι' ἄγνοιαν. οὗτος μὲν οὖν ὁ λόγος ἀμφισβητεῖ τοῖς φαινομένοις ἐναργῶς, καὶ δέον ζητεῖν περὶ τὸ πάθος, εἰ δι' ἄγνοιαν, τίς ὁ τρόπος γίνεται τῆς ἀγνοίας. (NE 1145b25-29)

Aristotle's language is most naturally read as a straightforward accusation that the permanence of the ignorance on Socrates' picture is precisely the feature of it that diverges from the phenomena (ἀμφισβητεῖ τοῖς φαινομένοις ἐναργῶς). (Note the link between φανερόν and φαινομένοις.) Aristotle can't be faulting Socrates for saying that akrasia is ignorance, since Aristotle himself says the same. Aristotle agrees substantively with Singpurwalla and Devereux's view that the ignorance of the akratic is temporary, but he disagrees with their interpretation of Socrates as holding this view. I believe the 'permanent ignorance' interpretation follows straightforwardly from the fact that Socrates identifies the cure as an art of measurement which he clearly takes the many not yet to have acquired. Until they come to have that knowledge, they will be ignorant. Devereux's reason for rejecting the permanent ignorance view is that he wishes to allow Socrates to make sense of akrasia as being first-personally experienced. Unlike Penner (see n. 56), I share this interpretative aim, and offer a way to meet it within the permanent-ignorance view. I identify akrasia not with ignorance but with an (imperfect) *awareness* of ignorance. Ignorance can be continuously present without being continuously experienced: akratics, when they are not being akratics, lapse into foolishness.

says that Socrates says that akrasia happens on account of ἄγνοια (1145b27), but Socrates himself doesn't use that word for ignorance in the *Protagoras*⁵³ discussion of akrasia. He speaks somewhat more specifically of ἀμαθία. When you call someone 'ἀμαθής' you pick out what he is missing *as* an education, which is why the word can mean 'boorish'. Correlatively, to say that someone's problem *is* ἀμαθία is to suggest that the cure for it is learning (μάθησις). Socrates says just this in his parting words to the many, when he tells them that they are missing something specific, "not merely a lack of knowledge but a lack of that knowledge you agreed was measurement." (357d6-7) He offers them a knowledge that promises to save their lives by allowing them to act in peace (ἡσυχίαν 356e1), with immunity to the self-doubt, regret and second-guessing (356d5-7) with which they are plagued. This is not the normal Socratic response to ignorance in an interlocutor. The akratic's claim to knowledge, in turn, lacks the quality that standardly characterizes such claims, that of vaunting expertise. Because the akratic claims to know in the context of describing knowledge as powerless, he does not take his possession of knowledge to put him in any better condition than if he lacked it. His 'I *knew* I should not have φ-ed,' is voiced as despair, not boast.

Socrates is always showing people that they do not know what they claim to know. When he does this to akratics, however, he does not follow his customary procedure. Plato uses a number of dramatic and linguistic devices to avoid presenting the encounter as routine elenchus. The

⁵³ Later in the dialogue (after the akrasia-digression, when Socrates resumes the courage is wisdom argument) Socrates does use the word ἄγνοια but quickly glosses it as ἀμαθία, which is the word he then goes on to use exclusively: "θαροῦσιν δὲ τὰ αἰσχρὰ καὶ κακὰ δι' ἄλλο τι ἢ δι' ἄγνοιαν καὶ ἀμαθίαν;" 360b7.

most notable one is having Socrates interact with hypothetical interlocutors. Socrates also, remarkably, seems willing to abrogate his usual role of questioner so as to offer (long!) answers. He presents the whole argument as a response to a question by the many (ἔποιντ' ἂν ἡμᾶς 353a3-4, ἤρεσθε ἡμᾶς 357c6), uncharacteristically putting himself forward, alongside Protagoras, as their teacher (διδάσκειν 352e6). When he does ask them questions, he confidently predicts their response, describing it (again and again) as necessitated (e.g. οὐχ ἔξετε 354d3, 354e2, οὐχ ἔξομεν 355e1). He does not show the many that their views are inconsistent, he *corrects* their mistakes and takes steps towards a positive and didactic theory of their 'salvation' (σωτηρία 356d3, e6). He not only presents his argument with what Gallop calls "an air of conviction," (p.117), but goes so far as to call it a *proof* (using ἀπόδειξις or its verbal equivalent at: 354e6,e8, 357b7, 359d3,5). As Vlastos nicely observes ('Socrates,' n.46) the 'ridiculous' argument is the Socratic counterpart to Protagoras' 'Great Speech,' a rare tour-de-force of Socratic expertise. What is Plato signaling by emphasizing all the ways in which this argument is not business-as-usual for Socrates?

Socrates regularly encounters people full to the brim with their own present certainty, complacent because they take themselves to know exactly what they, at that moment, believe. Socrates' response to such foolish ignorance is to introduce the pain (or 'sting'⁵⁴) of ignorance. His elenctic method works at getting such people to see that they have to choose between two of

⁵⁴ See *Apology* 30e5, *Phaedo* 91c5 and especially *Meno* 80a. Meno, half-understanding what it is to be 'stung' by Socrates, poetically describes the awareness of ignorance as numbness. Meno approximates the feeling of the absence of knowledge by describing it as a noticeable absence of feeling (numbness).

their deeply held beliefs, or between a claim of expertise they must profess and yet cannot back up. They end up feeling trapped, as though there is no way out (ἀπορία). What Socrates offers akratics is just the reverse: an art of measurement which will resolve their many ‘appearances’ into one, will eliminate their pain, put them at peace and show them a way forward. When confronted with foolish ignorance, he plays the gadfly; to akratics he offers a soothing balm.

The akratic’s ignorance is indeed the most striking (ἡ μέγιστη 357e2) ignorance, for he doesn’t know what he himself thinks. It is also the fullest or most realized form of ignorance, being an ignorance which makes a phenomenological mark. The akratic’s pain and regret are signs that he hears the rustlings of his ignorance, rubs up against it, glimpses it out of the corner of his eye, catches a whiff of it. When Socrates describes the akratic’s pathos/pathēma⁵⁵ as ignorance, he means to point out that ignorance is something you can feel, being the kind of thing that appears.

⁵⁵ Segvic resists the standard translation of πάθος/πάθημα as meaning ‘experience’, and translates instead ‘condition.’ She rightly notices that the standard translation has trouble explaining the standard way of reading the claim that the akratic’s πάθημα is ignorance: “when he further down declares that the πάθημα in question is in fact ignorance (357c7), he is not saying that the *experience* characteristic of putative akrasia is ignorance, but rather that the condition of the agent’s soul that is wrongly attributed to *akrasia* is in fact ignorance.” (p.69) But “condition” does not work well as a translation of the question to which the phrase Segvic quotes is the answer. Socrates imagines the many demanding, “if this experience is *not* being overcome by pleasure, what is it then; what do you say that it is?” (357c7-8) The most natural way to read this is as a request for an explanation of what they feel is undeniable—namely, that

On the standard interpretation of the akrasia-argument, Socrates denies that the akratic is gripped by the representation of his action as wrong⁵⁶. This interpretation prevents Socrates from

they have a distinctive kind of *experience*. My interpretation allows us to translate πάθημα as ‘experience’ throughout.

⁵⁶ This is usually advanced as a criticism of the argument, but Penner (‘Weakness’) understands Socrates to *rightly* deny akrasia. Penner sees what we call akrasia as belief fluctuation. Mere beliefs—even true ones—are liable to being overturned in virtue of the presence of some false belief somewhere else in the belief-system. Knowledge alone ensures consistency amongst beliefs which in turn ensures the stability that will foreclose change of mind (=akrasia). I think the problems with Penner’s interpretation all stem from his failure to avail himself of the perspectivalism with which *Socrates* describes the instability of belief (as Wolfsdorf points out, p.131). Penner has no real use for Socrates’ ‘art of measurement,’ since his account of the value of knowledge is based on the fact that it introduces consistency among sets of propositions. Penner’s argument (in ‘Belief’) is, for this reason, oddly out of touch with the problem of akrasia: he shows only that false beliefs generate instability, not that they are prone to generating *akratic* instabilities. That is, he does not show that one with mere belief will be particularly liable to change of belief when faced with a temptation of, e.g., food, drink, sex. Nor do his examples suggest that false beliefs will lead one to akrasia as opposed to other kinds of bad action. But the most serious problem for Penner’s view in ‘Belief’ is that perceptual beliefs, which he grants are involved in every action, are ineliminable sources of instability. No amount of wisdom and internal consistency amongst my ethical beliefs will preclude my misperceiving that clear liquid as gin rather than gasoline. He fails to consider the one form of belief-instability

drawing a distinction between the tortured ignorance of the akratic and the blissful ignorance of the standard Socratic interlocutor. But Socrates depicts akratic ignorance not as a simple lack or defect but the kind of informed lack that both calls for a non-elenctic response and points to an ‘art of measurement’ as its cure. This suggests that we should seek an alternative interpretation. I’ve been arguing for the viability of an interpretation which understands the akratic to be conflating a simulacrum of his action as wrong with a belief that it is wrong. If I am right, Socrates grants the akratic the phenomenal presence of the wrongness of his action, and acknowledges the distinctively tormented and self-aware character of akratic ignorance.

III. The Container View

Let me return to the question with which I opened this paper: how can the phenomenon of akrasia illustrate the power of knowledge as distinct from that of belief? The answer we have arrived at is this: though both knowledge and belief inevitably motivate, motivation by belief is consonant with akratic conflict and its attendant psychological pains. Someone akratically φ -es when he φ -es, believing that he should φ , but sincerely claiming to know that he should not φ . If, instead of believing that he should φ , that agent *knew* that he should φ , he would be incapable

that Socrates actually focuses on. Penner is forced, I think, to conclude that the kind of knowledge which would be proof against akrasia is not possible for creatures such as us (whose actions depend on perception). He cannot respond by pointing out that misperception cases are not the cases in which akrasia typically arises, because, as I remarked above, he has also not shown that instability of the ethical belief on which he focuses corresponds to the typical akratic scenario.

of sincerely claiming to know (or to believe) that he should not φ . The knower might have a simulacrum with the content ‘I should not φ ,’ but he won’t conflate this simulacrum with any higher form of cognition. When Socrates says that knowledge removes the power of appearance, he means that knowledge, unlike mere belief, is unconfutable with appearance. I might believe, but fail to know that I believe; I cannot know, and fail to know that I know. The power Socrates is claiming for knowledge is that if I know, I will never act akratically, because I won’t claim to know otherwise. Socrates can grant that one never acts against one’s beliefs *and* acknowledge the distinctive power of knowledge to make one immune to akrasia⁵⁷: what knowledge offers us is not ‘the power to φ ’—belief can give us that—but rather, the power to φ *painlessly*.

⁵⁷ Penner thinks that one who takes the motivational power of knowledge to follow from that of belief is committed to denying that Socrates is demonstrating *any* power of knowledge as distinct from belief. He calls the view that the impossibility of acting against knowledge follows from the impossibility of acting against belief the “direct corollary view” and asserts that it entails this reading of the strength of knowledge: “knowledge is strong because belief is strong.” (Penner ‘Strength,’ p.120) Penner does not consider the possibility that the reference to the ‘power of knowledge’ might not be a reference to its power to motivate action (synchronically *or* diachronically). That knowledge has a power *distinct* from its ability to produce correct action is the moral of *Meno* 97c-98b. Against reading that passage as itself suggesting Penner’s motivational stability view, I note that *Meno* suggests Penner’s view at 97c6-8, and Socrates rejects it with the question: “Will he who has the right opinion not always succeed, as long as his opinion is right?” Socrates is making a different distinction there, one that takes for granted the assumption that true belief is no less useful ($\chi\epsilon\acute{\iota}\rho\omicron\nu\ \omicron\upsilon\delta\grave{\epsilon}\ \eta\tau\tau\omicron\nu\ \acute{\omega}\phi\epsilon\lambda\acute{\iota}\mu\eta$ 97c4) or effective ($\omicron\upsilon\delta\grave{\epsilon}\nu\ \chi\epsilon\acute{\iota}\rho\omicron\nu\ \acute{\alpha}\pi\epsilon\rho\gamma\acute{\alpha}\zeta\epsilon\tau\alpha\iota$ 98b8). I believe that the power of knowledge to render a simulacrum

This interpretation might lead one to wonder why *akratiks* need to hear a speech in praise of knowledge. For if *akratiks* are the ones who experience the distinctive psychological pains for which knowledge is the cure, one might have expected them to *already* be motivated to seek out teachers. The *akratic's* 'awareness of his own ignorance' cannot, on Socrates' view, extend to being aware of it *as* ignorance. For instead of describing themselves as ignorant, they describe themselves as knowing. Why? Why, if their own psychological pains point them to this fact, are *akratiks* nonetheless unable to see that knowledge, rather than being their condition, is the *cure* for their condition? The answer is that they have a bad theory of what knowledge is, a theory to which Socrates repeatedly sets himself in opposition.

When the many protest as to the weakness of knowledge, their point is not that knowledge regularly loses motivational contests with other psychological states⁵⁸, but that it is not of the sort to motivate in the first place: "...while knowledge is often present in a man, what rules him is

ἄκρῳ does in fact correspond to description at *Meno* 97e-98a of knowledge as 'tied down' by justification; and I suggest that the link between the two passages is the rejection of the 'container view of knowledge' I describe just below. But I cannot substantiate this claim, since it lies outside the scope of this paper to offering a reading of the *Meno* passage.

⁵⁸ Wolfsdorf (p.127) is right that the many are not claiming that knowledge is always overpowered by pleasure, but he's wrong to suggest that this is the only possible interpretation of the claim that 'it never rules.' The many's point is not, as he thinks, that knowledge only *sometimes* rules, but that knowledge is only sometimes opposed by pleasure. Their view is that in the best case knowledge comes along for the ride; it's never in the driver's seat.

not knowledge but something else (οὐ τὴν ἐπιστήμην αὐτοῦ ἄρχειν ἄλλ’ ἄλλο τι): sometimes anger, sometimes pleasures, sometimes pain, at other times love, often fear; they think of his knowledge as being utterly dragged around by all these other things as if it were a slave” (352b5-c2). The many put themselves forward as ruled by something—anything—other than knowledge. They think that knowledge *never* rules: even when they act in accordance with their knowledge—presumably, they are not continuously akratic—they do not credit their knowledge for their action. Why do the many hold their knowledge at arm’s length, thinking that whether or not they ‘have knowledge’ is a question divorced from their motivational outlook? The dismissive language of knowledge ‘often’ being ‘present in’ a man (ἐνούσης πολλάκις ἀνθρώπῳ ἐπιστήμης) suggests that we should diagnose them with the ‘container view’ that Socrates warns Hippocrates against at the opening of the dialogue:

“When you buy food and drink from the merchant you can take each item back home from the store in its own container and before you ingest it into your body you can lay it all out and call in an expert for consultation as to what should be eaten or drunk and what not, and how much and when. So there’s not much risk in your purchase. But you cannot carry teachings (μαθήματα) away in a separate container (ἐν ἄλλῳ ἀγγείῳ). You put down your money and take the teaching away in your soul by having learned it, and off you go, either helped or injured (ἢ βεβλαμμένον ἢ ὠφελημένον).” (314a3-b4)

The akratic understands his knowledge in the manner of the one who purports to carry knowledge in a separate container: he claims it as his own despite admitting to being insulated from it. What exactly is Socrates warning against when he cautions that knowledge is not the

sort of thing one can, having inspected, thereupon decide to ingest? It is useful to bring in a parallel passage at *Symp.* 175cd, where Socrates likewise warns his interlocutor (here Agathon) against a ‘container’ picture. Agathon expresses a desire to sit next to Socrates so that by touching him he might benefit from some of the knowledge Socrates has recently acquired and now holds (ὁ σοι προσέστη, d1). Socrates chides Agathon for thinking that knowledge is similar to a fluid that can flow from one cup to another. The work done by the image of a *separate* container (ἐν ἄλλῳ ἀγγεῖῳ 314b1) in the *Protagoras* exchange is assigned in the *Symposium* to the image of knowledge flowing, intact, along a string between two cups (ταῖς κύλιξι 175d6). Socrates is attacking a conception of knowledge as separable from the knower, focusing in the *Protagoras* on the subject side (denying that the knower could be untouched by what he knows), in the *Symposium* on the object side (denying that knowledge could be unaffected by who its knower is).

Alcibiades enters the party after the exchange between Agathon and Socrates, and reiterates the container view when he attempts to praise Socrates’ wisdom:

“I don't know if any of you have seen him when he's really serious. But I once caught him when he was open like Silenus' statues, and I had a glimpse of the figures he keeps hidden within: they were so godlike—so bright and beautiful, so utterly amazing—that I no longer had a choice—I just had to do whatever he told me. What I thought at the time was that what he really wanted was *me*, and that seemed to me the luckiest coincidence: all I had to do was to let him have his way with me, and he would teach me everything he knew—believe me, I had a lot of confidence in my looks.” (216e-217a)

Alcibiades understands Socrates' wisdom in terms of his possession of beautiful objects, and he takes himself to see the beauty of those objects (Socrates' knowledge) even when that knowledge is contained in Socrates. He also thinks that those objects could potentially be transferred from Socrates' soul to his own in the sex-for-knowledge exchange that he envisions when he imagines having Socrates as a teacher. (Nor does Socrates succeed in disabusing him of this picture: Alcibiades faults the inferior value of his physical beauty in comparison with the beauty of Socratic knowledge for Socrates' unwillingness to seal the deal!) Alcibiades, presenting Socrates' knowledge as being as beautiful as Socrates himself is ugly, evidently shares Hippocrates and Agathon's conception of knowledge as insulated from its knower. Socrates by contrast, regularly resists a picture of knowledge as alienable, transferable, separable. The claim that knowledge is *inalienable*—a rejection of the container view—surfaces also in the *Meno*, in Socrates' metaphor of knowledge as bound (δήση/δεθῶσιν 98a3,5)⁵⁹ to the soul of the one who owns it.

The container view asserts knowledge as separable in two related senses:

(1) Transferability: knowledge is the kind of thing that can move from one person to another.

So, if A has it, A can—without losing it, of course—'give' it to B.

⁵⁹ We find similar language of Socrates rejecting of the idea of 'pouring' (ἐκκεχυμένως) or 'inserting' (εἰς τὴν ψυχὴν φέρων ἐνθῶ τὸν λόγον) a *logos* into a soul at, respectively, *Euthyph.* 3d7-8 and *Rep.* 345b5-6.

(2) Alienability: one's own knowledge is a possession from which one stands at arm's length.

Alcibiades illustrates such an objectification of knowledge when he describes Socrates as filled with beautiful 'things'.

It is not only Hippocrates, Agathon and Alcibiades who hold the container view. Socrates begins his discussion of akrasia in the *Protagoras* by associating *most people (hoi polloi)* with the view that knowledge is something one holds at arm's length. This view leads them to insist, when describing their akratic actions, that they *already have* knowledge. Akratics have not changed much since the time of Socrates, a fact which is especially evident if one considers akrasia from a parental point of view. At school, your child picks his nose and sucks his thumb; at his friends' house he doesn't say please or thank you; in college, he takes up smoking; at his first job, he works himself into a nervous breakdown; approaching middle age, he overeats and never exercises. Again and again, you correct your child: "take your thumb out of your mouth, be polite, smoking is unhealthy, you need a vacation, you would feel better if you ate less and got out more." His response, not at first, perhaps, but inevitably, and with growing irritation, will be: "I know." He is not just saying "I know" as a way to get you off his back. He is telling you that your words are otiose because he already *has* everything they could offer him.

Your child says "I know" when he reaches the point of being more familiar with the case against his behavior than you are. He insists on having hit a kind of epistemic ceiling with respect to, say, information about health. He claims knowledge on the basis of a certain kind of access—to an image, an argument, a statistic—one that he could, in turn, hand over to another. This use of "I know p" is equivalent to "I contain within myself a vivid, articulate, well-thought out

representation of p.” Alcibiades feels ‘fully aware’ (πάσχω ἔτι καὶ νυνί, ἔτι γε νῦν σύνοιδ’ ἐμᾶντῳ) of the Socratic point of view. He experiences his claim to know as an undeniable fact, because, like the liberal racist, he is staring right at his “knowledge” with the eye of his mind.

What is wrong with the container view? It’s hard to deny that there is something to be made of metaphorical language in which I ‘contain’ whatever I know or believe or otherwise represent, some sense in which these ‘contents’ are (at least usually) available to me for examination, and that, so long as we speak the same language, I can ‘pour’ one of these contents into you by verbally articulating it. Socrates is objecting not to the metaphor of containment and transfer, but to the conception of the mind such a metaphor suggests. He could express his objection by pointing out that the only thing you can be assured of ‘receiving,’ when I pour my knowledge or belief into you, is a simulacrum; I can’t straightforwardly give you *knowledge* or even *belief*, unless you do some of your own thinking about what I have said. What characterizes proponents of the container view is that they adopt a point of view on mental states that flattens out the normative dimension in which the distinction between knowledge, belief, and simulacrum resides. In describing this dimension as ‘normative’ I mean to advert to the thought that, on the Socratic account, belief is *failed* knowledge, simulacrum *failed* belief. That is, the three states should be understood as standing in varying success-relations to the one thing (knowledge) that they all aspire to be. The metaphor of the mind as a ‘container,’ by contrast, betrays a picture on which simulacra stand as the lowest, indeed only, common denominator of mentality.

Suppose Hippocrates associates with Protagoras long enough to become familiar with the kinds of things Protagoras says, but remains unconvinced by them. We might describe Hippocrates as

having acquired a set of Protagorean teachings (μαθήματα) which do not engage his motivational propensities because he does not lend them credence. Would Socrates deny that Hippocrates in this story is insulated from being benefited or harmed by Protagoreanism? I think he would not. Instead, he would deny Hippocrates ‘has’ Protagoreanism, any more than someone with a painting of a couch has a couch. Socrates would say: just as you cannot sit on a painted couch, you cannot act on a simulacrum. “Your” simulacrum that p does not count as a way in which p is truly *yours*. Beliefs are yours, but not as much as knowledge is, since knowledge is ‘tied down’ in your soul by recollection (*Meno* 98a). Socrates understands the basic case of thinking or representing something to be knowledge; he understands belief as a defective kind of knowledge; and simulacrum as a defective kind of belief. On the Socratic understanding of mental states, a simulacrum counts as being ‘what someone thinks’ only in a twice attenuated sense. Instead of understanding simulacrum and belief in terms of what they fully realize—being alienable and transferable representations of some content—he understands them as being at varying distances from what neither manages to fully realize: knowledge. Both Socrates and the container theorist describe belief and simulacrum in terms of a common property, but the latter picks out something that they *have* in common (being alienable and transferable), Socratism something that they *lack* in common (being knowledge). The container view approaches mental states *reductively*, from the bottom up. The Socratic innovation is to insist on a top down approach⁶⁰.

⁶⁰ The Socratic account of belief is, therefore, opposed to both conceptions of belief raised in Gendler n. 11. Citing H.H. Price, she distinguishes between, on the one hand, “the “occurrence” or “traditional” view—that to believe a proposition is to be in a mental state with a particular sort of introspectively available feature, such as “vivacity” or “liveliness” or “solidity” ” and, on the

This innovation does not amount to a denial of the distinctiveness of akratic phenomenology. In replacing the akratic's claim to L_H with $\boxed{L_H}$, and the akratic's claim to $\boxed{H_I}$ with H_L , Socrates does not boast some special phenomenological access to the contents of someone else's mind. In my own invented notation, I've represented simulacra by drawing a box around some content. Socrates evades Aristotle's charge of blatant phenomenological inaccuracy (ἀμφισβητεῖ τοῖς φαινομένοις ἐναργῶς NE 1145b28) so long as we grant that *the box itself needn't have a phenomenological counterpart*. But should we grant this?

Someone might insist that the ontology of mental states is of the *esse est percipi* variety. Such an objector contests the metaphysical possibility of confusing belief and simulacrum. If I take my belief for a simulacrum, doesn't that *make* it a simulacrum (and likewise in the other direction)? The question turns on what the word 'take' means. On the Socratic story, it does

other hand "the "dispositional" or "modern" view—that to believe a proposition is to be disposed to act in certain ways." The traditional view is the container view; the modern view says something about belief with which Socrates will agree, namely that, "if you believe that p, you will act in accordance with p." But, he will point out, you will act the same if you know that p. What, then, distinguishes belief from knowledge? Socrates' answer is that if you believe that p, you may act in accordance with p in a conflicted way, namely, while under the power of the simulacrum that $\neg p$. What the dispositional view misses, and the Socratic one captures, is how akrasia is possible. Socratic belief is a state which, by contrast with knowledge, leaves room for akratic action. Socrates would object that the traditionalists conflate belief and simulacrum, and the modernists conflate belief and knowledge.

not mean ‘know’ or even ‘believe’ but the verbal counterpart of ‘simulacrum’—*phainesthai*. If I take my belief for simulacrum, I am ‘taken in’, as it were, by the power of appearance (ἡ τοῦ φαινομένου δύναμις, 356d4). Were Socrates to explicitly assert that the akratic wrongly ‘represents’ a mental state (MS) as being X (knowledge, or belief, or simulacrum), he would do so by saying that, to the akratic, MS *appears* to be X. Socrates does not grant to the akratic the second-order *belief* that he believes the pains are greater than the pleasures, any more than he grants him the first-order belief that the pains are greater than the pleasures. Surely it follows from *knowing* that some item is knowledge, belief, or a simulacrum, that it is just as I know it to be. Perhaps some restricted version of that thesis also holds for my beliefs about my mental states. But only the most rabid advocate of the container view would suggest that any simulacrum as to the status of my mental states *makes* it into a mental state of the relevant kind. (At *Rep.* 476c6 Socrates describes someone who would make a claim of that kind as living in a waking dream; dreaming, he says, is the confusion of a likeness with original). Someone who would press such a point has already adopted a reductive picture of the mind on which the simulacrum is the arbiter of mentality. He *assumes* the falsity of, rather than offering an independent argument against, the Socratic thesis that there is more to the difference between states of one’s mind than meets one’s introspective eye.

Socrates concludes the ‘ridiculous’ argument by chiding the many for being unwilling to hand over all their money to those (like Protagoras, Prodicus and Hippias) who claim to cure ignorance (357e). His advice delights the assembled sophists, and is widely recognized by commentators to be ironic. I offer the following explanation for the role of this irony: Socrates has just shown exactly why the many won’t get what they need from the sophists. Even if the

sophists had knowledge, they could not transfer it. The many have much to learn, but, like all adults, they have gotten as far as one can by ingesting the ‘knowledge’ of another. The knowledge they need is not already contained in someone else’s mind. They have no use for any knowledge but their own. Socrates ends the dialogue by pointing out a tension between the two views he has argued for: virtue is knowledge, virtue is not teachable. The tension, however, is a product of combining those two tenets with a third. It is natural to assume that knowledge is teachable, but it is also the view for which Socrates has *not* argued. Socrates asserts without argument that if virtue were knowledge it would *appear* to be *most* teachable (μάλιστα ἂν διδακτὸν φανείη ἡ ἀρετὴ 361b3). But this ‘appearance’ is a product of the container view. If I know that p, the most I can ‘transfer’ to you is a simulacrum of that knowledge—and we will call that transfer a transfer of *knowledge* only if we take what is basic to the knowledge that p to be what it shares with the simulacrum of p. Socrates demurs: knowledge is not separable *as knowledge* from the soul of the one who has it, nor is it implantable *as knowledge* into the soul of the one who receives it. The claim that ‘knowledge is teachable’ turns out to be the container view in another guise.

Socrates’ ‘ridiculous’ argument in the *Protagoras* is rightly taken to be a central text of Socratic intellectualism. If, when Socrates is supposed to be ‘denying akrasia,’ he is in fact busy using the reality of akrasia to deny the container view, Socratic intellectualism should arouse fewer qualms as to whether it offers a realistic portrayal of our psychological struggles. Those wishing to object to the Socratic claim that knowledge is the most powerful thing in the soul will have to marshal more than the mere fact of akrasia.

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