

Pain and Pleasure in Classical Times

Edited by

W. V. Harris



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Pleasure, Pain, and the Unity of the Soul in Plato's *Protagoras*

Wolfgang-Rainer Mann and Vanessa de Harven

1 A Few Preliminaries

The question of whether the hedonism Socrates introduces into the discussion at *Protagoras* 351 B is a position he means to endorse *in propria persona* or is rather part of a complicated dialectical maneuver he deploys against Protagoras has sharply divided interpreters of the dialogue for generations.¹ It seems, on the one hand, unbelievable that Socrates (whether the historical figure or Plato's character) would espouse such an ethically or philosophically 'lowbrow' view, as commentators tend to see it. On the other hand, many commentators have found it equally difficult to accept that Socrates would argue from (what are by his lights) false premises to a conclusion he endorses: the unity of virtue. Many of those who take Socrates to be a hedonist have tried, in various ways, to rehabilitate the thesis, or to deflate the commitment to pleasure, in order to avoid the apparent awkwardness.² Others attribute the view about pleasure to the historical Socrates, or regard it as a phase in Plato's intellectual development.³ Those who deny that Socrates is a hedonist do so either

1 For the pro-hedonist position see e.g. Grote 1865, Adam and Adam 1893, Hackforth 1928, Vlastos 1956, Dodds 1959, Crombie 1962–63, C. C. W Taylor 1976, Gosling and Taylor 1982, Nussbaum 1986, Irwin 1995, Rudebusch 2002, Rowe 2003, and Moss 2014. For the anti-hedonist position see e.g. A. E. Taylor 1926, Grube 1933, Guthrie 1956, Sullivan 1961, O'Brien 1967, Vlastos 1969, Dyson 1976, Zeyl 1980, Annas 1999, Kahn 2003, Dimas 2008, and Shaw 2015.

2 For example, Crombie 1962–63, Gosling and Taylor 1982, Rudebusch 2002, and Moss 2014 take Socratic hedonism to be high-minded or enlightened, and so less offensive as a thesis; Nussbaum 1986 and Rowe 2003 minimize the commitment by making hedonism a placeholder or stalking horse for the good; and Irwin 1995 deflates the thesis by retaining the good as *motivationally* prior to pleasure (i.e. we pursue pleasure because we think it is good), which is a respectable order of priority, and taking pleasure to be *epistemologically* prior (i.e. we make judgments about pleasure before making judgments about goodness), which is a morally benign order of priority (since what we 'really' want is the good).

3 For example, Adam and Adam 1893, Hackforth 1928, C. C. W Taylor 1976, and Gosling and Taylor 1982 attribute the hedonism to the shortcomings of the historical Socrates; Vlastos

by, again, rehabilitating or deflating the view he ‘really’ commits himself to, so that it no longer counts as hedonism, or by divorcing hedonism from the argument for the unity of courage and wisdom, or, most commonly, by taking Socrates to endorse hedonism formally but to be ironic or insincere in his commitment to pleasure, so that readers (at least those ‘in the know’) are meant to understand an implicit disavowal or criticism of the thesis.⁴ In what follows, we will argue that excellent sense can be made of the relevant passages, taken at face value, without maintaining that Socrates himself holds that pleasure is the good and therefore ought to be pursued.⁵ We are thus ‘anti-hedonists,’ not by invoking irony or insincerity, but by following the letter of the text: a close

1956 and Gosling and Taylor 1982 take the character Socrates, and thus Plato, to be confused in the *Protagoras*.

- 4 Vlastos 1956, Kahn 2003, and Dimas 2008 deflate the Socratic commitment to pleasure being (a) good, but not *the* good, while Guthrie 1956 goes for high-minded hedonism. Vlastos 1969, changing his mind, takes the majority to be committed to full hedonism (where pleasure is identical to the good), while Socrates remains committed to the weaker thesis that pleasure is (a) good, but Vlastos now counts as an anti-hedonist insofar as he denies that either version of hedonism is relevant to the argument against the possibility of *akrasia* (lack of self-control, weakness of will, or incontinence); Shaw 2015 also argues that this argument of Socrates does not rely on the premise of hedonism; Dimas argues that Socrates is committed the weaker view that pleasure and the good are co-instantiated, which is compatible with but does not require hedonism. (NB: *Akrasia* is of course an Aristotelian term, not a Platonic one—whereas its opposite, *enkrateia* (self-control, strength of will, or continence) does occur in the *Republic*—but by now it has become standard to use both terms in discussions of Plato, a convention we too are following.) Grube 1933, Sullivan 1961, O’Brien 1967, Dyson 1976, Klosko 1980, and Zeyl 1980 all take the route of ascribing some kind of irony or insincerity to Socrates.
- 5 Present day philosophical discussions of hedonism often distinguish between a *psychological* or *descriptive* claim—people, as matter of psychological fact, are *motivated* to go for (what they take to be) pleasurable, and are motivated to avoid (what they take to be) painful—and some version of a *normative* claim. (See e.g. Katja Vogt’s contribution to the present volume.) Such normative hedonism can either be of a straightforwardly *prescriptive* sort—people *ought* to go for what is pleasurable, and *ought* to avoid what is painful—or be of an *evaluative* sort—pleasure is the good, or is the highest good, or is the only thing that is good in its own right (with any other putative goods counting as good only if they are appropriately related to pleasure, e.g. by being somehow conducive to it). One could then get to either a descriptive or a prescriptive claim via a suitable version of the *sub specie boni* principle: if everything is pursued under the guise of the good, and if pleasure appears in the guise of the good, and vice versa, then everything will be pursued under the guise of pleasure (descriptive). On the other hand, if one ought to pursue everything under the guise of the good, and if pleasure appears in the guise of the good, and vice versa, then one ought to pursue everything under the guise of pleasure (prescriptive). Since Plato does not draw a sharp fact/value distinction, it may well be misguided (or anachronistic, see Gosling and Taylor 1982, 57) to seek to attribute to him either a purely descriptive claim about pleasure, or a purely normative one. We briefly return to this issue near the end of our paper (see n. 43, below).

reading of the *Protagoras* shows that Socrates, in the course of the discussion, never commits himself to any form of hedonism at all.

The status of hedonism in the *Protagoras* is, however, also of interest beyond the confines of interpreting the dialogue, or indeed even beyond the project of reading Plato. The view that pleasure (sometimes) is good, and that thus one (sometimes) ought to go for what is pleasant can seem like a commonplace thought, a piece of basic folk psychology. And near the beginning of both the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Eudemian Ethics*, Aristotle points out that people in general regard pleasure as (a) good, and that some—those he whom he calls, as certain of our translations have it, ‘voluptuaries’ (*apolaustikoi*)—pursue pleasure as that which makes for human happiness and flourishing. The way Aristotle discusses the voluptuaries’ view suggests that he takes it to be a rather low or slavish position (cf. e.g. *NE* 1. 5. 1095b14–22 or *EE* 1. 5. 1215b30–1216a2). Somewhat ‘better’ people will go for something like honor. And those with certain intellectual pretensions ‘proclaim that [happiness] is some great thing, beyond the comprehension of [most people]’ (cf. *NE* 1. 4. 1095a26–27). Aristotle’s discussion further suggests, though he does not quite come out and say so, that ordinary people are thoroughly familiar with the view that pleasure is what is best (and thus makes for a good, happy life), and indeed that this a view they themselves at times hold and even avow.

We bring this up here at the outset because a striking feature of the *Protagoras* is that ordinary people are presented as *disavowing* (or pretending to disavow) the claim that pleasure is (the) good. They are made to say, via their ‘spokesman’, Protagoras, that pleasure is *only* good if it arises from *kala* things or actions (i.e. those that are noble, fine, or honorable).⁶ Yet it turns out that they cannot give content to this claim and so are forced to concede that they are in fact committed to what (they say) they disavow. The hedonism in the *Protagoras* thus serves to bring to light both a deep incoherence in how people ordinarily think of themselves, their motivations, and behavior, as well as a certain falsity inherent in popular morality.⁷ This, even more than the ‘discovery’ that Protagoras is not competent to teach virtue, is a central lesson of the work.

6 Some commentators have taken this disavowal as the final word and thus see the majority as denying hedonism throughout the discussion, e.g. A. E. Taylor 1926, Hackforth 1928, Dyson 1976, Irwin 1995, and Annas 1999.

7 Shaw 2015 in nice fashion appropriates Orwell’s expression ‘doublethink’ to speak of the confused and self-deceived way in which the many understand their values and moral commitments, resulting from the social pressure to hold but never avow that injustice is prudent, and, at once, to avow but never really hold that justice and virtue are good.

2 Some Background on the *Protagoras*

The *Protagoras* opens, as do several other Platonic dialogues, with a framing conversation that provides the dramatic setting for Socrates to recount the actual exchange, in this case to an unnamed friend (cf. e.g. 309 A 1–310 A 7 and 362 A 4). The central discussion, however, begins considerably later, with the question of what Protagoras will teach his pupils (316 B 8). This postponement of the main discussion and the particular question it seeks to address is occasioned by an *initial* exchange within the narrated dialogue, the one between Socrates and his young friend Hippocrates (310 B 3–314 C 2), and Hippocrates' inability there to tell Socrates what, substantively, he hopes to learn from Protagoras (312 E 5–6). (Hippocrates is so eager on becoming Protagoras' student that he barges in on Socrates before daybreak, in order to enlist his help in securing him a spot as one of Protagoras' students (310 A 8).) This inability in turn prompts Socrates to ask Protagoras about his teaching, as it were, on behalf of Hippocrates. After some back and forth, Protagoras explains that his teaching (*mathēma*) is:

... sound deliberation (*euboulia*), both in household matters (*ta oikeia*)—how best to manage one's own household, and in civic affairs (*ta tēs poleōs*)—how to be maximally effective (*dunatōtatos*) in civic affairs, both with respect to acting and (public) speaking. (318 E 5–319 A 2)⁸

Socrates immediately paraphrases this as *politikē technē*, i.e. 'the art of citizenship' or 'the art of running a city' (C. C. W. Taylor), which promises to make men into good citizens (*poiein andras agathous politas*) (319 A 3–5). Protagoras eagerly embraces this paraphrase, and Socrates proceeds to challenge him, offering reasons why one might very much doubt that this can be taught (319 A 10–320 C 1). These reasons rely on the idea that *democratic* Athens proceeds rightly in allowing *every* citizen to have a voice on questions of public policy. This shows, Socrates suggests, that the Athenians do not hold that there is any *special* expertise or wisdom in this sphere of human activity, which someone could teach to those who lack it. He thus puts Protagoras in the potentially awkward position of coming across as a member of an *anti-democratic* elite. For Protagoras cannot justify his fees by claiming (in Athens) that the Athenians have got it all wrong, that the *polis* in fact should not allow every citizen to have a voice on matters of public policy, but permit only those

⁸ Here and throughout the translations are by S. Lombardo and K. Bell 1992/1997, though often with changes of our own.

who have learned the art of citizenship (from him!) to speak in the Assembly, say. Protagoras' Great Speech (320 C 8–328 D 2) is, among other things, his attempt to answer or defuse Socrates' worries in line with the Athenians' democratic commitments.

Socrates, for his part, responds to the Great Speech by raising 'one small matter' (328 E 3; cf. 329 A 4, A 6, and B 6) he thinks Protagoras has not settled: *is virtue or excellence a single thing*, such that if someone possesses one of what are conventionally thought of as the virtues, she necessarily possesses them all (viz. by possessing that single thing)? Or are the *virtues* (note the plural) rather separate and distinct, so that someone could, for example, be courageous but not at all just (and so on)?⁹ Via a series of further questions (329 C 6–330 B 6) Socrates sets out the agenda and method for the subsequent dialectical exchanges, which (despite various twists and turns) constitute the remainder of the narrated dialogue (330 B 6–362 A 3).

Protagoras is induced to adopt as his *thesis* the claim that the virtues are distinct (and the related claim that it thus *is* possible for someone to possess one virtue but lack another). Socrates, in his role as *questioner*, *attacks* that thesis, by putting a series of questions to Protagoras with the intent of inducing him to grant things *conflicting with* his thesis (or to deny things *following from* it). Protagoras, in his role as *answerer*, needs to *uphold* his thesis, that is, in order to 'escape' the question-and-answer exchange (the *elenchus*) unscathed, he must avoid granting (or denying) anything that is problematic in the way indicated.¹⁰ Thus Socrates *indirectly* argues for the opposing thesis: the virtues are unified, i.e. *virtue is a single thing*; and he, likewise, in effect also argues for

9 It is worth pointing out that Plato's 'list' of the so-called cardinal virtues, both in the *Protagoras* and in other works, differs markedly from what the epigraphical evidence shows the Athenians took to be the most important virtues of someone who was of value to, or had benefited, the *democratic polis*. (See Whitehead 1993, where he speaks of 'democratic cardinal virtues' and develops further ideas initially presented in Whitehead 1983.) *Sōphrosunē* in particular seems to have retained 'oligarchic' overtones (Whitehead 1993, 70–72). For more on this virtue see also the extensive discussions in North 1966 and Rademaker 2005. Thus Plato may be seeking, already in the list of what virtue comprises, to exploit tensions between the professed democratic outlook of the Athenians and their *de facto* commitment to aristocratic values (a matter which surfaces at several points in the dialogue, for example, at 347 C–348 A). We are grateful to Elizabeth Scharffenberger for drawing our attention to Whitehead's important papers.

10 The terminology (*questioner*, *answerer*, *thesis*, and so on) used in the body of the text for Socratic-Platonic question-and-answer exchanges (i.e. dialectic and the *elenchus*) is drawn from Aristotle's discussion in the *Topics*; see Mann 1992, Mann 1998, and Reinhardt 2000, 61–67, as well as Mann 2003. On Plato's use of *dialektikē* and related expressions, Müri 1944 remains fundamental; and on dialectic in the Academy more generally, see Ryle 1965, Ryle 1968, Moraux 1968, and Brunschwig 1984–85. Lloyd 1979, 59–125 provides

the claim that this single thing must be knowledge or wisdom. However, crucially, given the dialectical context (viz. the method and its practitioners' goals as just described), it is not the explicit, or even, as far as the dramatic frames go, the implicit, objective of Socrates to establish *any* thesis or positive account. In short, Socrates is not arguing *for* anything, as is indeed customary in the so-called Socratic *elenchus*.¹¹ In this respect, then, we take the argument to be *ad hominem*: its goal is the negative one of showing that Protagoras' thesis is untenable—either because it is false, or because Protagoras lacks the resources for defending it adequately.

Here an important caveat is necessary. Taking the dialectic to be *ad hominem*, i.e. as being directed *at* the answerer, does not require ascribing insincerity, dishonesty, or the like to the questioner. We would like to emphasize this, because it is not uncommon for the expression '*ad hominem*' to be treated as interchangeable with terms like 'fallacious,' 'insincere,' and 'dishonest.' But in fact the *elenchus* may often proceed by means of false premises, namely those the interlocutor has committed himself to, without this requiring that we charge Socrates with insincerity, fallacy, or subterfuge; and Socrates is presumably always *in effect* arguing for an *intellectualist* view of our place in the world, so there should be nothing untoward about his arguments here leading to such results either.¹² Accordingly we agree with Michael J. O'Brien that this is a 'normal *elenchus*,' but we disagree with his further claim that Socrates is 'not being straightforward at all.'¹³ Thus *for us*, to maintain that Socrates' argument is *ad hominem* is simply to say that it aims to examine critically Protagoras' claims to teach virtue, the picture of education he paints in the Great Speech, and his commitment to a popular conception of the virtues as separable and distinct.

3 The Immediate Context for Hedonism, and the Turn to *Akrasia*

By 349 A–D, after, again, some interruptions, Protagoras has been forced to concede that wisdom (*sophia*), moderation (*sōphrosunē*), justice (*dikaiosunē*),

additional, helpful background. The papers in Fink 2012 address a number of issues in 'the development of dialectic from Plato to Aristotle' (this is the volume's title).

- 11 Addressing the much-discussed issue of whether the Socratic *elenchus* can establish any positive results is beyond the scope of our present paper. The issue, fortunately, does not matter for the questions we are addressing.
- 12 By 'intellectualism' we here mean the view (which Plato's Socrates often avows) that 'the good life is a matter of *knowing* what is good,' (so Frede 1992, viii; emphasis added). In the *Protagoras*, as we will shortly see, Socrates correspondingly argues for an essentially *cognitive* picture of the emotions and other affective states: each such state turns out to be (for Socrates) a matter of *thinking* that something is good, or is bad.
- 13 O'Brien 1967, 138–139, our italics; cf. also Irwin 1995, 86.

and piety/holiness (*hosiotēs*) are 'reasonably close' to each other, but he insists that courage (*andreia*) is 'altogether different.' Socrates' immediate goal (at 349 E ff.) is thus to challenge this sub-thesis, i.e. to argue that courage, too, is to be identified with the other four virtues, in particular, with wisdom. His initial attempt at securing Protagoras' agreement to this identity *fails* (349 E 2–351 B 2). This failure leads Socrates to digress, in abrupt fashion, from their discussion of courage, changing the subject (or so it seems) by asking: 'Tell me, Protagoras, ... do some men live well (*eu zēn*), others badly (*kakōs*)?' (351 B 3).¹⁴ And it is only here, in the context of exploring whether there is such a thing as living well, that talk of hedonism first surfaces in the dialogue: for Socrates will next go on to introduce the suggestion that pleasure is good, and pain bad.

Before turning to any of the details of that suggestion and its subsequent discussion, we can already note that hedonism appears very late in the dialogue. This would be an odd position to locate an allegedly central view of Socrates, especially since nothing in the earlier discussion can be thought of as preparing readers for its appearance. More importantly, we can see that hedonism appears as part of the immediate dialectical context or strategy; that is, Socrates brings it up as part of arguing towards the conclusion that courage is to be identified with wisdom. This, of course, does not suffice to show that Socrates does *not* endorse hedonism. But it suggests that the matter of whether or not he endorses it is irrelevant to the dialectical strategy, since it is Protagoras who is in the role of answerer (sometimes alongside 'the many'), and who thus is forced to take a stand on hedonism. Instead, we should rather ask: *how* do the claims about pleasure play the roles they are meant to play; *how* does hedonism contribute to Socrates' argument against Protagoras' assertion that courage is altogether different from the other virtues? If we can answer these questions, we will be well on our way towards answering the further question of *why* Socrates (i.e. Plato) introduces hedonism at this particular point in the work, and to *what extent*, if any, these roles require Socrates' own commitment to it. We might also hope to gain, concomitantly, a clearer sense of just what sort of hedonism is being considered here—a prescriptive thesis to the effect that everyone *ought to pursue* pleasure as the good (and *ought to avoid* pain as the bad), or rather a psychological thesis to the effect that everyone, in actual fact, *does pursue* pleasure as the good (and *does avoid* pain as the bad), or perhaps some sort of combination or conflation of the two.



14 The abruptness here is sufficiently striking to have led C. C. W Taylor to posit a lacuna in the text in the original edition (1976) of his commentary; see Taylor 1991, 225, *ad* Taylor 1976, 162.

Now, some details about the part of the dialogue that is our main focus. At 351 C Socrates asks Protagoras whether living pleasantly is good (*to ... hēdeōs zēn agathon*), and living unpleasantly (sc. without pleasure (*aēdeōs*), or rather, in a painful manner) bad.¹⁵ Protagoras wants to deny this: a pleasure is only good if it is also *kalon* (noble, honorable, or fine).¹⁶ More generally: some pleasures are bad (and shameful); some pains are good (and honorable), or at least, not bad (and not shameful). At 351 E 1–3 Socrates sharpens the issue, by asking: are pleasurable things good, simply to the extent (*kath' hoson*) that they are pleasurable? Is pleasure itself (*hē hēdonē autē*) good? Protagoras is not prepared to accept this straightaway, and thus says that they need to investigate whether pleasure (*hēdu*) and good (*agathon*) are the same (*to auton*), or not (E 3–7).¹⁷ That investigation follows.

First, however, there is a detour. Starting at 352 A, we encounter what seems to be an additional digression (from the more basic matter of whether or not courage is to be identified with the other virtues): about whether knowledge is something strong (*ischuron*), 'in charge' (*hēgemonikon*), and capable of ruling (*archikon*) in a person. This Socrates wants to affirm.¹⁸ And about whether

15 We do not find Socrates making any commitment to hedonism here: the inference he makes here (*ara*) follows from what seems to Protagoras to be the case at 351 B 5–10; cf. A. E. Taylor 1926, 259 and Zeyl 1980, 253 for agreement on this point. Those who find Socrates committing himself to hedonism *in propria persona* at 351 C 1 include Hackforth 1928, 260, Sullivan 1961, 21–22, Crombie 1962, Vlastos 1969, Dyson 1976, Gosling and Taylor 1982, 47, C. C. W Taylor 1976, 164–166, Nussbaum 1986, 451, n. 56 (citing the emphatic *ego*—but against this, because it introduces a direct question, cf. Zeyl 1980, 255, n. 16), Irwin 1995, 82, 86, and Annas 1999, 168.

16 We doubt that this is a misunderstanding of Socrates' proposal on Protagoras' part, as Dyson 1976, 42 suggests; indeed, to the extent that the *Protagoras* is complimentary to the sophist, featuring him pushing back during the *elenchus* and artfully navigating his tangled web of commitments, we think it is more likely that Protagoras is mindful of speaking to public morality, false as it will be shown to be. Further, Protagoras' hedging language in 351 D 1–3 arguably shows that he, too, has the dialectical context in view: he says he is not sure it is 'fitting' (*apokriteon*) for him to endorse hedonism and that it would be 'safer' (*asphalesteron*) to answer otherwise (for the latter as a rhetorical term of art, cf. LSJ, s.v. *asphalēs*, I. 4–5). Thus we disagree with the thesis of Shaw 2015 that the sophists have absorbed and internalized the views of the many, as opposed to consciously exploiting and navigating them.

17 One could also construe the question as asking whether the same (thing) is both pleasure and (the) good, or is both pleasant and good. Contrast our view with the deflationary position of Denyer 2008, *ad loc.*: that Socrates is asking whether a person will count as having done well taking pleasure in living out a full human life, not whether pleasure is intrinsically good.

18 As does Protagoras, who of course is hardly in a position to deny that his wares are 'anything but the most powerful forces in human activity' (352 D 1–2).

there is such a thing, such an experience, as 'being overcome' by pleasure (or, implicitly, by *thumos*, pain, fear, erotic passion, or ... (cf. 352 B 5–8 and E 1–2)). This Socrates wants to deny. But he recognizes that he needs to explain *why* people are tempted to offer explanations of their behavior along these lines (353 A 2–6). Among those who are tempted to say such things are Medea in her great monologue (Euripides, *Medea*, 1021–86),¹⁹ and Phaedra in her reflections on pleasure, shame, and knowing what one ought to do, but failing to do it (Euripides, *Hippolytus*, 373–90).²⁰ As Charles Kahn notes, given these two

19 Medea concludes her speech with these words: 'I understand what evils (*kaka*) I am about to do/ but my *thumos* is stronger than my *bouleumata* (*thumos de kreissōn tōn emōn bouleumatōn*)—which [= this *thumos*] is the cause of the greatest evils for mortals' (1078–1080, tr. B. Seidensticker 1990, 90; Mastronarde 2002, *ad* 1078, offers 'harmful things' for *kaka* here). Matters are complicated by the fact that several scholars have challenged the authenticity of all or some of lines 1056–1080. The suggestion that these lines are interpolated goes back to Bergk 1884, 512 n. 140; and the case against them is argued vigorously by Reeve 1972. Diggle, in the 1984 OCT, brackets the lines. Defenders include Kovacs 1986 (who does, however, athetize 1056–1064), Rickert 1987, Seidensticker 1990, and Mastronarde 2002 (who does, however, excise 1062–1063 (a doublet of 1240–1241)); see also Mastronarde 2002, 343–346, *ad* 1078–1080. For an overview of earlier discussions along with copious references, see Seidensticker 1990 and Mastronarde 2002, 388–397. Additional complications arise from disagreements about how the two key words are to be understood. We follow those scholars who see *thumos* not as emotion or passion in some general way, but as amounting to an archaic/aristocratic sense of self-worth, involving self-assertion, pride, a commitment to honor and the avoidance of shame and humiliation, and so on, and who thus construe it as being very similar to what Plato, in the *Republic*, will likewise call *thumos* (or to *thumoeides*), i.e. the spirited part of the soul. (Cf. e.g. Rickert 1987, 99–101.) The word *bouleumata* is problematic for a different reason: earlier, Medea had used *bouleumata* to refer to her plans of wreaking vengeance on Jason (see 769 and 772); and by 1040–1048 it is clear that these plans include killing her children. Here, at the end of her speech, however, it is *thumos* that is pushing her to seek vengeance (and to do what is bad/harmful, *including* above all what is bad for/harmful to her herself, viz. killing her children); thus the plans to be overcome by *thumos* can, in line 1079, no longer be the specific plans for revenge she had labeled *bouleumata* before. Lloyd-Jones 1980 urges that the term is 'colourless' as a way of evading the problem, whereas Mastronarde 2002, 395 suggests that Medea may be referring to all her deliberations, 'to the entire process of internal debate carried on in the monologue, not just to the one side or the other, so that Medea is almost acknowledging an impasse between the two sides but saying that her angry spirit makes this impasse and the process of debate irrelevant.' This points to two further, large questions, which we also cannot consider here. Is Euripides interested in the phenomenon of *akrasia*—situations where a non-rational, or at any rate, a not wholly rational force (here: *thumos*) conflicts with reason and its pronouncements (about what to do), and in fact 'overcomes' them? And might he be engaging with Socrates in doing so? (See, e.g. Snell 1948, Moline 1975, Irwin 1983, and Rickert 1987.)

20 Phaedra says that 'it is not on account of the nature of our minds (*kata gnōmēs phusin*) that we fare (or act) badly (*prassein kakion*), since thinking well (*eu phronein*) can be

notorious examples of *akrasia*, Socrates' denial of the phenomenon 'would seem just as implausible and paradoxical in Plato's day as in our own.'²¹ (And this will seem so, even if we think that Euripides presents cases of motivational conflict rather than instances of *akrasia*, strictly speaking.²²) Indeed, Plato's readership would very likely either itself be tempted to think and say that there is such a thing as 'being overcome' (by *thumos*, or pleasure, or ...), or at least it would be wholly familiar with thinking along these lines.

Protagoras, who in his role as expert and teacher needs to distance himself from the majority (and who may even recognize the Scylla and Charybdis he is about to navigate), wonders why they should bother considering what most people say, since they are given to saying any chance thing (353 A 7–8; cf. 352 E 3–4). By way of response, Socrates indicates that he believes this issue 'is relevant to finding out' (*pros exheurein*) about courage and its relation to the other parts of virtue (353 B 1). Thus he flags explicitly what one would have suspected in any event, namely that all this *is*, somehow, in the service of the central project of arguing against Protagoras's initial thesis that the virtues are distinct. As noted above, given various points Protagoras has been forced to

found/ among many people. One ought rather to look at it like this:/ what we know and understand to be good-and-useful (*chrēsta*)/ we fail to follow through on—some [of us] because of laziness, / and some [of us] because they give precedence, not to the *kalon*, / but to some other pleasure (*hēdonē*)' (377–383). This passage, too, and especially the lines following it are subject to much controversy, which we cannot address here. (See, e.g. Segal 1970, Claus 1972, Solmsen 1973, and Kovacs 1980, whose construal of *hoi d' hēdonēn prothentes anti tou kalou/ allēn tin'* in 382–383 we are following. Snell 1948 and Irwin 1983 also consider this passage in connection with Socrates and Plato.) It may, however, be worth noting that Snell 1948, 128–129, sees here an allusion not just to the Socrates of Plato's early dialogues but also to thoughts along the lines of *Memorabilia*, 3, 9, 4, where Xenophon writes: 'He [sc. Socrates] did not distinguish between wisdom (*sophia*) and moderation (*sōphrosunē*). But if someone who knows which things are beautiful and good (*kala te k'agatha*) and acts in accord with them (*chrēsthai autois*), and knowing which things are base, avoids them, then he judged (*ekrine*) him to be both wise (*sophos*) and moderate (*sōphrōn*). When asked further if he thought that those who know what they ought to do but in fact do the opposite are simultaneously wise (*sophoi*) and un-self-controlled (*akrateis*), he said: "Not at all—they rather are unwise (*asophoi*) and un-self-controlled; for I think that all people choose, from among the possible options facing them (*ek tōn endechomenōn*), what they believe to be most beneficial (*sumphorōtata*) for themselves. And so I consider those who act wrongly (*mē orthōs*) to be neither wise (*sophoi*) nor moderate (*sōphrones*).'" Phaedra would thus seem to allow for something Socrates rules out: according to her, a person can be wise, but fail to act rightly, i.e. in accord with that wisdom, whereas for Socrates, the failure to act rightly—i.e. acting *mē orthōs* instead—simply shows that the person so acting is *not* wise.

21 Kahn 2003, 168.

22 See e.g. Rickert 1987, for an approach to Euripides along these lines.

concede, the only part of that initial thesis that still survives is the sub-thesis that courage is distinct from the other four virtues. Hence, the focus now is on *it*, and on the relation of courage to the other four. Allowing Protagoras to maintain, for the time being, his distance from the majority on both hedonism and *akrasia*, Socrates and Protagoras proceed to argue against the commitment the many have to the phenomenon of 'being overcome'. Along the way, Protagoras will endorse hedonism and will be forced to acknowledge that his sub-thesis falls prey to the same problems as the conception of *akrasia* which the many have (this, of course, is why the subject of being overcome is introduced into the discussion).

Though matters have not been spelled out fully at this point, Socrates relies on the following idea: getting clear about the nature of courage (and its relation to the other virtues, in particular, to wisdom) requires getting clear about what is *really* going on in cases where people speak of 'being overcome' (paradigmatically, by *pleasure* but in this case by *pain*, specifically *fear*) and accordingly saying that they are doing what they know, or believe, to be the *worse* thing to do.²³ (Or, in the case of cowardice, failing to do what they know, or believe, to be the *better* thing to do.) And getting clear about that in turn requires getting clear about what they think about *pleasure*, in particular, what they think about the relation of pleasure to the *good* and the *kalon* (the honorable, or noble, or fine). How is this meant to go?

4 *Akrasia*, the Unity of the Soul, and the Structure of Motivation

A naïve, everyday conception of *akrasia* requires what one might, with Jessica Moss and others, call *motivational pluralism*:²⁴ the sources of a person's motivation to act (or to refrain from acting) can differ; in particular, a person's *judgment* about what is good or noble (to do) can *conflict* with what she *desires*, with what is more pleasant (to do). And if there is such a conflict, one or the

23 Here we bypass a debate in the literature over whether the argument is meant to conclude that *only* knowledge (and not also belief) cannot be overcome. Anti-intellectualist and unitarian interpreters, e.g. Kahn 2003, restrict the argument to knowledge, so that Socrates is not denying the possibility of conflict but avowing the sovereignty of knowledge; others who restrict the argument to knowledge include Vlastos 1969 and Dyson 1976. We take Socrates to be arguing from the stronger intellectualist thesis that no one acts against what she *believes* to be best, in agreement with Frede 1992, xxix, and Moss 2014, 289, n. 9, and 305–308; but see Kamtekar 2018 for the view that Socrates is arguing *not from* but *to* this familiar Socratic thesis.

24 See Moss 2014, 300 and *passim*.

other of the two ‘elements’ involved can prove ‘stronger’—or, as it may happen, ‘weaker.’ Thus one can further suppose on behalf of the naïve view that if, in the face of, say, a tempting pleasure (which, if pursued, would lead someone to refrain from doing what she judges is best (to do)), the person none the less does act in accord with the judgment, she is then being ‘strong’ (*enkratic*) and has ‘mastered’ the temptation (the pleasure). Correspondingly, if, in the face of that tempting pleasure she actually does pursue *it* (and thus refrains from doing what she judges is best (to do)), the agent is then being ‘weak’ (*akratic*) and has, by contrast, ‘been mastered’ by the temptation (the pleasure).

Now, first and foremost, Socrates’ argument against the possibility of *akrasia*—i.e. against understanding the kind of behavior just described as *being a case of akrasia properly speaking*—is directed against motivational pluralism: the naïve, everyday way of describing and conceptualizing *akrasia* already involves the mistake of supposing that there could be more than one source of motivation (i.e. it denies the unity of the soul). If there is only a *single* source of motivation, there obviously cannot be any motivational conflicts of the sort that (supposedly) characterize the *akratic* agent (or, for that matter, the *enkratic* one); and without such motivational conflicts, there cannot be *any* cases of ‘mastering’ or ‘being mastered,’ strictly speaking. Thus the phenomenon, i.e. bad behavior of a certain sort, and the account of it need to be re-conceptualized and re-described.²⁵

At this point, the dialectical context and strategy becomes highly relevant. If we simply encountered Socrates denying motivational pluralism while people in general endorsed it (at least implicitly), we might well be faced with a standoff. What speaks in favor of Socrates’ view (and any proposed re-description he might offer) as opposed to the naïve view, which, after all, is likely to be *our*

25 Many interpreters of Plato hold that a major reason why Plato, in the *Republic*, divides the soul into *three* parts, and thus allows for three *distinct* sources of motivation, is precisely to make room for a different description and analysis of phenomena like *akrasia*—different, that is, from what he offers in the *Protagoras*. (See e.g. Frede 1992.) Indeed, Moss 2014 takes it to be a desideratum on interpreting the *Protagoras* that we find in it the seeds of the *Republic*’s tripartite psychology. We cannot here take up this kind of developmental claim, though we are sympathetic to the idea that the *Republic* responds to and departs from strict intellectualism (but not to the idea it does so by simply rejecting the premise of hedonism and thereby, automatically, intellectualism as a whole, conceived of as dependent on Socrates’ own hedonism in *Protagoras*, as Moss 2014, 288 argues). We would like to stress that one should not read *back into* the *Protagoras* the *Republic*’s tripartite psychology and the motivational pluralism associated with it. Doing so makes it impossible to understand correctly either the arguments about pleasure, pain, and *akrasia*, or the claim that knowledge can be that which is ‘in charge’ in a person.

view as well?²⁶ Given how dialectical arguments work, it would be sufficient for breaking the impasse, if Socrates could successfully show that the many—despite their overt avowal of the existence of *akrasia*—are *also* (by their own, though as yet unavowed, hedonistic lights) committed to rejecting motivational pluralism (and thus to accepting the unity of the soul). That is, for ‘success’ in this argument, what matters is neither Socrates’ own view, nor whatever speaks in its favor; rather, what matters are the views of his interlocutors and the commitments they involve. Here, these are officially the views of the many, but it turns out that they are *also* those of Protagoras, for his views are revealed to be not as different from those of ordinary people as he would like to say they are.²⁷ Whether Socrates himself is committed to hedonism or not is thus wholly beside the (dialectical) point, as indeed the medical pretense at 352 A serves to remind us.²⁸

If the preceding remarks are along the right lines, it means that the premise of hedonism is strictly part of the argument against motivational pluralism. In one way, it is trivially easy to see why this is so: if, in fact, *all* behavior is motivated by the desire to obtain pleasure (and to avoid pain), then we simply and straightforwardly have *motivational monism*. The difficulty will be getting ‘the many’ to recognize that their embrace of the possibility of *akrasia* (as they describe and conceptualize it) and their motivational pluralism turn out to be two sides of one and the same mistake.

26 Note that the sentiments Euripides has Medea and Phaedra expressing sound completely banal and uncontroversial: our anger, sense of pride, or fear of humiliation can interfere with, and override, our rational deliberation and planning; likewise, plenty of people know what it would be right for them to do, yet for all that fail to act in accord with their knowledge (see notes 19 and 20 above).

27 That Protagoras stands with the many (and not Socrates) on the matter of motivational pluralism is something he has already revealed—as Jessica Moss nicely argues—in his exchange with Socrates, at 349 D–351 A, where he resisted Socrates’ attempt to identify courage with knowledge. In particular, Protagoras there said that confidence (*tharsos*) arises from (*apo*) skill or craft (*technē*, viz. a kind of knowledge), but also from spirit (*thumos*) and insanity (*mania*), whereas courage (*andreia*) arises from nature (*phusis*) and the proper nurture of souls (*eutrophia tōn psuchōn*). (Protagoras had agreed with Socrates that those who are courageous are confident, but he had denied that those who are confident are therefore also courageous.) Protagoras thus in effect relies on the view that a certain kind of behavior can have a variety of motivational sources. See Moss 2014, 301.

28 Socrates suggests that he wants to examine the *mind* of Protagoras in the way in which a doctor examines the *body* of a patient. That is, the focus is to be on what *Protagoras* thinks (and is committed to), not on what *Socrates* himself holds.

5 The Many (and Protagoras) on What Makes Good Pleasures Good, and Bad Pleasures Bad

Socrates' route into the issue is somewhat indirect. Having affirmed their commitment to the phenomenon of 'being overcome' (353 C 5–7), he asks the many on what basis (if not on the basis of being unpleasant/painful) they deem so-called bad pleasures bad, and on what basis (if not on the basis of being pleasant/not painful) they deem good pains good. More precisely, he offers the many a suggestion for what this basis is: do *they* not call certain pleasures bad, not on account of those pleasures *themselves* (i.e. not account of them *qua* pleasures, or *qua* pleasant), but rather on account of various bad consequences which result down the line, 'diseases and poverty and many other things of that sort' (353 D 2–3)? And those consequences, in turn, merit the label 'bad' 'on account of nothing other than the fact that they result in troubles/griefs (*aniai*) and deprive us of other pleasures' (353 E 5–354 A1). Correspondingly, do *they* not call certain troublesome/grievous things (*aniara*) good—e.g. harsh military training and medical procedures such as having a wound cauterized—not on account of the pain itself (i.e. not on account of these things, *qua* painful), but rather on account of their *later* bringing about 'health and good condition of bodies and preservation of cities and power over others and wealth' (354 A 1–7)? And these later results, for their part, count as good only because they lead to pleasure and to the relief from and avoidance of pain (354 B 5–7). At this point, having offered the many this diagnosis of their condition, Socrates directly asks them the following question:

'Or do you [sc. the many] have some other end-or-result (*telos*) in view, other than pleasure and pain, in regard to which you would call these things 'good'? They say "no," I think.'

'Nor does it seem so to me,' Protagoras said. [Protagoras here commits himself to hedonism, alongside the majority.]²⁹

29 We take Protagoras to be committing himself to hedonism here along with the majority based on Protagoras' saying '*oute dokei*,' which signals that he is engaged with the content of Socrates' question to the many, saying it does not seem to him either (in agreement with the majority) that there is any *telos* beside pleasure and pain. If Protagoras were merely agreeing with Socrates that the many would say 'no,' one would expect an affirmative response like '*sunedokei*,' as in the previous three answers (354 A 1, A 7, B 5). With Protagoras agreeing here to hedonism (cf. Sullivan 1961, 23), there is no problem at 358 B 3–6 or 360 A 2–3 when Socrates takes the thesis as given, a matter which worries C. C. W Taylor, who thus takes those passages as evidence of Socratic hedonism (C. C. W. Taylor 1976, 201, 208). Indeed, commentators have found here evidence for just about every possible way of attributing the hedonism to one or another of the parties (Socrates, Protagoras,

'So then you [sc. the many and, implicitly, Protagoras as well] pursue pleasure as being good, and avoid pain as bad?'³⁰

'Yes.' [Protagoras is officially answering on behalf of the many here, but in effect also on his own behalf.]

'So this you regard as bad: pain. And pleasure you regard as good, since you call the very enjoying of something "bad" whenever it deprives us of greater pleasures than it itself provides, or brings about greater pains than the very pleasures inherent in it? Since if you call the very enjoying of something "bad" by looking to *some other* end-or-result (*telos*) than the one I am mentioning, you could tell us what it is; but you won't be able to.'

'I [sc. Protagoras] don't think they'll be able to do so either.' (354 C 1–E 2)

Socrates is thus claiming that the practices of the many, as far as their labeling certain painful things 'good' and certain pleasant things 'bad' is concerned, *reveal* that they are relying on the thought that pleasure is good, and pain, bad.³¹ Why? Because by interpreting them as relying on this thought, we can best make sense of their practices. He is also offering the many a chance to distance themselves from the very thought he imputes to them; but, he says, they will not actually be able to do so. Now, one reason they might not be able

and the many): A. E. Taylor 1926, 259, thinks the many are committed to hedonism, but not Socrates and Protagoras; Hackforth 1928 takes Socrates to be a hedonist, but not Protagoras or the many; Grube 1933, from the ironic perspective, denies that Protagoras is *really* committed to hedonism, but sees his inability to provide an alternative as dialectical license for Socrates to *take* him as so committed; Dyson 1976 thinks the many do not commit themselves to hedonism here, whereas Socrates and Protagoras do; C. C. W. Taylor 1976, 176, 209, takes all of Socrates, Protagoras, and the many to be committed to hedonism; Irwin 1995 holds that the many are not committed to hedonism, but that Socrates is; Annas 1999, 168 finds that the many do not commit themselves to hedonism, but is agnostic about Protagoras and Socrates; Moss 2014, 290 takes Socrates and the many to be hedonists, but not Protagoras; Kamtekar 2018 thinks Protagoras is a hedonist, and that the many are ethical but not psychological hedonists.

30 Kahn 2003 finds Socrates here avowing *in propria persona* what he calls 'quasi-hedonism,' the view that pleasure is *a* good, while Protagoras misunderstands, and Socrates allows Protagoras to misunderstand, the thesis as pure hedonism, *viz.* the claim that pleasure is *the* good. Our view is that Socrates avows nothing *in propria persona*, just as the dialectical context would suggest, and that the relevant thesis is indeed pure hedonism and not something weaker—notwithstanding the fact that Socrates does initially state the premise in its weaker form (351 C), while Protagoras reformulates it in the stronger form (351 E).

31 See Segvic 2000, 28, 38 for the thought that one's true preferences are revealed not by the reflective opinion one expresses but by one's actions: you are what you do.

to do so is that this is in fact the correct view (and one Socrates himself holds).³² Yet it might also be the case that they are not able to do so because *they* lack the resources for formulating an alternative account (and Socrates knows this), even though it is in principle possible to formulate such an account.³³ This would explain why Socrates proceeds with such confidence. By itself, the passage does not settle the matter. *We* would like to emphasize that the dialectical context only requires the second, weaker claim.



What Socrates goes on to say next confirms that he has the dialectical context clearly in view: he stresses that the many could *still* retract their claim (about the relation between pleasure and good, and pain and bad) and stand by their commitment to the possibility of ‘being overcome.’ Although Socrates is addressing the many here, Protagoras’ hedonism remains established and, so to speak, in the bank; it is not the dialectical focus of this portion of the discussion because Protagoras has formally denied the possibility of *akrasia*, and this will prove to be the downfall of his final sub-thesis that courage is distinct from wisdom.

Now, again, people, if you asked me: “Why are you going on about this at such length and in so much detail?” I would reply: “Forgive me. First of all, it’s not easy to show what that which you call ‘being weaker than pleasure’ really is; and secondly, all the demonstrations depend on this.” But even now it is still open to you to retract [sc. your claim],³⁴ if you are able to say that the good is anything other than pleasure, or that the bad is anything other than pain. Or are you satisfied (*arkei*) to live [sc. your] life pleasantly without pains (*to hēdeōs katabiōnai ton bion aneu lupōn*)? If you are satisfied [sc. with that] and are not able to say anything else than that the good and the bad are that which result in pleasure and pain, listen to this. (354 E 4–355 A 5)

32 In this case, there would be no alternative to it, in some strong, literal sense of ‘no alternative.’ See for example Grote 1865, Hackforth 1928, Dodds 1959, Gosling and Taylor 1982, 51, 53, Irwin 1995, and Moss 2014.

33 Sullivan 1961, 27 takes the fact that Socrates here envisages an alternative to hedonism as a big knowing wink that reveals Plato to be operating on two planes: Socrates’ formal endorsement of hedonism, and what he really thinks. We agree that Socrates envisages an alternative to hedonism, and that the perceptive reader is invited to notice this, but we deny both that Socrates is formally committed to any form of hedonism and, therefore, that the reader must advert to irony to understand what is ‘really’ being said.

34 For this meaning of *anathesthai*, see LSJ, s.v. *anatithēmi*, B. II. 2.

The 'this' which Socrates is asking them to listen to is the famous argument against the possibility of *akrasia* (as that notion is understood by the many), in 355 A 5–356 A 1. The rather tricky details of that *reductio ad absurdum*, happily, do not matter for our purposes here.³⁵ One thing that does matter, however, is that Socrates, in the immediate aftermath of the argument (at 356 A 5), considers an objection based on the effects of temporal distance, or, as we might say, on the question of whether one should discount (or weigh more heavily) something good (pleasant), depending on whether it is present or nearby in the immediate future, as opposed to being far off, in some more distant future. (And likewise, *mutatis mutandis*, in the case of bad (painful) things.)

6 Pleasure, Pain, and an Art of Measurement

The comments marking the transition between the basic argument against the possibility of *akrasia* and this further issue (of temporal distance and its distorting effects) are of central importance to the rest of Socrates' argument. For he suggests that one crucial effect of equating the good with pleasure, and the bad with pain, is that that this will make it easy to *quantify* good and bad (thought of as *qualitatively* homogeneous and therefore commensurable), and so *measure* the relative excess of pleasure over pain, and vice-versa.³⁶ While Socrates does not say so explicitly, a significant reason for introducing hedonism thus is to pave the way for the suggestion that *akratic* behavior, in essence, results from making a cognitive *mistake*—it is a matter of taking less to be more, or more to be less.

But such an unadorned claim about measurability invites an immediate, seemingly fatal objection: if good and bad are commensurable in this way, then *how could we ever be mistaken about how pleasant or how painful things are?* In particular, is it not always clear, whenever we compare something pleasant to something painful, which one 'wins,' and why? Considerations of temporal distance allow for cases where it is fairly easy to grasp what the relevant mistake might be, and how it could arise. Far from introducing qualitative distinctness, the notion of future pleasures and pains brings out their homogeneity without sacrificing the possibility of error. Socrates proposes that temporal distance instead gives rise to a kind of perspectival distortion (much in the way that

35 See Wolfsdorf 2006 for extensive bibliography and a perspicuous summary of the relevant range of interpretations of that argument.

36 See the language of esp. 356 A 3–5; see also Nussbaum 1986, who takes Socrates to introduce hedonism *in propria persona*, albeit *pro tempore*, entirely for the sake of securing the art of measurement.

spatial distance does in the case of items having spatial dimensions). Thus, to take an obvious sort of example, a present or near-at-hand pain (e.g. that of a tooth being extracted, or being about to be extracted) looms much larger than do the prospects of longer-term pains (e.g. of dental decay and disease, in the future). Accordingly, in the moment of choosing or acting, the person may seek to put off this 'good' pain (good, because it will result in greater pleasure, or less pain, over the long run), because she misjudges the *quantity* of pain: it *seems* as if the short-term pain is *greater* than the longer-term pain (or, alternatively, as if the longer-term pleasures will be too *few* to make up for the present pains). Hence, there is a straightforward sense in which the *akratic* agent is *not being irrational*; she is rather weighing or measuring pains *incorrectly*.³⁷ Socrates is able to get Protagoras to agree, on behalf of the many, that an art of measurement would 'save' us—most immediately from such mistakes, but more generally from leading any life that is less pleasant (or more painful) than how pleasant (or painful) a life would be—if we always *measured correctly* all (available) pleasure and (avoidable) pain (356 E–357 A).³⁸ This in turn prepares the way for Socrates' interim conclusion: what is needed is some kind of quantitative art, that is, some kind of *knowledge* (357 B 4; cf. B 4-C 6).



Having agreed that an art of measurement is needed, Socrates sets aside the inquiry into just which art this will be, in order to summarize the results they

37 Socrates proceeds as if what matters is *total* pleasure (and *total* pain) over the course of a person's whole life. One could easily object that this is misguided, that there should be (room for) *some* discounting/privileging based on temporal distance and/or the likelihood of various future scenarios happening (or not). But Socrates' basic argument will go through—though it would need to be complicated considerably—even if we only allow that *some* cases of privileging the present over the future are irrational, and that it *sometimes* makes good sense to forego, say, an immediate pleasure for the sake of a (pleasant) longer-term goal, or to endure immediate pain or discomfort for the sake of less pain and greater comfort in the future. If people claim they do what they 'know' they ought not to do in such cases, because they 'are overcome' (by pleasure or pain, respectively), Socrates can still say that they are misidentifying the *relevant amount* of pleasure and pain involved, and thus that their 'being overcome' really is a matter of their *incorrectly* measuring or weighing (the pleasure and pain).

38 Nussbaum 1986, 111 holds that 357 A marks the spot where Socrates endorses hedonism *pro tempore*, although his interlocutors have assumed it of him all along. For considerations against taking the passage this way, see Zeyl 1980, 256. See C. C. W. Taylor 1976, 199 (but cf. all of 194–200) for the view that Socrates' argument against *akrasia* and the measurement analogy generally fail altogether because he argues fallaciously for his own conclusions.

have reached (357 B 6–E 8). A key point Socrates stresses is that the many, prior to having heard the argument he has just presented, would have laughed-off as ridiculous his suggestion that the experience (*pathēma*) which they call 'being overcome by pleasure' is really a matter of ignorance (*amathia*). But now that they have taken on board that argument and its conclusions, were they still to laugh, they would be laughing at themselves:

For you agreed that those who make mistakes with regard to the choice of pleasures and pains (*peri tēn tōn hēdonōn hairesin kai lupōn*)—that is, with regard to good and bad things (*tauta de estin agatha te kai kaka*)—do so because of a lack of knowledge, and not merely a lack of knowledge, but a lack of that knowledge you agreed was measurement. (357 D 3–7)

Note that the explanatory aside—'that is, with regard to good and bad things'—explains what *the many* have taken on board; it says nothing about Socrates' *own* view of the matter. And what he immediately goes on to say should give us pause before holding that it *does* reflect his own thinking:

So this is what 'being overcome by pleasure' is—ignorance of the greatest sort, and it is of this that Protagoras, and so too Prodicus and Hippias, says he is a physician (*iatros*) [sc. one who can *cure* that ignorance]. But you [sc. the many], thinking it to be something other than ignorance, neither go to the sophists yourselves, nor do you send your children to them for instruction, believing as you do that we are dealing with something unteachable. By worrying about your money and not giving it to them, you all do badly in both private and public life. (357 E 2–8)

Taken at face value, Socrates is here saying that *if* people in general believed that what they *call* 'being overcome by pleasure' were actually ignorance, one would expect them to seek instruction. Indeed, they *ought* to do so insofar as they ought to be trying to do *something* if they think that teaching and learning will be of value. Hence, going to the sophists would at least be a start, since they do profess to teach virtue. But the many are not even doing that. This clearly shows how far *they* are from holding that what they conceive of as 'being overcome by pleasure' is really a matter of ignorance. Note that there is nothing in the passage suggesting that Socrates himself recommends going to the sophists; he merely cites the majority's *not* going as evidence of their beliefs, i.e. as *revealing* that they do not think virtue is teachable. No doubt, passages like this are laden with additional significance and nuance. For example, Socrates is in effect renewing the challenge about the teachability of virtue he had raised

near the opening of the dialogue. He is thereby also raising the stakes of the discussion for Protagoras (namely, the justification of his fees and his bold embrace of the title ‘sophist’). And Plato is surprising us with the dissonance that Socrates, of all people, is pressing the option of turning to the sophists in order to gain knowledge of virtue.³⁹ All this, however, does not mean that Socrates is being ironical or disingenuous, since he is neither endorsing nor recommending hedonism of any kind (whether explicitly or implicitly).

Now, to the extent that Socrates does think that virtue is teachable, i.e. to the extent that he has equated the virtues with wisdom, one might object that Socrates is, after all, recommending that people should seek out the sophists. Or rather, is he not, by offering this suggestion, inviting the many (and us) to think through more carefully the kind of knowledge and ignorance that would have to be involved? In other words: presumably (Plato holds that) one *cannot* learn what one needs to learn from the sophists; hence, the knowledge or wisdom in question must be something other than what the sophists (can) provide. Thus we of course concur with those interpreters who hold that Plato is engaging with the readers *of* the dialogue in a way that differs from how Socrates and his interlocutors engage with one another *within* the dialogue. But, once again, acknowledging this point does not require that one view Socrates as being insincere, or engaging in trickery—openly avowing one thing, while (covertly) intending another.

7 The Unity of the Soul and Socratic Neutrality on Hedonism

There is still, however, one further passage that may seem to tell in favor of Socrates’ endorsing hedonism. At 358 A 1, he turns to Protagoras, Hippias, and Prodicus, and asks them if they agree with what he has been saying:

‘Now, I ask you, Hippias and Prodicus, as well as Protagoras—for let this *logos* be shared by all of you—to say whether you think what I say is true or false.’ They all thought that what I said was marvelously true.

‘*So you agree that the pleasant is good, the painful bad.* I beg the indulgence of Prodicus who distinguishes among words; for whether you call it ‘pleasant’ or ‘delightful’ or ‘enjoyable,’ or whatever way or manner you

39 The issue of Plato’s own attitude towards the sophists is more complex than it is often thought to be. For a strong argument that he may be far less hostile than most readers have assumed, see Blank 1985. But contrast Tell 2011, for a sophisticated restatement and defense of the more traditional view.

please to name this sort of thing, my excellent Prodicus, please respond to the intent of my question.' Prodicus, laughing, agreed, as did the others.

'Well, then, men, what about this? *Are not all actions leading toward living painlessly and pleasantly honorable?*⁴⁰ *And isn't honorable activity good and beneficial?*' They agreed. (358 A 1–B 6)⁴¹

In reporting how he addressed Prodicus and Hippias together with Protagoras, Socrates signals a return to the outer frame (viz. to the question Socrates had posed on Hippocrates' behalf). That is, the remark 'They all thought that what I said was marvelously true' is addressed to the unnamed friend from 309 A–310 A. It turns out that all these sophists agree with each other, and with ordinary people: hedonism holds, as a descriptive thesis. And if it holds as a descriptive thesis—or rather, if no intelligible alternative to it is on offer—then we can in addition ascribe to the sophists and to the many the following *quasi-prescriptive* claim: it is reasonable for a person who in fact acts as if pleasure is the good (and who offers no alternative besides pleasure as to what the good is) also to hold that she *ought to* pursue pleasure as the good.⁴² Socrates here need be committed only to the relationships among the several claims, not to the core claim itself.⁴³

Secondly, *if* hedonism holds, *then* there is no such thing as 'being overcome by pleasure,' Socrates can endorse this conditional without committing himself to the truth of the antecedent. In fact, in the context of motivational monism, one could substitute anything else (of a sort suited to a similar functional role) for pleasure, and the conditional would, *mutatis mutandis*, still be true. This

40 Deleting *kai ôphelimoî* in 358 B 5, with Schleiermacher; cf. Burnet 1903, *ap. crit. ad loc.*

41 This is yet another passage where some commentators locate Socratic hedonism, e.g. Kahn 2003 finds Socrates committing himself to the weaker and thus more palatable thesis that pleasure is *a* good; C. C. W. Taylor 1976, *ad loc.* finds Socrates, but somehow not Protagoras, being committed to hedonism. Those who find the majority and Protagoras represented here, as well as Socrates, include Grube 1933, Sullivan 1961, 23, and Zeyl 1980, 257, all of whom take Socrates' formal commitment as ironic, fallacious, or disingenuous, and who justify his moves by reference to the sophists' own moral shortcomings (so they deserve it), to the purity of his motives (so it is for their own good), or to the nature of the *elenchus* (so that is just how the (dialectical) cookie crumbles).

42 We are grateful to Matt Evans for discussion of this point.

43 Thus we have bypassed debates over the precise kind of hedonism in play, whether psychological, evaluative or prescriptive (see n. 5, above). We suspect that Gosling and Taylor 1982 are right that the psychological and evaluative thesis are one and the same for Plato, but we are also sympathetic to the prescriptive claims made by Dyson 1976 and Zeyl 1980, and to the evaluative claims made by Sullivan 1961 and Moss 2014; we disagree with C. C. W. Taylor 1976, 189–190, who thinks that 356 A 8–C 3 expresses evaluative but not descriptive hedonism.

fact helps shed light on the point of introducing hedonism at all: it serves as an *illustration*, and a particularly vivid and easy-to-grasp one at that, of motivational monism. For *any* monist, 'being overcome' will turn out to be ignorance. Hence, *a fortiori*, for a hedonist 'being overcome' just is ignorance. Or rather, by seeing how and why for someone who accepts hedonism, 'being overcome' is really a matter of ignorance, we can see how it would likewise be a matter of ignorance for anyone who accepts a structurally similar view. *This* is a point Socrates endorses; but it is one he can cheerfully endorse without taking any stance on the question of whether or not hedonism is true. And such indeed is the summary Socrates presents at 358 C:

'Then if the pleasant is the good, no one who knows or believes there is something else better than what he is doing, something possible, would then do what he is doing when he could be doing what is better. This being overcome by oneself (*to hēttō einai hautou*) is nothing other than ignorance, and to control oneself (*kreittō heautou*) is nothing other than wisdom.' It seemed so to all. (358 B 6–C 2)

What Socrates agrees to here, as one of the 'all,' is again explicitly conditional:

If the pleasant is good,
then (i) *akrasia* is impossible,
and therefore, (ii) the phenomenon that people call 'being overcome' is
 better understood as ignorance (sc. of the art of measurement).⁴⁴

Now, one might still worry that Socrates' commitment to the consequent of the conditional strongly suggests that he is committed to the antecedent as well, even if this does not strictly follow.⁴⁵ However, the dialectical context shows that the argument is designed to persuade the *majority* that it is *their* commitment to hedonism that reduces *akrasia* to absurdity and thus forces the phenomenon of 'being overcome' to be re-conceptualized as ignorance. Recall that at 355 A Socrates makes this explicit, offering the majority the chance to retract their hedonism or be subject to the *reductio* that follows.

More importantly: it is open to Socrates to endorse the entire conditional as well as the consequent, while continuing to reject the antecedent, because the truth of the conditional is secured by the fact that hedonism can be understood

44 Note that, *contra* Vlastos 1969 and Shaw 2015, this shows that hedonism really does play a role in the overall argument.

45 As e.g. Hackforth 1928, 42 and so many others hold.

as *an arbitrary instance of motivational monism*. Thus it is not the truth of hedonism *specifically* that secures the truth of the consequent—that *akrasia* is impossible and 'being overcome' is really a matter of ignorance. Rather, it is the truth of motivational monism *generically* that entails the familiar Socratic thesis that no one errs willingly. If there is only *one* good for which we aim, then—*whatever it turns out to be*—there can be no motivational conflict, and doing the 'wrong' things must always be due to ignorance. To be sure, hedonism is not a haphazardly chosen instance of monism. The thesis is, after all, diagnostic of the *actual* values and beliefs of the many and the sophists. Again, however, the work that it does in securing the consequent is *not* a function of hedonism specifically, but of its being the instance of the monism that the many reveal themselves as being committed to.⁴⁶

Pleasure, therefore, proves to be an excellent placeholder for the good: it makes for, first of all, a *bona fide* species of motivational monism (albeit one that is, in reality, *false* as a description of human motivation); hence, it secures the truth of the conditional and consequent.⁴⁷ Secondly, the hedonist thesis amounts to a diagnosis of conventional morality, so it is dialectically well suited for engaging with the majority, as the frame requires. Thirdly, for the same reason, it is dialectically suited to Protagoras as well. And, finally, Socrates (and Plato) may well think that pleasure is genuinely worth considering as a *candidate* for the good.⁴⁸ But Socrates need not be endorsing hedonism in order to

46 We are thus in substantial agreement with Moss 2014 concerning motivational monism, with the crucial exception of how to construe Socrates' (use of) hedonism. Moss takes Socrates to posit and endorse hedonism in order to *secure* the monism and thus 'save' his account from attack (note that the dialectical context speaks against this saving aspect of the reconstruction, as it would place Socrates in the defensive position of arguing *for* something—a task for the answerer, not the questioner). We, on the other hand, take Socrates to be working *from* motivational monism, selecting hedonism as the instance relevant to his interlocutors, in order to generate the *reductio* of *akrasia*. But he could presumably just as well have selected a monistic commitment to honor or to knowledge in, say, addressing Aristotle's 'better' classes of person mentioned above in our preliminary remarks, as a way of closing off the threat of the divided soul, as Moss puts it.

47 *Contra* Gosling and Taylor 1982, 53–54, who take it that the falsity of the premise would yield no support for the consequent. Note that the respect in which we take hedonism as a placeholder is not the same sense in which Nussbaum 1986 and Rowe 2003 do, since they understand Socrates as endorsing hedonism *in propria persona*, even if only *pro tempore* or as a stalking horse for the good. We thus take the argument to depend on hedonism to the extent that *akrasia* is understood as a matter of being overcome by *pleasure* (and cowardice as a matter of being overcome by *pain*), but we do not take it that the denial of motivational conflict rests on hedonism specifically. Thus we disagree (twice over) with those who have sought to deal with Socrates' apparent hedonism by divorcing the argument from it, e.g. Vlastos 1969 and Shaw 2015.

48 As Grube 1933, 206, n. 3 has urged.

bring it to bear on his interlocutors, nor need he be ironic or disingenuous in saying that he takes the thesis seriously.

8 Hedonism and the Relation of Courage to the Other Virtues

The next phase of Socrates' argument secures the sub-thesis introduced at 349 E: that courage, too, is to be identified with the other four virtues, and with wisdom in particular. Having agreed with the sophists on the truth of the conditional (as stated above), and having agreed, further, to the claim that ignorance is 'to hold a false belief and to be deceived about matters of great importance' (358 C 3–5), Socrates next secures joint agreement to the descriptive thesis that 'no one willingly goes toward bad things or what they believe to be bad' (358 C 6–D 4). With the final premise that 'fear is the expectation of something bad' (358 D 5–E 1) in place, Socrates is at last in a position to draw the inferences required to establish that courage is wisdom. If no one goes toward what is bad, and if fear just is the expectation of something bad, then it follows that no one goes toward (or faces) what they fear—but going towards (or facing) what one fears, of course, *would have been* Protagoras' majority-style definition of courage. Indeed, as A. E. Taylor points out, on the conception of courage the many have, courage in fact *is* irrational, for it amounts to overcoming fear so as to go willingly toward what you *know* to be bad for you and thus have *good reason* to avoid.⁴⁹

Here, again, the remaining mechanics of the argument do not matter to our central point. What is salient is that Socrates has established that, by Protagoras' own lights as a hedonist, the motivational pluralism underwriting his initial thesis of the virtues as distinct and separable is false. The conventional definition of courage as mastering one's fear, just like the naïve description of *akrasia* as being mastered by pleasure (or by *thumos*, pain, fear, erotic passion, or ...), rests on the mistaken assumption that there is, or could be, more than one source of motivation. In fact, it is precisely because the virtues are usually thought of in terms of motivational pluralism (as Protagoras urges in resisting Socrates' first argument for the identity of courage and wisdom) that, according to popular Greek thought, they are as likely to be the source of our downfall as of our salvation. Medea is destroyed by an excess of *thumos*. Phaedra, having first been overcome by pleasure, succumbs to an excess of shame. In addition, we might note that Hector is seen as having been destroyed by an excess of courage, in his case as well arising from *thumos* and a sense of shame (see

49 A. E. Taylor 1926, 249, n. 1.

Iliad 6, 441–445; cf. Andromache's remark about Hector's great strength being his undoing at 6, 407). But these diagnoses are mistaken: for whatever, exactly, the good turns out to be, success in life will be a function of measure; and *virtue*, since it is *ex hypothesi* a matter of getting things right, *cannot be subject to excess*. Thus Hector does not suffer from an excess of strength or courage; rather, he wrongly values the glory of battle.⁵⁰ Phaedra is not succumbing to an excess of shame, but is rather failing to understand correctly what her good is. And Medea's vengeance is not a case of being overcome by *thumos*, but of wrongly valuing honor more than her children.



We are now prepared to specify the role of hedonism in establishing the identity of courage and wisdom. We suggested earlier that one crucial effect of equating the good with pleasure, and the bad with pain, is that this makes it easy (at least *in principle*, or so Socrates seems to think) to *quantify* good and bad, and thus also to *measure* the relative excess of pleasure over pain, or vice versa—which in turn paves the way for reconceiving *akrasia* as an error in measurement; that is, any supposed *akrasia* proves to be a wholly *cognitive* matter. Now, in the case of courage, hedonism makes it easy (again, at least in principle) to quantify *fear* as a kind of pain: the coward, by measuring wrongly, arrives at the result that the pain of standing one's ground exceeds the pain of fleeing; the brave person, by measuring correctly, arrives at the opposite result. Accordingly, courage has now been reconceived, in intellectualist terms, as cognitive success—a matter of *knowing* what is and is not to be feared—rather

50 At *Iliad* 7, 67–91 Hector fantasizes that the tomb (*sēma* and *tumbos*) at the mouth of the Hellespont of a Greek warrior (whom, after having challenged him to single combat (cf. *Il.* 7, 49–51 and 73–75), he will kill) will serve, for future generations, to inscribe on the landscape his own glory, and so to enhance it: “This is the tomb (*sēma*) of a man who died long ago, / who was performing his *aristeia* when illustrious (*phaidimos*) Hector killed him.” That is what someone will say, and my *kleos* will never perish! (87–91, trans. Nagy 1979, 28). Finkelberg 2002 argues that this is a reference to the tomb of Protesilaos, on the Thracian side of the Hellespont. But Nagy 1979, 28–29 and 341 considers a more intriguing possibility, based on his conviction that ‘the traditions of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* constitute a totality with the complementary distribution of their narratives’ (21), namely that Hector's words are deeply ironical here and would be so heard by the epics' traditional audience. For at *Odyssey* 24, 72–84, we learn that the Greeks built the *final* tomb (*tumbos*, 80) for Patroclus and Achilles at the mouth of the Hellespont (cf. *Il.* 23, 243–257, esp. 245–246)—thus in the tradition, it is actually Achilles' tomb (*tumbos*) that will be a beacon to future generations (cf. *Od.* 24, 83–84), and it is a marker (*sēma*) of his *kleos* at exactly the spot where Hector, delusionally, imagined that his own *kleos*, having been made ‘concrete’ in the tomb of an *unnamed* Greek warrior, would be immortalized.

than as the ability to master a conflicting motivation. Courage thus turns out to be wisdom after all. One major consequence we can draw is that Protagoras must be ignorant of *how* to teach virtue, since he seems not to know *what* virtue is. Furthermore, according to Protagoras' definition of courage as mastery, it could not even *be* something teachable, precisely because mastery is *not* a cognitive achievement, and precisely because on such an account, which allows for the possibility of *akrasia*, knowledge is construed as something that does *not* 'rule' in a person's soul (as Hector, Medea, and Phaedra illustrate so vividly). Socrates introduces hedonism *en route* to arguing for the unity of courage with the other four virtues, and, as we have seen, he uses it as a way of identifying virtue with knowledge *because* hedonism is an instance of motivational monism and *because* pleasure is a *prima facie* very plausible candidate for a single source of motivation.

We can say, further, that Socrates introduces hedonism at exactly the point where he does, because Protagoras evinces a commitment to motivational pluralism in replying to Socrates' first argument (349 E–350 C) for the identity of courage and wisdom. Protagoras had resisted Socrates' conclusion by maintaining that '*confidence* (*tharsos*), like power, comes from skill (and from passionate emotion as well); *courage* (*andreia*) [comes] from nature and the proper nurture of soul' (351 A 7–B 2). This means that someone could be confident as a result of emotion, *without knowledge*, and fail to be courageous. If Socrates can show Protagoras, via hedonism, that emotion (so construed) is *never* a motivator, he will then have secured the premise that Protagoras resists in the first argument, namely that the confident are courageous. And this is exactly what he proceeds to do: hedonism, as an arbitrary instance of motivational monism, secures the consequent—that *akrasia* is impossible, and that 'being overcome' is actually ignorance (sc. of the art of measurement). Though he does not make this point explicitly, Socrates has thereby shown that confidence can, after all, be achieved *only* by knowledge, *not* by other means, like emotion.⁵¹ And having established motivational monism, Socrates can return to identify courage and wisdom, just as originally proposed. To be sure, he does not pick up the structure of the original argument (nor does the second argument for the identity of courage and wisdom (359 A–360 E) proceed by the same means), but he now has the resources to do so if he wants to. As it is, by the end of the second argument Protagoras is no longer fighting back (360 E).

51 That he conceives of the art of measurement as yielding confidence can be seen when he says it 'would make appearance powerless (*akuron*) by showing us the truth, would give us peace of mind (*hēsuchia*) firmly rooted in the truth, and would be the salvation of life' (356 D 7–E 2).

9 Final Remarks

In closing, we should again recall that after Socrates has 'established' hedonism, the many ask him, 'Why are you going on about this at such length and in so much detail?' He replies that 'all the demonstrations depend on this (viz. hedonism)' (354 E). We can now see *how* this is so. The demonstration of the sub-thesis that courage is not distinct from the other virtues depends on hedonism to convince Protagoras and the many of the consequences of motivational monism. The teachability of virtue also follows from hedonism, since the art of measurement, as a kind of knowledge, is presumed to be teachable. However, the teachability of virtue follows from everything that Protagoras was at pains to *deny*, starting with hedonism. Hence, the implied negative answer to the question (from much earlier in the dialogue) of whether or not Hippocrates should seek Protagoras' tutelage, also depends on hedonism. This is so twice over: first, the role hedonism plays in the argument shows Protagoras does not know what he is talking about when he talks about virtue (and therefore presumably is unable to teach it); and second in that Protagoras' own initial reluctance to agree to hedonism, especially when it is put so baldly, reflects the express views of the conventional majority—few Athenian families would be willing to pay large fees for their young men to learn the art of measuring pleasures!

The merits of our account, we submit, are that there is no need to find Socrates espousing hedonism, nor is there any need to puzzle over why Socrates argues from premises that are false by his lights to a conclusion he endorses. Our reading not only does no violence to the text, it simplifies the interpretative process by consistently taking Socrates at face value. By the letter of the text, Socrates at no point endorses hedonism *in propria persona*; and the dialectical context makes it clear that the offensive premise is introduced as a diagnosis of conventional psychology and morality, so there is also no need to engage in subtle machinations in order to isolate a palatable thesis weaker than pure hedonism to attribute to Socrates. By the same token, there is no need to take a stand on whether the *Protagoras* represents the historical Socrates, the character Socrates as Plato's pawn but not mouthpiece, or the character Socrates as Plato's *alter ego*. In addition, our thesis is wholly neutral on questions of Plato's development (and where, in that development, to locate the *Protagoras*), having shown that the *Protagoras* is no longer anomalous in ways that have exercised commentators for so long. If we are right, the dialogue is not only not anomalous, but can be seen as setting out the motivational monism that lies at the heart of Socrates' intellectualism. Of course, to the extent that one regards the *Republic* as introducing motivational pluralism

and thus as retreating from strict intellectualism, our account is wholly compatible with, though does not in all details require, a familiar developmental narrative: the *Republic* is later than the *Protagoras*, and in it Plato offers a more complicated moral psychology (the tripartition of the soul) so as to be able to offer a ‘more realistic’ account of motivational conflict in general, and of *akrasia* in particular.

Further, Socrates can legitimately argue from a (false) premise he does not endorse, to a (true) conclusion he accepts, not only because hedonism is true for his interlocutors, but also because, as an instance of monism, it has a structure that entails the impossibility of motivational conflict. That the many and Protagoras need to be brought around from behind their false moralizing talk of ‘bad pleasures’ and ‘good pains’ does not at all undermine their (unvoiced) commitment to hedonism. It rather underlines the incoherence of their unreflective views: the actions of the many reveal their (unavowed) commitment to the premise, and give lie to the conventional pieties they do avow. Thus neither is there any need to accuse Socrates, ‘Socrates,’ or Plato of confusion, disingenuousness, or fallacy—our interpretation is in this regard maximally charitable. Nor, likewise, is there any need to introduce irony or subterfuge in order to understand the ‘true’ meaning that Plato wishes to convey—our interpretation is maximally simple. Nevertheless, the *Protagoras* is exceptionally rich in its multiple frames, layers of engagement, and the tangled web that its title character weaves, so that the simplicity of our interpretation on this one point (the role of pleasure and pain in the work) leaves ample room for conversations between Plato himself and perceptive readers. Indeed, we believe our analysis has cleared out interpretative clutter for the sake of clarity in the ongoing dialogue with Plato.*

* In the course of working on this material—beginning in 2012, in connection with several sessions of the New York Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy devoted to the *Protagoras*—we have incurred several debts of gratitude which we are pleased to acknowledge here. Jessica Moss very kindly sent us a copy of her paper (Moss 2014) prior to its publication, at an early stage of our joint thinking about the dialogue; and while we disagree with her on the matter of Socrates’ hedonism, we have learned much from her discussion and framing of the issues. The 2015 conference at Columbia provided us with a wonderful opportunity to present an ancestor of this paper; we are grateful to the participants for their provocative questions and challenging objections. Very special thanks also to Kate Meng Brassel for taking the time to write up her very helpful comments on the penultimate version our paper. (W.-R. M. would like in addition to thank Elizabeth Scharffenberger for ongoing conversations about Plato and the *Protagoras* over a span of, by now, many years.)