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Title of thesis: **"The Paradox of refuting Socrates' paradox"**

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***"If a paradox was defused where would be the wonder stirred in us by its oxymoron?"***

Gregory Vlastos

***"We live on an island surrounded by a sea of ignorance. As our island of knowledge grows, so does the shore of our ignorance".***

John A. Wheeler

**To my parents, Nick and Violetta**



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## 1. Introduction

What is paradoxical about the Socratic paradoxes is that they are not paradoxical at all. Socrates famously argued that knowledge is sufficient for virtue and that no one errs willingly. Both doctrines are discussed in the *Protagoras* between Socrates and the Abderian sophist, however the argumentative line that Socrates chooses to follow in order to refute ‘the many’ has raised a serious degree of controversy among scholars. Is Socrates upholding the hedonistic view? Or, as I will argue, is he only trying to show the bankruptcy of the explanation of akrasia as ‘being overcome by pleasure’ which ‘the many’ advocate? According to my position in this paper<sup>1</sup>, Socrates intends to do the latter, showing that this hedonistic explanation of akrasia leads to absurdity. Plato’s and Socrates’ identification of goodness with pleasure would mark a sudden and unexplained departure from their moral theories, and would render the Socratic denial of akrasia an argument with limited range –only for those assuming hedonism. Kahn (1994:50) notes that ‘it is difficult to believe that the Socrates we know from the *Apology* and the *Crito* – the Socrates who claimed that the only consideration for a good man is whether a proposed action is or is not just- could ever have identified the good with the pleasant’.

If we are correct to hold that Socrates does not intend to identify the good with the pleasant, then we are immediately put against a new and much more difficult challenge; that is, to suggest how the Socratic denial of akrasia could regain its catholic plausibility against the commonsensical stance to akrasia, namely that people act against their best judgment due to their impotence to resist to motivational forces such as pleasure, pain, fear, passion and love. Socrates does not offer any other explicit account –apart from the hedonistic one- of how his doctrine could be catholically defended; hence the task of decoding the Socratic line of thought is far from an easy one.

The key move in order to decode the puzzling Socratic doctrine is to understand how Socrates treats the notion of ‘knowledge’. For Socrates, moral knowledge is distinguished from mere belief; in this sense, (a) only knowledge has the commanding power which enables one to sustain his best evaluative judgment against

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<sup>1</sup> I feel greatly indebted to Professor Theodore Scaltsas for his enlightening comments. Also I would like to thank Frosso Foteinaki for her ideas and her support.



other motivational forces and (b) only knowledge is sufficient for the virtuous conduct. By contrast, as mere belief is susceptible to other motivational forces like pleasure, pain, fear, etc. its possessor will, in turn, be susceptible to the revision of his intentions which derive from his best value judgment. In the *Protagoras*, Socrates implies that intentions grounded on belief can be ‘dragged around’ by desire; and according to my view in this paper, this Socratic stance allows a non-epistemic interpretation of his thesis. According to the traditional epistemic interpretation of the Socratic denial of akrasia, one’s wrongdoing is always a miscalculation that takes place on his practical syllogism. However, my understanding of the Socratic denial of akrasia allows cases of one even going against his best judgment, when his judgment is based on belief. In that sense, a judgment grounded on belief has insufficient power to guarantee that the chosen action will follow, whereas only judgments grounded on knowledge have a commanding and lordly power. For Socrates, everyone always goes for the good but only those with knowledge can infallibly discover and act on the good. Those with mere belief can only reach an apparent good, which may be good or bad. The motivation for the good is not unshakeable for those with mere belief since the grounding of their belief is scarcely strong enough to hold on the correct intention. Socrates therefore holds that the grounding of knowledge influences the motivational state of the moral agent. Thereupon, my interpretation differs from others in suggesting that for Socrates not all the cases of akrasia are cognitive mistakes in their judgment. Rather I hold, in opposition to the received stance on akrasia, that Socrates allows that one could act against his best judgment, when the latter is grounded on mere belief.



## 2. A crucial distinction between the –putative- akratic agent and the weak willed agent.

Before I start with my argumentation about the debate on the Socratic appeal to hedonism and the denial of akrasia in the *Protagoras*, I feel that I should first make a crucial terminological point. Much of the literature concerned with action theory and the discussion about the Socratic tenet on the denial of akrasia, has been –traditionally- treating the terms ‘akrasia’, ‘weakness of will, and ‘incontinence’ interchangeably. At first glance, ‘akrasia’, ‘weakness of will’ and ‘incontinence<sup>2</sup>’ look, notionally, very alike; however, according to my reading of the Socratic thesis, the notional difference between ‘akrasia’ and the other two concepts is far from negligible.

The Greek word ‘akrasia’, which is etymologically equal to a- (without) kratos (power / self-control) indicates, for an agent, lack of self-control; namely, it is ascribing to an agent impotence to act on his intentions, which derive from his (best) evaluative judgment. But, does this description of ‘akrasia’ do justice to the phenomenon that Socrates denies as being impossible? As I shall maintain throughout this paper, the latter description of akrasia falls short of capturing perfectly the meaning of the Socratic thesis. What Socrates holds in the *Protagoras*, is that,

- a) If A *knows* that between two open alternatives (say x and y), X is, all things considered, better than Y, and
- b) If A is free to choose either X or Y, then
- c) It is impossible for A not to choose X and choose Y.

The key word in Socrates’ argument is the word ‘know<sup>3</sup>’; for, nowhere does Socrates argue that, mere belief, contrary to knowledge, is sufficient for the conduct of the correct

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<sup>2</sup> As Gregory Vlastos (1969:75) notes, incontinence is not an exact equivalent of ‘akrasia’, because ‘incontinence has sexual connotations which are singularly inappropriate in notable instances of akrasia’.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Knowledge’ is indeed a very tricky and ambiguous concept which, diachronically, puzzles philosophers about its nature. In this paper, I shall attempt to hold that the way that Socrates treats ‘knowledge’ in the *Protagoras*, makes his argument on the denial of akrasia plainer and perfectly sound.



action. Now, what can be implicitly derived from Socrates' treatment of belief, is the assumption that,

- a) If A, has *merely belief* that between two open alternatives, X is overall better than Y at a moment  $t$ ,
- b) And provided he is free to choose either X or Y, then,
- c) A, is *not* definitely going to choose X at a moment  $t^*$ <sup>4</sup>.

In this second case, the lack of knowledge renders A susceptible to the revision of his intentions which derive from his *prima facie* best evaluative judgment. If A has merely belief<sup>5</sup> that, between the open alternatives X and Y, X is all things considered better, then his wanting and his intending X at time  $t$ , does not guarantee his wanting and intending X at time  $t^*$ . The latter phenomenon, as I will maintain, is distinct from what we previously defined as –putative– ‘akrasia’ and also different from what Socrates, in his famous ‘paradox’<sup>6</sup> rejects as a possible psychological state. In fact, Socrates never argues that mere *belief* is sufficient for one so to securely retain his intentions, or his will to act, with reference to what he judged to be the best open option at a moment  $t$ . Socrates, according to my reading, ascribes the unbeatable and commanding characteristics exclusively to knowledge, not to mere belief; therefore, a defeated best value judgment which is grounded on mere belief should not be taken as a case of akrasia.

Following Richard Holton<sup>7</sup> on his distinction between akrasia and weakness of will, I will suggest that the Socratic thesis on the denial of akrasia does not rule out the acceptance of the common phenomenon of weakness of will. As Holton (1999:241) states

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<sup>4</sup> The symbols  $t$  and  $t^*$  are used to highlight a very significant point; A, even when having merely belief about the overall comparative superiority of the open alternatives  $x$  and  $y$ , does not act against his here-and-now intention. Mere belief renders A vulnerable to changing his *previously* formed (*moment  $t$* ) intention, at a later moment  $t^*$ .

<sup>5</sup> ‘Belief’ and ‘opinion’ are two words that I shall use interchangeably in this paper.

<sup>6</sup> When referring to the so-called Socratic ‘paradox’ I will be using quotation marks, as I find nothing paradoxical about his doctrine ‘no one errs willingly’ and his thesis which denies the possibility of akrasia. Of course, Socrates (both the historical and the Platonic figure as we see in the *Protagoras*), find paradoxical and absurd, the exactly opposite thesis, that is, the thesis accepting the possibility of akrasia as a common phenomenon..

<sup>7</sup> R. Holton (1999) ‘Intention and Weakness of Will’, *Journal of Philosophy*, pp. 241-262



‘the central cases of weakness of will are best characterized not as cases in which people act against their better judgment, but as cases in which they fail to act on their intentions’ (because they have already revised their previously formed intentions). For Holton, intentions are ‘action-guiding states’ and weakness of will takes place when one revises too readily his *contrary inclination defeating intentions*. In this paper, I argue that intentions grounded on knowledge cannot be revised, whereas only those grounded on mere belief can be revised; moreover, I will hold that this view can be derived from the Socratic stance and his distinction between the power of knowledge and that of belief. Inside this context, the distinction between akrasia and weakness of will becomes as I think, plainer.

**S1:** *Akrasia* would take place only if one’s intentions deriving from his best value judgment and grounded on *knowledge* were revised against the view of other motivational forces.

**S2:** *Weakness of will* takes place when one’s intentions deriving from his best value judgment and grounded on *belief* are revised against the view of other motivational forces.

I shall maintain that it is **S1** what Socrates finds impossible, whereas **S2** could be allowed by the Socratic views on akrasia.

## **2.1 Socrates in the Protagoras: A sincere appeal to hedonism or Plato’s ‘thought experiment’?**

In the *Protagoras*, the argumentative line that Socrates uses in order to defend his tenet on the impossibility of akrasia has raised much controversy among ancient philosophy scholars. Do Plato and Socrates seriously intend to argue that goodness is identified to pleasure in order to deny akrasia against the beliefs of the multitude? Or, does Plato simply use the figure ‘Socrates’ in order to express his ironic attitude in an ‘ad hominem’ argument against the hedonistic views maintained by ‘the many’? The answer, according to my reading, can not be entirely captured by *either* of the two hypotheses; as a matter of



fact, there is much textual evidence supporting both cases. On the one hand, Socrates, in the *Gorgias*, explicitly rejects hedonism, while the adoption of a hedonistic position in the *Protagoras* would mark Plato's and Socrates' sudden departure from their fundamental views on the nature and the relationship between virtue and happiness. On the other hand, the Socratic thesis against the possibility of akrasia would probably not take off the ground if it lacked its hedonistic premise; therefore Socrates has to be taking hedonism seriously.

Undoubtedly, there are many things that one should take into consideration before taking the one or the other side; however, I shall hold that the view of Socrates not intending to identify goodness with pleasure seems to be much more plausible. Following Zeyl<sup>8</sup> (1980:250) I shall call 'prohedonistic' position, the position which holds that Socrates takes hedonism seriously and that his argument against the possibility of akrasia is highly depended on the identification of the good with the pleasant; on the contrary, according to the 'antihedonistic' position, Socrates' uses the hedonistic argument, *ad hominem*, in order to show to 'the many' that akrasia, even for a hedonist, is impossible. The position of the antihedonists is that Socrates commits Protagoras and the multitude to the hedonistic view, but not himself; the latter antihedonistic position implies that the Socratic tenet on the denial of akrasia could be freed by its hedonistic premises without losing its plausibility. However, a prohedonist would argue that nowhere else does Socrates defend in detail his doctrine as in the *Protagoras*. As Irwin (1995:86) notes, the hedonist argument is all that Socrates offers in order to argue for psychological eudemonism; ***Nothing in the Protagoras or in the shorter dialogues suggests any other argument that could do the same work. The hedonist argument does what Socrates needs it to do it only if he believes it***. Nevertheless, the prohedonistic view of Socrates in the *Protagoras* seems to be deeply problematic since it inescapably commits a prohedonist to concede that:

a) Socrates maintained that his doctrine on the denial of akrasia would be more plausible in the light of hedonism, and hence hedonism is a *necessary* premise for his thesis.

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<sup>8</sup> D.J. Zeyl (1980) 'Socrates and Hedonism: Protagoras 351b-358d', *Phronesis*





- b) Plato -at least- when he wrote the *Protagoras*, adopted the Socratic hedonistic defense on the denial of akrasia.
- c) Socrates, and Plato of the *Protagoras*, explain happiness and goodness in terms of the quantitative comparison between overall pleasure and pain in one's life.
- d) Goodness is reducible to the predominance of the overall pleasantness of an action x over the overall pleasantness of an action y.
- e) The acquisition of knowledge, and therefore of virtue, serves the better judgment of what is overall more pleasant or more painful, namely what is better and what is worse.
- f) Knowledge and Virtue are merely means to the end which is happiness, namely the overall predominance of pleasure over pain.

However, probably all these propositions seem to be unwelcome and contradictory for both the Socratic and the Platonic moral theory, for:

- a) The Socratic tenet on the denial of akrasia would then stand undefended against a non-hedonist. Also, it would probably fall short of explaining cases where an agent is putatively overcome by fear, anger, passion or love. Of course, it would be a scarcely strong enough view to hold that Socrates' denial of akrasia is a doctrine only for those who assume hedonism. Rather, it seems that, Socrates, treats hedonism as a premise of the multitude's argumentation in order to reveal the absurdity of 'the many' hedonists; all the same, for Socrates, the hedonistic premise is not a necessary and indispensable premise of his general claim about the impossibility of akrasia.
- b) A hedonistic position would be obviously incompatible with Plato's ethical views as expressed in most of his later dialogues. For example, in the *Gorgias*, Plato stresses with great force his aversion to hedonism. Of course, it is not a rare phenomenon for a philosopher to change his mind about an issue under examination; in fact, it is pretty fair to say that Plato developed significantly his ideas throughout his works and abandoned some basic Socratic tenets (for example, the Socratic tenet on the denial of akrasia). Nevertheless, it seems weak to argue that Plato changed his mind about hedonism so radically between two dialogues written -roughly- at the same period.



c) - f) would also cause serious problems to the Socratic and the Platonic ethical theories. The reduction of the distinction of good and bad to the distinction of more or less overall pleasure, apart from not being a very plausible argument (Irwin; 1995:113), it also raises another serious difficulty; namely, how is the overall pleasure or pain going to be objectively counted? Plato had detected the latter difficulty in the *Protagoras* (357a6-357b7), where he stressed the need of a relevant craft which would disambiguate objectively what is better and worse in quantitatively hedonistic terms. However, the searching of the relevant craft remained incomplete and Socrates promised to discuss this issue some other time. Further, when it comes to pleasure, there is much space for subjective judgments on what is taken as pleasant and at what degree. A masochist finds pleasure in pain or a psycho maniac in killing; and even if we accept that these are extreme cases, it is still pretty obscure to tell infallibly what is objectively more pleasant and more painful, let alone count it with accuracy. I think that neither Socrates nor Plato would be satisfied with a strictly quantitative approach to goodness and happiness which at the same time would encompass highly subjective views on what is pleasant, therefore on what is good. Last but not least, the reduction of goodness and happiness to overall greater pleasure over pain in one's life, inescapably, renders the virtues, instruments to happiness. According to the hedonistic view, virtue encompasses the knowledge of what is overall more pleasant; in this sense, virtue and knowledge play a purely instrumental role in happiness. Plato would have probably found this result extremely unwelcome, since his ethical theory is based on the view that virtue is a component of happiness and not merely an instrument for happiness (*Republic II*). For a virtuous man, virtuous actions are made for their own sake and not instrumentally in order to reach some other end, for example, pleasure. Socrates and Plato would not feel very comfortable to abandon the view that evaluative judgments about what is good should come first for a man who wants to be virtuous. If they were seriously arguing from hedonism, then they should have to concede that evaluative judgments about what is good follow those judgments about what is pleasant. In my view, this is the strongest counterexample against the prohedonistic view in the *Protagoras*.

Moreover, the *Protagoras* offers further textual evidence which support the antihedonistic view; for example, when Socrates asks Protagoras if he believes that to



live pleasantly is good and unpleasantly bad (351b1-c1), Protagoras distances himself from extreme hedonism by stressing that pleasure is something good only when taken in honorable things; characteristically, Protagoras states, that *'there are pleasurable things which are not good, and on the other hand, there are painful things which are not bad'*<sup>9</sup>(351c2-d7). Of course, neither Socrates, nor Plato would ever intend to attach themselves to extreme hedonism.

- *'Surely you don't, like most people, call some pleasant things bad and painful things good? I mean, isn't a pleasant thing good just insofar as it is pleasant, that is, if it results in nothing other than pleasure;'* Socrates' question cannot be mirroring the views of Plato or Socrates as presented in the other dialogues; what we can infer from Socrates' deliberately oversimplified questions is that, Socrates' effort is to use Protagoras' mouth in order to depict the hedonistic views of 'the many'. In fact, Protagoras, before replying to Socrates', stresses the fact that the question posed by Socrates is oversimplified: *'I don't know, Socrates, if I should answer as simply as you put the question...'* (351d1). At first glance, that does not seem peculiar, since Socrates' customary method has been to make his interlocutors adopt his own views, which are expressed as questions; however, as Zeyl (1980:253) interestingly notes, this is not the case in the *Protagoras*, because Socrates' questions 'do not simply have the form 'p?', but the form 'do you think (say) that p?'; Socrates wants to elicit Protagoras views rather than to express his own'.

In addition, Julia Annas<sup>10</sup> (1999:170), comments that, it is Socrates that firstly refers to hedonism in a way which implies that it his own position (351c4); however, 'as soon as Protagoras starts treating it as Socrates' own position in the argument, Socrates drops it abruptly and tries a different tack'. And, as Annas wittily notices, Socrates tried very hard throughout the dialogue to guide Protagoras into being the respondent; therefore, it seems weak to hold that Socrates would introduce his own position at such a late stage of the dialogue. As a matter of fact, Socrates was very respectful of Protagoras' teaching and rhetoric skills and that fact is depicted in Plato's description of Protagoras as a particularly wise man (309d). Inside this context, one is justified to suppose that

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<sup>9</sup> Protagoras' opinion here is very close to the account given by John Stuart Mill's regarding the degree of 'goodness' of the pleasures.

<sup>10</sup> J. Annas (1999) *Platonic Ethics Old and New*. Cornell University Press



Socrates' method of approach to his interlocutor, in the *Protagoras*, is deliberately modified compared to other Socratic dialogues. Socrates introduces a fictional respondent, 'the many', and this is the 'Trojan horse' of his argumentation. His main purpose is not, directly, to show that Protagoras is wrong in his views. What Socrates mainly aims at is to show that the commonsensical explanation of akrasia as 'overcome by pleasure' leads to self-contradiction and absurdity. Socrates' tactic is to deny akrasia by refuting 'the many'; He wants to avoid arguing *directly* against Protagoras, because he is aware of the fact that Protagoras' ego is too strong to accept his imminent dialectic defeat. As a matter of fact, the Abderian sophist during the discussion about Courage and its relationship to Virtue used his sophistic tricks in the sight of his dialectic defeat (350c6),

***-‘You are doing a poor job of remembering what I said when I answered your questions, Socrates. When I was asked if the courageous are confident, I agreed. I was not asked if the confident are courageous. If you had asked me that, I would have said, not all of them’.***

Protagoras' maneuver in the discussion about courage is indicative of his intentions in the dialogue; he was prepared to change his positions too readily in order to avoid being defeated in the 'dialectic battle' with Socrates. But, Socrates had already detected Protagoras' intentions and when the discussion went to the possibility of akrasia Socrates decided to follow a different tactic. Previously in the dialogue, he had threatened Protagoras that he would leave the discussion unfinished (335b1-c7) if he did not stop the very long monologues, but now Socrates chose another tack so to 'manipulate' Protagoras, namely the introduction of a fictional respondent, that of 'the many'. By attributing hedonistic views to 'the many' and not personally to Protagoras, Socrates succeeded a) to describe what the common belief on the case of akrasia is, and b) to avoid another conflict with Protagoras caused by the sophist's strong ego. Now it is plainer why the invention of 'the many' is the Trojan horse of the Socratic argument; for, Socrates does not want to 'say': -Protagoras, even if you are a hedonist, you should not maintain that akrasia is possible. Rather, he 'says': -Protagoras, 'the many' are hedonists, let's go and prove together to them that akrasia is impossible. Further, Socrates does not take a



straight-out position for or against hedonism, but as Zeyl, (1980:260), forcefully argues, Socrates suppresses 'his own disavowal of that theory. For if he openly questioned or rejected hedonism, he would lose the strategic advantage of his position: the locus of debate would shift away from the issue under discussion, that of supplying a scaffold to support the thesis of the unity of courage and wisdom'. Worse, he would be encouraging doubt in hedonism, and thus undermine his own denial of akrasia.

To sum up, Socrates in the *Protagoras*, is not clear on whether or not his position is actually hedonistic or if he just uses the argument from hedonism as a 'dialectic tool' in order to show to Protagoras and to 'the many' that akrasia is impossible, even for a hedonist; however, as I tried to argue above, we have strong reasons to believe that the antihedonistic interpretation of the Socratic stance in the *Protagoras* is much more plausible. If the prohedonistic view was right, then Socrates and Plato would inescapably face a number of serious difficulties that rise consequently, namely:

- a) An unavoidable incompatibility between the treatment of hedonism in the *Protagoras* and their ethical theory as depicted in the majority of the Platonic dialogues.
- b) The fact that, Virtue and Knowledge would not be conceived as components of happiness but they would simply play an instrumental role so to achieve happiness.
- c) The problem of conceding that judgments of what is pleasant would be prior to judgments of what is good, which is explicitly denied in the *Gorgias*.
- d) Virtuous actions would not be made for their own sake, but they would aim at pleasure.
- e) The Socratic tenet on the denial of akrasia would be forceful only for those who assumed hedonism.

Also, there is enough and convincing textual evidence supporting the antihedonistic claim of the Socratic intentions in the *Protagoras*. Nevertheless, as a prohedonist would hold, the Socratic argument on the denial of akrasia can be valid and plausible only if Socrates has taken hedonism seriously. The big advantage of this view is that Socrates, nowhere else, does explicitly and analytically defend his argument against the various objections raised (and common belief) hedonistic or not. But, to hold that the argument on the denial of akrasia is depending on its hedonistic premise is to accept that the denial of akrasia is a



weak and undefended thesis against a non-hedonist critic; and surely Socrates cannot have intended such an unwelcome result. Thereupon, the prohedonistic position raises multiple difficulties and creates more problems than it solves. According to my reading, the Socratic doctrine can be freed from its hedonistic premise, which Socrates uses only to show that even for a hedonist, who is putatively overcome by pleasure, akrasia is impossible. This is, in fact, the big challenge for an anti-hedonist; much more than to show that Socrates and Plato did not take hedonism seriously is to explain how the Socratic thesis can be defended against a non-hedonistic attack; and this is exactly what I will attempt to do in the following chapters.

## **2.2 How the Socratic tactic in the *Protagoras* led the hedonistic views of ‘the many’ into absurdity.**

In 2.1, I have argued that Socrates does not intend to identify the good with the pleasant and that his treatment of hedonism serves the better exhibition of an ad hominem argument against ‘the many’ hedonists. Here, I shall examine how the Socratic ad hominem argumentation leads the hedonistic views of the multitude into absurdity. However, I will not go into detail, in this chapter, regarding the use of the words ‘knowledge’, ‘will’, ‘desire’ and ‘belief’. My main concern here is to show that the ad hominem Socratic argument on the denial of akrasia is *valid* when it comes to those assuming hedonism.

In the *Protagoras*, since Socrates and Protagoras have –temporarily- ended the long discussion about the Socratic thesis on the unity of the virtues<sup>11</sup>, they move on to examine another Socratic thesis, namely that ‘no one errs willingly’. The last part of Simonides’ poem constitutes the implicit introduction to the discussion about the impact of knowledge and belief on action; moreover, Simonides’ poem marks the beginning of

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<sup>11</sup> I shall maintain that the discussion between Socrates and Protagoras about the Unity of the virtues is anything but irrelevant to the subsequent discussion on the impossibility of akrasia. The soundness of the Socratic thesis on denying the psychological state of akrasia is heavily depended on his other ‘paradoxical’ doctrine, that is, the identification of Virtue with Knowledge.



the Socratic defense of his doctrine on the impossibility of akrasia, against those using the hedonistic hypothesis:

*‘All who do not wrong willingly (εκών) I praise and love; Necessity not even the gods resist’<sup>12</sup> (Protagoras, 345d3).*

Socrates, at this point, reforms intentionally, the meaning of the verse of Simonides’ poem. He takes the phrase **a)** ‘All who do not **wrong** willingly..... I praise and love;’ to be meaning, **b)** ‘All who do not wrong.....**willingly** I praise and love’. And then, he continues to argue explicitly that,

*‘I am pretty sure that none of the wise men thinks that any human being willingly makes a mistake or willingly does anything wrong or bad. They know very well that anyone who does anything wrong or bad does so involuntarily’ (345e2).*

Socrates expresses without the slightest doubt his famous ‘paradox’ that ‘no one errs willingly’; he does not argue that people never go wrong, but that their mistakes are simply the result of their lacking in knowledge of what is better and worse to do. What follows in the dialogue, is Socrates’ and Protagoras’ attempt to refute the position ‘the many’<sup>13</sup> –mistakenly- hold, that is, that people err willingly, overcome by pleasure, love, fear or passion (352b2-c7);

*‘Come now Protagoras, and reveal this about your mind: What do you think about knowledge? Do you go along with the majority or not? Most people think this way about it, that it is not a powerful thing, neither a leader nor a ruler. They do not think of it in that way at all; but rather in this way: while knowledge is often present in a man, what rules him is not knowledge but rather anything else—sometimes anger, sometimes pleasure, 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’.*

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<sup>12</sup> Cooper, John M. (1997) *Plato’s Complete Works*. Hackett Publishing Company

<sup>13</sup> ‘The many’ and the ‘multitude’ represent the common and unsophisticated view on the phenomenon of akrasia. ‘The many’ can not conceive the meaning of ‘willingly’ as Socrates means it, and hence they mistakenly believe that acting against one’s better judgment is something that could be made knowingly and willingly.



Socrates rejects as impossible the psychological states ‘overcome by pain’, ‘overcome by love’, ‘overcome by anger’, ‘overcome by fear’, when one is ruled by *knowledge*; however, he concentrates his defense only against the allegation of ‘the many’ that one can be ‘overcome by **pleasure**’. The latter Socratic stance has given ground to the position that Socrates’ denial of the possibility of akrasia is plausible only for those who assume hedonism. As a matter of fact, Gerasimos Santas<sup>14</sup> (1966:7) notes that one possible limitation of the Socratic argument in the *Protagoras* is the dependence on its hedonistic premise; Socrates argues only against the ‘overcome by pleasure’ explanation, whereas ‘he makes no clear move to show how his argument might be applied against the explanations *overcome by fear, love, hate and passion*’. Of course, even if we concede that Socrates made no clear move to show how the explanations ‘overcome by’ fear, love, anger, passion, hate or pain are ruled out as absurd and impossible, it is still too risky to argue that the ad hominem argument from hedonism constitutes a limitation of the general force of the Socratic tenet. As I have argued, Socrates does not take seriously the hedonistic hypothesis of ‘the many’, therefore it is scarcely strong enough to hold that Socrates based his whole theory against the possibility of akrasia on a single limited hypothesis, the hedonistic one. But, before suggesting possible ways of unchaining the Socratic thesis from its hedonistic premise, I will move on to examine whether the ad hominem argument against the multitude is, in fact, forceful enough so to refute ‘the many’ hedonists.

The core Socratic argumentative line against the hedonistic beliefs of the multitude takes place, in the *Protagoras*, between 352a1-358e9. Socrates has characterized knowledge a powerful and lordly thing which cannot be ‘dragged around as if it were a slave’ by pleasure, fear, love or anger; then he moves on to ask Protagoras whether he believes that ‘*knowledge is a fine thing capable of ruling a person, and if someone were to know what is good and bad, then he would not be forced by anything to act otherwise than knowledge dictates, and that intelligence would be sufficient to save a person*’ (352c4). Socrates in this passage basically argues for two things: a) that knowledge is not only necessary but also *sufficient* for goodness in one’s actions and b) that no other motivational force could ever be strong enough to conquer knowledge and stop an agent

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<sup>14</sup> G.Santas (1966) ‘Plato’s Protagoras and Explanations of Weakness’, *Philosophical Review*, pp. 3-33





from doing what he knows (and what he judges) to be superior in goodness. Protagoras kindly agrees with Socrates and notes, in addition, that knowledge and wisdom are the most powerful forces in human activity (352d3); namely, no matter how forceful a desire or any other motive could ever be, still it would not be strong enough so to conquer an evaluative judgment which encompasses knowledge / wisdom. The latter Socratic suggestions about knowledge concern the general soundness of the thesis on the denial of akrasia, however from 353b6 Socrates focuses the discussion on the allegations of ‘the many’ and their explanation of akratic cases; *‘Going back, then; if they should ask us: - We have been speaking of being overcome by pleasure. What do you say this is?’* From this point on, Socrates commences his ad hominem argumentation against the multitude; he has already ascribed hedonistic views to ‘the many’ and what he aims at in this part of the dialogue is to show that their own explanation of akrasia as ‘overcome by pleasure’ leads to absurdity. Socrates follows a specific tactic here; he does not introduce any new theory or any new argument of his own so to disprove the claims of ‘the many’. By contrast, he attempts to refute ‘the many’ by disambiguating the premises of their very own argument (353c4-354c4). As a matter of fact, Santas (1966:6) maintains that the Socratic argument is not primarily designed to defend the impossibility of akrasia against the views of the multitude, but that it mainly focuses on showing that the ‘overcome by pleasure’ explanation of akrasia given by ‘the many’ hedonists, inescapably leads to absurdity.

At the first stage of the argument (353d) Socrates attempts to guide ‘the many’ to become familiar with the hedonistic conception of the good that they hold; for them, A) ruinous actions are such not because of their immediate pleasure<sup>15</sup> but *only* because of their painful results (353d5). And B) if the otherwise ruinous actions gave exclusively pleasure to the agent, then they would not be thought anymore as ruinous actions, but as good actions (353d7); therefore, from (A) and (B) it is implied that for ‘the many’, goodness is identified with pleasantness and badness with painfulness. However, it is of

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<sup>15</sup> In 351c-d Socrates asked Protagoras if he believed that B) ‘All pleasure is good’. Protagoras, representing the multitude, replied that ‘there are pleasurable things which are not good and painful things which are not bad’. When Socrates clarified that bad actions are thought as such not because of their immediate pleasure but because of the painful results, Protagoras and ‘the many’ finally conceded (B), namely that ‘all pleasure is good’.



crucial importance to note that, as Vlastos (1969:76) suggests, ‘the many’ initially do not attach themselves to hedonism by denying conceding that:

- a) ‘All good is pleasure and all evil is pain’; rather their first position is that
- b) ‘All pleasure is good and all pain is evil’. (353d-354b)

All the same, with his maneuver in 354b6-c1 *‘These things are good only because they result in pleasure and in the relief and avoidance of pain? Or, do you have some other criterion in view, other than pleasure and pain, on the basis of which you would call these things good? They say no, I think’* Socrates ‘extracts from them the admission that, in judging a given course of action good or evil, they look to nothing but its yield of pleasure and pain.....and this is to agree with (a)’ (Vlastos; 1969:77).

Now, with proposition (a) and (b) having been conceded by Protagoras and ‘the many’, Socrates is legitimated to claim that ‘the many’, ‘pursue pleasure as being good and avoid pain as bad’ (354c3). The latter admission of ‘the many’, namely that pleasure and pain are equivalent to good and bad, constitutes a vital step for the Socratic argumentation since it allows the logical convertibility between the notions ‘good / pleasure’ and ‘bad / pain’ (355b5-c2). Socrates, after the admission of the latter propositions by the multitude is licensed to move on to the following substitution in the argument of ‘the many’. He takes:

1. A knows that x is overall better than y, but he chooses y ‘overcome by its pleasure’.
- To be equal to:
2. A knows that x is overall better than y, but he chooses y ‘overcome by its goods’<sup>16</sup>.

As Terence Irwin (1995:83) notes, proposition (2) is not obviously leading the views of the multitude into absurdity, however ‘Socrates believes that this will be obvious once the many are reminded that they accept hedonism’. In fact, ‘the many’ have accepted that

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<sup>16</sup> Gregory Vlastos (1969:82) wittily notices that the only correct substitution here is ‘the goods’ in plural. The reason for that is that the Greek text genuinely uses the word ‘τα αγαθά’ which is equivalent to ‘the goods’ not the ‘good’ in singular. Therefore, the self-contradiction in the argument of ‘the many’ is not obvious until Socrates sets the question whether these goods outweigh the evils (355d2-e4). If the goods outweighed the evils then the agent would not have erred and the explanation of akrasia given by the multitude would be immediately refuted.



judgments of what is good can be reducible to judgments of what is pleasant, thereupon they unavoidably identify the ‘good’ with the maximization of overall pleasure. However, the identification of goodness with maximum pleasure raises serious difficulties for ‘the many’ hedonists in terms of their explanation of akrasia. As Socrates states, what a hedonist does in order to judge what is better and worse, is to *‘put the pleasures together and the pains together, both the near and the remote, on the balance scale, and then say which of the two is more. For if you weigh<sup>17</sup> pleasant things against pleasant, the greater and the more must always be taken; if painful against painful, the fewer and the smaller’* (356b2-b6). Now, if for ‘the many’, greater overall pleasure is better than lesser overall pleasure and lesser overall pain is better than greater overall pain, then, Socrates is licensed to make another substitution which shows, once more, how the explanation of akrasia offered by the many is absurd:

1. A knows that x is overall *better* than y, but he freely chooses y because y is overall greater than x in pleasure.
2. A knows that x is *overall greater in pleasure* compared to y, but he freely chooses y because y is overall greater than x in pleasure.

OR

- 2a. A knows that x is overall *better* than y, but he freely chooses y because y is *overall better* than x.

Now, it is crystal clear how the explanation of akrasia given by the multitude as ‘overcome by pleasure’ becomes self-contradictory and totally absurd (355d2). ‘The many’, as shown forcefully by Socrates in the *Protagoras*, have unsuccessfully tried to argue for the possibility of akrasia as a result of the strength of desires and pleasures against the best evaluative judgment of the agent which is grounded on knowledge. Socrates has made them concede that their evaluative judgment of what is good and bad is the one and the same thing with their judgments of what is overall more pleasant or overall less painful. Therefore, a hedonist’s decision to choose intentionally the overall

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<sup>17</sup> Again, goodness and badness are not treated in absolute but in comparative and quantitative terms.



worse / less pleasant option instead of an overall better / more pleasant one, cannot be nothing else but a miscalculation; in that sense, the Socratic doctrine on the denial of akrasia remains absolutely unharmed by the claims of ‘the many’ and their explanation of how akrasia could be possible. Nevertheless, however forceful and plausible the refutation of ‘the many’ might be, Socrates still does not explicitly provide any other argumentative line that would play the role of a general defense for his ‘paradoxical’ thesis on akrasia. At first glance, the Socratic thesis seems weak and undefended against a non-hedonistic approach to the problem of akrasia; however, as I will attempt to show in the following chapters, the Socratic tenet can be unchained from its hedonistic premise and retain its general force and plausibility.

### **2.3 The crucial role of knowledge in the Socratic denial of akrasia and the implied vulnerability of mere belief.**

It is of particular importance to notice that the Socratic argument on the denial of akrasia is built on the connection between knowledge and action; and of course, it is not accidental the fact that Socrates uses exclusively the words ‘knowledge’ or ‘wisdom’ when he refers to the denial of akrasia, whereas he seems to remain silent about the relationship between mere belief and action. For Socrates it is knowledge that is the ‘dictator’, the ‘powerful and lordly thing’ that cannot be ‘dragged around as if it were a slave’; it is knowledge, the kind of intelligence that ‘suffices to save a person’. It is knowledge which guarantees the virtuous conduct, not *merely (fallible) belief*; as a matter of fact, Socrates has repeatedly underlined with emphasis the huge difference between knowledge and belief (*Republic*; 430b1, 476d4-478b<sup>18</sup>, 509d-511e and in the *Meno* 88a-89a). Also, in the *Gorgias* (466c-467a5), Socrates holds a rather polemical stance against belief; when Polus tells him that a tyrant can do whatever he wants ( $\alpha$  βούλεσθαι / α δοκεῖ), Socrates responds that Polus has posed two separate questions. For Socrates the

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<sup>18</sup> Socrates, in the *Republic*, sets the distinction between knowledge and belief /opinion quite plainly: ‘Does it opine the very thing that knowledge knows, so that the knowable and the opinable are the same, or is it impossible? –It is impossible, given what we agreed, for if a different power is set over something different, and opinion and knowledge are different powers, then the knowable and the opinable cannot be the same (Rep. 478a9-b4)’.



Greek ‘α δοκεῖ’ < η δόξα= belief / opinion, is not necessarily entailing the Socratic ‘want’ (as ‘βούλεσθαι’), whereas, *knowledge* guarantees that one will clearly and stably distinguish what is good and therefore that he will definitely choose it, because it is ‘the good<sup>19</sup>’ that we are all going after<sup>20</sup>. Per contra, the tyrants have merely false or fallible beliefs about what is better to do, therefore their desires and choices can not be genuine expressions of their real ‘want’ but expressions of what they (falsely) think that they want. Thereupon, it is fair to hold that for the Socratic tenet on the denial of akrasia ‘knowledge’ and ‘belief’ play an extremely different role. As a matter of fact, in the *Protagoras*, as Gregory Vlastos (1969:72) forcefully states: *‘the original statement above and all of its subsequent restatements throughout the debate speak only of the power of knowledge- not of belief as well. Knowledge, says Socrates, is a powerful, lordly, and commanding thing, not to be dragged around like a slave by pleasure, pain, and passion. No one would seriously suggest that Socrates would have wished to say the same thing about belief ungrounded in knowledge’*. Socrates maintains that knowledge is a commanding thing and that it cannot be dragged around as if it were a slave, but does this count for mere belief as well? Does Socrates hold that belief is a commanding thing that it cannot be dragged around as if it were a slave? As a matter of fact, we have strong evidence to believe that for Socrates ‘knowledge’ and ‘belief’ play a radically different role in the development of one’s moral psychology. In the *Protagoras*, Socrates is very explicit on that; only knowledge is sufficient for Virtue, not mere belief. Only knowledge can be so powerful to resist other motivational forces related to pleasure, pain, love, fear, anger and passion. Only knowledge is capable of being commanding when it comes to action. Socrates has never argued that mere belief suffices for virtue; by contrast, what he claims is that only knowledge can be identified with virtue. Therefore, I find very good reasons to hold that for Socrates in the *Protagoras*, mere belief is not immune to other motivational forces related to pain, pleasure, love, passion, fear, etc. Evidently, belief is not -when compared

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<sup>19</sup> When I say the ‘good’, I do not use it in an absolute sense; namely, there are cases that one has to choose between two open alternatives and he judges both of them to be good choices. In such cases, the ‘good’ is used in a comparative sense, namely, the agent chooses what he judges to be overall better. Accordingly, between two rather bad open alternatives one will choose the overall less bad alternative.

<sup>20</sup> **This is an extremely important point for it implies that knowledge alone can discover the good whereas belief can only reach the apparent good which may be good or bad.**



to knowledge- an equally strong and stable cognitive state; and as I conceive the Socratic thesis on the denial of akrasia, belief is not sufficient for the development of a stable and strong psychological state either. But knowledge is. Thereupon, what Socrates explicitly argues for is that:

1. If A *knows* that X is overall better than Y, and if A is free to do either X or Y, then A will **definitely** want to do X and will **definitely** do X.

Now, according to my reading, what we can also derive from the Socratic treatment of belief is that Socrates implicitly allows that:

2. If A *believes* that X is overall better than Y, and if A is free to do either X or Y, then A will **probably** want to do X and will **probably** do X.

Proposition (1) expresses, I think accurately, the Socratic argument on the denial of akrasia. If A has **knowledge** of what is best to do, then his will, his intentions and actions will certainly be consistent to his evaluative judgment and his knowledge of what is best to do. However, proposition (2) tells us something radically different;

Proposition (2) speaks about the power of **belief**, not that of knowledge; thereupon it renders A susceptible to the revision of his previously formed intention which was derived from the best evaluative judgment. In this case A's evaluative judgment that X is overall better than Y does not guarantee that A will act consistently to his previously formed best judgment. In other words, in proposition (2), A's intentions to act X at a time  $t$ , are susceptible to be 'dragged around as if it were a slave' by passion, fear, love, pleasure at the moment of action  $t^*$ . Of course that does not mean that at the moment of action ( $t^*$ ) A acts contrary to his here-and-now intention, but that at the moment of action, A has already revised his previously formed intention which derived from his best value judgment. Socrates, in the *Protagoras*, explicitly argues for proposition (1), whereas he implicitly suggests that mere belief, as being clearly weaker than knowledge could sometimes be 'dragged around' by various co-existing motivational forces which



can potentially conquer our beliefs and revise our intentions. In this sense, the Socratic account on the denial of akrasia encompasses only those cases where one has *knowledge* of what is best to do. For Socrates only knowledge is unbeatable and contrary to mere belief it guarantees consistency between one's judging X to be the best option, intending to act X at  $t$  and acting X at  $t^*$ . In the light of this distinction, are we legitimated to infer that what Socrates implies is that those having merely belief in their evaluative judgments are potential akratic agents? As I will try to show in the following chapter, the answer can not be affirmative. The fact that mere belief might render one vulnerable to the revision of his intentions which derive from his best judgments is not, according to my view, contradictory to the Socratic thesis on the denial of akrasia.

#### **2.4 The Socratic impossibility of akrasia and the commonsensical possibility of weakness of will: towards a harmonic reconciliation.**

In the three previous chapters (2.1, 2.2, and 2.3), I have attempted to argue that:

- a) Socrates does not attach himself to hedonism and that he uses the hedonistic premise in order to refute 'the many' in an ad hominem argument.
- b) The ad hominem refutation of the many is successful as it leads to absurdity the explanation given by them on how akrasia can be possible.
- c) For Socrates, if A judges X to be an overall better option than Y at a moment  $t$ , **only knowledge** is sufficient for guaranteeing that A will choose X at the moment of action  $t^*$ . Mere belief is not a 'commanding and lordly thing', therefore it could be 'dragged around as if it were a slave' by other motivational forces (passion, anger, love, hate, fear, pleasure).

In this chapter, I shall argue that the Socratic denial of akrasia is not entailing the denial of the common phenomenon of weakness of will; therefore to accept the impossibility of



akrasia is not to deny the possibility of weakness of will. Obviously, this view marks a substantial departure from traditional Socratic and Platonic interpretations; however, I believe that only by making the distinction between the Socratic notion of akrasia and that of weakness of will, one could ever fully grasp the ‘paradoxical’ Socratic thesis.

Now, we have to go back and rethink the terminological point made in the beginning of this thesis. My position is that the Socratic conception of akrasia should not be identified with the notion of ‘weakness of will’. The Socratic *denial of akrasia* entails the following four propositions:

1. No one ever wants intentionally the bad (*Protagoras*; 345e2), which also entails,
  - 1a. No one ever wants or chooses intentionally the overall worse available option.
2. Knowledge is the most powerful and commanding thing and it is always unbeatable when it comes to acting according to one’s evaluative judgment on what is best to do at a moment  $t^*$  (352c2-b7); which in turn, entails
  - 2a. Evaluative judgments and intentions grounded on knowledge are immune and perfectly stable against any other co-existing motivational force, i.e. pleasure, pain, fear, love, passion, anger or hate.
3. If A *knows* at a moment  $t$  that between two open alternatives X is better than Y, A will certainly *want* to do X at a moment  $t^*$ , which entails
  - 3a. At the moment of the action  $t^*$ , A, will definitely want to do X and will definitely do X, provided that he is free to act (from the propositions 1, 1a, 2, 2a and 3).
4. No one errs *knowingly* and *willingly*.

As we can see, the Socratic thesis on the denial of akrasia is actually based on three cornerstones; a) everyone is inclined to want the good and no one goes intentionally to the bad, b) it is impossible for one to act against his here-and-now intention, c) only knowledge guarantees consistency between what one judges to be the best open option at a moment  $t$  and his here-and-now intention to act according to it at a moment  $t^*$ . Now, in order to refute the Socratic thesis on the denial of akrasia one needs to abandon at least one of the above propositions. Proposition (a) seems to be a plausible one if we accept





that everyone is inclined toward what appears to him to be the good. As Donald Davidson (1969:94) notes, intentional actions are made ‘in the light of some imagined good’; this is why the doctrine that always everyone goes after the good ‘has an air of self evidence’. Socrates also treats the above proposition as a self evident one (*Protagoras*; 345e3) ‘***I am pretty sure that none of the wise men thinks that any human being willingly makes a mistake or willingly does anything wrong or bad***’. In addition Hare (1965:70) states that ‘seeking the good must be some sort of synthetic necessary truth. It is a logical necessity’.

Moreover, to refute proposition (b) one would probably have to object to the link between unconditional judgments / intentions and action. If actions themselves are not the expression of our intentions at the moment of acting then what could explain better the mechanism of decision making? In fact, as Santas notices (1964:161) ‘Plato argues that there is a necessary connection between recognizing something as good for one and desiring to have/ possess/ get it. In addition, inside the same context, Alfred Mele (1982:362) characteristically poses a rather rhetorical question; ‘how can it be determined whether an agent is most motivated at  $t$  to do A, except on the basis of his doing or falling to do A at  $t$ ?. Propositions (a) and (b) seem to be highly plausible and pretty much unharmed against possible objections. Thereupon, it is proposition (c) that most philosophers have attempted to reject in order to refute the Socratic tenet on the denial of akrasia.

Proposition (c) speaks of the commanding and unbeatable power of knowledge; namely, if A knows at a moment  $t$  that X is overall better than Y, and he is free to choose either X or Y, then it is impossible for A to finally choose Y at the very moment of action. Diachronically, philosophers have chosen to object to exactly this proposition in order to show that Socrates was wrong in denying akrasia. As a matter of fact, common sense leads us to think that the revision of our intentions is a pretty natural and common phenomenon. Take for example a fictional agent ‘A’; A, ‘knows’ that betting his own house in one blackjack hand is too risky, irrational and probably self destructive; however, ‘overcome by his passion’ to gamble he bets his house and finally loses it. His first reaction is to get exceedingly mad at himself: ‘I KNEW THAT IT WAS WRONG! I was again overcome by my passion to gamble’. As a matter of fact, A’s *prima facie*



evaluative judgment –seemingly- contained knowledge; he ‘knew’ that it was too risky and irrational to bet his own house in one hand, he ‘knew’ that by losing his house he would probably drive his wife and his children furious against him, he ‘knew’ that his life could probably be perished in a few seconds. Nevertheless he made the wrong choice at the moment of action even though he had previously judged the open option of placing as being a very bad and extremely irrational one. But, did he really *know* before and at the very moment of deciding to place the bet that his was choosing the worse alternative<sup>21</sup>? Are we legitimate to say that A is an *akratic* agent?

First of all, in order to classify the vicious gambler as an akratic we need 1) to accept that placing the bet was undoubtedly the worst option, for if it was the best alternative the gambler would not have erred, and 2) that at a point *before* and / or at the *very* moment of deciding to place the bet A *knew* that he was choosing the worse open option ‘overcome by passion’. As Audi (1979:178) notes, whether one is akratic ‘at a given time, should be determined in relation to the practical judgments one holds at that time’. Even if we find it an easy task to concede that (1) is true, namely that placing the crazy bet is the worst option, it is proposition (2) that raises serious difficulties in terms of interpreting correctly what exactly Socrates meant by using the concept of knowledge. For Socrates, agent A before deciding and at the very moment of placing the bet did not have *knowledge* of the wrongness of his intention. As Socrates claims, knowledge ‘cannot be dragged around as if it were a slave by passion’; therefore in Socratic terms, A did not *know* that his action was the wrong one neither before nor, of course, at the moment of acting. Now, this may sound contradictory to our commonsensical intuition; common sense advises us that although in our *prima facie* judgments we can recognize which the best option is at a moment *t*, at the moment of acting *t\** our previously formed intentions seem to have been revised due to other motivational forces which lead us act against our previous best judgment. A, judges at 22.00 that refraining from the crazy bet is by far the best option, but at 22.05 he finds himself weak to sustain his previous intention and by revising his intentions he places the crazy bet. In my view, Socrates is not attempting to rule out such cases as impossible.

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<sup>21</sup> If we accept that his two alternatives were a) to place the bet, and b) to refrain from placing the bet.



As I have already argued, Socrates in the *Protagoras* implies that mere belief is susceptible to the revision of our intentions; thereupon, in the case of the vicious gambler, as Socrates implies, the agent had mere belief at 22.00 that refraining from the crazy bet was the worse alternative, not knowledge; and on these grounds we can explain the revision of his intention. But, if the agent who revises his intentions (which derived from his best judgment) and does not act according to them is not an akratic one, how should we call him? Ex hypothesi he is not a virtuous agent, for his actions show an extremely intemperate character; also, he is not a brute one, for, minutes before acting wrongly his evaluative judgment was heading towards the right direction. However his previous correct evaluative judgment, by being grounded on mere belief and not on knowledge, proved to be scarcely strong enough in order to stay in force during the moment of action. Now, I think this is a typical case of Holton's description of weakness of will where one revises an intention which he should not have revised. As I conceive such cases and as I believe that Socrates allows in the *Protagoras*, the explanation of the agent's weakness is related to the nature of their judgments and intentions which are grounded on belief. What Socrates denies is the vulnerability of judgments and intentions with knowledge not those with belief; he is very careful to avoid such gross identification between the power of knowledge and belief and this is, I think, a serious sign of Socrates implicitly allowing the phenomenon of weakness of will.

As a matter of fact, Richard Holton (1999:274) has forcefully developed the idea that 'akrasia' and 'weakness of will' have a distinctly different meaning;

*'A person exhibits weakness of will when he revises his intention, in circumstances in which he should not have revised it. This 'should' is not meant in a moral sense. Rather, it is the 'should' that is generated by the norms of the skill of managing one's intentions. A person is weak willed if he revises his intentions too readily'*. Of course, as Holton argues, we should not maintain that every single case of revising our intentions counts as a case of weakness of will. For example, if I decide at  $t$  to buy a chocolate ice-cream but at  $t^*$  change my mind and decide that I finally prefer a vanilla ice-cream then the revision of my prior intention would not constitute a case of weakness of will. Rather, weakness of will most commonly appears when our prima facie best evaluative judgments on what is overall best to do conflicts with other motivational forces like



pleasure, fear, pain, etc. As Holton (1999:250) puts it, there should be made a distinction between cases of weak will and those encompassing merely caprice. 'If someone over readily revises an intention that is, at least partially, contrary inclination defeating, that is weakness of will; if they over readily revise an intention that is not, that is caprice'.

The following example given by Brickhouse and Smith (2000:174) is a fine example illustrating a case of weak willed agents, but as I shall strive to hold once more, not akratic ones. They say: *'Let us imagine some college roommates who know they have a philosophy quiz the next day and who say that they KNOW that studying tonight would be the best thing for them to do and that even if they heard that there was to be a party tonight they would not go. But later, when they actually hear that there is a party, they put down their books and attend it, saying that their desire to go to the party just got the better of them'*. Just like in the case of the vicious gambler, the two college roommates' prima facie intention on what was overall best to do was 'overcome by pleasure or passion'. Their prima facie intention -which derived from the evaluative judgment- that it would be better to stay in and get prepared for the philosophy quiz was revised because of the enjoyment that the party would probably offer. The Socratic denial of akrasia, in my view, does not exclude such common cases; the two roommates' first intention to study all night long was 'dragged around' and finally revised because their judgment and their intention did not contain knowledge but mere belief. If the roommates' judgment was grounded on knowledge, and not on belief, then they would be able to discover the good (not merely reach the apparent good which may be good or bad) and sustain their best intention until the time of action, since as I have argued everyone is motivated to want the -imagined- good.

The latter example of the lazy college roommates is, I think, a typical case indicating weakness of will. This is so because (a) the students had made at some point (prior to action) the evaluative judgment that staying in to study would be the best overall option and (b) because at the moment of action their desire to go to the party proved to be stronger than their previous intention to stay in and they acted against their best judgment. But (b) does not imply that at the moment of action the students acted against their here-and-now intention; it simply means that they acted against their -previously formed- best judgment and intention to stay in and study. Of course, one would probably



object that even at the very moment that the students decide to go to the party, they still have in mind that staying in is the best overall option and what they ‘ought’ to do. But Hare (1965:83) has tackled convincingly this kind of objections; *‘If a man does what he says he ought not to, though perfectly able to resist the temptation to do it, then there is something wrong with what he says, as well as with what he does. In the simplest case it is insincerity; he is not saying what he really thinks. In other cases it is self-deception; he thinks that he thinks he ought, but he has escaped his own notice using ‘ought’ in an off-colour way’.*

At any rate, the acceptance of the phenomenon of weakness of will as revising our intentions and acting against our best value judgments is not necessarily at odds with the Socratic denial of akrasia. The latter escapes the commonsensical objections since it implicitly allows the possibility of weak willed agents whose value judgments are grounded on mere belief. In fact, the harmonic reconciliation between the Socratic doctrine on the impossibility of akrasia and the commonsensical argument on the possibility of weakness of will relies on the distinction between knowledge and belief as components of our evaluative judgments and intentions. But, even if the distinction between akrasia and weakness proves to be a plausible argument, the soundness of the Socratic thesis will still be seriously doubted unless we succeed to discern how does Socrates mean knowledge, and why knowledge, in the way that Socrates treats it, is such a commanding and lordly thing ‘not to be dragged around as if it were a slave’. Only the establishment of a strong link between Socratic knowledge<sup>22</sup> and conduct can unchain the Socratic tenet from its hedonistic premise once and forever and give to his thesis an air of general soundness.

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<sup>22</sup> From this point on I shall be using the term ‘Socratic Knowledge’ when I refer to ‘this commanding and lordly thing that cannot be dragged around as if it were a slave’.



## 2.5 The Socratic treatment of moral knowledge.

The Socratic doctrines are commonly characterized ‘paradoxical’ because their meaning, at least at first glance, seems to be contradictory to our commonsensical intuitions. For instance, when Socrates argues that ‘the only thing he knows is that he knows nothing’ it must be the case that either Socrates does not mean what he says, or that the two ‘knowledges’ do not have the same nature. According to Gregory Vlastos (1985:1) although ‘the standard view’ is that Socrates does not mean what he says, the puzzle can be solved if we simply understand the dual use of the Socratic treatment of knowledge: *‘...we need only suppose that he is making a dual use of his words for knowing. When declaring that he knows absolutely nothing he is referring to that very strong sense in which philosophers had used them before and would go on using them long after – where one says one knows only when one is claiming certainty. This would leave him free to admit that he does have normal knowledge in a radically weaker sense – the one required by his own maverick method of philosophical inquiry, the elenchus’* (Vlastos; 1985:12). Socrates avoids the contradiction by accepting ‘elenctic knowledge’, whereas what he disavows is ‘certain knowledge’. As a matter of fact, as Nozick (1995:146) wittily notes, Socrates is not saying: (a) ‘I do not know the **TRUTH**’, but (b) ‘I do not **KNOW** the truth’.

The introduction of this chapter is only seemingly irrelevant to the argument presented in this paper. In fact, it is of particular significance for the reader of the Socratic doctrines to come to terms with the idea that Socrates is being deeply enigmatic when he expresses some of his most famous ‘paradoxes’; ‘Virtue is Knowledge’, ‘No one errs willingly’<sup>23</sup>, ‘I only know one thing that I know nothing’. In these three ‘paradoxical’ statements Socrates’ enigma is hidden behind the exact meaning of ‘knowledge’; the explanation of how Socrates treats knowledge in each occasion is the key move towards the understanding of his doctrines. In our case, it is far from accidental the fact that Socrates argues for two of them (Virtue is Knowledge, and No one errs willingly) in the same dialogue, the *Protagoras*. Both doctrines speak of the commanding and unbeatable

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<sup>23</sup> The ‘paradox’ can be also expressed as ‘No one errs knowingly’. However, I think that ‘No one errs willingly’ is more accurate because the Greek word ‘εκών’ denotes intentional will (βουλησις) to act. At any rate, it is fair to say that for Socrates ‘willingly’ entails ‘knowingly’.



power of knowledge; namely, if one has knowledge (a) he is undeniably a virtuous agent, (b) if one has knowledge in his evaluative judgment and his intention he can not go wrong. As we have seen, Socrates implies that mere belief can not do the same work as knowledge; however he does not give –explicitly– any account to explain which elements in the nature of knowledge differentiates it from mere belief and renders it ‘lordly’ and unbeatable.

Surely, Socrates is not referring to knowledge of mathematics; namely, if one is an expert in mathematics he is not also necessarily a virtuous person. It is clear that Socrates does not use ‘knowledge’ in this oversimplified way, for that would render Virtue the result of a cold-blooded calculation. Accordingly, it can not be knowledge of a specific science or knowledge of a craft, for then the Socratic argument would be condemned to implausibility by identifying knowledge of a craft with virtuous conduct. Being an exceptional doctor, physician, judge, athlete or shoemaker does not guarantee virtuous conduct in one’s life. Obviously, Socrates would never intend to identify Virtue with the knowledge of one of the sciences or crafts; I think it is plain enough that Socrates ascribes the commanding and lordly characteristics to moral knowledge that is knowledge of what is good and bad. But this is not very accurate and informative; namely, the theoretical grasping of what is good or bad to do does not suffice for the acquisition of the virtuous conduct. When the vicious gambler says ‘I *knew* that it was wrong to place the crazy bet’ or when the college roommates say ‘We *know* that it is overall better to stay in and study’ their impotence to act on their evaluative judgments reveal some kind of weakness. The vicious gambler and the college roommates have reached only the apparent good; that is, their cognitive input does not suffice for the conduct of the correct action although they are motivated to act on the apparent good. Their defeat is rather psychological since their best intention has been ‘dragged around’ and their action finally goes against their best value judgment. The force of their belief on what is best to do proved to be insufficient so to *determine* the correct intention at the moment of action. According to my non-epistemic reading, this is the major difference between the impact of moral knowledge and belief on our actions. Moral knowledge is a commanding and lordly thing, because it has the force to determine the correct intention which derives from the best value judgment. On these grounds mere recognition of what



is apparently good cannot dictate the correct action; we still have to make the distinction between recognition of the good grounded on knowledge and that grounded on belief and assume that everyone wants the good.

As a matter of fact, Santas (1964:158) suggests that in Socratic terms, mere recognition of what is apparently good is not enough for the virtuous conduct; alternatively one needs to have both knowledge of what is virtuous and virtuous behaviour in his power in order to behave virtuously, as 'these two items of knowledge are logically independent'. In the *Protagoras*, Socrates implicitly sets forth his argument that moral knowledge is something more than mere recognition of what is good and bad:

**Soc:** -*'Do you know who dives confidently into wells?'*

**Prot:** -*'Of course, divers.'*

**Soc:** -*'is this because they know what they are doing, or for some other reason?'*

**Prot:** -*'Because they know what they are doing'.*

**Soc:** - *'Who are confident in fighting from horseback? Riders or nonriders?'*

**Prot:** -*'Riders.....those with the right kind of knowledge are always more confident than those without it, and a given individual is more confident after he acquires it than he was before' (350a).*

The analogy between knowing to dive into wells / fighting confidently from horseback and virtuous conduct implies that the latter entails some kind of *practical* wisdom. Socrates says that one should be called a diver only if he proves that he has the ability to dive confidently into the wells. The same goes for the rider; For Socrates, mere recognition of how a diver should move his hands, how to breathe when he snorkels, etc, is not enough to call one a diver. One should be called a diver only if he has both the knowledge and the practical capacity to dive confidently. I think this is what Santas points out when he suggests that 'to know what is virtuous' is logically independent to 'to know how to behave virtuously'. However, in this exploration of how Socrates treats moral knowledge and on which grounds he differentiates it from mere belief, I do not wish to argue that knowledge encompasses non cognitive components.

All the same, the view that moral knowledge might have both cognitive and non-cognitive components, is implied in the *Laches*; in the discussion about courage Laches





says that courage is *'a sort of endurance of the soul, if it is necessary to say what its nature is in all these cases'*, whereas Socrates adds that endurance of the soul is not enough for virtue if it is not accompanied by wisdom (192c1-d10). In other words, one in order to be virtuous in terms of bravery needs to have wise endurance in the soul (192d10); endurance of the soul without knowledge or knowledge without endurance of the soul are both situations that fall short of the virtuous requirements in terms of bravery. Terence Irwin (1995:37) notes that *'Laches sees that we do not want brave people simply to stand firm in battle; we want them to endure in the variety of situations that demand endurance. If we are to train them to endure, we must train them to recognize the degree of danger and the importance of facing it; since this recognition is a state of the soul, not simply a behavioural tendency, bravery must consist in some state of the soul'*.

Further, Laches, on behalf of Socrates attempts to prove that Nicias' argument about bravery is 'nonsense' (195b4-c9). Laches' immediate question is whether in cases of illnesses, doctors, because they know what is to be feared, should also be called courageous. Nicias, of course, denies it and states that Laches *'...thinks a doctor's knowledge of the sick amounts to something more than being able to describe health and disease, whereas I think their knowledge is restricted to just this'*. Socrates probably agrees with Laches by stressing to Nicias that Laches 'does seem to be saying something' (195c3). If Socrates actually agrees with Laches, he implicitly accepts by analogy that the description of what is good is not enough for the virtuous conduct. If a doctor's knowledge amounts 'to something more than being able to describe health and disease, accordingly a virtuous person's knowledge should amount to something more than merely being able to describe what is good and bad. What exactly this 'something more' is in Socratic terms, I do not have the space to argue in this paper. My argument on how Socrates understands moral knowledge is certainly incomplete and my future aim will be to discover how my non-epistemic interpretation of the Socratic denial of akrasia could explain deeper the superiority of moral knowledge compared to mere belief.



## 2.6 The impotence of belief to determine the correct intention.

In the light of the distinction between the power of moral knowledge and that of mere belief we can understand how the former is sufficient for the virtuous conduct, whereas the latter is not; however both allow that the agent is at some degree cognitively aware of what would be the best thing to do. By having merely belief one is able to reach what is the apparently best thing to do but the impotence of his belief results in the revision of the context of his intention. I have argued that Socrates in the *Protagoras* implicitly accepts this phenomenon. Also, what Socrates explicitly argues in the *Protagoras* is that the context of a judgment grounded on moral knowledge and its derived intention could never be revised. However, why is it that belief does not guarantee stability of our intentions?

As a matter of fact, Socrates in the *Protagoras* offers an explanation why those with judgments grounded on belief are more likely to have their intentions revised at the moment of action. *'Do things of the same size appear to you larger when seen near at hand and smaller when seen from a distance, or not?'* (356c5-c7). As Nozick (1995:143) notes, Socrates' argument is that *'time preference is like visual perspective, so that rewards look smaller, the more distant they are in future. If they thereby look smaller than they actually are (where their actual magnitude is measured at the reward) then isn't someone making a mistake, a cognitive mistake, akin to a visual illusion?'* Namely, the vicious gambler's and the lazy student's belief on what is overall best to do is blurry and insufficient to guarantee the virtuous conduct; thereupon, when a worse overall option is less distant than a better one, agents' intentions which are grounded on mere belief are more likely to be revised. Per contra, if one has Socratic knowledge he is able to discern clearly which the best option is regardless the distance between his best judgment and action. A very interesting note comes from experimental psychology; George Ainslie (1975:473) argues that *'If a smaller reward is available long before a larger alternative, any device to get the larger-later reward must include some means of dealing with the temporary attractiveness of the smaller-earlier one. The skill of impulse control would then be the ability to devise ways of committing one to get*



*past these smaller rewards*'. As I have attempted to show, for Socrates, this infallible device is only Socratic knowledge.

Now, let's consider the following example: Two philosophy graduate students discuss in the beginning of the academic year; both of them agree that they should have self-control, patience and power of will in order to be focused on their studies. They know that if they work really hard they could get a distinction, they might be awarded a scholarship, they would widen their learning horizons, they would make their parents and friends proud of them, they would make a very good first step for their future career, and they would be praised by their professors. They both agree that to work really hard is by far the *overall best thing to do and so they conclude* that they should not party more than once every week, they should study every day and that they should hand in their papers always on time and never later than the submission deadline, because of their laziness. If we accept they are being sincere and not self-deceptive when evaluating their future intentions, the two students –seemingly- are both able to recognize and describe what the overall best thing to do is. However, student A finds out after a couple of weeks that he is too weak to follow his prima facie best intention to study hard; he parties more than once every week, he forgets to study for long periods of time and he finally submits a paper way later than the deadline because of laziness. Therefore he fails the course and subsequently he fails not only to get a distinction, but even more to simply complete the philosophy graduate programme. Per contra, student B accomplishes successfully all his targets by working really hard throughout the academic year and by being consistent to his best value judgment.

In our hypothesis both students were sincere and not self-deceptive when they agreed that working hard is the best open option. They could both –seemingly- recognize the goodness of their future intention; thereupon, why did only student B remain consistent to his value judgment and its derived intention? The explanation could be that student A had merely belief that studying hard was the best option, whereas student B had knowledge of it. This is why student A could not be consistent to his best judgment. When the lazy student was deciding to go to the second or the third party at the same week without having studied at all, his best intention impotent as it was from the beginning, was revised at the moment of A's deciding to go to the party. However, that



does not entail the revision of A's best judgment; A even during the party could probably judge that not going to the party is the overall best option. And this is where my interpretation differs from traditional interpretations of the Socratic denial of akrasia. A's acting against his best judgment does not constitute an akratic case for my reading of Socrates, because we assume that A's judgment was grounded on belief. So, in opposition to the common sense stance on akrasia, Socrates on my understanding would allow that one can go against his best judgment when that judgment is grounded on belief and when his intentions are revised under the pressure of other motivational forces.

## **2.7 The virtuous, the weak willed and the brute agent.**

I hope that by this point it has been shown plainly enough that Socrates distinguishes Socratic knowledge from mere belief. Also, I think that it is also quite obvious why the Socratic denial of akrasia does not rule out cases of weak willed agents. In this sense, it is fair to say that Socrates ascribes Socratic knowledge only to the virtuous agent whereas he implies the ascription of belief to the –potential- weak willed agent. Moreover, Socrates describes a third type of agent, the ignorant or brute agent; this type of agent is not capable of making correct evaluative judgments with reference to the good, and on these grounds he is not susceptible to the bad because 'the bad is not susceptible to becoming bad' (*Protagoras*; 344d8).

The brute agent, as Socrates let us know in the *Gorgias*, is the most miserable and least powerful agent (466d5-471a1). Typical example of an ignorant or brute agent is a tyrant, for tyrants do 'just about nothing they want to do, though they certainly do whatever they see most fit to do' (*Gorgias*; 466d5-d8). A brute agent's evaluative judgments are mainly guided by what seems at each occasion instantly pleasant. As a matter of fact, the ignorant is in a much worse position than the weak willed. The weak willed is, at least, capable of forming correct judgments with reference to what is overall best to do and occasionally act on them, if the conflicting motivational forces are not too strong; in this sense the brute agent is inferior to the weak willed both in cognitive and



psychological terms. Socrates in the *Protagoras* stresses the fact that the ignorant cannot be charged of being weak willed, for the former is not capable of having not even belief about what is good: *'Whom does incapacitating misfortune throw down when it comes to, say, the command of a ship? Clearly not the ordinary passenger, who is always susceptible. You can't knock down someone already supine; you can only knock down someone standing up and render him supine. In the same way, incapacitating misfortune would overthrow only someone who is capable, not the chronically incapable'*.

The brute agent is 'chronically incapable' and on these grounds he is in a much worse cognitive and psychological condition compared to the weak willed. The weak willed agent has a tendency<sup>24</sup> to form weak intentions because his judgments usually encompass belief; however that does not mean that he is always mistaken in his actions. The same goes for the virtuous agent whose judgments usually contain Socratic knowledge; therefore the virtuous agent is much likely to act virtuously. However, he is not immune to an erroneous conduct. This is not to suggest that Socratic knowledge might occasionally be insufficient for the virtuous conduct, but simply that Socratic knowledge is not permanently attached to the virtuous agent. In other words it is not the virtuous agent that it is unbeatable but Socratic knowledge.

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<sup>24</sup> It is crucial to note however, that all three types of agents aim for the good and they are motivated towards the good.



### 3. Conclusion

Socrates in the *Protagoras* is very successful to show how the explanation of akrasia given by the multitude is absurd. If the good is identified with the overall pleasant, then for a hedonist, a mistaken conduct would necessarily be the result of a miscalculation of pleasures. However, the refutation of the multitude is not sufficient to stand as a plausible defence against those who do not assume hedonism. Certainly, such a key thesis of the Socratic moral psychology is aiming to explain human behaviour and not to be limited in a certain group of people, even if they are ‘the many’. The Socratic thesis, as I tried to sketch in this paper, can be freed from its hedonistic premise and regain its catholic force, if we understand how Socrates uses the concept of knowledge. The first move is to see that for Socrates everyone goes for the –imagined- good. Further, that knowledge and belief play a significantly different role on human conduct. This distinction allows us to maintain that the denial of akrasia can be harmonically reconciled with the acceptance of weakness of will as Holton defines it. Finally, for Socrates only knowledge can not be ‘dragged around as if it were a slave’ and this is what differentiates knowledge from mere belief. The significance of the ‘dragged around’ might allow a non-epistemic approach to the Socratic doctrine and allow cases where one acts against his best conclusion because the latter is based on belief. In such cases the agent intentions or actions go against his best judgment because his belief about the apparent good is not strong enough to lead to action, but is defeated by conflicting motivational forces.

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**I hereby declare that this dissertation has been composed by me and is based on my own work**

**Signature:**

**Thomas Giourgas**